Russian Roulette: Reloaded

by Vixen_Tail

Summary

Part 1 of 2.

No one ever said an SI gets a place in canon events, or that they would be ideally placed at all. How much would you recall if you had decades to go before anything in a long forgotten story comes to be?

SI/OC as part of the Russian Mafiya, liberties taken with crafting said Mafiya Family.

Notes

Disclaimer: Katekyo Hitman Reborn! belongs to Akira Amano.
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Chapter Notes

Yes, I got sucked into another fandom. Yes, it's another SI/OC fic. I'm going to try to avoid some of the issues my other one had, so expect updates to be slow since I'm going to try to stick to the plot worked out for this.

FYI: I actually have no idea how the Russian Mafiya works, bits and pieces of the lore for it I used in this story is cobbled together from different sources and tweaked a bit. Some translations of the Russian used is available at the end.

In Russia your name is legally written out like this: Family Name (Maiden if applicable) Given Name 'Nickname' Patronymic Name. One's Patronymic name is apparently the father's name with an –ovich for boys, -vovich if the last letter is another vowel. Though there is a Matronymic version, and my SI/OC's mother has one, it's not nearly as commonly used unless one's mother doesn't know the father's name (apparently unwed mothers). There is some conflicting sources for that, so I went to the first one I found and kept with it. (Which was a name generator site and why the mom has a female 'daughter of' Matronymic name.)

A discussion between myself and one of my Russian reviewers on FF.Net resulted in a bit of a story mechanic shift, notes about it are at the bottom.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I - (Thursday the 3rd of February, 1955. Saratov, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Nikishina Sonya Mikhailovna was born to Nikishin Mikhail 'Misha' Vladislavovich and Nikishina (ne Lazareva) Nyura Ruslanovna on the evening of December 28th, 1950, in Saratov, a port city on the Volga River in Soviet Russia.

Their daughter was 'typically' Russian in features, with her mother's wavy ash-blonde hair coloring added to her father's sharp Slavic features and grey eyes, and she could very well pass herself off as a Barbie doll with baby fat given a couple more years to grow in. Neither of her parents were bulky people, which made the very young girl assume she would eventually inherit a willowy frame though she hoped she turned out more like her mother. Who could probably put in a claim of having been a ballerina in her younger years and get away with it.

Much to the relief of both her parents, Sonya wasn't the type of child that demanded a lot of attention. She was quiet and kept to herself, fusssed little, and generally preferred to be left alone most of the time.

Which worked for them, they didn't seem too enthused with being parents at all.

Mikhail was intent on not being around much, when he was around he was either home to drink in the warmth of the house or try arguing with his wife about something or another. Nyura liked to pretend she wasn't a stay-at-home mother against what seemed to be the socially accepted norm around the local town to the point the neighbors thought little of the woman, the longer she could
ignore the fact she had a daughter or husband the happier she was. Why either of them went through with the trouble of having a child was more than Sonya could answer, but in return for the food and shelter she didn’t mind staying out of their way like they wanted.

She had enough trouble on her own end, the whole 'hands-off' childhood thing worked for her too.

Sonya's odd personality for a typical Soviet child, just being aware of how strange her home life was being merely a symptom of something not being exactly as it seemed, was something caused by the dream-nightmares she had starting shortly after her first few months of life. Dreams where she was living an entirely different life as one Rachel Victoria Stokes, a daughter of an always working lawyer mother and a mainly absent chemist of a father.

An American college graduate, who had been trying to figure out what to do with her degree in International Affairs which she had worked hard for but had no longer recalled why she had wanted it.

Only Rachel had died, in a mugging gone horribly wrong on dark night, while she tried to wrestle with herself about what she was going to do with her life. Once she came to terms with the sudden and abrupt removal of anything familiar, Sonya was left trying to muddle through twenty odd years of another life heaped onto her personality as it developed from a childish self-centeredness and into a fully aware person of her own right.

An American born in the year 1987 and died in 2012. Now she was a citizen of the USSR in the 1950s, dreaming about a young woman who wouldn't be born for decades if at all.

There were any number of days when she woke still thinking she was a young woman called Rachel, and the disjointed feeling she got when spotting blonde and not brown hair then grey and not hazel eyes was often disturbing. The age/height difference was a headache all its own, causing more than a small measure of her early childhood clumsiness so despaired over by her so-called 'mother'.

Said early childhood was mostly a never-ending series of nightmares and confusion for her as she tried to at least not draw any attention to herself as she sorted her own mind out, but she still rather disliked the abrupt change in circumstances that happened early in 1955.

As awkward as being a child born to two less than enthusiastic parents was in a town where that seemed to never be the case, she rather preferred it to learning that her parents had used her to pay off a debt they owed someone else.

Nikishina Sonya Mikhailovna then became one of many children taken to the local Mafiya recruitment drive, due to either their parents or unrelated members tempting them in.

The Mafiya group specifically the group of children to young adults all now belonged to had once been part of the vory v zakone, the thieves-in-law. Remnants of those who had previously been condemned into the GULAG labor camps under Joseph Stalin's reign, and kept holding the 'brothers in arms against the government' idea that had been mostly discarded upon their release after World War Two by the rest of the Russian Mafiya.

Sonya learned all of that from her tattoo artist, who took pity on her obvious confusion but appreciated she didn't wail and moan about the little curled cat tattoo she was given on her right bicep like some of the even older children did. Discounting that most of his storytelling was probably a bit whitewashed for a child's sake, she actually liked the little kitten and shrugged her agreement to return to him when she 'earned' her next tattoo.

Valya was good at his art for something that wasn't quite 'mainstream' popular yet, and he was
somewhat pleasant while she was under his hands, so she accepted the tiny slip of paper that held the address for his usual haunt on it in case she wanted him to add to her non-existent tattoo collection.

The next thing she learned was that her kitten denoted that she was brought in young to be a thief, the general standby for those not specifically courted on whatever kind of recruitment run this was, instead of for any of the other criminal branches their new thieves' clan dabbled in. She wasn't the only one getting a curled cat tattoo that same day, but there were about a handful of other designs getting inked on other, mostly male children as well.

Some of them were picked by the people that guided the kids of varying age ranges into the warehouse-turned-tattoo parlor, others seemed to be assigned by lottery. There were card tattoos, various symbols denoting several money values, pairs of dice, a handful of guns on the older if still young adults, mixed in with the more common cats and spider webs and one lone much older teen that was in the middle of getting a bullet crossed with a knife where she had her own.

Sonya was by no means sold on this new direction of life, but she was also not as stupid to think she might be able to just walk out. For one, although she had the intelligence of an American college graduate she had the physical form and appearance of a young child. For another, if her parents had her to pay off whatever they owed then whoever they owed their firstborn child to probably wouldn't like nor stand for it if said payment took off on him or her.

Third, this was well organized and practiced. Well supplied, prepared for, and things seemed to be getting done at an alarmingly fast rate. They had done this before, would probably do this again, and any kind of escape Sonya could come up with had probably been tried many times before therefore likely any escape attempt would be foiled quickly.

She would have to wait and see, for both an opportunity to escape or if she really liked this no matter how much as she doubted she would she might stay regardless of her irritation with her parents.

Getting sorted out by their freshly given tattoos was a mess and a half at the end of the night, because they were new and most were still bleeding even with the surprisingly clean rags passed around like candy to staunch it. Of course, there were the handful of children that didn't pay attention to what they were getting which resulted in time wasted checking the swelling flesh for what general shape said tattoos were in.

Sonya ended up sorted out next to a chatty redheaded girl that called herself Tatiana and another but older mousy haired boy that gave Dmitriy as his name, her fellow girl another thief who could've gotten a card tattoo but picked a cat and Dmitriy clarified his spider in a web as apparently just 'dedicated to a life of crime' rather than an actual future job class to be trained in.

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II (Thursday the 10th of May, 1956. Arnseiy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Being fostered with Tatiana the to-be con artist was a distinctly different kind of situation than living with her own parents. Thankfully and strangely.

Taking stock again a year later proved… somewhat interesting.

For one, the couple the two of them were sent to learn under were accepting of Sonya's early independence from them only if she kept them informed of what she got up to. For another, she didn't have to find something to do out of sight every day by herself anymore.

Additionally, they weren't in Saratov anymore, they were in Moscow. It was apparently easier to
hide the fact they were raising up the next generation of Mafiya members in larger cities, but equally so her 'father' didn't want her to remain in Saratov so she ended up elsewhere with a group of other 'displaced' children picked up by that Mafiya recruitment drive he shoved her into.

**Vor** Bazanov Arseniy Pavlovich was the girls' main trainer in everything an aspiring thief needed to learn the basics of, his partner but not wife who lived and certainly slept with him Primakova Elisaveta 'Lisa' Rostislavovna was the one primarily raising them and teaching them everything else a citizen of both the USSR and their Mafiya syndicate required them to know. They also stood in as their 'parents' in their little fake family, Tatiana claimed she had none and Sonya knew full well her own were still alive just utterly disinterested in her.

Arseniy only tended to teach the girls in the evening hours, and as such he slept most of the mornings away. The youngest of the household figured he worked a type of second shift, since being part of their Mafiya syndicate that upheld a variation of the *vory kod* prevented any of them from honest employment if one could support themselves by their criminal exploits. Elisaveta, who told the girls to call her just Lisa early on, took care of teaching them basic knowledge about everything else herself instead of sending them off to school like most children.

The older brunette first ensured they knew how to read and write not only in Cyrillic but several other Slavic languages first, then branched out into teaching them to speak in different languages as well as what Sonya recognized as basic geography, Soviet Union's variations and then foreign law, their own Thieves' Code they were being 'asked' to uphold, basic forgery in the guise of 'art', a very selective series of chemistry lessons, and mathematics.

Apparently neither girl could go to the public schools available as that would just allow the *uchastkovyi*, a cross between a Sheriff and a Constable but a local resident to their part of the city, to pick them out as Mafiya members before they ever stole their first mark. The two girls would eventually become known to the *militsiya*, and possibly the KBG, but Arseniy held the opinion the later that occurred the better.

Both children had ballet lessons in the morning, early enough that Tatiana usually swore under her breath every morning when Lisa woke them for the day. Sonya didn't mind the dance lessons, it helped with her still lingering clumsiness that she had yet to grow out of, and the other girl was enthusiastic of learning it if not appreciative of the early morning hours.

They also got to see a lot of the other girls they would eventually be working with then, as the woman who ran the ballet school was a minor clansman’s wife who didn't mind teaching more Mafiya girls to dance even if they never did go professional.

Breakfast was made shortly after that, mostly done and eaten without Arseniy, then another hour or so of gymnastics in the backyard or the basement to work on tumbling routines. A short break for hygiene reasons and so Lisa could go greet her lover when he woke, then they spent the rest of the morning on whatever the older woman wanted them to learn.

Lunch was taken a bit later than Sonya was used to at first, and very rarely did Arseniy join them for that awake or not. If he did join them they would move into what typically ended up being the more recognizable training a thief might use to escape, disguises and how to act like you belonged even if you didn't, how to use odd building features to escape that way, and the like. If not then Lisa would teach them how to lie, how to act in high society, how to tell someone was lying, and the less overtly stated parts of the code they were going to be held to as thieves for the Russian Mafiya.

Late afternoon was when the girls occasionally got to see Dmitriy again, as well as all the other children also in their neighborhood there for training and not more domestic reasons. That was more recognizable training in skills a thief needed to know that *vor* Arseniy handled for all of them;
pickpocketing, lockpicking, safecracking, hot wiring both automobiles and security systems, how to lose a tail, how to fence what you stole, and the like. Every now and again when the older criminal wasn't available due to whatever they would go to a different location that seemed centralized to their various foster homes for combat training under a man called vor Aleksandr, for small arms, knives, and whatever else anyone wanted to learn to use.

Then the two young girls had dinner with their two 'foster parents', and the rest of the evening was left to practice whatever skills they wanted before bed.

There was no real schedule to anything. There were frequent days when either Lisa or vor Arseniy weren't available and some rare occasions when neither were around for a day or three. Sonya and Tatiana were encouraged to do whatever appealed to them during those times, but while the older redhead was content to crack safes or work on her vocabulary in different languages the younger blonde liked to take a book on whatever was handy and escape their 'foster home' to explore some of Moscow’s less traveled streets or get a bench somewhere quiet.

It was a beautifully austere if cold city, and always somewhat colorful with something new to investigate if she just looked. Some industrial pollution and cookie cutter architecture that tarnished the view fast, but she didn't think it was any worse than America's manufacture suburb hellscapes or even the Rust Belt of ruined factories a little south of where Rachel once/would live.

Unfortunately, in Lisa's and Arseniy's eyes, she didn't go out solely to practice her pickpocketing. Though she did tend to do that a little just so the vor didn't lecture her on keeping skills sharp and contributing to the household funds, as well as keep an eye out for the odd identification that either of her 'foster parents' might be able to use.

Sonya rather did like the rewards the occasional pickpocketing brought her, because even if she still wasn't sold on the whole 'thief' thing the Mafiya life she was living would prevent her from having the school records getting a decent legal job would require. Barring her from that side of the world until she had the experience and skills to dodge anyone sent after her long enough to correct that. The set of her own lock picks and the agreement for staff training she secured by acquiring the IDs were particularly useful, as she was very good at lockpicking and rather wanted to keep from getting a skull or tombstone tattoo that denoted kills any time soon or in the far future.

Tatiana tended to act like an older sister she never wanted, a high-maintenance one that demanded attention when she could, so she wasn't all that sold on the character of what could charitably be called her first real 'girlfriend'. The redhead also got a little jealous of the younger girl's skills, because hers were a little more immediately useful than safe cracking or forgery.

Lisa was more of an elder sibling-type role model, mostly because the woman didn't like being called 'aunt'. She was a cheerful early riser that didn't care if they swore or bitched if they did so while doing what she set them to do.

Vor Arseniy was more of a parent in the house, because no one wanted him angry or irritated. He wasn't abusive, but he also didn't hold off on smacking either girl if they got too mouthy or disrespectful of him.

It was also because of him that Sonya could wander on the rare occasions she had free. He had said it was alright and not even Lisa went against what he said when he wasn't home.

It was on one said occasions that she ran into something unusual, rather someone unusual, that clued her in to something being a little skewed from the reality she recalled in the bizarre dream-life of Rachel's she once lived through.
III (Wednesday the 3rd of September, 1958. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Three years into her next new life in Moscow, in the fall of her seventh year and a decent budding thief in the making, Sonya met Cherep.

Just Cherep, apparently. He who had bright purple hair with matching eyes and spoke his Russian with a distinctly Czech accent. Wandering around the streets just like her, even if it was a school-day where most of the kids their age were tucked away in dark and dreary classrooms getting stuffed full of knowledge they might not ever use.

He was mainly a little annoyed at the questions she kept pestering him with, but she was more than a little fascinated and too curious to care.

Purple wasn't a natural coloring, yet his hair was bright ass purple. Even his eyebrows and eyelashes were the same blatant shade of eye-popping violet, including the hair on his arms.

"Why does everyone keep asking that?" He asked the shockingly clear fall sky not three minutes after meeting her, and even if it wasn't directed to her Sonya answered him anyways.

"Probably because they want to know what dye they can use to get your hair coloring. It's pretty neat, really." While Cherep gaped at her, for what reasons the tiny pickpocket didn't care to know, she plucked out a strand of his chin-length hair to inspect the root.

It was purple the whole way through. Huh.

The violently purple kid she had found then squawked like an offended parrot, slapping at her hands well after she plucked a strand of his hair. He didn't even look too surprised that he missed her by a good margin, merely glaring with that same darkening lavender eye coloring the equally tiny blonde had to accept as being completely natural as well. "Don't do that."

Tucking the strand of hair into her borrowed book as a bookmark, she gave him a level look and tucked the bound stack of paper under one arm. "And how are you going to stop me?"

Floundering a moment as the question stumped him, he looked around then his features brightened as if he had thought he hit on the perfect idea. "By leaving, bye."

Amused at the weak attempt, she blatantly followed him out of the square she confronted him in. It only took him a street to realize she hadn't stayed behind, and the glare she got over his shoulder made her crack a smirk. "What?"

The kid, because he was more of a child than Sonya had ever been herself, huffed out his obvious irritation with her and proceeded to try and ignore the fact he was being followed. Badly.

As in, he tried running a few streets until his limited stamina ran out. She easily kept pace with his best effort to outrun her, much to his painfully obvious chagrin.

She politely, for her, waited out the gasps for breath before nudging the boy nearly folded in half and struggling to breath with one shoe. "Really? That was… pathetic."

Really pathetic. Like… not even the other civilian kids she sometimes watched from afar got out of breath that fast. He probably wasn't… well cared for.

The other child’s clothing supported that guess, given the sloppily done patchwork almost not spanning the hole in his shirt enough to contain one sharply boney elbow.
"Don't you have other people to bother?" Cherep gritted out petulantly at her, still breathing heavily enough she was beginning to become concerned for him. "Go stalk someone else."

She actually thought about following his bitchy advise, but since neither vor Arseniy nor Lisa was home that day and Tatiana was being a little moody bitch Sonya didn't really care to be home just yet. There was the possibility of going to bug vor Aleksandr for additional lessons in whatever was at hand or going across the neighborhood to see what Dmitriy was up to, but neither option was guaranteed because they had their own things to do most days and might not have time for a lone girl-child.

Most didn't. Sonya had never been stopped or bothered before she got a tiny bit distracted by the strange hair coloring.

It wouldn't pay to find a good target to pickpocket because no one was home to appreciate the new legal identity they had a limited time to use before it was reported. At home she had already picked most if not all the locks the vor had in stock for her, and was thoroughly bored with doing the same schoolwork that it seemed Rachel had once already done in her life and Sonya knew from that.

There was little else she had to do in a timely manner, sucked to be him.

"I actually have nothing else to do that's as interesting as you are right now." She informed him dryly, shrugging a little at his incredulous look that earned her.

Cherep gaped at her unattractively for a few moments longer, but eventually gave a kind of shudder-shrug and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Um... okay."

She waited a beat, but when all the kid did was stare at her expectantly the blonde had to huff in bemused irritation herself. "You... are such a pushover."

"Hey!"

It wasn't until much later, when she got home and ignored Tatiana wailing about having to cook for herself to check if Arseniy or Lisa were home yet, that Sonya absently recalled what Cherep's name translated into English as and realized what had bothered her so about the kid she met that morning. Other than his apparently natural coloring, that is.

Cherep was a word she had for a skull.

A purple haired and eyed individual named Skull?

First off... who the hell named their kid skull?

Secondly... Rachel had watched an anime who had someone like that once. Sonya didn't recall most of the plot or anything about a lot of the characters in that show, all she really recalled was a wimpy son of some Italian Mafioso and boxers... and the cursed babies with the pacifiers.

She blankly stared at the ceiling over her bed as her 'foster sister' moped around a little downstairs and told herself it was just a coincidence, then tried to believe it.

She was part of the Russian Mafiya. The physically tiny thief would've heard something about colorful fire or creepy-strict zombie Mafia-Enforcers by now if that was at all true, and she hadn't. There had been a complete lack of anything supernatural or different from this life and her last.

However, she was a very minor baby Mafiya thief. Maybe she didn't qualify for that kind of
information yet?

Maybe… maybe she should stick around Cherep until she sorted that out… because if something like
that did exist… well…

Torn between wanting to laugh or cry at the impossibility, even if it was a connection to her last
lifetime in a place she never thought to look, Sonya huffed a sigh as she rolled over to go to sleep.

IV (Friday the 26th of September, 1958. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist
Republic.)

"Sonya's been meeting with someone!" Tatiana practically sang much to Lisa's tolerant amusement,
grinning stupidly at the fellow baby thief almost two full years younger than her.

"And how long did it take you to figure that one out?" Sonya deadpanned back, following them
easily enough as they walked to where the morning’s ballet practice was held. "It's only been going
on for most of the month."

There was a kind of honor among thieves, or at least the Mafiya ones she had gotten to know here,
but privacy wasn't something this version of them religiously practiced. If it happened regularly,
chances were that both Lisa and Arseniy already knew it was going on and were planning something
if you weren't supposed to be doing it.

Case in point, the first time she left their little home and neighborhood for another part of Moscow
Lisa had known the moment she returned. Whether or not that was due to spies or someone being a
concerned neighbor and informing her, or just because she noted something not available in their
section of Moscow on her, was up in the air. The first time Tatiana blew off practice or study when
she had the free time to just laze about like a bum Arseniy had known and given her hell for it and
the man had been gone for three days due to whatever it was that took his attention most of the time.

"Sonya?" Lisa questioned lightly, giving the youngest a serious look even with the grin on her lips
and tossing her short brown hair out of her way with one hand.

She kind of wondered how the woman managed that expression so flawlessly. "He's got purple
hair.

"Which would explain why he caught your attention." The older Mafiya member gave a semi-
accepting and semi-dismissive shrug, holding them up just before the doors to the dancehall to
continue posing questions. "Why keep meeting with him?"

"Because his reactions to me poking him are funny."

It wasn't worth it to lie, but telling the truth wasn't something Sonya want to do either. Telling the
older woman that she was watching him for any purple fire suddenly appearing probably wasn't a
good idea. She still wasn't too sure about the odd coincidence of the meaning of Cherep's name and
his unusual coloring, so like the rest of the weird things that nagged her it was ignored.

Just like the memories of being Rachel and the fact she was used to alleviate the debts her parents
had.

Lisa hummed instead of showing either disapproval or approval, waving both girls into the building
for their usual morning activities.

It wasn't until they were stretching at the barre with their class that Tatiana asked a few questions
herself. "Are you going to bring him home with you?"

'Was she going to bring him into the Mafiya' was what the redhead was really asking.

They were supposed to be on the lookout for additional blood for their syndicate, though it was more like a community in practice, and required to train them themselves if they found anyone.

"No. He's not really the type." Sonya informed her lowly with a shrug, trying to ignore the attention she was getting from some of the older girls for finally speaking up during this time. "From what I gather he's as innocent as can be, meeting Arseniy would probably cause him to faint or something. Clumsy too, he'd forever be trying to keep up even if he started classes with the boys right away."

Tatiana pulled a Lisa and hummed, not nearly as blandly as the older Mafiya woman could pull off but enough to convey the fact she wasn't sold on the younger girl's reasoning.

Much to her disgust Dmitriy pulled her aside just before their mass lesson on deciphering altered blueprints for hidden safes and panic rooms to ask her basically the same thing. The boy was kind of like the cousin that no one knew what job he had, he was generally good with whatever dropped into his lap and didn't seem to mind doing a bit of everything.

Dmitriy was also a solid friend she had somehow made over the last couple years, even if he tended to avoid the redhead she lived with when he could. "Well?"

Sonya rolled her eyes at him and the older boy snorted at her.

"Give me the quick and dirty version, then."

"Met him not too long ago, has weird but natural hair and eye colors, and he still freaks out when I track him down on my free days. No, I don't think he's Mafiya material. Anything else?"

He blinked at her a few times, frowning suspiciously. "This isn't the onset of a crush or anything stupid like that, is it?"

"Like the one Tatiana has on you?" She asked of him wryly, pulling him into her home's living room where Arseniy was setting up for his lesson that evening. "Hell no, don't think I'm even old enough to start that nonsense."

He gave an aggravated sigh, but willingly left her for the designated 'male' side of the room.

Their lesson might have been mixed in terms of ages and gender, but that didn't mean there were even remotely decent people on either side. Separating them out merely kept certain personalities from clashing and interrupting the lesson, both things that might just end up hospitalizing a handful of the younger but already established Mafiya members.

Arseniy hadn't been pleased the last time someone had the balls to interrupt him, he had tossed the offender straight out the front doors on his head. The last idiot that tried to grope Lisa on the sly ended up needing to get his hand reattached due to losing them to a pissed off vor, as well.

Sonya was always surprised when some moron tested his limits yet again, even if it happened nearly three to four times a year since she had started living and training under him.

Later that night, the older man's only reaction to learning she had admitted to knowing a civilian 'friend' was laying down the rule that only if she finished her work for any day she could go off to meet him if she wanted.
Tatiana was appalled at the favoritism.

He wasn't impressed with that assumption. "Maloletko, use your head. A true vor doesn't own property, it's against the code. Her friend can be used to buy and hold any property she might want, which gets around that nicely."

The younger girl actually suspected there was a little favoritism involved, if merely because she didn't tend to need lessons repeated to her so Arseniy didn't really have to deal with her often. Tatiana had been in trouble more than she had, both girls were rather sure Lisa reported to him everything they got up to given he never really needed to ask where they were in what skill or how much they practiced.

Both the insult and the mini-lecture was enough to get the older girl to shut up though, and the before bedtime safecracking practice continued as normal.

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V (Monday the 29th of December 1958. Dmitriy's Garage, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Tatiana was among the first of them to be arrested.

Even considering the rest of the neighborhood baby Mafiya members around at various ages or rough skills, no one else had managed to screw up that badly yet.

Sonya skipped out of the house nearly the same instant Lisa reported the other girl's arrest to a freshly returned for the night Arseniy, spent a safe few hours with Cherep in a park then wandered over to the garage Dmitriy both lived over and worked at when he had little else to do.

The preteen, who was by that point eleven to her eight years of age, almost burst a rib laughing at the irony. "Who's the petty thief in your unit? What was she doing, pickpocketing?"

"Oh no, not picking pockets. The militsiya picked her up trying for a five-finger discount." Corrected the younger girl lazily, lounging on the hood of the car Dmitriy was hotwiring to show less mileage for later selling. Her nose wrinkled against the stench of motor oil and superheated metal that lingered in the shop with everything closed against the inclement weather outside even if they were the only ones there at the moment and nothing was running. "Shoplifting… poor Tatiana."

He actually stuck his head out from under the sedan, giving her a confused frown that she could see for once. "Why the hell did she do that? Tatiana can't be that stupid, to try a method she's not trained for."

"I bet you it has something to do with a few of the other girls around here." As the redhead did pour most of whatever free time she had into hanging out with the rest of the Mafiya girls living locally, while Sonya occasionally ducked out to see Cherep.

"No bet. That's too obvious." Dmitriy rolled back under the car, though the baby thief wasn't sure what he was doing now given the lack of metal on metal that would've sounded if he was doing something. Though from what little she knew of automobiles he might be manually rewinding the speedometer just to waste some time.

"I think I don't ever want to be arrested."

"You thinking of going straight?"

She gave that question some serious thought for a moment.
Over the years, her morals had changed a bit from what Rachel had to now. She didn't care much either way for the idea of stealing for a living, the only thing she kept to was ensuring that whoever she stole from would be able to afford the misfortune without too much trouble.

As it was, she did like the reward system she knew her two 'foster parents' Mafiya members were training her with, to mentally link positive recompenses with her stealing. Like a dog getting a treat for doing a trick but the 'treats' were generally either useful or desired, so Sonya kept up with it.

Rachel had floundered trying to pick her own job after college, she was surprisingly okay with having her own decided for her even if it was less than legal in nature. "Not really, I just don't want to deal with the hassle of getting arrested."

"That'd take some almost unreal skills, girl." Dmitriy informed her absently, finally fully rolling out from under the probably stolen sedan to pick himself up and look her in the eye. Just so they could have the rest of the conversation able to see one another, and so he could wind down from whatever he had been working on. "You know you're probably already on someone's watch list by now, right?"

An errant thought of her recent major wanderings made the young thief smirk at as was arguably her best friend right now. "Then I'll be the World's Greatest Thief. Never caught, only suspected."

"Aiming high, are we?" He murmured more to himself than her as he cleaned off his grease and oil marred fingers with a rag pulled from his own battered tool chest. "Aren't you going to have to get into the higher end heists if you want to aim for something like that?"

"Probably." Sonya shrugged and hopped off the bonnet of the car she had spent the last two hours laying on, giving the older preteen a short wave of farewell on her way out of the garage and through the piling snow back to her 'home'.

To be bluntly honest, she didn't abstain from robbing low-income people out of some displaced desire to respect her fellow citizens' property or wages. She never pickpocketed them because it frankly didn't pay off that well, and they tended to spot the difference in their wallets faster.

You got more from lifting half of a tourist's wallet than you could from cleaning out five warehouse workers on payday, and one person raising a fuss was less notable than five in the same area.

That also meant the young thief tended to relieve wealthier citizens of their money simply because she tended to be lazy and not want to stalk more people than she had to.

Risk management wasn't something her Mafiya syndicate taught, but it was something she could pull easily enough from a dream-life.

VI (Thursday the 1st of January, 1959. A flophouse, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Cherep screeched a bit too loudly for Sonya's peace of mind when she popped open his window and let herself inside.

It was early, and one of the almost impossible days when the lady that ran their ballet classes was too sick to teach. Lisa was also gone for the day and possibly part of the next doing something no one spoke anything about, leaving vor Arseniy home with both Sonya and Tatiana.

The older girl was still basically grounded and confined to the house until she made up for the hassle
the man went through to bail her out of jail in a mostly legal way that wouldn't stick her with the beginnings of a rap sheet.

Well… rather a rap sheet with more than any normal civilian girl would have.

That ended up giving her a downright out of the blue free morning in the middle of a Russian winter, when she generally tended to only have the afternoons or evenings to herself.

Only a fraction of which she had spent on him, all total, in honesty.

While she could appreciate Cherep's shock at seeing her in the morning, it was still **too early** for it. "**Shut up** already."

He flailed with his hands, as he usually did when she surprised him or did something he didn't think was polite. It was more panicked than Sonya was used to seeing from him, probably because he didn't know she knew full well he was bunking in a flophouse for beggars and the homeless.

She felt a little insulted at that possibly only assumed reasoning for the actions going on.

It hadn't been that hard to track him down, and the fact he usually wore ragged if serviceable clothing was a big tip off that he wasn't remotely financially secure. His health was another, but that could've been attributed to several factors if she was pressed to be honest. Figuring out he was an orphan, or at least without parental influences, was just as easy because in the half a year she knew him he never once mentioned either a curfew or limitation on his time to her and they did sometimes spend lunch and dinner together.

Sonya even kept a ready supply of rubles on hand for visiting him, tucking a few bills into his pockets now and again when it was either freezing cold or she hadn't seen him for a stretch of days. She had been curious how weather-proof his residence was and now she knew it'd do for deep winters, but it was a bit drafty.

Cherep wasn't doing too badly on his own, which was why she never really confronted him about his situation and still wouldn’t. He could go to a local trade school if he wanted, ate somewhat regularly even without her, so she never felt very guilty for leaving her friend to handle his own affairs.

He'd either manage to do better on his own or stay in the slums all his life, and unless he asked for help she wouldn't nose into his life that much.

Instead of anything she was sure the kid was expecting from her, Sonya merely slumped on his saggy bare mattress of a bed but left the two ragged wool blankets he used to insulate himself at night alone. "**For fuck's sake, please stop.**"

"Sonya?"

"Yes?"

Blinking wide purple eyes at her, Cherep gripped then pulled his ratty blankets higher up his flannel clad chest and darted a few looks at his previously jammed shut window sill she had closed behind herself. "What are you doing?"

She peered up at him around her arms, not tempted at all to get upright. More sleep sounded wonderful to her. "Lazing around. Might take a nap. Why?"

He gave a full body twitch at her reply, the same one she always got for somehow irritating him.
"What are you doing in my room? How do you even know where I live?"

"Again, lazing. I've got a free morning, oddly enough." The tiny thief scooted herself to a more comfortable position, stretching out across the foot of his bed. "And it wasn't that hard, I knew where you lived a couple days after I met you."

The boy gave her what he probably thought was a disgusted look, but he ended up looking more like a disgruntled cat to her than anything. "You are… annoying."

"And still, you're a pushover. Go back to sleep."

He visibly thought about it for a long moment but did eventually lay back down.

Sonya curled her arms up over her face, to both block out the early morning light and bury her nose into her own clothing instead of suffering through the rather squalid stench of Cherep's tiny room. It was a mix of burning dust, unwashed bodies, and the cheap soap he used to keep himself and his clothes somewhat clean.

Lying in a pool of sunlight was the only plus. That, and the walls blocking the worst of the draft seeping through this building.

"Do... you want to go get breakfast?"

"Later."

"Alright."

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**VII (Tuesday the 22nd of March, 1960. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)**

**Technically**, Sonya could probably afford to strike out on her own after she turned nine if it wasn't for the whole age/physically a pipsqueak thing.

By the end of 1959 she was a well-trained petty thief, a respectable pickpocket and lockpick any crew of thieves could find multiple uses for. All she really had to do was a big haul or two, at least big enough for Arseniy to approve and take a cut for both lodging and training her and one for their clan's treasury, and she'd be freed from her 'foster home'.

She could even find a crew to join for said hauls or stick to working alone as she mostly tended to do already.

Her half joking goal of becoming the World's Greatest Thief meant there were a few more rough edges she still had to polish up before striking out of her 'foster home'. Safecracking for one, hacking was also something she really needed to investigate given Rachel's memories of the internet and how it hindered criminal activity once it took off, hot wiring security systems was another.

Lisa was highly amused at the goal she set herself, how she found out was a mystery she wasn't poking, vor Arseniy not so much but probably more for the fact it would mean Sonya was sticking around longer than he had figured on initially. They eventually decided then informed her that if she wanted to keep on training she could very well live with them at least until Tatiana deemed herself finished and ready to strike out on her own. Only if she contributed to the household funds, their tribute to the clan's coffers, and when she had nothing else to do keep going to both training and the physical conditioning classes when they were held.
Tatiana scoffed when she heard, fully into the swing of puberty and still with the jealousy problem that marred the girls' relationship. Sonya mainly ignored her, hoping that the redhead would get over it and they could go back to how they were in the beginning.

That hadn't been bad, a bit standoffish but decent enough. There had been none of the hate, at least.

Upon hearing she was going to try for that goal Dmitriy personally guided her through some hotwiring exercises and set up more when she asked. In return for the effort the preteen demanded a future favor or two from her, which had Sonya staring at him for a long moment dubiously before reluctantly agreeing to.

She did wonder what he wanted that badly to try to gain a hold on someone that might get it for him without personal risk. Favors weren't traded around lightly even between the younger kids running around the neighborhood for a reason, it usually only took one or two bad examples to warn off the rest from going lightly with it.

For the time being, all Sonya concentrated on was planning her first big heist and keeping an eye on what was happening in the world.

She knew the Cold War was ongoing and had no plans on still being in the USSR for the few decades it would take for Communism to be replaced by Capitalism. She was pretty sure there was a fallout of some serious degree that wouldn't be very conductive to her lifestyle.

The ongoing Space Race was interesting to watch happen, and she was torn between the smug pride in America for eventually beating the rest of the world to the Moon and some enthusiasm for the burgeoning USSR's Space Program's successes. The excitement and pride were somewhat infectious to witness.

One thing she did plan on was being in Germany when the Berlin Wall fell, just simply because she could, and the first order of business the moment she got out of the USSR was to find herself some damn blue jeans.

Sonya planned to remain with Lisa and Arseniy for two or three more years as she built up her skills further just to be safe, then leaving the USSR for other pastures. As long as she sent back her tributes to their syndicate it was actually allowed because stealing where you lived tended to be a very bad idea, so thieves tended to wander a bit even without outside motives prodding them.

She spent a lot of time in January working up the nerve to steal a few building plans of high-end shops she intended to sharpen her cat burglary skills on. Then planning on how to get around the security systems and any possible guards, pricing what she was likely to pick up when she went so she'd know the order to prioritize, and how she was going to get to Kaluga and back with her 'hot' loot.

Lisa wasn't much for big heist planning, so Sonya spent a downright unusual amount of time with Arseniy as he overlooked her initial plans and pointed out the flaws that might get her caught before she learned the hard way.

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Sonya wasn't impressed with the barely veiled mockery of the previous aristocracy's fall in the play
but he had been, so she figured it was alright. Once she got back she would probably drag him to the cinema to see something impressive and find out what he thought of *The Snow Queen*, an animated film she recalled watching once upon a dream-time's childhood.

Packing up for her first big heist was both easy and hard as the young thief had been lifting small things for years, but this was the first time she would do something so blatantly illegal outside petty theft or easily hid targets.

Morally wrong or not, Sonya was *excited* to be formally entering her profession and that kept her fussing over her equipment and tools for a large part of the night.

Part of it might just be because she was tired of being viewed as a child, another part might just be the conditioning she had been subjected to for nearly five years making her unconsciously assume the big job would get her a big reward.

It could even be because she was anticipating a challenge, something she hadn't had since tackling the initial thief skills taught to her.

Lisa equipped her with the address of the safe house in the area she would be stealing from just before the young Mafiya girl got on the train with her luggage and reminded her to pay her dues for using them for shelter and operating in their territory.

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**VIII (Wednesday the 23rd of March, 1960. Kaluga, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)**

For all that Sonya had trained for years to handle something just like it, she had no expectations that her first heist would go smoothly.

It didn't, but at least she hadn't been surprised by that.

Her target was a jewelry store, a medium-sized one that had been in business for years and weathered the fall of the nobles shockingly well for a now communist run country. Probably by being somewhat affluent in their local section of the government. They had a few hired staff that would stall any formal investigation for a time and they were not nearly popular enough in designing their own pieces for their jewelry to be easily identifiable if she fenced them locally or in neighboring cities.

Not a good first target as there were a lot of semi-suspicious things going on there, but it was within her range *and* in an out-of-the-way part of the country so if she *screwed up*... she *might* dodge the worse of the suspicion she would then be due.

While she was a little concerned that they might have more than one method for catching jewel thieves, it was also an older building that hadn't been remodeled to have an alarm system in place yet. There was a night guard unfortunately, but her target wasn't the gems on display for sale unless she had the time and space for stealing them too.

What she wanted was the raw metal and gemstones waiting to be set. Much easier to fence and less noticeable to law enforcement and given the store did do repairs and a rare few custom designs?

They probably had the raw material on hand. Raw, *harder to track*, unworked silver and gold with maybe the loose gemstones due to be set into a piece of jewelry.

The afternoon of her planned heist, the physically tiny thief took an oversized piece of luggage with
her and cased the store out under the guise of waiting for her mother to finish book shopping one building over. After a good look around and the preliminary inspection to ensure there wasn't an alarm system in place yet as the paperwork claimed, she wandered to the bookstore her fake mother was supposedly shopping in.

Getting the building plans for both buildings had taken a lot of time, but it paid off because she knew exactly where the vents ran in the bookstore and how to get to the roof of the jewelry store from there. A quick duck into the second-floor washrooms, after waiting for the only other lady to leave, netted her an easy access way that wouldn't raise awkward questions of what she thought she was doing.

Changing into long sleeved clothing, tying up her shoulder-length blonde hair into a bun, slipping on a pair of leather gloves, and the thief was ready to begin carefully climbing into the vents while juggling both the vent covering and her bag.

It was a tight squeeze, not to mention the luggage she had picked to hold whatever she stole tended to be unwieldy in its nearly empty state. She had to spend most of an hour carefully and silently edging her way up a sheer vertical shaft to the roof vent, then she spent the rest of the afternoon waiting behind the grill that kept animals from getting into the vent.

Next time, she was bringing a book or something for this part.

To play it safe, Sonya was only going to move between buildings under the cover of night. She had a black hood Lisa had made her, to cover her bright ash blonde hair from being spotted, as well as a thin scarf in dark blue that would cover her from nose to chin just in case. The luggage she had was reversible, the current 'inside' was a dark felt color and would be used to hold whatever she stole until she got somewhere to fence or pass it on for her tributes. Currently it held her lock picks, three lengths of rope, a screwdriver, a stethoscope, and her 'day' change of clothes.

When the sun finally sunk beneath the horizon, she carefully pried the vent covering off and slithered out onto the roof of the three-story building.

Emptying her bag of most of her tools she first tucked her lock picks into a pouch at the small of her back, secured the stethoscope around her neck, her screwdriver into a sleeve against her left forearm, then she uncurled one of her lengths of rope and affixed it to the sturdiest structure on the roof in preparation for later that night.

Another few hours were wasted as she waited for both the nightlife to taper off and for the security guard to have enough time to become complacent. Shortly after midnight was the point when she felt somewhat confident she would be able to reach the other building's roof without being spotted, and she finally got around to starting her heist already impatient and a bit antsy about how long she had been basically a sitting duck if anyone so much as got curious.

Dropping down a story wasn't that hard, and with her gymnastic training she managed it and the landing easily even if she could have lowered herself with the rope that instead lowered her bag.

It was once she got to the other roof that things started to go wrong.

According to the plans she had acquired the roof access door didn't have an alarm on it, but here in reality it was wired and clearly marked as a fire escape. Finishing her last-minute preparations for her break-in the thief also glared at said clearly marked door, wrapping the scarf over her lower face and fitting the hood over her hair and the excess cloth to keep it in place.

Instead of that plan, she had to look at this building's vents before maybe considering the windows.
The problem was that these vents had covers that screwed on in this building, and it was likely she'd have to force the interior vents off and that would make noise she wasn't sure she could afford.

There wasn't much left to do but try something, as her first plan was a bust.

Recollecting her bag from weighing down the end of her escape rope, Sonya removed the exterior vent with her screwdriver and left it on the roof. Sliding into the ventilation ducts was different than doing the same in the newer building next to it, as it was less smooth and more piecemeal in construction. Her clothes kept getting snagged on sharp lips of metal or the occasional nail, making for a very jerky descent into the building.

She took the first opportunity to leave the ventilation system she could, a hallway vent that was positioned near the floor she barely squeezed through thanks to her tiny size. Finally, on the second floor and in what seemed to be the store's main offices, the budding thief started casing around for anything she might want to take.

Scorning the office supplies, as most of it was both too heavy and not worth much, she stole into what looked like the business owner's office after picking his lock. It took her less than three minutes to find the safe, but almost fifteen to crack it.

The business ledgers were left as they were, but the number of old ruble coins in pure gold and silver became the first things she lifted from her first heist. The supply of paper rubles went next and a bag of loose gemstones were the last of the things she took out of there. Relocking the safe and the office door behind her would hopefully delay the discovery of her work that night, or at least just this bit.

More settled now that things were finally going somewhat right as planned, she padded off. She was off to a lucrative start, and she hadn't even had to evade a night guard or found her main goal yet.

One last cursory look around the second floor showed little else that would interest her, so the Sonya descended to the first floor carefully.

Then she made a rapid retreat back up the stairs just ahead of the security guard as he apparently followed his normal habits to patrol the second floor after a check of the showroom downstairs.

By the ticking of the office clock glaring out into the gloomy space, it was barely one in the morning. Sonya decided to follow the man to figure out his route before risking getting caught from skipping ahead of his usual path.

What she forgot was the loose coins that caused her to duck hastily when her bag shifted, and they clinked together clearly into the near-silence. There was a pause in the guard's stride, a long one that took almost a minute as he listened for any further odd noises that might signify her location or another thief moving around him.

She didn't dare breathe until he slowly started walking again, and only moved when his pace picked up back to what it was before she almost tipped him off to her presence.

Instead of following him immediately, the thief waited until he had gotten a decent amount of space between them before finding a place to temporarily stashing her bag on someone's office chair.

Screw following him with the bag in hand… that near-miss had almost cost her a few years off her life.

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IX (Friday the 25th of March, 1960. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)
Bleary-eyed and still exhausted, Sonya returned to Moscow with more jewels and precious metals than she planned on.

She did successfully pull off the heist in the end, but at the cost of scaling up a ventilation shaft then spending the rest of the night and part of the next morning in the neighboring building’s ventilation shafts with a bulky bag of loot to struggle with.

The jewelry store clerks had secured their stock of gems and metal under the display cases instead of leaving them in the mostly glass with brass fittings showcases, giving her the opportunity to lift them without alerting the lone guard that the store was being robbed under his nose. She had to take twice the amount of time she had planned on including that in her heist, as it took two shots to completely clear out with a guard wandering around, but she did it and got the jeweler's workstation located in the main floor's back room she had originally targeted.

Though she managed to get more than she thought she would and that was good in a way, it also proved to be a very heavy load for a young thief of her stature to manage.

She had waited until well after the robbery had been reported before even twitching from the lip of the vent she had spent more hours on than she was comfortable with inside of. Using the time she would need to make it down the other building’s interior safely to put even more space between the cops showing up and finally leaving the area to widen their search for the thief responsible.

Making her slow and careful way out of the bookstore after changing back into the previous day's clothes had been nerve-wracking, Sonya even got stopped by a operativnik who asked what a young girl was doing wandering around alone that morning and she was forced to bullshit about a visit to a uncle a few streets over on the spot while the stolen goods he was looking for pulled heavily at her shoulders.

Her heart had nearly hammered out of her chest while doing so, but eventually the press of 'more important' things had gotten her dismissed.

The rest of her big heist day was spent sleeping off the late night at the Mafiya maintained safe house, then doling out the cash and a few of the bigger gems she managed to swipe as her tribute for infringing on another group's territory.

Her last day in Kaluga was geared more to sorting out the loot she stole, earmarking a few pieces of actual jewelry for both Lisa and Tatiana and a bar of solid gold for both Arseniy and Dmitriy. If she was a little more certain to Cherep's character and what he would do if given stolen items she might have marked something out for him, but she figured paying for meals and things to do when she visited was safer for the time being.

Sonya would be keeping some of the loose gemstones and two of the ruble coins for herself. It wasn't wise to keep trophies, but... rare old coins. Something she could sell later if she needed cash for something unexpected.

The rest she would fence or liquidate, then pay her thieves’ clan tribute for a couple years with most of what was left and hoard a bit for a nest-egg.

Packing it all back away and in properly hidden locations took some doing, because the quilted blanket with the internal pockets she packed for it ended up too heavy to conceal everything. She had to acquire another and make simple thread loops to contain any noise all that metal would generate, just to ensure that if she was searched she would be able to get away with her loot.

Before she left the town, the tiny thief picked up the day's newspaper just for laughs. Her heist was
secondary to the news about the successful launch of satellite Sputnik 5 and its later retrieval, but she was pleased to read about how the animals involved in the launch surviving perfectly fine.

She'd take the paper back with her but didn't plan on holding onto the article detailing the burglary of a mildly popular jewelry store for any longer than a week.

Her return to Moscow went off rather well, her two loot blankets hadn't rated a look beyond noting she had them by the conductor. Arseniy picked her up from the station, easily taking both suspiciously heavy blankets from her and not even twitching at the fact she had an additional one aside the one they sent with her.

Once home and her things were unpacked, she went to the basement with both older Mafiya members to sort out exactly what she had to give as tribute to both their syndicate and them as the ones that trained her. It was only after she started in on the second blanket, ripping the seams and spilling out the rag muffled jewelry and metal on the table set up for her, that Lisa started acting like a proud mother hen over her successful haul. All Arseniy did was smirk himself, but it did get bigger as more loose gems and metal ingots were set down for consideration after the complete jewelry sets.

It took them a few hours, and a bit of guesswork for general values certain pieces could be fenced for, to total up the amount she would be credited with bringing in. Sonya took the opportunity to distribute the tokens of her appreciation to them both under the vor's sharp eye and set aside the other pieces she intended to give Tatiana and Dmitriy.

Discounting the rare old coins that needed specialized fencers to sell or would be just buried somewhere and dug up once things got nice and muddled, she made away with nearly a million rubles in jewelry, gems, and metals. In USSR that might have been a lot, but it was barely a quarter of a million in US dollars.

Arseniy gave a slow nod as he totaled up their guesswork, finally giving Sonya a rare look of approval. "You may get a jeweled moon tattoo over your cat, to show you've successfully pulled off a jewelry heist at night. You could even get a grey dove, or even a pink rose, to show you did it without raising suspicion over your innocence."

"Even if I don't intend to be a jewel thief?" She quietly questioned tiredly, rubbing at her eyes with her left hand. "It's interesting, but something I'm probably not going to do again in a fast hurry."

He gave a dismissive shrug of a shoulder, picking through the heap of precious metal and stones to sort out the intricately designed pieces they would have to either sit on or sell fast. "You have time to waste, the proceeds of this will cover your dues for a few years if you want."

Lisa was pairing up the earrings, clipping them to blank cardstock they kept on hand for making fake business cards when needed for cons. "You can take a break, Sonya. No one can say you didn't earn it."

It was something to at least contemplate, so she gave the two of them a shrug in answer for now.

They were right, though. She had more than a little time to think about it before she had to do something or risk a hitman coming after her for flaking off her duties as an aspiring Mafiya thief.

X (Sunday the 27th of March, 1960. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

After a day simply for rest, and to reset her sleeping pattern to be less 'night owl', Sonya skipped town again to visit Valya's tattoo parlor in Saratov.
The man proved to be greatly impressed that she achieved the rights to be identified as a 'jewel thief' as young as she had. She gave him an opal gemstone in exchange for inking the crystal crescent moon positioned to cradle her kitten.

The man even touched up her first tattoo before she left his rather hidden alcove for tattoo work, because over the last five years she had grown a lot and it was looking both faded and a bit stretched out.

She promised herself that only if she reached her mid-teens without getting caught would she get the white rose on the other side of her cat. Pink wasn't all that impressive, honestly, and she didn’t remotely like the idea of murdering someone just to earn herself red roses.

Then she spent a few hours just wandering around her hometown, merely because she was kind of fascinated to see the differences half a decade had done to the city. She avoided the house she once lived in and general area she spent her first few years wandering around, simply because she was aware she had issues with both her biological parents and didn’t feel like encountering either just yet.

There were doubts now, but not enough to make confronting anyone about her possibly off suspicions.

Instead, she visited a few of the farther early haunts. Noting if they had been re-appropriated or not and by whom.

Her second return to Moscow was quieter than the first time, given she took the morning train out and came back on the evening one.

What she didn't expect was encountering Cherep, or Cherep encountering a few Mafiya members that didn't think he was amusing.

Sonya dumbly watched from the shadows as one of the drunk and tattooed men take a swing at her friend, absently noting they had prison tats instead of the professional ones her syndicate had their members get.

There were drunk Mafiya vory on the street... in a territory she was sure they weren't allowed to wander freely... disturbing the quiet street, likely drawing the wrong kind of attention to themselves and the baby-Mafiya-in-training in the neighborhood, and they were harassing her friend.

As far as being a Mafiya member went, she wasn't particularly violent. She slapped and punched her friends, lightly, but didn't go out of her way to harm others if she could avoid it. The one thing that always seemed odd to her was her deep appreciation for the combat training they were given, especially the staff training she had bargained for years ago. She had loved it, badgering vor Aleksandr for every bit he might know and asking around for anyone else that might be able to teach her.

Using that combat training as it was intended had never really crossed her mind, other than ensuring Tatiana's sometimes big mouth didn't end up harming her unnecessarily. The staff-training she had begged for but only got a small amount of had been more a curiosity to her than something she had planned on ever using.

Staff training she promptly put into use with someone's discarded rake, after quietly breaking off the metal head affixed to one end.

Sonya leapt in to wallop one of the men across the face without much issue, sliding her thin body between that man and his two friends and her own friend. The fact Cherep didn't even squeak at her
sudden arrival was mentally filed away to be questioned later, because they had a bigger problem.

The *vory* she had just defied were all killers, given the general guideline of what tattoo meant what the tiny thief could identify that much at a glance. A knife through the neck was a killer for hire, one had the 243 police badge across the back of one hand that was for assaulting police officers and a collection of skull tats for murders on his chest, and the third had the Celtic cross style crosshairs that meant hitman scrawled across his back.

Thankfully, the hitman was the one laid out cold by her first strike. She wasn't too sure how well she would have held up against him if he wasn't drunk and caught completely off-guard. As it was his two friends/underlings/drinking buddies were apparently the easily offended and aggressively drunk types, Sonya had difficulty fending them off even as wasted as they were.

They outweighed her, would've had a longer reach without the length of wood she had appropriated as a weapon, and were more used to fighting with the other as a team than she was fighting two opponents at the same time. The fact they were intoxicated was really the only reason she managed to buy any amount of time or even survived the first exchange of blows.

The *vor* with the police battery tat finally managed to gain a brain cell or two to use, a very disturbing grin crossing his dirty face before he abruptly spun to reach pass her for Cherep.

Who had stood there behind her like a moron and Sonya swore to herself that she would teach him what not to do in a fight the very next day… if they survived.

Desperate and a little terrified of the situation about to develop with her friend in the middle, she slammed a two-handed swing down on his arm even as she mule-kicked his partner in crime away from her for breathing room to use.

She was as surprised as everyone else when her double-handed blow managed to break a man's forearm and her kick knocked the other Mafiya man backwards into a brick wall. She still retained the presence of mind to drop the wood to grab Cherep and haul ass out of there before anyone else could recover, but a very nasty suspicion started weaseling into her thoughts even as her friend finally started trying to keep up with her.

As a not even ten-year-old girl, she was nowhere near strong enough for what she managed to do not a minute ago.

She tried to tell herself it was just the adrenalin. People could do awesome things when in fear of their or someone else's life, right?

It was *coincidence*, the kid technically named 'skull' behind her wasn't going to be cursed as a rainbow baby for years and there was no such thing as multicolored Mafia fire that could bend reality.

...right?

Chapter End Notes

AN#2 : Promised Translations

*Vorovskoy Mir – Thieves' World, Russian term for the underworld*
Vory v Zakone (Singular vor, Plural vory) – Thieves-in-Law, title awarded by one’s peers (like a peerage title rather than a military rank).

GULAG – was the government agency that administered the main Soviet forced labor camp systems during the Stalin era, from the 1930s until the 1950s.

Vory Kod – Thieves Code (I made it up, seeing as the Ponyatiya doesn't exactly fit in with the KHR! world developments)

Uchastkovyi – Quarter Policeman, someone who maintains close relations with the residents of his quarter and gather information among them. In particular, uchastkovyi should personally know each and every ex-convict, substance abuser, young hooligan etc. in given quarter, and visit them regularly for preemptive influence.

Militsiya – A kind of paramilitary law enforcement, less military and more police in nature.

Maloletka – Used to mean little slut in this usage (lit. underage girl)

Operativnik – Detective/Investigator of the KGB

Edit Corrections - Had to change the Family based build I originally had, due to the fact Russia's underworld are structured more like gangs or clans rather than the Italian Families and one reader pointed that my way didn't fit as well as it should. Still not quite a reflection of real-life mafia, but closer now. I also screwed up the GULAG acronym use, I'm American... sue me. Also corrected some of the translations, as it implied the wrong thing about the terms used.
First and foremost, a few story mechanics got challenged by a reviewer over on FF.Net and a couple things got tweaked in response after that very long discussion. Thankfully it's not a major change, but there is a little difference in terms and such so you may wish to reread the first chapter to see what.

Secondly, because I have to make this expressly clear, this is not real life. I will tie in history and how a very well connected Mafia impacted it, next chapter, but the Russian Mafiya you read in here is not the Russian Mafia in real life. There were several reasons why, but it mostly boiled down to the fact Omertà is somehow a world-wide law in KHR! enforced by creepy undead dudes with a bondage fetish. Which, if you didn't know, kind of goes against the Vory z Zakone values where if asked if you are vor, you have to respond that you are even if the police are recording you doing it. That being said, I pretty much started out using a kind of base in the Italian Mafia and thinking of how that model had spread out and trying to tie in Russian values. Which, again, got challenged a bit by one reviewer who knows the lifestyle I'm trying to represent here due to his work in the police in the same region.

Totally okay with me, actually. Entirely fascinating discussion, that.

That all being said, be warned my Russian Grammar sucks major butt. I have an awesome reviewer that is perfectly willing to challenge my usage of it, and I'm perfectly happy for corrections if you find any. Which will probably mean that if I do use Fenya, it will either be cringe worthy horrible or spot on by complete mistake.

XI (Sunday the 27th of March, 1960 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya managed to slow her panic-fueled flight eventually, snagging a firm hold on her errant friend before he darted past her.

She wanted some answers, particularly why Cherep had stood there like a moron instead of run for his life when confronted with three vory. Drunk off their ass ones, but they were still Mafiya men who worked the wet-work side of the criminal world she found herself in.

True killers that had been shamelessly arrested for it, one that worked for hire and one of the others worked within his own syndicate.

One look at the purple boy's oddly pale but flushed face told her that getting her answers would take a bit of finesse and probably a heaping amount of tact.

"Explain."

Pity for him she apparently had no tactful bone in her body when upset.
He was almost bent in half much like he had been just after they first met, hands on his knees and thin shoulders heaving like a bellows, trying to regain the breath he lost bolting after her down the darker Moscow streets to prevent anyone following them. He couldn't verbally answer her, but Sonya was familiar enough with his flailing habits to glean the idea that he hadn't intended for that to happen.

However, he didn't immediately deny any actual involvement with the vory from what she could infer from his motions.

"Were you looking for them?" If she sounded a bit betrayed and a little panicked, she figured she could be excused.

As she had never really cared to figure out why Cherep accepted her bothering him on random days, merely assuming he appreciated the company as much as she did. He didn't have that slick edge to him most of the Mafiya members she knew of possessed, and he wasn't likely to develop that given she had refused to pull him into her life to any degree.

She visited him, not the other way around.

The fact Cherep was a dork, was clumsy, was nearly painfully honest in his reactions, all of it made her appreciate the measure of normality he gave her very skewed life.

Which was incredibly childish of her, she knew, but two years had gone by and nothing more had come of her bugging him it was one of few options as to why he never protested left to pick from.

Sonya wasn't sure what to do if he tried to take advantage of her, either her skills or just her presence in his life for whatever reason. The sickly feeling that she might have misjudged him settled in her gut, and she stared at him blankly until the other kid finally managed a sentence.

In the semi-dark of twilight, his surprisingly vibrantly purple eyes glared out at her as he straightened up slightly. "I-I… was… looking for… you."

She blinked grey eyes at the half-bitten out rebuttal, a little nonplussed by that fact.

He knew she was Mafiya?

Since when?

"Why?"

Here he flushed redder, more than simply exertion would account for. "You… were acting oddly."

She kept staring at him blankly, causing the slightly older preteen to throw his hands in the air in a fit of pique only to bury them into his unique hair and tug as he figured out how to phrase everything he wanted to say.

"Usually you only have a few hours free to come see me once or twice a month, yet you spent a whole day with me after one of your usual visits. I figured something was up later that night, but when you didn't come back…” He trailed off uncertainly, stubbornly not looking at her anymore.

The urge to smack her own face with a hand was growing. It hadn't even been a week since she last saw him, which was typical for her usual habits. Cherep apparently got worried for her, when she broke said typical habits just because there had been a very real risk of getting caught on her heist and wanted to ensure she got her Cherep-time.
It was stupid fluffy friendship concern, and so a-dork-able of him.

Emphasis on the stupid.

"Please don't tell me you walked up to the first member of the Mafiya you found and asked for me by name."

The flush on his face turned into a blush that nearly glowed fire engine red in the dim lighting.

Sonya was torn between beating her head in on the brick walls hemming them in the alley on both sides and smacking him for the near heart attack she almost had.

"Cherep… skull, crossbones, and tombstone tattoos all mean that vor is a murderer. Same with dots on the hands. The number they have is how many they have done for the Mafiya, or how many they want to brag about or keep track of." The little thief informed him bluntly, cradling her now pounding terror-induced headache with both hands. Looking at him was out of the question, she would burst out laughing and probably make her headache worse, so she stared at her own palms and kept her voice level. "The police badge on a hand or arm means police battery. Just… keep that in mind and don't do that again. Especially don't go up to drunk ones."

With any decent amount of luck, those three drunk Mafiya men wouldn't recall the scuffle or what started it. She didn't believe in luck though, she believed in Arseniy and his probably violent reaction to the news they had been screwing around in territory that didn't belong to them.

Sonya, Tatiana, Lisa, and Arseniy belonged to the Zolotov Thieves Clan, known for their skilled thieves and strong presence in the middle-class suburbs of a wealthy neighborhood in Moscow. The younger thief of her ‘foster’ family rather suspected she lived not quite on the outskirts of the edges of the Zolotov claimed territory, far enough away from the main locations to be less suspicious to the militsiya but close enough in case of any true emergency.

Zolotovs had actual professionally given tattoos on their members. They did allow the prison given tats that, she knew from a different lifetime, were infamous for spreading diseases like syphilis and AIDS to mar their members' skin but only if arrested and in prison. Otherwise you got it done in the much more sanitary tattoo shops they protected, no exceptions.

Being thankful for that fact alone was more than enough for her to report the three probably fresh from jail vor to the older Mafiya members she knew.

The fact those three went after her friend no matter if he had started it was another, thieves were not known to be generous.

In fact, thieves by nature were sometimes malicious and always greedy creatures.

She, even after taking into consideration her unusual circumstances, was not unusual for a Mafiya trained thief. Arseniy was pretty much a typical vor as well, he could be just as cruel and greedy as most if more experienced and respected than she was.

Even if reporting the three vor, who could have easily wandered down the wrong street by mistake after stumbling out of a bar, would likely end up killing one of them neither Sonya nor her ‘foster father’ would lose much sleep over it.

A vor was expected to retain their control, no matter what they drank or what drugs they took. These had not, and that would be all that she needed to ensure they paid for what they did.

She abruptly dropped her hands, giving Cherep one last look to ensure he knew how foolish she
found his recent actions. "Whatever. Come on, let's get you home."

He gave her that same seething wet-cat look she earned when needling him about something he did that proved to be less than ideal. She was alright with that, because it had been stupid and at least he knew it now.

"Sonya? You are okay, right?"

She managed to break someone's arm with a piece of wood and kicked someone hard enough they dented a brick wall, all because he had no sense of self-preservation.

"I…? Am fantastic." Assured the tiny thief tiredly with a flat tone. "I left Moscow for a couple days, Cherep, and it could've taken longer than it did. So I visited because it might've been a long while before I got back."

"…oh."

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**XII (Monday the 28th of March, 1960. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)**

Arseniy's expression could have been carved from stone as the man listened to what reasoning Sonya had to violate her curfew. All that had been planned on was her getting her tattoos added to, something that would take only a few hours factoring in the round trip by train.

Her detour to rescue Cherep's skin and walk him home had not been calculated into her plans for the day.

She knew full well the purple boy's safety wasn't a good excuse, the older two Mafiya members knew she had no plans on pulling him into their world therefore she shouldn't put him before them and their lifestyle if she wanted to keep out of trouble.

Three obviously drunk Mafiya vory harassing her friend in Zolotov territory was a good one, even if she had to inform Arseniy about the brick wall denting after she kicked one into it. He'd figure it out anyways when he went to deal with the interlopers, lying would do nothing but get her into trouble with him for attempting to lie in his face.

Worse, getting caught doing it.

From the complete lack of expression on the vory's face, she was in enough trouble to being with.

The older man left shortly after she told him the street and approximate location she had seen the three drunk vory. Sonya had to accept the matter as dealt with unless he said otherwise when he got back. She really didn't want to know any detail other than if they survived the night or not.

Lisa gave her and Tatiana a bland smile and suggested they go to bed since it was so late. They did so without word, because when the older woman got bland like that it meant she was upset and that just made Arseniy more than a little aggravated when it happened.

Tatiana pulled her to a stop just before they entered their respective rooms. "Sonya? Were you hurt?"

"Bruises, mostly." The younger girl admitted, rubbing one wrist that might be sprained. "I'm a little scuffed up, but alright."
She might not have felt them during or just after the fight, but she felt every ache and bruise right after getting Cherep back to his dingy little home and the last of her adrenalin drained away. They ensured she held no illusions about just how lucky she had been that the three killers had been both heavily drunk and probably fresh from prison, had they not been she might not have done more than get herself majorly hurt or probably dead again.

There would be a very colorful collection of bruises on her skin by morning, and she didn't really want to think about how much they would hurt then.

Ballet practice and the gymnastic training were going to be hell tomorrow.

Tatiana frowned at her but didn't protest Sonya leaving her in the hallway for her own room.

The exchange gave the younger Mafiya girl some hope for their relationship, just as the silver charm bracelet the older girl was wearing did. She hadn't been sure if she would accept anything from her given the small jealousy problem Tatiana still had, but the bracelet she stole for her first heist was still on the redhead's slender wrist.

Maybe the older girl had grown out of it a little?

She was almost a teenager.

Sonya wanted her foster sister back the way she had been.

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XIII (Thursday the 31st of March, 1960. Aleksandr's basement, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Dragging Cherep to vor Aleksandr’s for the first time later that week was partially interesting and mostly irritating, partly because the kid only stopped protesting once she succeeded in dragging him to the rather remarkably normal looking home and mostly due to the complications she ran into.

Sonya presented her purely civilian, purple haired and eyed friend to the old vor and asked, "How hard do you think teaching him basic self-defense will be?"

The ancient and battered looking man, who had been the one to teach her most of her fighting skills alongside several other hot-headed young baby Mafiya, took one look at Cherep's pretty to the point of being almost-girlish features and just sighed heavily through his nose.

Admittedly the older boy just looked like he wanted to be anywhere else but right there with them, his expression more resigned than agitated much to her amusement. Apparently, he was alright with her introducing him to other Mafiya members even after almost having the brains smacked out of him earlier that same week by a few others.

Either he had no sense of self-preservation or he really did trust her that much.

"You intend to do this?" Rumbled the grizzled vor, dismissing the preteen for the equally young thief.

Sonya supposed she was the greater threat of the two of them and gave the old man a half-nod part-shrug. "Thinking about it, yeah. Why?"

He looked the so far silent Cherep over, and she copied him to figure out what he was after.
As Aleksandr was the man who taught her to fight, who still expected her to develop her skills more even if she quickly outstripped what he could teach her about her chosen weapon, she did trust his mostly non-verbal assessment of the challenge ahead of her. The old vor, and he was pushing either the lower or greater edge of fifty given his massive collection of scars, tattoos, and grey hair, used fighting with some of the older children as a punishment for the idiot baby Mafiya who thought a weapon in their hand made them unbeatable right away and didn't need training to use it. They generally didn't last long against Sonya, who had been training to use her weapon for nearly half a decade.

Cherep's entire form was practically screaming an unwillingness to be here, if no fear or terror to account for why. The fact he was still here even when it was apparent he didn't want to be gave him few points from the look of things.

He had probably watched as the boy allowed Sonya to manhandle him into his underground training hall without a word of protest, and how he was still standing there without speaking up in any kind of protest of her intent. Aleksandr probably thought Cherep had little to no backbone, and while that might be true it wasn't the best impression her friend could give a character like the man in charge of training budding criminal elements to kick some significant ass in time.

Then again, she hadn't been much better starting off… and now she could hold her own in a fight against two drunk and surprised vory in her own right.

"I may have heard from a little birdy that you managed something a little unusual a few nights ago." Spoke up the old vor, still eyeing the increasingly wary boy child before him. "Think you can do it again?"

She scowled a little at the reminder, since she had yet to figure out anything decisive about that moment of unusual strength she used a few nights ago. Logic would dictate that trying to repeat the feat would give her a more solid answer either way, but she really didn't want her recent fears to be confirmed.

If any of that mess was true it might end up helping her a little… but that would mean it was possible her Cherep was that Skull and he would be rather miserable in a cursed-baby way and she would have to let that happen.

...no. Fuck that. He was hers first.

"I can try, why?"

Aleksandr gave her a bland and very unpracticed smile, which made her suspicious.

Sonya didn't know what he would've asked from her to train her friend in basic self-defense, it was the whole reason she had intended to teach Cherep herself. This, though… wasn't an earth-shaking favor, but still something that would probably annoy the older man. He had more than enough to do training the children in the Zolotov's Mafiya version of a 'big brother' program to at least be less easy prey for when they were older.

The Zolotov Clan gave children with either no family or bad homes a new place to live and grow up within, in return said children grew up with a lot of loyalty to them. The bulk of which would become their next generation of Mafiya members, the rest would support the clan in different ways but would probably chose to bite off their own tongues instead of endangering the rest of them.

Aleksandr's implied suggestion wasn't much of a favor, and Cherep wasn't presenting himself as any type of diligent student.
Therefore, Sonya suspected something else was going on. "No, seriously. Why?"

"If you can do it again in front of me, I'll train your little kitten."

The young thief hesitated for a long moment. "Fine."

She still couldn't figure out how that equaled the favor of training her friend, but if he wanted to…

Cherep wasn't letting go of her wrist, though.

She turned to see what he was doing and frowned slightly at her pinched-faced friend. "Cherep? What?"

"Are you sure you want to do this?" He asked her, one eye warily trained on the old vor but mostly turned so he could see her too. "You can… uh, teach me, can't you?"

"I can, but Aleksandr is better. He taught me." That bit didn't address whatever it was that he was now highly concerned over and she scowled more, literally drawing a blank over what else might be bothering him.

The purple haired kid still looked incredibly uncomfortable with the whole idea and was still holding onto her wrist tightly enough she might be losing circulation in it.

"She doesn't have much of a choice, malchik." Aleksandr informed them both quietly, looking Cherep over keenly as if he had done something impressive but surprising against his expectations. "Arseniy knows she did it once, and what he knows eventually gets back to the rest of the clan. That might be what's taking him so long to come back, they're going to want that. It might be worse to stall off confirming she can do it if they become impatient."

Sonya was missing something. She didn't particularly like the feeling.

Her mostly civilian friend didn't look comforted by the information, in fact he looked downright upset, but he let her go anyways.

Giving him a twistedly bitter smirk that fit his aged face much better than the bland expression had, the old vor turned back to the blonde thief and gestured deeper into his basement-level training room. "Well? Hop to it."

Confused, suspicious, and feeling like she somehow stepped on a landmine, she did so.

The walls of the basement were lined with racks of wooden weapons, replicas of things that could be used in a fight and actual training weapons for teaching the use of. There were very few staffs, mostly there were a couple lengths of wood over in the racks used for showcasing things one could use in a pinch if a cleaning supply closet was at hand.

This was where she learned how to fight with a broom handle, or more to the point the shaft of a rake, if she didn't have her own weapon on her.

Which she didn't tend to carry around, as hiding a thick pole of wood taller than her was an exercise in futility.

She pulled out one of the broom handles, because it was the most like what she used that night. "It might take me a bit. I still have no idea what I did."

"We have all day." Aleksandr informed her calmly. "I can even help you get back into the mindset, if
you tell me what you were thinking."

Sonya might not know what was going on, but she also wasn't that stupid. If she told him she had been scared for Cherep's sake, he'd probably use that and threaten the kid.

He might have trained her up, but she wasn't his favorite student. She was just one of many that he taught.

"I'll muddle through somehow."

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XIV (Thursday the 31st of March, 1960 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Cherep dragged her off the moment Aleksandr let them go for the day. Mulishly pulling her along in a reversal of how they arrived to the old vor's home, even if he was nursing probably bruised ribs and she was a bit more than winded.

Sonya put up with it because she was both curious and confused, and from the sound of it he might know a little of what was going on. She had her own suspicions, no matter how much she would like to deny it.

Once was happenstance, twice was a coincidence, but three times was an established pattern.

The vagueness and the hinting around threw her off a little, but even if her more remote suspicions were true… if her Cherep was that Skull, Sonya needed to know so she could plan for it. Additionally, that information might make an impact on her plans for herself and her line of work but that was at most a secondary concern when lined up against cursed rainbow babies.

There was also that thread of hysteria and panic lacing her thoughts that needed to be dealt with, as well. She was trying not to dwell on that though.

The purple haired preteen dragged her past her own home and in the opposite direction from the place he rented out a room at, she suspected he was aiming for one of the rare parks on the edge of the city for whatever it was he wanted. She was proven right too.

He ignored the pointed looks from the few childminders and parents out and about, collecting their charges for dinner or bedtime because it had been late already when Aleksandr allowed them to leave for the day. He also ignored the fact she didn't tend to allow him to manhandle her anywhere usually but was going along with him now.

She did so because the kid had been stiff and wary since their conversation with the old vor, meaning he probably knew a bit about what was going on and she wanted to know what the hell was going on.

"A-are you sure, Sonya? I-I mean," Cherep was stubbornly not looking at her even as he finally came to a stop in a little semi-glade carefully cultivated probably with the idea of late teenager couples in mind, "you don't have to do… that just for…"

"To ensure you'll be able to defend yourself from any more ideas of yours that go wrong?" She asked dryly, taking a couple steps farther when he let her go so she could turn and look at her friend fully. "Cherep… what is this all about? You're a little too stiff to not know anything."
He hunched his shoulders in response, keeping his vibrantly violet eyes away from her.

That was… alarming.

The other boy didn't tend to do quiet, unless he was highly uncomfortable or upset. Normally, she heard every grievance, opinion, or preferences he had with either her or the situation they were in no matter where they were or what they were doing.

It was more of a challenge to keep him from talking her ear off than to figure out what he thought about any given topic. His childish protests and rants were mostly amusing, if rather stark reminders she wasn't exactly the child she appeared to be.

Twenty years of extra maturing in another life tended to do that to a person.

"All I know is what happened to me." He told her slowly, looking nowhere near comfortable with the topic at hand. In fact, he looked rather like he wanted to do anything to throw the whole conversation off. "B-but if it's anything like that, then this isn't going to end well for you."

Sonya inspected her friend's face, pursing her lips and seriously considering if she really wanted to hear this or not. "What happened?"

"…my parents killed me."

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**XV (Thursday the 31st of March, 1960 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)**

As it turned out, Cherep had been first killed on accident and the near heart attack number two he caused her was unintentional. Other than the whole 'he was part of a statistical anomaly in childhood deaths', it really wasn't quite as bad as he had made it sound.

Sonya didn't quite know if she was more upset that something lethal had happened to her friend or if it was more that she couldn't explain that one away as any type of coincidence. She decided to go with the first one just simply because it made her feel less shallow.

An undead, immortal Skull. One being able to do certain things that weren't physically possible.

A very well developed, almost business-like type of Mafiya that skirted around the legal side of the world easily enough from what she had seen.

It did explain what her friend was up to, in that he was obviously not Russian by birth but in Moscow anyways. His accent had been only one of many things that made her think foreigner by birth but getting that confirmed was less amusing than she had counted on.

The whole story the other child told her boiled down to freaking out his parents with his non-death when he had clearly been dead after getting knocked down a flight of stairs, a series of shady doctor types stalking him for his undead abilities, and a kidnapping gone strange. His early life on the street before she showed up had merely hammered the weirder points of his life home, in that no matter how hard it got or how badly he got injured he would still end up physically fine given some time.

At least the kidnapping had informed him a little about what he had managed to do but getting stranded in a country not his own had complicated a lot.
All he knew for sure was that his abilities fitted into a certain type his once kidnappers had been looking for, he was unusually strong in said ability, and that others who displayed the same 'unique' skills were highly prized for some reason to the point there being a trade of such people flourishing. Fitting that with what Sonya knew from Rachel's leisure pursuits from another life didn't paint a very pretty picture for her or him.

Well... at least she now knew he really didn't have any self-preservation instincts to speak of.

Cherep literally couldn't die.

What did he care if anyone tried to off him?

It wasn't like they would succeed or anything.

The tiny thief took a deep breath, cradling her head in her hands because if she looked at him...

"So... huh."

The purple haired preteen across from her in the park's clearing fidgeted with his hands in her field of view, and without looking she knew he was cringing. That made her wonder if he tried to tell anyone else before her, and what had happened when he tried.

Probably not a whole lot of good things, honestly.

"Look, I understand that you can't die. But I don't ever want to see it, so you're still doing the whole self-defense thing." Sonya informed him slowly, raising her head to give him her best 'no-nonsense' look. Which sharpened up into a nasty glare when he opened his mouth to protest. "No, Cherep. I'd rather you didn't die, regardless of how temporary it is or not."

Because that was still terrifying to think about happening at all.

If she taught him a little now, then later when...

No. Cherep was her friend first. Screw everyone else, she found him first.

Baby rainbow curses could be dealt with later. Right now, she was only going to deal with herself and him and possibly her own Mafiya ties next. She would need information, a lot more information, before she could start thinking on anything else.

"...you don't think it's creepy?"

"It is creepy, and a little morbid." Allowed the slightly younger girl slowly, raking a hand through her hair. "So what? Apparently, I can do something a little similar too. Sucks to be us."

He snorted, a miserable expression on his girlish face. "Tell me about it."

"I just did, tupitsa."

She needed to either sit down and try to dredge up everything she knew of this world from some stupid comic book in her last life or sit down with Lisa and grill that woman for answers she might be able to use.

Rachel's life might not actually be much help, other than a very general guideline of what not to involve herself in a couple decades down the line, because Sonya didn't recall a whole lot from that. It had been nearly a decade since she had last thought of it, the details were damn blurry now.

It wasn't like she had known it was going to become so majorly important, and keeping notes of the
future in a massive multilingual and privacy deficit neighborhood like hers...

Before this life, it hadn't been anything more than a pleasant diversion when she read the story and watched the anime. What her new life was apparently based from was just a fraction of what it had covered, and it hadn't been the only anime Rachel had been enamored with.

Hell, Sonya recalled more of *Naruto*'s plotline and *Inuyasha*'s cast than she recalled what her own life's apparent 'storyline' held in store for her.

Alas, the lack of silver-haired hotties in her life.

It made her wonder what story her last life had been a fraction of, and if she could find out here.

Either way, this life would probably hold the answers she couldn't recall anymore. All she had to remember was the 'Strongest Seven of the Era' would end up cursed babies until the Tenth Vongola candidate did something to fix the damn issue and avoid pissing off anyone along those lines. Which she might just end up part of, given she had apparently no intention to abandon Cherep to his future misery alone.

Wasn't there a time-travel war thing going on sometime between all of that?

Well… she'd figure it out eventually…

"Right… we're screwed, but at least we're going down together." Forcibly redirecting her thoughts, mostly because there was little more she could do about them for the moment, she refocused back on the other kid. "You ever think of trying to go home, Cherep? Your parents should still be alive, right?"

Looking a little blindsided from the change of topic, the boy shrugged at her in response without much care. "I've never really thought of it. They were… terrified of me by the end, Sonya. I think the whole fact I was kidnapped might actually have been a bit of a blessing to them."

"They might have been terrified *for you*, you know."

"I'm pretty sure it wasn't that way around, actually." Cherep looked damn depressed in his sopping wet kitten way by that too, which made her not want to try asking him to check just in case.

Well, he wouldn't be the first kid to run away from home… no matter what kind of help he had gotten getting away. Although she was sure there was more to that story than just 'I managed to get away a few days later'.

She was content to leave the options he had available up to him though, as she wasn't exactly the poster girl for family ties either. The very least she intended to do was wrestle his old address out of him and go double check, he might like getting his birth records to help him out and his birthday was coming up.

"Whatever. Go home, Cherep. I'll drag you back to Aleksandr's tomorrow, sometime after noon."

Her dork of a friend picked himself up off the ground with a small frown. "You're sticking around, then?"

He was also very carefully *not looking at her* again.

She beat back her desire to wing a rock at his messy purple hair for such a *stupid* question.
Cherep was annoyingly abuse-able, no wonder Reborn and that blond sniper dude did it regularly… and why did that make her want to hate the two of them?

She wasn't exactly better in that she did it too…

"Yes. You're stuck with me. Suffer my random visits gracefully, it won't end even on your deathbed… since apparently that'll never happen."

"And you're fussing over me from a distance? Cause I saw all the money you stuck on me, Sonya."

The idiot beamed at her, squawking and running for it when she rose up to her own feet and reached for a nearby fallen branch.

XVI (Friday the 1st of April, 1960. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Mafia Land?" Lisa echoed, a faint thread of surprise in her tone as she served up dinner to the empty place for the vor of the house before herself. "It's not really all it's cracked up to be, Sonya."

Well, if she ever really needed solid confirmation after talking to her purple haired friend… that was it.

"I've been there once, myself." Continued the older woman absently, either not noticing the face the youngest was pulling or not caring. "It's… not exactly much different than any other vacation destination, just less vagueness is needed to avoid getting arrested. It's perfectly acceptable to wander around with a fully loaded assault rifle, just so long as no one loosely classified as 'visitor' and 'innocent' dies from it."

Tatiana had been blindsided by this topic of conversation, but perfectly willing to continue it.

"Really?"

Their foster mother shrugged, waving around the fork she was eating with as she chewed. "It's basically an amusement park for mafia members, what do you expect?"

"Less stupidity?" Sonya tried, still wondering how such a thing had come to be… and how it hadn't been shut down yet.

Privately owned land maybe?

Who owned it, then?

"It's a good place to network a little, too." Lisa informed them both with a sly smirk. "There's Guild Halls for a whole lot of branches of underworld dealings, and countless other Mafia Families and Syndicates tend to scope out new blood there. We might actually go for a visit once Tatiana starts working."

The young blonde wanted to smash her head into their dining room table, in contrast the redhead looked excited. "Really?"

"You both should probably scope out the Thieves' Hall a little. I don't think you'd want to try that out, Tatiana, but Sonya might find it more to her liking."

Confused, she looked up at that news.
The brunette gave her a small smile from across their kitchen table. "Taking contracts to steal things for others will either convince you to go back to soloing what you want to do or find yourself a niche you like. You might even like bounty hunting or taking up hitman contracts, just promise me you'll try it out at the very least."

"Can we do that?" Tatiana butted in before the other girl could process that, looking and sounding bewildered.

"So long as you pay your dues to the Zolotov Clan? Of course." The very bitter note in her voice had both young girls staring at her in surprise. Lisa's smile had turned a touch brittle suddenly. "We're female, we'll never attain the vor status unlike the men. As far as most Mafyia syndicates on this end of the world care, we're support at most and arm candy at worse."

Apparently, women's suffrage hadn't quite reached the underworld just yet… or at least hadn’t reached them out in the USSR’s criminal underbelly. Sonya supposed that was why the older woman didn't have the status Arseniy did, even if they were about the same general age.

Well, their world was rather male dominated.

Tatiana was more surprised than her at the news, and probably more disgruntled. The physically younger of the two of them had put together the fact that all the vor they knew were male and every female was either married or merely making income for their clan and come to that realization. It hadn't bothered her much, seeing at this life wasn't really her original goal in the first place and she was perfectly fine with just 'thief' and not a 'thief-in-law'.

Her eleven-soon-to-be-twelve-year-old preteen ‘elder sister’ was probably realizing that only the boys she worked with in her little ring of thieves would get that label. Likely galling in a way when the group was mostly her own work in pulling little Mafiya brats together for large stakes heists later in their lives.

Before their discussion could continue the only male member of the household finally returned from wherever he had been, giving his partner a look that only Sonya's extra life experience allowed her to interpret. Arseniy was giving Lisa a 'why do you do that to yourself' look, edged in some downright rare exasperation.

She figured that a possible hang-up of gender in the Mafiya was an old topic for the two of them, and it was equally possible they knew each other from very early in their lives. It was even possible they knew each other since the same period in Sonya's and Tatiana's lives, and that was why a vor like Arseniy was teaching a pack of idiotic brats how to be Mafiya as Lisa taught them other equally important skills.

She found that kind of history together rather awesome and wondered if she, Tatiana, and Dmitriy would have something similar in a decade's worth of time.

The man thumped a thin book down next to her plate, a leather-bound affair with no obvious title, and wandered into the kitchen for a drink to go with his own food.

Despite the rule about reading at the dinner table, Sonya cracked it open to see what it was about. Cramp handwriting sprawled out in a neat hand mark every page she got a good look at.

"Sonya." Called the older woman with a frown, giving the volume in her hand a once over of her own. "You know better."
XVII (Monday the 4th of April, 1960. Arseniy & Lisa’s home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Tatiana didn’t start out a petty thief like Sonya had, the orphan had been earmarked to become a con-artist by her Zolotov recruiter. She could have gotten one of the card suit tattoos, but… kitty.

She had been the best of the crop in her recruited group, gone after because she had no parents to raise her but had a remarkable charisma that let her talk her way out of a lot of things in and around her orphanage, before a tiny blonde girl got tossed into the mix suddenly.

Sonya had not been expected at all, by anyone.

The man who had brought her in all those years ago had looked to be a relative of hers, and while giving up an unwanted or at-risk child to the Mafiya for their protection wasn’t unheard of... Tatiana hadn’t expected to see it happen in front of her.

That had been why the redhead took the initiative to approach the little girl, who she expected to be upset or scared by what she got shoved into with probably little to no warning.

She found out fast that Sonya had been neither frightened nor upset at all. The tiny midget, shortest girl there by virtue of her shockingly young age, had looked bored.

It wasn't by any means the first sign that whatever the blonde had escaped had aged her past her scant few years, the younger girl was like a morbid old woman in a child's body. The redhead had floundered trying to connect with her little foster sister, because she was both too old and too young at the same time as well as hard to talk to.

Sonya didn't play dress-up or play games at all, the closest the girl had to a leisure pursuit was reading novels and wandering around the city. She also usually had all the emotional range of a block of ice unless something interested her, or the situation was somewhat serious.

She also fucked off for long stretches of time, either not wanting to be in a house for a few hours or just to wander about. It made it hard to have a casual conversation with her, or even see her for more than just the mandatory stuff.

Tatiana gave up trying to get to know her after getting fostered together for a full year. Sonya seemed to do well as a socially retarded little prodigy, or if not well seemed content with what she had by then. Somehow one of her old friends from the orphanage managed to get the girl to talk to him for more than just the minimum, and that donkey’s butt Dmitriy refused to explain how he managed that minor miracle, so she had decided to respect the younger girl's choices and move on.

No matter how mature or understanding she liked to think of herself, it did hurt to be sometimes effortlessly outdone in certain subjects they were taught. Sonya always had little problems learning new lessons, barring history which she tended to screw up frequently, and with her natural quietness she had been stealthy long before they were fostered.

The thief skills were the only time the blonde lagged slightly behind her, while the younger girl was a better pickpocket and lockpick than her it was the redhead who was better at cracking safes and forging documents. She was better at the more 'hard-core' skills than 'petty', which their talents seemed to differ.

However, the little thief was also successfully stealing at a very early age. Nimble fingers coupled with her young face meant she could wander around at will and pull a decent amount of money in, to start paying back vor Arseniy for allowing the girls to live with him for what was left of their
childhood.

Her first wake up call, that hinted maybe her icy little foster sister wasn’t as content as she appeared to be, was when she finally made her own friend outside of their collective group.

Cherep was practically the opposite of Sonya in almost every way, slightly clumsy and brightly cheerful instead of contained and reserved. Jarringly, the boy made the girl smirk and on one occasion actually crack a smile... and was the topic of the first non-awkward conversation between the two foster sisters in nearly two years' worth of time.

Tatiana had the thought maybe she had approached the other girl wrong. Instead of trying to bond over things she liked, maybe she should try finding something the little thief liked that she could get into.

Which didn't work out too well, because the girl was still a damn block of ice in terms of personality unless a purple colored kid was somewhere nearby. Sonya was also surprisingly protective of Cherep and his civilian lifestyle, which made it hard to see if she could befriend the boy too.

The slightly older redhead had to remind herself her little foster sister was socially inept in a lot of ways, and it was possible the younger girl just didn't know how to connect to another girl. Therefore, she refused to give up as easily as she had before because if Sonya had to start stalking her best friend in order to get him to accept her as one it was totally possible that it required something drastic to show the girl Tatiana wanted to be her friend and sister too.

She didn't think it was working until the other girl came back from her first successful heist, which was galling in its own way because the blonde was two years younger than her.

The charm bracelet had been one of the many little trinkets the younger thief had brought back with her. Getting presented with it was the first sign that Sonya thought something of Tatiana and her opinion, and the semi-hopeful but wary look she wore when she presented the present to her made the redhead think she was possibly getting somewhere.

She probably wasn't the greatest foster sister in existence, because she had pretty much abandoned her little sister to her own devices for years before realizing that probably hadn't been what the other girl wanted. However, she was still trying and the five years they had lived together allowed the redhead to read some of the tics the blonde had.

When Sonya came home one night, looking as if someone had shoved one of her practice staffs down her spine, Tatiana at least knew something was wrong. She spent a whole moment trying to recall what the younger girl had claimed she was going to do that day, then figured there was something wrong with her friend Cherep.

Since the two of them still couldn't communicate at all well without very awkward pauses or floundering for more topics, she took that conclusion to Lisa instead of asking her foster sister. Their foster mother agreed to ask about it and did so a day later, but she was a little surprised that whatever it had been had them both going to Arseniy with it.

That discussion took less than an hour, and she was still wondering why Cherep was suddenly living with them.

XVIII (Tuesday the 5th of April, 1960. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Union)
"He's a little scary." Cherep informed her inanely, still clutching what little belongings he had to his name to his chest instead of putting it away in the drawers being made available to him.

Sonya was still a little confused herself, so she figured his own hesitance over the whole situation was allowable. "Arseniy is only scary when he's angry, and that only happens if you actually try to piss him off or do something stupid. He's just usually surly seeming by nature, you'll get used to it."

The thief was not sure why the Mafiya vor had ordered her to relocate her friend to their house, but she did appreciate it anyways. The man hadn't twitched at learning her reasoning for not helping the purple boy out of his slum hole of an apartment, but his expression had gotten rather ticked off when she got into why she was sure he'd probably not be able to get out of it without help she was only then planning on giving him.

Some of what he told her in confidence had to be relayed to the vor, but she was hoping he'd forgive her that. She had stuck to the kidnapping, and the possible experimentation, rather than admitting to the still gut-twisting 'undeath' thing.

The kid kind of needed his paperwork, his birth certificate and traveling papers to explain where he came from and why he was in the USSR and not his native country of Czechoslovakia.

Sonya had planned on doing a heist in his hometown to get those, then asking either Lisa or Tatiana to mock up what else he would need to legitimize himself… but apparently Arseniy decided to take care of that all himself.

She might need to go out of the country to lift Cherep's paperwork from wherever it had gotten to, but she would only have to if her foster father struck out on his end now.

Speaking of certain redheads, Tatiana appeared from the staircase and flounced over to the guest room… which she now supposed was the boy's bedroom.

The older girl cheerfully ignored the purple haired kid's wary look and her semi-suspicious stare boring a hole into the side of her head at her arrival, flashing them both a small grin. "Isn't this great? Now we have a foster brother!"

"Eh?"

Sonya ignored Cherep's less than articulate response and shrugged. "At least Arseniy's no longer the only male in the house and Lisa might actually stop suggesting on a girls' day out for us all."

"Aw… that would be fun." She pouted at the younger thief, and after a beat turned back to the bewildered boy still standing in the middle of his new room. "So, hi! I'm Tatiana, Sonya's older foster sister. You're Cherep, right? Least, that's what she claimed your name was."

"It is." He confirmed slowly, still looking at the older girl like she was some new type of bug that had suddenly popped up out of the woodwork. "I didn't know Sonya had a sister… or that she was fostered."

"Yeah well, Sonya's social skills are a little… bad. You'll have to forgive her that."

What?

"I've noticed." Cherep reassured her dryly, a small smirk pulling up one side of his mouth.
Sonya blankly blinked at them both, still confused from before and now a little lost.

There was nothing wrong with her social skills.

"Do you think you can translate for me? Cause I've known her a few years now and I still have trouble holding a conversation with her."

"I've found that you can't wait for her to respond, because she won't usually. Just keep talking, Sonya will listen for as long as you do."

Tatiana had a look of dawning realization on her face as she spun to her with a very wide grin. "You're shy!"

"…what?"

"I didn't realize… you're always so self-contained and confident. Sonya, you don't have to be shy around me." Getting grabbed and smashed into the preteen's non-existent chest was a new if uncomfortable experience for her, the older girl also didn't seem too interested in letting the physically younger thief go. "That would explain why you're so quiet, didn't you have friends before we got taken in? I bet you didn't."

Well… no she didn't, but that was more because of the twenty years of another life getting dumped on her head during that time. She might have got out a lot, but there wasn't a whole lot of socializing going on at the same time.

Tatiana pushed her away, only far as her arm's reach unfortunately. "That explains so much. I can't believe you're shy."

"I'm not." She protested slowly, frowning up at her. "I just don't talk much."

Cherep made a noise, which sounded like a cross between a snort and a laugh. The blonde hoped he hurt himself, because although she didn't understand how the older girl came up with her theory she knew the kid hadn't helped at all.

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XIX (Friday the 8th of April, 1960. Aleksandr's basement, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"You didn't tell him all of it?"

"Did you want me to?"

Cherep blinked his wide purple eyes at her blankly, jaw slightly unhinged. "But…"

"I could fix that, if you want." Sonya informed him easily, still a little sour over the misunderstanding he had perpetuated with her foster sister. She tapped the butt of her makeshift staff against the ground to be sure of its purchase against the hard concrete ground, stretching out her aching legs.

She was still trying to figure out the Flame stuff by using her own minor experience with the incident in Aleksandr's basement training hall. If a few very odd facts hadn't been confirmed independently, she might have been able to brush off the one possible use of her own.

Something as bewildering as the existence of Mafia Land was a very pointed suggestion that certain
things she had been slightly afraid of were true.

He might just need that information sometime in the future, so she was going to suck it up and figure the damn thing out without him having to die again to learn something.

There was also that book Arseniy gave her… she should probably investigate that thing too instead of skeptically skirt around it suspiciously.

"Why?"

She gave a sideways look, then sighed through her nose. "Because."

Cherep still looked like he didn't understand, which made her feel slightly insulted.

The brat had told her about his undeath in confidence, out of worry for her and what she might be getting into. Why the hell did he expect her to turn around and tell everyone?

He had been kidnapped for that, keeping the information to only those that needed to know was just common sense.

She pushed herself up stiffly, using her staff as a cane out of respect for her still tender calf muscles. Before he could do more than squawk at the sudden moment the old vor who ran the training hall summoned him back over for his own lessons, effectively ending their conversation about what she had and had not told others about him.

A bit too irritated to appreciate the thought of the bruises the poor purple haired kid would walk away from the hall with, Aleksandr wasn't a gentle teacher and the man had taken it upon himself to teach Cherep how to defend himself, she went back to what she had been doing.

While her mind set wasn't conducive to experimentation, the stress relief in using her borrowed staff against the practice dummies was greatly appreciated. Sonya pretty much failed to think of anything but their little mini-argument and in the process of working out her irritation with the boy she might have hit the straw filled burlap sack a bit too hard.

Which naturally meant she broke the shaft of wood she had been using clean in half and the dummy somehow made a small crater in Aleksandr's training hall floor.

Somehow.

Like she had somehow kicked a man into cracking a brick wall one dark night.

She heaved a tired sigh, using the broken off end of her staff to poke the mess of straw out of the way to see what damage she had caused. It was one thing to suspect, another to learn it was possible, and an entirely different thing to see it happen again.

Aleksandr's voice coming from right behind her nearly made the young thief jump out of her skin. "I think a break might be in order, Sonya."

"Arseniy gave me a book, I think I'll read that before trying this again." At least she now knew she was either on the right track or close enough.

The old vor gave a completely noncommittal hum, eyeing the damage in his floor over her head.
XX (Saturday the 9th of April, 1960. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

The book Arseniy gave her was a handwritten diary of a *Dying Will Flame* user, a Rain from about three hundred years ago.

Sonya despaired over her future for a full hour before getting past the first page.

While it was fascinating from a purely historical standpoint to read about a guardsman named Milos, one of the Regent Sofia Alexeevna’s personal guard and his daily exploits serving as a wall-figure in her court, there was little in the way of actual information she could use to figure out what she had done and what Flame she had.

Although the journal was something she could blindly stare at while she dredged her own memories from her time as Rachel for any hints of what to do, the tiny details that filled the accountings of one man's day filled in a couple holes for her.

From what little she could recall from her other life, it was called *Dying Will* because the ability was unlocked by using willpower that typically was mustered either at the edge of death or in defiance of it. Like she possibly defied the idea of Cherep's death before she learned he'd never have that issue.

That wasn't really something Sonya excelled in… given her lack of motivation all around. Dying and remembering it had dampened a lot of her previous personality into a laid back, quiet, loner type who didn't tend to make connections well. Tatiana and Dmitriy were exceptions merely because they both approached her and made the initial effort to get to know her.

Cherep was merely the exception to just about everything, freaky coloring and abilities included.

She figured it was either karma or irony that she would just suck at having willpower, and of course her only specifically chosen friend would come with a bucketful of difficulties.

As both Rachel and Sonya, she had pretty much gone with the flow of life. She had never bucked the system laid out for her until this one, and only because her eye caught on her brand-new foster brother's odd coloring and she got curious.

She supposed she could try defying her assigned role as a thief of the Mafyia, but that just sounded suicidal rather than anything else.

It was entirely possible for her to get out of her current lifestyle, just not realistic. A whole whopping nine years of age did not an adult make, and the Zolotov clan ran their little 'youth outreach' program with the aim of collecting new blood and skills from the lower-class and slum children who just needed a little something better to flourish from. Either a new home when they had none or a broken one, or a bit of guidance from someone actually taking the time to listen and teach them.

Her own situation was… possibly not what she had assumed it to be but given the conversation she overheard the night before her father took her to a warehouse-turned-tattoo-parlor there had been very little else she could make any assumptions from. The fact it was now five years into her new life and no one had yet to say anything about her mother's plan to sell her off to satisfy a debt just made Sonya a little wary of what had happened and what it might really mean.

That would probably not end well when it raised its ugly head, but there was little she could do if her initial assumption was wrong but wait and find out.

Other than finding her biological father and asking, but Sonya wasn't sure if she wanted to know and
the man had told her not to go back to Saratov. Which she already flouted once, getting her tattoos
touched up and added to in her hometown.

As it was, she had a measure of protection in the Mafiya rather than outside of it. That same
protection had been extended to Cherep, who was pretty much allowed to come and go as he wanted
and would probably only be known to have Zolotov sympathies in the fullness of time.

Unless he really wanted to get into anything himself, but Sonya was pretty sure that wouldn't happen
unless something drastic happened to him.

"Sonya?" Lisa interrupted the young thief's train of thought when she poked her head into the girl's
room. "Aren't you usually out and about by now?"

"Usually," Agreed the still youngest foster child wryly, wondering what panic attack her foster
brother/best friend would have next since he was kicked out for combat training without her, "but
this is... confusing."

"How so?"

Grabbing hold of the opportunity to ask questions with both hands, because one did not question the
head of a Mafiya household lightly, she sat upright on her bed and turned to her elder. "Why was I
given a book? Doesn't anyone know how to use this... stuff?"

"There used to be, but for some reason Dying Will Flame users have been light on the ground for the
last century or so." The older brunette informed her easily enough, rubbing the back of her neck as
she took the steps needed to enter the room fully. "The lack of any real users stymied a whole lot of
things that used to rely on them, until the rare few that could use that stuff were guarded jealously by
the ones who claimed them. Within our own group there aren't any others available to teach you
anything. We'd have to ask another syndicate if you want actual instruction, and that carries with it a
whole lot of risks."

Sonya had figured some of that out herself, given that Cherep had gotten kidnapped for his own
talents.

The news of a decline was new to her, but that made a small amount of sense coupled with a two-
hundred-year gap between the sets of cursed rainbow babies. Which had its own mention in her
journal, as apparently an oddly short Frenchman by the name of Pierre-Antoine Carpentier had once
been 'the Storm Arcobaleno' and a friend of Regent Alexeevna.

That had prompted her to vow to take a very long look at a world history book or two, because there
might be another reason why Lisa thought she was bad at history other than simply because her
memories of Rachel's schooling was going and she had once learned America's version of it.

"Sonya?"

The young thief rubbed her face with her hands. "I'll figure something out, Lisa."

"Ask if you need to, sweetie. We might be able to get a few questions answered if we're careful."

Sonya heaved a sigh as the older woman left her bedroom.

She needed more willpower. Neither Sonya nor Rachel were willful in personality, right now it was
likely she had next to none.

How did one build up willpower?
From what she recalled from her past life’s leisure activities, either by near-death experiences or over the top training… and that was only if she was willing to take a cartoon as the ultimate authority in her second attempt at life. Which she wasn’t intending to do, because of that all so wonderful term ‘artistic license' that might have twisted a few things from the reality she was now living in.

Sonya would take what little of the storyline she recalled and the names of the major characters and plan around that, but the story's less than clear occurrences might be enough to trip her up if she relied too heavily on that.

If she was going to take her current experiences as truth, then on both occasions when she had done something outside the realm of physical possibility she had been either scared or irritated to the point of distraction. Which was a very strong hint, but both emotions involved a kind of tunnel vision that would probably end up being lethal for her.

Which would also probably scar Cherep for life, and not something she wanted to do.

Flipping a couple pages of her book absently while still mentally assembling what she knew was possible against what she knew was truth, the tiny thief wondered what to do now.

Arcobalenos, Dying Will Flames, Mafia Land, an undead Skull verses a highly developed and organized Mafia underground that spread out over all corners of the world, possibly undead Mafia Enforcers, her own possible use of Flames, and thirty to forty years before Vongola's Decimo begins to move around and shakes up a few things.

Her friend probably had a little more or less than a decade before the Strongest Seven were assembled, whatever amount of time they would spend together, then the rest of that time he and several others would be cursed to baby form. Which meant she had just as little time to think up some way for the brat to support himself like that… and the only place that wouldn’t blink twice at pint-sized adults in a baby’s body would probably only be the Mafia.

Probably all thanks to Reborn's efforts and reputation as the World's Greatest Hitman.

…Sonya was pretty sure that would not start well at all. Cherep wasn’t Mafia, or even Mafiya like her, and she still couldn’t think of him that way no matter how hard she tried. He was just too nice and honest for that to work well for him.

Then again… with his initial circumstances, he might not have had any real options. A Czech boy in Moscow wouldn’t have known how to navigate around and find a Mafiya group that would take him in and not expect him to join up as soon as he was old enough.

Arseniy had taken the undead boy in and between the Mafiya members in the house they would probably set him up so he’d have options before sounding him out for the Zolotovs. He was probably a year or so older than Sonya who was already working as a source of income for her clan, but probably not much younger than Tatiana who was almost ready to start working with the rest of her ragtag gang of thieves.

…so, what was going to happen now?

Chapter End Notes

Vory v Zakone (Singular vor, Plural vory) – Thieves-in-Law, title awarded by one’s
peers (like a peerage title rather than a military rank).

Militsiya – A kind of paramilitary law enforcement, less military and more police in nature.

Malchik – Little Boy

Tupitsa - Means dullard, bonehead, dunce, numskull. The general meaning is stupid and dumb.
As a warning, there will be 'historic errors' in the future. Mainly they are supposed to be there, but this is part of the story where our main character starts to note a few things are off from the history she recalls. Sonya will not catch all of them, but there will be bits and pieces you might be able to catch before she ever has the inkling there is something not right. We will eventually get to and cover the main ones in story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

XXI (Friday the 3rd of June, 1960. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

To be honest Sonya didn't expect Cherep to protest, fuss, or come up with any sudden or not objections to the new living arrangements.

Being wrong in that at least forced her to pay a little more attention to her civilian friend and what made his personality up.

Through the two years they had known each other as mostly casual friends, neither had pressed the other's boundaries anywhere near the point a few months of living together under the same roof did. She wasn't exactly the most stellar example for using social niceties in existence, she didn't tend to talk more than once or twice a day before he started living with them, and he had a few issues himself over exactly what he could or could not do when it came to her.

That was before the fact his best and probably only friend was an unrepentant crook got shoved into his face in a way he could neither deny nor refute. He may have noticed before, but she hadn't ever been so frank with what she did in front of him. There was no real way to hide it, not with how their home was run and what training the girls still did on occasion.

She found out that Cherep wasn't inherently nasty, morally numb, or cruel minded enough to be indifferent to that. The most Sonya would say if pressed was that he was a wimpy pushover who was also way too nice for his own good. Which stood to reason that he would have a few moral problems with the fact she regularly robbed people of their petty cash and anything else of value they carried daily.

Worse yet, she robbed people and she got praised for it... or, at the very least, wasn't scolded for doing such. In front of him. Usually with a comment or two about how much she brought in or what they would like her to look for the next day she had little else to do.

Rachel might have seen the world like Cherep once, in shades of color but mainly in black and white. There were good people and bad people and Rachel had tried to be good, only to end up as a statistic of a good girl killed by someone who could have not meant to but hadn't changed a thing in the end.

Sonya, Mafiya foster child and budding thief, had that worldview shattered into tiny pieces before she could even walk. She knew just because one person said 'crime' and another said 'livelihood' it didn't mean either were wrong, they were just different perspectives across similar lines society drew out in shades of legality and morals.
Arseniy wasn't a nice or a good man. He was probably a murderer in his own right, had vices that could make a pastor weep, and seemed perfectly content like that. Lisa, for all that she tried to seem neutral and caring at the same time, had her own problems and struggles that she was only recently come to realize existed. Tatiana never really seemed to have an issue with what they were in training to do with their lives, Sonya didn't know if she really had no problems or not due to the fact they weren't all that close.

Cherep, getting suddenly shoved into a Mafiya household as he had, was only seeing the very end results of nearly half a decade of work the girls had put into their prospective jobs. Half a decade of social conditioning and training to be able to be thieves for the clan and live perfectly content with the consequences.

The tiny blonde tried to keep that in mind as she listened to him babble on while they people watched from a park bench, and the fact he still thought in 'good vs bad' terms rather than 'this faction vs that faction'. Trying to remind herself that he probably didn't know what he was asking of her, and she shouldn't hold it against him until someone with enough patience went through it with him.

Technically she should really be picking out marks to rob, but her still newish foster brother insisted they were 'people watching' and like to point out that robbing people just encouraged them to steal or cheat from others to get back what they lost.

It was a very interesting way to phrase 'an eye for an eye', at least.

"Why can't you just go after other criminals?"

Sonya gave up the pretense of watching for her next mark and buried her face in her hands, all the while thinking of the varied and many ways that suggestion could go wrong.

Beyond the fact that there was a kind of social pretense in place for all the Mafiya brats she knew in the neighborhood, a collective assumption of 'us against them' and a very shallow type of brotherhood of thieves still in the process of being worked into place, they all were still Mafiya. Vory, for all that Sonya would never actually hold that title due to her gender, had their own ways of fixing disruptions in their Motherland. Getting hauled into a council of vory and her actions being judged through the lens of hardened murderers wasn't exactly her idea of 'keeping her head down'.

Even if she was encouraged to steal from others, stealing from another Mafiya brat would gain her a reputation that would cause the other kids to avoid dealing with her. Which would just harm her in the long run, when she started getting into different jobs that might need different skills to handle.

She might be acrobatic and a deft hand at both pickpocketing as well as lock picks, but she knew safecracking would just get harder as time went on unless she poured a massive amount of time and energy into honing that skill. Tatiana was better than her in that, would probably continue to be better than her in it, and stealing a safe instead of opening it on site might just be something she would have to deal with decades down the line.

If she turned her foster sister against her by stealing from her little ring of thieves before they ever left their foster home, she would probably be forced to go to someone else with the right safecracking skills she might need that she wouldn't trust nearly as much as the redhead.

There was also the fact forgeries needed a well-developed network to be useful for more than a single use, and Lisa was teaching the older girl how to maintain her network if needed. Sonya didn't have the skills there either, as being sociable was a large part of that and she greatly preferred dealing with her foster sister to dealing with individuals she didn't know nor could get face to face with.
"Cherep, trust me when I say that will not be possible for a couple years yet… if at all."

"But you're going to think about it?" Her purple haired friend pressed, heedless of the worries that would dump on her.

"Sure, whatever."

Maybe if he thought he could 'reform' her she could actually get something to bring home today.

XXII (Wednesday the 27th of July, 1960. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

She knew, the same way she knew the sun would rise in the east and would set in the west, that when Cherep brought up maybe changing who she stole from the next time he got unnerved by the Mafiya overtones of their home life that Sonya would be hearing about the idea for the next couple of years.

…or however long she could get away with having her best friend at hand and not off by himself doing god knows what that might cause his undead/undying issue to come up again.

He was an odd fit in a Mafiya household, because besides the combat training he faithfully tagged along on and a couple of the gymnastic lessons when Aleksandr could force him into going he didn't attend any of the other general Mafiya or thieves’ lessons still ongoing on top of anything else.

She and Tatiana didn't have to attend nearly as many of those thieves’ lessons as they used to, even if they occurred under the same roof they all lived under. The blonde girl had blanket permission to miss as many as she wished if she was doing something productive since her first heist, and the redhead was in the beginning stages of planning for her first with the rest of her team.

While Cherep knew they went on, and that both girls had attended them for nearly half a decade, he never actually had to be in the house for them nor meet more than just a few of the Mafiya members in the neighborhood.

Sonya had no problems dragging him out so the older and more aggressive Mafiya brats around wouldn't catch sight of him.

Arseniy was providing him with some protection, a roof over his head, and three square meals a day for however long the kid decided he may need the help. Mostly for free, as he was a kid in some distress and a friend of hers, while the man took a hard look at his past and parents to ensure what happened to him never happened to anyone else... but it was more Sonya's job to ensure he kept out of trouble and out of anything he might regret later. It was her who brought Cherep to the vor's attention, and she was pretty much his only friend still with the semi-intentional isolation going on.

Additionally, she wasn't the most popular in the neighborhood. That distinction belonged to another, a friend of Dmitriy's that made her skin crawl for no apparent reason other than the sleazy charm that seemed to ooze off the kid. Bullying wasn't much of an issue, more of a non-issue since they were all combat trained at least at a basic level and encouraged to take care of any major fights under Aleksandr's weathered eye.

Cherep, unfortunately, was playing catch up in the worst way and would probably be considered a weakness she needed to deal with or rid herself of.
Targeting that weakness would be any Mafiya brat's first move if they ever had an issue with her, or even if they respected her. Admiration and envy went hand in hand, her maybe slightly unusual skills and young age hadn't earned her any favor among her peers. Her lack of social interactions had ruined what was left, to the point she was rather unpopular with her fellow Mafiya brats.

"To be bluntly honest, trying that around here would probably just make things hard on me without any real cause for it." She was forced to inform him one night, when the class Arseniy was holding would probably overrun by an hour or two more than usual and so she took him a bit further afield than normal.

On the edge of another Mafiya group's territory, but they would be safe enough if they held to the more universal vory z zakone principles and didn't make waves or trouble while in foreign territory.

"Why?" He even had the gall to look depressed by her flat refusal, in that stupid kitten way that made him look even more girly than usual.

Sonya felt like she had just sucker punched him in the stomach after kicking his puppy, and she hadn't even done anything to warrant either the look or feeling. It was the downside of being friends with him, and she hadn't even known she had heartstrings left to pull after everything else she had been through as both Rachel and Sonya.

"Because even if I'm as careful as possible, that would inevitably piss off someone who has Mafiya connections. That person would alert his or her contacts, I'll eventually end up with a bad reputation of stealing what my fellow thieves stole, and probably might end with my death before long if I'm not lucky."

She had really considered it only once, well before she had become resigned to the fact she would be a Zolotov thief, but the drawbacks outweighed the risks of that method to pander to her battered morals. It wasn't an original idea, someone else had tried.

Keyword: tried.

She didn't know what happened to that kid who stole from his fellow Mafiya foster children, no one did. All she knew was that he wasn't there anymore, either kicked out or sent somewhere else or worse.

Though, she was kind of doubting that worst part, given Cherep's situation and status as a fellow houseguest. Even her own situation made her doubt, if her presence in Moscow really had been because her father wanted to spare her whatever her mother's intentions were instead of satisfying her debt thing with someone in the Mafiya.

He still abandoned her without so much as a backwards glance, fuck him too.

"Everyone you can think of has connections like that?" It was a valid question, for all that it sounded like he was grasping for straws to keep his idea afloat.

Sonya answered him anyways. "Around here? Yes. It was why I had to leave Moscow in the first place. Before I could go after bigger targets, I would need practice. The only practice around here are my fellow Zolotov members, and that's just like shooting myself in the foot."

Cherep obviously hadn't thought of his suggestion/plead in the terms of 'steal from' paired with 'Arseniy' yet, but he seemed to be making up time in that from how white he blanched. That really wasn't the best thing to think about, she knew it just as well as the violence the man could wear like clothing when he had a reason for it.
She did at least throw her friend a bone, because it had been a valid suggestion if not a good one. "I can't do that now but ask again in a few years and we'll see."

He blinked.

"We… or at least I, don't plan on spending my whole life here. While hunting in my own home ground is a bad idea, hunting in someone else's might not be. Depending."

She still intended to avoid the Vongola and its allied Famiglias with all due caution, but that was just a large chunk of Europe and some of Japan. The Americas, the Far East, Africa, and an innumerable amount of smaller countries in between were still places she could go.

He looked thoughtful, so she cautiously assumed he wouldn't mind either tagging along with her or her tagging along with him for a few years.

Once they left the USSR, anyways.

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XXIII (Monday the 8th of August, 1960. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Cherep naturally had very low expectations. Something honestly earned over his short life so far.

That way he couldn't be surprised or disappointed, and it generally worked for most things.

Somehow, he had survived his own death without permanent impairment to either life or limb which was alright… but his parents had become frightened of him to the point both had to be in the same room with him or neither would be, which hadn't been. Getting kidnapped a little more than a year or so later hadn't been all that great either, but he did finally stumble on someplace to call home where he wasn't feared or flinched from so that balanced out a little. Living alone as a street rat had been hard, but then Sonya took an interest in him and cared a little just in her own strange way making everything that much easier on him.

Her turning out to be a thief in a Mafiya clan was almost unsurprising in the end.

Now, Cherep was still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

He wasn't yet one more beggar child lurking in the streets anymore, or homeless and going hungry like he had been before even that… or the possibly devil possessed child they would never be rid of his parents had thought of him when it all started.

He couldn't figure out if his new circumstances were a good thing or not.

On one hand, Arseniy was scary as sin, but he didn't have much to do with the man whose home he lived in now. He somehow now had foster sisters, one elder and a younger one no matter the face Sonya pulled at being called so by Tatiana. Lisa was nice enough but reserved and a little bland with him, which was kind of understandable.

On the other was the glaring fact he lived in a home of Mafiya members.

That his 'new baby sister' stole at all cast all the help she had given him over the last couple years in a very strange light. The money alone… he knew, now, that she had probably stole it and most of what she had robbed others of had gone to Arseniy and what little she kept as a twisted kind of
allowance had gone to him.

It was a bit heartbreaking and thoughtful all at once. The only help she knew how to give was twisted up into the Mafiya already, and she was only a few months shy of her tenth birthday.

At least she didn't seem to mind that he wasn't at all alright with what she had done, was in the process of doing, and training to do with her life.

The only bright spot in the murky situation was that he wasn't expected to follow along into criminal activity even if he did live with Mafiya members. The combat and gymnastic training seemed to be compulsory for everyone, which he didn't mind doing so long as Sonya went with him at the very least.

She might be up to the point of trying to shatter an iron pole in her own training while he learned the basics of self-defense, but that was alright with him. The USSR, including Moscow itself, wasn't crime free, ironically enough not because the neighborhood contained many Mafiya members. Self-defense would probably eventually pay off later on and prevent his new baby sister from stressing out over him more than she had already.

What it seemed he was expected to do was... nothing he hadn't already been doing. Which made Cherep feel rather dubious over the whole situation.

From what Sonya had informed him, Arseniy had been the one to order her to bring him home. Why seemed to be because he might be at risk for another kidnapping attempt from what he understood from it. For how long seemed to be until the youngest foster sibling decided to leave home herself, or possibly even a little later given the lack of pushing to find other arrangements he was going through.

Lisa, the woman that kept the household running and very patiently helped all three children in their education, had been eyeing him speculatively lately so that may change sometime soon.

He was still confused, though. Even more when a copy of his birth certificate, a passport he wasn't sure if he never got, and immigration papers he was very certain he never had before got pressed on him one day by Tatiana.

At least he was legally in the country now.

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XXIV (Thursday the 13th of October, 1960. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

**Adolph** Hitler had been *assassinated*.

Sonya spent a whole half hour blankly staring at the history book she finally actually paid a decent amount of attention to, that she had thought would only need a glance over or two to refresh her knowledge of history. Tracing the same few lines repeatedly with her eyes out of sheer disbelief.

Hitler had apparently been killed a whole year earlier than if he was left to commit suicide, if what she recalled from Rachel's schooling was correct.

The results seemed to have been a mix bag honestly, making her wonder if it had been a good thing or not.

While if Hitler was left to suicide on his own terms, the Third Reich fell apart and a good portion of
Germany collectively tried to distance itself from the Nazi ideals as far as possible. There had been the remains of the previous party lingering around which even eventually leached into even America's, highly paranoid at the time, culture via white supremacy groups… but it never got much popularity as a school of thought due to the horrors linked to it.

Nasty and horrifying because it was a world war against a genocidal war regime no matter how you looked at it, letting the notorious dictator commit suicide seemed to have been the best option from what she could see now from what would've occurred otherwise.

The changes made from assassination a year early included the fact many Nazi sympathizers deciding their dead Führer was some sort of a holy martyr for their cause and dragged WWII out a few more years. They had about a year, year and a half, to cover their tracks when it seemed as if their cause was destined to lose no matter how they tried to do.

Then they went underground with it. Taking their former fellow citizens hostage and continuing the war in a guerrilla kind of way. Which made the casualty totals even greater once the Allied Powers started sifting through to understand what had happened and more importantly how.

The European Jewish survivors of the Holocaust had barely seven digits to them across the former Axis Powers members.

Due to the sheer difficulty in tracking the culprits responsible down, because even with a head start the Nazi Party still got caught with their pants down halfway due to what seemed to be fanatically driven willful blindness, having Nazi sympathies was tantamount to social suicide now.

In both parts of Germany itself, it was still considered treason.

There was even a still ongoing manhunt for any former members of the German Nazi Party even a decade after the war ended, a civilian based hit contract that anyone could get into and not have to abide by the underworld mafia rules Sonya knew from getting lectured on it by Arseniy every month.

She made a mental note to be very careful in Germany if she wanted to see the Berlin Wall fall. If it would fall. The Nazi paranoia in that area alone would make her double check what she said or did.

The longer reaching effects of that event was more interesting, in a way.

The US had a significant number of boots on the ground in China and the USSR for the last year of the fighting, actually working together with the communist societies, when the Germans tried to continue the bloody struggle their Führer had started. Hopelessly, because between the Red Army and half of the American Forces on one side and the rest of the US military forces and the Allied Powers on the other they got crushed rather mercilessly where they tried to hold anyways.

Due to both the horrific toll of the Jewish Concentration Camps and a mingling of American, Chinese, and Russian soldiers which didn't happen in Rachel's time because the US got only as far as China's west coast in the Eastern part of the world, the Cold War hadn't got into the paranoid driven arms race because of somewhat greater understanding and a lingering brothers-in-arms sense from a year's worth of joint operations.

While the Iron Curtain was still a thing, the Cold War was more of a civilian driven space race/government model argument rather than a military buildup fraught with tensions between previously allied countries.

There were still elements of a communism vs capitalism death fight going on, viciously in the
business sectors according to the newspaper, and nuke stockpiling all over the place. Spies obviously were busy trading information, counter-espionage efforts were on-going, and it was still treasonous to even speak of maybe defecting to either country, but there was a distinct lack of military or war-based aggression from either side… discounting the proxy-war going on in Vietnam right now.

However, it seemed the true 'public enemy' was more blind fanaticism to any one cause rather than any single physical group.

Almost as if everyone was carefully not being the next Nazi Regime to be dealt with, instead of paranoid warmongers looking for the next threat to fight. It moderated everyone's approaches into more diplomatic tones, and it seemed as if overtures were still cautiously going around for the United Nations' formation.

She couldn't recall when that started up, if that was early or late for the UN’s establishment.

The 'payoff' of an early assassination seemed to be a greater technology development and more diplomatic overtures. With more attention poured into a mostly friendly worldwide race for the stars it meant less was going into watching the military buildup and trying to counter it, most of that seemed to be explained away as recovering from the cost of WWII.

While horrific and terrible to deal with no matter which way it ended, as it was a World War against genocide, the price tag on the other hand… Sonya was rather sure it wasn't worth it for a ten or twenty-year jump start in tech and friendlier relations between nations.

The Jewish people could possibly qualify as an endangered species now, the only reason they had any kind of stable number was only due to their strong presence in America and Africa absorbing their freed European fellows.

Everything in her book was all civilian history. It made her rather reluctant to ask Lisa for what had happened in the underworld while all that was going on.

There were a few more things that directly contradicted what Rachel had known as fact, Italy hadn't been part of the Axis Powers but still not part of the Allied one either. Apparently, the country had been a hot mess through most of the Second World War and no leader lasted more than three to five months during it.

Due to Sonya's Mafiya education she knew the so-called Mafia Wars had been on during that time, a violent scramble that spread from Italy to France and finally into Spain. Ottavia Vongola had apparently beat the Vongola Alliance into shape during that time, ousting those that had violated her terms and firming up a border of Allied Famiglias to contain the madness.

The Mafia Wars had also made all three countries more vulnerable when they were invaded, so it wasn't entirely a good thing either.

France and Italy had been way too busy trying to oust the Nazi Regime that took up their government to continue the Mafia Wars before long. Spain had been the only place the underworld war managed to fight itself out to the bitter dregs. Meaning that to the Mafia worldwide, both countries were still hot and should be avoided unless you had to visit for life or death reasons and there just wasn’t much left of any Spanish Mafia Syndicates once the military finished mopping up their mess.

Given a decade or so that might just change, but even as far north as she was Sonya could still read some of the mess getting reported through the civilian news. If she could hear about it now without too much effort, it probably wasn't safe to go poke yet.
Politically speaking, once the mafia groups in the regions stopped killing each other and went after
the invaders, the efforts they put into helping their old governments to get their seats back legitimized
them in a way. Those that survived, anyways.

You couldn't award medals to criminals, so *mafia cover businesses* came to be. A sort of legal fiction
in place that was still in use a decade after the fact.

Very little about the whole thing was known in the civilian world now, but Vongola and Cavallone
were two names she vaguely recognized. A bit of cautious digging even got her the current CEDEF
home office address.

It made her want to laugh, but she caught the hysterical undertones of that impulse and squashed it.

Rachel had studied American history more than European, Sonya resolved to visit the US as soon as
she could to see if she could find any other major divergences.

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XXV (Wednesday the 28th of December, 1960. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist
Republic.)

Birthdays were not typically celebrated in their home.

Lisa allowed a sweeter breakfast than they usually ate, and Arseniy patted whichever was the
birthday girl on the head when he woke up for the day. There might be cake involved if someone
had the time for baking it.

Which was pretty much it, other than the sparse gifts Sonya and Tatiana gave each other on
occasion.

She hadn't been expecting anything different for her tenth birthday, and indeed it followed the pattern
for the most part.

The redhead had quibbled over the date of her groups' first heist to be home for it, which had been
appreciated and slightly touching. The almost twelve-and-a-half-year-old girl even gifted the younger
thief with her old set of safecracking tools, which had been appreciated even more. Sonya planned
on slipping her current set of lock picks into the older girl's traveling bag later that night as well, so a
few more tools to make up for the lack was good.

Cherep managed to find and purchase a gift for her, but she had half expected him to do something
like that because he had been putting his purple head together with Lisa lately. That had to be
something to do with her or his newly semi-legal paperwork, and there hadn't been much else it
could have been about.

While different, because usually it was Sonya gifting things to him like the coat he was fast growing
out of, it also made her smile.

The fact it was a Russian history book on the Tsar Dynasties was a little strange but given anything
else he had seen her doing lately was combat training or thieving when she could?

It wasn't exactly surprising he defaulted to the more innocent or at least civilian friendly option.

With the lack of anything else to do, and her foster brother's nagging about doing something special
for her birthday at the very least, she took him to see a local showing of the Moscow State Circus
mostly on a whim.

Sonya was now taking a break from shattering metal or wooden poles and putting holes in Aleksandr's training hall's floor. Something she managed maybe once or twice a night with excessive effort but told her little more about whatever it was she could do besides break bones.

She was toying with the idea of asking for more information for the additional help if she got that cracking-holes thing down to a science, which meant what she had planned on doing for her birthday was out since Cherep wouldn't leave her alone about doing something for it.

Probably because he never had the security or safety to celebrate a birthday for a long time, and he was still young enough that birthdays were special occasions.

However, had she known what that trip would spark she might have kept them both home for a quiet night in.

He was entertained for the most part, which had been the whole point of the thing, but when he spotted the human cannonball act much less the ring of fire motorcycle stunts the only stunt driver there was debuting…

Sonya was sharply reminded of why, in the two-going-on-three years they had known each other, she had never taken him to see any circus performance before.

…he would not shut up about it.

Then, halfway home where she could hide in her room and pretend to go to sleep instead of listening to him talk her ear off, Cherep decided that owning a motorcycle of his own was his new life goal and she needed to hear all about it and what he wanted to do with one.

Although she appreciated the fact there had to be childhood dream involved that turned her friend from a runaway orphan-type into Skull de Mort the Immortal Stuntman… she didn't really need to hear the details of what enticed him into such a perilous field of work.

Nor did she appreciate the fact her birthday present to herself slash bribe to get Cherep to shut up had failed so drastically.

"You're too young to own a motorcycle." The tiny blonde cut him off mid-sentence, rubbing at the temple that throbbed the beginning of her headache.

"There's an age limit?" He yelped in horror, looking as if her poking holes in his plans had mortally wounded him.

She had to look away before she smacked the look off him.

The question also made her think hard if there were any driver limitations around yet… probably not?

"Would your feet even be able to reach the road if you got one of those metal monsters?" She asked instead, stopping a few streets short of her goal and turning to look at him fully. "Aim for getting one around fifteen or so, when you're not a scrawny brat anymore. Until then figure out what you're going to need to keep one running."

"Huh."

"…we do have a garage, a friend of mine called Dmitriy works there. You could probably ask for
some mechanical or engineering training too... but be aware that would invite the Zolotovs to ask something from you in return."

Cherep blinked wide purple eyes at her, but Sonya stubbornly kept her gaze off his face.

She'd leave this part up to him, fully aware if she did follow him or he followed her he'd end up dealing with a bit of the underworld in his own right before long. Keeping him out of it when he didn't mind getting pulled in slightly wouldn't help him any, and it was ultimately his choice.

No matter how much she would rather keep him free of it, it was likely no matter what she did he'd end up neck deep anyways.

"I'll... uh, think about it."

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**XXVI (Monday the 2nd of January, 1961. Dmitriy's garage, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)**

Cherep and Dmitriy got along just fine, especially when they had their heads bent over grubby machinery. They didn't even need introductions, the younger boy got distracted by all the shiny metal things the older one was working on.

Sonya was almost instantly jealous, not used to her best friend not paying the gross of his attention to her when they were in the same area.

After watching her fellow Mafiya fosterling lead her friend around his usual haunt and showing off what projects he had been in the middle of, she had to rephrase that thought to 'she was completely jealous over the boys' instant bonding'.

It had taken Cherep weeks to get used to her showing up to bother him, but not five minutes into meeting Dmitriy they were already buddy-buddy grease monkeys together.

Heaving a nearly silent sigh at herself, she had the mentality of a twenty-something jealousy shouldn't be a thing for her, the young thief retreated to an oil stained and grimy couch. Which she was somewhat sure Dmitriy slept on when he got too caught up in whatever he was elbow deep into.

Cracking open the book Cherep had gotten her, she settled in to read for the time being.

Engines weren't her field of expertise, her knowledge spread just far enough to ensure she got whatever maintained and looked at by professionals when needed. She'd be of no help to either unless they needed her to fetch them tools.

She spent several good hours like that, looking up only if a bit off curse reached her corner of the garage or something heavy and metallic dropped. By the time the two of them stopped for the day, or hour or however long it would be Dmitriy needed to eat and go back to work, the sun was well on its way to setting and Sonya had gone through several generations of Tsars and how they ruled according to the opinion of the author.

Cherep, nursing several small nicks on his fingers and liberally smeared with dirty oil and specks of grease, beamed at her as he all but skipped to where she had set herself up. "Can I come back tomorrow?"

"As long as you know the way," Sonya replied absently, folding over a corner of the page she was
on to mark her place, "and only if Dmitriy doesn't mind."

"Wait, you're not going to come with?"

"I should really get back to practicing at Aleksandr's sometime soon." She demurred easily, exchanging a nod with her Mafiya friend. "Dmitriy. You do know this is Cherep, right?"

"Your civilian boy?" Sounding surprised, the oddly swarthy skinned Russian gave the slightly younger boy a searching look as he passed a rag to clean off on. "The one you befriended years ago? Why am I only now meeting him?"

"Because you're probably going to do something stupid, that's why."

Dmitriy grinned sharply at her. "Define stupid."

"I'm ten. He's barely over eleven." She rolled her eyes when the other boy shrugged that off easily. "Cherep's now my foster brother."

"Kinkier things have happened, but I can work with that." He claimed cheerfully, turning to the obviously confused civilian between them. "So… Cherep. Can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Make it fast, we need to be home and check in with Arseniy before full dark."

Dmitriy nodded absently, swinging an arm over Cherep's shoulders and forcibly steering the confused younger boy away a little. Sonya huffed, tucking her book a bit more firmly under her left arm.

Her foster brother's steadily stiffening body language told her all she really needed to know about what he was filling her best friend's head with and resolved to beat her old friend into the floor the next time they had combat training together. Everyone seemed to think she was socially inept, but that was just because she couldn't really connect with the others that had mainly childish mentalities… therefore she didn't try.

"I'm NOT asking Sonya to steal things for me!" Cherep squawked, knocking her out of her thoughts. "So, there's no way in hell I'd ask her to steal for you!"

Alright, maybe she had been a little off in her assumptions. "Dmitriy?"

The complete ass didn't even have the grace to look sheepish. "What? Tools can be expensive, and I don't have the time to go get new ones myself."

"Why not just ask?"

"Because you'd demand a favor in return, Sonya."

She gave her fellow Mafiya fosterling a narrow look, even if she had to give him that point… but there was a difference between asking one Mafiya member to convince another to do one a favor and trying to get a relatively innocent civilian to do it. Distracted as he was, Cherep finally managed one of the moves vor Aleksandr had been trying to drill into him by clumsily twisting out from the arm across his shoulder.

Sonya was sure he had let the purple kid escape him, but she could deal with that.

"You know the others will try, might as well know how he'd jump beforehand." Continued her more Mafiya-connected friend pleasantly, as if she wasn't probably plotting out how many pieces to
separate his body into for easy disposal while Cherep scampered behind her to relative safety.

"That's a very pretty excuse. One wonders if you prepared it long before this."

"One would be right to wonder." Dmitriy was still pleasant sounding… mostly.

She was surprised to realize she wasn't too surprised that he could be as self-serving and cold to use an almost stranger to take advantage of her skill set. What she wanted to know was exactly how long had he been intending to do this.

"Then one hopes you are prepared to deal with the consequences of such things." All but purred the tiny thief lowly, probably taking way too much pleasure at how he turned slightly green around the edge of his nearly permanently tanned face.

She had to make an example, so such a thing wouldn't be tried until Cherep could deal with it by himself. He was right, others would try the same thing unless she could scare them off trying it.

"You'll get your tools, but you not only owe me a favor but a stint as my sparring partner. Both to be called in later." She flashed him a completely insincere smile before firmly steering one wide-eyed best friend out of the garage and down the street.

What made the whole situation all the worse was that she couldn't tell if Dmitriy had been honestly trying to help them but covering it up with the stunt he pulled or if the preteen who would probably become a Mafiya carjacker was merely the first to try and use her friendship with a nearly complete civilian to their own benefit.

Sony had known he could be arrogant and a little malicious simply by nature, but he had also been surprisingly brutally honest about it and level-headed for the most part over the past five years. Now she could add opportunistic and slightly callous to the things she knew about the boy.

It wasn't a pleasant realization.

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**XXVII (Tuesday the 17th of January, 1961. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)**

**Sonya** only belatedly realized she had a lot of books when Tatiana came home after a two-week long absence for her first heist and gifted her with a few more.

Somehow, in some manner that she apparently hadn't paid enough attention to, most of the books in their home were in the younger thief's room. With the three newest ones she had run out of room both in the little bookcase under her window and the stacks of additional books nearby were too high to risk adding more on top of them.

She had everything ranging from fantasy stories to foreign history books now, her latest obsession when it came to the written word, stacked neatly or shelved away in almost every available flat surface she didn't need to walk on.

Objectively thinking about it for a long moment, she realized she had been collecting books for almost all her life. Ever since the dream-nightmares of Rachel's life had started and she had desperately needed a distraction.

Reading had kept her quiet and out of the way and, other than the small obstacle of learning to read
Cyrillic script, it had been the first thing she poured her efforts into doing to temporarily escape her twisted reality for a short while. The habit had continued even with the thieving skills she had been taught heaped on top, to the point it culminated into a library-esque room.

Tatiana realized what had made her pause after taking her own gift to her foster sister and was currently in the process of laughing herself sick. Mainly at the younger thief’s deliberation of where to place her new tomes only to become stumped as her options turned out to be already occupied with yet more books. "Just toss them on your bed. We'll go find a crate or something to put all of these in tomorrow."

She gave her the look she felt that suggestion deserved, setting the books next to her bed instead. Unfortunately, she couldn’t slide them under it as it turned out there were even more under there already.

She blankly stared at her latest find, wondering when those got there and if she should go along with the redhead’s suggestion as the preteen cracked up harder.

"What are you even going to do with all of these in a few years?"

"I'll buy myself a library, of course." Sonya retorted without thinking, a little nettled by the teasing and irritated over the fact she hadn't realized she had been hoarding books. "I'll make Cherep hold the deed, but it'll hold everything I might ever want to read."

"Or collect in your magpie like way?" Tatiana tacked on, smirking a fit to crack her face and apparently not interested in the least to allow her foster sister the time to think up a suitable excuse for it all. "I pity anyone who would want to borrow from that library, you're a little terror when someone borrows a book from you."

Was she?

Pausing a full minute trying to think of what she had done the last time her foster siblings wanted to borrow one of her books, the tiny thief stared at the other girl hard. Then she flushed slightly in embarrassment, recalling how much she had lectured her purple haired friend on what she would do if any of the books he borrowed ended up damaged in any way.

There were even a couple mechanical manuals freshly added to one pile because her foster brother had asked if she had any of them, and Sonya was still in the process of planning the acquisition of a couple more.

Heaving a sigh as the older girl left her to try and handle her issue with her room, she decided she might just have a small hoarding problem when it came to books.

Since she did plan on leaving the Mafiya household in as little as a couple years, she probably should start wondering where the hell she was going to store all of it until she had her own place.

XXVIII (Wednesday the 18th of January, 1961. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Right," Lisa told all three of the underage children in the house the next morning, "pack the bare essentials to last you all the week. We leave in two days."

Cherep paused in the middle of drowning his pancakes in syrup. "What?"
"We're going on a short little vacation." The woman informed him cheerfully, extending a finger to ensure the syrup he had been in the middle of pouring didn't overflow onto the kitchen table. "I wasn't sure if you would like to come with us or not, but as long as you stick close to Sonya you shouldn't have much difficulty where we're going."

Placing the bottle of maple syrup down now that he had been reminded, the purple haired kid gave her a sideways look. "Where are we going?"

"Mafia Land." Tatiana chirped at him brightly, slathering her own breakfast in enough jam to give her cavities. "Lisa promised to take us once I finished with… eh, well… with what I started."

Sonya nibbled on her toast, warily eyeing the amount of sugar her fellow children were intending to eat. For that reason alone, she decided to make sure she wasn't in the vicinity when the sugar rush kicked in. When Cherep turned wide purple eyes on her, the young thief paused and gave him a questioning look of her own.

"What?"

"The Zolotovs, while not a particularly powerful faction of the Russian Mafiya, are influential enough to be entitled to a short visit once a year for a few of its members." Lisa answered instead of the young blonde, who had a mouthful of toasted bread and didn't really care to try explaining things to him as she wasn't sure herself. "While I don't normally go myself when there is room for extra guests, Sonya did ask about the place and it's not a bad idea to go and let them explore a little. Arseniy has a bit of business to do there for our section's Brigadier, so you three will come with us this time."

He squeaked, sounding almost like he had hiccuped when there was no air in his lungs, then rather robotically started eating while sitting ramrod straight in his chair.

Tatiana gave her little sister a slightly sharp but bright smirk, which was ignored as the physically younger thief busied herself with her teacup.

While his reactions were entirely amusing, she didn't intend to allow herself to fall into the pitfall of abusing her friend to hear or see his rather strangely addictive reactions to certain things. That way lied a slippery slope she wasn't too sure if she could stop herself from traveling if she got far enough. She also intended to keep the redhead from doing it as well, because if she wasn't going to be able to prod such things out of her best friend then her foster sister wasn't going to be able to either.

Petty of her, she knew, but she was surprisingly alright with that.

Lisa was exempt from any retribution Sonya might manage, because that woman not only cooked for them but also had a strong influence on what they did each day. It wasn't worth it to irritate her. Arseniy got a reaction by merely popping up when Cherep didn't expect it, which was almost a daily occurrence, and he still slightly scared all the younger members of the household. Therefore, she wasn't going to bother thinking about it in respect to their foster parents.

Her best friend really did have to learn to stop being so abuse-able, it wasn't good for his health or her future mental stability.

Distracted by her thoughts as she was, she missed him finishing off the stack of sugar-soaked bread he was eating. She did notice when he tugged on her sleeve, because it jarred her cup of tea hard enough to slosh the liquid over her fingers.

Thankfully the black tea had cooled enough she didn't scald her hands. It still earned Cherep a dark
look, because it was the closest thing to coffee Lisa would let her have.

"Can I talk to you?"

A sugar-hyper Cherep and a conversation… not the most idea morning she had ever thought of. "Go start packing, I'll be up in a bit."

He bobbed her a nod, giving the older woman a shaky smile and a mumbled thanks for breakfast before darting out of the kitchen.

Tatiana burst into snickers once he had escaped. "That boy… what's wrong with him now?"

"Cherep has a strange way of viewing the world, given what he's lived through." Sonya informed her blandly, considering the last few swallows of tea in her cup and wondering if it would be worth tasting cold tea for the caffeine boost. "I'm still working on him."

"You'd better hurry with that, before he decides you're not worth it." Lisa cautioned the younger thief, clearing away the plates that had been abandoned on the table before setting her own place to eat as well. "I'd hate to see that happen to you two. You're both surprisingly close for a Mafiya-civilian friendship."

Hiding her sudden scowl by draining her cup, as she hadn't really thought of that before, she collected her breakfast dishes to give to the woman before she sat down.

Which was stupid of her to think, because Cherep was his own person and it was entirely possible he'd might just decide to cut ties with her himself. If she was entirely honest with herself, that was more likely than him putting up with a thief for a friend for the rest of his life.

The older woman gave her a thin smile and accepted the empty cup and plate. "Good luck."

Grimly on the inside even if she was striving for calm on the outside, the young blonde gave her a short nod then followed the path her best friend took.

XXIX (Wednesday the 18th of January, 1961 continued. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya wasn't surprised at all Cherep had made exactly no progress on packing, not even pulling out a bag to store his clothes in, and she had dragged her feet making it up to his room.

The kid had his own unique way of protesting, and procrastination was a big part of it.

"Cherep…"

His spine snapped straight, probably popping a few vertebrae while he was at it, and he turned to her with a pinched expression she hadn't ever seen on him before. "Mafia Land?"

"I asked about it nearly half a year ago, Lisa promised to take us after Tatiana started working. Since she finished her first heist, no matter how small it ended up being, we're now due for a visit." She slunk her way cautiously inside his room, taking a perch on his messy and unmade bed. "It might be your only chance to see it. I don't think Arseniy or Lisa will ever take us along again."

"Funny, Sonya, real funny." He gritted out, spinning back around to inspect his room. "Why am I
coming along? I really, really don't want to."

"If we don't, the fact a child is living alone might get brought up to a member of the militsiya. Which would bring a whole lot of attention we really don't need to the neighborhood, not all of us here are Mafiya remember."

"But- …it's… mafia. I'm not… at all comfortable with this."

"It's still mainly a vacation destination, Cherep. An amusement park and resort, no matter the lawless members of society it caters to." Crossing her legs underneath her, Sonya set her elbows on her knees and her chin on her palms. "We're not going to be there long, most of the time we'll be gone is traveling there and back. A day to get to the port, an overnight trip by boat, a day to settle in, maybe a day or two poking around, then we'll pack up and leave. The most you have to do is go with, I won't care if you decide to spend the whole trip stubbornly stuck in whatever accommodations we get."

That took a bit of the steel out of his spine, but his frown stubbornly stayed in place. "I'll only do this under protest."

She sighed. "I'll owe you a favor for it."

Cherep blankly stared at her.

"You do know what that means, right?"

"Like how Dmitriy owes you one for that shiny new tool chest, even if you beat the tar out of him?"

"…yeah."

He cocked his head to the side, still considering her. "Then can I ask-"

"I don't owe you that much."

"…so, if you owe me more you might?" He asked instead, a slow smirk pulling the corner of his mouth up.

"…possibly." She intended to never owe her foster brother another favor, at least until she might realistically survive it. Stealing from other crooks would require a whole lot more skill than she had now.

If she was lucky, he might even use that favor up before she ever had to face owing him more.

…how much was being her friend worth?

Probably more than she was comfortable with… but that was way too late to think about. He was kind of a handful anyways, there had to be some balance in her favor on that end.

"So… can I ask you to run away with me and join the circus?"

Her mind literally blanked out for a whole moment. "The circus?"

"You can be an acrobat!" Her colossal dork of a brother nearly cheered, visibly warming to the idea even as he rambled on about her flexibility and putting her skills to some good use. Then he managed to work in his current life goal of owning a motorcycle into his rant, and then wondered aloud how he might end up performing as a stuntman if he could swing it.
It was entirely clichéd, running away to join a circus… much less a Russian circus.

She was also a thief, who apparently would become a carnie thief if she wanted to keep good track of her friend. Well… she did want more range before she continued her career as a criminal.

"I'm still telling Lisa and Arseniy where I'm going, we're going, because running away from them just sounds like a bad idea."

The boy cut himself off with another of his squeaking gasps.

"So, it'll be less of a 'runaway' situation and more of a 'move out' one." Sonya continued rather absently, lifting her chin off her hands so she could bury her face in them as she thought out the process such a move would require. "Damn it all… where the hell are we going to put my books?"

He stared at her for a long, silent moment. A snicker started it then, apparently, he couldn't hold it in anymore and burst out laughing at her… or her question, she couldn't tell.

"So…" He continued some time later, after both Lisa and Tatiana checked in on them to ensure he hadn't pulled something in his hilarity. "I'll go to this Mafia Land in return for you coming with me when I leave?"

"Sure… hell, why not?" She considered their situation carefully even as she made the rather flippant reply.

Cherep made a rather gangly looking eleven-year-old, and she was just shy past ten herself. They both didn't have much to their names, other than her entire collection of books that could probably get paired down a little if she discarded the easier to acquire copies. She'd have to figure out where to stash the bulk of that before they left the house...

Realistically speaking, it wouldn't be possible for a few years. Once he hit thirteen or fourteen, around or over Tatiana's age, it might happen if he could pass himself off as just a younger looking fifteen or sixteen. He was currently a foot or so too short to claim he merely had slow growth spurts, which didn't even get into Sonya's lack of vertical height or her still rather baby fat padded features.

All in all, two or so more years wasn't that far away… for her at least, Her foster brother might have a different opinion on that.

"I want veto rights to what circus we join. I can probably do a better background check then you can."

"Eh?"

"Just… pick a couple you think might be what you want, and I'll ensure they won't take advantage of us."

"Oh." Cherep blinked at his floor a few times, then smirked at her. "I'm glad you're coming with me."

"Don't thank me yet, we have yet to go anywhere." She slipped off his bed, stretching out a little as her ballet-sore muscles protested the movement. "Hurry up and pack."

XXX (Friday the 20th of January, 1961. Mafia Land.)
The travel to the port city they were catching the ship at was mostly uneventful, other than the fact it was Cherep's first time on a train.

The cruise ship that took them to the island Mafia Land was situated on was a first for all three of the younger members of their party, even Sonya who had Rachel's memories to draw from.

Unfortunately for Tatiana, the preteen proved to be one of those that got seasick easily. Which ensured she slept through most of the time the younger two used to explore the ship a little.

Before the preteen could knock out Lisa took all three of them aside and gave them a few rules to follow once they arrived, which basically boiled down to 'don't pick a fight/pocket you're not sure you can handle and stay out of trouble as much as you can'.

Cherep spent the five minutes after that conversation almost hyperventilating into Sonya's back. She spent most of her free time that night absently patting him on the back to get him to calm down, while wondering where she might find a bookstore once on the island and inspecting their fellow passengers.

The physically young thief elected not to inform her friend that the cruise ship was operated by mafia members, nor that most of the guests with them seemed to be much of the same. If he was already having issues not even five hours out from where they were headed, she didn't want to know what that information would do to him.

Disembarking from the ship was mostly painless, other than the fact her best friend finally realized who exactly had been on the ship with them. The concept of a mafia ran cruise ship seemed to baffle him, and she thanked whatever lucky stars she had it kept him quiet long enough for Arseniy to get them past the reception area and into the criminal resort town.

She wanted to say it was reasonably typical in its layout, once she got a decent view of things. There was a seaside wharf that held most of the tourist attractions on the southern edge of the island and the middle held both a general shopping center of a type and the hotels most that traveled there stayed at, the farther away from the wharf you got the more specialized the stores and services available were.

North was a very large open market for anything one could use to kill another, the western edge of the island resort had what amounted to twenty-four/seven nightclubs and bars seeded with what looked from a distance to be brothels, and the east held the different guildhalls and a few arenas. The decent number of maps posted around helped her figure out what was what.

Other than the fact the whole island was set up to facilitate the trade of violence and a haven for everything illegal under the sun and a few things not, it was a pretty interesting vacation destination.

Sonya probably wouldn't mind coming back one day in the future, so she'd have a couple days to spend poking around. When she didn't have a mostly civilian limpet who was making it way too obvious he was either fresh as a daisy to the underworld or incredibly uncomfortable.

She was pretty sure there would be a ring of bruises on her left bicep the same shape and size of his right hand later.

Much to her relief, and for her best friend's safety, the fully grown and dangerous looking Russian vor took up most of the attention their small group gained. Lisa, as a fully grown and pretty woman accompanying him, gathered most of what was left. Very little was paid to the two girls and one boy that followed in their wake, the most they did earn were a couple eyeballing Cherep and a few skeptical glances to Tatiana’s fiery hair.
Sonya was a bit torn trying to decide if she was insulted at the lack of attention paid to her or thankful her tiny size allowed her to skate under the general radar. Being underestimated could be a lot of fun, if she really wanted to press her luck.

What she did do, instead of either acting out to draw attention stupidly or try to keep her relative invisibility going and drawing attention that way, was keep an eye peeled for what type of stores they were passing.

She needed something other than one ancient Rain's diary to puzzle out her Flame type and how to use it, and if there was anywhere she wouldn't have to ask either fully grown Mafiya members to risk or barging for that information this had to be it.

Her main goal for the next few days was to find something supplemental for her experiments, because all she knew for certain was that she wasn't a Sky or Rain Flame user. She was also pretty sure she wasn't a Mist either, because that one would make no sense in compared to her stupidly ridiculous strength.

However, finding a book or someone with a loose enough tongue within two days in Mafia Land without Cherep getting itchy feet and wandering into something he won't be able to get himself out of would prove to be one hell of a challenge.

…and, if she could find a pole weapon that wouldn't shatter under her best swing, she'd be delighted.

Chapter End Notes

Vory v Zakone (Singular vor, Plural vory) – Thieves-in-Law, title awarded by one's peers (like a peerage title rather than a military rank).

Militsiya – A kind of paramilitary law enforcement, less military and more police in nature.

Edit Notes : Went back and fixed the formatting issues as well as made a few corrections. (4/21/15)
XXXI (Saturday the 21st of January, 1961. Mafia Land.)

Much to Sonya's delight, and Tatiana's not-silent-enough despair, there was a bookstore in Mafia Land's central shopping complex.

The shop looked to be a frequent traveler's store for paper items from all the port cities that serviced the island, holding everything from newspapers shipped in from around the world to popular fiction or nonfiction novels one might want to read on vacation. Given it was also a store run by former or current members of the mafia, it even had what looked to be gun manuals near the back next to cookbooks and a couple chemistry texts.

"We're going to a clothing store after this, you little bookworm." The older preteen warned her foster sister as she followed her into the brightly lit store. "Besides, where are you even going to put more books? We have weight limits on our luggage, and you're running out of room at home."

"Cherep will help, and these books I can't get at home." She ignored the question, valid as that concern was. Some of her books were now residing under her foster brother's bed, because Tatiana wouldn't hold them in her room unless they were useful enough for her to use every now and again.

The shop also had a couple mechanical handbooks on tanks, jeeps, and motorcycles, and she snagged one blindly to give to Cherep when they went back for the night… or when they went to drop off their shopping when it got too heavy.

She took some time looking through the cookbooks, because she found one that detailed a way to use basic kitchen supplies in everything from smoke bombs to a crude tear gas. It gained a snort from the feisty redhead, who decided that there was a book she'd rather like to have and took it from her.

The real target Sonya was after turned out to be a mafia child's storybook that looked to have been written a century ago. It was also in French, apparently just because the author wanted it to be.

There was no foreword to tell her where the story took place or was recorded from, nor what region of the world she might investigate for more stories or different versions.

Skimming through it, stripped of all the flowery terms and obvious pro-mafia propaganda, it left her with a very basic grasp on the various Flame elements and what made them up. The Classic or Hard types anyways, not the Inverted or Soft ones, but she might be able to puzzle that out herself.

She was also pretty sure there were more than the usual seven types, but damn if she could recall them. Something, something, Earth Flames at least...

Her quick look-through also reconfirmed her original thoughts, that she wasn't a Sky, Mist, or Rain. Harmony, Illusions, and Tranquility did not fit into the only example she knew of what she could do… but it was still an iffy thing given her physical youth and inexperience. Probably not her main type, if she had a secondary type to fuss with too. Which left her with Classic Lightning, Sun, Cloud, and Storm, and possibly five out of the seven Inverted as well, which the story book had cardboard cutout characters molded after.

Very flat characters. A nice and caring Sky that Harmonized, enthusiastic Sun with Activation, calm
Rain with Tranquility, fixated Storm with Disintegration, deceptive Mist with Illusions, reckless Lightning with Hardening, and an aloof Cloud with Propagation.

Which was all only one facet of any Dying Will Flame user in the most obvious and overt ways, and most of which she already knew.

While nice to get solid and written confirmation on that, Sonya would have to take a longer in-depth look to see what would explain the unnatural strength she had. For while trying to learn to shatter wooden and metal poles on command was interesting in its own way, the sprained wrists and shrapnel that resulted on occasion were tedious to try and avoid and it was always rather painful to suffer through.

There had to be a less destructive way to figure it out, because she hadn't seen a hint of oddly colored fire yet that would let her guess and pure strength wasn't a specific trait of any one Flame type.

Activation might be it, if Sun flames could enable one to use more of the muscle than the percentage normal humans used at any one time. Propagation could do it, if she was using Cloud Flames to boost either her muscle mass or the force behind her swings. Lighting and Storm were possibilities, if she was doing anything to the staffs she had been using without being able to see herself do it by either Hardening the staff or Disintegrating whatever encountered it… if she was willing to stretch her disbelief a bit.

If she really wanted to, she could even make a case for using Mist flames in a non-typical way to convince everyone and herself that she did destroy everything she had. She really hoped not, but it was a possibility.

Staring at the book probably wasn't the best idea ever too, given that Arseniy didn't seem to want her to spread her little talent with breaking things around outside of their group. Instead of spending the time to puzzle over it in the store, she added the book to the pile of them she already had going.

There were a couple more in different languages, aimed more for teens and younger adults, so those were added in almost as an afterthought.

"Find anything good?"

"A couple things to read on our way back, maybe." Answered the no-longer-as tiny thief absently, still looking for anything else that might help her. There had to be something better than children stories, even if they were mafia ones, that she might be able to make a comparison with.

"Anything that reminds you of that… friend of ours?"

That was an odd enough question it pulled her attention to her older foster sister, who had an irritated expression on her face at odds with the light tone of voice.

"One thing so far." The younger informed her elder sister with a shrug, using the distraction to see what had the other girl's back up.

Oh.

They were being discreetly spied on by the clerk, possibly because they were mafia brats and shoplifting wasn't a particularly rare crime for them.

Another possibility, much to her paranoid imagination, anyone picking up books on Dying Will Flames were watched for if they were in possession of the Flames or not. Which would be a nice convenient way to look for users, and it was possible the information would sell for a bit if
everything that pointed to Flame users being currently rare was as correct as she suspected.

Any further information she was looking for probably had to be asked for, which may or may not work and would probably put her on someone's watch list.

To risk it or not?

She considered the few books that might have the answers she was looking for, then back to the bookcase she had been pursuing.

If she needed more information after checking what she already had, it would probably be better to ask Arseniy for it. He could decide what to do, because she didn't know what was safe to risk or not. The vor had a better grasp on the underworld's movements and would probably continue to have it until after she finally made a stupid mistake to learn otherwise.

Mistakes in the underworld typically ended in one's death.

She didn't intend to make any mistakes that could be prevented with a dash of caution, she had a fair bit to do before she would be content to die again. However, that was intent-based.

Mistakes were… well, mistakes.

"How hard do you think teaching Cherep French will be?"

Tatiana's eyebrow rose in silent question, prompting Sonya to show her the storybook she pulled out first.

It was as good as any cover story, if questioned.

"...good luck with that. I'll give you the fact he's decent with mathematics, but his grammar on the other hand..."

"That's not his fault, it's his Czech accent that makes him sound funny to us."

She hummed noncommittally, which was ruined by the slow creeping smirk crawling up the redhead’s face.

"Oh, shut up. Where did you want to go after this?"

Her smirk grew a touch evil looking.

The clerk that had been trying to covertly keep an eye on what they were poking at and overhear their conversation eventually hurried them out, just so he didn't have to hear everything the older girl knew of current European fashions.

Given Sonya didn't really want to know either, as it was the early 60's when the hippy-bohemian look had yet to become popular and afros were fast becoming a thing everyone wanted to have, she tuned Tatiana out as well.

XXXII (Saturday the 21st of January, 1961 continued. The Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)

"Do you know how to swim?" Sonya asked Cherep even as she handed a book to him and dumped the rest of the bags she had on her bed.
He looked highly amused to be automatically handed a stack of wire bound paper the moment his foster sisters returned from checking out what shopping they could visit in range of their hotel. "Yeah, why?"

"Cause there's a beach here, silly." Tatiana dropped all six of her shopping bags on the twin bed the girls were sharing, whirling around to grin at her younger roommates. "It's mostly used by families with younger children really, but still a beach. I don't know how to swim, and Sonya ever so thoughtfully volunteered herself to teach me how."

"There's also all the women that want a nice tan to show off when they go back to wherever." She chipped in absently, searching through the redhead's new piles of clothing to find the swimsuits they had picked out. "And, if Cherep doesn't want to swim, there's always the boardwalk to explore or the amusement park… but I'd suggest we go as a group for that one."

He gave her an unimpressed glare, and she had to suppress the desire to smirk.

Wet-cat had nothing on that expression.

"You can't stay cooped up here all three days. You'll drive yourself up a wall or two and take the rest of us with you."

"Watch me." Even as he said it, Cherep's face twisted into a distracted frown. "It'd be nice to go swimming again…"

"Sonya learned in Saratov, in the river. I can't imagine how cold that had to be."

"It wasn't bad, just… smelly." The industrial revolution might have tapered off, and the start of the environmental concerns might be making a small dent into the amount of pollution being produced, but her biological birthplace was still a port city.

Sonya didn't really want to think what might have been in the water that one time she took a dip in it when her biological father decided to ensure she wouldn't ever drown by teaching her even if she already knew. It wasn't like she could've told the man she already knew how, explaining the whys of that would've been difficult.

"Come on, you can laugh at all the seawater Tatiana's about to gulp down and we'll go find something greasy and fast to eat afterwards. We'll be back before dusk, when all the really interesting things are supposed to start."

"She means before all the really immoral and fun things start to happen." Tatiana mock-whispered, swiping the swimming suit she had picked out from the other thief's fingers. "Alas."

The younger girl rolled her grey eyes, shoving a pair of swim shorts at Cherep. "She's mad I said no to her bar hopping idea."

"It's a good idea!"

"It's not."

The redhead flounced to the door connecting their rather lavish bedroom to a bathroom, tossing a sniff over her shoulder at them. "We're legally allowed to drink here, so why-"

"We're not legal here, there just aren't any laws here." She interrupted her pointedly. "Just because you can doesn't mean you should. I'm sure if we ask nicely, Lisa or Arseniy will let us drink at home. At least that way we can be home and hungover rather than try to navigate a new place drunk
off our asses while hoping everything goes okay."

Cherep blinked at her blankly a few times, even as their sister came to a sudden halt before reaching the bathroom’s threshold. "Really?"

Sonya gave the purple haired and eyed boy a disgusted look in return for the utterly disproving expression aimed at her before turning to their elder. "I'm pretty sure of it, since Lisa told us to ask them if we ever wanted to experiment with things like that."

"When was this?"

"Couple years ago, a few months after I met Cherep."

Tatiana opened her mouth, shut it slowly after a moment of hard thought, and then shook her head before she started speaking. "How... why... why do you recall that? I'm pretty sure I remember something along those lines, but... I forgot about it like a day later."

"Because you have the attention span of a gnat when you're interested in something. That was a little after they started us on safecracking, remember? You loved it and spent most if not all of your free time cracking practice safes when not forced to do something else."

"It's one of the rare few things I'm better at than you." She informed her haughtily, hand on her hip and a smirk on her lips. "I was fascinated with the novelty of such an event."

"I think I might have liked it better when we were ignoring each other."

"Don't listen to her." Cherep spoke up suddenly, softly smacking Sonya upside the head. Which she let happen, as she didn't understand the sudden tension in the room and hoped he had some idea. "She's just cranky you were going to have the last word."

Tatiana's smirk, which had dropped a little, returned full force as she spun around and finally entered the bathroom to change. "You're a doll, Cherep."

"The hell was that for?"

"Rude much?" He rolled his eyes at her when she glared at him. "Stop that, you are disturbing when you pout."

Sonya smoothed out any expression from her face. "I'm not pouting, I'm miffed."

"Same difference. Small hint for you, Sonya. Don't bring up that ignoring thing, Tatiana's a little embarrassed over that."

"Why?"

Cherep gave her the flattest stare she had ever seen from him. "You know that social incompetence she likes to tease you over? I don't think it was a joke."

"...I'm going to drown you."

"No, you're not. I'm going to sit in here and read while you teach Tatiana to swim, and maybe tomorrow I'll go with you to the beach if nothing happens to either of you."
Lisa woke them all up just before dawn the next day, flicking the lights on without care for what eyes she might burn with them. "Up, all of you. Yes you, Cherep. You need to come with us this time."

A few months of living with them under his belt enabled him to at least wait until their foster mother was out of the room to ask, "Why?"

"Lisa told us last night, but you were already asleep by then." Tatiana informed him groggily, rubbing a fist against her eye as she rolled out of her side of the bed. "We're supposed to get medical checkups and vaccinations boosters this morning. Oh joy."

"Normally Lisa does this at home, but since we're here I guess we are doing this now." Agreed Sonya, dragging herself over to her luggage only to stub her toe on one of the redhead's purchases from the previous day. "The hell is in this, rocks?"

"Shoes."

"My toes don't see the difference, Tatiana."

"At least they aren't books."

Their brother muffled a snort, grabbing a change of clothing and shuffling over to the bathroom in order not to follow in the physically youngest thief's footsteps in stubbing something. "Ladies, let's not force Lisa to come back and hurry us up. Please."

She grudgingly decided he had a point, since the older woman was never nice about it if she had to wake them or encourage them to get moving more than once. Dropping the only half-formed complaint she had been about to fire back, she instead stripped and dressed herself in the more comfortable of what clothing she had with. "Think we're doing vaccinations now or when we get back?"

"I hope back, if only to ensure the boat ride home will be merely miserable because I hate boats and not because we're all sick." Blinking at the closed doors separating them from their only recently acquired foster brother, Tatiana lightly nudged her shoulder blade to gain her attention. "Has Cherep ever gotten his vaccinations done?"

"Err… I hope he has, or he's going to be miserable for a good week." Given his history, she rather thought not.

Depending on how much time he had to himself before she ever spotted his oddly purple hair, it was likely he had gone without medical aid for a couple years. Add that all to the fact she thought very little of his parents, who had gotten scared of their good fortune to have a child that was unkillable when their incompetence had resulted in his initial death in the first place, meant she was rather sure he had gone five or six years without actual doctors looking over his health.

Normally, the Zolotov thieves had their medical records fudged by a registered nurse that came around every couple of months.

The man fabricated incidents that would explain away the usual and frequent training injuries they incurred, a broken wrist from a botched job turned into a fall off a playground jungle gym and the broken glass scars from smashing an inconvenient window turned into a fall into broken bottles instead. The point being all the fostered Mafiya brats she knew of had actual medical records… even
if most of the background information in it was pure bullshit.

However, Cherep likely didn't have any medical records either. Or at least, no where that they could hope to make use of them.

Thankfully they were in Mafia Land, which had a fully functioning hospital. Most of the Zolotov used vaccines were taken from them, and they likely supplied most of the underworld with them and other medical services as well. In a hospital like that, hopefully being asked to fake a record for one orphaned boy wasn't going to be too odd.

"Erm… so…"

Sonya turned back to look at her foster sister shifting in place uneasily. "What?"

Tatiana threw up her hands in exasperation, then snagged her tiny purse with the money the girls had pooled to afford the things they wanted to purchase here. "Never mind. Let's go see what Lisa has in mind for breakfast."

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**XXXIV (Sunday the 22nd of January, 1961 continued. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)**

Even with the head start, it still took them several hours to clear out of the mafia run hospital.

Although the adults merely needed a checkup each, the children they were nominally in charge of only had basic incident reports and one had absolutely nothing in the way of medical reports. Height, weight, teeth oddly, a few x-rays, reflex testing, hearing checks, eye exams, tailoring several years of medical reports into a full medical file on each of them, and then recording various other bits and bobs took a bit of time each.

Sonya felt a bit like a horse after it was over.

However, mostly, it was Cherep's fault it took so long.

In between the blood testing to check what antibodies he had already and after the x-rays to check his bone structure, the doctor he was assigned to then found the long-healed cracks in his vertebra from when he broke his neck years ago. Then the fact he seemed to have broken his left arm and several fingers only a few years prior, a couple ribs showing suspiciously old damage like they had caved in, and some very odd results in his blood test needed some open-minded consideration of surviving what should've been beyond fatal poisoning attempts.

She got to return the favor of a bruise in the shape of a hand, clutching her foster brother’s arm hard enough so the brat didn't bolt like a guilty person. While Arseniy confirmed he knew of the neck incident and that was one of the reasons why the purple haired boy was with them now and not where he once was.

Mafia people weren't nice people, but when they had standards like the doctor that looked perfectly willing to murder the much larger Russian vor if he had been the cause of the boy's old injuries… things tended to get ugly real fast unless you had a very good excuse or could point them in another direction.

Lisa's pinched features kept Tatiana from asking questions while they were waiting for a medical history to be tailored to their foster brother's old healed injuries so any civilian doctor who investigated or read it wouldn't have a stroke, but Sonya wasn't stupid enough to hope no questions
would be eventually asked.

When they were finally done at the hospital, the undead Cloud now possessing a new medical history that was only half bullshit and the rest of them updating theirs with Lisa collecting a box of vaccinations and booster shots that would need to be taken as soon as they got home, Arseniy gave her a look that basically asked if she thought he was an idiot.

She really could only indicate the boy himself, who was stiffly moving and paper-white. He was also not looking at anyone else in his stupid procrastination protest/fear of their reaction thing she had yet to figure out a reliable way to address without spooking him. Then she shrugged, to inform him she probably didn't know much more than he now did.

Which was pretty much the truth, since he hadn't informed her much beyond the whole first death incident and the basics of how he got to Moscow in the first place.

Noticeably, Cherep had left out exactly why he knew full well his death-defying ability would continue regardless of any 'special skill' he had been eventually stolen for… or why his parents knew that fact, or how many shady doctor types learned, or how long and how bad his kidnapping incident had been before getting himself free.

Which probably meant he had been killed a couple more times after that first time, but if Sonya ever learned who did it she would probably either tell Arseniy or that doctor the full truth as far as she had put together… or hunt the assholes down herself.

Probably one death from the incident that resulted in his previously broken ribs, a couple more times from the chemicals still lingering in his bloodstream, and any number of other methods that wouldn't show up if allowed to heal a month or more. Yet her best friend was alive, and not talking about it. They had proof of that avoidance in Arseniy's hands.

The vor snorted, a sound which jolted the younger boy out of his head given his panicky look at him, then rolled his shoulders as if shaking off some thought. "You peredniki have until noon, then get back to the hotel."

"We'll be visiting the Thieves' Hall after lunch." Lisa tacked on rather blandly, padding off after him when the man abruptly split off from them at the hospital's front steps.

"Cherep… if you want to stay in the hotel room you should follow them." Sonya prompted after an awkward moment, because Tatiana looked as if she dearly wanted to ask and the blonde wasn't sure if he wanted to deal with that or not or if the redhead had enough tact to wait until they were home.

"Or we could go check out the boardwalk." The preteen safecracker proposed with a fake and bright grin. "You did promise."

"I didn't promise anything… just that I might think about it if you survived your own adventure." Cherep hastily corrected her tightly, slowly unbending his spine the longer they waited on him to decide instead of asking or pushing him into something he might not want to do. "But… that sounds good."

He was still a little too wide-eyed for her to believe he was anything approaching remotely comfortable, so she gestured to the direction they would have to go to find the beachfront stores. "Whenever you're ready."

"Mmm, didn't you also want to check out the weapons on sale around here?" Gesturing behind them to where the road the hospital was on led further into the island, Tatiana painfully didn't bring
attention to how long it was taking their brother to decide on what he was going to do. "We could always go take a look or browse a bit… but you know most of what's here is probably hitman supplies. Guns, bullets, knives, poisons, and those sorts of things."

"Probably yeah, but I just want something that won't break apart on me after a few hours work and that's specific enough I hope there's some kind of store already here with what I want."

Cherep muttered something along the lines of 'I'd rather see tacky tourist shops', seizing Sonya's wrist and starting off in the direction she had given him. Their older foster sister followed them with a more natural sounding giggle.

XXXV (Sunday the 22nd of January, 1961 continued. Mafia Land.)

They returned to the hotel with little time to spare, Cherep clutching a massive black teddy bear almost the same size as him Sonya bought just because it was something for him to maul without leaving her with more bruises… or her punching him for the repeated manhandling.

They also had a massive assortment of candy that she was planning on not being around for when they finally ate it.

Said over-sized teddy bear ended up occupying a chair of its own during their Asian inspired lunch, guarding all the sugar they had acquired. Arseniy having left again for whatever business he was here for allowing them to put the stuffed doll in his spot much to Lisa's visible amusement.

The woman was much more settled than she had been by the end of their trip to the hospital, making the blonde cautiously guess the vor filled her in a little with what he knew of the boy's situation. Otherwise the brunette would be a breath away from glaring at her, for the imagined crime of keeping pertinent information from them.

Which she was still doing because while she might know Cherep was probably a Dying Will Flame user himself with their generation's strongest, if Soft/Inverted/whatever meant opposite than 'normal', Cloud nature… she had no way to prove it just yet.

She'd rather like to keep going on with that too. If she had no proof, she wasn't technically keeping things from them and therefore possibly able to get in trouble for it.

If her foster brother was going to be that Skull de Mort in a few years, the Zolotovs might really want him to be firmly under their thumbs before he could skate by on mere technicalities of only be 'aligned' with the Russian Mafiya. Even the weakest of the Arcobaleno would be a very important chess piece to control, they wouldn't be called the 'World's Strongest' without validation, especially since two or three of them would end up in Vongola hands before long and another was spoken for by the Triads.

The thought was probably entirely treasonous in a way and probably not what good Mafiya girls did, she didn't care.

Again, Cherep was hers first. Everyone else could go screw themselves, even if everyone else included the Mafiya syndicate that prevented her from finding out what a childhood of slavery was like.

She already almost compulsively stole for them. That would have to be enough to show her loyalty to the Zolotovs.
After they finished lunch Lisa gave Cherep the option of going with them, but he refused rather neatly claiming he needed a nap and instead stalking up to the suite of rooms they were using dragging the massive stuffed animal and the rest of the girls' shopping after him. Their foster mother didn't seem to mind too much, beckoning both younger thieves after her as she left the path leading to their hotel.

Sonya wasn't sure what she was expecting from something called ‘The Thieves' Hall', and she wasn't sure if she found what she had been expecting or not.

It looked like a regular office building… but given that normal looking façade in a place called Mafia Land obviously something was off about either it or her worldview.

They were show in by the doorman, who probably doubled as a guard/bouncer, Lisa exchanged a greeting and a bit of gossip with what looked to be a secretary that sounded just odd enough to make her assume it was code or insider habit.

Whatever the older Russian did, it made the lady manning the desk show them into a ground-level meeting room. Lisa got a stack of files pressed into her hands, and she cheerfully let them smack onto the table that took up the bulk of the room.

"These are mostly low-level requests from our neck of the woods, but along the type of things this agency is typically responsible for. Take a look, the both of you."

"Any particular reason why?" Tatiana asked after both girls gave the manila files a dubious look each.

"Because there really are only a few ways to get noticed and respected in our line of business." Lisa informed them pointedly, ticking off the options they had off one hand. "Develop a well-connected and incredibly loyal network of contacts that can advertise what you do and who you did it to without them stabbing you in the back, do over the top jobs that will get you noticed and hunted by the civilian authorities and possibly risk breaking Omertà, or take jobs through a guildhall like this and let them deal with advertising and networking. While this may not be a problem you'll need an agency to help you make those contacts, Tatiana, every little bit helps when you finally strike out on your own. Sonya…"

"I'm screwed on that contact thing, I take it?"

"I can substitute for most things, and I'm sure Tatiana will be willing to help." Giving her a surprisingly awkward seeming shrug, the older Mafiya woman took a seat and gestured the other two to find their own. "You might even want to think about getting Cherep to be a point of contact for you, sending things to me for fencing them off instead of trying to find anyone local and not inclined to stab you in the back either during the transaction or after. But… lone thieves don't typically do well, sweetie. Safety in numbers is a phrase that especially includes us. At first, we thought you'd be a very fine petty thief who wouldn’t need a supporting network outside of the clan… but you were surprisingly skilled with that lone jewelry heist."

To be honest, Sonya had never intended to be more than any normal petty thief at first. Petty thieves weren't ones an even mildly affluent Mafiya syndicate like the Zolotovs worried about, and there was safety in being only one of many. Had things gotten unsustainably bad or troubling, it had been likely she could've ducked out without too much difficulty so long as she made sure to leave no links behind.

Then she met Cherep and her desire to do something notable with her life won out over her desire to keep her head down and not make waves.
Lisa was right, their society was rather isolated from other pockets of the underworld. Not only due to sheer distance from each other, but because one Mafioso from Italy would stick out like a sore thumb in the USSR and be easy pickings for the vory. That also made information and news hard to come by, and if she really wanted to make a serious go at becoming anything like the 'World's Greatest Thief' she'd either have to act out and draw dangerous levels of attention on herself or do something incredibly stupid like get herself noticed by the police.

An agency for thieves was probably her best bet to make that lofty goal without risking her neck… or Cherep's.

She wondered how well her foster brother would take to the suggestion of being a thief's agent.

…probably not well.

XXXVI (Sunday the 22nd of January, 1961 continued. Thieves' Guild Hall, Mafia Land.)

"Well?" Sonya glanced up to Tatiana's expectant look, who had only poked a few files out of sheer curiosity. "Did you find anything interesting?"

The physically younger blonde looked at the file in her hands again, but given she had spent more than five minutes reading it though it wasn't likely either were put off by her stalling. "Maybe. How does a museum heist sound to you?"

"Oh, not good. Damned hard to fence, those things." Lisa interrupted before the older girl could comment, giving the file in her hands a scornful look. "Museums have ways to track the items in their exhibits, and if they can trace it back to you…"

"It's just for a few specific pieces, not a request to loot it to the bedrock." Spreading out the thoughtfully included pictures in the file, she showed them the goals for the requested heist. "I don't think I'd have to go into the museum at all if it wasn't for this one bit, as I'm pretty sure I could rob a wealthy home or two to find the others."

Most of the other requests had things like stealing from people Sonya already knew were shady and a possible killing or two, both of which were things she wanted to avoid for as long as she could. The one in her hands was less violent in request and less suicidal in intent, so she had bothered to read more than just the so called 'shopping list'.

The main objective someone was apparently willing to spend an obscene amount of money to get was one of the state seals from Russia's earlier years as a nation. Thief she might be, but she didn't understand why as it was almost useless as anything but an expensive and illegal paperweight one would have to hide if one entertained more law-abiding individuals.

Maybe a very patriotic Russian wanted it?

Unfortunately, or fortunately if you wanted to look at it that way, there was no name identifying who was asking nor who would be accepting the contract. Only a series of numbers she would have to give to 'turn in' the job and get paid for it if she did do this.

The seal wasn't the only thing the client wanted, but the rest of it probably wouldn't be so risky to hunt down.

The coin he, she, and/or it wanted was, hilariously enough, one of the old ruble coins she already
had from the jewelry store robbery. That wouldn't be too tricky seeing as she had it at home.

Thankfully there was nothing else overly large or unwieldy needing to be stolen, just a couple fragile glass pieces she could probably find in any respectably old and venerated family estate. If there were any old and venerated family estates left in Soviet Russia.

Which would draw the problems of personal home security in a level she wasn't really looking forward to, but probably something she would have to tackle before long anyways.

Tatiana scooped up the scattered files, stacking them together in a very noisy way. "Then I think we may be done here, right?"

"Almost." Lisa interrupted her pointed shuffling of paperwork. "If Sonya is going to start working for the Hall, she needs to be formally contracted for it. It's a bit of an involved process, though I can expedite most of it."

"Formally?" Sonya echoed slowly, a bit bewildered that there would be more of a process to this than just picking up a job.

Would it be anything like the dues the Zolotovs were entitled to for her Mafiya education?

"It includes an employee pass to the island and accommodation when you need it. Hotel rooms and such." The older woman tempted, in an obvious manner. Equally as obviously she didn't think she really needed to, but she was sure their foster mother was pulling Tatiana's fiery red braid a bit. "You'll be in and out a bit if you keep up taking jobs here. It's supposed to help defray costs, so you'll keep coming back and taking contracts."

"But not travel expenses?"

"The island moves too much to guarantee that, but you get a schedule of all the ports that will supply this place for a couple months in advance."

"The island moves?" The preteen safecracker interjected incredulously before the younger pickpocket could ask for more information, looking up from her second look at the files to see if she was tempted enough to sign herself up alongside her own foster sister.

"It is completely man made, and we're currently in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean." She pointed out blandly, either ignoring the disbelief on both girls' face or not caring enough to sound less patronizing. "The only saving grace Mafia Land has, aside cutting-edge mafia developed technology and Omertà keeping this place a mostly guarded secret, is that it's in international waters and stays there. Even if the governments around the world learned about it and then wanted to shut this place down, they can't without putting their own warships at risk or starting another war with a lot of paranoid countries thinking they will go after them next."

Sonya blinked at the older woman as she processed that.

Well… that explained quite a few things, to be honest.

XXXVII (Sunday the 22nd of January, 1961 continued. Thieves' Guild Hall, Mafia Land.)

'Expedite' apparently was Lisa's way to inform both girls that she had once been one of Mafia Land's contracted thieves once upon a time. She got a sign-on bonus for both herself and Sonya, so
she decided she really didn't care much beyond that.

At least the Thieves' Guild Hall didn't require dues like her Mafiya clan, they merely got twenty percent of the payment as a referral fee on every job she did for them. The commission fee would drop to fifteen if she kept up with the work enough for a couple years, and it might even end up being merely ten percent if ever requested by the serial number the clients were given to identify the various thieves working for them. Had her foster mother not recommended her the initial starting fee would've been twenty-five, and only drop to as low as fifteen no matter how good she was.

It was very clinical, hands off, and strictly regulated to ensure no one inconveniently disposed of the thief that stole for them before anyone got paid. She could see why such a market was open and used, and why the Thieves' Hall was just across the street from the hitmen version of an independent employment agency.

While not impossible to identify and kill certain thieves after the jobs they did, it was certainly hard enough only the really pissed off or asshole-ish would bother trying. According to her new and rather brutally specific contract, while keeping herself anonymous was her job the guild would avenge any of their thieves that were killed due to their work for them by matching the gross pay from their last job and the job they got killed for then placing a hit on the one that ordered their death or the one that killed them with the resulting amount.

Which could get stupidly expensive very quickly if someone was resorting to an independent outside guild of thieves to get what they wanted, so very few criminal types would risk that. According to Lisa anyways, her contract didn't state that in so many words but had a lot of figures for finding out how expensive it would be to kill her depending on how much she worked.

Additionally, any injuries occurred 'on the job' were her own to deal with but they would pay for any Mafia Land hospital checkups to be done after whichever job was finished and 'turned in'. If she was bleeding out or horribly maimed and needed surgery right away was apparently inconsequential, so long as she delivered whatever she was supposed to steal first and by any deadline set.

Oh… and any drug or human trafficking she might do while employed by the Thieves' Hall was grounds for termination in the more final sense of the word via their fellow contracted employees that did hits more than heists.

Mafia Land apparently had very little tolerance for both happening in its territory or by its people, but you could take any drugs you wanted while employed as there was no drug screening or rules against using controlled substances when working for them. A bit odd, but Sonya could deal with that stipulation by not bothering with any drugs in the first place.

As an official Mafia Land employed thief, she got a serial number and a very bogus looking but apparently legal ID that claimed she worked for what was probably an international shell company in 'Acquisitions'. Which was practically useless right now, being she had only recently been elevated into an age that had double digits would mean no one would believe she was legally employed anywhere no matter what documentation she had on hand.

Lisa's promised pass for the island was worked into that ID card, meaning she could come and go as she pleased but couldn't bring anyone into Mafia Land with her for free. At least she'd put in effort to ensure she kept track of what book she was using it as a bookmark for.

If Sonya decided to keep up with contracted jobs, she would eventually end up doing a lot of traveling. It did sort of appeal, in a way.

She hadn't really seen much of the world in her last life, staying put wasn't really all that attractive
now she had and was on her second chance.

Apparently one of the reasons why Arseniy hadn't bothered to get them round-trip tickets for the train they used to get to the port they left the mainland from was that Mafia Land was drifting up from the coast of Africa until they were a reasonable distance from Iceland. It would then swing around to skate down the eastern seaboard of America until they hit the Florida Keys where they'll bounce down to South America, then round the southern tip of that landmass before heading into the Pacific Ocean and hitting up the Far East before starting back to Europe.

Meaning when the little foster family went home they would only really need a fraction of the time it took them to get to Mafia Land in the first place, because the island was more north of where it had been when they arrived. A short trip by boat to England or Norway and an overnight ride on the train would probably see them in the USSR by breakfast, if nothing went wrong.

Well… a lot of traveling probably meant she wouldn't have to join Cherep's eventual circus to keep herself fed or pay her Mafiya dues, all she'd have to do is keep in mind where they were going and line up jobs in the same general region. Not area because that would draw way too much attention to whatever circus her friend joined, but a country away was probably do-able.

There would also be a distinct lack of looking for reliable fences this way too, which had been something she had been worried about ever since her foster brother asked her to go with him.

Sonya would probably end up joining as a temporary worker or last-ditch replacement. If only to have an excuse to cling to so she wouldn't have to have a very awkward and probably depressing conversation with Cherep about exactly how she could afford to follow him around or where she went on occasion.

…and maybe pigs could fly without catapults, but she could hope. The boy wasn't stupid… just a bit too nice, a little dense sometimes, and lacking in school-related bookwork knowledge Lisa was only recently helping him catch up with.

The best part about being employed by a shady organization like the Thieves' Hall from a place as bizarre as Mafia Land was that she would be assigned a storage locker to keep whatever she wanted inside if she did five or more jobs within a year, if she did ten she got a tiny flat assigned to her on the island itself. She would have to keep up with whatever number of jobs each year afterwards to keep whatever bonus she got and wanted to use.

While it didn't sound like a whole lot of effort for rather attractive rewards, that wasn't considering the time she'd have to spend getting from wherever Mafia Land was to where the things that she had to steal were or the time needed to plan and execute a heist then the time getting back without drawing attention to herself to turn in whatever contract.

Five jobs might be sketchy for her first year even if she only spent two or so months on each, ten was obviously a goal to work for.

Although the apartment accommodations would probably be cramped and shared with numerous other international criminals, the storage option was something she was interested in.

It'd be a place to store her books for a couple years until she had a permanent place of her own, held in trust by Cherep or not.

Sonya wasn't at all sold on living on the island even if she was working here, but it was something to think about and an option if she ever needed it.
The bonus Lisa got for referring her was nice, a semi-large lump of cash in a currency of their choice the two opted to split. She had been running a little low, given most of the money she had brought with her had been the proceeds from her jewelry heist almost half a year ago. The blonde had been wondering if she wanted to risk picking mafia pockets or not, and this would at least let her opt out of trying that.

She was somewhat confident she'd probably get away with it, but she was trying not to do stupid things that might end up killing her.

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XXXVIII (Sunday the 22nd of January, 1961 continued. Mafia Land.)

On the last full day they would be spending on the island, the girls managed to drag Cherep out to the beach for most of the afternoon.

They kept to the more child friendly bits of the amusement park after spending a few hours in the water and, if you glossed over the fact most of the carnival games weren't rigged to ensure you lost or that the sharpshooting booths were set up on a live-fire range and had actual firearms and live ammunition used to play, it wasn't much different than any other carnival or fairground Rachel had ever seen.

There wasn't much that Sonya could use that distracted her best friend from the fact most of the game booth prizes were generally either lethal or something normal children probably wouldn't want, or that the various game was a lot more expensive than typical in exchange for the realism.

She did get him to smirk when she joined an arm-wrestling competition because the gentleman running the mini-tournament implied he was more than just girly-looking, and their brother cracked up with Tatiana when she won it with only slightly suspicious ease. Thankfully there were mostly fellow mafia brats in that round, and she could escape before any of the older members of the underworld decided to test how far her strength went.

Their older sister proved to be a better shot than either of them, but their dork of a foster brother stuck to playing games of chance instead of skill even if he lost more than he won. The redhead won herself a very nice handgun that probably wouldn't nicely fit in her hand for a few more years yet, while Cherep ended up with a rainbow-colored feather boa he decided to proudly wear even if the girls were laughing at him. The younger sibling won her foster sister an extra clip for her shiny new handgun and managed to find him an equally gaudy set of heels that matched his new accessory perfectly.

They returned to the hotel before sunset, merely because none of them wanted to find out what the Mafia Land nightlife was like and they still had to pack to leave the next day.

Admittedly they wouldn't be leaving until after noon, but both young thieves did want to buy a bit of everything they couldn't get in the USSR before then.

A combination of the morning fright, midday exercise, and a steady diet of sugary foods afterwards made both Tatiana and Cherep turn in for the night early enough that Sonya had a lot of time to spend pouring over the other books she had bought earlier the day before.

Not that it told her much else beyond what she already knew.

It did give her a couple more facets to the 'typical' personalities each Flame type was supposed to
It really did look like she'd need Arseniy's help to find anything else of value on the island, or risk it by asking around herself, or ignore the whole thing and keep on trying to develop something she only had half a clue how to do.

Instead of reading pro-mafia propaganda repeatedly when she didn't have to, she stayed up with Lisa long enough to catch the older man when he came back from his own business and explain the problem to him.

The vor made no promises, which she hadn't wasted time hoping for, but agreed to at least see what he could get on the subject before they left Mafia Land.

She did leave him with her mostly useless set of books on the subject when he asked her to.

As she hadn't decided if she would take them back home with her or not, the more useful information could be written down elsewhere and probably in a better manner than how they were as children's stories, she gave them up easily enough.

Besides, maybe he could pin down her Flame Attribute better than she could. She wasn't entirely sure if she was managing an objective view of her own personality.

That kind of brutal self-honesty was rare, and not something she was sure she had.

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**XXXIX (Monday the 23rd of January, 1961. Mafia Land.)**

Sonya managed to get Cherep to go weapon shopping with her by ambushing him with the idea before he was awake for the day and coherent enough to refuse.

It wasn't a tactic that worked very often, as he was usually one of those disgustingly peppy morning people who were awake when they opened their eyes and usually he was quicker than her most mornings. She tended to get more out of Tatiana by resorting to asking before any caffeine was to be had, even if Lisa only allowed them tea instead of coffee.

Her newish foster sibling was inherently nice enough to keep his word to a friend no matter how crooked, even if their elder sister tended to see anything she agreed to in the early morning as promises made under duress and therefore not something she had to be held to.

That wasn't to say he was entirely happy with the idea, but he still didn't stay behind as he had for their shopping their first day on the island. Instead, her followed in her wake a little too close to be mistaken as a very young bodyguard and kept eyeballing the suspicious splotches of what was probably various bodily fluids spilled the previous night as they made their way to where the arms dealers had set up a block of shops.

As Tatiana had guessed the day before, the main trade in the violence industry was mostly guns, ammunition, and explosives with a side order of poisons, concealed knives, and garrotes.

How some of those poisons didn't count as ‘drugs’ with some of the claims their hawkers professed was a little beyond the younger thief, unless they all ended in death no matter what other effects tended to pop up while the target was in the process of dying.
"I don't know, Sonya. This doesn't look like it will have what you want."

She scanned the four closest vendors, and their 'display' pieces that she was mostly sure could fire bullets if someone wanted them to. "We're not looking for the cheapest or bulk suppliers, so we might have to go farther than one block in to find anything interesting."

Shrugging, the redhead wandered on ahead of them. Taking a moment here or there for a closer look at whatever was on sale that hour, most of which she would be hard pressed to aim correctly much less actually use.

Shotguns had nasty kicks, right?

Cherep still kept as close as a burr for the most part, almost tripping over Sonya a couple times before the lack of anything more violent than an argument or two happening around them made him relax slightly.

"I distinctly recall you mentioning I could spend all the time we were here in the hotel room and you wouldn't have been bothered."

"Well… yes, but I never said I wouldn't try to drag you out once or twice. Which you never said I couldn't do."

He gave her an unimpressed look, which made no dent whatsoever on her self-satisfied smirk. "The next time we do something like this, I want veto rights."

"So that means there will be a next time? I'm holding you to that."

Blinking in surprise a few times, the young Cloud heaved an aggravated sigh and carefully nudged her in the ribs out of protest. "This isn't as… bad as I thought it would be… but not something I want to do very often."

She rolled her eyes at him. "This is probably the safest mafia playground and black market in the world, simply because there isn't the ever-looming threat of a police raid possibly happening and ratcheting up the tension everyone is under. That means it is, ironically enough, safer than any other illegal market in existence. I would never bring you along to any in the USSR, simply because I would never trust them with you. Safe to say, unless you actually want to come back here sometime in the future, I'm not going to be the one getting you into anything illegal."

He gave her an incredulous look, then shifted those wary purple eyes to take in the closest of the arguments on-going around them. The wrinkled looking and middle-aged hitman looked pretty pissed off already, the vendor he was yelling at looked a moment away from pulling one of the guns he had on display and shooting the bastard.

"I said safer, not safest." She defended herself a bit waspishly, seizing him by the wrist and pulling him farther into the crowd so they didn't lose sight of Tatiana's flame bright hair.

"Right… that make it all better. I'm sure."

Cherep was turning into such a snarky little shit, much better than his spooked kitten face when he didn't know how to deal with her in the beginning. She wasn't sure if she was rubbing off on him or if this was purely just him, but she appreciated it all the same.

It made her want to hit him less, strangely enough.

Their elder sister put a stop to anything else they might have said, hurrying back to them with a wide
"Grin. "Found something you might be interested in. How about a polearm instead of just a stick?"

"You complain about my sticks, but I can whack you from across the room with it." Sonya followed her anyways, because while she might really want to stick with something safe and blunt like a staff she may just need a blade or two if everything went to hell on her in the future.

The older safecracker rolled her eyes at her but showed her the store she had found. It was quite the find she had made, a catch all for melee weaponry instead of yet another ammunition store with a side selection of knives ranging from pocket sized to short swords in length.

The real prize of the store were the clunky gemstone rings locked into a very secure display case, which the young pickpocket only belatedly realized were for Dying Will Flame users after wondering why rings were available in a weapon shop.

They looked rather shoddy at a glance, the stones cracked and cloudy, and since Sonya couldn't recall when Flame rings became a thing to be used even if she vaguely knew they would be she doubted they would help anyone much.

If she recalled correctly, that kind of ring would shatter after a use or two.

They were also hellishly expensive.

Until she knew what Flame type she had and how to use it, it wouldn't be worth the hassle to see if she could get one.

"Sonya?" A nudge from Tatiana drew her attention, as she pointed out a specific weapon displayed on the wall. "What about that one?"

She was pointing at a slim and lightweight war hammer.

Sonya left the store with a Bec de Corbin the proprietor insisted was Flame resistant, though she had her doubts about that. If she managed to shatter it, she would be rather cross given how much the damn thing had cost her.

Her older sister picked up a couple of knives while the shop clerk tried to sell the 'specially designed to be damage resistant' weapon to the blonde, and both girls chipped in to get Cherep a set of brass knuckles when he lingered a moment too long over them.

Even if he spluttered in protest.

XL (Monday the 23rd of January, 1961. A Mafia Land Ferry.)

"That wasn't so bad, right?"

Cherep gave Sonya a very level look over the head of the stuffed bear he was resigned to be carrying around for their whole trip back home. His crooked best friend merely smirked wryly at him, lightly kicking her luggage under the bench they were sitting on.

They would apparently be disembarking from the ferry in France then take a couple of different trains to hit the main rails, for an overnight ride to get them most of the way back into the USSR, and they'd probably hit Moscow sometime after dark tomorrow.
He was looking forward to watching the scenery pass by him because everything even remotely questionable had been packed into a shipping container that would probably reach Moscow before them, so he didn't have to sit there with the wonder if they were going to get arrested by any border inspections or not hanging over his head.

The only sour point was the fact he didn't speak or read French, German, or any language other than Russian or Czech. Cherep could at least deal with that issue in time, Sonya promised to help teach him a couple of languages then he could read the signs like any other tourist in the next year or so.

Mafia Land had been rather baffling in that respect. While he appreciated being able to read some of the signs and managing a conversation if he wanted, there was still the tiny fact it was mafia that boggled his poor head. Until their trip to the amusement park it had almost looked like some beachside vacation spot, with packs of foreign speaking tourists wandering around. Much to his surprise they hadn't even been the youngest children there, which told him that mafia people were almost another subculture entirely.

He hadn't known some people allowed their children lethal weapons or viewed the act of carrying them as some kind of reward or prize, and he probably would've been perfectly happy to have never noticed that. Even his new baby sister had looked bemused, guiding him and Tatiana away with a sour muttering about cows and hand grenades he didn't understand correctly.

At least, he hoped he didn't understand her correctly.

"It was... different." Cherep temporized instead of admitting she had a point, propping his chin on top of the ridiculous stuffed animal she had forced on him. "Not entirely good…"

"…but not that bad either, right?"

"You're not going to drop this, are you?"

"Nope."

Rolling his eyes skyward, he gave an awkward shrug. "Fine then. No, it wasn't that bad."

"I found a book for you and Tatiana, got something long and surprisingly pointed to play with, and might actually have gotten something I'd been wondering about done." Sonya informed him almost haughtily, kicking her feet idly and leaning back against the ship's railing. "I think our stay was great."

"Hooray for you. One question. Is there going to be lunch on this boat?"

"Oh god." Tatiana complained sickly, already green in complexion and hanging onto the railing they were leaning against for dear life. "Cherep, shut the hell up."

"Lisa said we'd be getting lunch in France before we board the train, because of poor Tatiana's delicate stomach. Just think… raw snails served in their shell… frog legs…" The blonde trailed off with a wicked smirk, waiting for the redhead to regain some control over her rebellious stomach. "… raw oysters and sea bugs boiled in their shells…"

Cherep winced in sympathy as their older sister got sick over the side of the ship yet again. "You are a horrible little foster sister."

"I'm the little sister, I'm supposed to be either sweet and loving or conniving and evil. And there's no way in hell I'm ever going to be sweet so evil it is." Defended the girl with a prissy little sniff, giving their horribly ill sister a sideways look. "And hopefully this will teach you not to mess with my damn
"This means war, you little hellion." Tatiana hissed back at her, pulling a rather good glare for all that she looked a moment away from losing the battle to keep what little of breakfast she ate where it was supposed to be. "I didn't know the damn thing was there."

"And you leave your shoes all over the place too, so you have no room to complain."

Sighing, and wishing that Lisa hadn't abandoned him with his foster siblings when it became apparent this wouldn't be one of the little things Sonya was totally apathetic about happening, he dropped his face into his hands.

His crooked best friend didn't normally tend to get this vicious, so he was rather curious what had been in that book when he was sure she had already read all the ones she had picked up that first day.

Arseniy had given it to her… so maybe that was the reason she wasn't letting this incident go?

Chapter End Notes

Vory v Zakone (Singular vor, Plural vory) – Thieves-in-Law, title awarded by one's peers (like a peerage title rather than a military rank).

Peredniki - Brats
XLI (Saturday the 28th of January, 1961. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Only belatedly, during the rather miserable first week home while the younger members of the house were recovering from a round of vaccinations and booster shots, did Sonya realize that she might have missed a very good opportunity concerning her first heist and her stupidly tricky ability.

If certain gemstone rings enabled Dying Will Flame users to focus and more easily use their abilities, then she might be able to find a gem that would work for her without shelling out a lot of money for some already made ones and attracting attention at a specialty shop. The rings they had found available in Mafia Land were probably a quality better than anything she could find on her own, but they weren't exactly masterwork pieces either and it might be possible to find her own and less expensive alternatives.

Conceivably, she might be able to rummage around another jewelry store for their stock gems and have an entire array of stones to test. It would be awkward as hell, trying to wear fiddly jewelry while attempting to break another handful of staffs and watching for which jewels broke or cracked on her, but doable.

It might even help her out in identifying her Flame type, though she was aware any gem that worked for her might not be in the color the Flame. Gemstones came in a wide variety of colors, and while her memory might insist the stones of Flame rings matched the Flames themselves that could just be because of a rare variety and not because those stones were typically thought to be that color.

Likely, whatever she made or found would be clunky and fragile since she wasn't a jeweler and as amateurish as could be when it came to Dying Will Flames. However, if she found one then it would work in a pinch for… whatever they were typically used for. Probably prevent her from stumbling into that tunnel-vision problem she had already butted her head against several times.

That old vor Aleksandr had not been amused to be almost smacked in the face one of the times he tried to get her attention while she was working on drawing up that startling strength at will. He now left gaining her attention to Cherep, who did so unheed of the risks a startled girl who could shatter metal every now and again posed to the integrity of his skull. In response Sonya poured a lot of effort into not falling into a narrow mindset while training.

She sighed heavily once the pros outweigh the cons of that idea somewhat handily, added the idea for another jewelry heist to her list of things to do, and turned back to the slightly damaged book in her hands.

Tatiana was very, very lucky they were all feeling a bit under the weather. Booster shots might not be as bad as getting full vaccinations, and somehow their foster brother was doing better than they were even if his shots were supposed to be worse, but the girls did have slight fevers and the redhead
had an annoyingly persistent cough Lisa was trying to soothe with honey laced tea.

The book Arseniy got her, which had a suspicious gouge into the back in the shape of the redhead's throwing knives from when she fumbled one undressing and it dropped point first onto the book, might not have specific answers for her but it did have enough that Sonya managed to strike off another two Flame types from her possible list.

Which left her with her two likely suspects. Sun and Cloud.

According to the book, use of Disintegration by Storm users left small particles behind and was never uniform in any initial application. Instead, she might have Disintegrated part of the vory she kicked or broke an arm of if she had primary Storm Flames.

That was, if the possibility of channeling Storm Flames through a wooden stick without it turning into dust in the first place was possible... and she wasn't really sure of that.

Lightning Flames would've kept her makeshift staff intact no matter the force, and while Hardening would've explained some of the damages she had done it wouldn't explain the kick impacting a brick wall to the point it dented or her continually shattering her practice weapons.

However, according to her new book it wasn't likely she only had one Flame type.

Apparently being *purely* one or another type was almost as rare as a being a Sky. Supposedly.

Even if it wasn't likely anyone could utilize more than one at a time, it was entirely likely a trait or two conformed more for a different Flame type than her 'main'. It was more likely she had two or more, the main she had probably already tapped into and another that would just confuse her until she got a firm grasp on her own abilities.

That was… not right?

Something about that was off from what she recalled, and that reminded her that all books had a bias she had to be careful of. May or may not be correct, in other words.

Unlike Cherep, who she could almost confidently say *was* purely a Soft Cloud Flame user from the information she now had and what she knew of him, she wasn't likely as clear-cut.

Worse, aside from the fact she now couldn't fudge the point that she *didn't* know for sure what her foster brother was in Dying Will terms, Sonya now likely knew how he was keeping himself alive through events that should have killed him.

If he internalized his Flame almost to an insane degree, he was then Propagating *himself* instinctively to either cover the damaged or weakened parts of his skeleton with new bone cells or replicate more blood and flesh to seal up injuries. She had gone around his back and gotten her hands on his medical reports, all those x-rays specifically, and could now understand enough to tell why that mafia doctor had been so enraged.

The more he became injured, the more of his Flame he used. The more he used, the stronger it got and the quicker he was back on his feet. The quicker he was back to moving around and continuing whatever it was he was doing, the more he got injured.

It was a vicious cycle that started early and probably only recently tapered off a little.

Hence why her Cherep would become Skull de Mort, the *strongest* Cloud of their generation. All because the brat would enter a highly risky job of being a stuntman and internally use his Flames,
probably unknowingly in a different life without her up until he met others who were the strongest of their types, to survive everything when all logic dictated that he should've been dead trying some of his tricks.

She didn't know how any head injury he might get would heal, and she was slightly terrified of learning how that would end. She'd buy him that damn helmet if she had to, because brains were tricky things and she liked her Cherep the way he was.

She also had to figure out if she was going to teach him to use his Flames or not once she got a handle on hers, but Sonya was leaning towards not anytime soon simply because of the idea of him running out of Flames then getting injured made her feel cold down to her bones.

The fact he hadn't burned himself up, and she had already read a whole chapter dedicated to the ways and how Dying Will Flame users could kill themselves via their abilities early on, was impressive already considering the amount of power it had to take to Propagate something even as tiny as bone cells at four or five years of age and then hold it until the injuries healed up naturally around the faked cells.

Cherep was kind of scary-awesome. The thief wasn't going to tell him any time soon, because then his head would get big and her brother would never shut up about it.

The Great and Glorious Skull-sama, indeed.

Dork.

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**XLII (Wednesday the 1st of February, 1961. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)**

*Recovering*, but with a lingering and annoying headache persisting that made her want to spend most of the day in bed, Sonya was pouring through the newspaper looking for the old Russian glass goblets she'd need for her Mafia Land job when a fully healthy Tatiana bounced into her room.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for idiots bragging about things they really shouldn't." She absently replied, paging through the Editorial section and wondering if the Lifestyle one would help her more.

Rich people could be some of the worst snobs, boasting about this and that. Hopefully some socialite had been stupid enough to comment on any acquisitions of a glass nature, so she'd know where to go to get them. She'd also use the time she wasn't completely healthy to Lisa's specifications and check out a few antique stores.

Nothing said she had to steal what she was contracted to get, and it was looking like the only thing she'd explicitly have to was that State Seal. "What's up?"

"It's my birthday coming up next." Tatiana needlessly informed her, bouncing on her toes and grinning like the cat that got the canary.

"Yes…?"

Sonya had known that her birthday was next, just like she knew there was little under thirty months between them. Tatiana was almost thirteen, gangly and almost all bony elbows and knobby knees
"Lisa agreed to get me alcohol, now instead of just on my birthday, but she said to ask if you wanted to try as well."

Blinking blankly at the redhead for a long moment, the tiny thief eventually sighed. She should've figured, of course she would recall that comment weeks ago about what they had to do to try 'adult' stuff like drugs and liquor. "Not particularly, no."

"Aww… but-

"How about, instead, I watch you get drunk and report anything stupid you might end up doing?" Sonya cut her off before she could really get into a good whine, settling the newspaper in her lap since she figured she wouldn't be getting back to it anytime soon. "Then on Cherep's thirteenth birthday we do the same for him, and so on for me when I get to your age."

She had been marginally impressed the preteen girl hadn't badgered the boy into telling her why his medical check went so strangely or took so long, but she really should've figured something else had the top spot in her mental list of things to do.

It had apparently come down to what interested her more, Cherep's probable past abuse or alcohol. Unsurprisingly, the liquor seemed to have won out. Tatiana probably, correctly, figured she knew and could tell her if she really wanted to know.

"Do you have to be so responsible sounding? I'm supposed to be the older sibling here." Slumping on her bed, the redhead pouted up at the blonde and batted her blue eyes up at her. "I wanted us to do it together…"

Sonya frowned at her but gave in with a shrug. It was for Tatiana's birthday, supposedly.

She wasn't going to put it past the other girl to try gaining her agreement to something else closer to the actual date later too.

"Fine, whatever you want. I'm still not going to drink much, but I promise I won't take any pictures of you doing stupid things in return."

"You're such a darling, Sonya." Muttered the older girl into her comforter, rolling languidly off her bed before she could do more than glare in response. "I'll let Lisa know, and go tell Cherep all three of us are going to do it."

"Cherep's going to be drinking too?"

"I asked him first, just in case you proved to be stubborn I could mention him and then you'd go along with us anyways."

*Touché*, thought the younger girl in amusement as her elder gleefully flounced from the room.

Tatiana was lucky she was her foster sister, as that sounded very much like manipulation via her relationship with a civilian. She'd have to think of something to counter that before the redhead thought to try that again.

Now she got to look forward to two drunk preteens, and probably the worst tasting swill Lisa would try to scare them off drinking with.
Joy.

Sonya turned back to her newspaper, wondering if there would be anything interesting in the personal ads section.

By the next day the budding safecracker greatly regretted her early birthday wish for liquor and, from what the younger thief heard over the course of their ballet lessons, the resulting hangover.

Lisa was looking distinctly proud of herself throughout breakfast, Cherep had copied her with sticking to the cheap box wine and was mostly fine, and the younger pickpocket herself at least had an interesting night watching the redhead drunkenly stumbling around the house.

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XLIII (Friday the 3rd of February, 1961. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"What are we doing?"

"I don't know what you're doing, but I'm shopping." Sonya informed Cherep seriously, examining the address she had written down on a piece of paper and trying to find the antique store she was looking for. "Why are you following me, anyways?"

"I don't like visiting Aleksandr's when you're not there." He shrugged, as if informing her he skipped his self-defense training when she was occupied doing other things wouldn't get him smacked upside the head. "So instead I'd see what you're so busy with."

She opened her mouth to scold him for skiving off his combat lessons but shut it after a moment and just kept on walking.

It was his life, though she worried over him she really had little to no control over his actions. She might guilt-trip him later, just to see if she couldn't get him to take it more seriously, but right now wasn't the time.

"I thought you didn't want to be involved with anything in my world?"

He blinked at her blankly a few times, brow furrowed as he belatedly realized what she was referring to and why it mattered with what she was doing now. "Sonya… what are you doing? Honestly."

"Shopping… mostly for a target if I'm unlucky." After bluntly informing him of that, she pulled the doors she was looking for open.

Cherep would probably keep his mouth shut while around others, and she was kind of running behind on finding a few certain things.

The antique store smelled musty, dusty, and… well, old. There weren't a lot of ancient things for sale, most of what was on display looked to be less than a century old and typically furniture, but all Sonya was really looking for was ways to narrow down her selection list.

Possibly to steal a ledger book or two if someone made the comment of once selling old Russian glass to anyone.

A clerk, probably drawn by the bells attached to the doors, took one look at the two children standing in the front of the store and almost sneered.
Almost, because she spoke up before he could. "I'm looking for Imperial era glass goblets for my "mama", it's almost "ded's" birthday you see. We thought he'd appreciate it."

The man's face went carefully blank for a long moment. "Ah… do you wish to inspect the selection, miss…?"

"No, I'm just supposed to see if you have any. "Mama" will be the one to look at them." The thief blatantly ignored his fishing, telling him her name when she might be robbing the store later would be pure stupidity.

"Allow me to consult the books, miss." Giving the two of them another look over, and probably not thinking anything nice about how either of them were dressed, the man swept away again.

She sighed and rolled her eyes a bit tiredly, there was little that could make her dress up more than she was when there was little reason for it. Dress and tights were as far as she was willing to go for right now, this shop wasn't in any affluent neighborhood where her apparel might discredit her significantly.

Cherep hadn't been planning on going anywhere himself, he was in the same clothes he usually visited Dmitriy in. Which had some suborn oil and grease stains on them, to say the least about the condition they were in.

"So… if they have any?"

"Might come back later to take a look at them. Much later." She didn't really think so, but she was hoping the stiff old ass manning the shop wouldn't mind calling around to see if any local stores had some in stock. Whether or not she bought them legally or stole the glassware was entirely up to the reception she got.

"Oh…. well… that's… nice."

Her brother looked rather uncomfortable now, and Sonya was enough of an ass herself to think that was funny.

"You don't have to stick around, I'll understand if you want to go do something else."

His expression shifted strangely, part relieved, tempted, and resigned all at the same time. "No, it's just… I have nothing else to do."

She frowned at that. "Dmitriy?"

"He's gone for the week, probably some of next too. Something about a final something or another."

Well… her oldest friend was about fifteen now. She wasn't surprised to hear the older teen was pulling his end-of-training heist, what did surprise her was that he took so long to do it. She did kind of wonder what he was going to steal, and what he'd do with the proceeds if he succeeded.

Then if he would continue until being arrested for the vor path or stop there for a supporter type one.

Sonya might have been the first one in their cohort group, discounting her age because she had a different mental one which made it a whole lot less impressive than it sounded, but there were several Mafiya brats that had already moved out of the neighborhood and got replaced with new children. The last go around even had a group of thieves moving out, meaning five new children moved into their neighborhood all at once.
Thankfully she was no longer the youngest of their group of Zolotov fosterlings anymore, but it did mean there were new children that hadn’t learned not to bother Cherep because his baby sister would probably break their fingers in retaliation.

Listening to them whine to Aleksandr was funny in a way that almost depressed her. It amused her because the old vor had little to no patience for whiny little brats getting their comeuppance and depressed her because once upon a time she hadn't been this cruel-minded.

That was probably part of the reason why the Cloud didn't want to go without her, even if he didn't like it when she purposely stomped on some of the worst behaving brats that bothered him.

"Err… Lisa might be willing to help you learn more French, and a handful of other languages. She taught me and Tatiana."

Cherep seriously considered that option, rocking back on his heels while they waited. "That sounds like a good idea."

"Be warned, if you do ask she'll have us speaking nothing but whatever language she deems you need practice with. So, you'll have to look forward to a month or two of whichever tongue being the only language spoken in the house."

He pulled another face at her, which made her smirk again.

A polite cough drew their attention back to the store clerk, who looked a lot less snobbish suddenly.

Sonya carefully didn't let her features twist into a frown. Eavesdropping, probably.

She ran the conversation she just had with Cherep through her head to ensure he wouldn't be suspicious of her, then almost snorted when she realized why he no longer looked as if someone shoved something metal and pointed up his ass.

Multiple languages in the civilian sector meant middle to high business class sorts of people.

Her age, multilingual, and looking for antiques apparently equaled out her plain dress and her brother's less than wealthy look in his head.

"We don't have any Imperial era goblets in stock at the moment, young miss, but our sister store on the other side of the city does."

She sweetly smiled up at the bigot. "Oh? Do you have an address for them?"

XLIV (Tuesday the 21st of February, 1961. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Some experimentation and another solid month of working on it, Sonya knew a few more interesting things about Dying Will Flames… more specifically her own Flames.

For one, although the metal head of the Bec de Corbin she bought in Mafia Land was resistant to everything she could do to abuse it… the wooden shaft it had been mounted on hadn't been.

The handle had shattered as easily as glass in her hands. Aleksandr had been interested enough in the testing to volunteer himself to either find a more resistant shaft for her or see if he couldn't get ahold
of more of the metal the head of her weapon was made of.

With that being dealt with, she instead turned her attention to the beginner's introduction book to Dying Will Flames Arseniy had found for her. More specifically, to the personality tests to identify one's Flame type located near the back.

She knew enough before to pin down her own types as a mix of Sun, Storm, and/or Cloud. She was hoping mostly for Sun's Activation, merely because being able to heal on demand sounded so much more useful than Propagation or Disintegration.

Scouring through the book and the hints about what certain types tended to do in their personal life and habits soured that hope, though.

What she knew for sure was that Cherep was a pure Cloud, Soft/Inverted though he may be.

Using that as a starting point and being as brutally honest as she could, Sonya had gravitated to him on her own without really knowing why at first then justifying it to herself later with his odd coloring and possible future. After that first meeting she had never really thought of his coloring as unusual again, just odd enough to identify him from a distance if she had to. His possible future was something she had mainly ignored until she admitted to herself that she wouldn't be letting him deal with that without her.

Which, according to her book, meant she was either a Hard/Classic Cloud or a similarly polarized Sun as those were the two most likely to put up with a Soft Cloud for any reason.

Storm Flames apparently only justified her continually clinging to him mulishly, regardless of which way those Flames polarized.

According to all three of the people she tended to hang around, Tatiana, Cherep and Dmitriy; Sonya was an icy little bitch if she didn't care about whoever she was interacting with. Once past that she was still a standoffish introvert, but she would give someone a moment or two of her time if she had to.

All of which were personality signs of a Hard/Classic Cloud Flame.

Her being more sociable to Cherep, and later Tatiana, weren't part of her likely Cloud instincts.

That, limited by the range of what she already knew, restricted her to a Soft/Inverted Sun or a Storm type secondary Flame. Sun wasn't likely, even though Suns typically did better socializing with Clouds of their same polarization and could put up with the opposite if they had enough of a reason to. Storm was much more likely to allow the socialization she did, but which Storm polarization she had was still murky.

Apparently, there was something to that social incompetence Tatiana liked to reference when talking to her.

Thus, Sonya manifested her Flames as a Storm-Cloud according to her book. More Hard/Classic Cloud than whichever polarized Storm she had, but with the remote possibility of Soft/Inverted Sun either in the fullness of time or if she really worked on it.

This was depending on if the book was accurate or not-slanted enough to take at face-value.

She carefully cleared off a spot on her desk and planted her face into the wood with a groan or exasperated pain.
Cloud and Storm weren't the best results a thief would want, besides Propagation meaning she could make her own fakes and Disintegration meaning she could make her own emergency escapes. Both were things that would probably only come up if she epically failed at her job and were a breach in Omertà just waiting to happen, meaning while not useless they weren't typically useful for her either.

If the Propagation failed at just the right moment… or the Disintegration was supposedly impossible and yet some civilian put the pieces together correctly to convince someone else… she'd get a visit from the Vindice in a way she wouldn't escape.

If she ever got to the point of needing her Flames to steal, she vowed to retire as a thief and do something less pathetic with herself.

Hell, Rain Flames would have been more useful in an immediate sense. She could've even made use of Lightning's Hardening more than Propagation or Disintegration.

According to her book, if polarized in opposite directions Clouds tended to work well together and occasionally were drawn to one another as that way they didn't think the other was infringing on their territory and lash out in response. The fact she and Cherep let the other hang around them at all was part of that. His initial reluctance was probably partly the fact he was stronger than her, but she was the one bothering him first.

That she was plotting to keep him out under the Zolotov's collective thumb was entirely her Cloud nature trying to keep her territory from being pinned down. Which according to the fact she didn't have physical territory she was driven to patrol or monitor meant that someone was taking that facet of her nature up, and three guesses for who that was according to the book.

Sonya was never telling anyone the fact her book insisted Cherep was her territory. It could go with her to the grave as far as she was concerned.

Storms just tended to fixate on things, her continued and fierce attachment to her brother and her mysteriously multiplying hoard of books were symptoms of that… as well as her strangely odd desire to exceed at a job she once had little interest in. Slightly or very reckless when fueling their fixation were signs of a Hard/Classic Storm, an almost insolent disregard for everything while in pursuit of their fixation was a sign of Soft/Inverted Storms.

Sonya could be either, certain oddities about her kept her from pinning down her Storm Flame polarization.

If she had to, she could then identify Tatiana with a main Flame of Classic/Hard Sun and Dmitriy as a Soft/Inverted Rain. The redhead she called her foster sister might even have a tiny amount of Sky potential, not enough to start drawing Guardians but enough to utilize a kind of Harmony manifestation to bond different personality types together.

Which would be interesting if she could prove it at all.

In theory, anyways. Figuring it out in practice was just as hard as it had been before she tentatively identified her Flame types.

According to her book, the next step should've been meditation. As in sitting in one place and trying to draw out one's Flames for both confirmation via the color of said Flames and as a control exercise.

Sonya had accidentally skipped that and headed into attempting to channel her Flame with her weapons practice, to the point she was basically a freakishly strong little girl who somehow managed not to burn herself up while getting a hold on one of her own abilities.
Backtracking into meditation probably would do wonders for her control, so that was what she planned on doing next.

That was, after she finished copying the more relevant bits of information on Dying Will Flames into the blank journal Lisa had picked up for her on a recent supply run to their clan’s headquarters. There was no real reason why all the information had to be spread out in several different books, masked with children's stories which may give someone the wrong idea about what skills they had or slanted to 'only this' when there were exceptions to the 'rules'.

Cherep wasn't a territorial asshole about his space, he moved in with her surprisingly easy if his freedom was so damn important, so the book was lying a bit. Or was misinformed. That was one of the few things she was sure of, but that didn't mean the rest of it was equally so.

Instead, Sonya was going to ensure it was all in order and laid out in an easy to read manner then donate the books she wouldn't need to keep to her clan. She might even make a copy of her resulting book and give that to Arseniy if she ever needed a favor from the Zolotovs later in life.

XLV (Saturday the 25th of March, 1961. Mafia Land.)

**Antique** stores were a hell of a lot easier to rob than jewelry stores, but the museum was harder than anything else Sonya had yet done as a thief.

Antique stores didn't have night guards, but museums had several 24/7.

Her take from robbing the sister store that bigot worked for included three different sets of old Imperial Russian crystal goblets; the contents of a display case of old jewelry and watches she planned on sitting on or selling in Mafia Land with the unneeded glassware; the ledgers of the store; an assortment of old books; and the contents of two safes as well as the register.

Antique stores also **bought** things brought in, which meant it was a lot more than the ready cash any shop needed to make change on any decent business day.

She couldn't take more than what she got away with as the glass had been excessively fragile, and she only made room for the jewelry and other small trinkets by wrapping them in old newspaper the store kept a supply of and using the bundles as packaging cushions along with the paper money.

It ended up being the oddest idea Sonya ever had for how to use her stolen cash, but it worked.

The ledgers were more for future research, being it had detailed accounts of who bought what she might be able to use to track down other items any contracted job asked her to. Tatiana rolling her eyes at her for stealing books was entirely unwarranted.

The other old books were just that, rare old books she just wanted for herself and couldn't talk herself out of taking.

The museum heist took a full month to plan, because the floor plan was open enough to eliminate any decent hiding spots and enable the guards to see more at a glance.

In the end, instead of waiting for night to fall and robbing the place when there was less security and civilians around, the budding thief stole one of the over glorified wax stamps out of the museum's storage area in broad daylight. She still didn't really see why someone wanted one, as anyone alive using it would probably get caught fast, but it was what she agreed to do.
That didn't mean stealing the damn thing had been easy, she in fact had to attempt it twice because she abandoned the job the first day when someone who was supposed to have been gone was still there. One of the restorers, who worked with old metal someone didn't want to melt down to be reused, apparently came in outside of his scheduled work hours to finish something up. Sonya had planned on using his office/closet as a staging area to find the seal she needed, so she was forced to wait a day.

The day after her botched attempt, when the man had been safely gone, she ended up looking for four hours due to a lack of recorded movements of certain pieces either about to be shipped off to another museum or displayed in an exhibit. When she finally found it the paperwork nearby claimed it was just about to be shipped off to a St. Petersburg museum, which made the thief very thankful she wouldn't have to go to that city to steal an extra bit of history.

The Grekov Gang ruled most of St Petersburg's underworld, and they were both more powerful and influential than the Zolotovs. Getting in there might not be much of an issue but stealing in that territory would've been a nightmare to arrange peacefully. Unless Sonya would do it silently, but that would just incite a manhunt for her as skimping on paying dues and fees like that was a very insulting snub.

Her Mafia Land job took her a total of three months to do, and due to the migratory nature of the manmade island it would take her another few weeks to close it out. Mafia Land was near the coast of South America now, air travel being what it was in the 1960s meant it was safer to take a ship across the ocean. Arseniy went with her, because neither adult liked the thought of letting her go off alone for all that she worked now.

Having the appearance of a child was starting to irritate Sonya something fierce.

It was nice to be overlooked and all every now and again but being treated like one all the time was different.

Since it was a day trip, the vor opted out of doing anything but following her around like an eerily silent bodyguard. She turned in her 'acquisitions' with her contract paperwork and picked up another one, not quite something she'd be able to do while remaining at home but something she'd be able to do while close to Moscow anyways.

Returning home would take slightly less time, but it was still a week of travel back and forth.

Sonya really hoped, but wasn't holding her breath for, being able to go alone next time.

XLVI (Thursday the 6th of April, 1961. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Un autre?" (Another one?) Cherep exclaimed incredulously, in French no less, peering over her shoulder.

Sonya twitched her papers away from his sight, frowning up at him even as she responded in the same language. "Oui, pourquoi es-tu surprise?" (Yes, why are you surprised?)

He just frowned back at her, running a hand through short purple hair as he thought through his words and mentally translated them. "Tu as dix ans, et tu as un emploi." (You have ten years, and you have a job.)
"J'ai presque onze ans." (I almost have eleven years.) She started to protest, then what they were about to argue about registered in her brain.

As well as the stupidity of her rebuttal, one year older did not make much of a difference taken with her current physical age. To be brutally honest, being barely three months past her tenth birthday did not make her anywhere near eleven either.

At her brother’s utterly deadpan look for her attempt to argue with that as her defense, once he worked through translating it, she sheepishly coughed once while smoothing the pages face down on top of a random stack of books she was using as a desk. “J'ai presque dix ans et demi.” (I almost have ten-and-half.)

In most of the world, and most of the USSR, ten-year-old children did not work. Even in the Russian underworld, Mafiya brats normally waited until they were at least classified as actual teenagers to do anything for their syndicate. Fifteen to sixteen, at earliest, and maybe a very fast growing fourteen on the rare occasions.

It was less uncommon elsewhere, but she wasn't elsewhere. Mafia Land was a blind spot in that respect, it dealt with other cultures that allowed children freedom earlier than her USSR typically did and was how her age didn't amount to a stumbling block in acquiring an actual job.

Contract-based though it may be.

When China and Italy both had five-year-old assassins and hitmen on some occasions, a ten-year-old thief from Russia didn't stick out too badly on an international stage.

Her foster brother also probably thought of her as younger than him. Which was both true and not, confusingly enough.

The thief had gotten used to thinking of herself as her physical age for most things, but the fact she used to be a twenty-year-old woman once upon a time still popped up now and again… however, she physically wasn't and that was the sticking point.

Mentally she might be able to handle the stress, but her body couldn't.

Taking another look at the limitations of her second contract, which boiled down to a time limit, then back at an increasingly wary looking Cherep… she decided she could wait.

It wouldn't kill anything.

"I have to do at bare minimum two contracts a year. Mafia Land’s fiscal year ends the same as everyone else, which means the thirty-first of December. This is the last job I have to do this year, Cherep."

"Oh…" He didn't exactly look pleased with that for a long moment, but he did shift the topic away from what she was planning on doing. He also seemed stupidly thankful she switched to Russian. "Have you given any thought to joining a circus?"

"You realize the same reason why you're not happy I'm working also applies to you, right?"

"It's as illegal as hell?"

She gave him a flat look, which made the brat smirk at her. "Non. Your age, Cherep. Tatiana and I, though we are perfectly qualified to be Mafiya thieves and work as such for our clan, do not plan on moving out of this house until we're at least fifteen. I'm pretty sure Tatiana's going to wait until I can
leave too, so it'll be sixteen or seventeen for her and fifteen for me. That's a little over four years away."

The only really confirmed Cloud nodded slowly as he took that fact in. "So…"

"I'm not the one that wants to join a circus. You're the one that needs to look for one, so I can dig up information on who runs it and where they go. You might also want to think about adding more languages to your plate, so you can talk to people outside the USSR. I speak four myself." Five if one wanted to get technical but English wasn't something Sonya had to use just yet, so no one knew she could speak it. "Additionally, you might want to give some thought as to what, in a circus, you want to do. We won't be allowed to just tag along, operations like that need every hand it has to make it work right."

"Mes enfants... vous êtes supposés être en train de parler en français." (My children… you are supposed to be speaking French.) Lisa called in from the hallway, making both start in surprise.

"Je suis désolée, Lisa." (I'm sorry, Lisa.) She called after their foster mother loudly.

In all honesty, she needed to brush up her French just as much as Cherep needed the practice. Her grasp on the language had faltered slightly while she had been learning Mandarin Chinese.

"En as-tu trouvé in?" (Have you found one?)

"Err... non." (…no.) Stuttered her brother through his response uneasily, more out of uncertainty of being clear than for the conversation topic. "Je suis en train d'apprendre sur les moteurs et comment ils marchent." (I've learning about engines and how they worked.)

"Et les langues je pense. Tiens moi au courant quand tu auras trouvé un cirque que tu voudras joindre." (And languages, I think. Let me know when you'll have found a circus that you'll want to join.) Sonya smirked at him, waiting the few moments he needed to work his way through her statements.

His irritated wet-cat look was reward enough for her. She shrugged at him, smiled prettily, and shooed him out of her room so she could get back to planning.

Her latest contracted job wouldn't let her skate by without actually tackling private home security. From the minute details she had it looked as if her contractor had a relationship that soured, and he/she/it wanted to either reclaim or have something stolen from the other party.

Private property was a hell of a lot harder to get the blueprints for than public. Depending on the age of whatever home she'd be breaking into, there was the possibility there weren't any blueprints available.

On this next heist, it was entirely possible she'd be going in without much information to work off.

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XLVII (Sunday the 9th of April, 1961. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"You're not listening to me at all, are you?"
"…no. What was it that you wanted again?"


"Oh." Sonya blinked at her a couple times, probably more to refocus than to look at her. "Erm… no? It's not going to be that hard."

"Do you even know which heist we're talking about?"

"The… private residence one?" She tried hesitantly, grimacing at the flat look the older girl gifted her with. "Oh, for the love of… Tatiana, do you want to come with me when I rob a jewelry store?"

She considered it for a minute, because pulling a job with a skilled thief did sound like some fun. Also, she wouldn't have to split the take with seven other Mafiya kids… just one foster sister. "I don't want to, but I wouldn't mind. You sure you not… I don't know… trying too hard?"

"Trying too hard for what?"

"To prove yourself a better thief that Lisa or Arseniy figured you would end up as."

Sonya blankly stared at Tatiana for a long, silent moment. "…what?"

"They pegged you as a petty thief! Maybe one that could open a way for others if you worked in a group, but mostly a pickpocket." When it didn't look as if she understood why her older sister was upset on her behalf, she pulled herself upright and set her hands on the younger girl's shoulders. "I would understand if you're doing so much to ensure you can make it as a cat burglar on your own, but it doesn't seem like it."

"I'm not, really. My first heist was for that. I proved myself better, so I'm no longer worried about it."

"So why… look. You've done two jewelry stores, an antique store, and a museum all within about a year. You're planning on adding a private residence and another jewelry store in the next few weeks. Why so many this year? There's no reason to overwork or overburden yourself. Mistakes are made that way, remember."

"I have to do this private residence to keep in good standing in Mafia Land for the year. The jewelry store is actually for a personal project I'm working on, which might end up being useful for the clan." The younger thief defended herself while peeling the safecracker's hands off, a normal reaction that was a bit depressing in full honesty, frowning slightly up at her. "I'm not planning on anything else until I have to go back and do another two contracts, so I stay in Mafia Land's good graces next year."

She gave up, flinging herself back down to the ground in a huff. "You're so much like an old woman. I don't understand why you're working so hard, you're only ten."

"Again, I'm almost eleven… sort of. I'm ten and some months, thank you very much."

That sounded catty and snotty, almost a reflection of her age that Sonya didn't usually act like.

She grinned up at the pickpocket-turned-cat burglar. "Cherep yell at you about this too?"

The completely flat expression on her face answered that question. "I don't understand why the both of you have to continually remind me."
"You don't act your age." Tatiana helpfully informed her, stretching out so she could cross her ankles and fold her hands beneath her head. "Be a kid for once, not a tiny and boring old woman."

Sonya's fingers twitched, even as twisted as they were in the grass beneath them. The book she had been reading while they spent time together in the park lay abandoned in her lap. "I don't feel like a kid, Tatiana. Why act differently when I could be myself?"

"Why push yourself when you don't have to?"

She gave her a disgusted look. "It's better than having nothing to do."

"But when we have nothing to do you can read all the books you want!" Obvious temptations didn't do the trick, but the redhead had half expected that.

"I ran out of books to read."

She hadn't been expecting that.

"What, really?" When all she did was roll her eyes, the older girl propped herself up and took the situation seriously. Mostly. "The world must be ending."

The blonde heaved a sigh, closing the book she had been reading and lightly smacking Tatiana on the head with it. "Not helping."

"Sorry, sorry… not really, but still."

If she was being honest with herself, she was a little surprised the two of them were wasting some time away together. Normally, Sonya would duck out to bother Cherep or wander the city when she had the time to spare rather than spend any amount of time being lazy.

Unfortunately for the blonde girl, or fortunately for Tatiana, their foster brother was currently taking his school placement tests. For Lisa would then be able to handle his education records for him and not have to send him to a school.

Which left the foster sisters home alone together, and with her slightly scrambling for something for them to do together. Occasions like this one were rare enough as it was, when the tiny thief slowed down enough for her to catch up.

Much to her own despair, the best option Tatiana could think of was the jewelry heist suggestion. "You really sure you wouldn't mind me coming with you?"

"For…? Oh, right. No, I don't mind. It's in three weeks, after I get back."

"An overnight trip?"

"Plan on at least three days. One to get there and scout the place, one to rob, the last to recover and leave. Doing it overnight that one time wiped me out, so we're doing this a bit more slowly."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Cherep deserved a damn medal. That was the longest conversation she ever had with Sonya on any one topic, and while she did have to mentally flail for another it hadn't derailed the whole conversation.
Stealing, either from or into and out of, private residences was very different from stealing out of public business venues.

When Sonya started looking for someplace to call home, she was going to nix all buildings that had balconies. A more obvious ‘steal from me’ sign there never was, and garden terraces with climbing vines were perfectly placed routes to the second floor… if not socially acceptable methods to scale a building by.

Getting in, and therefore getting out, was going to be stupidly easy.

The trickier of the features her latest heist gave her was the lack of guards. Instead, homes had people living in them that held to no specific routine and could pop up at any time.

That was slightly nerve-wracking to work around.

Additionally, homes old enough had creaking spots littered throughout its floors. Her ballet and gymnastic training allowed her to stop putting weight down the moment she heard any wood groaning, but if anyone was listening hard enough it was still obvious where she was.

It was slow going, both in being careful where she put her feet and trying to remain mostly silent while moving, which only increased the likelihood that someone would wake up and want either a glass of water or the bathroom and find a little thief wandering around instead.

According to her contract, what she was looking for was in the second-floor study. Yet again a rather useless paperweight, probably asked for because of the sentimental value attached rather than the price tag.

Sometimes what people wanted stolen from others occasionally baffled her, amusing as it was to wonder what events led to the requested contracts in Mafia Land.

After three bedrooms, two of which were occupied, and a rather nicely done bath Sonya finally found the upstairs study.

Since she planned on waiting ten or so minutes to ensure she hadn't woken anyone and it was mostly safe to make her ponderous way out, she located the small bronze statue she had been requested to steal. Then, with a little time to kill, peered at the book titles displayed on the bookcases littered around the room. The lights were off, so she only had dim moonlight by which to read.

It wasn't a good idea. She knew it, adding more books to both her load right now and the piles of them she had at home wasn't something she should do. While stealing other things to throw off any attempts to hunt her down was a thing she tended to do, if she kept stealing books someone might catch on the same thief was responsible for everything.

Tatiana would also tease her relentlessly about her developing bibliomania.

Distracted as she was, she still heard the creak of a less-than-ideally oiled door swinging open.

Diving under the ornate and heavy desk got her cover, if badly picked since under the desk was such an obvious move. Slinking around to the corner of the furniture in the still dark room, the tiny blonde pulled herself up short when the lights flicked on.

Moving now would be stupid, and she was just thankful the statue was still where she found it.
Whoever it was that was up moved in a lumbering way slowly, probably not quite fully awake. Sonya slid herself over to the other side of the desk, keeping herself low and as close to the wood as possible. When the footfalls sounded like they were rounding one side of the furniture, she carefully crawled around to keep the desk between whoever that was and herself.

"Vitya?"

With a wince, she rolled herself under a couch to take herself out of any possible sights from both the desk and the doorway. Curling herself up so her tiny form was solidly in the shadow the couch cast on the floor.

The grey-haired old man, who had probably been on his way to get an alcoholic nightcap, didn't bother to turn around at the woman's voice calling out.

Sonya kept an ear on where they both were all throughout their quiet conversation. She didn't really need to know the man had a drinking problem, as that was obvious since it was the early morning hours and he had gone straight for a glass already. She also didn't appreciate being forced to listen to what was probably his wife scold him for it either.

By the time the two of them finally switched the lights off and shuffled back to bed, their uninvited guest was firmly of the opinion they owed her some of their books. Not just for the indignity of taking shelter under the damn couch, but mostly for the gossip session she had been forced to listen to.

Since it would be another hour or two before she felt safe enough to take the statue and leave, she had the time to pick out a couple good ones instead of whatever she could grab. More deliberate picks would lend more weight to the assumption she had been after books more than the figure, at least.

There were a couple foreign history books on display, the type that looked old and probably not censored of anything the country would've been embarrassed by. Since she had been on the lookout for more, ever since she found that Adolph Hitler assassination thing in her world history text, a few of those would be going home with her.

As she packed up both the statue of a strangely stylized mermaid and a few tomes, Sonya decided the only way this heist could have been more uncomfortable that it had been would be if the owners of the home had dogs.

Thankfully, they seemed to be more partial to cats than dogs. She had already passed the housecat on her way in, and the damned thing had just glared haughtily at her.

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XLIX (Thursday the 27th of April, 1961. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Cherep?" Sonya poked her head into his room, pushing the door farther when he waved a hand at her in acknowledgement. "Got a moment?"

"Um… sure?" His purple head of hair popped up on the other side of an engine he somehow convinced Lisa to let him bring into the house and set up in his room. Consequently, his room smelled like oil and metal and the scent was even clinging to his clothing nowadays.
She was mostly sure that was a car engine, but where he got it or what he intended to do with it was beyond her. "So… Dmitriy's leaving."

"I heard."

As he had finished his training and was a fully working thief, opting out of trying for vor for now, the young mechanic had decided to leave the more light-fingered jobs to other Zolotovs and instead work on their clan's fleet of vehicles. Dmitriy was entirely of the kind of guy you'd take a stolen car to, so it'd get reworked into looking like a different car than the guy that would do the stealing in the first place. He could if he had a reason for it, and proved that, but he hadn't been interested in continuing to carjack for a living.

Now, instead of living over a garage nearby, her old childhood friend was going to be moving farther into Moscow and working for the clan. That knocked off Cherep's favorite thing to do most days, going to the garage and getting dirty instead of following Sonya around and watching her pick pockets.

The main hangout and headquarters for the Zolotov clan was a bit too far for a casual walk, part of the reason Dmitriy was moving out of the neighborhood in the first place.

Which might explain the hunk of oil crusted metal currently occupying her brother's bedroom floor. It was entirely possible it was a pacifying gesture, so she didn't have a reason to hunt her friend down and express her displeasure to him again.

He hadn't tried again after his first meeting with her foster brother ending with her demanding a favor to cancel out the one she owed him and his presence as her sparring partner.

"Right, well… I had an idea."

Her brother hauled himself up on his bed, carelessly smearing the grease on his arms around with a similarly dirty rag, giving her an expectant look.

"How would you like to learn to pick locks?" She didn't let him do more than pull a face at the suggestion, continuing in a rush. "Not like for what I learned to do it for, just to know how."

He blinked at her blankly, and the thief bit her lower lip.

"Really?"

"It's a thought I had, since apparently you don't really like the self-defense lessons Aleksandr is giving you." Enough so that he'd been skipping them when she wasn't there. Again, Cherep's passive-aggressive protesting methods at work. "So instead of fighting off whoever would try to kidnap you again, I thought I might as well teach you how to escape if you need it."

He flushed slightly, raking a hand through his short hair out of both embarrassment and confusion and leaving an oily smear in the strands. "Was that why you wanted me to learn?"

"…what did you think I was doing this all for?"

She wasn't entirely sure if she wanted to know. Especially since he started fidgeting, something he hadn't done around her for nearly a year.

"Erm… I thought you wanted me to join… this." The colossal dork waved a hand around, as if to encompass the whole neighborhood with the multitude of Zolotov trainees that called it home.
Sonya made a rude sound, skirting around his engine block and settling herself on his bed too. "I knew full well you'd never really like this life. I've actually been trying to keep you *out* of it. Why do you think I warned you about all the ways my clan could sink their claws into you before you could do any of it?"

Cherep chewed on that thought for a very long, very awkward moment. "Well… um."

Reaching behind her, Sonya snagged his pillow and smacked him upside the head with it.

"Right… sorry. Ow."

"That could *not* have hurt. It's a *pillow*."

"You forget your strength sometimes." Defended the preteen, still rubbing the side of his head she had hit. "Soft or not, they can still hurt."

She huffed, hugging the pillow to her chest.

She hadn't quite gotten the hang of the meditation exercises recommended by her book for Flame users, and rarely could she do more than merely warm the tips of her fingers. If she didn't want to be a circus sideshow freak with her stupid strength, she really had to get a hang of it sometime soon.

"Anyways, so… my suggestion?"

"You *sure* they're not going to ask something I don't want to do from me?"

"The worst you'll be expected to do is keep an ear out for any Zolotov thieves in trouble, or any rumor about trouble coming our way. That's for this living arrangement, and pretty typical for anyone a Mafiya syndicate helps out. Since I'm teaching you, I decide what to demand in return." Sonya stuck her nose in the air at his incredulous expression. "I demand you help me out if I ever get engine trouble in my life."

Cherep's expression twisted into amused, digging his still dirty hand into his hair again. "That I can agree with… as long as this 'request' has a time limit of a couple years."

"What? Why?"

"Locks change, right? Over time they'd get harder. I might need more lessons, so then you'll get more years on that warranty."

She blinked a few times, as she hadn't thought of that. "Well yes. I suppose you may be right."

"May?" He echoed, a smirk creeping across his face to replace the smile.

"May. We'll see."

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L (Sunday the 21st of May, 1961. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

*With* all the traveling going on in Sonya's life, Tatiana got stuck with plotting out which jewelry store the foster sisters would rob.

Damn it all, she had new books to be read…
The moment Arseniy brought them both home after her last trip to Mafia Land for the year, the blonde was either showing Cherep how to figure out which picks he would need for different locks or helping their elder sister figure out the logistics of their future heist.

Having done a jewelry store once before she did have a few suggestions from hard won experience, but the redhead looked rather determined on putting the basis of a plan together herself.

Lisa was all for the girls doing a job together, claiming Tatiana would benefit from both the planning and doing and Sonya would get more experience in working with other thieves.

The safecracker then learned that older buildings weren't the best ones to target even if getting their blueprints was easier, planning the heist was radically different than doing one, and got acquainted with Sod's Law. The former pickpocket showed her how to use ventilation ducts to get around stealthily, and they both still had to play keep away with the three guards the store they were robbing employed.

Again, Sonya ended up grabbing more than she had planned on. Part of that was her foster sister's insistence that if the blonde had the strength to carry more then they should use that, and part of it was merely moments of opportunity that became available to them while on site.

Their target had been a newer branch store of a rather successful jewelry business, unlike the little and old privately owned one the younger sister had started herself out on. Since she only wanted certain gems herself, Sonya had been more selective in her stealing than her older sister.

They still started from the back rooms and worked forward, which left them an escape route in case something went sour fast or one of the guards were extra vigilant. The contents of three safes and one stocked workroom later, they poked around the display cases to see if there was anything they could take.

Unlike her last jewelry heist, the clerks hadn't secured their display pieces under the counters. However, the girls did get several pieces that hadn't been on display and were stored under the glass cases. Tatiana, running a risk that Sonya did not appreciate in the least, even managed to steal the necklace off one of the window displays in between guard patrols.

Instead of spending hours stuck in another building's ventilation shaft, they instead lowered the slimmer blonde and their loot to the ground via the rope they brought while the redhead found her own way down using two conveniently close brick walls.

It took them another day to get home, sewing the gems and jewelry into the same internal pocketed blankets the former pickpocket had used for her first heist and catching a train back to Moscow in the evening.

Spilling the loot out under Arseniy's eye went faster with four hands, and while gold and silver bricks were reserved for their clan's cut of the proceeds… the physically younger thief instead selected a few gemstones rather than have her take sold to the local fence.

"Why do you want the stones?"

"Remember the rings in that weapon shop? I think I might be able to find a replacement on my own, it's just…"

Tatiana smirked at the pile before them. "Just… there might be more rocks in whatever shade than you planned on?"

Sonya wrinkled her nose mostly in sour agreement but kept her eye on the pile that was starting just
in front of her. Even if she only took all the purple and red stones, for Cloud and Storm Flames, that was still going to be a large chunk of money she'd be trying to destroy.

Maybe this hadn't been the best idea…

From one store purple gemstones came in variations of alexandrite, amethyst, purple garnet, purple opal, purple sapphire, purple diamonds, purple tourmaline, purple spinel, tanzanite, and purple zircon. Reds came in types like red beryl, ruby, red diamonds, imperial topaz, red spinel, red tourmaline, carnelian, red sunstone, garnet, fire opals, red agate, red fluorite, red jasper, and red tiger's eye.

That was all just one jewelry store's stock jewelry and gemstones, if she looked elsewhere she'd probably find different stones in the same colors.

…worst of all, she had the possibility of Storm Flames. It might just end up with her destroying any kind of ring she tried to wear anyways without it ever boosting her Flames enough to get a handle on her abilities.

"Well… this idea is a bust."

"Maybe if we get one of those rings, and get it appraised at another jewelry shop?" Suggested the redhead lightly around a yawn. "There's no guarantee those rings are gems, they might just be a kind of crystal shaped to look like one."

The blonde scowled at her out of petty irritability, not in true anger. "Stop poking holes in my plans. I need something to do, thank you."

"There's nothing to say you can't try, just pick one or two from every category and sell the rest." Lisa temporized, picking through the selection still waiting to be sorted. "Try a different gem every week, record the results, and we'll see if we can't find something that will work for you."

The younger thief eyed her still considerable pile once they finished parting down the unset rocks. There were still almost fifty different loose gemstones of varying sizes. "This will still take a while."

"You've got the time, why not?" Tatiana lightly shoved at Sonya's shoulder, getting up since her take had been sorted out to be sold off already.

"Point." Allowed the blonde girl, sweeping her gems into a small velvet bag they had stolen them in.

Chapter End Notes

Vory v Zakone (Singular vor, Plural vory) – Thieves-in-Law, title awarded by one's peers (like a peerage title rather than a military rank)
Mama – Mother
Ded – Grandfather
LI-LX

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

LI (Sunday the 28th of May, 1961. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

With several months Sonya had nothing planned for before her, she decided there was no time like the present to start on experimenting with her gemstones.

Taking a good long look at what she had gathered in the privacy of her own room, she then had to fight the impulse to smack herself upside the head.

She wasn't a jeweler, or a geologist. A tumble of loose gems of similar shades of purple in varying cuts all looked the same to her. While a few jewels were secured in settings, there were only a handful of those neatly labeled for use by clerks with little base knowledge to work from.

Apparently, her plan of 'secure the gems then figure the damn thing out once home safe' hadn't been the best one. Hindsight being what it was, she should have probably taken the time to ensure the loose gems remained in with their mounted fellows just to keep the types all straight.

The former pickpocket eyed the jumbled mass of precious and semi-precious stones on her bed in exasperation. She could pick out the opals, strange shades of tiger's eye, and jasper… but the rest that weren't labeled neatly would need professional help in sorting.

Considering it in the secured safety of her own space with time to spare, there might even be a less than legal option. Given all of it was stolen property in the first place, it would be risky to have them appraised by anyone not shady or without even the tiniest of Mafiya connections.

Her clan likely had a local fence somewhere nearby, it stood to reason that if the person took the results of two previous jewelry store heists and sold them off in exchange for a slightly inflated cut of the proceeds then he or she had a good idea of how to identify jewels. At the very least, they should know someone else that wouldn't mind identifying the exact types she had for her.

Gathering up the stones she couldn't tell apart, Sonya took the mess to Lisa… who laughed at her, delicately picking her way through a couple of them the young thief couldn't identify on her own. "All of these?"

"I've got the ones I can figure out upstairs still, but if I do get a good result and shatter the stone later on… I'm going to need to know which gem it was, so I can get a replacement."

Just to make the mess even more of a headache, the blonde had to think about settings and the cut of the facets too. If it would make any difference was debatable, but if she did get results other details like that might just tweak it in strange or different directions.

"I'm starting with purple shades, as supposedly I'm mainly a Cloud."

"Supposedly?" Lisa echoed without inflection, rolling several violet shaded jewels between her fingers.

"I've got a main Flame of Hard or Classic Cloud, according to the book Arseniy got me in Mafia Land. Secondary of Storm, I can't figure out which way that one polarized, and a minor possibility
for Inverted Sun. Supposedly. I've yet to actually confirm that but I'm working on it."

"The strength?"

"Entirely possible it's just an unconscious use of Cloud Flames." She confided what little she had assumed to the woman uneasily. "Multiplication, Propagation, whatever you want to call it; it's an increase of either muscle mass or the force I can exert all at once. Which would be why my practice staffs all shattered and didn't Disintegrate in my hands."

"You don't sound happy with that." The older woman pointed out the obvious easily, letting the multi-colored sparkling gems fall back into the velvet pouch they were being stored in.

"I was hoping more for Sun's Activation. Which can be used to heal, among other things. I have the possibility, in the fullness of time, but that's not something I'm likely to get the hang of quickly."

She hummed, considering the girl.

Which merely confused Sonya. "Lisa?"

"Do you know enough about these Dying Will Flames to make a report about it?"

The younger of the two thieves very carefully didn't pull a face at that inquiry as she took a few seconds to fully think it over.

In all honesty, she probably could.

Most of what she knew was all theoretical so far, unconfirmed facts in a book she got someplace suspect that she didn't have the time or ability to verify using herself. Even still, it was a lot more information than she had started out with and probably more than enough for anyone else looking for instruction on their less than normal skill sets.

Part of her wanted to wait, though. The problem with that would be if she was asked to identify more Flame-capable around that she knew of with more information under her belt... she might not be able to keep Cherep's name out of it.

Sonya was not a people person by any stretch of the term, something possibly influenced by her Cloud nature or not. She had never been, nor would she ever, be one of those charismatic people that could talk rings around others. She couldn't really recall clearly if Rachel had been one or not, all she did remember was that in her last life she had a select group of friends and stuck with who she had known for the most part.

Her decision would be limited by two things. Time and her foster brother. Either make a report now with faulty information and hope future reports could be done by paper or wait to confirm it all and have less ambiguity to hide Cherep behind if questioned closely.

"I could, if you want me to. I'd like to practice on Arseniy before you arrange anything important, please."

Lisa, who was pretty much the mom of the household and had watched Sonya grow up for the last five-six years, raised an eyebrow at the bland confirmation. "Just like that?"

"I have possibly two out of the seven Flame types, three in a couple years at best. If you take the polarizing Flames into account, I have two or three out of fourteen. There isn't much I can do to make a complete report on this stuff, as I will not have the resources to find more answers in other directions." The younger thief wanted to pam...
the brunette did know her very well and could probably guess why she'd get defensive or protective over what should be just odd knowledge she had.

The only things Sonya ever got protective of were her books and siblings. With her Mafiya clan, she did not want them to connect Dying Will Flames and her best friend until the purple colored brat could watch his back without her.

"I'll let Arseniy know when he wakes up."

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LII (Tuesday the 30th of May, 1961. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Summarize what you do know, then get into what you should but haven't confirmed. Leave the unconfirmed rumors for last, and party tricks for the very end." That had been Arseniy's advice to her, so that's what Sonya gathered up in one handwritten journal she had started after her first trip to Mafia Land.

What she did know was disgustingly little for all the effort she had poured into learning about Dying Will Flames of the Sky.

Due to the name alone it was an ability one usually gained on the edge of death or when the possibility of death became unavoidably apparent and one reached for something different, one needed willpower in order to summon up the ability or use it in any practical sense, and they manifested as a kind of Flame that didn't harm the user so long as they weren't overused.

The physically young former pickpocket could also use very little of her own Flames, besides the still wonky sometime super-strength she was somewhat positive came from an innate use of Hard/Classic Cloud Flames.

The information she should know but wasn't yet positive about included her Storm secondary and the minor Sun she might have if she put effort into developing it, and the nature summarizations in the back of the best of her books on Dying Will Flames of the Sky.

As there were seven types of Dying Will Flames of the Sky, that also meant there were about fourteen different distinct personality types. If you counted the variations between the mainly Soft/Inverted and Hard/Classic types, like how it was possible Sonya's Storm wasn't Classical or Inverted but something in-between, then there were more than could be cleanly calculated. An infinite number of things could also change or affect how a Flame user's nature expressed itself, but supposedly the basics were typically the same.

According to the book that she got from Arseniy and what she managed to extrapolate then add in from every Mafia storybook she managed to get her hands on, a Flame users' base nature ran the gamut of doormats to violent psychopaths.

Classical Skies were the doormats, as they tried to attract their Guardian Elements by being accepting and encompassing to all and sundry but couldn't bring themselves to avoid or push away abusive characters that tried to take advantage of them at the same time. Inverted Skies were obviously the opposite, they could be elitist pricks about their Guardians' prospects and callous to those that didn't meet their personal standards to the point of being indifferent to their deaths.

Both variations were still an embodiment of Harmony, what all other Flame users were almost
instinctively driven to seek out or attract. They also were mitigating or emotionally manipulating influences, the only point different Flame users could bridge to other users that had a nature that didn't normally tolerate another's.

Classical Suns were typically nurturing in nature, trying to bring out the best in everyone they met even if that someone didn't want it. Again, Inverted Suns preferred only dealing with those they knew were talented... and if they decided to teach or help someone in a skill their 'student's' willingness wasn't exactly a point they bothered with.

Both polarizations of Sun Flame users were active kinds of people, generally very physical with their 'help'. They could also be very stubborn, in varying shades of the word.

 Probably the most social of all the Flame types was Rain Flame users, and with their Tranquility ability also the Mafia world's answer to therapists. Which, since Flame users have been atypically rare for the last century or so according to Lisa, meant very bad things for the underworlds' collective sanity.

Classical Rains were supposedly passively tolerant, someone that was very difficult to irritate or ruffle and generally easygoing. Which left Inverted Rains to be aggressors, those that would poke every hot button one had until you snapped.

Storms were the more obviously 'eccentric' types of Dying Will Flame users, they were also as explosively tempered as their name suggested in either the fast and hot variety or slowly building and suddenly violent way. They were also the ones to hold grudges second best, only falling a bit short of Cloud Flame users... which said very little good about Sonya's temperament in a few years.

Storms of a Classical bent were fixated perfectionists, they catered to their fixations with almost fanatical enthusiasm and precision that another would be tempted to label as 'going overboard'. Inverted Storms were perfection fixated, what they did had to be perfect or they would spend an ungodly amount of time repeating their actions until they were.

Lightning users were the flightiest, in a few decades they would probably be labeled with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Classical Lightning users basically had the attention span of a gnat, attracted to the shiniest or flashiest things only to lose interest equally as fast and move on. Inverted Lightning users tended to get attached to one thing, but they as well tended to be interested in little but what attracted them so getting their attention onto something else was like pulling teeth.

The trade-off was that Lightning users could process so much more than normal. Their lightning-quick flashes of condensed attention was enough to tell them everything in one glance another person would take three times as long to understand the significance of.

As she already knew from her own personality and Cherep's, Cloud Flame users were just as opposing in polarized nature but not entirely as her books suggested.

Classical Clouds were territorial and usually loners, getting between one and what they decided their 'territory' was did not tend to end well as they generally didn't bother to warn you what would happen and instead just got violent. Inverted Clouds were 'free spirits' socialites rather than territorial, generally passive and rather rootless to the point that threatening their freedom was something only suicidal idiots tried to do. They were also probably the most 'long-ranging' of Flame types, even if one side of that coin tended to stick to a physical territory.

Her foster brother, who was strong in his Flames even if he couldn't consciously control them, was almost the perfect poster boy for Inverted/Soft Clouds. Not quite to the level of 'free spirit', but he was very ornery in a passive-aggressive way when he thought his personal freedoms were being
infringed somehow and generally easygoing otherwise. Up and including allowing himself to be physically relocated if that would work best for everyone.

Sonya didn't ever try to hem him even verbally and let him have his way usually if she couldn't argue, trick, or tempt him into another path. Although if that was due to being a Cloud of the opposite polarization or just because she knew that wouldn't end well was debatable.

As the two of them got older and they grew into themselves, it would be questionable if how they behaved then was due to just Flame natures overtaking what they would’ve been like or if it was all just supposedly maturing outlooks behind their late teen personalities making them behave as they would. That was probably be something the former pickpocket wouldn't ever know, as she would never get a subjective look at the problem as close as she was.

Mist users were the most erratic and hard to pin down. Since they were generally the first to activate their Dying Will, there wasn't much on the basic personality beforehand available.

What little there was suggested Classical Mists were meddlers, the type of person that would stick their nose into anything and everything. Inverted Mists were introverted to the point of expressive in it, exaggerating a trait or two to the point that was how most tended to identify them by even if it wasn't a natural or even a true trait.

Then again, Mists were a headache and a half alone. It was entirely possible any Mists interviewed for the books she had taken the information out of messed around with their answers just to be difficult.

Unconfirmed rumors about Dying Will Flames were as similarly limited as what Sonya had managed to confirm or at least get information about.

According to everything she had read, her nature was supposed to get worse as she got stronger as a Flame user.

Which it wasn’t. Sonya had been more ‘Classically Cloud’ in nature when she had been five compared to how she was now that she was ten, and she had nearly gotten reasonable control of her strength by this point.

Or if not 'control' then able to summon it up almost at will and break anything she wanted.

If that was because of her Storm secondary getting stronger or her possibility of Sun nature was debatable, but it was just as likely as claiming it was Cherep's fault.

Hell’s fire, she was practically a chatterbox compared to how she had been.

Her 'territory' was also something unconfirmed, however much her book insisted her best friend was such a thing. It also insisted the damage she did to three drunk vory was her getting territorial but all she recalled from that incident was a whole lot of fear, and it just seemed iffy to her to have a person as territory.

People were not things. She flatly refused to even humor the idea.
Disregarding her foster brother, her territory could be anything from her biological birth city of Saratov to her role as a Zolotov thief. Getting confirmation on what it was wasn't likely to end well.

Sonya could look for patterns and possibilities all she wanted, but it would be her getting territorial over something that would confirm what.

A ten-year-old, or however old she'd be when it happened, girl who could shatter bones getting territorial would not be pretty for whoever tried infringing on her. Likely this was something she really had to warn both Arseniy and Lisa about before it happened.

From hints and suggestions in the book the vor got her, Flame users were supposed to start acting out in a few pre-established patterns after hitting their late teenage years. The other six types of Flame users that weren't stabilized by Harmony bonds by then would start seeking out the seventh and get progressively more entrenched in how they displayed their Flame's nature in hopes of such behavior would let them catch the attention of a Sky.

The stronger one was in Dying Will Flames, the earlier it happened and the worse it was.

How those Dying Will Flame natures, and Flame users themselves, interacted with each other without the buffer of a Sky at hand was… a hot mess. Allegedly.

Sonya couldn't decipher much beyond Classical Clouds Flame users were those she might end up killing and trying to rationalize to herself… and Mists, because apparently Clouds and Mists never got along well even with a Sky at hand. Storms were nice to Rains and Lightning users of their opposite polarization, and great with other Storms of their same, but generally had rocky relations with everyone else. At least they weren't violently opposed to Storms of their opposite polarization like Clouds.

If she never found herself a Sky, and she wasn't entirely sure she wanted someone to be that to her, those other Dying Will Flame user types might just incite homicidal tendencies in herself. She'd never know it either, unless it happened and she could somehow manage to catch the behavior before she harmed someone.

Rejection was… something the blonde wasn't even sure what it applied to when it came to Flames. There was Flame Rejection, Sky Rejection, and just simply Rejection referenced by her best Dying Will Flame book and a few of the storybooks aimed at teenage mafia members.

Obviously, it was bad. Really bad when it came to both Flame and Sky Rejection according to the plots in the storybooks, but she had little additional information. It was also something she would be happy to not know about, it sounded that horrible with what little she did know.

Flame Rings were… possibly not something Sonya would be able to understand in time. She had over twenty different stones to work through, which might just take her a year to do depending on if she spent a week or two weeks investigating each type. She also didn't have a comprehensive collection of gemstones, merely all the ones she could get in one semi-affluent branch store.

Either she'd figure it out in a year, or it would take much longer and require her to rob another jewelry shop or buy one of the ones available in Mafia Land and get that one appraised.

Tatiana was possibly a Classical Sun, Dmitriy an Inverted Rain, Lisa might be a Classic Rain herself or a similar polarized Sun of her own, Arseniy could be either an Inverted Lightning or a similar polarized Storm or both if Sonya was honest.

The little she could do with her Flames so far was bend iron, shatter steel, and lift more than her
Arseniy helped Sonya work up a report to give while Lisa had her loose gems appraised.

Around the same time the young blonde thief got her jewels back, the vor took her into the Zolotov's main headquarters to make her report to the right people.

The first time she had ever been there, and her first thought was... eclectic. There was a lot of random things hidden in certain corners if you cared to look. Probably a lot of stolen things, and it all kind of clashed together.

The 'right people' according to the man posed as her foster father included the Avtoritet, or Brigadier, in charge of the Zolotov recruitment and training that took place in her neighborhood. Him and three other Avtorityets overlooked the personnel intake and management for their entire clan in Moscow for their Boss, their Pakhan, and were apparently the ones Arseniy reported to.

She had known the vor whose roof she lived under wasn't just any member of their clan, but it was still slightly jarring to know where he fell exactly. It should have been obvious since the vor in question was the one hammering several Mafiya lessons through thick skulls a handful of nights a week, and he could make decisions about security around the neighborhood without being reprimanded from what little she had seen a little over a year ago when Cherep joined them at home.

Arseniy was... either a Boevik or a Krysha. A warrior or an enforcer, in other words.

Why he was training Mafiya brats was still something to wonder about, especially the faction of their clan that mainly dealt with training thieves and not just Mafiya hopefults trying to become vor.

Sonya had thought Aleksandr had been the vor in charge of their neighborhood. The grizzled old combat trainer had his home to himself with no fosterling Mafiya trainees underfoot, despite the training hall under it that was used very often in any given day.

She snapped out of her mental wanderings fast when Arseniy brusquely introduced her and informed the four men what topic she would be covering.

Laying out everything she knew of Dying Will Flames took an embarrassingly short amount of time. What she might know but couldn't confirm took nearly three times as long, as it covered the other Flame types she'd never have the resources to understand herself. The rest of what rumors or facts that might be true, but she hadn't yet confirmed, was nearly as nerve-wracking as spilling what she did know.

Adding on most of the Flame possibilities in her household except for her best friend's did at least amuse two of the Avtorityets. As per Arseniy's advice to leave the party tricks for last, Sonya bending a respectively thick iron rod into a loop barehanded finished off her presentation.

She was dismissed shortly after the four men had gotten a good look at the metal she had twisted, which had been expected. Arseniy held the rest of the information they might want to look at and had the time and effort put in to be listened to by those vor.

She might be the Dying Will Flame user, probably one of few remotely active users in the clan due
to the trouble she had in getting information on the ability in Moscow, but she was still a little girl in
a Mafiya syndicate. One a few months shy of her eleventh birthday as well, to make it all worse.

To the Zolotovs, who were a recent addition to the Mafiya’s underworld, her Flames were still
relatively new to them and not something they had precedents to help them utilize.

It worked for her, because with what Lisa informed the girls about Mafiya gender equality and the
fact Sonya was a thief meant there would probably be little direct control her clan would try to exert
over her future travel plans. She had her Mafia Land contracts to help in that respect as well, which
would cover why she would be leaving the USSR in as little as half a decade.

If the little thief paid her dues and heeded the mafia’s and her clan’s laws, she was pretty much set.
There wouldn’t likely be any attempts on her freedom until after Dying Will Flame users became
more common.

With how isolate the Russian underworld was, any attempts in the future would only happen a few
years after the rest of the underworld realized Flame users would no longer be a passing if rare ability
only very select mafia syndicates could boast of.

Probably only when the Seven Strongest of the Era made their debut and established themselves
using said rare ability.

The only problem with that kind of behavior from her clan was the fact Sonya would be left to
fumble her own way in the dark. Apparently, to the Zolotov Clan, if she succeeded great but if she
screwed up and killed someone or herself… at least she’d be a great warning story for the next Flame
user to pop up.

Dying Will Flames weren’t something the Zolotovs could ask around about without questions being
asked why in return. Thus, the reason she had made the progress she had without guidance from
anyone in the Russian Mafiya and why it wasn't likely she’d ever get a teacher for it.

Oh well… at least she could visit Dmitriy while here and ask if he’d like to learn how to use some
dubious Flame ability called Tranquility the long and hard way.

While Sonya still intended to stick with Cherep, if her clan wanted to show off a Dying Will Flame
user then she’d either be expected to come back when they called or supply a different alternative
they would like better.

Rains were more sociable than Clouds, after all. Dmitriy was also male.

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LV (Monday the 26th of June, 1961. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet
Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya had started picking her way through her gems before Lisa got the rest sorted out, but the
purple diamond and alexandrite she had started with didn't so much as heat up through the two
weeks she wore the diamond or the other two she had a hunk of alexandrite on her.

There was no reaction from them, or any perceivable change in her grasp on her Dying Will Flames.
Which, while not surprising, was a little daunting when paired with how few stones she had to work
with and how many she probably didn’t have.

At least she could fence the purple diamond pendant, and alexandrite was a very popular if common
stone in the USSR. The cash wouldn't be as much as an actual heist, but still respectable for the week's allowance even if Cherep wanted to go see the circus again for his upcoming birthday.

The whole concept had been a shot in the dark, so she really shouldn't have been so surprised it failed in application.

Learning meditation was tricky and boring without someone to help, but as it didn't seem to be hurting her control over her strength or her temper she kept up with it. The jewel of the next two weeks, a loose hunk of purple sapphire faceted as a teardrop, was clutched in one hand.

After several weeks of no reaction, Sonya had been understandably surprised when the gem imploded in her hand not five minutes into trying to control her breathing and thoughts. Feeling the sapphire crumble in her hand was odd, but also startling enough she blankly stared at her own fist for the first few seconds.

The pain registered next, and the thief opened her hand to see the extent of the damage to her palm.

"Shit." She wouldn't be selling that sapphire after all.

If she had clutched the gem too hard or if it shattering had force behind it was debatable, but she still had jagged pieces of sapphire stuck in her palm. The rest of it was in cracking chunks, with bits of fine sapphire powder mixing into the blood seeping out of the puncture wounds.

Sniffing irritably at the injury, she got up and headed for the kitchen as Lisa was likely there. The older woman preferred her fosterlings to eat something healthy for lunch before making Arseniy's first meal of the day. If she wasn't, there was a probably illegally overstocked first aid kit under the sink.

The older pair had made a point of all the kids knowing that, and that it wouldn't be an issue if they needed it for whatever reason. Not using it when they had a need would get them in trouble, not the other way around.

Sonya was pretty sure morphine was a controlled substance, but there was still a bottle of that in the kit.

"Lisa?" The blonde warily poked her head into the kitchen, grimacing when she spotted the brunette. "I may need some help."

"Oh?"

There wasn't enough blood to start dripping just yet, but there was enough to cover her palm and make it look worse than it was. "With this."

The older thief stared at the shattered mess of jewel and blood for a moment, heaved a sigh, and dug out the kitchen's first aid kit from under the sink. "What caused it?"

"A sapphire." She informed her flatly, taking a spot next to the sink so she could wash the blood away and so the woman could see the fragments of the gemstone that hadn't dug into flesh.

"It worked?" Asked the brunette, sounding surprised and confused at the same time.

"Not sure if this does qualify for 'worked', but I did get a reaction." Not a great one, and Sonya would make it a point to avoid sapphire jewelry in the future. "I think… I might try again next week just to make sure it was the gem and not me. I'm done for this one."
Lisa looked at her curiously, digging around the kit with one hand. Probably to find the tweezers. "It's Monday."

"It's also early in the day, and I'm already bleeding."

"Well… you have a point there."

Carefully washed her palm off for her, dumping the bigger shards of gemstone into a little empty jam jar instead of letting them go down the drain, the older woman started efficiently pulling the shard of jewel out of her skin. Her foster daughter got distracted inspecting the fragments for any other damage, but she couldn't even see a reason that would explain why the sapphire shattered as it had.

"So what did this tell you?"

The younger thief carefully considered the question instead of blurtling out something stupid as the pain really set in. If Flame damage couldn't explain it, then… "I think I am the wrong type for sapphires. If I could use one, then there would be some kind of discoloration from heat damage on the edges of some shards. Tatiana and I saw several Flame Rings in Mafia Land, and all of them had scorch marks from use. Probably from quality assurance testing, if they were new."

"And so?"

"Sapphires probably won't work for Clouds or Storms. Then again, sapphires are typically blue gems, so I'd expect a Rain to have better luck with one… or a Mist."

"Isn't Rain what you claimed young Dmitriy was?"

Sonya was a little surprised how fast that bit of gossip got around, even to the rather isolated neighborhood little Mafiya hopefuls were living. "Yeah… I have another two, so I probably should give him one and see what happens."

Lisa raised an eyebrow, plucking the largest shard out of the tiny palm in her hands and ignoring the twitch of equally tiny fingers flexing in response to the pain. "Are you sure you want to teach him?"

"I'm not even sure I can teach this stuff."

"Sonya."

The young thief winced as an awkwardly stuck shard of sapphire slid out of her palm under the older thief's control. "Dmitriy is probably going to remain where he is, and if Dying Will Flame users become more common he'd be the one to get any clan requests on it dumped on him rather than me. The clan will also prefer going to him rather than me."

"It is your discovery, your work clearing up the questions we have on it."

"Being special isn't always a good thing, Lisa."

Cherep had gotten kidnapped when one shady individual realized what he was looking at. Sonya was a very young little girl with a similar ability. All total, it wasn't exactly a safe hobby to be dabbling in.

Lisa wasn't stupid, and she also had a large hand in raising her up to the thief she now was. The woman pressed her lips together but let the topic slide by them as she picked out the smaller shards of sapphire stuck in her palm.
"Be careful."
"I'm trying."

LVI (Tuesday the 8th of August, 1961. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sapphire wasn't a Cloud or Storm Flame gemstone. The second one Sonya tried the next week shattered just as easily and she had merely warily held it on one flat palm while repeating her clumsy meditation exercise.

Dmitriy, who hadn't really been all that interested in Dying Will Flames in the first place, did at least get a visible but flickering reaction from within the stone she gave him. It was odd enough to attract the curiosity of the young mechanic, and interesting enough that he agreed to attempt learning.

She set him up with a stripped copy of her research journal on Flames, editing out everything on other Flames but Rains. Claiming the edited edition was just so he wouldn't have to pick through other natures or control building suggestions for other types, but privately held back the part of ’and so he wouldn't put two and two together and take a hard look at Cherep'.

The former pickpocket then tried an amethyst, purple opal, and a chunk of tanzanite in the following month. The amethyst scorched too easily in her hands, facets that had been clearly deep purple clouding up quickly to look lilac in the space of a day. The opal gave the best reaction, fitful spurts of light violet color ejecting itself from the gem but nothing Sonya tried influenced the reaction in any perceivable way. Tanzanite was almost opposite, instead of no response from the rock it fractured bit by bit but not as violently as the sapphire had.

Working off a hunch, late on Cherep's birthday she had him hold a fresh chunk of tanzanite in one hand and punched him in the same arm hard enough to bruise. He squawked at her but also screeched when the jewel set itself on fire, with lavender shades, in his grip.

He promptly dropped it, warily eyed the rock she had forced into his hands, then her. "The hell was that for?"

"Curiosity." She picked up the curiously warm gem, he hadn't held it long enough for that to be body heat. "I'm getting this carved or set, but I wouldn't suggest you carry it until you find what circus you're looking for."

Rubbing the spot that was likely purpling into an impressive imprint of her fist, Cherep pulled a face at her. "Nothing too girly, please."

She snorted, tucking the chunk of tanzanite into her pocket. "I was thinking more like a little skull you could wear."

It wasn't exactly perfect, but it would work for the time being until they had the space to poke Cherep's Flames without her clan catching on.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 19th of July, 1962. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

The start of the winter months saw Sonya playing with purple shaded garnet, tourmaline, and spinel.
The last of her possible Cloud gemstone focuses, at least from one jewelry shop's contents.

The purple garnet fractured faster than the tanzanite, but it also showed fast growing splotches of scorching. Tourmaline gave a controllable response even as it burned up, but it required more effort to draw up than the stone she found for Cherep or Dmitriy's sapphire flickers. Purple spinel gave her nearly the same reaction tanzanite gave her foster brother, startling her into dropping it the first time it happened too.

The very last purple gem she had, zircon, ended up tried once then ignored as she played with spinel jewels and tiny tongues of light purple fire until her own birthday.

Spinel probably wouldn't be the best focus gem she would find but the important thing was that it worked, and she could find it in the USSR even with the lack of imports coming into the country.

With a Cloud gem found, and extras supplied by Tatiana when she heard the gem experiments bore some results, Sonya turned her attention to her red gems.

Since spinel came in variations of red and her foster sister gave her some, she started with those just to play with the jewels for another week. The results were pretty much the same, disregarding the fact the purple shaded stones were starting to show heavy wear from being used as a Flame focus.

Lisa and Cherep had collaborated to get her a decent book on crystal formations and gemstones for her birthday, and from reading that she learned spinel gems were sometimes known as false rubies and sapphires. Given her less than stellar reaction with sapphires, she gingerly tried rubies.

It gave a similar reaction as the spinel, except that Sonya burned herself on a jewel for the first time.

Dying Will Flames weren't supposed to harm their individual users, unless they were overused. The possibility it was more the stone than an overuse of something was possible, but risky to assume.

She tentatively decided rubies were too responsive for what she needed it for, then set them aside. The former pickpocket would revisit the problem after she had tested the rest of her gems.

Garnets, which she tried to see if shade did influence anything, gave a different response than purple ones. Instead of shattering with signs of scorching, Sonya got fitful flickers of reddish-purple fire as the stone clouded up.

Why garnets were different depending on shade when spinel wasn't was beyond her, but interesting to know.

Fire opals gave similar results as purple opals. Nothing the blonde did could get a more reliable answer than the occasional flicker now and again when she wasn't trying.

Red tourmaline, on the other hand, reacted interestingly. The flickers of Flame were fitful and weak, but ridiculously easy to coax out on demand.

Actual Flames. Via a sparkly rock. Proof in the flesh that things would get strange in a fast hurry.

Tiny and not reliably controllable, but a start.

She still had several other red stones to test but ended up deciding that for now spinel and red tourmaline would do. What jewels she had left were dumped into a jewelry box that was Tatiana's eleventh birthday present for her.

Sonya had two Mafia Land contracts to do and maybe another heist on her own to do that year yet,
to afford next year's clan dues. The amount she had from the previous year's Mafia Land contracts and half the take from one jewelry store might not cover it.

It was 1962 and if the value of the re-issued ruble didn't keep up its value unlike the last decade, when one needed almost twenty rubles to buy a loaf of bread, then she would be left to scramble for more.

Which didn't sound at all fun.

Shortly after Tatiana's fourteenth birthday she set her Dying Will Flame research to the side and asked Lisa where the damn moving island was now.

LVII (Monday the 30th of July, 1962. Thieves' Guild Hall, Mafia Land.)

Sonya's first Mafia Land contract for her eleventh year was more comprehensive than the two she had taken before, the closest contract to the USSR asked that instead of a target item to steal she was to rob a certain household.

To completely rob, as in go through the house and take anything not nailed down and maybe trash what was left.

Private residence burglary did not list on her favorite things to do. Arseniy looked rather disgruntled by the fact she'd have to go directly to Romania and then come back to the island to keep within the contract's time restriction, as he didn't exactly have a lot of time to tag after one of his fosterlings.

The tiny thief rather liked the fact he let her go anyways, but she pretty much hated everything else about the contract. She didn't speak or read Romanian, she disliked stealing from houses with canines around to guard the neighborhood, and robbing a home was a lot different than robbing a store of anything marketable.

She was pawning everything, she didn't want to take any of it back with her. Doing so in Romania when she didn't speak their language was also a hefty pain in her ass, especially since she looked like a little girl pawning off her parents' luggage.

She ended up with very little reward for the effort, which cemented her dislike from robbing people that probably couldn't afford it. Sonya couldn't even try and find something she'd like to keep, because that house had been home to a girl about her physical age and robbing it just made her feel three different types of disgusting.

Making it clear to the clerk/secretary that had been assigned to help her sort through contracts that if he ever gave her another home robbery contract like that again she'd aerate his head with whatever was handy at least soothed some of her upset.

"You asked for something near the USSR!"

"I asked for something lucrative near the USSR," she reminded him icily in her supposedly native Russian, "robbing a household is not lucrative. I barely broke even on travel expenses back and forth. If you are incapable of doing your job, say so."

The man was young yet, brown hair and dark eyes with a pockmarked complexion. Small pox or pimples or whatever. Probably not much older than twenty. He also really hated her, from all appearances. "A private residence would have an array of jewelry, bank or government bonds, and
antiques. Two of which you're noted to deal in, miss."

"Costume jewelry, debts, and knock-offs, sir." Countered the young girl, still icy calm even if she was irritated to the point of picking a fight where she didn't need to. "None of which I can move would fetch more than twenty euros in any antique store, therefore my net gain would be tiny. The payment for completing the contract was the only thing of note the entire job. If you cannot utilize the assets given to you to manage, maybe you should look for a different line of work."

"Maybe you shouldn't bitch so much, little girl? Take what you get and be happy with it."

She arched an eyebrow at the insult, then gave a sharp nod. "Thank you for saying so. I'll have to remember to ignore you."

He spluttered, she ignored him and left the conference room just so she should sharply slam something in his pockmarked face.

Screw doing both jobs right then, she was going home for a couple months.

If the ass had claimed everyone had to do a bad job now or again she would've accepted it, not well but still. That he didn't meant she was going to ensure she never took a contract he recommended ever again, because for whatever reason he really, really hated her.

Sonya didn't know why, if it was her age, gender, country of origin, all three, or something else. It didn't mean she had to put up with it, while her Mafia Land job was convenient it wasn't something she needed to do.

It would just be tricky if she wasn't working here in a few years.

Heading out to the amusement park's reception area, which doubled as the docking area for ship travel, was simple enough. Even if it was Mafia Land, and she was physically eleven years old, no one tried to so much as look at her sideways or down their noses at her being alone.

While she did keep a wary eye out, because this was an island of Mafia dealings so robbery or muggings or the occasional murder weren't unusual, she didn't see anything too alarming or interesting beyond what she had already seen until just before the arrival/departure hall. A lanky older teenager with some wild and short black hair was facing off with two individuals down an alleyway. The teen was sharply dressed for a boy his age, but not quite to the point of wearing three-piece suits on a generally tropical island like the men trying to use their greater size to intimidate him were wearing.

Given how much they were sweating, it wasn't working too well.

One of the two men, who held himself like he was someone important, punched the teen in the face even as Sonya watched in morbid amusement from the street.

When his associate drew a knife and reached for the teen, she lost her amusement.

Reaching down, she grabbed a loose stone from somewhere near her left foot. Drawing back up to her pathetically short kiddy height she threw it to give a hard knock to Arrogant Ass Number Two's head before strolling on.

The teen could probably handle one-on-one on his own, and possibly could have dealt with two-on-one even with the knife in play.
Sonya just really, really hated people taller than her that day.

LVIII (Monday the 30th of July, 1962, continued. Mafia Land.)

"Parla Italiano?"

The lanky young man was following her.

"Dō ni Nihon wa dōdesu ka?"

How did Italian and Japanese collide enough for him to learn the language, exactly?

Neither were languages Sonya spoke, so she merely kept walking on trying to ignore her new tail.

She was kind of concerned that if she tried going home he would follow her, so for the time being she was wandering Mafia Land's less populated streets trying to wait out the teenager.

"English, maybe?"

"Unfortunately." Maybe he'd go away if she told him what he wanted?

"Ho? Well, then. My thanks for the assistance, miss…?"

"Isn't it rude to ask for a name before giving your own?"

The twitch of his mouth informed her he was amused at her stonewalling, and probably enough to try waiting her out instead of the other way around.

She hadn't used her family name in years, so it was what she gave him. "Nikishina, mister…?"

"Sinclair." He gave her a probably charming smile, tilting his upper body forward in a slight bow when they came to a stop near a strip of restaurants. "Renato Sinclair, miss Nikishina. A pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise." Sonya informed him tartly, the tone of her voice suggesting it was the opposite. "Is there a reason you are following me, Mister Sinclair?"

"You have some marvelous aim. You could say I'm rather interested in how, exactly, a young lady of your tender years could throw something hard enough to knock out a rather thick skulled, fully grown man."

"Curiosity kills the cat, Mister Sinclair." She knew perfectly well it wasn't going to budge him off her and would privately admit that taking her aggression out on one of his assailants probably hadn't been her best idea ever. "Besides, with you ever so Sunny personality… I'd assume you know full well what I am."

He narrowed pitch black eyes on her even while keeping up the charming smile, she kept her expression mostly blank and a little bored in return.

Her biggest tip off was the lack of bruises on his lightly tanned skin, even though she had watched him get slugged hard in the face. Either Mist user or Sun, and her mental hackles weren't crawling or aggressively raised enough for a Cloud faced with a Mist user.
Additionally, there was a speckle of blood on the cuff of one sleeve. A Mist user would've covered it up before confronting a little girl.

"I think... I owe you a cup of coffee. At the very least."

"I don't."

"I insist." Sinclair gave her a much sharper smile, his right hand finding a place on her upper back. "It's just a small thing, miss Nikishina. Won't you please allow me to repay you?"

Lashing out before he could jerk away, Sonya gripped his wrist in her left hand and squeezed warningly until she felt his bones grate together. "Mister Sinclair, since I am neither a relative nor your ward do. Not. Touch me."

Sinclair didn't even flinch, and she had to admire that level of pain tolerance. "...of course, my mistake. Clouds do not like being led or herded against their will, right?"

Okay, she walked into that one. Her apparently obvious irritation only seemed to amuse him as she let his wrist go.

"One would think you would hide an unhealthy interest in twelve-year-old girls, in order to be not thought of as a pedophile. I know I am concerned by the level of interest you hold for me, Mister Sinclair."

Her pointed comment at least wiped the humor from his face, so the smaller thief turned and headed straight for the first café serving coffee she spotted. The faster this was over with the happier she'd be.

He was still quick on her heels even taken aback, so she resigned herself to a very sharp and twisted conversation. The Sun would not be an easy verbal opponent but she had started it, so she had to deal with it.

She left picking out where they would be seated to the Italian teen, and merely followed him to a simple pair of chairs arranged on either side of a small table at the back of the restaurant's opened patio thing. "How do you take your coffee, Nikishina?"

"With cream, preferably." She eyed the list of beverages served over the counter. "I would rather a Russian Spiced Black Tea if you would, however."

She got a tilt of his head in reply, as he was already focused in attracting the attention of one of the waitresses. It was disgustingly easy for him, Sonya supposed he was rather good looking... but she wasn't to the point of puberty when such things would matter to her.

He placed their order, and since the counter bar was low enough for Mafia customers to keep a wary eye on what was going to be served to them both Sinclair and the former pickpocket kept an eye on their respective drinks being made.

It wasn't until his espresso and her tea were served that he tried to talk to her again. "Now then, miss Nikishina... could I have a first name?"

"You may not."

The refusal didn't seem to faze him. "If you insist. Young lady, since you know what I am and what you are why are you being so obstructive?"
She arched an eyebrow at him and sipped from her teacup. "Is there reason for me not to be? You are the one bothering me, even if I do not wish to be."

She had some sympathy for Cherep, if she had been as bad as this young man in the beginning.

"Suns and Clouds are known to be friendly."

"That is an old wives' tale, Mister Sinclair." One only had to look at Sonya's and Tatiana's early relationship to learn that. It was damn frosty until they started making an actual effort to understand the other. While they had the possibility to be friendly, it took effort. "It merely means I'm more inclined to assist you without a Sky at hand. Which I have, but if this is the thanks I get I might as well walk on next time."

Sinclair narrowed his eyes at her again, hiding the rest of his expression behind his cup. "I take it you are going to be stubborn no matter what?"

The thief gave him a taut smile of her own. "Of course. Give a little to get a little, Sinclair."

He at least conceded the point gracefully. "I'll see you around then, Nikishina?"

"It's likely, since I don't see you as the type to give up easily."

"I'm not."

Getting up and abandoning the rest of her tea, she shot him a bland look. "Obviously. Cute sideburns, Sinclair. I'll see you around."

Saluting with his espresso, Renato tugged one of his curly sideburns with his other hand as she left.

It was entirely likely he'd try following her, but she was certain she could use the train lines of Europe to lose him eventually.

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**LIX (Saturday the 13th of October, 1962. Mafia Land.)**

**Sonya** took all of two hours to calm down on the boat ride back to mainland Europe, then she spent the rest of the trip with her head in her hands.

She couldn't believe how much trouble her temper had gotten her into, and how much bait Sinclair laced his words with that she had fallen for.

Yes, it had been a crappy job and her irritation was understandable. It didn't explain why the hell she had involved herself between a probably Inverted/Soft Sun and his assailants unless she had been looking for someone to take her aggression out on.

It also wasn't the Italian's fault she had behaved rather horribly, so taking her lingering aggression out on him had been outrageously ill-mannered of her. Lisa would've smacked her for being so rude to a made man, even one from another country.

The conversation afterward was sort of amusing in a non-mafia orientated viewpoint. Suns were stubborn, obstinate people and apparently Sonya had been a stereotypical Cloud with a Storm's temper in return. Her refusal to give an inch unless he managed to trick it out of her was probably only encouraging him to keep on bothering her.
She'd likely see Sinclair every damn time she returned to the island if he had the time to spare, so she'd better think up an apology to him between now and then in the hopes it would put him off.

If Arseniy had been there, she'd probably get her ass grounded for the information she had spilled so easily.

Sonya spent the next month looking up things to control her temper with, in between playing with spinel gemstones, trying to summon either her Cloud or Storm Flames without one, and Aleksandr's attempts to find a staff that would stand up to her abuse. Cherep got interested in the gemstones when Dmitriy stopped by to see if she had a different shade of stone other than purple for him to use, as his sapphire was getting rather brittle already.

There was one bad moment when an amethyst reacted to his attention when Sonya had been pawing through her jewelry box, but at least the two of them were the only ones in her room at the time.

The lack of more sapphires in her possession meant another jewelry store robbery was needed, but the young thief put it off until after her next Mafia Land contract. She could also probably get an array of blue shaded gems for Dmitriy to try, and maybe yellows for Tatiana.

She did wonder what had happened to her intent on not doing more jewelry store heists after her first one but put that thought aside just as she had Sinclair's silkily stubborn attempts to make her talk.

Her last Mafia Land job for the year had her traveling by herself. Arseniy wasn't at ease with letting her go back and forth from Mafia Land alone, but Lisa was surprisingly tolerant of the lone travel time. If nothing continued to happen to her between the moving island and the USSR, she'd likely keep on traveling alone.

Sonya was at least thankful she hadn't staggered into trouble like Sinclair with the vor around, he'd probably not be happy with her about it.

Said asshole Italian of some strange acquaintance did make it a point to greet her charmingly when she was on her way to fulfill her next contract using her first name, but at least said contract was not a home robbery again.

Instead she got to put her grasp of the French language to use and stole some information and the contents of a safe out of a very wealthy business with its home office in Paris. A modern, for the 1960s, office building had proved to be a different challenge than any of the other heists she had done.

The budding cat burglar was merely thankful there were no dogs, but a little disappointed that beyond needing her lock picking skills it hadn't been as hard as it should have been. No guards other than the ones outside to duck and dodge, so the overnight janitorial staff would be facing some rather hard questioning the next day.

"You look… disgruntled." Sinclair drawled lazily when she stalked out of the Thieves' Hall's front doors not a week after last seeing him.

"Why am I not surprised?" She looked up, mentally asking whatever was up there to send her some much needed patience. "What, Sinclair?"

"Well, I see that time away hasn't improved your temper much. Sonya."

Giving the smugly smirking Italian a flat look to start with, the young thief crossed her arms over her non-existent chest and scowled. "I do not recall giving you permission to use my name."
"We're friends, are we not?"

"You have a very interesting definition for friendship, Sinclair."

"Call me Renato. It's the least you could do after making me hunt around to learn something as simple as your first name."

"You mean it took effort to charm it out of the secretary on the ground floor? My, my, Sinclair. Not quite as charming as you thought you were, are you?"

The amusement on the young Italian man's face slipped off only for an instant, but Sonya knew she scored a hit. "Do you have the time to finish that coffee you skipped out on? I'd like to know what the youngest contract thief I've ever seen is so nettled by."

"You see many of my kind then?" She thought about it, but again being stubbornly non-talkative would only encourage him. "If you wish to hear me bitch, then by all means. I have the time."

The young man looked suspicious for a half a second, warily eyeing her sideways as she descended the front steps of the Thieves' Hall. "Just like that?"

"Surprise." Being she had a Storm nature too, it might be fun to twist his head around a Cloud that didn't always act like a Cloud. "I'll even pay."

Sinclair looked as if he couldn't tell where the punchline to the joke was.

Sonya decided it was his best look yet.

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LX (Friday the 2nd of November, 1962. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Why, exactly, is my twelfth birthday coming up so soon?"

"Because it's almost been a year since your eleventh?" Cherep answered her dutifully, sounding distracted and as if he thought she had some kind of mental retardation.

Sonya thoughtfully smacked him upside the head, so he could share the same status. The fact his forehead hit the new engine block Dmitriy had forked over for his thirteenth birthday was entirely unintentional.

He peered over his shoulder with peeved purple eyes and a smear of grease on his temple. "Really?"

"At least your head didn't dent the metal, be happy with that." She defended herself, smirking at his deadpan expression. "This year went by too fast."

"You travel a lot and bury yourself in books when you are home. I'd be surprised if you hadn't lost a month or two of time somewhere in there." He turned back to the slightly different hunk of... she was only slightly sure the metal was aluminum alloy, it could probably be cast iron under the grit and dirt just as easily. "If I didn't have this baby and her predecessor, I'd think you didn't love me anymore Sonya."

"Really?" She echoed his previous question flatly, eyeing his back suspiciously.
"It was either traveling, books, or those shiny gems all year. Getting your attention from them was like herding a cat away from a beached fish." Her foster brother hauled himself up on his bed with her, ignoring the smears of oil and grease he was getting everywhere his hands touched.

Even with the chunk of motor sitting in the middle of his bedroom, the dirt and grease stains only traveled when he did.

"I'm actually surprised you put the book down to spend time with me again."

The thief had already read the book she had been reading a little while earlier and predictably lost interest easily. "Yes, well... have I been neglecting you, Cherep? Is this your official complaint?"

"Don't you love me more than books, Sonya?" He returned just as quickly, slumping sideways onto her and wrapping his dirty arms around her waist. "I feel so lonely."

"You're about to be dead if I can't get this shirt clean later."

Cherep sat bolt upright in response, smiling sheepishly over at her. "Sorry. So?"

"So, what?"

He rolled his eyes at her, and she did take a moment to marvel how different he was now than when he had been a street rat. "This next year, put some time into not being totally absorbed in whatever you have in your hands."

Sonya thought about it. "Was I that bad?"

"Not bad, just distracted way too easily." Her mechanically inclined best friend raised a purple eyebrow at her. "Why?"

"Classic Storm nature is supposedly hard to fixate but easily distracted, Inverted is fixated easily but hard to distract. So..."

"Can't it just be something about you personally?"

She blinked at him a couple times as she absorbed that. "Probably... if I didn't already have the Flame type. It just means it might get worse."

"You? Being worse? Stuff of nightmares, that." He slid himself out of arm's reach with a grin. "So, which is it? Is your magical, mystical fire power of the Storm Classically fixated on the books you have or Inverted and fixed on what you pour your effort into?"

"Or both on both, I don't know." With a groan, Sonya let herself drop to lay out on his bed and used her hands to cover her face. "Pick one, you have a one in three chance to be right."

"What do I get if I'm right?"

"Pick something."

He slid over, so he was looking straight down at her. "A motorcycle?"

She had to laugh as she dropped her arms. "Really?"

"One you bought legally. With money you earn legally." Expand the preteen, a wicked smirk stealing over his face. "Or... do you think you can't do it?"
"Are… you trying to dare me?"

"Maybe. Is it working?"

Snorting, she pushed herself upright with a huff. "Alright, I'll bite. I agree to the terms except for the legally buying thing. I've got rules to follow, so you'll have to buy it."

Cherep rolled his eyes but nodded. "Agreed. I guess Inverted."

"Why?"

"Because you're mainly a Classic Cloud. It would make sense if your secondary was Inverted."

"That would be if any of this mess of mysticism made some kind of sense." She sighed and shrugged. "Fine. If you're wrong, you have to steal something in front of me."

"WHAT?"

"What? Forfeits of being wrong. You're not chicken, are you Cherep?"

His jaw worked as he sought an argument, but his features fell into a pout before long. "You are a cruel, unusual little girl."

"You are the one that joined this foster family last. One would expect you to know that going in."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever."

"You realize that your hands are covered in engine gunk and you just spread that all over your face when you rubbed it with both hands, right?"

Cherep pulled his hands away from his face, scowling at the smears of grease, oil, and dirt marring his palms. "Couldn't you have warned me a little earlier?"

"I could have. Did I want to? Nope."

Chapter End Notes

Some of this is pulled straight from Wikipedia, because I'm that lazy.

Vory v Zakone (Singular vor, Plural vory) – Thieves-in-Law, title awarded by one's peers (like a peerage title rather than a military rank). Boevik – Translates to 'warrior'. Works for a Brigadier having a special criminal activity to run, a Boevik is in charge of finding new guys and paying tribute up to his Brigadier. Krysha - Literally 'roofs' or 'covers'. Extremely violent 'enforcers' as well as cunning individuals. Such enforcer is often employed to protect a business from other criminal organizations. Avtoritet (Plural Avtorityets) – Literally translates to 'authority'. A captain in charge of certain operations within a Mafiya syndicate, could also be called Brigadier. He gives out jobs to Boeviks ("warriors") and pays tribute to Pakhan. He runs a crew which is called a Brigade (Bratva). Pakhan - is the Boss or Krestnii Otets 'Godfather' and controls everything.
LXI-LXX

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

LXI (Sunday the 4th of November, 1962. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya was very, very tired of doing jewelry store heists. Therefore, she decided her next one was going to be big enough not to have to do another for at least half a decade or so.

Hopefully long after she had the resources to leave the USSR.

Bigger, in thieves' terms, also meant 'hazardous'.

If she was going to try to steal more jewels than she'd use in five years, given the rate of decay of gemstone focuses between herself and Dmitriy to base a guess from, then she was going to need more hands.

"Tatiana? I would like to hire your group, please."

The redhead blinked at her, mouth full of the dinner Lisa had made and they were in the process of eating. Swallowing hastily, she put her fork down and gave the blonde her full attention. "For?"

"Backup for tackling the local branch boutique for Cartier." She informed her grimly.

The name attracted both Lisa's and Arseniy's attention, but Cherep merely looked confused.

She wasn't really surprised, Cartier was a brand name in jewelry designs that was international by the early 1900s. They were once famed to be favorites of the old Tsar family and nobility of Russia and still famed for catering to European aristocrats, American Industrialists, Hollywood movie stars, and an array of Indian Princes. Now almost sixty years later, it was a French store that still did business even in the highly xenophobic USSR.

Everyone needed their shiny stones to show off, even a communist society that wasn't supposed to have an upper class.

"Sonya? Is that necessary?"

"It is if I want to stop doing jewelry sometime soon." The littlest thief at the table sighed and set her own utensils down to give their foster mother her full attention. "I'm going to need extra spinel and red tourmaline gems, Dmitriy needs sapphires and would probably like a different stone if we can figure out what's better for his use. As it is entirely possible Tatiana would like to learn, she'd need a yellow gemstone found for her. If I keep doing smaller stores at the rate I have been, it's entirely possible I'll mess up somehow or get caught eventually."

Sonya made a note to learn how to slip jewelry off people while they were wearing it, because she was going to be stubborn about no longer doing jewelry stores.

"Okay so… terms, little sister?" Tatiana spoke up eagerly, likely because the last heist the two of them had done had turned out rather well for her.

"So long as we are not caught, and we get a decent amount of what I'm after, the bulk of the take is
your groups' to deal with. You may even credit the amount we're going to tithe to the clan to me. We'll split any cash available between us, and whatever isn't jewelry or paper money will be decided on later.'

The fourteen-year-old eyed her foster sister. "That's uncommonly generous of you."

"We will be doing this the week before Christmas' Eve."

"Ouch. Your usual style of slippery shadow take?"

The safecracker had a point, the security alone on all the custom orders before Christmas was going to be a nightmare to evade… but she didn't intend to do this like she normally did. "No. We're going to take out the guards and do it leisurely like."

"I think… you two should stop talking about this at the dinner table." Lisa interrupted them serenely. "You have all night to discuss terms. More vegetables, Cherep?"

The blonde winced, then glanced at her best friend. Much to her surprise, her fellow preteen looked rather bland as he accepted the older woman's pointed mothering and the ladle of soup.

Cherep gave her a glance, one that practically screamed 'did you want me to fuss?'

Aww… he'd learned tolerance somewhere. Just in time too, she was starting to get a little concerned about her latest habit of speaking quickly without thinking of who was around or what the topic was of.

Damn her developing social tendencies, apparently that paired with a Classical Cloud's nature did her no favors.

"My apologies, Lisa, Cherep." Sonya flicked her glance to the head of the table, but all she got out of looking at Arseniy was amusement. His sharp eyes were still on her for a long moment, but his attention returned to the meal before long.

She had been spending a lot of time with her supposed 'foster father' in the last year, but the vor was a rather hard nut to crack. She just wasn't used to trying to read people like him, and never got a very good feel for what he thought about anything of import.

Tatiana wolfed down the rest of her food, and the former pickpocket hadn't had the appetite after her realization to do Lisa's pirog much justice, so the girls relocated to the basement to plot not much later.

"So, everything loose and in certain solid rainbow shades is yours?"

"I only need purple and red gems of a certain type… but I really should do all of them available just to be sure. I would need all the blues and yellows like I said."

"If these yellow jewels are for me, wouldn't it be better if it was my part of the take?"

She gave her foster sister a look, trying to see if she really was serious about that. "Really?"

"Learning to do that fire thing you do? It means you'd have to spend time with me, hell yes."

The younger thief snorted. "Or I could do you like Dmitriy and set you up with a semi-responsive stone and some notes to make your own way."

She merely gave a smile in response, drawing up a loose contract she'd take to the rest of her group
to get them on board with the heist. "So purple, red, yellow for me, but blues as well. Any other colors?"

"I suppose… green and orange. Maybe." Mist was what… a deep purple or blue shade?

That was already covered, so if she ran into a Lightning or a Sky she'd have the gems ready.

"You don't want the clear stones? Diamonds are a girl's best friend."

Sonya rolled her eyes at the slogan that made the colorless rocks so popular. "They also cut glass too."

"What? …really?"

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**LXII (Monday the 10th of December, 1962. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)**

Since Sonya proposed the job in early November, and Tatiana got a rather seriously interested result from her group of rogues rather fast, the girls pulled every building plan they could from the store in question and the surrounding city block to study.

Arseniy had reported to their higher ups their target, because the affluent members of the Zolotovs did frequent the boutique on occasion. He returned with an order, from their Pakhan no less, to avoid certain custom jobs the store was working on for him and a few others.

That meant the foster sisters had to plan to fake an interruption that would allow them to miss certain things, for the follow up investigation after their robbery so no one pinned the job on the Zolotovs from that alone.

With some luck, it would remain a 'planned' interruption and not be an actual one.

The former pickpocket also had the opportunity to meet several of the safecracker's pack of thieves, who also got the opportunity to talk to her instead of merely see her around the neighborhood. It was a learning experience for all involved because the blonde still didn't socialize well, and she was enough of a 'client' they put in the effort to do it anyways.

There was Adrik, a slim and sly boy that liked teasing whoever was in range and specialized in circumventing electrical security measures or using them against any security force. Nikolai, who was probably the muscle of the group with his stocky build but could banter almost as well as Sinclair did. Ziven rounded off the male side of the pack, he was a fellow blond built more for speed than strength, but Sonya clearly recalled him from hand-to-hand lessons under Aleksandr.

Ziven could probably out punch her in speed any given day of the week, so long as she didn't have something in hand to keep him at a distance.

Besides Tatiana herself there was only one other girl. Galina was a mousy brunette that clearly didn't like the youngest of the temporary group, but she was professional enough to bite her lip and keep quiet about it.

Their ages ran from oldest being sixteen, Nikolai, to thirteens, Adrik. Sonya was still the youngest at almost-twelve, but conversely was the senior thief for their joint heist. Tatiana and Nikolai jointly shared responsibility for the 'face' of their group, and thus most of the talking. Galina tended to plan
out what they did, Ziven handled scout work, and Adrik handled flouting security measures.

Which might be why the only other girl had an issue with the younger sister, planning their job was supposed to be her responsibility. However, as the foster sisters had done more of that type with the eldest's group supplying the muscle, Tatiana was going to handle planning with some aid from Sonya.

Since it was a much bigger job than normal, even their 'foster parents' got in on the prep work.

Lisa took the redhead with her to scout the showroom floor on the excuse she was shopping for a brooch for a made up 'grandmother' of their foster family. Arseniy and the younger sister went to commission a piece for the older woman's birthday in April, which got them a good look at the back rooms where most of the jewel crafting took place.

Doing the scouting like that meant the girls and the rest of the thieves would have to wear face concealment, but it was worth the detail when they got a good note of security camera placements before going in. Adrik needed the information to provide guesses of how long he could fool anyone and the time frame they were looking at for the actual heist.

Galina was eventually placated by being given the responsibility of narrowing down the ways the group could enter and exit the building, and individual escape routes from every floor if needed. Getting away free was just as important as the method used to steal, even if their syndicate Boss had a word in on what was going with them.

Given the layout of the building, it was decided Tatiana got the offices and back rooms with Ziven as backup and Sonya would have to handle the show floor and the workshops with Nikolai. Galina and Adrik would help whoever were closest to them when they had the time, but those two would mostly be on lookout so they'd have to load them with whatever loot they'd take in between different rooms.

The plan to get in and out again was trickier, especially since they would not be trying to avoid the guards.

What they had to avoid was attracting outside attention, so Adrik would cut the power and phone lines to prevent a warning from getting out first and they'd use either rope or a nearby building to reach the roof of the store. They would look for an opened window, but if there wasn't one to be had Sonya would be opening one for them via force. She'd use the vents again to get into the top floor, Tatiana and Nikolai would use rope to lower the rest into the building, so they could find the guards first. The blonde thief would then have to go back up to lend her Flame given strength in order for Nikolai could get in, and maybe help Ziven take care of said guards, but the risk was deemed minor since her vent crawling had been proven useful before.

Getting out relied on several different factors. If nothing went wrong they could escape the same way they got in, with Sonya revisiting the same vents to both close the window and rejoin the others. If there was an interruption… it would depend on what they got interrupted on.

Either way it happened once outside, with or without loot in hand, they'd have to split up in six different ways to reach a Zolotov safe house or prearranged meeting point. They wouldn't get back together until the day after, making the slow way home on foot to avoid being noted as a group and having the stolen items transported back by other clan members in clan-controlled vehicles.

The former pickpocket turned cat burglar mentally promised Cherep that she'd get him something nice and legal in apology for ignoring him in favor of planning a heist.

Even if she had less than a month to go before said heist.
The week just before their target day, Arseniy came home rather abruptly and snagged Sonya to go back out with him. She could do nothing more than shrug at both Tatiana and Cherep before they left the house.

There was a car waiting for them on the curb which informed her this, whatever it was, was a lot more serious than she had realized. "What happened?"

"Your boy Dmitriy is in some trouble." The vor yanked the back door open, gesturing gruffly for her to get in. "Our Avtoritet sent for you while they gather the right vory."

Sonya blanched and almost threw herself into the backseat of the vehicle, wondering how the hell Dmitriy screwed up enough to require a council of vory convening to judge his actions.

Additionally, what the hell did he do that somehow connected to her?

Wait… "Arseniy? Is this somehow a Flame thing?"

"That's what they're claiming." Her foster father slid in next to her, kicking the back of the driver's seat to get the man to start the car moving. "The two were in one room, the garage the brat likes to frequent. The other, the driver of a rival Pakhan, somehow ended up unconscious. They're braying betrayal, Dmitriy insists he did nothing, but it has all the signs of your Flame of Rain being the cause."

That made no sense whatsoever.

She knew where the mechanic was in learning about his Flames, he was a little behind her even if he was older and working off what she had gathered beforehand. She couldn't even get a flicker of fire to spout at will without a gem in hand, Dmitriy only had sapphires that flickered internally and couldn't put a dog to sleep from everything he'd said about it.

The fact whichever rival Pakhan knew enough of Zolotov internal happenings to know there was a Rain Flame user in their headquarters was alarming. That could be her old childhood friend's fault, depending on when and how he practiced or played with his gem.

Sonya didn't really think it was likely, but the concern was there.

"I doubt it."

"Enough to bet your life on it?"

The tiny blonde gave Arseniy a long look as she weighted that in her head against the nature of Inverted Rains and the Rain in question's personality. "Yes."

He grunted, slinking down in his seat a little as some tension she hadn't noticed left his frame. "Can you prove it?"

Could she?

"…I will try."
The vor flattened his mouth in a thin line, but probably knew there would be difficulties no matter what was true or not.

It didn't take them much longer to reach headquarters, Sonya's first act was to corner Dmitriy and get his side of the story. A rather hushed conversation later, she still didn't have any remote idea how such a situation came to be.

Her friend admitted quickly enough that he hadn't liked the other young man still out cold on the garage floor, but he also didn't try to Tranquilize him. Arseniy drifted closer to them both, a signal that time was running out quickly. She rapidly questioned him on any and everything he tried his Rain Flames on, which was when they noticed it.

She then informed her father of the how and what with literally only moments to spare, because the unaffiliated vor were all assembled and ready to begin. Two of the seven looked as if they had been yanked out of bed, and the tiny thief knew this wasn't going to end prettily.

At least, not for the other syndicate.

Predictably, the assembled council of vor were not happy to be called over a slight spot of theft that backfired on the thief horrifyingly. The truth of the matter turned out to be a stolen if rather badly fractured sapphire, which Dmitriy had been using as a focus and a crutch to gain control over his Flames.

A sapphire which had active if weak Rain Flames soaked into it. Which was leaking enough Tranquility to down a horse, much less a young man with little to no resistance to such things.

The Rain on trial had been immune to the effect and therefore hadn't known, it was his Flame therefore he was safe from it.

The fact a search of the insensible party's pockets by an unaffiliated vor until his fingers turned numb to find the gem also turned out a tranquillizing dart secreted away made the whole situation rather dicey.

Sonya and Dmitriy didn't get to see the results of that, they were escorted out with everyone else that wasn't necessary while the council debated what the consequences of assembling them unnecessarily should be. She got a rough hair ruffle from her foster father before that, who told the young mechanic that he was to guard her while there were unknown others invited into their headquarters.

"I didn't realize this Flame stuff was such a big thing."

"You're the one that stayed in the USSR, it's more common outside of it." She informed him blandly, poking around his tiny room.

It was a cupboard by nicer terms, had enough space for a small bed and a dresser but not much else. The location was it's only selling point, she was a little miffed this was what he had left their neighborhood and her foster brother for.

Dmitriy had collapsed on his bed, she had ignored that as it had been a rather stressful evening for him. "Did you know the gems retained enough to leak like that?"

"Nope, congratulations. You found something out before me. It might be something about sapphires paired with Rain Flames or just about Rain Flames themselves, but it's your bit of knowledge." It did give her some ideas, though.

"I'm ever so delighted to be of assistance." Said Rain grumped, shoving himself upright enough to
look at her. "Why are you so insistent on teaching me?"

"You're staying put. Tatiana and I wish to be more long-range. If the clan requires someone with Flame knowledge, you're the best candidate I know of to dump it all off on."

"I feel so used."

"Get over it. After New Year's I'll come by with a different selection of stones, I'll need you to go through them and find one that works better for you."

"Loot from your next jewelry heist?"

"You heard that out here?" Sonya really did wonder about their clan's internal security. It really wasn't looking too good, with the news of a Rain being leaked out outside Zolotov control and news of her high-end heist already making the rounds so even a minor mechanic could hear about it.

Dmitriy flashed her a roguish smirk. "Have fun with that."

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LXIV (Monday the 31st of December, 1962. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Relocking a lock with lock picks was tricky but doable. Sonya had almost re-secured the display cases she and Nikolai had cleared out when Adrik ducked into the showroom floor hurriedly. He gave the two of them a frantic wave to the windows, flicking his fingers to signify the flashing strobe lights of police cars.

She jerked her thumb up and flashed two hooked fingers to ask if the others had been warned, the slim youth just a year older than her nodded and gestured to his empty side.

Galina had gone to warn them, apparently.

Well, they had planned on faking an interruption. This was just… a lot more heat than they expected to work with. Loaded down with almost more jewelry, gemstones, and precious metals than they could comfortably move with. With a very flaky escape plan reserved for emergency extraction.

Joy.

Sweeping her arm around and then pointing down, the youngest thief got the two of Tatiana's thieves to follow her to the basement. Tatiana, Ziven, and Galina joined them and helped Nikolai barricade the only entrance behind them.

Palming a spinel jewel from the upstairs display cases, the tiny burglar took a deep breath and prayed to whatever power was out there that she wasn't going to destroy her hand.

Galina and Adrik marked out the likely location of an underground service tunnel from what they knew of the building's layout and the sewer lines underneath them all and Sonya punched the ceiling in, so they could escape that way.

As she had stood right over the spot she was attempting to weaken, she fell face first into the resulting hole in the floor and hit the rubble littered ground beneath that heavily. Nikolai was next, and even with his muscles he had difficulty moving her further into the now dusty gloom without Cloud Flame induced strength to help.
She bit her lip to keep silent, staggering up to her feet obediently so the others could get through even as she suppressed the desire to cringe at the pain radiating up her arm. It had been a lot worse than anything else she had used to hurt herself with, even when the practice staffs shattered under her and bits flew back to give her bruises or cuts.

Of course, she probably shattered a few bones in her hand this time.

They didn't have the time to do a field test on how Cherep did his 'never injured' trick, they had to clear out fast or risk getting caught red handed.

Or more 'red handed' than she was right now.

Nikolai left them first, he had the most weight next to Sonya and he squeeze her shoulder before he left. Adrik dithered only a moment but took off quickly as well. It took a few rather pointed gestures from her younger foster sister to get Tatiana to go off on her own, Galina had to provide the momentum for it. The brunette gave her a measuring look at the next turn off but stalked off on her lonesome easily enough.

Before Ziven went off he straightened the bones of her hand, proving that the worst of the damage was mostly fractures in her fingers and two messy breaks somewhere in her right hand. As the only thing they had to splint with was the jewelry they stole, and they were on a time limit before their arrangement with the nearest safe house was dropped, he couldn't spare the time to wrap them for her. What he did manage was more than enough for unasked for help.

She had the longest way to go, she volunteered herself to do so because of her Propagated strength. She cursed herself, the police, Flames in general, the gemstones she needed for her experimentation, Christmas merely because it generated some of the weight, and several other things in every language she knew… and several she didn't but picked up the swearing for due to the fact her neighborhood was multilingual in a broad sense of the word.

She was taking the next half a year off. No stealing, no Flames, no nothing.

Cherep would be ecstatic. Sinclair might just have a heart attack, given she usually left taking a contract to a bi-yearly thing and her fellow Flame user had been making a point of keeping a sharp eye on her.

The service exit Sonya had been assigned typically required fingers to open, she kicked it open instead. While it was an obvious sign that whoever blew a hole in the basement of a store exited right there, she didn't care much. It was next to a drainage ditch, it had the cover and length to confuse everything.

Also, she couldn't use her broken hand. She had limited options and was rapidly running out of patience for everything.

The long trek to her meeting point were some of the most painful hours of her life so far. The breaks ached, she could now feel the bruises forming, and there was sweat getting into her cuts from when she fell through a floor. Painful, aggravating, and very damn lonely.

Being able to unload the bulk of metal ingots and half a showroom stock to the waiting hands of her fellow Zolotovs was something the weary thief was pathetically grateful for, the fact they took the time to splint her hand for her even more so.

She would've kissed the person that gave her the painkillers had they not been older than Aleksandr and a bit toothless.
Getting home, injured or not, was something of a trial. The robbery getting noted mid-heist meant there were a lot of militsiya on the streets scouring for any suspicious characters. A tiny blonde girl walking alone in the early morning hours was just asking to be picked up, so instead the lamed burglar stuck to the backstreets and alleyways… which were never clear of their own type of trouble.

Being visibly injured meant they either thought her as weak or as troublemaking, it was only the fact one of the vor she had seen from the farce of a council called over Dmitriy's actions decided to shadow her to Arseniy's home kept her from making her hand worse.

In return for the aid, Sonya gave the man the spinel gem she used to try boosting her strength to smash through tile, concrete, and steel. The vor took it with a shrug and a bob of the head, stalking off since it wasn't territory he could work within.

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**LXV (Tuesday the 1st of January, 1963. Russian Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)**

*Tatiana* demanded to be taught how to use Sun Flames, since she had heard Sonya bitching about not being able to heal anytime soon. Lisa merely arranged for the nurse that normally just fudged records to come by and double check the set of the bones the youngest thief had broken, in suspiciously quick order after she finally got home.

Arseniy blinked at her the moment he spotted her on the couch getting her hand put in a cast, cocked an eyebrow at her injuries, raised his eyes to the ceiling when informed why she had them, and then patted her on the head on his way past when she informed him of her plans for the next half a year.

Cherep was a little worried when he woke up the morning she got home. Hearing her plans made him both happy and likely to sneak guilty looks at said broken hand.

She was just happy she'd likely never have to do another jewelry store robbery for years.

The take from the job included a lot of signature pieces that would require being sold in Mafia Land's markets, they would never be able to be fenced locally without someone squealing like a stuck pig. Lisa would take care of that, she got all Sonya's couriered mail from the island already and could inform Tatiana when they were sold for splitting the money once there was some.

They had left some of the crystal statuary in the store, to help with the image of being interrupted mid-heist. A couple found their way into the loot anyways, as well as decorative eggs and watches that had to be fenced elsewhere as well.

Aside the traceable pieces, there was a literal rainbow of loose gemstones and a massive pile of less intricate jewelry that could be sold right away. Several different types of metal ingots were included, ranging from the usual gold and silver in several purities the youngest thief was familiar with to platinum, copper, zinc, a bar of tungsten, and two bars of palladium.

Most of the metals would be going to the Zolotovs for their tithe of the proceeds, the tungsten and palladium would be sold elsewhere too, and the amount split between everyone that had pitched in for the heist.

Sorting it out, and keeping the labeling with the right stones, had been a week-long task.

*Tatiana* and her gang excluded Sonya from helping on the basis on her injured hand, but she got to
Aside the contents of jewelry shop safes they made away with, her elder sister and Ziven had managed a couple interesting finds themselves. There were more of the old-fashioned ruble coins available, which the girls decided was ornamental and therefore part of the take and passed them around. The redhead safecracker had cheekily grabbed several books from a bookcase on metallurgy, gemstones from around the world, crystal formations, and other geology assorted subjects. A few gold-plated pens, desk knickknacks Adrik wandered away with, and assorted personal items out of desks Galina found were tossed in the sell pile.

The former pickpocket was not surprised to be given the books as well as her half of the ready cash the store had held in the first hour of sorting.

There were also some very interesting wooden cases for loose gems taken, because of the interruption startled Ziven into grabbing whatever and running with them. He basically lashed them to the back of his backpack using the rope they had used to get into the store, but the slim cases with the velvet lined partitioned insides gave her an idea.

Emptying out the contents, she stored some of the colored gems she would be walking away with inside. A neat label written by Lisa, and the blonde had cases of gems to try to give whatever Sky, Lightning, and Mist she might run into within the clan. The remaining one was stocked with portions of the blue shaded jewels and would be sent on to Dmitriy to test out.

Tatiana pouted, but gathered up the yellow gemstones she'd be trying out in their individual little velvet bags. She really had nothing to complain about, all the purple and red stones Sonya now possessed were in the same little pouches.

She wondered if she should try to entice Galina to try the green gems, who was showcasing all the signs of being an Inverted Lighting, or if she should wait for her foster sister to realize it. She decided to wait, because she already had the redhead and Dmitriy to cluck after.

Although she'd take all the loose gems in certain colors, and a couple gems that had to be pried out of their settings even though she was dubious over the opals, Sonya was getting just as much as the others if getting paid immediately.

Very little of it was usable by her for purchasing personal things, but she didn't really care.

With a broken hand and a whole lot of empty months before her, the younger thief left the last of the sorting to her foster family and assorted thieves and instead spent a very nice New Year's Day with Cherep instead. They went to go see the fireworks, buying dumplings from street vendors and watching other children build snowmen and forts.

"Of course, you'd be stuck with a broken hand when you finally spend time with me." He quibbled at her dryly, hunching into his coat when a rather stiff and icy breeze tried sticking fingers of cold air down his back.

"You almost sound as if you think I deserve it." Biting into hot dumplings with only one working hand was a trial, because she couldn't really control her right very well and the cast prevented three of her fingers from moving.

When she burned her tongue, she couldn't yank the little meat pastry out and instead tended to drop it. Right now, they were cold but still tricky to eat with her left hand.

"Err… I don't. Really. It just sucks."
Sonya nodded absently. "Next time I have to do that, I'm bringing the thrice-blasted warhammer with me."

"Isn't that... I don't know, obviously identifying?"

"Aww... Cherep! Are you worried for me?"

Cherep's rather deadpan expression switched to a mischievous one.

"Of course, little sister." The sickly-sweet coo was paired with him wrapping an arm around her thin shoulders, and he knocked their temples together. "Do you need some help eating? Should I feed you?"

"Cherep... just because my right is broken doesn't mean I can't punch you with my left."

He let go of her with a laugh covered by a cough, backing up hastily. "Alright, let's not get violent. So, as for the hammer issue... how are you going to solve that?"

"The same way I solved my last issue." Propagation could do more than multiply, or the ability of Clouds everywhere would've been called that. She should be able to make something tiny become big, and that was her next project.

After her vacation.

"But for now, we're wandering. Aren't we?"

Her foster brother nodded a few times. "We are. Wander away, Sonya."

"Um... I was following you."

"But I was following you."

He blinked, then grinned as Sonya sighed. "I take it I should get us back to known territory?"

She pinched the bridge of her nose with her only working hand, ignoring the grease that had been on her fingers getting transferred to her skin. "If you would, please."

Cherep had never let her live down the occasion she had gotten lost going around the block back when he lived in a flophouse. The fact he had better navigational skills than her was a source of endless amusement to him.

The fact he could make it home from anywhere in Moscow was something he was stupidly proud of.

LXVI (Friday the 22nd of March, 1963. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

It took Sonya a week to get bored. She hadn't realized how much she had been doing before, after her first heist was over with and Cherep ran into trouble until her latest and greatest job to date.

Instead of going back on her word, because she was going to have a vacation even if it killed her, she took a hard look at her bedroom. Her tomb of a library type bedroom, which had the bare minimum of space needed to move around free and bound stacks of paper everywhere else.
Towering stacks of paper everywhere, including places that weren't even 'hers'.

Her foster brother decided he wasn't going to help her with it and voluntarily went to practice self-defense under Aleksandr. Lisa simply gave her a stack of crates and boxes to help. Tatiana pretended her gang really needed her help with something before she could ask.

Arseniy was gone again for several days now, and she wouldn't have asked him anyways.

She mentally labeled them all cowards and dug into the mess one-handed. It might be the worst of the rooms she had to clear out, because there were more books in her sibling’s rooms, but it couldn't be that bad.

She was wrong about that.

An avalanche of books was just as dangerous as one made of snow. Book-avalanches tended to give more paper cuts too.

It took her four days to work through her own room one-handed, another to pick up everything her best friend had been holding onto for her, an extra day to resort her various containers, and two to finish off what had been left in her foster sister's room.

The fact Sonya had a bookcase, it had just been overfilled and then had books stacked in front of it therefore she had long since forgotten about it, had been bemusing.

Then she recalled there were more books under her bed. Probably more under her foster siblings' beds too.

The grand total left her with four large crates, three medium-sized boxes, and a rediscovered bookcase full of books. Lisa did help her scrub down everything then sweetly asked a newly returned Arseniy to move the unneeded and packed up books up to the attic.

The tiny burglar still couldn't get over the fact she had floor space now. Occasionally she'd try to steady herself in the morning with a book stack and gracelessly fall to the floor instead.

That took up a week and a half.

Half a month out of the six she set herself. At this rate, she'd die of boredom.

Her next project was learning how to write left-handed. Cherep, who was left handed, decided to learn to write with his right at the same time.

They sucked for a solid month before any skill was perceivable. Before she got good enough to try her lefty skills with drawing she was cleared to take off the cast on her right.

It was sore and still a little swollen, but she rather adored her ability to use both hands again. It hurt, but it was the good kind of healing hurt. Mainly.

Tatiana found a gemstone by then, forgetting about it for a little while then practically trying a gem an hour and only looking for a good result, a yellow beryl crystal commonly named heliodor. She got a bit frustrated with the fact she couldn't instantly control the Sun Flames it emitted as a kind of glow instead of flickers of golden fire tongues, but it did radiate enough blessed heat to reduce the swelling in Sonya's hand when pressed into her skin and covered by Tatiana's.

It had to be repeated whenever the younger foster sister jarred or moved her hand wrong, or every morning, but the elder was curiously unconcerned by being used as a hot water bottle in that respect.
With her right hand now free, the blonde laboriously wrote up differently stripped copies of her research journal and gave the Sun one to her foster sister. The Sky, Lightning, and Mist ones were tossed into their respective boxes of gemstones. The Storm one was left on her desk, because even if she had a Storm Flame it wasn't her primary one and her Cloud might screw up her work on it.

In return the redhead safecracker lectured her on 'resting' and 'relaxing recent injuries for healing purposes to avoid relapse'. Lisa, overhearing the whole conversation/one-sided lecture, asked if the younger girl needed something else to do. When told yes, she left the house and returned with an amateur jeweler's kit.

Cherep laughed, and then nearly laughed himself sick on her very clean floor when she did make use of it to make a cheap, reusable bracelet setting for Tatiana's chosen gem.

The last three months of her self-enforced vacation was around the time the USSR entered the semi-thawed part of late spring. It was also when the circuses started doing outdoor shows again. The same time her best friend slash foster brother decided there was no time like the present to try his hand at scouting out one to join later.

Sonya ended up spending a large chunk of the petty pocket money cash Tatiana split with her on circus entry fees and snack food... and watching trapeze artists swing around in midair. She made dutiful note that her best friend gravitated to acts that had motorcycles in them, still. He didn't like the trained animal acts as much, sideshow events made him shy away, but the strong man affair made him smirk.

Probably because she could beat a strong man even with a broken hand.

The carnival tagalongs were what he spent the bulk of his time exploring between the big top shows.

She mentally tallied up what he liked and what he didn't as they reached their foster home at the end of another day exploring whichever circus was locally set up. Trained animal acts were unfortunately very popular, and sideshow exhibits were a staple of most traveling circuses. Both were likely acts they wouldn't be able to avoid when Cherep insisted on joining one.

Right now, she was wondering if she'd make a good gypsy.

"Sonya? I'm stuffing some of my old clothes in your closet, okay?"

The young thief blinked, then bolted up the staircase in a near panic that had Cherep blinking dust from his eyes. "Tatiana, wait! I didn't clear out-"

The crash of someone hitting the floor cut her off, the following thumps informed her there would be another crate or box of books to be dealt with.

"-my... closet yet. You okay?"

"...Sonya? Come here and get your damn books off me."

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**LXVII (Wednesday the 5th of June, 1963. Mafia Land.)**

**Renato** was not amused. "You have to be joking."

Little Sonya Nikishina merely sipped at the cream laced coffee in her hands and ignored him.
If the Russian Cloud hadn't been so interesting, the hitman would've up and left long ago.

However, Dying Will Flame Cloud users were middling rare. The Hard Flame type also didn't tend to travel well, not without a Sky personally budging them out of the little corner of the world they claimed as territory.

Little Sonya traveling so far from her territory just to do jobs in different parts of the world was atypical of her breed, which therefore made her interesting on top of being a rare sort.

The self-possessed little girl, who spoke rusty and accented but old-fashioned English rather well for a communist, was sharp enough to give Renato some amusement bantering with him. It made the whole fact she was barely thirteen worth it, and her wicked sense of humor that Clouds were not known for possessing he rather liked personally speaking.

Of course, if she kept on doing things Clouds were notorious for not doing or bothering themselves over he was going to start thinking she had a split-nature Flame. She probably actually had one or two more and was getting a kick out of baffling him with her other Flame tendencies from how often the girl smirked at him.

The little box of coffee, particularly espresso, flavored liquor filled candies sat on the table between them.

*Little minx*, the Italian thought huffily to himself. "What, exactly, do you feel like apologizing for?"

"Eight months without contact, Sinclair. I had not intended to, mind you. However, I broke my hand doing a job back home then spent four more months after it healed up on vacation." The blonde took another pointed sip of her drink, reminding him that he had practically been forced to play tea party with her until the very end of their last meeting. "It was frightfully rude of me not to try to get a message to you... but I have no way to contact you either."

"What made you think I care?"

She blinked at him slowly, then just as pointedly admired her coffee cup's design in the harsh tropic noon sun.

Renato had practically abducted her off the street the moment he spotted her, just to find out what the hell had taken her so long to come back to Mafia Land.

She *might* have a point there.

*You realize there are people hunting Flame users like us, right? I was merely concerned.*

*I have heard of it.* She informed him shortly, the self-smug tone of voice fading into something more like the stubbornly held in violent irritation like tone she had used when they first met. "And thus, my apology. I couldn't get word to you that I was fine, and it's why I'm bothering to apologize at all."

He eyed her, particularly her eye coloring, suspiciously for a long moment. They remained stubbornly grey, without a hint of any color bleeding through.

Whatever way she found out about the rumors didn't have to do with her territory then, or she had more than enough self-control to prevent her Cloud Flames from giving herself away.

Damn. He was more than interested to know how she managed the traveling when she had such a strong and Hard Cloud Flames before even hitting her early teenage years. They were all supposed
to be territorial and snub socialization, but Sonya didn't obviously do either.

Mafia Land wasn't her territory, nor was it likely back in her native country. The girl didn't mind getting delayed returning or him pinning her in place using social niceties she seemed to have been drilled in complying to automatically.

It was entirely possible she didn't have one yet.

Renato would pay to get her to claim Italian territory for herself but knew well enough that any hinting he might do would merely make her stubbornly snub the idea.

There was no guard quite as good as a Cloud guard, but they tended to remain where they were found and couldn't be budged for love or money.

"Fine. I accept your apology then, Sonya." He had started it, however it began with her aid delivered by a flying rock, so he had to continue with it.

If the hitman ever wanted backup in the form of a violently protective Cloud user, he could afford to indulge her a little. Having Sonya obliterate whatever was between him and her if he needed the aid in the future was well worth the headaches she delighted in giving him.

All Hard Flame Clouds got progressively more violent as they got older. This little Russian Cloud was just young enough to retain some measure of forbearance unless it was really required.

Screw the ribbing he got when he was spotted having a drink with a little girl, she would eventually drift over to the hitman side of the island to feed that lust for violence.

When she did, Renato would have the last laugh.

LXVIII (Sunday the 25th of August, 1963. Aleksandr's basement, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Two Mafia Land contracts done, Sonya returned to the USSR three months later slightly sunburned but at least majorly uninjured.

She had sought out and obtained permission to use the Zolotov retained suite of rooms in a Mafia Land condo to stay in while she got herself caught up on her duties to the moving island. The clan vory coming and going had ignored her easily.

The contracts themselves were fast becoming less interesting, but she still liked the convenience and the traveling she could do with them. Sinclair's visits were becoming the highlight of her trips, depressingly enough.

More importantly, Aleksandr was finished with her proposed alterations to her Bec de Corbin and returning to Moscow got her in range to play with her new toys.

The warhammer/pick shaped polearm was now the length of her palm, two spinel gems embedded into the sides of the head. The extra material, since even though her miniaturized weapon was solidly metal they had a decent amount left over, had been fashioned into similar little weapon shaped charms. They were lacking gemstones, only waiting for her to confirm spinel was the gem she was going to use for anything Cloud Flame orientated or if she got good enough not to need them.
Cherep peered over her shoulder to see what she was smirking over. "I don't get it. It's tiny."

Ziven, who had somehow decided the blonde burglar was a very good friend of his and therefore her friends were his as well, looked equally unconvinced of the lethality of her tiny warhammer.

Taking a deep breath, Sonya gripped the head of her Bec de Corbin. She had more than enough control with a gemstone to funnel Flames into them just like Dmitriy could, and her polearm obediently grew with the more of her Flame's heat she pressed into the jewels.

The boys' expressions when she finally had a fully sized, if a little too big for her hands, Bec de Corbin made the whole nearly yearlong wait worth it.

"I get it." Her foster brother amended hastily, wide purple eyes on the wickedly sharp pick end of the hammer head. "Don't think I wanted to, but I get it."

She tried not to stagger under the weight of the metal, breathing rather hard for such a simple exercise. Apparently, she needed a lot of practice before using the Bec de Corbin could be more than just an emergency option.

"You sure you can use that?" Ziven asked lightly, eyeing her and the weapon she grew from a toy-sized one.

She had to let her Flames go, mentally noting she needed a lot more Flame practice with and without the jewel focuses. Her Bec de Corbin shrank slowly, the spinel gems retaining just enough and bleeding purple-tinted energy off slightly to ensure that while it would shrink if she lost hold it wouldn't turn into a palm-sized bit of metal before she could grab on again.

"At the very least, it's better than breaking some of the bones in my hand again." The younger thief informed him as evenly as she could, tapping the end of the staff on the ground as it shrank even more and finally was shorter than she was tall.

The spinel gems had fractured burn marks from the amount of Flames she had poured into them, unfortunately. Or maybe scorch marks from her wavering control?

The metal looked okay as it returned to palm-size, but Aleksandr would judge that himself when he looked it over closer than she could with an unpracticed eye.

While she had to have skin contact to the gemstones to Propagate the metal right now, it was at least likely it would hold up to Cloud Flames being poured into it on a semi-regular basis once she managed to figure out how to use them in a fight.

She would have to grow and shrink the polearm a couple times a day to get used to the effort, and likely pair that with trying to find a Cloud gem resistant to cracking so easily. She could conversely resign herself to exchanging the gems every time she used the weapon, but… she didn't want to do more jewelry stores so no.

To do both, she'd have to go through a lot of her stock of spinel gems anyways while she looked for a more resistant one.

If she needed more, she was going to buy the damn things.

"That's kind of cool, really… other than the fact you can carry around a warhammer easily without anyone noticing." Cherep spoke up, plucking the tiny form of her weapon out of her hands to get a better look at the queer metal.
"So," Ziven interrupted with a grin, probably tucking away what she had just shown him in a corner of his mind to dwell on later, "hand-to-hand practice then?"

Sonya gave the teen a disgusted look. He was going to kick their asses, then probably do it all over again and again before the day was over. Fighting against him with bare hands was just as bad to the ego as fighting against her with a staff.

He knew it too. He was one of the blonde burglar's fellow disciplinarians Aleksandr stuck tetchy Mafyia brats with eyes bigger than their brains on when they annoyed him too much. Getting one's ass beat by someone that didn't need a weapon was humbling, so was getting whacked upside the head with a pole repeatedly.

"One of these days, we have to see which is better. Your hands or my staff."

"So long as it isn't the warhammer you're using, maybe." Ziven temporized instead of giving an agreement, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"It's a Bec de Corbin. It's technically a counterbalanced military pick on a stick."

They both blinked at her correction, looked at the tiny copy in Cherep's hands, then back to her.

"Still… I refuse so long as you want to use that." The hand-to-hand combat specialist in the making informed her seriously. "Tiny hammer toy or not."

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**LXIX (Thursday the 5th of September, 1963. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)**

**Sonya** had fucked up.

At least she knew it now.

Sprawled out on her stomach on the floor of her clean and orderly bedroom, she paged through all the information she managed to gather. From herself, from Dmitriy's plodding progress in her footsteps, and Tatiana's slow but steady developing mastery of using her heliodor crystal to make pretty yellow fire spring up at will.

She could've been stretched out on her bed doing this, but meh.

Rewriting it all into her main research journal took up a decent block of time and told her she hadn't left enough blank space between Flame type polarizations as she probably should have. At least there would be enough room for Cherep to add his side of the Cloud Flame equation later.

How did she screw up?

There had been no reason for her to break her hand on that last jewelry store job.

Adrenaline being what it was, it was entirely likely she would've broken or fractured some bone anyways. It had been a tight spot, the militsiya might have been only moments to minutes behind them, and screw-ups happened.

However, *Propagation* being what it was Sonya had known she didn't multiply her integral musculature in any great degree to obtain the strength she had. She remained a gawky stick of a girl
no matter how hard she was trying to hit things.

She could recall that Skull de Mort could increase his muscle mass via Cloud Flames, but it was something he concentrated on doing and it was more showy than useful. Cherep's unconscious use of internalized Flames likely helped in preventing any terrible damage from being made internally.

...or covered it up.

Her initial use of Cloud Flames was her Propagating force. Her first unconscious use of it had dented brick walls and shattered wooden staffs, but she didn't incur damage from doing something no human could physically match without Flames. Unless whatever shattered under the force of her blows blew backwards and nicked her, but that had been a much later discovery with intentional usage.

She had just wanted to hit really, really hard... so that's what happened.

Multiplied force meant the former pickpocket could lift more by augmenting the force she pushed up with, hit harder with what she pushed out, and go farther than normal twelve-year-old girls using a fraction of the energy... so long as she had the Flame for it. She hadn't run out on the long trek from her service tunnel emergency exit to the clan meeting spot for her, but she had been nearly exhausted from the effort.

The entire fact she might have run out of Flames if the journey had been even a bit longer... was scary. She had just gotten tired of the weight, not noticing anything else about her exhaustion or thinking it odd. She was well trained, in both ballet and gymnastics, and so rarely tired herself out anymore.

...rather, she had thought she was well-trained.

If she seriously thought about it, she hadn't gotten exhausted for a very long time now. Unless it had to do with the amount she slept, but that was shaken off quickly these days.

Sonya didn't think she even used her muscles much anymore, she couldn't recall the last time they burned like how she felt after a spar with a hand-to-hand combat specialist like Ziven. Which she had practically emptied all the Cloud Flames she could pull on into her Bec de Corbin beforehand.

She needed more physical training. Possibly a lot more, to make up for the last three years of skating by on unconscious use of Cloud Flames doing everything instead of her own body.

That would not be fun.

Back to her Cartier job, though. If she had ever thought their emergency exit plan would be the backup plan they had to utilize, she likely would've at least attempted to punch through ceilings before they did the job. It would've told her that while possible, it wasn't what she had to do to obtain that result.

Once she got better at using her Flame, it was likely all she would need for emergency exits like that was a mere tap of a finger. A flick, if she had to.

Not a punch that could break her own bones.

She'd rather not have to do that again, but backup plans were always useful and there was the fact she didn't really want to see the insides of a jail cell.

Her new plan for her mornings was to wake up, Propagate her miniature Bec de Corbin and hold it
as long as she could, go to ballet practice, try to get a reaction from the purple and red gem of the
day, eat breakfast, go to gymnastic training, then try to figure out her Storm Flame ability.

While Disintegration wasn't a thief ability of any real note, it was still a method of Disintegration.
I.E. covering her tracks if she ever needed it.

It also meant it wouldn't be possible to detain her. With Cherep's early childhood misadventure of the
twisted kind and Sinclair's own recent mention of people with a similar outlook if unknown motive
as those that assaulted her best friend... the ability to be a cheating escape artist when everyone
thought she was a violent psychopath instead would be worth its weight in gold.

Not that anything Disintegrated weighed much, but the point stood.

Sonya needed to figure out if trying to use Storm Flames was different then all the times she had
successfully used Cloud Flames for anything, if using the jewels and crystals did or did not hinder
the ability to use Flames without them, and a reliable method to ensure she was using her own
muscles most of the time instead of her Cloud Flames.

Most of her recent efforts in controlling her strength had been poured into not harming anyone
accidentally, now she had to figure out how to turn it off completely.

Again, joy.

LXX (Friday the 8th of November, 1963. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet
Federative Socialist Republic.)

Two months was the length of time it took for Sonya to stop feeling like an overcooked noodle all
day. Now, she was to the point she woke up sore at the very least but still dropped into bed like a
limp ragdoll.

Draining her own Flames every damn morning then going to dance and gymnastic practice had been
hard, and there were a couple of days she had been severely tempted to cheat like she had been for
years before. She stuck with it though, mainly because Lisa had become concerned by the sharp drop
in her physical capabilities and asked about it.

Cheating under her foster mother's eye when she knew full well you weren't supposed to be doing
it?

She knew less painful ways of committing an embarrassing suicide.

Shortly after she started trying to tackle her usual daily schedule without Cloud Flames boosting her,
she had to compare Dmitriy, Tatiana, herself, and Cherep with other similar-aged children/teens in
the neighborhood just to be sure there wasn't any other handicapping going on. While it was possible
her brother had the same problem as her, depending on how much of himself was unconsciously
Propagated at any one time, only their foster sister had another possible cheat when it came to
physical work.

At least she knew why it was so damn hard to tire Cherep out for a day. He could wear her out more
often, which told Sonya he was still stronger than her. She did wonder if she'd ever really catch up
but then again, he did have about five years of major Dying Will Flame use over her. It wasn't that
surprising that her only shallow attempts to control her own Flames had no patch on someone that
could internally use his for years on end.

Tatiana could probably heal herself from anything that might happen, including the small tearing of tissue that built up muscles. It was likely only a recent problem if one at all, so while somewhat concerning it wasn't likely a factor just yet. They would have to wait and see if it was happening, then try to find a way around it if it did.

It might just be a fact that Suns needed more physical training than everyone else to equate the same measure of muscle growth, too. The former pickpocket didn't quite remember too well... but the white-haired boxer Sun guy from Vongola's Tenth Generation Guardians might have been \textit{that} physically inclined just because he had to be, or he didn't bulk up at all.

If that was true, it was entirely questionable if he realized he had been different than others in that respect. Civilian kid, anyways. There wouldn't be any kind of help for him identifying any internal energy issues when it came to his Sun Flames.

Tranquility didn't have a physical impact, unless it was someone falling asleep standing up hitting the floor as consequence. Rains didn't seem to have any difficulty with physical ability, but once Dmitriy got his ability under control he would still be a rather tricky opponent to face.

Sonya had to rewrite her research journal on Dying Will Flames, because she had long since ran out of room when it came to Flames other than her and Cherep's Cloud. That task was still pending, because she wanted to see what her old friend, as the first person she helped learn the ability, got in the next few years. That would be both a 'Classical' and an 'Inverted' section together, which would let her make a more accurate judgement on how much room each section really needed.

She wondered, groggily as she pushed herself up to get ready for the day's ballet practice, if she should ask, bribe, or beg Sinclair to add in what he knew of Inverted Suns.

There was no way in hell her Mafia Land hitman coworker was a \textit{Classic} Sun, he wasn't nearly as peppy or exuberant to pull \textit{that} off. Hyperactive, possibly. Somewhat annoyingly persistent, of course.

No way in hell would she described him as 'peppy', 'bubbly', or even 'positively tempered'.

If he did decide to help a bit, she'd have a good idea what all the information on both polarizations would take up now and not later. That way she wouldn't have to rewrite the damn journal \textit{again} if something came up and she needed the full thing.

Sonya abruptly realized she was stalling and pushed herself up off her bed. She did recall in time that her stacks of books were no longer around to help her stabilize, so at least she wasn't starting her day out with an unexpected meet and greet with her floorboards. She grabbed her recently unearthed desk chair instead, and since Tatiana liked her showers in the early mornings the younger foster sibling decided to get on with draining her Cloud Flames first.

Groping in the early morning dark for the tiny Bec de Corbin where she usually put it before bed got her a whole lot of nothing. Trying to feel around for where she might have put it last night merely got discarded shards of spinel gems stuck into the pads of her fingers.

She blamed the recent rather sore mornings she had the last few weeks for what happened next after she picked them out.

Frustrated, irritated, and sore was not a good general mindset for a Cloud. Apparently, it was only a good mindset only if said Cloud wanted to pull on and materialize their Flame externally.
She'd forever deny it, but she really did scream like the little girl she was when she realized her gem
pricked hand was on fire.

The thump from the room next to her told her she'd scared Cherep out of bed. His little sister was a
little too fascinated with staring at the multicolored fire flickering on her fingers… and the whole not
getting burned bit, to care much.

Mainly light purple, even the light it was giving off was lavender in shade. Deep flickers of red near
the base of her Flame, her Storm showing up less developed since she hadn't done much with it yet.
Tiny fire tips in yellow showed the Sun she might gain control of eventually.

Sonya was in love. With her own inner fire. It was awesome.

Arseniy shoulder-checking her bedroom door open startled her into losing what little control over the
Flame she managed to grab after having the life nearly scared out of her the first time. The vor,
backlit by the hallway light in her broken doorway and having probably caught the sight of her being
on multicolor fire but with no visible burns to show for it, flipped on her bedroom light to eye her
severely first then a resigned look passed over his face before she could muster anything to say.

"Is Tatiana going to do that too?"

"…maybe?"

He eyed her severely again, and she was very sorry for probably startling him into charging for her
room. Her father had likely been just barely asleep when she screamed out of fright.

He had an excellent reaction time regardless.

"If you burn the house down, you're paying for it."

"…noted."

Chapter End Notes

Pirog - or pyrih, is a baked case of dough with a sweet or savory filling. Usually meats
and mushrooms, cheese, or fruit fillings within.

Vory v Zakone (Singular vor, Plural vory) – Thieves-in-Law, title awarded by one's
peers (like a peerage title rather than a military rank).

Pakhan - is the Boss or Krestnii Otets 'Godfather' and controls everything.

Avtoritet (Plural Avtorityets) – Literally translates to 'authority'. A captain in charge of
certain operations within a Mafiya syndicate, could also be called Brigadier.

Militsiya – A kind of paramilitary law enforcement, less military and more police in
nature.
LXXI (Tuesday the 17th of December, 1963. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Comparing results from all of Sonya's fellow Zolotov Dying Will Flame users got her several rather strange theories to ponder.

The 'Dying' part... wasn't necessary. Flame users didn't have to face death to use their Flames or find it in the first place. As seen with Mists, Dmitriy, and Tatiana, it was possible to gain the ability to use their inner fire without ever really facing the possibility of death.

Dying Will Flames were probably named such since escaping death was the way it was discovered, not because defying death with one's own will was required.

Conversely... one gaining their Flames by defying death seemed to give the best results right away.

Cherep never would have survived as a child unless he had all the Flame and power he could muster to sustain his life in the face of lethal injuries. He had next to no conscious control with them, they wouldn't train him up until they had the security the clan wouldn't get around, but Sonya wasn't nearly as strong as he was in Cloud Flames even with three years of using it instead of her own muscles.

Learning that control would probably still mean defying death was the fastest way to go about using Flames if one didn't care about the side-effects, depending on how hard her best friend turned foster brother found developing control.

Tatiana showed remarkable progress catching up to Dmitriy, who was a full year and some ahead of her in using their respective Flames. The redhead Classical Sun user was very motivated, compared to the Inverted Rain who was merely going along with learning just because.

The safecracker's willpower to learn the Activation healing ability first also meant she wasn't doing too well in any other path a Sun should be showing, a mixed blessing when it came to the 'efficiency' aspect a Sun had. Exuberant without the annoying levels of peppy-ness as she was, it was getting worse and better all at the same time. Being more efficient with her energy meant Tatiana could do more, she was fast catching up to Cherep in the energy levels she had on a day-to-day basis.

If the Sun's muscle tone started fading, then they would have to give her more training to do. It hadn't happened yet in the half a year she had been learning her Flame, even with the new ability to heal small cuts and bruises the teenaged Sun just recently discovered she could finally do. Lisa was on the lookout now, so they would have to see.

Dmitriy seemed to have the most level growth of them all, if a lot slower than anyone else. Tranquility being what it was, he had grown to the point he tended to stop the engines he was working on if he got too distracted or into his work. The mere fact he could stop machinery with the ability provided him enough interest in trying to Tranquilize a living thing on purpose, but the best he could do now was put the housecat at headquarters to sleep without a gemstone in hand.

It was debatable if the Rain had managed it himself or if the feline had become bored and decided on
He had not gotten to the point of drawing out his Flames, but the chunk of blue jade he settled on as a better focus did radiate a watery kind of visible energy if he pushed it hard enough. He cracked his jade if so, and after the second time he had to come back for a replacement she had threatened to make him pay cash for his next one.

Sonya herself was halfway between her siblings in how she approached her Flames. A sharp jolt of death defying got her using them, but she poured effort into learning how to control them afterwards.

The result was a mix bag of good and bad. The half-step forward one step sideways way she was making progress was irritating, but she was rapidly getting back to where she thought she had been.

She was seriously thinking of pulling Tatiana's Lightning girl into the mix they had going but knew her limitations well enough that she'd probably botch the invitation. Galina wouldn't be going anywhere, and eventually either the redhead or the brunette herself would notice the Flame... or the group would risk death somewhere and then it would pop out.

Inverted Lightning, anyways. Galina would respond better to her gang's leader than said gang's leader's younger sister.

There seemed to be a very, very bad habit of any Flame user to think of any others around them in terms of possible Flame type. Sonya was perfectly guilty of it, having already identified the likely primary Flame of everyone around her and even got to guessing secondary possibilities.

She had a wonder if it had any impact on her greater social ability, or if her greater social grasp was responsible for her finally looking outward to the people around her.

She did wonder about her Classic Cloud nature, on the other hand. In her own opinion, she was back to being normal. As she dimly recalled being from Rachel, a lifetime ago.

Her first years as a Zolotov thief had been rather icy by choice, she hadn't known what the hell had been going on. Hadn't felt safe or secure enough to talk to others and so she hadn't and just worked up the skills to just defend herself.

To be honest, she still didn't know what the hell had happened with her biological parents. It might not have been good in Saratov with them, but it hadn't been bad either.

...

Sonya had moved.

A Classically natured Cloud, who moved from her home territory to a different one. One which might have another, older Classic Cloud in it... Aleksandr was entirely Cloud-like, in a way. To be honest, so was Arseniy.

She hadn't thought so, because everyone knew Clouds were territorial and possessive. Two in the same area would be asking for someone to die.

...ah.

Oh.

Well... old wives' tales and nature vs nurture. What happened if a baby Cloud was raised by another?
Trained by another?

Placed in their territory and expected to raise her?

Had her situation ever happen before?

More worryingly, was she going to have a problem with the vory in a few years?

Aleksandr… that would suck, she went to him for any and all weapon or fighting problems.

Arseniy… well, the man was practically her father. Especially since her biological one up and abandoned her to the Mafiya.

Sonya closed her research journal.

She needed more information, before she panicked.

LXXII (Tuesday the 17th of December, 1963 continued. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Arseniy listened to her recent wonderings blandly, chewing through what was for him his breakfast even if it was high noon. "So, what happens if I don't use your Flame stuff?"

Sonya dropped into a chair across the kitchen table from him, wondering the same thing.

Dying Will Flame use was kind of like opening Pandora's Box. You got a mess of good and bad all jumbled together depending on how you went about opening the damn thing… but that was only after you started using it.

Apparently the better you got at it, the more it affected you. Worse, it started slowly and snowballed from there.

"I… don't know?"

A lot of people never activated their Dying Will, simply because they never needed it or knew it was possible if they had. An equal measure of the same people might but might never again use if after one or two occasions and merely think it a 'miracle' or a 'coincidence'.

A fraction of that might end up in the underworld trying to understand, along with the children of their predecessors and other mafia members.

Then everyone got sucked into Omertà and very few ever got out again… barring their own death.

"Then stop panicking about it. If it happens, it happens." The vor shrugged the issue off almost callously. "So far as I'm concerned, this just means in ten or so years after you move out you won't be the one to come back asking for room and board."

She stifled the probably hysterical giggle, because that was not something she was used to doing.

"Pack off, girl. You've got Aleksandr's this afternoon."

"Yes sir… um…"

"What?"
She slunk back into the chair she had almost slipped out of, cringing slightly. "What, um… happened to my parents?"

Arseniy sighed at the question, lowering his fork instead of taking his next bite of food, then scowled heavily into the air over her head. "I regret to inform you that your mother is dead. Very dead. Sorry."

He didn't sound it.

Sonya eyed him warily. "That's nice… you didn't get her then?"

"For trying her hand at child slavery? With her own daughter?" The expression on his face twisted darkly, and from how he was gripping his fork it almost seemed as if he really had wanted to stab her mother. "She's lucky it wasn't me. Her own problems caught up with her. No, I caught up with your father."

"…is he alive?"

"Define alive."

She probably shouldn't ask, the asshole abandoned her without a backwards look, but… "Among the living?"

"Yes."

"Actually living?"

"In a way."

Her foster father didn't want to tell her, obviously. The man was alive, and Sonya was morbidly curious if she had to watch out for him or not. "In one piece?"

"Nope."

That was way too cheerful for the topic. Especially for his prior expression.

"In what way?"

"…missing the family jewels." Arseniy stabbed his eggs a couple times as his left eye twitched irritably. "He had an emergency vasectomy done to save his miserable life."

…Sonya didn't want to know. That whole mess was painful and rather screwed up to begin with, what with her life as Rachel preventing any connecting she could've done with them.

Then… apparently her mother tried to sell her to cover her debts. Not to the Zolotovs obviously, but she hadn't known that at the time.

Which was baffling and rather sore subject matter the blonde didn't like to think on often.

What the hell had she done to deserve that?

"Aw hell. Don't cry." Dropping the fork on his plate and running a hand roughly through his hair in frustration, the vor eyed her closely. "We weren't going to tell you until much later on. He's… okay, he was a whiny little shit when I was dealing with him. Might have been the subject matter, that. But he got you somewhere safe first before running, it… counts?"
If she had been feeling better, or the subject was different, that would've been funny. No wonder Lisa dealt with the girls more often than he did back in the beginning, he *sucked* at being nice.

Sonya… kind of wanted to go hit things. It sounded nice, mindless destruction and maybe a spar or two with Ziven.

"He's alive, and you're the only kid he'll ever have. You get to decide if you want to see him, but I'm insisting on being there for that."

This was the most she had ever heard Arseniy say all at once if it wasn't Mafiya lesson oriented. "Okay."

He eyed her yet again, only a touch warily from what she could tell. Probably making sure she was alright like she claimed.

She hadn't been the best daughter ever in either life, really. There hadn't been a lot of expectation in her first one as Rachel and nothing done as Sonya.

She had tried?

A little at least, staying out of the way had seemed to be what they wanted.

…no, she wasn't going to dwell. The thief had things to do, she could think on what-ifs and the like much, *much* later. Probably end up thinking on it in the middle of the night, as it was.

It wasn't like she could demand answers out of her mother now.

"I'm… going to go, then."

His response was a rather pained sounding sigh. "You sure you don't want to talk to Lisa? First at least?"

Sonya didn't even know *what* she felt about the mess, talking about it just yet probably wouldn't help. "I'm going to go destroy Aleksandr's floor again, then maybe."

He didn't say anything as she slipped out of the kitchen, but she knew perfectly well he was probably still watching her.

To top off her rather bad day, Tatiana and Cherep were waiting for her in the living room looking way too guilty. It was harder to catch now, but her foster sister's smile was brittle looking and while her best friend might look less like a girl at fourteen… the wet-cat looks were still a dead giveaway.

"We're not talking about it until I've decided what I feel about it."

"Fair enough." Tatiana spoke up quickly, flashing a guilty look to the doorway behind her to where a *vor* might lurk if shadowing her movements. "So… combat practice. Yay."

She palmed her face, not even needing to look to know her foster brother was trying to say something but coming up blank with what it should be so he was just leaving his mouth open like a beached fish. "Let's just *go*."

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LXXIII (Sunday the 5th of January, 1964. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)
Hormones were terribly nasty things, especially when it came to little girls.

Sonya supposed she qualified for young teenager now, again, but her thirteen-year-old self was just as short and gangly as her twelve-year-old one. She maybe did a bit of growing in a vertical sense, but she was growing like Cherep did in beginning.

All sharp elbows and knees for the first bit.

At least her unbalanced body chemistry picked a semi-decent person for her to develop the world's most awkward crush upon.

Tatiana developed a crush on Dmitriy way back in the day, when the girls had still been sort of frosty as sisters. Her subconscious picked Arseniy to have her first crush on.

The vor, who very probably was the one to mutilate her father for abandoning her to the Mafiya and running for it when his wife got herself into more than just a bit of trouble. The same man who patted the foster siblings on the head when they had another birthday or did something remarkable, the same way someone would pat a dog on the head for doing a trick.

That man.

The one who was pretty much the foster father out of their ragtag little family unit.

Lisa at least thought it was sweet and amusing. It really was the only highlight of the younger thief's rocky start to her developing years, the fact the vor's actual lover didn't seem to mind too much. The older woman could be scary sometimes, and entirely sadistic when she thought she had to prove she could be a terrifying person to oppose.

Well… that, and the fact she hadn't ended up crushing on Sinclair. That bloody bastard would've been insufferable if he caught on, he still flirted with the waitresses when they had coffee.

Cherep would've been awkward about any crush on him too, now that she thought about it.

Of course, that would be if it all wasn't a little awkward already between the younger generation in the house. Added on top of her development problems, the atmosphere in their home got strange quickly when she was included.

Really, she just wanted to crawl into bed and pretend the next year had gone by already. It had started out rather badly, didn't look to be getting better anytime soon, and if she didn't have things she had to do she might have tried it anyways to avoid Arseniy.

Terribly timed crush or not, the news the vor gave her about her parents had been depressing.

Sonya still couldn't make out what the hell she felt about it all, the fact her mother ran afoul of her own plans backfiring or her father's response to it… or the way he ended up afterward.

Vor were not nice people. They did try to safeguard the children around them and could be a little more than just sexist sometimes.

A not even five-year-old girl getting abandoned on the doorstep of their recruiting efforts?

She wasn't remotely surprised with what Arseniy had done. If she had been more vindictive or violently inclined she might have thought to do it herself if she had ever caught up with her fath- with Nikshin Mikhail.
Curled up on her bed, she was currently trying to put the whole situation out of her head as she tried calling up her Flames without a gemstone. Sonya could and tended to do it every spare moment she could, but the multi-colored fire hadn't showed up again after her first breakthrough with them.

It was either a small wash of violet tinted fire on her palm, a tongue of red fire that licked up her fingers, or a couple fitful yellow sparks spat at her. The more she worked with one the less response she got from the others, which she had no idea how to counter.

The Sun was nearly gone as it was, the last reaction she got from it was a flash of a spark. Only the one, and it refused to pop again no matter what she tried.

Holding the working Flames steady and in place was proving rather difficult. Her first attempts to do it intentionally had proved herself to be a bit of a fire hazard. There was a charred mark on her bedroom desk when her left hand had lit up and not her right like she expected. Which only reminded her that will-Flame or not it was still a fire-based ability and fires was a hazard to watch out for.

Balanced on her bedside table was a cup of water, which Lisa had informed her would be present any time she tried the Flame calling exercise. Partially in response to scenting the smoke before the thief could inform her of the problem and being very unamused at the firebug she had suddenly turned into.

She was really waiting for Cherep to decide on if he wanted to try talking to her or not. He had been dithering over the decision outside her bedroom door. In the meantime, she played with her Flames because it was ridiculously soothing thing to do with a spare moment.

"Err… Sonya?"

"You done being awkward yet?"

"Me?" He squawked, both looking and sounding offended as he edged into view. "I… erm… yes?"

Her dork of a foster brother fidgeted, the blonde thief sighed. Then she wondered… if she slapped her face with a palm full of Flames would it burn her?

Maybe just singe her hair?

…that would be bad if she burned her eyebrows off. Eyelashes too.

Huh.

Did hair count as 'no personal harm'?

It had to, right?

Otherwise there would be a lot of bald Flame users wandering around.

"How am I any different from last month, pray tell?" She asked him flatly, trying to get the colors she had to appear at the same time and go up different fingers.

The Cloud Flames in her left obeyed her fine, the tiny amount of Storm Flames in her right spluttered all over the place. No yellow sparks at all.

Damn it.
It wasn't like she really understood how she did it. It seemed as if she wanted hard enough the Flames appeared and if she didn't they just went away. There wasn't any grasping for some fire power she never noticed or finding something internally that correlated to the ability.

Her Flame just was, and conversely it wasn't, at the same time.

Want, willpower, seemed to be the only controlling factor. Thought didn't do jack but distract her.

That was, once past the whole issue of 'being on fire and not getting burned is impossible' mental roadblock… or the whole 'internal rainbow-colored fire power' thing.

Why the hell were Dying Will Flames named after weather-related phenomena?

"Um… you're not?"

"So why are you still standing in the doorway?"

Cherep considered the question, looking backwards at the hallway wall behind him. "Fire safety. You're a little… combustible right now."

Sonya suddenly didn't miss her best friend as much as she thought she had. "You… are a brat sometimes."

"And you're on fire. Really, Sonya. Safety first you know."

He stopped looking so smug when she tossed her cup of water into his face.

LXXIV (Thursday the 23rd of April, 1964. Mafia Land.)

Sonya came to a stupid, utterly belated realization that Flame-resistant metal actually meant it was Flame resistant. Not just resistant to the damage Flame users tended to cause.

She felt like a moron for half a minute.

Then she decided that if Propagating Flame resistant metal drained her of Cloud Flames so fast, it was a pretty decent control exercise anyways. She didn't feel as moronic after that.

It had taken her about half a year to realize it, and by then she was already really attached to her Bec de Corbin and its miniature-super sized party trick.

Sonya might still be popping spinel jewels like batteries every time she used one of the mini-polearms she had. It was a decent price to pay for a staff weapon she could carry around on her in plain sight, in broad daylight, and never be arrested over.

As her three original mini Bec de Corbins were all made out of Flame resistant metal they'd do as a weapon against other Flame users. Rather expensive weapons, but decent.

Now she needed a semi-decent metal to make a little less Flame-resistant polearms out of but one that still wouldn't shatter under her hands, in hopes she wouldn't be buying or stealing spinel jewels for the rest of her life. If she could find a better alloy or metal mix, maybe she wouldn't need nearly as many jewels to regulate her Cloud Flames through one.

Problem was… she knew more about jewels, crystal formations, and such more than she knew about actual metal, minerals, alloys and their properties. Aleksandr didn't know anything about Flames and what they could do, only slightly about weapons and their makes as he did more makeshift combat
teaching, so his help had been limited. That stumped them until she decided to see what Mafia Land had in stock and if she could get any without being questioned too closely.

While she was at it, maybe some way to carry around her mini-polearms in easy reach?

Like a… necklace, or something less likely to choke herself. Bracelets… pocketed bracers?

A magnetic pin maybe?

…was Flame resistant metal magnetic?

If this questioning thing kept up at the rate she had been going, Sonya was going to need a damn shopping list.

Her latest Mafia Land heist, a semi-decent one that asked her to steal the emblem of a rival business out of the owner's office, hadn't been too bad. It had a security force internally, so it wasn't so easy a rookie thief could do it and for all that she stole one thing it at least warned her she wasn't getting a sign-on bonus to pay her way there or back.

It had paid rather well after the fact anyways, so in a good mood and with money to spare the baby Cloud Flame user was not terribly surprised or upset when the invasion alarms sounded.

The reason she never tended to stay in Mafia Land long was entirely due to the fact it was an island of mafia related businesses that cohabitated. Eventually now and again, someone realized there wasn't one owner of the whole island and it was possible that if he/she/they took over the manmade moving island then everyone would have to pay them to use it as the black market/connection point/haven it was.

The fact there still wasn't one internal mafia family that ruled the island was because every time it happened, everyone else on the island not affiliated with the moron-flavor of the month tended to protest.

Violently.

Whichever mafia syndicate that did it also got banned for a year by the conglomeration of mafia groups that ran the island together, so the results of trying typically were their own kind of deterrent.

If they survived in any number, anyways.

The fact it still happened to the point it was an actual draw type of attraction nowadays?

She sometimes wondered about the intelligence of some of the people around her.

Sonya sighed as a cheer went up around her in response to the announcement of free-violence allowed against whichever attacking group, ducking into the closest shop before the bulletproof window shields could lock down to prevent looting from happening during or after the fighting. With little else really to do, she went back to shopping around.

The actual shops in Mafia Land were connected by slightly subterranean tunnels for that exact reason.

Entrances were at the back of the shops and ran nearly the whole length of the merchant and residential areas. You could only get out of the tunnels during an attack by certain station exits with revolving one-way doors that peppered the streets, and only the other store/hotel entrances when inside the buildings before lockdown. The service tunnels that led further down into the island's
command center got closed off once the alarms blared out a warning, and the individual sections below that became remotely secured in their own ways.

According to Lisa, anyways.

The street vendors that sold weapons typically made a killing no matter who tried to grab their stuff, they stocked weapons and ammunition specifically just for these kinds of occasions. The cost of it all would be refunded by the island's staff after everything was over, and generally the vendors got highly popular afterwards as well.

She was not surprised to run into Sinclair not too long after reaching the tunnels either. All Mafia Land employees used the tunnels very often too, especially when they lived on the island.

At least, she was pretty sure he lived here for the time being. She saw him way too damn much.

"Sonya." Renato had been pawing through a couple boxes he slipped into a pocket, ammunition for a small caliber pistol or something of the sort.

The thief was only mildly interested in what his hand were doing when she caught his nod of greeting, instead she was trying to read the painted notes on the wall of which shops were in what direction. There was a Cyrillic translation in there somewhere, she just had to find it in the mass of scrawled notes. "Sinclair. Know any decent Flame channeling metal? Or at least a decent metal that won't melt under my hands?"

He shot her a questioning glance then flicked his eyes to what she was trying to read, pocketing a handful of loose bullets and pulling a revolver out from the small of his back to load with his other handful. "The only one I know of is titanium, but if that's because it's just harder to melt or dent than steel is questionable. I can occasionally melt it in a firefight."

"Actually, that makes me think of tungsten." She sighed as she considered it.

It had a ridiculously high melting point too, and maybe what she was looking for. She had just stolen a chunk of that metal not too long ago.

The hell was up with her luck?

"Thanks."

Renato's right eyebrow cocked up, and he gave her the bulk of his attention and not the loaded handgun he had. "Why ask, Sonya?"

"I need a less Flame-resistant metal for my day-to-day weapons." She gave the shiny silver revolver a smirk. "Playing into the stereotype a little much there?"

Hitmen and handguns. They were like the penny-dreadful staple of mafia people everywhere.

"Weapons, as in plural?" He asked leadingly while ignoring her question, sliding the barrel closed and a smirk or his own curling the corner of his mouth up. "Any chance I will get to see them sometime soon?"

They both ignored the muffled explosion that shook the ceiling over their head, the lights embedded into the walls not even flickering in response. Mafia Land was well built to cope with that kind of damage, especially after all the times morons had dropped the explosives they were trying to buy in the middle of the weapons market.
"Not today. Go shoot a couple idiots in the leg for me while I finish my shopping."

Renato rolled his eyes at her but gave a little mocking bow as he clicked the hammer of his gun back with one thumb. "Only if you call me by my first name, little lady Sonya."

"Renato Sinclair, do go away."

"Cheater."

Sonya gave him a pointed look that questioned if he had looked in the mirror lately.

He merely smirked in return as he sauntered off.

LXXV (Saturday the 16th of May, 1964. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

With Sonya's terribly timed crush on Arseniy still reeling its unsightly head every time she saw the vor, she got back into the habit she had long since gotten out of.

A Classic Cloud's patrolling.

It had been something she had started back when she had been even tinier, not that she knew it for what it was then so thus she made excuses for it rather than hide in a room or something. Even after losing what could have become her 'home territory' had she stayed in Saratov, she kept it up in Moscow until shortly after Cherep moved into their home.

If she had been doing Cloud patrolling after being fostered in a Mafiya home because of unease, habit, or because she had instinctively tried to understand the new situation before different but unconsciously more dominant Clouds impressed on her it was their territory was debatable. The fact any impulse to continue stopped after she and her fellow Cloud decided they were friends and he moved into the bedroom next to hers was slightly troubling for Sonya's desire not to see her best friend as 'territory'.

Since she was so out of practice at it, it could really be called 'free-ranging' more than patrolling.

There were different things to see than she recalled; new park benches in a few areas, several different shops that opened or were about to close here and there, and the always different people out and about now spring was trying to thaw the city were also things she noted in an absent kind of way.

Hopefully, her patrolling habit would fix the couple holes she had in her mental map of Moscow's Zolotov territory. Maybe that way Cherep would stop being so smug every time he had to get them back home after a walk to different circuses or cinemas.

Her walkabouts were also great times to ponder things, especially as she had stopped trying to meditate out of sheer disgust for her inability. Mostly, how the hell she was going to raise legal money in case her foster brother was right on his guess of her Storm polarization.

Sonya was still drawing a blank on that one, and she'd been wondering that over in her head ever since the bet started.

She stuck a leg out almost on automatic, tripping a cutpurse that tried to snatch the bag of the stooped over old lady not five feet in front of her. Snatching the purse out of the air, she absently handed it back to the startled woman ahead of her just as she opened her mouth to yell before hauling the thief
up by the back of his collar.

Which is when her mind caught up to her actions.

"Adrik?"

"Wha- Sonya?"

She took an entirely inappropriate moment to wonder if he had been initially sorted like her, a petty thief, only to find his real talent lay elsewhere in a thieves' array of skills.

A cutpurse turned security system specialist?

Not as farfetched as a pickpocket doing solo cat burglary.

Then she pushed him behind her slightly, so he wasn't gaping at her in full view of his botched-victim. Sonya turned an entirely sheepish and apologetic smile on the old woman suspiciously eyeing them both. "Excuse us, baba. I need to go yell at my friend a bit."

She sniffed at both the boy still dangling from her one-handed hold on him and the insulting term. The thief slowly lowered the other, so his shoes at least touched the ground before the old biddy noticed.

"Blister his ears, devochka."

"Oh, I will. I can promise you that."

It did not pay to rob people who couldn't afford it. She knew that a long time ago when she had just been lifting pockets for cash and not doing businesses and shops. Adrik had to know it too, but here he was doing it anyways.

He waited until the little stooped old lady at least got a decent amount of distance from them. "Your hypocrisy is astounding."

She lifted him back off the ground, so he was at least a couple good inches off the sidewalk, and about bit his nose off. "You and I are going to talk."

LXXVI (Saturday the 16th of May, 1964 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Since Adrik was one of Tatiana's minions, Sonya dragged the cutpurse home with her.

In silence, too. Partially because she was very irritated with him, and partially because she wanted to be sure of her own mental state over his thieving habits.

It wasn't because he was stealing in home territory, it was because he was robbing old ladies.

Right?

She had difficulties trying to decide, so that was why they were going to her sister over it all. If it was her Cloud nature getting prissy, the Sun would have no problem telling her so and taking her to task for it.

Thankfully for her mental debate, her foster sister hadn't been amused to hear of Adrik's actions either.
"They have networked gossip circles! Why would you do that?" The teenage redhead, fifteen in age and a pretty decent Classic Sun Flame user if she had a gem in hand, gripped her long hair in both hands and wailed. "Once one of those old babas sees your face, they all will know! What they know their children know! Then everyone in the neighborhood knows! You might as well shoot yourself in the foot!"

Adrik's expression got progressively sulkier as Sonya's sister carried on berating him.

The blonde thief herself was just happy she hadn't been overreacting. That would have been rather embarrassing.

Tatiana eventually realized she was getting a bit too carried away and took a deep breath to try calming herself down. Passionate Suns, indeed. "Adrik, why?"

"There's rumors of a personal computer that might coming up for sale next year." Still sulky sounding, but at least it was a reason Sonya could sort of understand. "I wanted to be sure I could afford it and my dues, since we're only doing minor things until I'm old enough to leave Moscow."

He was about the same age as Cherep… which sounded about right. Sometime next year Tatiana would be leaving home for a different city, and maybe the year after the USSR itself for the surrounding countries.

She frowned thoughtfully as the Sun rubbed her face, all the while the cutpurse expanded on what he thought a 'computer' might be good for and why he couldn't ask the group since he wasn't sure on that yet.

Weren't the first computer designs clunky things?

Sonya didn't really know how the computer age started, but she knew a lot of people were involved. Different people and companies involved across the world meant more options, sure. It also meant they wouldn't work together well for a bit longer.

Compatibility, that was the word. Different computer systems wouldn't be very compatible for… ever, really. Apple versus PC issue from Rachel's life all in one word there.

"Adrik, you work for a thief who has a very good cat burglar as a sister." Said cat burglar tuned back into the scolding session when she was mentioned. Tatiana was even helpfully pointing at her too. "If it's that important to you to figure out, we can hire Sonya to steal one for you."

They could?

"We can?" Adrik put aside the fact he had been getting yelled at quickly to peer at the youngest thief in the room.

The Storm-Cloud supposed they could, just like how she had hired Tatiana's group for her last jewelry heist. It wasn't of the level of the favor she had done for her foster sister, being involved in a high-profile job like that boosted Tatiana's group's reputation rather high after they succeeded.

They would be considered less 'green' after a heist like that under their belts, and therefore more reliable for anyone looking for a group to do something similar.

On the other hand, if Sonya did then other thieves might want to hire her for a little aid or a job too. If she turned down too many, they would try to get Tatiana to ask her to do it instead.

Thus, why she didn't actually do any other thieves a job or two for favors or trades. The only one she
ever made an exception for had been Dmitriy, and that had been because she could hold it over his head for a bit and everyone knew she made him pay through the nose for it.

"We're going to owe her a lot for doing it even after the favor from before, but yes." The Sun user gave a pointed look at her little sister.

Said little sister realized she was required to speak up. "…sure."

Adrik seemed to shrug off the whole incident that led to the conversation, lighting up like a Christmas tree. There was still an element of wariness to him, but since the physically younger girl had held him off the ground for at least an hour of travel or so she supposed she deserved that. "What are your terms, then?"

In other words, money or favors?

"A favor. I'll steal a computer for you, when they become popular enough to spread to the commercial side of the market, so long as you teach me to work one." She wasn't looking forward to that job, clunky computer equipment was probably fragile enough to make everything tricky.

The cutpurse had the whole geek look working for him anyways. She could easily see him being a hardcore gamer type like from Rachel's schooling years.

…what exactly would be the mafia's answer to the advent of the computer age, anyways?

"After a period of six months, so I know the thing, I'll do the teaching… so long as a better model doesn't come up."

That might be complicated. The blonde had known the other thief was sly from before, but that could potentially trip her up into stealing him a new computer every damn year if she wasn't careful.

From what she knew, competing companies would put out different models every now and again just to keep up with the fast-developing technology and each other.

"Four months, and perceptively better as in works faster than just more expensive."

"Three if you can get me everything I would need to operate one."

"Except for the power supply, I'd assume."

Adrik had the cheek to look amused at that. "Of course."

The cat bulger nodded her agreement. "Deal."

They shook on it.

She wouldn't be at risk with a deal like this until the Silicon Valley thing happened back in the States. Sonya might not recall clearly what happened, but she knew the computer industry boomed both during and after that to result in Rachel's old desktop.

Tatiana clapped her hands together, beaming. "So! Now, let's talk about robbing old babas we live next to."

It was an evil beaming smile for an expression on a Classical Sun user.

The cutpurse wilted a bit, his excitement over haggling the deal out fading rapidly in the face of his leader's attention turning back on his especially crooked misdeeds.
She decided to excuse herself, as she wasn't really part of Tatiana's group or under her influence. She reasoned that since the Sun had everything in hand and was a bit busy, and Adrik might not appreciate her listening in as he got yelled at, Tatiana wouldn't mind too much.

She wasn't *running from her sister*, really. It was called a tactical retreat.

Suns could *burn* away Clouds, too.

Now, had the situation been her Cloud nature getting pissed with the theft happening in home territory or not?

Sonya still didn't know for certain. While Tatiana didn't seem to think she was out of line, it was *possible* it was just the stealing and not the *baba* bit.

…shit.

What kind of thief collars other thieves working in front of them?

Not very popular ones… or dead ones. She needed to get both a clear answer and a handle on that problem *fast*.

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LXXVII (Tuesday the 19th of May, 1964. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya wondered absently if Tatiana's group started because Nikolai was a bit of a beefcake.

The elder foster sister did start piecing her group together just after her crush on Dmitriy ended a swift death due to his grimy career putting her off him.

…she really did need to iron out her head, or something.

It was a wonder that stuck with her after Adrik had crashed a lunchtime of Lisa's, bringing everything he knew on the supposedly newfangled 'computers' with him and the other co-leader of his gang.

Nikolai had just wanted to get briefed on what the deal was and what they now owed Sonya, so while Tatiana had a conference with him Adrik nattered her ear off about a lot of things she couldn't recall.

She might have tuned him out in pure self-defense.

With her somewhat unorthodox background she knew the difference between a microprocessor, which was the latest gadget 'revolutionizing' computers AKA clunky *calculators* everywhere, and a motherboard, which was where said microprocessor was located. It was rather hard to profess any interest in the topic when Rachel's memories of laptops and sleek desktop computers looked nothing like what was currently on the market.

What she did now know that had been important from the geek-babble heaped on her poor ears, was that the best European 'computer' company was in Italy.

Olivetti was the name, and they were known for manufacturing typewriters and the like and had recently announced to certain circles the possible commercial production of the 'Programma 101'.

Which really was an overly glorified desktop calculator compared to what Sonya thought of when
the word *computer* was mentioned.

Worst of all, it was entirely likely the company had connections to Vongola's CEDEF... or if it didn't yet, it might just end up a real part of the shell company that covers the greater Italian mafia *Famiglia* in the country when the personal computer thing took off. If she was a Don of a crime family, holding onto an up and coming security nightmare like *computerized networks* would be something she'd want a finger in.

She just did *not* want to go to Italy. She'd been learning Italian lately, sure. Mostly just because of Sinclair and the fact it might be useful much later when Cherep had an encounter of the cursed baby kind and if she couldn't do anything about it.

She'd be learning Japanese next for the same reason, even if she already knew Mandarin Chinese and that typically worked for most Asian countries.

However, she *had* made the deal... backing out because of personal wants would be rather bad for her reputation.

"I have a... *associate*, who I don't really trust but might help." The Storm-Cloud informed Adrik slowly when he paused for breath, turning the problems over in her head. "If the company *does* have mafia connections, I'm not stealing from them and risking my neck for something I can get easier in America for less risk. IBM does the computers for the US Space Program, and I'm sure one of theirs is just as good."

The cutpurse pouted, which still worked for him even if he was the same age as Cherep and getting out of the 'boyish good looks' category.

It was cute, but Sonya was unmoved.

Wet-kitty pouts were harder to ignore.

"But it's a *European* company. On the cutting-edge, too!"

She had to control the desire to snort, coughing a little into one hand instead. Cutting-edge for the 1960s maybe, not to her. "Look, the production estimates aren't even set in stone yet. It might not be next year or even the year after when they finally start selling the damn things. Even then, the first model off the production line isn't the best in terms of being debugged."

"De-bug-ed what?"

Damn it all, that was why Sonya talked like an old lady. She had slang and terms that wouldn't be used for *decades* in her speech pattern that occasionally popped out like that.

The youngest thief sighed and rephrased her point. "It won't be working perfectly, as in there might be problems with the manufacturing that won't show up until well after someone else boots--I mean, turns it on."

"Good point, I guess." Adrik looked as if she had gutted his hopes and dreams with her nay-saying.

Again, Cherep's tries to wring her heartstrings was better quality.

She damn well *didn't* want to go to Italy, so too bad.

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**LXXVIII (Friday the 7th of August, 1964. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet**
"What the hell qualifies as 'legal'?

Cherep blinked blankly at his best friend standing in his bedroom's doorway, who looked more than a little irritable over something. Probably her question continuing to be unanswered. "Uh… what?"

Eloquence, thy name was not Cherep.

"You said I had to acquire money legally, so what do you define legal as?" Sonya repeated a bit more slowly, kicking an old shirt he had been using as a rag away from her foot. At his continued blank look, she scowled and tacked on, "For the bet, you dork."

"Which bet?"

"Our bet, over my Storm polarization."

Now she sounded as if she found him a little slow. Which, to be fair, Cherep felt because that was a good point.

He never did clarify that, did he?

She had merely rejected the buying a motorcycle legally bit, not the getting money for it legally part.

The 'secret' Cloud Flame user in the household kicked out his legs, which had been cramping a little as he crouched to check the movements of the engine block that was this year's birthday gift from Dmitriy, as he thought about it. The engine was damaged and inoperable, but still serviceable as a learning tool if probably a little too low to the floor for him now.

The getting tall thing couldn't happen fast enough. Even Sonya seemed to agree, if she had once shot down his initial plans of getting a motorcycle based on his shrimp-sized height as a kid but was putting effort into it now.

Did that mean he was about tall enough for one?

Right, her current question. "Um… with a job?"

His fellow Cloud, and that was awesome they shared something as rare and as random as that Dying Will stuff, gave him a flat stare which made him a bit nervous. "In my line of work a heist is also called doing a job, genius. You really want to go with that definition?"

Cherep coughed, sheepishly grinning back at her. "Well… no. That would defeat the point."

His crooked best friend heaved a sigh at him, picking her way around his engine so she could crawl up on his bed and sprawl out while he thought.

He knew she knew what he was up to trying to get her to have a legal job, but the fact she hadn't immediately rejected the legal part gave him some hope Sonya wouldn't just be a thief for the rest of her life. It could be just that she was humoring him too, which was kind of awesome in its own way because she was still thinking of doing it just because he said something.

She hadn't tried to convince him to try for a less dangerous job herself when he made mention of his plans, just pointed out that a few different skills might help and where he could go to gain them. She did sigh exasperatedly over him and his plans to start with a circus stuntman job, but she'd be coming with him.
The least Cherep could do was return the favor of pointing out different things that might help her in the future, yes a day-job was a bit transparent but she might want a working cover a time or two so trying it out now might help, but as he'd learned in his years living in a Mafiya home… one's words didn't always mesh up to what one meant.

He'd also gotten over his instinctive flinch when something less than legal was afoot. Both his foster sisters tended to forget he wasn't just another thief when he was in the room and they started talking shop.

Which was another strange but awesome thing in a twisted Mafiya way.

Acceptance like that had been rather rare in his life up until then. It was more of the girls thinking of him as 'one of us' rather than 'that boy that lives with us but isn't one of us' they used to do thing. The lunch they had earlier was a key point for that fact.

He was pretty sure they both forgot he wasn't a crook in the weirdly working lunch thing they did with the other two boys that came by, who were apparently Tatiana's thieves and not just fellow thieves in general.

It had been cool to hear Sonya argue out of hurrying off to steal something right away.

Cherep was also rather sure they forgot he had been there, which might be part of that too.

They were used to him, of him being around. Again, awesome.

…he had some low standards, didn't he?

"For fuck's sake, Cherep. If you don't decide sometime today, I'm going to."

"I'm thinking."

"Think faster."

For a girl who probably had her brain plotted out in a book or five, which might now be part of the mass of paper that insulated the ceiling from the roof right now, his baby sister could be very impatient about getting the information she wanted.

He huffed an amused laugh and turned his wandering attention to the definition she wanted out of him.

Legal had seemed like a good word at the time. However, depending on how rigidly he set the limits Sonya could probably stall a whole lot. Under-aged workers were technically illegal, in a way.

Her fourteenth birthday was coming up next. If one couldn't get a legal job before sixteen, though probably more like eighteen, then it would be another two years before the bet would be solved in that direction.

Even if Cherep won it.

It was entirely possible he might lose it too. One in three chance to be right, otherwise he'd have to steal something for her… or was it in front of?

"Legally acquired wages, either from a job done for nothing against the law or by selling something you made yourself."

That about covered it, right?
"…this selling option. If the components are stolen before being assembled then sold as honestly as… uh, I can, does it count as legal?"

He swore she was now just questioning things to annoy him. "No."

Sonya rolled around his bed, so she could look at him fully. "If I use money I got illegally to buy the components legally, then sell it. Is that legal?"

Definitely doing it just to annoy him. "Where are you going with this?"

"Lisa got me that amateur jeweler's kit, but I swear to high hell… if I actually have to use that…"

"Yes. Yes, you do."

He probably deserved the smack to the back of his head for that one.

____________________________

LXXIX (Thursday the 3rd of December, 1964. Mafia Land.)

Of course, Sinclair wouldn't be anywhere near Mafia Land the one time Sonya actually was looking for him.

One of these days, she'd get to have a word with whoever was in charge of her luck. Destiny too, whichever prick oversaw that was going to have their head meet a wall courtesy of her Bec de Corbin's hammer end.

Well… one of the weapons' end that she had, anyways.

Her search had turned up some information on the man, teenager technically at the time but a nineteen-year-old was more a young man than a teen. Renato Sinclair was a flirt of the shameless degree, tended to drink expensive wines but indulged in whisky now and again, bought bullets by the crate, and probably one of the most charming bastards to grace the island.

According to rumor, anyways.

Which, after a couple years of infrequent meetings twice a year with him, she had known already.

Hitmen weren't nearly as numerous as thieves were in Mafia Land's contract work sector, so they tended to rake up the most gossip anyways.

The day she had first met Sinclair, she had been told most of what made up his character nearly the same hour she got away from the man.

Mostly by semi-concerned thieves, most of whom were really after what she had that Renato had been interested in. A couple different hitmen had tried to chat her up to see what as well.

Which had been the other reason she had accepted the second offer of coffee from the man, just so she could take some of the irritation she had with him out on the subject of that ire.

After one full day of looking for the Inverted Sun hitman, the Russian Storm-Cloud gave up and went to pull the last contracted job she would do for the year. She'd find him when she got back, or he'd hear about her looking for him and find her himself.

As it turned out, after one rather weird job involving a jeweled dog statute of all things, Sonya found Sinclair.
Rather, he found her on his apartment building's front step.

"You are a tricky bastard to find, you know."

"Should I be concerned?" Drewled out the Sun while eyeing her warily, tucking away the surprise easily. Had she not known him somewhat, she would've missed it. "Usually I've stood a lady up on some occasion before they try to corner me, but I didn't think we had a standing date."

She rolled her eyes at his paranoia. "I want to ask you about a possible business I might have in Italy, you peacock."

"Peacock is a new pet name I've not been called yet." The tensed line of his shoulders broke though, and his left hand finally stopped trying to covertly inch to where she knew he kept a gun. Pushing a hand through his unruly black hair, he glanced from her to his apartment building. "I thought you didn't live on the island?"

"I do not."

Renato shot her a withering look for her tone. "How did you know where I live, then?"

"Thieves are good at finding a target's address too. Sometimes I have to just to know where the item that I am supposed to steal is." The thief waved a hand at the block of living quarters, which was another whole section of the island set smack dab in the middle of it at the base of the mountain they had. "This is not exactly employee only either."

"Point."

She sighed through her nose when he still hesitated. "I will buy you breakfast if you help me figure out if the Olivetti company is or is not involved with the mafia of your home country."

"The manufacturing company for calculators and the like?" Renato looked absolutely confused at her interest. "What could you be stealing from there?"

Sonya arched a challenging eyebrow at him. "Is that a yes?"

"Are you going to tell me why?"

"Only if you do help at all."

He rolled that around in his head for another moment, and she was sure he was doing so just to be difficult.

How hard would it be to bribe the same information out of another Italian on the island?

"Breakfast it is then. I feel like eating French today."

If she didn't know better, she'd swear the ass had read her mind and knew the exact moment she started thinking of bribing someone else. As her only Italian contact, or rather her only contact period, he really should be given the option of taking whatever bribe she had for information first. Hence why she was on the steps of his apartment building asking, but there were limits on the level of preference certain acquaintances got.

"I suppose you know of a good place around here that serves French cuisine?"

"Why of course, Sonya."
"Didn't get anything from the Thieves' Hall information broker, then?"

"Of course not. It was the first place I checked." Sonya informed him tartly, waving off the waiter that was hovering around her because she had abstained from ordering anything other than tea.

He shouldn't be as concerned as he was, she paid the damn bill.

"I would not be doing this if the information was so easily had."

Earl Grey this time, they didn't have Russian Black.

Renato twitched a little uneasily when the waiter she dismissed leaned a bit too far over into his personal space to pick up his empty plate, narrowly eyeing the poor, shaking young man and closely inspecting every movement he made. She wondered if he was thinking about shooting the kid, who looked terribly green and jumpy to be a seasoned staff member of a restaurant that catered to mafia hitmen and the like.

She did fully realize the irony of that statement coming from her. As a thief that started at the physical age of nine and was weeks away from her fourteenth birthday, she looked greener than the waiter did. However, after coming to terms with the irony of once dying by a crook and now living as one, she rather easily brushed that off.

"As far as I know, Olivetti is clean of any underworld dealings. My information is a little out of date, since I'm not from the region and don't keep tabs on it since it wasn't." Sinclair informed her easily enough now that he was fed, a slightly dismal look given to the French press brewed coffee he had been forced to order when he learned the espresso machine that was here was down for maintenance. "I could go and double-check for you, Sonya, if you tell me why you want to know."

Decisions, decisions.

She could, but that would probably devolve in a fishing expedition on her foster family that she didn't really want to let him know about if she didn't have to.

Hitmen generally worked on finding people with less to go on when they did a hit, she wouldn't fool herself into thinking he would never have a reason to go after her or her misfit family.

Renato Sinclair was perfectly charming to her in a bastardy kind of way, but it really was a rather superficial relationship between them at heart.

If she wanted to forget that, the fact he nearly shot her this morning when she turned up somewhere he didn't expect rather dispelled the illusion.

The Russian was the one taking a chance on him, in asking him for help like this.

"I do not wish to step on the toes of any mafia family there, as I would be a freelance thief on this job and have no help if I do."

If he didn't want the obvious reasoning, he should ask more accurate questions.

She wouldn't be aligned to anyone for the act of doing the favor because it was an internal Zolotov thing, more specifically a favor between herself and Tatiana's group as individuals and not as Mafiya thieves. Not a clan job nor a Mafia Land one, both of which came with their own protections for doing heists or jobs against different mafia factions she was abstaining from to spare Adrik the cost
of hiring her through the clan's internal channels or through the island's services.

Renato's mildly annoyed expression was amusing too. He'd trapped himself though, so if he wanted their association to continue at a decent level he had to go and check for her because she did answer him.

Sonya sipped her tea and waited for his next verbal thrust.

"I suppose you would include the upper management positions and their backgrounds as part of that?"

Now he was just splitting hairs even if it was a good point, as what the company and what its CEOs do could be perfectly different in many ways.

Since he was doing the favor, she did have to give him that one for this to continue. "Not necessarily. Those are two different things on occasion."

"There will be a number of people to go through and find information on." The Sun using hitman informed her lazily, leaning back in his chair and probably very carefully deciding how to phrase the rest of his side of the conversation.

"Just the three top members, I think."

"Six in return?"

"Two. I am not asking for their life stories nor do I want to learn of it. Just if they are mafia related or not." He would be the type to go overboard and drown her in information if she annoyed him a touch too much.

He cocked his head to the side. "I can live with two."

Tatiana had better love her for this. She owed two favors to a damn Italian Mafioso.

Sonya didn't like owing people favors. There was a world of things one could do with a perfectly willing accomplice skilled in different areas, and there were another countless ways to entrap them into service using said favors for leverage.

She had gone almost five years only owing two people a favor in her Mafiya career, Dimitriy and Cherep. She managed to get the young mechanic to cancel out his, and she didn't mind owing her best friend one because he would just use it on silly things like follow him when she had already intended to.

Renato Sinclair was a different breed of beast than her fellow Mafiya brats. He'd either use his two favors to know whatever it was he wanted to know or use one for his question and hold the last in reserve for a rainy day.

Sonya rather suspected the latter, but the security would maybe be worth it on this job. She didn't know the region, or how the mafia worked in Italy, and had no way to get that information from anyone since this was an internal favor-type thing instead of an actual contract.

Mafia Land would've sent agents out to give her a few pages briefing her on what not to do and how to not offend, the Zolotovs would've sent her a vor or two for protection, but on her own? Contracting those agents herself would be more expensive than she could afford for something she wasn't sure when it would be possible to steal her target, hiring the vor herself would invite the
rumors and speculation about how to hire her she didn't want to start.

Again, it was subjective when she could complete this little favor.

As a native of the country, the hitman did know what she needed to keep safe in his homeland for a stretch of time and how to not piss anyone off enough to come after her.

"I think, since we are going to be working together, you should at least address me by my first name."

Thus, why she had tried to look elsewhere before defaulting to asking the Inverted Sun user. He could be such an asshole sometimes. "Very well... Renato."

Renato's smirk could practically radiate his smugness all the way over to her side of the table. "This isn't time sensitive, is it?"

"A year or so before I would desperately need the information."

"I'll have the information before your usual time to visit next year, then."

Sonya nodded her thanks, getting up to leave with a rather unsettling feeling of foreboding hanging over her.

Why did it feel like she just sold her soul to the devil?

…shit. That arrangement wasn't self-updating if this favor for Tatiana's Adrik took more than a year or two to do.

The young thief hesitated… but kept heading for the door anyways. She'd seen more than enough of Sinclair for the damn year, and unless he used up the favors she owed him the Storm-Cloud didn't want to owe him more.

Chapter End Notes

Vory v Zakone (Singular vor, Plural vory) – Thieves-in-Law, title awarded by one's peers (like a peerage title rather than a military rank).
Baba – (Old) Woman
Devochka – Basically girl
1965 started with a bang, literally.

Sonya blinked a few times, looking to the hallway out of confusion and wondering what the hell her foster sister was up to.

Whatever it had been, it sounded painful.

…it wasn't Cherep, right?

He had that engine in his room, but she was sure he wasn't so stupid as to try starting it up while it was both in the house and not connected to anything stabilizing.

"Sonya! Come here, please?"

The young thief, because as old as she was mentally/spiritually she was physically and experience-wise a young teenager, sighed. Putting her book to the side and slipping off her bed to heed the Sun user's call. "Coming."

Unlike Sonya's room, which was a budding librarian's wet dream even after she removed the bulk of the books that migrated into her hands, or Cherep's, which still smelled like a garage even after Lisa forced him to clean it, Tatiana's room was more alike a fifteen going on sixteen-year-old girl's room in 1965.

Meaning a lot of clothes; go-go boots, hot pants, lacy camisoles, afghan knit shawls, and more scarves than there were colors in the sky cluttering certain parts. Black market vinyl records from the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Mick Jagger, and Sonny & Cher just to name a few, stacked next to a record player on her desk. Posters of British rock bands she might or might not have records for on the walls, and her latest discovery of beaded curtains strung up behind her bedroom door.

…and the psychedelic colored bean bag chair, couldn't forget that monstrosity her sister found somewhere and dragged home.

Even if half the clutter she had was entirely out of place for a 1965 version of a USSR bedroom, since they were in the middle of a less hostile than could be Cold War, that bit still baffled the younger sister.

While Sonya would've stared at the multicolored thing that doubled as a floppy, misshapen chair normally when entering her sister's room, her attention was more drawn to the fact the redhead had seemed to have startled herself out of her bed.

Laying on the floor on her back. Staring at her left hand.

Not that she was stoned, it was because Tatiana was on fire.

Fascinating.

"You said you wanted to see the first time, right?" The older teen questioned warily, eyeing the Flames like it might just try biting her nose off even if it wasn't burning her skin. "This is really
creepy, just so you know."

"Mmm."

It wasn't like the Storm-Cloud's tri-colored start.

Tatiana's inner fire was yellow all over... solidly a Sun and showing it. No flickers or a different color threaded through. Possibly the first time did show everything one had, but that would mean the redhead had no other Flame type to her.

Equally likely, the only reason Sonya's turned up in the colors it had was because she knew of them and knew it was possible.

Overall, this was pretty much inconclusive for trying to prove any theory over the other.

Well, that was Cherep and now Tatiana who had single Flames to them so far. If Dmitriy didn't turn up with a secondary Flame to him, or her foster sister didn't develop one later, she was going to start wondering how accurate her book was on other bits it had claimed.

She could easily see Dimitriy being a Rain-Storm, and if he did turn up and inform her he only had blue fire to him when he managed it then... it would still be all inconclusive.

Sonya was both running out of other people to gather information about Flames on and time to collect the data together. Once the older teen left home, that would be it for what Sun information she could get within their clan.

Unless the redheaded Sun decided to keep some sort of journal on it, but the younger thief didn't think Tatiana would do that for her. Out and about, it would be hard to both keep traveling around as much as she'd probably have to as well as write and keep a diary secure in a group containing three males and another girl.

The only thing she could learn from this incident was her theory on how fast a Flame user developed did have some effect on how they gained control. Her elder foster sister might have been the last one on the train in Dying Will Flames, but she outstripped the Rain in getting good at it.

"What were you thinking about? I was... well, pissed off myself." Sonya shrugged her slight embarrassment off when she thought of how girly her scream had been, and exactly how Arseniy had looked storming her own bedroom in response.

It was an incredibly stupid crush, she was not going to moon over the fact he did go to rescue her as if she had needed it.

It took her a few moments, but she belatedly realized Tatiana was blushing heavily.

"...nothing."

"Really?" She eyed her foster sister, especially the rather magnificent blush lighting up her fair skinned face. "It doesn't look like nothing."

"It's. Nothing." The young woman insisted stiffly, moving to pick herself up only to recall the fact her hand was on fire and jerk her left off the floor. She looked both disappointed and a little relieved to see her Flames were gone. "What...?"

"The next step is lighting up deliberately, and continually, until you end up getting a uniform result overall. Lose your will to be on fire, and it goes away." The information made her thoughtful, so she
stepped farther into her sister's room to help her up off the floor. "Are you sure you don't want to tell me? I promise not to laugh."

"Liar." Tatiana snipped snootily, the mock-accusing expression faded after a moment when she was back on her feet. "Well... to be honest, I kind of don't want to leave."

The younger thief blinked blankly up at her. "Why the hell not?"

Sighing, the redhead let herself fall backwards onto her bed. "Oh, my. Lord. You might be getting better, but I swear... your incompetence when it comes to people..."

"What?"

"I don't want to leave you here for another year, alone except for Cherep. But he's a boy, and we're finally actually sisters." Pouting outrageously, only half faked as far as she could tell, the other thief peered up at her hopefully. "I end up leaving, and you might go back to being an ice block the next time we see each other."

Sonya frowned slightly. "We can always use Lisa as a point for letter exchanges until either one of us actually has a phone number. But how did that light you up?"

"I noticed you didn't address the ice block concern." The Sun shot back, getting herself comfortable on her bed again. "I was thinking about kidnapping you and making you come with me and my gang, actually."

"...no."

"It'll be fun! I promise!"

"No, Tatiana."

"...please?"

Sighing, the Storm-Cloud started rubbing at her forehead. "We'll be fine, even if we have to do a yearly get together in Mafia Land. I do not intend to give you the cold shoulder."

Pursing her lips in a pout, the redhead shrugged and picked up a magazine on the floor to read. "That sounds like a good idea, actually."

Eyeing her foster sister, the younger thief decided she was being derailed from the question. Tatiana didn't want to answer, and there was little Sonya could do to make her.

She wasn't going to do anything but annoy the Sun if she kept asking, so she left it at that.

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**LXXXII (Monday the 22nd of February, 1965. Arseniy & Lisa’s home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)**

Since Sonya's usual times to visit Mafia Land was around late spring/early summer and once again near the tail end of fall, she had a decent amount of time to waste before Sinclair would be getting back to her on what she asked of him.

Renato, before Renato would be getting back to her.
She had to correct that in her head, or she'd slip up and continue to call the asshole Sinclair. It would be both frightfully rude, since he was doing her a favor in a place she had no good contacts or personal desire to be there, and rather petty of her.

Not that being petty would've stopped her, but she did occasionally like talking to the bastard.

They might have met when she had been twelve, but it hadn't stopped him from talking to her rather than at.

Of course, her physically tender age hadn't stopped him from drinking in front of her, flirting with just about every female that walked past them, or annoying her with just being himself. If she hadn't been as mature as she was, he could've been an incredibly bad influence on her.

While she waited, she got to see Lisa attempt to cram everything even remotely educational that any thief might find they needed into Tatiana's head. She and Cherep caught a little of that themselves, but the bulk of the attention was on the Sun's head.

The redhead didn't complain nearly as much as her foster sister expected, probably out of nerves over the idea of leaving what had been home for the first time.

The safecracker wouldn't be coming back after a week or two, or after a job was done and over. She'd be going out to first set up someplace for a home base, then to operate on her own in free territory or some other Mafiya groups'. How well she succeeded would either enable her and her gang to range farther and get into other jobs or drive her back to the clan's headquarters, but that was only if she did fail to get a foothold somewhere.

The only way the eldest of the foster siblings would be coming back was if she was here to visit or to live somewhere in the neighborhood herself.

Sonya guessed she did have a reason to be so panicky, even if she privately doubted the older girl would do badly out on her own. That was the point of having a gang, to help smooth the way and share the workload.

The bang of the backdoor slamming against the wall distracted all the members of the house.

Tatiana thankfully shut the math book, Cherep hiked up the chemistry one he was deciphering, and Sonya watched idly over the top of her history text.

"They sold it!"

Even Lisa was confused over that as a greeting. "What?"

Adrik skidded into the living room, giving an awkward shrug and a sheepish grin at the older woman's reproving look for his haste. "The Olivetti Company, they sold their electronics division."

The Storm-Cloud in the room set her book down slowly. For the love of fuck… if she had bartered with Sinclair for no reason she was going to kill someone. "Excuse you?"

"They were the ones developing the computer, the division sold I mean." Breathing rather hard, probably from running from wherever he had been to Tatiana the moment he heard the news, the cutpurse slunk into a seat next to his leader. "To General Electric, in America."

Hopefully, that would mean the younger thief could avoid Italy… but damn it all, that meant she hadn't had to ask Renato to check the company out.
Sonya sighed and rubbed her temple. "Then I'd have to steal you this computer thing in the US, right?"

"I… don't actually know." Adrik scratched the back of his head sheepishly. "It's so… well… such a new concept that it might still be with the company, and not with who they sold their branch off to. Depending on which it is, you might still have to go to Italy."

"You don't know?" She gave him a rather poisonous look. "Well then, go find out. This is your little baby project, I'm just stealing it when the time comes."

The young man flinched a little under her eyes, flicking his gaze to his gang leader but finding no help from that quarter either.

"You heard her, off you go." Tatiana waved him off, eyeing her own textbook as if it might grow some strange appendage and attack her. "She's already doing a lot for us, and this is what you wanted."

Adrik muttered something that, by the look Cherep shot him, he was lucky neither sister heard. He did obediently get up to leave. "I'll come back if there's any more news."

"Please and thanks." The younger thief muttered herself, thinking rather fondly of impaling him on her polearms.

"Sonya?" The Sun peered over at her curiously, probably trying to stall off another lesson session if she could. "Something the matter?"

"I made arrangements to have the company checked out while I was in Mafia Land last, and he might have just told me it hadn't needed to be done." Sighing, the Storm-Cloud shut her history book as well and set it on the floor of the living room. "If I don't have to go to Italy, I might have just bartered away a favor for no reason. I'm a little… irritated."

Lisa considered it, humming softly. "With who?"

"A… Italian Mafioso I know from doing my contract work." Sonya temporized, not willing to tell her entire foster family she knew and was dealing with a hitman.

Cherep was doing incredibly well as it was, but they were all mostly thieves. The vor he might not get were murderers before they became one, but there wasn't any way to fudge the fact a hitman killed for a living.

Even he knew what the term 'hit' meant in the underworld. It was ridiculously romanticized in the civilian world.

Stealing was markedly different than murder.

"Well… live and learn." The older woman shrugged. "Not everything is set in stone, and occasionally things like that happen. I hope it wasn't too dear of a price."

"…no. Not really. He's a bit of an ass, but he only asked that I addressed him by name."

…so far, at least.
Sonya had not actually equated her ability to Propagate force with being able to jump high on her own.

It was one of those things that started with an absolutely idle and banal comment that segued into something either remarkable or foolish… or both.

Cherep was fantastically good with basic mathematics. It was something he hadn't known before Lisa started to get his schooling up to par, and the young man was absorbed with engineering which just made it all the better when he started devouring math textbooks like she did everything else ever written.

That meant he got to physics and theoretical mathematics when his baby sister was still trying to make sense out of basic trigonometry again and why the hell she had to know it. Tatiana was even lagging behind their purple haired foster brother, and she had gotten to physics long before him.

It was in his physics books he showed her, that 'lift' was the application of force that exceeded the weight of an object dragging it down and the wind resistance. He was pretty sure she'd be able to get some height before her lack of wings brought her back to earth.

Sonya, rather pointedly, informed him that since humans weren't made to fly she'd keep her feet on the ground… thank you very much.

Cherep called her a chicken.

The incident didn't get any better from there.

Now… the Storm-Cloud was a little stuck. On their roof.

In broad daylight.

While she could… possibly… make it from their home's roof to a neighboring one, and thus find a way down that might not shatter her legs trying, someone would see and/or hear her.

Complete coin toss on who would spot her first, a civilian or a Mafiya member of the residential area.

The home they lived in was two stories, four bedroom, two baths, and a basement type affair. Three stories if you counted the attic space. It was also built like it had once been a barn.

Meaning it had a peaked roof, but sloping sides.

Sonya was stuck on the back of it, pretty much in full view of the backyard, from their neighbors' backyards, and maybe the windows of the house behind theirs. Cherep was being of no help at all, he was laughing a bit too hard to be able to breathe right.

She hoped he choked, it was a little uncomfortable sitting up here in early springtime.

His hilarity eventually drew notice, thankfully, from the other members of their home. Lisa stepped out herself to see what in the world amused him so much, and eventually caught sight of the youngest and her predicament.

The brunette, entirely unflappable even in the face of the weirdest incidents and always ready with support, simply smiled up at the thief stuck on their roof. "Need a little help?"
"…I didn't quite think this through well enough."

"No, it seems not." She eyed the distance, then spared a glance at her middle child. "Alright there, kiddo?"

"My… ribs… ha!"

"Alright then." Lisa wandered inside, probably to find a rope or ladder that would span the distance needed.

"I'm going to kick you in your damn ribs when I get down from here."

He spluttered, trying to stop laughing at her but being completely unable to.

Sonya sighed heavily, huddling a bit further into her probably way too thin coat.

It wasn't entirely his fault, she had contributed a fair bit into this little experiment. Neither of them had thought of getting down, only to figure out how high she could go alone. Figuring out how to apply her multiplied force into a downward direction had been a little tricky, during a few bounces of irregular height that told them Cherep had been onto something.

It hadn't been until Sonya foolishly tried to see how high she could go that she noted she might not do as well on the landing as she had been doing on the initial jumps. Hence her scramble for the roof, which at least wouldn't break her legs or at the very least twist an ankle on the impact.

She could manage a story worth of height on a drop as it was, maybe another half that on top. Two or three stories would hurt, especially if she hadn't been prepared to try and mitigate the damage.

If she didn't have the grace and flexibility nearly a decade of ballet and gymnastic training had given her, it was entirely possible she would've failed to grab hold of the roof and get herself somewhere stable.

While she could go up, getting down seemed to be her problem. If she ever did this again, a rooftop with a fire escape would be a preferable feature. At least, maybe some way to equal out the force down that would refrain from blowing out her knees if she wasn't careful on landing.

Nice to know, and it might just be a bit of talent that would save her down the line.

It would not excuse her supposed best friend of laughing at her when she got stuck.

Lisa came back outside with a rope and a simple grappling hook in hands, a whirl or three and the clawed metal went flying at her.

Catching it, Sonya hooked it to the weather vane a little higher up than she was sitting.

"Are you sure that's going to work?"

"Might not, but at least I'd be lower than I am now when I drop." She tugged the line a few times, once viciously, and swung herself off the side of the roof.

It groaned suspiciously, and bent a little under her no longer inconsiderable weight, but the young thief touched ground with it still upright.

Mostly.

Sonya gave the rope to Lisa, so she could try to unhook the grapple, and stalked over to her foster
"Oh, Cherep… hold still…"

LXXXIV (Monday the 29th of March, 1965. Mafia Land.)

"Olivetti is clean of any mafia involvement. Only shifty thing of note there seems to be a bit of sly misnaming."

Sonya pushed a cup of espresso closer to the hitman, silent offer for the drink she pre-ordered him and the waitress just dropped off when he reached the café. "Misnaming? This wouldn't have to do with the selling of a division to General Electric in the US, would it?"

Renato picked up one of the silver spoons that had come with her cup of tea, cleaning it off with a napkin then dipping it into the drink just to check for poison before taking possession of it. "Yes. So, you heard then?"

"It was fairly annoying to hear of." She wouldn't ever take another of these jobs ever again if she could help it. Brand new, fresh off the line, whatever, no more. "Would this misnaming have anything to do with the team in charge of the Programma 101 they were developing?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." He eyed her over the rim of his cup. "Will you now tell me why?"

"A favor, for someone rather dear to me. I am to steal one of those newly developed, overly glorified calculators. In return, I will be taught to use one myself." Her expression probably told him what she thought of that, being as it was merely a calculator no matter what functions it had. "If said someone had not asked, I would not have touched this job with such an unclear target objective."

"So, you will go all the way to Italia for this someone?"

"Likely sometime this summer, yes. Possibly only to check on the situation and ensure the terms of this job are as required." The Russian sighed lightly, blowing softly over the top of her drink. "So, one, at worst two, visits to Italy this year… alas."

The Italian across from her looked, frankly, insulted. "What is wrong with Italia?"

"Besides being the home of one of the largest and strongest mafia Famiglia in the world, which I do not wish to become known to if they take offense of a Russian thief on their home ground?"

His affronted expression melted into an amused mocking one, saluting her with his cup. "Well… yes. Point to you, little lady Sonya."

She rolled her eyes at him, setting her tea down. "Really, Renato. There is also all that nastiness left over in the underworld from the Second World War, as well. I do not think I heard if that had been resolved or not."

Humming instead of answering that concern Renato stretched out his lanky frame, so he was practically draped over his spindly café chair.

Since he had decided to stop being helpful, Sonya busied herself with her own drink again. She had two heists she had accepted to plan out, having taken twice the number of contracts she had been doing just to see if she could merely add a visit in the summer to her yearly habits or if she'd be better
off trying for the ten contracts for an apartment deal offered.

The thief needed that storage space, especially if she wanted to keep her books. Getting an apartment could wait another year or two.

Thankfully they were close enough together she might just be able to do one after the other, but they also weren't as... 'sanitized', as she had been doing.

Meaning if she got caught, she'd be dead and not just arrested.

Civilian targeting contracts were all pretty much milk runs, really. She had been using them to get used to taking contracts and being forced to plan little while traveling to them but being this was Mafia Land it meant there were very few of those to be had. She'd been lucky enough to get the two years' worth she had as it was.

This would be slightly different, in that her first mafia orientated target would be first up. They wouldn't be nearly as loose or easy in terms of internal security, or even as easily infiltrated as a civilian business or home.

It was likely she'd never get hold of a blueprint for these either.

"Anything interesting?"

"Not likely. They never seem to like giving me actually interesting jobs to do."

She caught the dismissive look he shot her paperwork. "Think you might find a different Hall more to your liking?"

"Like the intel brokers, you mean?"

Renato snorted disgustedly, which made her smirk.

Aside the Thieves' Hall, which was right across the street from the hitmen's version of it, there was also an office building for those that traded intelligence and another for the international network of fences on the same street. Farther down one end there was even an assassin's' watering hole, which usually only took the contracts the hitmen didn't. Down the other and across a street was a rather large bar/hotel that freelance 'made men' tended to frequent if they were unaffiliated and looking for a group to join.

The street was called 'Body Avenue', a play on both the fact you could hire just about any crook there or get someone killed... if you paid.

Since they both did work on the same street, technically, it helped explained why Sonya saw Renato every time she got into Mafia Land herself if not why they didn't tend to miss each other more frequently.

Even if they were all located on the same street, it didn't mean they all got along.

Most of the rest of Body Avenue viewed the hostel/bar/hotel for the unaffiliated as best thugs, grunts, and maybe a bullet catcher or two. They, in return, disliked just about everyone that sold their skills instead of finding someone to direct their loyalty to and having them make use of their skills.

The fences might work with the intel brokers but tended to get along better with thieves since they did supply them with more items to sell. The intel brokers preferred hitmen, because thieves were apparently a bit overly picky with the quality of information they got. The hitmen apparently didn't
really get along with anyone, especially not the assassins that lingered farther down the street.

Sonya was in and out of Mafia Land too much to get a good feel of her fellow thieves and what they liked, but it seemed as if they dealt with assassins better. Why she didn't know, just that she was unusual for her continued association with Renato.

LXXXV (Wednesday the 19th of May, 1965. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Once her doubled up contract work was over with, Sonya decided she might just be better off taking a season and trying to cram five contracts within three or four months.

If the jobs were at least lined up, so she wouldn't have to go too far out of her way back or forth, she'd be able to manage her Mafia Land job and following Cherep around the Continent.

Only taking a winter or winter-spring break to handle the rest of her work, at worst merely half a year at once away from keeping an eye on her best friend. If she did it, the whole thing could only be called a brief crime spree streak.

She'd try that next year, during the summer. If it worked, she had the next five to ten years of her life scheduled out already barring anything unexpected. Hopefully that would be for only long enough for her fellow Cloud to decide how the hell he was going to go about being a stuntman outside of a circus.

That part concerned her a touch, to be honest.

Stuntmen were not an injury-free group of people.

Sonya stopped in the middle of a sidewalk, wondered if her foster brother actually knew how to drive yet, and swore viciously in her head as she turned around to go home.

She had been driven out, mainly due to Tatiana's nerves sparking a bit of a competition between her and the purple want-to-be stuntman.

The redheaded Sun user had decided to try and recruit her little sister into her gang, so the sisters wouldn't have to be apart... or for their relationship to deteriorate any. Cherep had overheard one such attempt, made a rather stupid comment of getting there first so she would be tagging along after him, and thus why she got out of the house most days.

…and they called her socially incompetent.

The time away had at least allowed her the time to investigate and control her Cloud patrolling nature and decide that it wasn't crime that irritated her but stupidity happening.

Only perk so far, really.

She was at least mostly sure the tension at home was all in good fun, just a little more sibling rivalry than they ever really had to deal with before. Tatiana got a distraction, Cherep got to brag a little, and Sonya was... annoyed.

The young teen didn't even get halfway home before her best friend managed to track her down instead. That was a usual enough situation that she gave him her attention instead of asking if he had
been taught to drive yet.

Him seizing her by the wrist and dragging her along confused her, she had thought he was out of this habit, until well after they arrived at one of the fairgrounds near the edge of Moscow and she saw a specific sign.

It was an advertisement for a motorcycle race, the prize being the very motorcycle the winner won on.

The Storm-Cloud supposed that answered if he ever learned how to drive. If he was this excited over the prospect of winning one of those deathtrap machines, obviously he had some experience to tell by. Enough to think he might win against someone that drove one for a living.

"I suppose there is a reason for this…?"

"I can afford the entrance fee." He came to a stop right up next to the sign-up booth, flashing her a bright, eager grin. "So, I'm going to try. Thing is, our bet was for one."

"…yes? However. One, we don't know who won that yet and two, it's mostly just for the funds to buy one."

"Which means if I win, we may need to change my stipulations on the bet."

Sonya narrowed her eyes on him. "You want to renegotiate your end."

"…maybe?" Cherep tacked on, flashed her another boyishly bright grin. "I might want a different motorcycle in a few years. So only if I win. Erm… in both cases, actually."

She looked at him, at the racetrack set up, and then at the crowd. "And why am I here, again?"

"Moral support?" He didn't have the genetics to sprout a lot of facial hair, meaning he generally got away with not shaving every day. The stubble when he forgot still seemed to itch, given how often he would scratch at it. "Please?"

"Are you nervous? You've only been wanting one for five-six years now." She rolled her eyes at the sheepish twitch of his features, running a hand through shoulder-length blonde hair to keep it out of her eyes in the wind. "Go win yourself an ear-breaking deathtrap, you dork. We'll talk later, after you decide what you want."

When he ran off to sign himself up, she took steps to ensure she had a good view of both the finish line and the bulk of the track.

Sonya, very firmly, put her hands over her ears and resolved to buy her friend a helmet for his birthday.

She spent most of the race despairing over the likely fate of her hearing.

LXXXVI (Wednesday the 19th of May, 1965 continued. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Tatiana's expression could only really be called pained. "It's… very loud."
"I know." Sonya informed her flatly.

Cherep won himself a motorcycle. A red and black 1965 Planeta 350, built by the Izhevsk Machine Building Plant.

Problem was, they were thieves. Safecracking was just one reason why a good thief needed equally good hearing, and loud machinery like that did not help them there.

She was now nursing a headache, too. "I think… he can make it quieter."

The foster sisters had taken refuge in the house, since it seemed as if the ear-breaking noisemaker would not be shutting off until their foster brother got over his glee at winning it.

"Isn't that against the point of a motorcycle?" The redhead questioned lightly, stretching her long limbs out on the couch. "I mean, he has been looking forward to this for… how long, again?"

Her younger sister sighed heavily, sprawling herself out on the safecracker's legs in revenge for crowding her out of her little corner. "Way too damn long, honestly."

She'd be a little concerned for her spot as Cherep's best friend, if said best friend didn't already look a little in absolute love with his metal bike. Lover was entirely a spot the damn motorcycle could occupy, as far as she was concerned.

A little disturbing, but all the bloody bike's.

"So now you're slumming it with me, I feel so special." Tatiana mocked lightly, jostling her legs and by association Sonya's ribs. "Now what are you going to do? I'm going, Cherep's got a way to leave himself, and that just leaves you now."

"Probably leave sometime after you finally go."

Sighing a bit herself, the redhead pulled herself upright. "Yeah… about that. We're leaving in two weeks."

"Already?"

"No point in lingering. I'll be back for your birthday, and consequently Christmas, but that's really only to handle my gang's clan dues for the next two years." The Sun's usually cheerful mien faded a little, and the young woman quirked a wry smirk for her little sister. "This time next year, we may not even be in the USSR anymore."

Sonya blinked up at her, thinking.

It was going to be odd to be living at home with Tatiana gone. Ten years living in close quarters with each other, while it hadn't exactly started out well… she at least like to think the older girl was a very good friend now.

"Suppose I'm just waiting on Cherep to leave for good myself. Poor Arseniy. He's going to have to deal with Lisa after we're all gone, and she gets mopey over the empty house."

The confident young woman that grew out of that jealous little girl she met long ago scratched at her cheek, pursing her lips and making a show of thinking hard. "You want to… do Christmas every year? Here, I mean? I don't exactly want to never look back, this place was a lot of fun while we were growing up."
"I don't think we can manage that right away... but in a couple years I wouldn't mind trying." She gave the older teenager a smirk of her own. "I promise to drag Cherep back with me."

She barked a laugh, tugging her legs free to sit up fully. "I'll hold you to that. I also finished what I could of your little handbook for Dying Will Sun Flame users, it's on your desk along with the rest of the possible Sun gems I've never got to work for me. Keeping a couple of the heliodor crystals for myself."

The younger thief sighed again, drawing a hand down her face. "Alright. I suppose I should go see what Dmitriy managed on his end and write that all up, shouldn't I?"

"Might be a good idea to get that one out of the way." Tatiana nodded, rising to her full height and stretching out again. As if she hadn't gotten more than her own fair share of space on the couch.

"I reserve the right to ask questions like an annoying brat when I want to."

"Noted. It's not like you hold off on that as it is."

Sonya rolled her eyes, finally moving to get upright herself. "I'm going to write out a full copy of all that I've got for you to keep. I'm leaving the jewels here, under Arseniy's control, but... well... it seems as if when there is one Dying Will Flame user there is another somewhere nearby. So, you might want to have a quick reference if you find someone else."

Like Galina, because it was entirely possible the other female thief was a Lighting user without the active Flames.

"How many of those do you intend to write?"

"...five. One for our clan to keep, one for Arseniy, one for you, one for me, and one more just in case."

Her wrist was already hurting just thinking about it, and while that extra one wasn't entirely needed it was best to have extra than not enough. She had already learned that over the gemstone issue. Dmitriy could keep it for now.

The stripped copies would remain with their respective array of gems, being as the Storm-Cloud wondered what parts of Dying Will Flame knowledge was true and which ones were merely assumptions propagated by rumor. Not everything written in books was true, and she'd been disproving a few things already in her best book on Flame users as it was.

She couldn't objectively look at herself anyways. Best to leave it to those that hadn't been opinionated and biased a little beforehand.

"Well you best get cracking on that. I've got to go pack up my room."

"...what in hell are you going to do with that beanbag?"

"You mean you don't want it?"

She stared at Tatiana, shook her head, and climbed the stairs ahead of her.

"Hey! What's wrong with my beanbag chair?"

"The fact you're colorblind."
Gleefully abandoning Tatiana to managing her mass of clothing just as the Sun had done to her and her books some years ago, Sonya instead worked on making clean and full copies of her research on Dying Will Flames.

Her wrist ached even before she put pen to paper, but with a lack of a typewriter in the house she was forced to do everything by hand.

The younger thief carefully copied out her work of simplifying the Flame types and how to identify them by personality alone, wrote in the little she had on Skies and left twice the amount of space blank as she had for their application and nature since she didn't know much of anything on them.

Same for Sun and Rain, adding Tatiana's own work in after the little Sonya had done and what Dmitriy had learned over the years in their respective sections and skipping space for the polarized opposites.

Then she got to the Storm section.

To be brutally honest, she had not managed much with her Storm Flames as she had with her Cloud one.

The best she could do was atomize things... *everything* her Flame touched. Even if she hadn't wanted everything to begin flaking away under her red fire, her Storm was virulent enough to eat everything anyways.

She had started with a wooden board, at first. Trying to carve into it, or strip it bit by bit. Instead the board Disintegrated almost immediately, and successive experimentation hadn't improved that to any manageable degree.

Painting one of her practice pieces hadn't helped, it Disintegrated just as easily as an unpainted one.

Sandwiching a wooden board between two others didn't change anything, her Storm ate through all of it. Had she not been holding the testing materials in one hand, it might have tried eating away the ground too.

Getting her hands on stone slabs and then putting a wooden board between them resulted similarly to her earlier tries.

There seemed to be *nothing* Storm Flames wouldn't eat away at a steady or fast rate, other than the Flame user that called them forth. Even Sonya's clothing hadn't withstood the ability, though thankfully she only lost a coat to her inner fire rather than the very shirt off her back.

She hadn't tried one of her Flame resistant Bec de Corbins yet, and probably wouldn't at this rate. Not even one of the four new tungsten ones she got commissioned last year at a small local jewelry store and picked up this one for testing.

The Storm-Cloud gratefully liked buying jewelry more than stealing them, and those had to be custom ordered as miniaturized weapons of war 'display pieces' weren't a popular style.

While her Storm Flames were still useful even in an uncontrolled state, it wasn't exactly something she'd be able to use on the sly. It was more like the very last option, if her own will and Cloud-
imbued strength failed she could always melt things from reality instead.

The best result with them, that she ever got no matter what she tried to do, was with a pointed crystal of red tourmaline. Even if Sonya could summon her Flames without a stone needed to focus them for her, the tourmaline cut into a teardrop shape worked almost as a laser pointer instead of as a wash of Disintegration fire that ate everything.

That didn't mean to say the Storm Flames didn't eventually eat everything anyways, but it started slowly and from only one point at all.

She went back to the store that did her tungsten Bec de Corbins and asked they cut a crystal she supplied in the shape of a slim skeleton key. That had been way too amusing to give a miss to, and if she managed to figure out how not to overly power Storm Flames in the future her red crystal key would work as a master key to everything.

By melting the internal workings of any lock, but the point stood.

Even if she couldn't manage that in the future, the delivery of Storm Flames into the mechanics of a lock would allow her to open doors or lids before it Disintegrated. Both the container/door itself and whatever/whoever was behind it.

The only problem was that she wouldn't be able to use that key in anything but a dire emergency or within mafia held territory.

Something *Disintegrating* without apparent cause other than red fire in front of a civilian would give rise to a panic that she wouldn't be able to stop. In the unlikely event such a civilian kept his or her head and tried to investigate how and why, the lack of physical agents apparent to cause such a thing would either incite the same kind of panic or trip some poor civilian onto the existence of spiritual Flames of the Sky without mafia involvement to keep it quiet.

Same reason why she didn't copy fakes with Cloud Flames to help cover her tracks, other than the point of it taking time and power she didn't usually have to spare. If one winked out of existence at an ill-advised moment, like say when someone was filming it due to whatever reason… the obvious lack of *how* could likely give police agencies around the world a clue to several other incidents that probably traced back to Mists and a few other unwary Flame users that got caught in bad situations.

She might use that if she was dealing with other mafia people, but not something she'd ever do when just out stealing from civilians.

Sonya didn't want a visit from the Vindice. She had only heard rumors so far, only when in Mafia Land, about them appearing when Omertà was breached or the concords between major groups was violated and it risked large-scale turf wars happening. Knowing *what* and *who* they were once made her not want to meet one, or touch that situation with a ten-foot-pole.

She grudgingly added in the very little she found out about Storm Flames, then pointedly turned the pages to start in on Lightning users and their quirks.

That one she knew Tatiana might need, so she was especially careful in copying that down.

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LXXXVIII (Thursday the 3rd of June, 1965. Ivrea, Italian Republic.)

Sonya didn't like doing goodbyes.
Instead, she followed Tatiana's group out to the first leg of their journey. The Sun's gang would be lurking around the southern edge of the USSR for her first few months on their own, close enough for getting help in an emergency but far enough away not to suggest they were Zolotov members on the hunt.

She also handed over the full result of her Dying Will Flame research on all of them, which had more holes in it than she liked but was also comprised of everything they had compiled and sought out together. Before she left them to it, the Storm-Cloud did inform her foster sister that she could be reached by sending a letter to Mafia Land in care of the Thieves' Hall.

Once the sisters broke off, Sonya headed further out.

Italy awaited her, especially if she was going to clear off the favor she was doing Adrik sometime this century.

Olivetti was headquartered in Ivrea, province of Turin, in the Piedmont region of northwestern Italy. It was at least far enough into the mainland part of the country the thief could take the train lines the entire way and not have to switch to a ship or ferry to finish her traveling faster.

The basin the town thrived in did have a fair share of lakes dotted around it, but as this was business related and not just traveling for the sake of it, the thief ignored that.

Roberto Olivetti, who had left his namesake company late last year, had been the one that suggested a table-top computer about three years ago. From all reports that Adrik managed to learn of and was confirmed by Renato, while the electric division of the company was now in General Electric's hands the team that developed the idea for him into a working project did something tricky.

They changed their project's definition from 'computer' to 'calculator', because no matter the memory it had for all of eight calculations it was still a computing number machine. Renaming the project spared them from being sold, and part of the mechanical division of the Olivetti company.

Thus the 'computer' was still in Italy under Olivetti, technically.

Sonya had last heard some conflicting reports on whether the computer would still be marketed. Which confused her, because computers would become something greater from this clunky beginning. It might just be confusing because she knew what kind of fire it would light under other companies, but if a company had done all that developing then why were they waffling over the decision to start selling it?

Her first order of business would be to find out what the bloody hell was going on, then if she could steal one of the damn things here or not.

Which, as an obviously blonde-haired Barbie doll from the inner Soviet Union, would be harder than just asking around. Thankfully the country was in the middle of the Italian economic miracle, meaning that while she stuck out like a sore thumb among the dark haired and mostly tanned natives they wouldn't be necessarily automatically hostile to her.

The only major problem was that she didn’t speak fluent Italian. Hers was broken, barely enough to speak simple things, read a slight bit more, and maybe ask for basic help.

She hadn't been able to devote a lot of time to learning it between traveling around and stealing.

She did wonder if Renato would mind helping her out a little on that. Native speaker as he was, he was the best to teach it to another.
...on the other hand, he was an Inverted/Soft Sun. Those Dying Will Flame users and the word 'help' didn't go together well for the student.

Sonya sighed again, put her 'Russian to Italian' dictionary into her luggage, and waited for the train to finally pull into her station.

For the time being, she was pretending to be a backpacker. Foreign, but also notable as such. She'd ditch the ruse and her 'backpack' in a hotel or hostel somewhere, then sneak her way to the Olivetti company's manufactory to scout it out once night fell.

If she did do a bit of theft, the fact whoever saw her knew she went into her room or apartment alone and didn't use the door to leave again would supply her with some cover. Even if she got caught sneaking around.

With some time to kill, the Russian played tourist. She found the bed and breakfast she'd be using, the Olivetti Company factory, a castle, a cathedral, and that was as far as she got before she found a library.

A capitular library of religious books, but it did distract her for a good few hours. Not letting herself walk out brazenly with a tome or scroll had been hard, but religious books were something she had to draw a line at.

There had to be one somewhere, or Sonya really would have a serious addiction problem with the written word.

Having killed her mood to go sightseeing, not even seeing the cool and high bridge on the edge of town made it better, she checked into the bed and breakfast using her broken Italian and a large number of euros.

Which the nice elderly lady pressed back on her, only taking as much as the price for a night when the thief double checked why.

Then, after spending enough time until dark fall brushing up on her Italian with her host in the vain hope it would help her at least a little, she went hunting for answers.

She had to resort to copying down whole reports and notes, then hightailing it back to her room over the course of three nights to make sense of what she got. At least the elderly couple that ran the bed and breakfast were nice about her taking up their extra room for four days.

They even helped her practice her Italian even more than just the basics, laboring under the mistaken impression she was looking for a good city to find a man and settle down in.

Days of painstaking translations, four major errors that she had to go back to correct, and three nearly incomprehensible pages of notes later, and the Russian Storm-Cloud finally knew what was going on.

The project lead, one Pier Giorgio Perotto, had gotten fed up with the stalling his company was doing on his project and would be traveling to the 1964-65 New York World Fair in order to first show off then sell the Programma 101 to the public. With or without his company's permission.

She would only have to wait until October, and she could avoid stealing in Italy entirely.

Vongola's reach spread farther than the region their 'Iron Fort' resided within, which it seemed as if no one outside of Italian mafia, the Famiglia itself or their allies knew where it was, but the 'rules' laid down by them was enforced widely enough to be… suggestive.
Instead of risking more that she could know of before she trod on someone else's territory, it was
time to plan a visit to the good 'ol US of A.

LXXXIX (Tuesday the 3rd of August, 1965. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet
Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Again?" Cherep protested from her bedroom's doorway. "You just got back."

Sonya paused in her repacking, because he had a point.

After clearing up the situation in Italy with the first-generation computer design, she had gone
southwest to a port town to hitch a ride to Mafia Land. One-month round trip later to handle her third
heist of the year, the thief had returned to Moscow to resupply for a trip to and from America via the
Mafia Land smuggling routes.

Once she stole the Programma 101, it would have to be shipped to Arseniy's care using the same
route until Adrik could pick it up while she went back to Mafia Land herself and finished the last two
heists she would do this year alone. That would take her right to the end of the year, and she was
probably only just home long enough for her brother's birthday, so she had planned on gifting him a
damn helmet before she left again.

Maybe a month or two of rest, of which her own fifteenth birthday and Christmas were included in,
then she'd have to start next year's rounds of heists to keep the storage unit she would be packing up
her wealth of books within until she had a permanent home.

"Well… yes." She considered her best friend closely. "Hey… Cherep?"

He gave her an inquiring wet-kitty look, which really didn't work like it had when he'd been nine
anymore.

"Want to come to America with me? I'm going to the World Fair, mainly to steal something… but I
think we might be able to fit in some sightseeing for a week or so."

Cherep's expression as he floundered between hesitant, not wanting to be involved on one of her
jobs, and excited, wanting to go just because sounded interesting, was fascinating to watch.

Sonya really should have thought of this before. Tatiana being gone left a rather big hole in the
house, much worse than the week-long absences they were used to when she went off with her gang
for either practice or minor jobs. With her bouncing in and out so much this year, that left Cherep
home alone with Lisa and Arseniy.

There was little for him to do in the neighborhood without his sisters around, besides learn the ins
and outs of his Russian made motorcycle and maybe visit Dmitriy once or twice a month.

She already knew he continued to fail to go to Aleksandr's without her and Ziven had spilled the
beans of how he got typically treated when she wasn't around, so she didn't greatly mind anymore.

Besides, the two of them should at least get used to traveling together.

There would be a lot of it between next year's end and whenever it was she got fed up with it and
demanded him to buy a house for them to use as a home base. They had done a small bit on Cherep's
first visit to Mafia Land, but that had been under 'adult supervision' and had Tatiana as a distraction.
Speaking of…

"If you want to come with, grab whatever you would need for a month and shove it somewhere portable." She informed him, returning her attention to folding her newly laundered traveling clothes. "And your paperwork, all of it."

America was currently in the middle of fighting in the Vietnamese war, and there was a draft in place. She did recall that much at least. He would need to prove he wasn't a citizen probably regularly, even if a World Fair would be attracting a lot of foreign attention from all corners of the world.

Vietnam was not something she even wanted to touch until well after the last of the chemical warfare was over and done with. Napalm and Agent Orange were just two things she didn't ever want to know if her foster brother could survive contact with.

That was part of her drive to leave the USSR herself, her biological home country was getting into some questionable nuclear testing and she couldn't recall if asbestos was a problem over here just like it would become in the States.

The Storm-Cloud didn't really care if the nuclear testing over here were supposedly for 'peaceful' purposes. She was damn sure the lake made by one such attempt, Lake Chagan, was now radioactive and would be for years.

One of the things she could clearly recall was that one of the cities would become just as hot as that lake, or it might have been region, but the point was the same.

She'd like to go somewhere safer, thank you very much.

"How… long are you planning on being there?" Cherep sounded a bit off, and a glance at his face didn't help her figure out why.

"All I know is that my target will be there in October, which could mean any part of the month." Sonya tucked the traveling hygiene supplies away into their own pocket, musing on the fact she seemed to live out of her luggage on a regular basis. "So, at best maybe a week at worst the entire month of October."

He ran his hand through his shaggy but short purple hair, considering it. "That's the New York one, right? The one that was implemented even if they didn't have permission for it?"

"Yes, which means it might not be all that great but it will be different enough to us so we'll not care much."

"Think there will be anything on mechanics or engineering there?"

"Its theme is influenced by the space race and the industry heavy culture over there." She informed him, shutting her luggage closed to check it would. "Might be."

"Like… maybe Harley Davidson?"

Cherep and his damn motorcycles. She shot him a narrow look over one shoulder. "Probably."

"Well," the absolute, utter brat informed her with a smirk, "we never did fix the terms of our bet, and you may just still owe me a motorcycle."

"If you're coming with me, go pack already."
Lisa had given them an entirely knowing and accepting smirk when they announced Cherep would be going with Sonya to America, so the older couple had the house to themselves for the first time in a decade.

It had been a touch sad, which made the younger woman weakly echo it.

The thief was mostly living on the road now, she had spent less than half the year in Moscow and wouldn't really be going directly back with her brother after they were done in the US. She had two more heists to do this year for Mafia Land, to get a storage locker/unit they would shove her books and what little Tatiana decided to keep herself next year.

She might be able to take Christmas, and consequently her birthday, off. Then she had to start managing the last of her loose ends in Moscow, like her father.

Next year was also the year she'd be leaving home for good, once her fellow Cloud picked a semi-decent circus to join. He had found a couple, but after she poked into it she hadn't liked a few of the rumors that persisted among the respective members of the groups about their experiences on the very edges of the Soviet Union.

It seemed as if Lisa already knew Sonya was half gone already, merely waiting on her best friend even if those plans hadn't been stated as much to them in so many words.

Arseniy had given her an incredibly awkward hug when he saw them off at the train station himself, which… again, touching but awkward. There was also a small fact of a childhood crush she still had the lingering remnants of, which didn't really help the situation nor Cherep’s curiosity at all.

She seriously wondered what they would do after she was gone, as it didn't look like either would be taking on more foster kids to raise. Even if there were new Mafiya brats in with Tatiana's gang leaving the neighborhood, no one was now living in the redhead's bedroom turned guest room yet.

Quite frankly, she wondered what their foster mother would do to occupy her time now that there weren't two little girls in need of some guidance of the womanly sort.

"Sonya?"

"Hmm?"

Cherep turned his attention away from the scenery their train was chugging past, peering over at her curiously. "I probably should've asked this before, but… how are we getting to the US?"

"By way of my other workstation." Answered the Storm-Cloud just as casually as he asked, turning a page in her paperback novel. Lloyd Alexander's *The Black Cauldron*

Not exactly new to her but still a good reread. Even if it was just freshly published.

"Err… great. Fantastic."

"Oh, stop pouting. We're not even going to disembark, it's just a pit stop midway through the Atlantic Ocean." She dug one-handed into her backpack, digging up a Russian to English phrasebook. "You might want to take a look at this anyways, so the extra time will only help."
"It's always a book with you, isn't it?" He took it from her anyways, giving it a weird look. "Why would you even have this? I didn't think English was a language you spoke."

"It is, actually. I learned... years ago." Sonya wondered, vaguely, if she should put effort into making Renato and Cherep meet since they would be nearby.

Then again, they were vastly different men. Her brother was still way too damn nice, he even let Dmitriy take possession of his beloved motorcycle for the duration of their trip. Mainly to ensure the bike would come to no harm being left for what could be a month in a Moscow fall/early winter season, but a little because the mechanic had begged to be allowed to play with it.

The thief wasn't sure if the motorcycle would be in one piece when they got back, but it was likely the Rain already figured that if he did something to Cherep's baby then she would do something to his head.

Renato was a charming asshole, but he was still a hitman with the screwed morals of a magnetized compass.

That... might not be a good mix, now that she thought of it.

"I take it your on translator duties when there, then?"

"Of course, unless you prove to be a linguistic genius somehow I don't see how you could gain fluency in just over a week." Sonya tapped the spine of her book thoughtfully, looking at him over the top of it. "If you had been, you might not have sucked as badly with the French or German immersion practice Lisa had us go through."

"Or the Italian?" He asked dryly, which did make something twinge guiltily in her.

That had been rather sprung on him by surprise, when she had asked their mother for a month or so of Italian practice after her one visit to the region. The fluency she got by just speaking with that elderly couple had helped her immensely, and so she asked for more on a month she spent at home before this trip.

Cherep hadn't known Italian, and Tatiana was gone already. He ended up keeping his mouth shut for a couple weeks if the older woman had been around.

She was very sorry about that. Her brother did pick up a bit, but not nearly as much as she had to her.

Learning Japanese would have to be done on her own but she had a lot of languages under her belt as it was, so she didn't mind that was going to have to be her own effort.

"Really, I am so sorry about that."

"The smirk you're wearing says otherwise." He refuted dryly, cracking open the books she gave him.
XCI (Monday the 16th of August, 1965. Mafia Land Ferry.)

Cherep might not be disembarking when their ship docked at Mafia Land, but Sonya would be.

Mostly to change money from one currency to another, the Soviet Union's ruble to American dollars, and partially to check in just in case Tatiana sent her something. She hadn't, but no news was good news in their business.

She got semi-decent rates at the money changers that had set up shop right in the middle of the arrival port terminal, though she lost about ten kopeks per ruble to switch a decent amount over. Technically she was trading a ruble for ninety-three cents and due to the slight imbalance, she got a small amount of her euros swapped over to make up the difference.

With their traveling funds ready to go, Sonya returned to the ship. It really was merely a stopover rather than an actual destination so there wasn't a whole lot of time left.

It wasn't until she got back to the berth she was sharing with Cherep that she cracked open a few of the brochures that had been available in the currency exchange branch. Money laundering wasn't a skill she ever expected to know herself, but it could be interesting to see what services the island had for it.

Then the modern European history she studied as Rachel came back with a vengeance and gave her a headache.

As far as she had known, studied, and then got a degree in another life; the euro hadn't been in circulation until just before the twenty-first century. It had been an idea suggested just after World War One, the very forerunner of the attempts to simplify the various currencies Europe was the European Unit of Account. That had only happened in the late 70s, which had been followed by the European Currency Unit four years later until the actual currency named 'euro' came into being on the first of January 1999.

Yet… Sonya had been using euros since their first Mafia Land visit, nearly four years ago. It was practically the only currency the various shops and services on the island used, though certain places could make change in other ones by request.

She picked through several more brochures, which were pretty much mostly things the island's various banks offered as services. Offshore accounts, round-robin investments for the actual laundering of cash, the currency exchange and their current rates, advisement for other countries and their tax laws, a couple warnings for counterfeiters about trying to exchange fakes on Mafia land.

It was only when she reached the few handouts on various denominations available and where they were accepted that she got any sort of answer for the euro question.
The 'euro' was billed as a mafia-wide approved fixed currency, something that had taken some effort to implement but allowed a standard rate to be enforced for certain services.

Apparently, that had once been a problem. Certain merchants/services had been competing to be cheap and affordable but only if you paid in their currencies of choice. The 'new' euro was claimed to have fixed that, even though the blonde thief knew of a French restaurant that rather preferred being paid in francs if possible and tended to give a slight discount if so.

How much all of that was true or not was questionable, as her only source was currently a Mafia Land flyer for it, but it billed the implementation as a 1957 occurrence.

Which beat out what Rachel had known as the first implemented version of a spanning European currency, the Unit of Account, by about twenty years. It wasn't entirely widespread, but enough so that if you traveled in Europe the best bet was to carry euros on you unless you knew what country you would wander into next.

Sonya tucked the fold out into her current leisure book, trying to adjust to that.

What else had a widely active mafia influenced?

As far as she had been able to look, there wasn't anything else that stood out in history… though, of course, the 'euro' was probably modern history and not in older editions of textbooks for the subject.

…or as modern as possible given that the Storm-Cloud was somehow living in a variation of Rachel's history.

She sighed and gave up on worrying about it, as there was nothing she could do nor was there anything she had to do about it. The euro just was, thirty-forty years before it should have become a thing.

Another Berlin Wall thing, from the look of it. It had happened, a hell of a lot sooner than she had expected, but at least it was a good thing.

Rather, a thing that helped ensure she wasn't getting underpaid for her work rather than a 'for the good of Europe and preventing WW3' thing.

"Hey, Sonya? Why... are there fake passports and identification papers being given out?"

She broke out of her thoughts, peering at the paperwork Cherep had walked into their stateroom with. He had two passports, what seemed to be French birth certificates, and was fingering a driver's license that looked to be issued in the same country.

"Huh. I wasn't sure if they would get done that fast."

He gave her a suspicious look, cracking one of the passports open to compare the names and dates given. "It's me... but I'm sure my name isn't 'Charles Monraeu'... and I'm sure I'm not born in France."

"Of course, you're not. It's a name close enough to your own you can answer to and French is a language we speak." She left her luggage alone next to her bed and stalked over to snag her own fake passport. "Mafia Land has an arrangement with certain ports and port authorities around the world. This is kind of like a mafia work visa, in a way. I'll let us into the country for a certain amount of time, until the fakes are removed from their immigration database when said time runs out and we need to be gone."
Her brother's expression was a fair cross between bemused and incredulous. "Really? They're going to just let us wander in and out of the country… just like that?"

"No. They're going to let me wander in and out of the country for a hefty price, you're just along for the ride."

Mafia Land was pretty much the height of 'international' in the underworld. It could work as a smuggling point for all sorts of different things, but the main use was getting in and out of countries in a fast hurry.

It might be cheaper and at least for long term to do it on your own, but if you needed speed Mafia Land's ship routes were the best way.

"I think you've blown whatever faith I had in international border patrols."

"Oh good. At least I did something this week."

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XCII (Thursday the 19th of August, 1965. Skidaway Island, Chatham County, Georgia, United States of America.)

Cherep's deadpan expression as they moved through the mafia version of immigration was a work of art. Given Sonya had pretty much done everything from steal to beat the tar out of fellow Mafiya brats in front of him… that was saying something.

Both sets of passports got looked at and the fakes stamped, their real ones secreted away in a false pocket of her luggage. Their fake paperwork got verified as coming up 'legal', a short reminder given on the deadline they had to be out of the country by, then they were released into the southern edge of the state of Georgia.

"If you really want to lose faith in humanity, I could tell you that no one there was actually a legal representative of the US government. They are from the mob that control the drug trade and smuggling rings in this part of the country, who get paid a decent amount to let this kind of thing happen." She informed him in French, smirking at his less than impressed look. "Oh, come on, Charles. It's probably not the most illegal thing you've ever done."

The thief's French was attracting a bit of attention, curious more than suspicious, but not nearly as much as her supposedly native Russian would have. Her fellow Cloud, having already been warned repeatedly about speaking it, responded in the same language.

"Again, not helping… Sarah." He pulled a face at her given alias, grabbing the door handle before she could. "Who came up with these names?"

"Trust me, they do get worse if you try to complain."

Mafia people either had no sense of humor or had a very twisted, strange one. She was just happy there was some measure in place that ensured at least initials remained the same.

'Sarah Noel' wasn't the best name she had ever gotten stuck with using that service, but it wasn't the worst either. She really preferred the 'Serra Novae' identity she used in Italy.

They were posing as a couple, just simply because she didn't want to dye her hair purple to make the cover work as siblings. The purple fading would turn pink with her blonde hair, and she didn't want
to go around with pink hair for a couple months until it faded the rest of the way or grew out.

Trying to figure out how to bleach Cherep's hair was entirely more effort than Sonya really wanted to bother with.

"Good morning! How can I help such a lovely couple?"

Blinking and turning her gaze from her supposed 'significant other' to the salesman with a very painful looking smile, the thief tried for her own awkward smile. "Yes? We are here to rent an automobile. We will not need it longer than a month."

"Oh good, you do speak English."

"Hey, can we get a sports car here?"

"Well… one of you do."

She gave the salesman a smaller but more real smile, backhanding her brother in the gut maybe a touch to hard. "Excuse me a moment, sir. We do not need a damn muscle car for this trip."

The man gave an awkward head bob, hesitated for a moment, then wandered off to prepare some paperwork for them.

"If you're going to be… 'moving' something in a fast hurry we might." He informed her haughtily, sneaking a couple glances out to the parking lot and all the shiny cars sitting in the sunlight they had walked past. "Might as well have one ready and not need it than get chased down driving something old and clunky."

"Moving is the best term you can come up with?" Sonya scoffed lightly but knew herself well enough to start calculating out how much she'd have to shell out for his desired model of car. "And Charles, my work is not so shoddy it will require us to pull out like that. I'm insulted you even suggested it."

"Sorry, sorry." Neither looking nor sounding very contrite, Cherep scratched the back of his head and tried for a very charming smile. "Please? For me? Oh… for my birthday!"

"I gave you your present already."

"Ah… miss? I need you to fill a few forms out. Only a formality, really, but the company needs to know where you're going, and a few insurance liability papers signed by the… uh, driver."

The blonde thief frowned at him, casting her fellow Cloud a glance of his own before walking over to see what it was they wanted her to fill out. "I don't suppose you have something 'sporty'? My boyfriend wants something fast, you see."

The salesman might be painfully ill-equipped to deal with French speaking customers, one of the reasons why they weren't in Louisiana, but he was still a man trying to sell a rental car for a company. He grinned like a shark, probably thinking of conning them into renting something highly expensive and not suited for long travel plans.

However, he was dealing with a professional thief. She knew cheating, dishonesty, and lies just as much as the next thief.

Sonya got a Cadillac Eldorado convertible instead of the compact Buick Skylark he tried to foist off on them, mainly on the tiny detail of luggage space. Which honestly wasn't much due to the fact they
both were convertibles, but at least the Cadillac had more.

She also had to pay a lot more than she had planned on for their security deposit, but it was entirely worth it to see Cherep light up when she pointed out their red and white car for the month.

"You're driving."

"Damn right I am... wait, why?" He paused in the middle of loading the trunk to suspiciously look at her. "You don't want to drive?"

"We used your driver's license to rent the damn thing, and I don't have one nor do I know how to drive." She informed him flatly, sliding into the passenger seat. "But please remember they drive on the other side of the road here."

Sonya did know how to drive... just not with a stick. She couldn't work a clutch and had yet to get Dmitriy to teach her either.

There were automatic transmissions in some of the rental cars, but not the one they got. She supposed that was something her mechanically inclined foster brother could teach her too, though she didn't know when he went in to get a license himself.

Probably at the same time the Rain had gotten his done, actually.

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**XCIII (Wednesday the 15th of November, 1965. World's Fair, Corona Park, Queens, New York, United States of America.)**

"That's what you're here for?" Cherep asked lightly, eating a rather quick lunch as they watched the reveal of the Programma 101. "That's pretty cool, actually."

"Mmm." Sonya wasn't listening to him very hard, she was eyeing the pavilion the Olivetti Company was using as their stage speculatively.

He wasn't surprised, or really bothered by that.

Making his peace with what she did for a living and how she went around about it had been somewhat difficult for him at first, but Lisa had put a lot of effort into trying to get him to understand their culture as criminals and how his foster family had been brought up. He might try to change it now and again, but it was her life and although he was her best friend he couldn't decide how to live that life for her.

A tabletop computer, though.

What he thought of when someone said 'computer' was a large room sized machine, crunching away at some vastly complicated and difficult equation. That was sort of the thing a university or a government used for things like the space programs, or maybe a large company that dealt with sciences.

Having that associated with that little typewriter sized computer?

Well, he could see why Adrik wanted one. Enough so to ask the blonde teenager to steal him one.

The price tag attached explained why they hadn't bothered considering a legal way to get one, other
than what the slim youth had tried to gather on his own before Tatiana suggested their little sister. Three thousand and five hundred dollars was a grand and a half more than the new Ford Mustang would cost.

No, he didn't specifically look at the ones available at the dealership near their hotel… it just happened to look that way. Salesmen were pushy, pushy people even if you didn't understand one word they spoke out of twenty.

Cherep figured this was probably the end of their little vacation/road trip. That was Sonya's target, which she had to chase around for half a year and halfway around the world to find. She'd probably greatly appreciate finally getting this whole job over with.

"Right… well, now that I know it's here and ready to go, what else did you want to see?"

He started slightly, more than enough for her to catch him doing it and give him a strange look.

"Charles?"

"Uh… ha, Sarah… I thought you're here for… just that?"

The thief sitting next to him gave him a flat stare that questioned his sanity. "We're also here to sightsee and wander around like tourists. Which, may I point out, we are."

The secret Cloud Flame user of the family coughed sheepishly, quirking a wry smirk for her. "I thought you'd go and… um. Yeah."

Rolling her eyes at him, his blonde little sister got to her feet and pulled him up by his arm. "No, absolutely not. Not the very day they reveal it, I'm not stupid. End of the week at earliest, when news has a chance to circle around and there would be more suspects than just who is in this crowd."

…so, he had the rest of the week?

He could deal with that.

"I swear to high hell though, you make us go through 'It's a Small World' one more time…"

"It's cool." Cherep protested, grinning at the very disgruntled image Sonya always presented when he managed to badger her into going around again. "I still haven't spotted the Russians in that yet."

"They're not there, the US is at war with the Soviet Union… however 'cold' it's all been." She sounded disgusted, probably at the false advertising.

She had no room to complain, given they were ‘falsely advertising’ the fact they were a couple.

Which he thought was kind of weird since they were foster siblings, but she had put some effort in explaining that siblings that didn't look alike would be more memorable than just a couple out to see the attractions.

The disbelieving glance she shot his hair was entirely uncalled for, they'd seen all sorts of different colors in the first week of being in America. Including the rarer blues and greens, which he thought deserved her scorn more than his purple coloring. Pinks, purples, and reds were not exactly rare hair and eye colors to have in the Soviet Union.

They were sharing a hotel bed, as part of that ‘cover’ as a couple, but his standoffish baby sister was more likely to whack him with a pillow if he stole all the covers off her than cuddle. She at least
ensured she wouldn't give him a bloody nose when she did, but it still surprised him now and again to get a semi-hard lump of fabric forcefully introduced to his face in the middle of the night.

"Well, if we have the rest of the week... how about the General Motors display?"

"That one is supposed to be rather brilliant." Allowed the professional thief, glancing around to see what landmarks there were near and comparing them to her little copy of the park map. "It's back a way, you can rubberneck at the Ford display again when we go past it."

"That is a fantastic car, Sarah. I don't care what ribbing you do, I like looking at it."

"You and your damn toys. I thought it would get harder to distract you as we got older, but no... all I have to do is ensure you have something mechanical at hand and you're as happy as a clam, aren't you?"

"Yeah, pretty much." Cherep didn't care about the mickey she could take out of him for it, he was a kid at heart and that was still an awesome car after everything was said and done.

**XCVI (Sunday the 3rd of October, 1965. Mafia Land.)**

**One** Programma 101 safely shipped via underworld routes and Cherep on his way home to Moscow later, and Sonya managed to finally finish the favor for Adrik and Tatiana.

Stealing even an armful of technology proved to be almost stupidly easy, compared to the mafia jobs she was currently getting into. Her next two jobs for Mafia Land proved harder, though those targets didn't have a few million people wandering in and out of them daily.

The Russian thief didn't rightly care much either, getting the storage unit assigned to her and taking possession of the key alone finally ticked off the last of her boxes that needed to be dealt with before leaving Moscow finally.

There were a couple of other things still pending, but those weren't majorly important in any way. Just... a little more than personal. She'd have to go see what time Arseniy had free to help her deal with her biological father.

She finished up her Mafia Land business the second week of December, so instead of immediately going and arranging passage on a ship heading to the mainland of Eurasia and possibly catching the start of her older sister's visit home she staked out a good café and cracked open yet another book.

She had scouted around the bookstores nearby the in city of Queens for a much more modern history book for Europe than she had back in Moscow. The euro question was still bothering her, and she had intended to look harder for any more differences popping up.

It was questionable if she would catch any. Fifteen years since Rachel breathed her last in a grimy and dark alleyway and Sonya's memory of that life was an iffy thing. Especially if she went four years with using a currency that shouldn't have existed for another two decades at the very least.

Additionally, she was pretty sure there was no such thing as a mafia history book. Any changes influenced by the underworld residents of the world would probably be untraceable by her, unless she knew of the people involved personally.
Like that Programma 101. Had she stolen it out of the Olivetti Company manufactory, it was entirely possible it wouldn't have been marketed this year… or even more worrying, at all. Not if there had already been dire questions on if it was something they could sell.

Which… would mean some probably bad things would be delaying the computer market.

Therefore, Sonya was never doing another 'cutting edge technology' job. Way too much stress over if she should steal or not for her.

She ignored it when someone took the chair opposite of her at the café table she was sitting at. If it was Renato, he knew how to get her attention. If it wasn't, she didn't care.

There was no one else on Mafia Land that she could count as more than just a casual acquaintance. Pitiful, but true.

"A history book? That's a new one."

Then again, Renato was a little older than her and probably did know something about it. The Russian girl glanced up at him, just to check he was in a good mood and likely to answer one of her random questions.

Then promptly wished she kept her eyes down, because he was flirting with the now blushing waitress again as he placed his order.

…so, probably in a good mood.

"Renato? What do you know of the 'euro'?" Asked the Storm-Cloud as he sat back to watch the progress of his espresso through the windows of the café. "How it came to be, that is. I cannot find it in my book."

She would admit it was a very odd question, but they did get paid in that unit of currency. Euro was also the major denomination Mafia Land used, alongside the dollar, yen, renminbi, pound, and ruble. One was sometimes favored more in certain sections than others, but all of them could be used with minimal griping.

"It's called the European Unit of Account, euro is just the shorthand nickname it acquired since it was implemented." At first that looked to be as much as he wanted to speak on the subject, but something occurred to him and he shot her a sly smirk. "It was suggested back in the nineteen-twenties, didn't get traction as an idea until after World War Two when the Treaty of Sicily was signed off on nearly three decades and a half later."

Sonya took a hard look at her book. No wonder she couldn't find the Treaty of Rome, it hadn't been held in Rome.

"Okay… so what am I missing?"

"That Italian Mafia Famiglia you wish to avoid were key supporters of it. They got the meeting of the first European Economic Union to use the Island of Sicily as their meeting place."

*Vongola* had something to do with the euro?

The Russian thief figured that explained why she was having such difficulties trying to dig something up on the subject. "I am just trying to avoid irritating them, not avoid them entirely. Freelancers do not tend to do well when against a structured group like that."
Renato only huffed at her and her reasoning, giving the waitress a charming smile when she arrived with his drink. "You know, this thing you have against Italia. I'm going to feel hurt if you keep it up."

"Ivrea is a beautiful city, and the Turin region was very pretty as I passed through it."

He shot her a flat look. "That's it? Not trying very hard, are we?"

"Mmm… no, not really. Only been once, you see." The teenager shut her book. She still had questions, but it wasn't very likely she'd get answers now.

"Maybe I should show you around myself? You really can't see much of the country without a decent guide." Suggested the hitman slowly, looking a bit more devious than such a suggestion should warrant.

She wrinkled her nose as she thought of what that would likely result in. She might be able to travel with Cherep halfway across the world, but she could also hit him when he was being annoying.

"I think… I'll pass. Thank you."

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**XCV (Monday the 27th of December, 1965. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)**

**Tatiana**'s visit home happened the very last week of December, she blew in and practically abducted Sonya to go and get their tattoos touched up.

Which, looking at her arm before she pulled on a coat, the younger thief figured she really should've done a year or two ago.

"So... question." The slightly taller and much more settled seeming redhead spoke up, seeming both happy and sad to be wandering around Moscow again. "Clouds, huh?"

She sighed slightly, long since resigned to the topic of this conversation and how best to defend her choices. "I am... more of what one thinks of when someone says 'Cloud Flame user', he isn't. Therefore, if the clan would need one of us, it would be best to be me."

Her older sister slid her a sideways look in response, humming noncommittally.

That was a horrible, horrible tactic Lisa had them trained up to spill everything when she pulled. "How's Galina?"

"Oh no, we're not going to talk about my Lightning. We're talking about your fellow Cloud." Tatiana made a face, probably thinking of said Lightning. "We're going to borrow the green gems though, just so you know."

"You can deal with Arseniy about that." Sonya patted her foster sister on the shoulder when she pouted. "Whole reason I left them with him, you know."

The Sun user shot her a sour look, grabbing her by the wrist and dragging them both into a side door the Storm-Cloud had probably passed hundreds of times before without giving it a second thought.

The man who greeted them from another room before joining them was likely Tatiana's tattooist, like
how Valya back in Saratov was the blonde thief's. His kitchen was set up for tattooing, from what
the sisters could see from the doorway.

Pushing her little sister forward, the redhead shot the man a brilliant smile. "She's been neglecting her
artwork, Boris. No longer a little kitty, she needs a bigger cat."

"Well then… let's see the damage." Boris gave her a bland smile and gestured to the kitchen chair
apparently waiting for their type of customers.

The former pickpocket sighed, stripping off her coat and thin sweater so they could see her faded cat
and moon tattoo.

Her kitten had greyed out, after nearly five years it was no longer a black cat but an almost greenish
grey. The crystal moon that had cradled it was now less crystal and more 'rock' in looks.

The tattooist clucked disapprovingly, fetching one of his many binders of designs and flipping
through it. Tatiana reached over and stroked the faded kitten on her little sister's bicep. "Poor kitty,
we'll make you a big cat soon."

"Please tell me you are not talking to and petting my tattoo."

Their host interrupted whatever would have been her reply, showing the girls his art collection for
'cats, jewels, and nighttime' themes. Thieves, jewel heists, and overnight work, in other terms.

Sonya admitted, privately, he might just be better than her old tattooist.

"What else are you good for?" Her older sister asked as she paged through the designs, settling
herself in a kitchen chair and cradling her chin in one hand. "I'm sure you can get a rose like me too
by now."

"Paw prints." She was a traveling thief, after all. "Do you want to put our Dying Will Flame types on
it too? I'm pretty sure we could work it in here."

"I already have it." The redhead gave her a smug smile, stripping out of her outerwear to show it off.

The Sun was an image given to those that brazenly worked in the daylight, which Tatiana certainly
qualified for and Sonya could probably get. The only times she had ever worked overnight was
when she was working with her foster sister on one of her heists.

The younger thief eventually selected a much larger tattoo design that what she had already, mostly
to cover up the bare beginnings of her tattoo work.

The moon mostly stayed, being recolored to a lighter purple shade instead, half concealed by a
darker purple and red cloud. Her curled kitten got covered by a wash of nighttime sky in the 'emptier'
part of the design, a much larger cat pawing its way across skin-shaded 'snow' or 'sand' into a green
thicket of similarly uncolored roses near the middle of her bicep. A blush of dawn backlighting both
the horizon and the underside of her cloud.

It was a lot of work for a tattooist and took up several hours to carve and ink into her skin.

The safecracker merely needed to touch up the colors of her own. Getting her own uncolored roses
filled in with red.

They tipped Boris a fair bit, since redesigning another's tattoo work was a lot of effort. The Sun was
sure it would turn out well once it healed up, as well.
To prove it, she covered Sonya's arm with a wash of Sun Flames to seal her skin and brighten in the inks.

"So… Cherep." Tatiana continued when they were on their way back to their childhood home.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"At first, it was merely because he wouldn't do too well if he got shoved into our little corner of the neighborhood and expected to swim." Started the Storm-Cloud slowly, dredging up her long-forgotten motives regarding her best friend as she flexed the last of the soreness out of her arm. "I still don't think he would like it much. Then it turned to preventing him from getting taken advantage of, which he is still way too nice to avoid that happening."

"And now?"

"He has not expressed any desire to join, so I will continue to do what I've been doing for him."

Cherep could probably make a go of being a Mafiya man now, if he wasn't so dead set on joining a circus and becoming a stuntman. If she did allow her clan the knowledge and a way to try holding on to him, it was likely he would resent the chains they would insist on.

He might then resent her, which was not something she even wanted to entertain the idea of.

XCVI (Saturday the 8th of January, 1966. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Having all three of them home, even if it was only a two-week long visit, proved to them all that they were outgrowing living together and their childhood home. Cherep and Sonya might still actually have bedrooms, but they did pack up the stuff the youngest thief would store for them all in preparation of the last two moving sometime this upcoming year.

The house was slowly going back to the way it had looked when the sisters first moved in to be fostered under Arseniy and Lisa. Tatiana claimed it was odd to sleep there when it didn't look remotely as it had when she was living there.

She also told them the highlights of getting her gang set up using their own efforts and supplies in a different city, even if it was temporary. In return the Storm-Cloud told her the story of how far she had to chase Adrik's favor, and that Cherep had gone with her.

It was halfway through Tatiana's leave taking that Dmitriy showed up, in one of the clan's automobiles no less.

"Five ruble on it being Flame related." The Sun informed the younger thief, smirking slightly as she hefted the case of possible Lightning gemstones over one shoulder.

"Sucker's bet, Tatiana."

Sonya had to agree with Cherep on that one. Sighing, she gave her elder sister a hug goodbye and went to see what had the Rain coming for her.
The rumors that spread of the Zolotovs having a Rain had resulted in a family taking their very... 
gifted young son in to them. An attempt to both safeguard said son and figure out how the hell he kept on conjuring animals and images out of thin air.

Mist, the blonde cat burglar thought… and semi-decent parents.

At least the brat was luckier than her brother and herself had been in that.

On the drive to headquarters, Dmitriy revealed he had finally gained some conscious control over his Rain Flames. The kid apparently had freaked out about maybe talking to someone that knew what was going on, again the parents had tried a doctor first when he mentioned a few strange things. That doctor's shady connections went for the Mafiya, so instead of more shady types he sent them on to the only syndicate he knew of that might be able to help.

The Rain had calmed the kid down using said Flames, only to realize his jade wasn't on him at the time when leaving to fetch her. A mental misstep, but one Sonya took note of as a working method.

Not that the baby Mist would need that kind of information. He was already spamming his Flames like a broken sieve, from all reports.

The Storm-Cloud took the last five minutes of that trip to mentally asset herself. Though annoyed this had interrupted Tatiana's farewell, she hadn't immediately thought bad of the poor kid. She had instead thought him lucky, maybe a little sourly but she wasn't a very sociable or decent person at heart.

Not looking too good on the 'Cloud and Mist equals hate' issue.

Maybe that was a personal problem. Mists reportedly tended for flamboyant or misleading, neither of which Clouds tended to understand or appreciate. She certainly didn't, it gave her a headache. A tendency for dislike wasn't the same as an assurance of it.

Dmitriy pulled into the garage he probably took the car out of, and Sonya let herself out while making a mental note to get him to teach her to drive stick-shift sometime this year.

She got very distracted from asking him about that, because she was mostly sure there hadn't been plants growing out of the walls when he had left. Judging by the swearing going on, it had to be a new feature.

A new Misty feature.

The blonde touched one lightly, figured it wasn't going to try killing her for it, and used a sharp jolt of Storm Flames on it. The only word that did the result justice was popped as her Flames ate the weaker Mist ones.

It also prevented her small amount of red Flames from trying to eat anything else because the Mist Flames immediately disappeared once her Storm ate its stability away.

Bonus.

The Rain that drove her here started copying her, but his Flames only had the Mist Constructs fading from where they touched rather than the destruction hers caused.

Leaving him to it, she started in on freeing up a way inside. Whoever the Mist kid was, the only fact that he wasn't trying to hurt the Zolotov vory was probably preventing them from lashing out in response to the hemming in a full corridor of their own headquarters.
He probably panicked without the Rain at hand to keep him calm, and probably tried barricading himself into a room or something. Sonya in fact found him in a closet, huddled in the back corner and about crying his eyes out.

"Stop it, fear is only making it worse."

The snotty little brat jerked his head up, giving her a watery and sour glare from red rimmed brown eyes. "Like you know what's going on. I don't want to leave my parents, I don't want these things to happen, I just want to go home!"

She reached out with a flat expression, and one hand popped yet another of his illusions growing out of the closet's walls with a palm full of red fire. "You, I, and your parents will be talking about this, and there is no way in hell we're taking you from them as you are neither an orphan nor a child at risk that needs a new home in the first place. I'm insulted you even suggested that."

He stared, first at her hand then at her. "You can make it go away?"

"I can Disintegrate your Constructions, yes."

The kid apparently decided she was his new best friend, crawling out of the closet a lot more cheerful than the Storm-Cloud had found him and even giving her a hug around her waist.

She was flat out confused. Her Flame had proved to be a threat to his, why the hell was she so acceptable?

XCVII (Monday the 17th of January, 1966. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

**The** boy's name was Samuil Usov Maximovich, baby Mist kid who scared himself into using his Flames after an incident with a half-feral dog tried attacking him.

Sonya admitted to herself that sounded better than her incident, she would've preferred the dog against three *vory* attacking her best friend.

The following week tasked every shred of social competence she had, and Dmitriy had to rescue her from a conversation more than once. Most of the talking between the baby Mist's parents and the Zolotov clan was done by the Sovietnik, their Pahkan's right hand and one of their boss' advisors.

The blonde thief had to figure out a semi-reliable way for the kid to keep on living with his parents but also get some help developing some type of control. Using Tatiana's rush-job search as their method of working through the gemstones available, they figured he did very well with both rubies and sapphires.

Better than either Rain or Cloud could make use of them, even.

She was again confused but took note of it anyways. Information was information, even if she wasn't sure what help or use she could put that to.

He didn't need the gemstone to Construct things, or to summon up his Flames at all. What it was good for was a physical reminder that it was possible for him to control everything he made.

His best result was with lapis lazuli, so Sonya fashioned him a necklace with a pendant of the
mineral he could carry around with him.

He wore it on a leather band wrapped around his wrist like a bracelet instead, the brat.

Usov was proving to be a very wicked minded little Mist, badgering her on every scrap of information she ever managed to collect on his Flame type and how or why she managed her own control over hers. While somewhat annoying, it wasn't so much she minded answering his questions than the volume of queries he posed to her at once.

He was also all of six years of age, meaning he wouldn't get less annoying anytime soon and she wouldn't be allowed to swear near him for another few years yet.

The week proved to be very helpful in learning to control her own Storm Flames, as when Usov drew out an illusion he didn't intend to the former pickpocket got to pop them. It was still unwieldy, virulent fire that ate everything she touched with it, but she got to the point of being able to use just a dab to destroy Mist Flame Constructions.

She couldn't wait to try carving things again, wondering if she had just overpowered everything with Storm Flames because that was how Cloud Flames seemed to work and that was what she had started with.

The end of those eight days was when Usov stumbled onto a way to de-Construct his own illusions, once he felt safe enough to play with his ability more than freak out when it happened.

Meaning he didn't need a Storm Flame user around to pop what he didn't intend to create or a Rain to calm him down enough for the illusions to fade on their own.

It also freed him from Sonya's side, allowing him and his parents to return home.

Usov pouted at the news, insisting on giving the female teenager a hug goodbye. She nearly swore he did it just to make her twitch but he was also a little boy who had a very traumatic experience, so she put up with the touching. Also, his parents thought it was adorable he liked her so much.

They were also watching him hug her.

She could not win in that.

What she did manage was to insist Dmitriy should be the contact point for Usov. She was both the wrong type to help him develop much and intending on leaving Moscow soon herself. The first point getting her more leeway than the second unfortunately.

Little Mist brat did like the Rain himself, it was just that the Storm-Cloud had been the one to fetch him the second time he panicked and taught him what little they knew that made him so attached… Sonya was pretty sure that was how it went…

Mostly… maybe?

The incident didn't improve the Zolotov clan's regard for Dying Will Flame users, but it did make their Pakhan decide that having one at hand just in case was a good idea. When he took a hard look at what Flame users their clan had to them; the fact Dmitriy was already in place and the girls, even the new Lightning, on their way to supporting the clan from afar led him to think the Rain was the best one for that position.

Sonya snickered, only a touch guilty. The man she manipulated into the position mostly willingly rolled his eyes at her.
She supplied their clan's boss with the extra condensed research journal she had, tacking on that she would be sending in periodic updates via Arseniy if she ran across any more information and Dmitriy would update the Mist section when young Usov got there.

It was the first time she had met her crime boss, the man himself well over the age of fifty and currently in the middle of teaching his son how to manage their clan. Zolotov Milos Danilovich didn't hold himself as one of his vor or as a gentleman, he gave off the impression of a slightly violent-prone banker.

…or a loan shark. A very successful loan shark.

Then again, he ran a clan half made up out of thieves. The impression was probably either deliberate for the very action of dealing with his thieves or just how he was.

All in all, she liked him well enough. He was shrewd enough to know what she had been up to teaching Dmitriy how to be a Rain, and content to allow that effort free her from being needed at headquarters indefinitely.

The blonde had also pulled a lot of money for the clan in the last few years, chasing down the jewels to try focusing Flames through them. It bought her goodwill with her clan and her boss, enough so that she would be allowed to wander freely after her best friend.

Which, really, had been all that she had been after.

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XCVIII (Tuesday the 1st of February, 1966. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"I do not see why we must be out right this moment." Sonya groused at Cherep's back, following him down the icy road to wherever it was he wanted her to be.

"Circuses recruit mostly in their offseason, which is winter." He reminded her cheerily over his shoulder.

Point of fact, she disliked being cold. Since they lived in the USSR, she was generally cold most of the year. Thus, she tended to be snappish and irritable when outside during winter or spring.

Fall never really bothered her too much, somehow.

If her brother's circus panned out this time, then he would be set to leave with the onset of the spring thaw. Well… as much of a spring-thaw as possible in the early months of the year. Which for Moscow wasn't until mid-way through March, really.

This circus, the latest of her fellow Cloud's finds, was a bit larger than the others he had inquired around about and got invited to join. One of the 'Moscow Circus' branches, mostly made up of graduates of the Moscow's State College for Circus and Variety Arts but there were a few other performers scattered about.

It was a good size, never really had a major problem getting in and out of the Iron Curtain, affluent enough to afford wintering lodging for their actors, and likely well reputed enough so Sonya wouldn't be able to nix it easily.

Even if it was off-season for the circuses, that didn't mean there were lazing about instead of still
practicing or performing. There were several amphitheaters within Moscow itself, some of which merely required a decent donation from the proceeds raked in over a night to be used. There was also the circus college, where performers could go and compare notes, practice, or find themselves an understudy or three.

The blonde thief had visited each, sometimes with Cherep dragging her along and sometimes just because of him but not with him. She did not understand his preoccupation with show business and becoming famous, because to her becoming famous, or rather infamous, was a bad thing.

Then again, she didn't really have to understand to support him doing it.

Cherep had gotten invited as a mechanic, more stagehand than performer but it was an in. The fact he had his own motorcycle and was perfectly willing to try his hand at stunt work was probably only a bonus. If they went with this that likely wouldn't happen until next year, when and if he developed an act or show for it or the circus master decided the act was needed.

"Cherep! My young friend. I take it this is the lovely Sophia?"

She very carefully didn't pull a face at the automatic assumption over her full name.

'Sonya' might be a nickname variation of Sophia, but it was on her damn birth certificate as Sonya. Since she could recall, her name had been Sonya though this life and she rather that didn't change if it didn't have to. It was difficult enough already, and she still responded to Rachel occasionally.

"Sonya, Master Liam. This is my little sister Sonya."

'Liam' was a very robust older man, with some very carefully arranged facial hair and very tattered 'work clothes'. He probably doubled as an announcer when the circus was on the road, not just the one that went out to promote the circus at any town or city they stopped at. The fact he was so willing to be seen out of his finery was a good sign, at least.

Her brother grinned good-naturedly at the older man jogging up to them, sheepishly scratching the back of his head while she gripped tight on her irritation.

If she blew this for him, he would sulk for days.

"We're here to poke around a little, and hopefully get her stamp of approval."

"Oh? And why would Miss Sonya's approval be needed?"

"Because Cherep is way, way too nice and someone has to stop others from taking advantage of him." The irritable Storm-Cloud gifted the man with a smile that was probably a little sharp around the edges.

Surprisingly, he didn't take offense.

Liam chuckled instead, waving them on to join him as he made for his troupe's lodging area. "Will you be coming with him then, little sister? You seem protective enough to chase after if you felt the need to."

"I likely will, yes. I do hope you don't mind."

"And you will not care even if I do, I take it." Stroking one of his rather fiercely waxed mustaches, he considered her as they walked. "So then... what can you do, Miss Sonya?"
“I am classically trained in ballet and dabbled a little in gymnastics.”

Every female thief in the Zolotovs was given the same training, the grace and balance helped them get in and out of some rather compromising situations sometimes. Best of all it doubled as a cover, one that was both difficult to lie about having and an explanation over why they had some not so middle-class skills.

Sonya was tempted to tack on the sleight of hand skills she had, but this seemed to not be one of the shady circuses that allowed such things. She could adapt to that if so, though.

"I… also, can make simple jewelry. What I am interested in learning about is magic tricks, myself."

Liam smiled broadly at her, including Cherep as well even if he had remained silent as the two of them talked. "I think we might just be able to use you, Miss Sonya. If you don't mind performing in front of crowds or heights, I mean."

"I have no great fear of heights, it's merely the fall that gets to me." The thief seriously thought about the crowd question but had to admit she didn't know at all and told him so.

"The fall is something all sane humans fear, even my trapeze artists. As for crowds, we shall see soon enough." Liam considered her, then Cherep, then them both together. "If we do meet your approval, little sister Sonya, I would like to invite the two of you to practice with us this winter. If we all decide it is a great fit, maybe even the first show of the season or more. Yes?"

The younger Cloud sibling smiled back weakly, thinking hard.

Liam was very certain of both his circus and his people making a good impression if he was already angling to get her to agree to something in the future. He was either in desperate need of a mechanic, of a showgirl, or maybe even just that nice.

It still made her suspicious, though.

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XCIX (Friday the 4th of February, 1966. Mafia Land.)

Liam's ever so imaginatively named Groβes Volksfest had nearly a hundred people to it, most were performers and a good chunk were the carnies that ran game booths, but there were a range of other types sprinkled through. He even had musicians, though most of them made better acrobats.

Sonya reluctantly decided this was probably the best one Cherep could find within the Soviet Union, or at least one she couldn't dig up more than their fair share of dirt on.

The circus planned to move out, back onto the road, in mid-April. After a show or two to knock the winter rust off and generate a bit of traveling cash to last them to their next destination. That meant she had to do some rearranging in a fast hurry, especially if her brother was so dead set on going along with them.

There was both her stuff to move into storage and the last of Tatiana's, some jobs for Mafia Land to be done since she wouldn't likely get the summer off to handle other business, and the last of the things she wanted to get done in Moscow needed to be finished.

Somehow, she had to get that done while also making a good impression on what was likely her future co-workers while with this circus… and figure out where she'd fit it.
The former pickpocket was just happy she managed to both finish off Adrik's favor and took a raincheck on the teaching bit.

She eventually got herself apprenticed to 'Madam Crina', an elderly woman posing as a gypsy fortune teller... or who was a gypsy fortune teller. While she wasn't entirely sure how that came about since she met the woman when the old bat had been blind drunk, it was at least helpful in sorting out herself when it came to circus life.

Master Liam did accept the suggestion that she had the very last of her personal business to handle yet, that would probably repeat every winter. If she didn't harry off during the working season he claimed he didn't mind.

With that all done, Sonya informed their foster parents about the whole 'run away to join the circus' bit she and Cherep were going to do. Lisa laughed until she cried, oddly enough. Arseniy rolled his eyes at them both, asking when she planned on cleaning out the attic.

That had been a nightmare of shipping logistics, which Tatiana would be made to pay for her share the next time the foster sisters were in the same general vicinity.

The Storm-Cloud had to follow right after, so she'd be able to shove it all into her storage unit and try to grab two or three Mafia Land jobs at the same time. She might have had to heavily abuse her Propagated strength to muscle everything in place, but she managed it.

It was only halfway to the Thieves' Hall that the slightly harried thief noted she was being followed.

Mafia Land was such a volatile mix of criminals that it was sometimes hard to tell, especially when one faction of people was suspicious of everyone else who were suspicious of them and everyone else in return and so on. As she was running a little short on time, instead of counter-stalking them to figure out what the hell she noted what she could and kept going.

She'd leave it be for now, but if they kept it up when she came back then she would have to do a little digging herself.

As far as she was aware, a minor thief like her didn't rate special interest. A Flame user might gather that much, but very few people knew of her ability in that and if they had talked she would've heard something.

...or someone managed to connect the Zolotov Rain and her together in the last few months.

Usov was a snotty brat, but it had been impressed on him not to talk about his or any Flame ability to those that didn't know. However, a lot of people could outsmart a six-year-old... even a Mist using one.

It could've been his parents, but she had been sure they were too thankful for her assistance to sell her out.

Okay... there were several ways her Flame use might have gotten out. Renato might have even done it, he never did promise to keep it to himself. All she had on him was his own use of Sun, and she even owed him two favors to boot.

Sonya stopped once fully inside her Hall, palming her face and flatly refusing to panic. Dying Will Flame users were becoming more common, it was obvious she'd never be able to fully keep that from circulating around if anyone noted something a bit off about her.

She was being stalked... it didn't necessarily mean it was Flame related. It could be a mafia syndicate
looking for a thief to use, or it could just be because she was pretty in a 'classic' way.

It could just be because they were bored.

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**C (Thursday the 17th of March, 1966. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)**

Sonya managed three Mafia Land contracts within a month.

None of them were clean affairs, one even forced her to run for it due to incomplete intel gathering on the situation. The Russian managed it in the end, without a new or interesting injury to try explaining away other than bruises from a bad landing and a few cuts from the running.

One also paid nowhere near the amount of risk mandated, and she lodged a complaint against the individual that commissioned the job in revenge. It would probably go nowhere, but it made her feel slightly better about getting duped into stealing from a government office while it was in use.

Hopefully that was the last time she would have to grab whatever in a fast hurry.

That left her with one month to try to integrate herself in the circus she and Cherep were joining. He had used his month without her to fit in rather well, his natural people skills at work in being cheerful and helpful.

The blonde was known as 'the young mechanic's sister', which worked for her. This was her brother's dream, she was just along because no one would be able to help him with it as their foster parents had helped the girls and the dork was way too damn nice still.

Madam Crina proved to be just as cankerous sober as she was drunk but held up her word in taking on the thief as an apprentice in the art of fortunetelling. Also, the tarot cards she had were awesome.

The incense she burned to cover the smell of alcohol abuse, not so much.

The older woman, Romanian if Sonya was any judge of accent, dressed herself like a serotyped gypsy. Scarves and shawls wrapped around her boney frame, a vest of garish colors, billowy sleeves, a full skirt with an elaborate apron over top, and knee-high boots with low heels she could probably wade through a tar pit in comfortably.

The Russian thief was jealous of her boots.

As Madam Crina’s apprentice/draw girl/gopher, she was expected to dress like her. That was simple enough for the most part, swaths of fabric were easily gotten if you knew where to go.

Getting them in the patterns and styles Crina approved of had been the trick.

The haughty old woman had not been interested in holding her apprentice's hand through her shopping even if she was a picky old bitch, which had been annoying. The acrobats rather liked the bolts of rejected fabrics, so while irritating Sonya figured it wasn't a complete loss.

They, particularly the trapeze artist named Ivanna, informed her that she was the third such 'apprentice' in fortune telling Madame Crina had gotten. Several others had gone in under her for various other trades but none of the others stayed longer than a year as such, so they weren't particularly holding out hope she'd remain with the circus for long.
Cherep rather heartily disliked the old fortune teller when he learned of that. Sonya didn't really see the point in getting upset.

It would either work out or it wouldn't, and she'd find something else to do if so.

"...I still don't see why you put up with that."

"I put up with you for years, didn't I?" The Storm-Cloud peered at the seam she was sewing using a bit of sunlight peeking through the rolling clouds overhead to highlight her work.

That looked straight... right?

"Madame Crina is not much more of a chore, really."

Learning how to sew clothing had not been a skill she ever thought she would need. The crotchety old woman she was now working for begged to differ, as when they were on the road all mending or alterations had to be done when it came up. The thief would be stuck doing it for her now, and making her 'traditional dress' for when they opened the circus to customers.

Sewing a skirt hadn't been too hard, it was the shirt that proved to be tricky. She had cheated the hell out of everything and took apart one of her older long-sleeved shirts and a skirt way too short for her anymore, using the fabric as templates for her hand-sewn ones.

If the fortunetelling gig failed, she might just try her hand at costume designing.

"Are you seriously going to try to tell me you don't mind the old bat?" Her brother asked of her incredulously, finally finished 'tuning-up' his motorcycle for the nth time that same month.

He really was almost chomping at the bit to leave Moscow, now that he finally had a decent circus Sonya hadn't refused thinking about.

"Yes, pretty much." She stabbed herself in the thumb for a similar nth time and figured out what a thimble was for after examining the pricks of blood curiously.

She was sure sewing leather would be harder than fabrics, even if she had Cloud Flame boosted strength. The thief didn't care if Crina sniffed at her for months, she was going to buy the damn boots and vest somewhere.

…and probably a set of bracers she could keep some of her mini-Bec de Corbins on or in. They were too long to work as charms on a bracelet, and her red tourmaline key was on a thin chain around her neck. Sonya could wear two as earrings, and had the magnetic ear hooks to do so, but that was a bit too liable to stab her in the neck if she wasn't careful.

Those earrings would require mini-hammers without sharp ends to be less hazardous. A maul, maybe.

Oh hell, and a belt.

Pausing in her work, the Storm-Cloud glanced over to the skirt she finished after two weeks of work on it.

She forgot belt loops.

Sonya felt the corner of her left eye twitch, so she carefully gathered up her sewing supplies and set it aside with the shirt she had been trying to make. "I need something to do, not circus related or
stealing or whatever."

"Um… like what?"

"…I'm going to go and destroy Aleksandr's floor one last time. Want to come with me and snicker at all the dumbfounded faces the little brats make when I do it in front of them?"

Cherep only thought about it for the sake of it, from what she got by looking at the smirk that crawled across his face as he stalled to tease her a little. "Sure."
CI (Saturday the 2nd of April, 1966. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Of the things Sonya rather needed to get done and over with before leaving Moscow, her list started with her biological father and ended with getting a driver's license.

With things as they were, she had the time to ask Arseniy about dealing with the former weeks before the circus she now belonged to opened for the first time that year. Well after she managed to gain her driver's license by using one of Dmitriy’s automatic transmission cars.

She knew herself enough to know she had been stalling and putting it off… but what in hell was she supposed to say to him?

*Thanks for the genetic contribution that led to my existence and for dumping me in the Mafiya. No, I hadn't really needed you around. By the way, I stole your wallet.*

Yeah… she was of two minds over even seeing the man again.

Taking a bit of precaution about what could likely happen as she still didn't know what she thought about the man and her childhood situation, she left her assortment of miniaturized polearms with Cherep. Since she could certainly do more than enough damage with her own fists if need be, it wasn't as if she was going in unarmed.

Any Cloud Flame user would quite literally need to lose their arms before they would be less than lethal at short range and even then, they could probably inconvenience someone greatly. She wasn't very skilled, because Cloud Propagated strength didn't equal indestructible bones, but she knew how to punch and the weaker bits of the human body due to her haphazard and targeted education.

The thief closed her eyes tightly, pinching the bridge of her nose and tried thinking less lethal thoughts.

She only had one facet of her childhood incident that lead to her becoming a Mafiya foster child, there might be some semi-agreeable reasoning he had for what he did. Not to say she would appreciate it or any reasoning, but there *might* be.

Sonya decided she sucked at trying to give someone the benefit of doubt.

…and she was stalling again.

Palming her face, the young teenager turned to Arseniy. He looked perfectly willing to sit and wait for her to decide to continue or not, and it was *very* tempting to ask him to blow the whole thing off.

"So... he's in there."

"Yeah."

Sighing at that unhelpfully short confirmation, she glared a hole at the closed door to her left.

Nikishin Mikhail Vladislavovich hadn't proved to be too hard for the vor to track down again. He hadn't even left the USSR, just merely relocated further down south to a tiny town that didn't know him, the fact he was a widower, or that he should've had a tiny daughter in tow.
Said daughter wasn't too sure if she was happy this would be over with quickly or disappointed she couldn't put it off for another year or two.

She only got one step towards it before the vor spoke up again. "Leave the door open."

Giving a short nod to show she heard him, she opened the door to the small receiving room on the first floor of the Zolotov headquarters.

Mikhail looked almost like someone had shot him when he got his first good look at his daughter in nearly eleven years. "Nyura?"

"If the woman is dead, how could she be opening doors?" Sonya snapped at him bitterly, almost reflexively irate even if she had tried to ensure she'd have a level head for this… discussion.

Apparently, she was nursing a grudge.

She looked enough like her mother to be mistaken as such. A childhood goal of hers, but not exactly a warm and fuzzy thought now.

Damn it, after she had ended up in a Mafiya foster home she had hoped she'd turn out more like him in looks just to prevent that kind of thing. Her mother was a bitch.

The thief shoved those thoughts away and gave her father a long look over. Even if she rather heartily disliked him and what he did to her, he was family.

Mikhail was… a lot older. Almost fifty by appearance alone even if she knew he was only in his late thirties or possibility early forties. Silver peppered his light brown hair, much more than mere age would account for. His body language and posture was currently cringing from her sharp words making him seem more like a bent old man that one just at middle age.

He managed to recover his composure as she noted the changes he had gone through over the years, straightening up just slightly. "Sonya… you look… well."

Almost immediately he seemed to regret his choice of words.

"Rather well, considering you dumped me off on strangers the first chance you got and never looked back?" She finished for him blandly with a nod. "Why thank you, father. I am glad you noticed."

"I never had the choice to come back for you, that… man out there saw to that."

She crossed her arms under her chest and pinned him with a flat look. "Arseniy only found you after three years of looking. You had between my fifth birthday and then to try to salvage your own mistake, do not try to pin the blame on him."

Sonya had gotten the whole story from the vor when she finally asked for this meeting. All the details, even the bits she hadn't wanted to know of or learn about.

Like the fact Nyura had sold her own daughter to a Turkish human trafficking ring that managed to sneak up the Volga River from the Black Sea. The vor of Saratov used the tip off Arseniy managed to figure out looking into her family history to demolish them, but not before the slavers caught up to her mother.

Mikhail made an expression halfway caught between a sneer and a scowl, aimed towards the doorway behind her. "I did not know the risk of running afoul of Nyura's blunder had abated by then, I had been planning on waiting five years before trying to find you again."
"Find? You dumped me on a Mafiya recruitment effort!"

"I didn't know that either!" He snapped back just as irritably, informing which parent she had inherited her short temper from. "I had only thought it was an orphanage collection point for street rats, not a gathering of little criminals."

"And that makes it all better, does it?" She ran a hand over her face again, trying and probably failing to gain a bit of restraint for that temper they shared. "Shot yourself in the foot there, father."

CII (Saturday the 2nd of April, 1966 continued. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Had Sonya not ended up with the Zolotov clan… Mikhail probably would've succeeded both hiding her and getting himself free from his wife's stupidity ill-thought out actions. Even if she ended up under a vor just a little less thorough than Arseniy, he might have still succeeded just without being able to pick her back up again half a decade later.

She had, though. Her foster father wasn't one for half-assed efforts, getting a rather precocious girl barely out of toddlerhood to foster had incited the investigation that led to her biological father being found out.

"You know, had you said a word of why before dumping me like so much baggage… I would've been so much less angry with you."

The former pickpocket had a bad habit of always assuming the worst. It made a few things pleasantly surprising, but she tended to lash out first before thinking of why something was happening or how it got that way.

Slavery was illegal and getting placed in a group of want-to-be criminal types had led her to assume she had been sold to the Mafiya.

Stupid in hindsight, the Russian Mafiya did not do child slavery, but she had been a tiny girl shoved into a very strange world and expected to keep up without an explicit explanation. Between Rachel's knowledge of the worst kind of humans throughout time and the appearances Sonya managed to see, it hadn't been a bad assumption.

Technically, she had been sold to criminals… just not these criminals.

The difference between Turkish slavers and Russian Mafiya, one had a standard of living to give their members… and much less unpaid slave labor.

"I barely knew what was going on, Sonya. Should I have told you? That your mother sold you? You weren't even five, a tetchy bit of a girl with her head in books." Mikhail sounded both insulted and derisive. "We never wanted to be parents at that age, you were an accident I tried to do my best for."

"If you hadn't wanted to be parents, then you should have kept it in your damn pants." Sonya informed him icily. Telling a Storm-Cloud they were a mistake was apparently not a very good idea, given her slipping temper. "A little warning? Maybe a comment of how you weren't up and abandoning me? Mentioning the possibility that I would see you again? That was too hard for you to do in between packing up and hightailing it out of the city?"

Her father acquired some unhealthy looking color, his slowly reddening features was something she
was thankful she didn't inherit the genetics to pull off. "It did not occur to me to give you false hope, it was just as likely that would have been the last you saw of me."

"At the moment, I am entirely sorry that isn't true."

"You don't mean that. You are my daughter."

Sonya leveled a neutral gaze on the man, tucking every scrap of irritation and hurt away to be dealt with later. Much later... like never. "Arseniy was more a father to me than you ever were. If it wasn't already filed away on my paperwork, I'd ask to change my name to reflect that."

Once she had stopped considering the vor as just scary/not to be pissed off, anyways.

"That... that beast of a man mutilated me! You cannot be serious, Sonya."

"You were the one to abandon your own flesh and blood to him, without trying anything to mitigate the damage your wife did or would cause us before fleeing like a coward."

Figuring that this conversation would go nowhere else but around the fact she was a thief or fully part of a Russian crime syndicate, or the hurt they were stubbornly holding on to, she decided it was well past the time to leave.

"Sonya! Don't you turn your back to me, girl." Mikhail's tone was taut, angry or irritated or whatever.

She was past the point of willing to try and figure it out but had enough family fidelity in her to glance back at him. "What now?"

Her less than caring, or interested or even remotely bothered, tone of voice made him turn an even darker shade of red. "Your so-called father was the one to brutalize me, don't you have anything to say to that?"

"If you ever want kids again, adopt one of those so called 'street rats.'" With that, Sonya shut the door behind her sharply.

Then came face to face with a highly amused but trying to hide it Arseniy.

The vor's lip was curled up even as he fought to keep his expression clear, the most lopsided smirk she had even seen on him. "Sassy little thing when poked, aren't you?"

She coughed awkwardly, having forgotten he was listening in on that conversation.

Arseniy rose to his full height from the chair he had been waiting for her in, giving the door she had shut a dark look but gesturing her to lead them out of the building. She did so just a touch jerkily, trying not to recall what she told her biological father about said man behind her.

It wasn't until they had started the long trek back to the neighborhood she grew up in that he spoke up again.

"Lisa can't have kids. Childhood illness took that from her, so we agreed to take a few years to foster a brat for the clan instead." The vor informed her quietly. "Tatiana was that brat, but you weren't any difficulty tacked on top of her."

The blonde swallowed thickly, blinking rapidly so she wouldn't cry. That did explain why a vor as highly skilled as him was doing spending a decade or so teaching a bunch of snot-nosed little brats
the ins and outs of Mafiya life.

"I don't mind, if you want to go through with changing your name a little."

"I'd… have to file for new paperwork, though. Cherep and I are planning on leaving in a matter of weeks."

"Or Lisa could finesse it through and get you a new set, she's good at that."

A slow, almost bitter smile twisted Sonya's lips. "She is, is she? I'll ask as soon as we're home."

Arseniy hummed lowly, ambling along as if they were only out on a walk and not going home after she confronted her own father about his less than stellar care of her.

The Storm-Cloud gave the situation, more specifically her foster parents' situation, her attention in favor of stewing in her own thoughts on her blood family.

Sun Flames… they healed, right?

Was it only freshly done injuries, or could it heal something like old impairments from illness years after the damage was done?

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**CIII (Monday the 18th of April, 1966. A cargo boxcar, a freight train, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)**

A violent, screeching halt to her rushing around hadn't been what Sonya had been expecting.

She *had* been expecting the crushing crowds, the very loud music and talking, and late nights… she was at least not surprised by those parts.

However, circuses were… slow. It was the best term she could come up with.

Every week there was a Friday to Sunday long fair, the rest of the week they weren't putting on the big-top shows or moving around they still had customers wandering in that needed entertainment. Half a month spent in every city they would stop at, so two weekends and a week-long stretch between at most in every stop. The slow crawl across Asia and Europe would be… entirely different than what the Russian thief was used to in her own traveling.

Preparing for their Moscow opening day and the rush to pack up for getting the circus underway afterwards were *not* nearly as hectic as some of the things the Russian thief had to rush through. It was almost lazy rushing in comparison, but that less urgent feeling was more than made up with the sheer *volume* of packing and transporting logistics that had to be done.

In as little as a month, Sonya learned that she probably wouldn't be a fantastic fortuneteller herself and she had some issues putting herself in a spotlight. It went against the grain for what kind of thief she was, as her stealing was done best without witnesses.

All in all, while she didn't mind circus life it wasn't likely something she could put up with more than a handful of years.

That was alright. She was mainly just following Cherep around until he had some measure of protection as even a semi-popular act. Kidnapping a well-known public figure was harder than trying
to snatch kids or minor young mechanics.

Her brother was kind of interested in learning how she did her Propagation of strength, while she really did want to learn how he Propagated himself. That would have to wait for him to figure out how to consciously control his Cloud Flames, and how to explain how it felt/seemed to work. Extrapolating it from there would take some work from them both to attempt learning the other's skill... but might prove to be more than worth the time spent.

For the time being, circus tricks would take some time to learn. Throwing knives, juggling random things, card tricks, and some stage magic were all things she might eventually make use of. Which would take some effort to master after she got the hang of the tricks. She might even actually try her hand at trapeze and tightrope walking, eventually.

They could be use in some not-quite-legal ways, so it was all good on her end.

That had been her plan, until her fellow Cloud revealed he already had conscious control over his Flames.

They were on board the train heading northwest to Kuzhenkino, where the Großes Volksfest would set up for a scant three days before moving on again. Cherep was with the heavy equipment cargo car, seeing as he was both the newest mechanic and didn't mind getting duty to ensure no breakage or theft happened between loading it all on and off.

The palm full of bright purple fire he showed her made Sonya a little... annoyed. *You're screwing with my data points, damn it.*

He shrugged that off with a slightly wry smirk. *I've been able to do this since you punched me in the arm that one night. To make the tanzanite light up.*

She chewed on her lower lip as she thought. She had been thirteen then, and still barely able to call up or consciously control her own Flames until just before her fourteenth birthday. Her brother had outstripped her by... years, really.

Then again, Cherep also had needed his innate skill with his Flames more than she had.

There was probably a correlation... Usov hadn't had any signs of being a Mist Flame user until he thought he needed something to save himself, then that fear of the unknown prompted them to remain. Which didn't end until a Storm-Cloud and Rain showed him it could be controlled at will.

Sonya needed the boosted strength to damage the vory assaulting her best friend, but she didn't require that ability to continue with her daily life, so her control and power waned. Redeveloping both control and power might've meant more to her drive to learn it rather than practice, possibly.

Dmitriy didn't have any conscious control until he got faced with a crying and hysterical child, but he had known it was possible and was now developing fine control over his power.

Tatiana only had the motivation to learn when her little sister ended up injured, and bullheaded her way through to learning a Sun's Activation based healing ability only until she had it.

Different motivations and requirements translated to different innate starting skills and control... probably controlled how strong one's Flame was, too.

Unfortunately, she didn't have the data to support her theories. There was way too much misinformation floating around for her to feel comfortable trying to push that information out somehow.
"You're not going to ask why I never told you?"

She snorted at him. "It was probably safer to keep it to yourself for while we lived with Lisa and Arseniy anyways. Plus… you are your own person. I don't need to know everything about your life, just that you're alright and alive."

"You know, I had wondered why you never demanded to know what I did most days… Lisa said it's an etiquette thing." Cherep ran a hand through his shaggy purple hair, his expression faintly bewildered.

"It is actually rather rude to ask what one does most days. Typically, because the usual response is to lie about it but occasionally because some think you don't deserve to know if you can't figure it out yourself."

There were spies to consider too, because the only ones that typically asked what one did usually ended up being government agency or police spies, information brokers, or other mafia group recruiters. All of which were semi-lethal things to try in doing in the underworld.

Therefore, if you didn't know what someone did in their days you would either find out yourself or be content with not knowing. Asking was hazardous to your health.

That was why she never asked why the hell Renato had so much time to bother her in.

"So… you didn't know Arseniy had me running messages around Moscow when you were otherwise occupied?"

"Uh… no, actually." That was… news to her. Stupid in hindsight, because everyone pitched in under that roof. "Is that where you got the money to win the motorcycle?"

"Yep."

Sonya didn't waste time feeling annoyed, Arseniy had given her fellow Cloud shelter and food and it was his prerogative to decide how the kid paid that favor back. Running missives was tame compared to what the rest of them had been doing, really.

It was his life too, she didn't know everything Tatiana got up to. Equally, they probably only knew a fraction of what she got up to. She had no right to demand that kind of information.

"Alright, do you know how you do that internal Propagation thing then?"

Her brother stopped fiddling with a recently replaced piston that had broken down, peering over at her suspiciously. "Why do you want to know?"

"For the next time I get injured."

He opened his mouth, blinked at her, then looked down at where his bike was stored. "I suppose telling you that a career that injures you isn't a good one would be highly hypocritical of me, wouldn't it?"

"Just a touch, brother dear."

"I don't really know how to explain it… just that it hurts a lot." Cherep shrugged his shoulders, probably a tossup between being uncomfortable with the topic and phantom pains from old injuries being recalled. "It doesn't burn so much as sting at first, but the clearest thing I can tell you of what I thought when this apparently happened to me was the drive to continue. To get up despite the
injuries."

That was… painful sounding. Not like her breaking her hand and then refraining from using it, more like the mechanic had broken a leg or something and kept on walking on it.

Sonya beat back the desire to question her best friend closely on who exactly kidnapped him.

He had never offered that information up and she'd never ask, because more likely than not he wouldn't want to tell her.

Either out of a desire to shield her from that part of his life, or from knowing full well if she knew stealing wouldn't be the biggest crime she was guilty of.

It also sounded like either a skill she'd have to attempt learning the next time she got in a tight spot and broke something… or she should start with small cuts and try to use her Cloud Flames to replicate skin to seal them.

That was a lot more self-destructive than just destroying physical things and maybe getting a cut or bruise in the end.

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CIV (Monday the 25th of April, 1966. Kuzhenkino, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"St Petersburg is next?" Sonya almost yelped, and consequently got whacked in the shin by Madame Crina's walking stick for raising her voice in constrained quarters.

"Yes girl, don't make me repeat myself." The sour old bat snipped at her while the thief packed up most of the contents inside their little tent, handing the large crystal ball and more ornate bits of her 'shop' herself. "I suppose that means St Petersburg is more to you than just the city of palaces then?"

More like the territory of a notorious underworld Mafiya group the blonde didn't want to tangle with. "It's just… surprising. I didn't know we are going that far north."

Either she had to keep her head down… or barter for safe passage. Safe passage would be the smart thing to do, trying to sneak on through could get a bit riskier than she liked when surrounded by civilians.

Thankfully they wouldn't be staying longer than a week, the circus had gained more initial operating funds their opening week than planned on so pushing out of the USSR fast to be the first outside the Iron Curtain was what they were trying to do.

"Hmph." The old gypsy woman didn't look remotely convinced, but the younger of the two thought it was more like the old bat didn't really care. "Ensure any trouble that you attract doesn't end up bothering Master Liam, girl."

Case in point. If it didn't affect the circus or the circus master, Crina didn't give a damn. Why was something she was kind of interested in learning.

Sonya tossed the last silk pillow into the chest built specifically for the delicate and easily molded cloth items, looking around once more to be sure she had gotten the bulk of their 'stage' packed up. "Right, whatever. I'm going to go tell the men they can break down the tent and move our things onto the railcar."
"Don't hurry back."

"Will do."

Their relationship might remain semi-antagonistic for the entirety of their time working together, but the Russian thief didn't really mind the thought. It was a hell of a lot better than the leering and sneers she typically got from the crowd attracting Madame Crina more customers, or the painfully faked friendliness of the trapeze artists and showgirls.

Cherep even got annoyed when the younger woman in the circus tried being friendly to her when he was around, so she was at least sure it was all faked to her. Probably.

Eh... people gave her headaches. Even her best friend at times. Straight-forward and semi-hostile was easier to deal with than simpering friendliness or snooty behavior.

Sonya located her brother easily, with his vibrant purple hair standing out in the sea of brunettes, blondes, and the occasional random colors. He wasn't the only one in the circus with vibrant or slightly odd hair and eye coloring, but he was the only one with purple as both.

"Madame Crina's tent is ready to go." She told the nearest male paying some attention to the ongoing picking up efforts in German, their circus' main common language. "What's going on?"

"We hit ground frost here, froze peg at night." Jaq, who played the exotic African strongman for the crowd looking for semi-unusual feats or exotic things to gawk at, informed her in his broken German easily enough. He was leaning on his massive wooden mallet, which showed dirt and mud where he likely hit the troublesome big top peg to loosen it up. "Nothing makes free."

She hummed her understanding. German wasn't his best language, but she couldn't speak Arabic or Berber at all just like how he couldn't understand Russian or any more of her French.

They watched in rather companionable silence as the people gathered around argue about how to get the stake of steel up, and the few attempts to just brute force the dratted thing out of the mud. They couldn't exactly leave it behind, the big top only had so many extra pegs that could take and brace the stress and weight of the massive circus tent.

She would not be offering her Cloud Flame strength as a possibility, only if they decided to finally abandon it would she yank the steel up and sneak it back into the supply carriage.

Cherep suddenly fell backwards onto his ass, flinging a lot of icy mud everywhere. The very stake like peg in question in hand. "Got it!"

Jaq harrumphed, swinging his massive wooden and iron prop over his shoulder. "I likely knocked up for him."

"Cherep's strength against your hammer? Very likely indeed." Sonya agreed with the burly and bald black man, patting him on the elbow. She couldn't reach his shoulder, she might only just be able to reach it with her full growth in a few years. "You might've given up a touch too soon if he got it so quickly."

Except... she could probably out lift the man if cheating by using her Dying Will Flames. The young mechanic had been listening and watching her utilizing her Cloud Flames for years, and they had been trying to use each other's ability lately.

Her best friend might not share her opinion on the showcasing of Flame abilities.
The thief had to obey Omertà, her brother didn't.

…and likely wouldn't. Even if it had gotten him kidnapped before, he was still planning on trying to become famous for his death-defying abilities.

Sonya, at the very least, should probably have a word with him about not confirming anything merely to help him stay off the underworld's radar. As well as some coaching on what to do if approached by any shady or too good to be true characters.

It was the biggest risk her fellow Cloud was taking with his plan on becoming a stuntman, especially if he did some Flame enabled death-defying in front of a full house.

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**CV (Saturday the 30th of April, 1966. Saint Petersburg, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)**

St. Petersburg was situated on the Gulf of Finland, part of the Baltic Sea.

Which was part of how the Grekov Gang became so influential, they had a sea route to the Atlantic Ocean and the countries not under the Soviet Union's rule. More than the *vory* of Saratov, who had miles of river to traverse before any goods were shipped in or out.

Smuggled black market goods, the smuggling people in and out of the Soviet Union, and the acquisition of anything outside of the Iron Curtain you might ever want was what they had built their little empire from.

The Grekov Gang was also *better informed* than the more mainland Mafiya syndicates. Partially, they could also control what the rest of them learned of those far from their icy home territory.

Which would also mean they knew more than what any syndicate generally tended to know about the rest of the world.

Additionally, it meant Sonya had *not* wanted to set foot in the admittedly beautiful city for any reason. Even if the ports here served Mafia Land more than any of the smaller ones farther south, and that trip took her longer, the Russian thief always went either more west or south to get or settle a contracted heist.

Hopefully the sexism in mafia life and generally 'unknown' umbrella most Flame users currently labored under would keep her from being too interesting.

While to the Zolotovs Dying Will Flames were just a strange fire ability some of their younger members could play around with… that would change fast, with Usov there to show them how much even a young Mist could fuck someone over.

To the Grekovs, it might be more like how the Vongola viewed theirs as desirable traits to be coveted and the users made loyal any way possible.

No, Vongola didn't have a shiny reputation. For one, they were *mafia*. For another, World War Two was only two decades from being over and a lot of that nastiness was still lingering around.

In an effort not to draw undue attention to herself, Sonya bit a bullet and went into one of the 'known' contact points for the Grekov Gang.
"Sonya of Zolotov, eh?" This Boris wasn't as amicable as Tatiana's tattooist Boris, but likely that had to do because she didn't belong to the local syndicate in power. "What are you doing with a bunch of civvies?"

As a fifteen-year-old, she no longer qualified for the blanket protection young children enjoyed in the Russian underworld. Getting protection or slipping in and out of other territories was a lot harder than her occasional heists around the Soviet Union few years ago.

"Laying low, of course." The blonde gave him a bland smile, ignoring the fact he likely wasn't the one in charge or who she really should've been speaking to. Likely, the vor in charge of this little hideout was one of the ones playing 'bodyguard' or not quite in the room with them. "I did a few jobs that might have been a bit too high profile to handle the resulting heat. So now I'm hiding with the pigeons and pretending to be a good girl."

Which was a big fat lie, but she was a thief not a schoolgirl. They would be expecting one anyways, it was better to give them what they thought they wanted then to leave.

Preferably before Madame Crina decided to finally get herself and her 'shop' set up for their opening day in this city. The old bat had lingered about that the last two times, until most of the others had set up where they would be for the two or three days they would be operating for a mere weekend long stay and poached a convenient 'corner' or the closest thing to it.

That wouldn't spare Sonya's shins if she was late getting back, but it was a risk she had to run.

There was some hemming and hawing, and some frankly insulting insinuation passed around, but she kept the pleasant façade up and ignored the harassment until her 'bribe' to get ignored for the week was accepted and she was free to go.

Keeping herself from stiffening up when a few snips of gossip about the Zolotov Flame users proved almost too tricky for her. The Grekov Gang knew about Usov, not his name but that he was very young and a Mist.

Scarily well informed could be added to what she knew of the most influential Russian Mafyia syndicate of St Petersburg.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 1st of May, 1966. Saint Petersburg, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Predictably, that wasn't the end of it.

Of course not, the Storm-Cloud didn't apparently have that kind of luck. She might've used hers all up keeping Cherep mostly out from under the Zolotov clan's collective thumb.

The Grekov Gang responded to a Zolotov in their territory by sending in a much more personable man the next day, a vor who charmingly introduced himself as 'Valera'. Then he tried buttering her up to learn the truth behind a few of the stranger stories coming out of Moscow, and coincidentally Zolotov, territory.

If Sonya had not spent some of her developing years around someone like Renato Sinclair, who was both a charming bastard and totally unapologetic about using it for his own ends, or her foster father, who wasn't nearly so charming but still eye candy in a way, she might have gotten distracted enough to fall for his pretty face slightly.
There was also her two decades of life as Rachel to consider, who hadn't been considered nearly as 'pretty' as the thief was now. She had dealt with things like popular cliques playing with 'lesser people' and college students jockeying for a professor's time and attention.

Added to all that was Jaq, who couldn't speak to her much with his broken German but was a marvelous bouncer for the girls of the circus anyways. The strongman did tend to beat away the overzealous admirers the trapeze artists and showgirls tended to attract as it was, he just didn't seem to mind when appreciated for doing so.

Jaq was also someone who Valera couldn't charm, given he didn't understand much Russian and understood about one word of five in German.

Renato was harder to dodge than Valera. She wasn't sure if that was a bonus in favor of the Italian Mafioso or against the Russian vor, but it was true.

The problem was the fact that the Storm-Cloud wasn't speaking to Grekov Gang's man proved she did have something to hide. That something only partially included Cherep, but he was still part of it.

Sonya didn't have the charisma to avoid confirming the bare basics, or apparently to pry a leech off her. The fact was annoying her greatly, more than getting Valera sicced on her at all had.

It stood to reason that she wasn't remotely happy when the mechanic popped up at first.

There was less than a day left to go, Großes Volksfest would be packing up at the end of this night and leaving for Finland, Norway, and Sweden in that order. That was where they would leave the Iron Curtain, as well.

The slick man probably sensed a weakness, because for all that he was getting stonewalled by her he was probably a good intelligence gatherer for their age group. The St Petersburg vor turned an ingraining smile on the purple haired mechanic. "Now, now? Who is this?"

"Someone, nice to meet you." Cherep eyed him, then her probably flat expression. Then took the conversation somewhere his little sister didn't quite expect. "Are you coming to the after-party?"

"Not planning on it, no." She responded hesitantly. "Why?"

"You know, you don't have to stick so close to Crina. I don't think that bat would mind if you tried socializing a little."

"I stick to said bat because at least she's honest about herself and how she views others."

"The women around here might not be collectively the nicest girls ever, but they're not all that bad. There's a couple I think you might actually like somewhat."

Sonya gave that some thought, because her best friend did know her better than anyone else around for kilometers. If he thought she might like someone, it was possible. "Uh… maybe. Depends."

"Excuse me-"

The Cloud siblings looked at him, then each other, then looked back at Valera and spoke at the same time. "No."

The thief then ignored him, because she had better things to do. "I don't have to bring something, do I?"
"Like what?"

"Liquor or food? It's a party, isn't it?"

"The food is mostly leftover concession stand fair, so no food. We do chip in for the cost of the booze, though."

"Then I'm chipping in for Jaq, because I had to hide behind him yesterday."

Cherep snorted dryly. "You realize that's why he does it, right?"

"It would be rude to not, taking advantage of him like that without giving him something to show for it."

"You should probably go tell Crina you're abandoning her for the night, then." Somehow, the mechanic had managed things which ended up with Sonya no longer cornered against a block of fair food stalls.

She took the obvious opening Cherep made for her, not entirely sure how he managed that but greatly appreciative of it anyways. He waited until she was obviously out of sight before turning to the vor that had been harassing her.

"Stop bothering her, before I spread the news some faction in St Petersburg has no problem interrupting normal business hours on whims."

"You're the devotchka's little guard dog, then?"

"A concerned bystander, at the very least." Her brother demurred easily, not reacting to the insinuation at all.

She was a little impressed at that, as she couldn't keep from getting defensive when pressed.

Maybe he had a point when insisting she should socialize more, she couldn't really get people to stop pressing if the icy thing didn't turn them off and she wasn't allowed to retaliate freely.

A mental note made to bother Cherep the next time she couldn't get someone off her, and the former pickpocket left him to it. He was doing a lot better than she had done trying to get the vor to leave.

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CVI (Thursday the 5th of May, 1966. Helsinki, the Republic of Finland.)

Passing part of the Iron Curtain from Soviet controlled countries into non-Soviet territory still bemused Sonya no matter how many times she did it.

From what Rachel had once known, the phenomena of the Cold War called the 'Iron Curtain' blocked off access between a large chunk of Eurasia and the rest of the world as a halt of all things. Trade, immigration, and outside news, none of it was supposed to leach through without underground, either underworld or spies leaking information, help.

Both a physical and mental barrier, an eyesore of a scar that split Germany’s capital city in half.

Which… wasn't how it worked as far as she knew it in this lifetime. She had made it a point to know, given her work on a non-stationary floating island that moved far in as little as a week.
Under a less hostile Cold War the Iron Curtain merely meant a boundary line that Soviet communists didn’t tend to cross and where trade being imported into the region tended to dry up. The ‘war’ was more one of ideology fought with business models and the continued successes of government rule, not one fought by suggesting the possibility of murdering another’s populace and armies before they could murder you.

Still an eyesore of a scar that separated East and West Germany, and a distinct 'regional' mindset was found in those that lived within it that was less than hospitable to those outside of it. More mental than physical in places, but enough was physical that it was similar enough as it was.

Part of that bewildering pacifistic warfare was fought by the entertainment industry, in the Russian Circuses that toured around and showcased the talents of young Soviet men and women to the rest of the world. They didn't quite stack up to Hollywood, but they were more real than fantasy people on the silver screen in return for the lesser spotlight.

While traveling for a vacation outside the Soviet Union made the border guards peer at their foster family suspiciously all those years ago… it also meant the thief traveling for 'business' was just barely tolerable, no matter what age she was at, and being one part of a circus troupe actually 'favorable'.

The circus master Liam got them through the Iron Curtain at St Petersburg and to Finland's capital of Helsinki in what seemed to her record setting time.

Rachel had grown up hearing the result of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rest of the Iron Curtain, which made what Sonya know of it more confusing.

Of course, that was until she bothered to touch base with the local faction of mafia in the area.

Not something she tended to do when outside the Soviet Union, for usually at best she was in whatever city or town for a night before leaving again. The slow crawl progress the circus was doing made her look around for something to distract her, and underworld neutral points were interesting to scope out if you had the time.

They weren't the safest thing to do, however.

Randomly wandering into one made for a very hostile reception, until you could prove you belonged to the underworld yourself. The Russian thief's tattoos did help slightly, but that wasn't something she could walk around showing off freely this close to the Soviet Union.

She ended up smashing some overly slick ass of a man's head into the bar, not hard enough to pulp the bone and brain but enough to knock the so called 'gentleman' out for the night. That got her a free shot of whisky she wasn't drinking and a bit of local gossip, as the man had been annoying the owner of the little watering hole before he switched targets to her.

Gossip about how hard one of the local syndicate's bosses was working to keep the trade going even in the face of Soviet stinginess. Getting more out of the bartender took a respectable amount out of Sonya's purse of loose funds, but she robbed the ass that had lewdly propositioned her to make up for it.

Finland's mercantile side itself was supportive of the views and policies of the Soviet Union, even if they didn't belong to it itself. Meaning they were probably the best place for trade to happen, as any imports into the Union were tariffed heavily. While obviously imports were scorned heavily deeper in the USSR, trading raw materials for consumables were less ostracized the farther one got from the Motherland.
An absolute lockdown on trade wouldn't help the economy in this part of the world, meaning the metal and minerals coming out of the Soviet Union wouldn't be traded for the surplus of food the Finnish somehow had.

She was interested in hearing it and wondered if that would allow her birth country to avoid the fall Rachel knew of. While she might recall a coup and some dubious policies were involved, sometime near Rachel's original birth date, she did not exactly know what led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

"Interested in shutting it down?" The bartender asked hesitantly in Russian when she pressed him for more.

"No, my job requires I travel. If there is no trade, there will be no travel. Not very good for a thief who wanders." The Storm-Cloud informed him honestly enough. "I would like to know if you know any obvious obstructions to my continued business."

"No… the most I know of obstructions were all dealt with already."

She mentally debated if he understood her incorrectly or was just being unhelpful. Maybe she should attempt finding someone that knew Finnish or Swedish to teach her. Sonya belatedly realized half the problem might be the fact she wasn't ordering anything to drink… but she also didn't want the whisky shot she hadn't watched being poured.

"You wouldn't happen to have any vodka, would you?" She would have to watch her intake closely, but at least she knew her limits with that poison. A couple shots wouldn't do more than make her tipsy, her limit for casual drinking.

Playing a snooty Russian connoisseur of liquor got her more information on the ongoing trade issues, go figure.

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CVII (Sunday the 29th of May, 1966. Muonio, the Republic of Finland.)

Setting up the Grobès Volksfest took two days, while breaking it down took one. With a general three days of operation a week if they were going fast and eleven if it was a slower visit, that left a day of travel from point to point.

The combination of the slow crawl up Finland, where they would cross over to Norway near the most northern edge of the country then zigzag across to Sweden the way down to England, and the amount of time between opening the circus and closing for the weekend literally drove Sonya to drink.

At mafia bars, but the point stood.

Why wasn't there a mafia library or something?

The biggest variation she found was a quaint little sandwich shop in Tampere, or a cigar shop and smoking lounge in Oulu, but mainly underworld gathering spots were all bars.

The Storm-Cloud would kill for a simple café… but mafia cafés likely started in France and it would take another two or three months to get down there.

The more she visited the underworld hotspots, the more she regretted her personal view on using her
Dying Will Flames obviously until they became more common. Which was not to, at least until she wouldn't be preemptively attacked or courted by someone more annoying than Valera from St Petersburg.

Local news in this northeastern corner of the underworld was that while Dying Will Flames were making a small trickle comeback, they weren't widespread yet. Syndicates were still zealously guarding their few users, even if their abilities were of a more party-trick variety than useful.

Like Dmitriy, and his ability to calm hysterics or stop machinery. While that might get to the point of Tranquilizing someone to death if he had the motivation, it wasn't apparent just yet.

At the very least she started buying bottles of whatever local brew was available and giving it to Madame Crina, who cut back on the sour sniping and bitchiness in return. It probably wasn't the best idea to enable the old bat's alcoholic tendency, but she seemed happier at least.

Sonya herself took up a very bad habit of smoking, but she'd stop… eventually. She had to, with her book hoarding issue the fires that could start alone would make her.

Admittedly, that issue could be solved by smoking outside.

She gave the, very annoying, cancer stick in her hands a dark look.

…fuck it, at least the habit was relaxing if not great for her health. She'd be coughing out a lung by the time she was thirty.

Besides her increasing alcohol tolerance and picking up a nasty habit, the freelance thief also learned a bit about the *Obtshak* and how it operated. The local conglomerate of mafia groups was at least an equal opportunity one, in that they had a thriving human trafficking ring ongoing.

She spent more time than she'd ever admit keeping track of the circus and ensuring the people she and Cherep worked with were not likely to meet anyone they would only meet once down a dark alleyway. Getting the information to do so made her feel three shades of disgusting, mostly because she wasn't going to wage a one-woman crusade against any underworld syndicate involved in human trafficking.

Sonya likely wouldn't survive trying that. She couldn't *afford* to. Therefore, she wasn't planning on it.

No matter how closely *that* scraped against her sensibilities or made her irritable.

The misplaced Russian stopped short, flicking her nearly burnt out cigarette butt to the sidewalk and grinding the still burning cherry under her heel. It didn't make her feel better.

Though she itched to light up another one, just simply because it was *something to do*, Sonya didn't particularly want to become a chain smoker and refrained.

The whole reason she was out that night was because her best friend and a few of the other young men from the circus decided to go out drinking. Strictly a guy thing in a tiny tavern of Muonio, their last city they would be visiting in Finland. Sort of a celebration of a kind, in getting free and clear this far with a semi-respectable amount to travel on.

Even if they did badly in Norway and Sweden, they had the funds to absorb that and continue to move on.

Instead of spending yet another night darning whatever Crina wanted fixed or seeking out a bar of
her own to get slightly tipsy at or try socializing with the other carnie workers, Sonya had decided to wander about.

It was a nice night, slightly warmer than Moscow. Pretty too, with the stars and everything overhead.

The scream that escaped the nearby alleyway she had just passed sent knives up her spine, and she hesitated.

On one hand it really wasn't her business… and yet she just as fast turned around to see what the hell was going on and if it was one of the circus workers.

Damn her bloody, paranoid curiosity.

It wasn't a girl, even if the scream had been shrill and ear breaking. Someone rather youngish hadn't been able to keep it in when someone else broke their hand.

She eyed the group suspiciously, but figured it was likely a thief that got caught out stealing from the wrong person.

Again, not her business.

That didn't mean they decided she was just as irrelevant as she thought them.

Sonya got something spat at her before she could keep walking but being unable to speak the local language kind of hampered the communication. She tried anyways, holding up her hands and repeating 'I'm not involved' in all the languages she knew. German, French, Italian, Russian, English, Chinese, and trying what broken Arabic or Romanian she had been adding lately.

It didn't help, she was almost unsurprised by that.

CVIII (Monday the 30th of May, 1966. Muonio, the Republic of Finland.)

Sonya didn't particularly want to kill.

It wasn't so much a moral, 'respect all living things' ideology she held fast to as it was a semi-troubling slippery slope in her shadowy underworld life. A kind of 'do it once and never stop' kind of assumption prevalent in her lifestyle.

Stealing one's valuables probably wasn't nearly as lucrative as stealing someone's life.

Therefore, if she ever had to… for the sake of her own life or her safety or whatever reason she would try to justify it, she would rather it happen much, much later.

However, these… people were armed and didn't look very happy with her moment of curiosity. They also had no issue pointing firearms in her face.

If she didn't want to kill them, she was a little limited on the Dying Will Flames end. Nothing overt, anyways. That ruled out her Bec de Corbins, because she wasn't obviously armed with large polearms.

The brat the four gentlemen of questionable morals had been roughing over collapsed, from pain or stress or just a combination of both or more, pulling down the arms of one man and attracting massed attention.
The thief moved directly afterwards to take advantage, abusing the hell out of her Propagation enabled speed and the combat teachings Aleksandr drilled in all the Mafiya brats that got shoved at him. An elbow to one's throat, a punch to someone else's guts, kicked out knee and her own drilled into someone's nose, and that left her the last man holding the collapsed brat.

He almost shot her, but the aim was off enough it didn't even skim her skin. Sonya did feel the heat of the bullet pass her stomach and likely put a hole through her clothes, so she punched his lights out.

That left her with four unconscious bodies and a whimpering brat, but at least she had no overt Flame use here that might come back to bite her.

Kicking the kid lightly in the thigh didn't get her much of a response. Sighing heavily through her nose, the Russian thief hauled the skinny kid up and tossed him over a shoulder.

She did interfere, so she had to take responsibility for what had happened. Sonya intended to dump him off at a hospital or, if he woke up, home if he had one.

Much to her irritation, he took the opportunity to throw up whatever had been in his stomach all over the back of her coat.

Well… if this didn't teach her to mind her own damn business, nothing would.

He was at least weakly twitching and somewhat moving under his own power, so she set him on his feet once they were free of the alleyway. Taking off and tossing the coat he soiled on him, the Russian promptly left him there.

He was alive and awake… ish. He could make his own damn way home… or to a hospital.

She dug into her pockets of her slacks, came to a sudden halt as something missing occurred to her, and turned back.

The brat was no more awake than he had been before, but he was at least aware enough to know she was possibly lethally violent and not something he wanted to draw the focused attention of. Him stiffening up when she approached was probably a little too late to help him much in that.

She just wanted her pack of the damn cigarettes back, and after digging them out of the coat turned to continue.

Small little parlor trick she had learned, a brush of Storm Flames could light things on fire if she was careful enough. It was less holding her red fire to an object and letting the Disintegration feature leech into whatever, more holding it close until it combusted itself under the heat, but an interesting trick that meant she would never require a lighter to smoke.

Kind of like using a laser or magnifying glass to light things on fire, but the versatility appealed to her. Possibly even her Cloud Flames could do it, but Storm Flames were how she discovered the ability.

Sonya expected that to be it, she had beaten up a couple of mooks and the kid was… alright-ish. The circus was leaving for Norway the next day, she'd wouldn't be in range of any retaliation in just a few hours. The brat probably knew to keep his head down until he was healed up.

Win for everyone, right?

She did not appreciate the inept stalking.
It took the brat a few streets to decide to do it, and she had almost forgot him by then. Likely he went back to see if he needed to run or something and decided following closely to her was somehow a great idea.

What about her was such bait for bratty little boys?

He followed her six streets, out of the city proper and into the suburbs and eventually into the fairgrounds themselves.

It wasn't *that* late, so instead of just shaking the kid off her tail or dealing with it she ducked around the last remaining tents a bit until he got closer. Close enough for her to shove him at Madame Crina's feet.

The gypsy woman wasn't remotely amused.

Her apprentice in mysticism hefted over a bottle of whisky from the semi-obvious stash of alcohol she had stored away, and at least the old bat agreed to translate.

The brat's name was Björn, and he had apparently decided to stick it with Sonya until the next city she visited.

Kid looked nothing like a bear, why Crina translated his name as such was beyond her.

The Russian thief shrugged it off, if it wasn't a permanent arrangement she'd deal. That gibberish that came out of his mouth made her itch, because it sounded like German but wasn't and she couldn't understand him.

Björn gave her a gap-toothed smile, or grin or whatever that arrangement of his mouth was supposed to be. She glared flatly back at him.

She had Crina tell the brat he was making his own arrangements, because she wasn't doing anything else for him.

Before she left him to managed his own way, she did at least straighten out the bones of his hand. Not to be nice, just so it didn't heal up crooked and have him following her even more. The fingers of her right hand were crooked from smashing them in a heist years ago, it wasn't really all that fun.

Turns out, she probably would've been better off just ignoring him.

He didn't stop stalking her.

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**CIX (Wednesday the 15th of June, 1966, Tromsø, Kingdom of Norway.)**

"You're using math to prove you can do stunts." Sonya summed up Cherep's excited babble shortly a few weeks later, picking through the few he had completed.

It wasn't really a bad idea, honestly. Even if it did make her want to grimace.

It was also more than what she ever figured math would involve in her life, but since he was actually very good at the subject she wasn't surprised he had done this. A bit nervous, and a little wary, but not surprised.

"Think Master Liam will go for it?" Her fellow Cloud had long experience in knowing what her less
than expressive tones meant, so he shamelessly ignored the non-enthusiastic mien of his best friend.

As far as Sonya had pegged out circus life, the moment they did less than adequately in a month Liam would go around asking for what the circus people thought they could add to their main show or side attractions. If her mechanically inclined best friend showed his work then, it would likely get at least considered.

Since she was his best friend, she told him so.

"That's... a great idea."

She rolled her eyes at his surprised tone, then rolled up the paper Cherep had used to calculate out angles, forward momentum, and likely distance he could get on his Russian made motorcycle for safe keeping.

They didn't exactly provide the circus with a lot of cash draw on their own. He might enable continued operations and had been doing rather well in that from what was bandied around where his little sister could hear, but she didn't generate a lot of income herself either.

Madame Crina was a niche thing. Fortune tellers were just a staple of visiting a circus. Being a draw girl, or occasionally subbing in for the old bat, didn't increase how much money their booth took in by a lot.

Enough to validate having an assistant, but not enough to make her invaluable.

This stunt thing, if it became popular, would change Cherep from being an expected expense for operations and become a revenue draw in his own right. Master Liam would likely at least try it out, since he was a very good circus master and seemed perfectly amiable to trying different things when he could from what they saw of the big top shows' rotations.

"Just... don't annoy Master Liam asking about it." Sonya ignored his suddenly innocent look. "I know you've been after this for years but try to be patient for a little bit longer. You're almost there. Don't screw it up at the finish line."

Her brother took back his plans with an entirely too angelic smile, tossing them into the steamer trunk he was living out of without looking. "So, what are we doing?"

"I don't know, do you want to go get something other than campfire food for dinner?" She wasn't really a fan of stew and crackers for dinner every night, which was what they typically ate if the circus wasn't set up yet or the cold jerky and dried fruit passed around when they were on the road.

"You're not going drinking tonight?"

"Not much of a point." The mafia hangouts were becoming more and more like simple local watering holes and less like what she'd expect for an underworld hangout.

By all appearances the farther north one got, the less actual syndicates operating.

Sonya had a theory those supposed mafia bars were all along smuggling routes, and only operated as such when their local faction of the mafia came through. Which made the northern end of Norway, Sweden, and Finland somewhat unclaimed territory in the underworld.

There wasn't enough crime to warrant a dedicated den or two. Freelancers abounded in territories like this so there was crime, but if there was a larger networked syndicate she hadn't found them yet.
Not that she'd try to stick it out up here, but it was interesting to know.

"We're going to need someone that speaks the local language." Cherep pointed out, locking his trunk and snagging himself a coat.

It might be the beginning of summer, but they were still in the northern tip of Norway. Biting cold at night didn't really describe it.

"How about that kid?"

"What kid?"

Her fellow Cloud slid an amused look at her as the left the 'dormitory' tent encampment for their night off. "The one that hasn't stopped stalking you since the last town."

"Bear boy?" Sonya asked incredulously. "We are not bringing that annoying brat with us."

Bjørn had disappeared for a short while, then somehow popped up once they had crossed the Finland/Norway border. The fact the Russian thief was flatly ignoring him didn't seem to bother him too much, and he kept any thieving away from the circus at least which didn't exactly motivate her into dealing with him.

Likely because she rescued him once he probably thought he could duck behind her again if he pissed off the wrong people. Which she wasn't going to do, because that would only encourage Bjørn to keep on doing it.

Actually, she wasn't even sure the brat was a thief. He might've just been a runner, for messages or other bits of less critical information.

Sonya narrowed her eyes on Cherep, who grinned mischievously back at her.

"How about Crina?"

Yes, the only reason she suggested it was to see him blanch. It was funny.

The fact the old bat overheard them and decided to invite herself along was just her luck.

They at least didn't eat stew again that night, and Norway had some fantastic bread. Crina stole half of Sonya's pack of cigarettes, annoyingly enough, but at least kept a civil tongue about her over dinner.

CX (Friday the 1st of July, 1966. Luleå, Kingdom of Sweden.)

Stealing while working for a circus wasn't the best idea, or at least doing them both at the same time wasn't.

That kind of thing could be traced back to the Großes Volksfest and Master Liam to make trouble for them, so even if Sonya got annoyed at the idiots that wandered into the circus just to gape at everything but not spend money she didn't lift their wallets.

She was on such good behavior it was depressing.

A circus troupe was enough of a close-knit community that any theft was rather quickly tracked
down and dealt with, meaning it wasn't even worth it in the first place.

The former pickpocket didn't really want to lose her skills while here either. If she couldn't practice them as they were meant to be used, or at least how she tended to use them, then something else had to be found.

She could practice ballet with some of the other girls and helping with the trapeze stunts did count as gymnastic in a way. It didn't really help her muscle tone, because by this point exhausting her Cloud Flames before exercise was a difficult thing to do.

When she went back to being alone, that would hurt like hell to fix.

The only way she'd get combat practice in was if she went out and picked fights, which was so stupid she barely gave the idea any thought. If one found her that was another thing, but violence like that could be traced back to the circus just as easily as stealing.

Sleight of hand tricks were likely the only way her fingers would remain dexterous enough for her main job. She had a semi-small selection of locks she practiced picking now and again, that changed as she found newer ones and discarded the simpler ones she had already learned by heart.

In four months the Storm-Cloud had learned to juggle and throw knives, some basic card tricks that she might be able to make a bit more impressive with Cloud Flames, and how to breathe fire.

Not because it was something she thought she could use, but because that was really freaking cool and Jaq's friend Faris didn't mind teaching her in return for some of her wine stash to supplement his supply.

Sonya might be a slight pyromaniac, given her fire ability and her willingness to use it.

The knife-throwing and juggling she incorporated into her gypsy girl costume, and the immediate downswing in how many leers and insulting propositions she got from local single men was gratifying. Faris had her help him out in a couple shows, mixing up the fuel that he lit on fire as needed instead of having a premade mix for every show limit his act.

Which was in truth lamp oil, not pure alcohol. The wine was just to mask the flavor and the bottle to deceive the audience about how it was possible, apparently.

Eh, still a cool skill.

She was in the middle of looking for more people to send Madam Crina's way for her day-job when Cherep sought her out.

He had a hopeful grin on his face that made her suspicious. "Think you could jump from a moving platform?"

"…probably, why?"

"How about a moving vehicle?"

"I've… never tried, so I don't know. Again, why?"

"Want to help me with a stunt? Master Liam said if I could impress him, he'd let me start doing stunts for the circus next year."

"So you want me…? To jump from the back of that motorcycle… on to what?"
"Not onto anything." The want-to-be stuntman informed her as if that was going to reassure her. "Up to one of the trapeze artists."

Sonya stared at him flatly as she tried to work that out in her head. "If I do this, it's cutting some time off how much I'm willing to be a circus performer."

"I just need you to do it once or twice, to convince the others it's not a really hard concept or trick."

Jumping off the back of a motorcycle and hoping someone caught her wasn't her idea of easy.

The Russian thief sighed and reassured herself that at least the practice parts would include every safety measure the circus used to safeguard their performers between shows. "When?"

"Once we reach Oslo, we're sticking it out for two weeks there."

That would... be in another month or so, as they were speeding through Norway and Sweden rather fast compared to how they went up Finland. Then again, it was fully summer now and it had been the mid to late parts of spring for when they were traveling north.

She shrugged off her misgivings, because this was what he'd need to avoid the mafia without an underworld criminal nearby to counter the attention any unconscious Flame usage would draw. "Alright, whatever. As long as I don't have to actually perform the damn stunt with you in front of a crowd, I'll help you out."

Cherep wasn't an overly muscled young man, it didn't seem as if Cloud Flame use would allow that, but he was strong enough to make her wheeze if he gave her a bear hug. "Thanks, Sonya."

"Just make sure to add into your calculations what the sudden downward force would do to your bike, and what the sudden loss of my weight would do to you. Please."

"How much do you weigh, exactly?"

His fellow Cloud felt perfectly justified punching him lightly in the gut. The grin he wore told her he knew asking would annoy her and did it anyways.
CXI

CXI (Sunday the 31th of July, 1966. Oslo, Kingdom of Norway.)

Jiayi was a tiny Chinese woman with dark hair and eyes, about middle-aged, and long since retired from performing for crowds. What she did for the *Großes Volksfest* now that her show days were behind her was choreographing the flying circus acts and managing the performers that showcased them to the public.

She was also the one that slotted time on the trapeze for any needed practice, and the lady that Sonya had to go through to pull off what Cherep wanted her to do once they reached Oslo.

The tiny and fierce woman's rapid-fired Mandarin Chinese was hard for her to follow at first, given how long it had been since she'd last spoken or heard the language. The fact she bothered trying to keep up at all at least won her some leeway from Jiayi, as well as the fact she did sometimes participate in the gymnastic routines the trapeze artists used to stay flexible.

The Storm-Cloud's bad habit of smoking rather negated all of that, however. The lady would huff and puff, but since the Russian thief wasn't the only one of 'her girls' to have nasty habits that impacted her breathing she let her go off now and again when the blonde was getting frustrated.

Trapeze swinging and tightrope walking was harder than she had counted on.

Ballet training and gymnastics only got one so far in the art, and before the tiny Chinese woman would sign off on Sonya using the big top's rig she had to prove she wasn't going to panic or fall off like an idiot. Which meant several days of practice on the much lower practice rig set up when they had the time to put in the hours to make use of it.

Day four of the 'rest' week they were taking in Oslo, almost a full month of working on the art whenever she could spare a few hours, was when she finally stopped trying to treat the tightrope like a solid balancing beam and could judge the momentum of the swinging trapeze bars to make a rather clumsy transference without arresting their momentum.

Meaning day five of that rest week was when Jiayi finally gave a reluctant green light for Cherep's stunt attempt.

Not before the fierce little Chinese woman wrangled a concession out of the Storm-Cloud to keep practicing on the trapeze. Her trained balance and hand-eye coordination a thief like her needed for certain skills apparently impressed the older woman somewhat, and the younger teen's flat refusal to be part of the big-top shows didn't seem to daunt her.

Having an emergency option if one of her girls got hurt too badly to perform seemed way too enticing for Jiayi to pass up.

Sonya, after the first bumps and bruises wore off, didn't mind putting in the hours the tiny lioness of a Chinese woman demanded. It wasn't nearly as intensive as what she really did need, given her Cloud Flames rendering any light or mild exercise routine ineffective, but every little bit could only help.

Her brother hadn't been idle while she learned the 'ropes' of trapeze swings, so to speak.
He and some of the other menfolk had cobbled together two ramps, one angled to give him the most height he could safely get and the other with a gentle slope back down to land on. It probably wouldn't last very long, and if he got the approval to go ahead with stunt work they'd have to make a better one for future shows, but it would work for the few days they needed it.

A few test jumps, some of them with a large bag of sand to simulate her weight, and he was as confident as could be. A slight change, though. No one else really wanted to be involved in something so risky, so it would just be the foster siblings trying out his trick stunt.

Now, the former pickpocket had to try to mix her newly acquired skill in trapeze swings and recovering from a fall while tightrope walking with Cherep's jumping of his little Russian made motorcycle.

It was… rather more nerve-wracking than she had counted on.

"I did say I was going to get you on one eventually."

"I entirely regret you were right in that claim."

Her fellow Cloud had the American made Bell Star helmet she had specifically ordered for him in his hands, the only full-face helmet of the era. Getting it when the USSR was so against imports or anything made in the US had been a headache and a half, but entirely worth it and the expensive price-tag.

Even if he misjudged the forces at work in mid-jump, at least he likely wouldn't be suffering a severe head injury.

The fact it was bright ass purple, nearly the same shade as his hair and eyes, merely meant he didn't tend to forget to wear the damned thing. For some reason, Cherep rather liked his coloring and wore purple whenever he could.

Sonya sighed heavily through her nose, vowing that the moment they were done she was taking a permanent smoke break for the rest of the day. "Let us get this over with."

Her brother, like the brat he was, flashed her an excited grin before tugging on his favorite birthday present from her.

A 1965 Izh Planeta motorcycle looked like a bicycle with a gasoline engine attached, as far as aesthetics went. There was more to it, but she didn't really feel charitable towards her best friend's favorite metal thing.

His plan for this stunt was to have her standing on the back seat of his bike, which while unadvised wasn't too hard for her if she braced her legs against his back and gripped his shoulders. Balancing while he got up to speed was tricky, and she started swearing under her breath when Cherep gunned the throttle and aimed for the jump ramp.

Sonya wore the safety harness attached to the performers when trying out new tricks, which was her only reassurance she wasn't going to get her fool head splattered open trying this. Jaq was on the other end, easily being twice her size in body mass made the strongman a very good counterweight if anything went wrong.

Actually hitting the ramp made her stomach drop into her toes, but to her surprise just letting go of Cherep's shoulders actually seemed to make everything easier.

Rather, putting space between herself and his deathtrap of a machine was something she was keen
Her brother bore down on the front end of his bike, tilting them rather disturbingly, which was her signal to jump for it. Doing so actually forced the back end of the bike to dip and evened him out, but then she was a little too concerned by reaching the swing left to hang to watch what was going to happen to him.

Getting a one-handed grip on it wasn't the best thing ever, the stress it put on her shoulder hurt until she got her other hand on the wooden bar. Then she looked down, trying to ignore the dizzying height.

From the look of the tiny people below her, the want-to-be stuntman had landed safely and was very damn excited about it.

Great. Fantastic. She was never doing this kind of crap again.

Sonya huffed, then glared at the next platform she needed to build up the momentum to reach to get down.

Never the fuck again.

CXIII (Monday the 8th of August, 1966. Oslo, Kingdom of Norway.)

The good news was that she hadn't torn something in her shoulder. That would've sucked.

Cherep was also given the news that he could start thinking up of other stunts and Master Liam would try to work it into the circus acts next year. Maybe not a big-top show, but at least a side-show display at first. Only if it proved popular would they start showcasing him as a stuntman.

Sonya supposed that might count as good news too.

The bad news was none of the other girls were keen on trying what she had done.

She could sort of understand that. She trusted her fellow Cloud a lot, enough to follow along with whatever crazy plan he had cobbled together and at least try it out. Not that she'd always do so, but generally if she couldn't find a reason not to she'd still do something he suggested once or twice.

The trapeze artists of their circus had known him for about half a year, mostly just casually as one of the 'stagehand mechanics', which wasn't the basis of any great relationship. The fact he finally had an opening to try for his dream of becoming a stuntman alone was impressive, really, but he was still unproven to be anything remarkable to the rest of their fellow circus performers.

The Russian thief still wasn't doing his trick stunt again. Once had been bad enough, but she hadn't had any expectations for it to make her even more wary of mixing the height and lack of support it required.

If she absolutely had to, she would. However, she didn't and now that she did have some idea of how risky it was baulking wasn't quite descriptive enough to explain her feelings on it.

Her brother was at least totally understanding of her reluctance for doing it again, he had brushed off her slightly stilted apology for that easily and merely gave her a rib-cracking hug for trying it with him once.
He made an awesome best friend, even if he did drag her into carnie life.

The open circus week that followed had been just as trying in its own way, even if they only opened officially at ten in the morning they closed near two in the morning the next day. Children, young adults, family units, and the elderly generally visited in the afternoon and the rowdier singles and parents, sans their young, made up the crowds out for the evenings.

It paid off, though. They had more than enough funds to charter a ship to cross the Baltic Sea once they reached Stockholm, Sweden, and enough to last maybe two or so months on the road even if they didn't open the circus up during that time.

The only downside Sonya really wanted to quibble about was being expected to breakdown and pack up the day after they were finished showcasing the Großes Volksfest. Everyone was tired and more than a little stressed from lack of sleep or straining to squeeze out that last bit of effort for the grand finale Sunday night.

She wasn't alone in cursing out the city's officials that specified what time they had the fairgrounds for, but the fact another circus would probably need a week break like they had the week before stopped it at just cursing. For anyone else to get it they had to move, preventing anything but dirty words being uttered in various languages instead of actual disgruntlement being felt.

By the time the Russian thief had gotten Madame Crina's junk packed up and told the men the tent was ready to be broken down, her legs and feet were aching. No wonder the old bat zealously guarded her damn fine boots and took a seat every moment she could.

Those boots were probably made specifically for the old woman's tiny feet, and to cushion the extreme amount of time she spent on them. She wanted her cobbler's name, and a whole week to commission herself a pair of them.

At least the circus was done with Finland and Norway, in as little as a week they'd be out of Sweden too.

France was next, and Sonya had a few plans outside of it that made her happy Cherep would probably be a little too distracted by choreographing his future stunt work to really pay attention to what she was up to.

Pierre-Antoine Carpentier, who had once been the Arcobaleno of the Storm almost three hundred years ago, had been noted as being a Frenchman. The Storm-Cloud wanted to look him up, because for one human memory was not the most accurate of things and for two... at least then she'd have a ready excuse for how she knew what bits she still did.

The thief herself still didn't know what she was going to do about the next set of Arcobaleno.

Yes, they would be the last set and yes, it would only be for about three or less decades… but, Cherep was hers first.

Sonya didn't particularly feel like sharing her brother, thank you.

Unlike the… hitman of that to-be group, the dark Sun, Skull wasn't necessary. Not from what Rachel had known. If that was true or not was questionable, in her last life she only saw very little of the purple-haired stunt baby.

The story she recalled had been about the Decimo of Vongola, not the immortal stuntman of the Arcobaleno.
She couldn't really plan for anything, because her fellow Cloud might just decide on his own he didn't need to associate with a group that contained several mafia types and a pair of soldiers.

He might just decide to help them anyways, despite how competent they were, and so the thief would just have to watch and wait.

Either way, that wasn't something she'd leave him to struggle with himself.

CXIII (Friday the 19th of August, 1966. Versailles, French Republic.)

If there was anything Cherep was greatly appreciative of about his Mafiya-flavored childhood, it was meeting Sonya and the many language lessons Lisa pressed on all of them.

French had been his first foreign language, aside Russian but he had lost a lot of his native Czech before brushing up on it a few years ago, meaning while the circus was in France he didn't have to find someone that spoke the local dialect just to sightsee… or grab Bjørn.

His foster sister's little fan boy hadn't left as he claimed he would do, the kid was still hanging around and pretending he wasn't following the young Russian woman. Said young woman and his little sister was pretending she didn't notice him in her day-to-day life right back.

He wasn't sure what was going on, but suspected it was something mafia related. Sonya was only that blasé when it came to mafia dealings that made his head hurt, which made it a fair guess. It didn't mean he wasn't keeping an eye on the boy, or how he tried to shadow his fellow Cloud around, but it didn't look all that bad.

He did notice when his best friend shifted her usual habits, instead of going off and drinking in various shady local watering holes she was poking around several old parishes and asking questions. She wasn't getting very far from all appearances but she didn't remotely look annoyed when she returned to wherever the circus was set up for the week.

Honestly, he was starting to wonder if she was bored or not. She wasn't really made for show business, however well she managed the vagrant like lifestyle inherent in circus life.

It hadn't seemed as if his sister had noticed their one-on-one reception in Finland, and to a lesser extent Sweden, had been a tad hostile. Cherep was chalking that up to her lingering, worsening social blindness and her bewildering preference for hostile or aggressive behavior in her personal dealings.

France had less difficulties with those of Russian descent, meaning that instead of a cold shoulder or suspicious eyeing they got semi-amicable greetings and smiles.

Which made Sonya suspicious, hilariously enough. It didn't mean she refrained from using that friendlier outlook to her own advantage, but just that she was more cautious in using whatever she got by it.

That might have had something to do with the recent reduction of bar hopping, now that he thought about it.

The Cloud Flame user decided he had hesitated long enough, as distracting as actually being assured of his dream to be a stuntman was or not, and he hunted down his foster sister for a handful of answers before she left the circus again.
"What is Bjørn doing, anyways?" The question had been far enough from whatever she had been thinking about it pulled the thief up short halfway to Madame Crina's tent, and she gave him a considering look.

"One of two things, if I had to guess." She started slowly as she put out the ember of her mostly burned up cancer stick, her French starting out a touch slowly then speeding up as her annoyance bled on through to her tone. "One, he could be looking for a patron of a sort. He's not much of a fighter apparently, therefore he wants someone stronger to be beholden to yank him out of any trouble that may come up. If he makes himself useful to me, then I'd be that person beholden to ensure his safety. Another reason might be that he could just be curious, but if that curiosity has any actual basis for being is up in the air."

"Didn't you rescue him?" Cherep pointed out blandly, ignoring the fact a smirk was crawling up his face.

He heard the story, and what she had thought about the incident. It still amused him she had such a problem with understanding the motivations of others she didn't know to not comprehend how some of her own actions looked from the outside.

His crooked best friend had just been annoyed she'd been pulled into something that didn't concern her, Bjørn probably believed she rescued him.

Indeed, the thief snorted harshly at the very thought. "Not willingly, it merely happened to look that way."

Sonya knew that but failed to connect that information to what Bjørn did or didn't know himself or didn't realize the kid might not care what her intent had been and only cared for the results.

Cherep figured this was like how he ended up with a Mafiya thief for a best friend. How nearly a full month of her stalking him equated to a friendship he wasn't sure, but after she stopped annoying him on principle he hadn't minded having a semi regular visits from a friend. There was just less intent on keeping an eye on someone from her end this time.

"Why not take him on?" Whatever it was the kid wanted couldn't be too bad, right?

"I'm having enough..." His fellow Cloud trailed off uncertainly, frowning rather hard out into the distance.

"Enough?"

"...trouble just keeping up with you. I don't need yet another person to keep track of." She finished rather forcefully, looking rather belligerent as she dug out another cigarette. "Besides, what the hell would I do with him while we're wandering the length and breadth of the Continent?"

That was a fair question, really. Sonya had enough difficulties with merely following the same circus he was, especially since she had started looking outside of it for something to occupy her time.

"Whatever it is you're so intent on learning about around here?"

The thief gave him a sharp look for that quip after lighting up a new tube of tobacco from her pack of them, but she did give the possibility some consideration after a moment.

"Just a thought, anyways. What are you looking for?"

"Someone that I read about, but he's long dead. I'd thought I'd at least find a gravestone or
something by now, but I haven't actually come across anything that even remotely suggests this guy once lived in the country even if I know he was born here."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised this has something to do with your books." Cherep ducked the automatic smack aimed his way from her, grinning slightly. "Give it to the kid, then."

His little sister's annoyed batting at him stopped, or to be more specific she froze, at the suggestion while she considered his point. ". . . that would mean I have to pay him back for it."

"Either humor him on your terms or his. I don't think Björn is going to be leaving you alone any time soon."

CXIV (Thursday the 25th of August, 1966. Reims, French Republic.)

Sonya had to give Cherep the point of his argument, but it didn't mean she had to like it.

However, lately she had been chafing against the rather restrictive nature she was under while with the Großes Volksfest. There were things she rather wanted to get around to doing outside of the circus and France was, post WWII, rather… strange in a patchwork way.

It hadn't been more than fifteen years since the official end of the war, and great swaths of land were still abandoned with charred farmhouses dotted here and there or mass-produced home 'blocks' were what signified one was coming up on the suburbs of some village. Sometimes the circus came across roads that hadn't yet been rebuilt, resulting in some strange roundabout routes used to get to the next city.

That contrasted rather startlingly with the refurbished farmsteads and the cities, which had more of the rebuilding efforts concentrated on it since it would likely cost less to house the greater amount of people.

Paris had been shockingly colorful, in comparison to Moscow's severe utilitarian grace.

It had been harder to locate any older buildings in the capital city, there were new façades or straight up new buildings lining the streets and paint could cover any number of discolorations if the surface it was applied to was even.

That, the still obvious destruction that had been wrecked on the country that lingered long after the end of the war, was why Sonya was mostly sure Pierre-Antoine Carpentier was going to end up being a dead end.

If there were any records of the French born Arcobaleno of the Storm three hundred years ago, they might have been destroyed a decade or so before she had even been born. It was entirely possible that some records still existed but finding the information would probably take longer than she had left in the country.

Not if she was going to keep on following the circus as Cherep asked of her.

The Russian thief rather wanted that information if it was at all possible… but she was also rather keen on keeping up with her best friend while he didn't have the umbrella protection of being even slightly famous.

Obviously, she couldn't be in two places at once… but she didn't have to be.
Of course, that didn't mean she wanted to resort to that kind of measure.

Björn was an unknown element, little Finnish boy that he was.

Sonya didn't trust the brat, or why it was he still tagged along after her when he had previously claimed he would do otherwise.

He might only have mafia connections in the loosest sense of the word and thought she could enable him to cut them entirely. The scrawny kid could also be really interested in her personally, for whatever motivation any young adult might have about a rescuer no matter how unwilling. Björn could also want to deepen his underworld connections further than his homeland could enable.

Mafia life was both sticky and slippery in that way, hard to shed but equally as hard to swim deeper if the possibility wasn't opened for you by another in deeper than you were. She wasn't going any deeper than she was, not on her own, as she couldn't in the USSR and didn't intend to in Mafia Land.

The Russian Mafiya didn't have women vory, so she was as respectable within it as she'd ever be. Assassination and hitman work didn't appeal to her, seeing as killing was only something she'd have to resort to if she royally fucked up a heist somehow.

However, the thief really did have to decide about what to do with the kid sometime soon.

If the brat kept hanging around he might note that she and Cherep had oddly colorful fire at their command and ask a couple questions from the locals she probably wouldn't appreciate. Björn was a security risk in a way, a possibility, and a threat all rolled into one little Finish teenager.

The major problem between making use of the kid was going to be the language barrier. Björn might have applied himself to picking up every scrap of Russian he could, but they were in France. The kid's French was better than his few partly words of her second birth-language, but it was still broken enough she wasn't going to trust it.

That would mean she'd have to use Madame Crina as a translator, learn Finnish herself, or wait until the kid's mastery of the French language was good enough to be certain he understood her.

Obviously, using the old bat was out. Sonya didn't intent to give the crotchety old woman any more ammunition than she had by now, Crina was bad enough as it was. Even if she likely didn't know exactly what kind of undesirable criminal type her apprentice was. That old bat had been around long enough to know her latest apprentice wasn't strictly legal in a sense, but for some reason was making the effort to be so for a time.

It was looking like she would have to deal with her anyways if she wanted things done in a timely manner, because she was the only person the Russian knew who understood Björn's Finnish and could possibly teach her unless or until his French was more understandable.

As it was, since nothing could be done straight away she'd keep on with what she had been doing. Looking for a man she was rather certain she'd never find while the circus made its ponderous way through the still recovering French countryside.

The Großes Volksfest would be going through Germany next, although they would be nicking into Switzerland for a grand total of a week before making a more southern approach to the USSR and Moscow. Thankfully where they were wintering again this year.

The Russian thief might just be happy they were avoiding Italy on their way back through the European Continent and into the Iron Curtain, but she did wonder if they would be traveling through
Czechoslovakia and what Cherep thought about that.

She was mostly sure he hadn't intended to return to his birth country at all, ever.

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CXV (Wednesday the 31th of August, 1966. Strasbourg, French Republic.)

Sonya gave the man a dubious look. "Really?"

"Of course, miss. I know of the Carpentier family, they have owned the vineyard a few miles north of the town for generations." The man, an older gentleman with silver streaks through formally dark brown hair and wrinkles framing watery green eyes, informed her cheerily. "Good wine, although the members of the family are rather reclusive."

The Russian tried not to show more of her disbelief than she had to but was mostly sure it was obvious anyways.

She had been scouring parishes and old church baptizing records, trying to find one specific family line using a three-hundred-year-old name, for the last half a month. The remote prospect of finding anything had made her certain she'd never find anything concrete, and the final week the circus had left in France was the point of which she succeeded?

Letting out a sigh through her nose, she gave the man's words some consideration.

There was really nothing to lose by checking it out. It might not be the Carpentier family she was looking for, as she had come across others with the same surname before but without a Pierre-Antoine in their family tree at the right time period. At worse, this would just be another such family.

At best, she'd finally find some solid evidence on the Arcobalenos or their existence to explain what little she recalled from Rachel's life reading about the story… or boost her own limited knowledge of 'the Seven Strongest of an Era'.

"Where is this… vineyard then, sir?"

"Near the border, next to the Forest Robertsau. If you follow the edge of the forest you can see the front door not too far outside of the city's limits."

She vaguely knew what he was speaking of. It wasn't that far from here; the former pickpocket could probably check it out and still return to the circus before nightfall. She wouldn't be able to go the next day, they were leaving France via West Germany for Switzerland.

Which would be interesting, to say the least. How did Switzerland's neutrality translate into the underworld's mafia?

Sonya had abstained from actually digging into France's mafia connections due to her little distractions and was slightly overdue for touching base with the local underworld.

With a shrug, the blonde teenager decided on the rest of her day's itinerary. "My thanks, sir."

The man nodded cheerfully, making her think there might be something to Cherep's insistence that civilians were less asshole-ish than most mafia members and she didn't have to be so suspicious of them.
She tipped the man a few of the francs she had and left him to his work.

Strasbourg, the border city that was the \textit{Großes Volksfest}'s last stop in France, was a little tenser than most of the French villages and towns they had passed through so far. That likely had something to do with the mass exodus of East Germans shortly before the Iron Curtain got a physical boundary in the Berlin Wall.

Part of the reason she still thought the Wall would fall eventually, that was not only awkward but unwise to try and physically separate an established city that way. The fact the Berlin Wall went up so late also attributed somewhat, a lot of the people who could read the writing on the walls had abandoned their country the moment they realized what was going to happen.

With the end of the Second World War and that mass defection, Germany’s population had to be reeling slightly if not scrambling to shore up sorely needed infrastructure. That was, after exercising the remnants of the Nazi Party out of whatever offices they had ended up in if the people themselves didn't end up executed or arrested for war crimes.

That exodus and the mere fact Strasbourg was one of the border towns made it rather deeply seeped in mafia connections, as all the mafia men from Germany used the town to plan their next move once free from any governmental scrambling that might restrain them. Which also contributed to the town having a bit of a suspicious air to it, mafia people weren't nice people, as Strasbourg developed into a more city-like area. Mostly due to the immigrants, but it was also more developed than the surrounding infrastructure explained.

All of that meant the city was a bizarre mix of urban developed streets and businesses, mixed in with a half-demolished main thoroughfare and semi-shifty city planning.

Only mafia people would place large pawn shops on the main street next to the train station and restaurants, for easy access to illegal weapons and a fence or two, rather than civil-minded city planners who would probably prefer to put those pawn shops on the very edges of the rebuilt city.

It was on a smaller scale but actually worse than Paris itself, even if you took into account the capital city's sheer volume of underground tunnels and hangouts implemented during the French revolutions over the age and expanded by the French Resistance only recently.

Strasbourg was almost, almost like Moscow in that respect. Not nearly as shady and with so many bolt-holes, but in open mafia neighborhoods and obviously claimed territories. It was smaller than the city she had spent over a decade living in with Cherep, but it had the same general air.

Sonya rather liked it.

\textbf{CXVI (Wednesday the 31th of August, 1966 continued. Strasbourg, French Republic.)}

She didn't like what she found when she followed the Frenchman's words to the supposed Carpentier homestead and vineyard.

So much for Cherep's insistence that civilians were less suspicious on average.

Instead of following the road, because she really didn't know what roads to take or not, Sonya had followed the edges of the Forest Robertsau up north. Checking in now and again on the houses that might have been her aim.
Since she wasn't the most sociable thief in existence, instead of knock on the doors she lurked around and waited for someone to say the family name before moving on to the next home.

It took her longer that just simply knocking on doors, but also kept her from notice.

Which made the presence of several unsavory types waiting in a semi-abandoned homestead jarring enough to catch and hold her attention fast.

She didn't know them, which didn't really surprise her.

She also didn't know what they were doing, nor what they wanted her for. If it was her specifically they wanted, or if it was her asking about a former Arcobaleno or Flame user that attracted their attention.

Like any good thief when presented with something they wanted that might be owned by another individual, she lurked around and stole it.

They had orders, tersely written physical ones one occasionally referenced while they waited. Meaning they were either locals hired through a third party or stationed abroad for other reasons and were expected to report back. The Russian didn't really care other than getting her hands on the papers and figuring out what the hell was going on.

Written in Italian or not, she could still read it.

Instead of finding out she triggered a defensive strike against anyone looking into one of the supposed 'pillars of the universe', this was merely human in nature.

As in a specific hitman in her acquaintance had pissed off someone with a whole lot of pull.

Enough pull to bother going after Renato Sinclair's associates and allies just because the magnitude of whatever offense the Mafioso had given pissed someone off that much.

The thief it was inconveniencing was a bit torn on what the hell to do about it.

It could answer why she had been stalked after that last visit to Mafia Land, she hadn't been back all year since joining the circus and it was entirely likely the Sun hadn't been able or knew to warn her about this. It could be something entirely unrelated to that stalking she had noted, which had to be borne in mind no matter what happened.

Said hitman she owed favors to might need a bit of help, or he might be perfectly able to take care of this himself.

However, Sonya was a bit committed to the circus thing Cherep was so hung on. She couldn't really afford to go and abandon her spot on a whim, even if Renato really did need her help after all.

She might not get that spot back after everything was said and done, and her brother wasn't safe yet.

Her fingers itched, but she refrained from digging out her latest pack of cigarettes. She was smoking way too much as it was and was trying to cut back a bit. The distraction held her still a moment longer than she liked.

The hired henchmen weren't stupid, for all that it proved laughably easy to steal the terse and suggestive paperwork from their gear. They were simply skilled in different areas than she was.

The Italian that spilled across her ears was just as musical as any native speaker, slightly quicker than
she could keep up with after so much time since the last time she heard the language spoken.

She caught the gist of it though, given their subsequent actions. Spreading out, checking high and low for any hiding spots someone might use, meant they were suspicious of someone lingering where they 'shouldn't'. They hadn't thought to look up, most never did, so she merely moved to keep herself out of any line of sight just in case someone did think to look in her direction.

Now she had a decision to make.

The Russian could go confront them herself, in hopes of narrowing down why this was going on. That would possibly mean she'd have to kill them to continue moving around unmolested or unhunted.

She could try to find a bit more on her own, pawing through the rest of their gear and maybe pickpocketing them for anything else of intelligence or monetary value. That wasn't likely to pay off, as something all thieves and criminals were taught was to shed anything identifying from their person before engaging any acts of dubious moral nature. Semi-official looking orders in her hands or not, she probably wouldn't get that lucky again.

Sonya could leave and pretend nothing had happened.

After a few moments, of delicate balancing and wall scaling around to avoid detection, she decided that abandoning this wasn't going to happen. If it would have, she would have left already the moment something suggesting violence appeared.

That probably made her a very stupid thief, really. Thieves like her were, by nature, creatures of stealth and avoidance, fights were only things of last resort unless they had a secure upper hand and escape route nearby. Tatiana might be a different sort of thief, but she could afford to be with her gang close at hand.

She was on her own here. Her methods had to be undetectable or lethal in respect to that lack of support, or she'd never survive it.

However, she also didn't really want to kill anyone.

Musing on the problem, she kept on shadowing the Italians as they hunted around but eventually grouped back together in the main room of the abandoned homestead.

"Where is the bitch?" One muttered to another, a simple enough question Sonya understood him clearly.

She didn't quite follow the response, but it was probably crude and rude in nature by the gestures and what sentence structure she understood.

Cute.

One, the man she was mentally labeling the 'leader' of this little mission, snapped something else at the two underlings of his. Something about the dawn and the next day.

Probably telling them it was likely she had decided not to check out the lead she had been given that same day and instead try tomorrow.

Which was entirely possible, it had been rather late when she set out from town. Her meandering walk up here had not helped, seeing as it was pitch dark outside now.
...her brother would start to worry if she left it much longer.

Sonya tentatively decided to riffle through their belongings before making any other decisions, when something new was added to the mix.

A middle-aged woman pulled up from the cellar.

…the owners or residents of the building were still present?

Broken French was more understandable to her than their Italian had been. The lurking thief clearly heard the order to fix dinner for the three men… or the 'children' would get it.

'It' wasn't understood on her end, and frankly the Russian didn't care to learn either, but the woman seemed to know full well what 'it' was.

Civilians, especially civilians that ended up in the middle of mafia operations, didn't tend to survive long. It was highly unlikely any of the original residents of this broken-down house would out-live this incident if she didn't do anything.

…and she was enough of a Russian Mafiya member to be instantly irate over the possibility of child abuse or mistreatment.

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CVII (Thursday the 1st September, 1966. Headquarters of the Campo Famiglia, San Giovanni in Fiore, Italian Republic.)

Renato Sinclair rather desperately pawed the 'cellular phone' brick thing the former Don of the De Campo Famiglia once owned.

The older man's cooling corpse wouldn't have need of it anymore. Spoils of war and all that.

He didn't really understand the damned device, nor did he hold much hope he'd get anything done using it. Hell's take it all, the hitman didn't even understand exactly why the old bastard had decided to devote so much of his resources into isolating then trying to kill him off.

It would take some time, and Renato was nothing if not through, but he would understand by week's end.

What Don De Campo had succeeded in doing was murdering off probably most if not all the freelance hitman's carefully cultivated contacts. The ones he had from his rather laughable version of childhood on up to now.

Most of them, so far, because he hadn't realized what had been going on until too late and missed warning them to go to ground before they got caught out. Deaths happened, one or two a year wasn't all that suspicious even for the more civilian of those contacts. When five of them ended up dead when he tried to reach them, then he got apprehensive over the coincidences.

Learning how much of his associates and allies were gone was another such thing that would require some investigation, but Renato wasn't confident any decent number of them had escaped the reach of this famiglia. The bulk of those contacts weren't hitmen, some weren't even remotely connected to the mafia.

The mere thought of the number of people he might have inadvertently doomed by simple
association had the hitman's grip on the clunky block of circuitry tightening until it creaked, and he almost pitch the thrice-damned thing at a wall.

The subsequent click and droning beep it suddenly emitted extended its life expectancy by a great margin.

Renato eyed the thing dubiously as it did something, the receiver box on the desk lit up in response to that something and it seemed to ponderously decide if it would work or not.

There was another 'click', an oddly echoed sounding one, and a voice came through the handheld part the hitman was still holding.

"Boss? We ain't done yet, the thief-girl hasn't shown up-"

A distant but audible meaty thunk cut the man off, even as far removed as he likely was Renato winced internally when the sound of something puncturing bone reached him. A woman's shrill scream sounded then cut off with a harsh gasp, a wetter suction sound following. Swear words, several rather inventive ones, were spoken by the first man who had been speaking until his voice was cut off by another of the meaty thunk sounds... a much closer one.

As if a butcher had chopped bone, if he was pressed to identify the sound.

There was suddenly a clatter, light footsteps on creaking wood, and a very different voice suddenly spoke into the hitman's ear.

"Whoever the fuck this is, if you-"

"Sonya?"

"…Renato?"

It had been a little difficult for the hitman to place that feminine voice speaking almost unaccented French, seeing as the last time he had ever heard the Russian thief so pissed off was back when she had been a young preteen girl and their association had been new.

Tisk, tisk. Rather saucy words for a little lady to be speaking.

Somehow, the young Cloud had avoided the trap the former Don of the De Campo Famiglia had set for anyone that would even remotely call Renato Sinclair an associate.

No, the hitman corrected himself dryly, the thief hadn't avoided it. She had obliterated it from the sounds of that fight. He idly wondered how many she had to kill and what state she had left them in. Clouds weren't the type to do things halfway.

"…the fuck is going on, Renato?" Sonya's tone was still flat as she switched to English, almost expressionless as she pressed him for answers she probably did deserve.

"Sorry, a little ah… miscommunication occurred."

"Miscommunication?" Echoed back the young blonde teen dubiously, the very word dripping in sarcasm. "Really. Exactly how did something on your end translate over to mean something lethal on my end?"

"I assure you, Sonya, I'm on the issue." Renato fingered the trigger of his favorite gun, not that there was anyone left for him to kill in the mansion. There were probably a couple handfuls still at large,
however. "It won't bother you again."

There was a moment of silence on the other end, from what other noises he could hear there was a rustle of cloth and someone dragging a booted foot across wood. "Strasbourg, France, is dealt with. Clean up the rest on your own."

"Will do."

A huff of breath from her translated into something staticky through the telephone lines they were tying up, not that it seemed either of them really cared all that much. "This better not happen again, Renato. Or at least, give a girl some warning if you could."

A faint grin stole across the hitman's face, which he was man enough to admit was mostly relief and a bit of dark humor. He had one contact left, it seems. "Of course, dear lady Sonya. It would be entirely ungallant of me to endanger you in such a way twice."

"I am sure you would not dream of ever being ungallant, Renato." Her dry return sounded much like her usual tone, startling a bark of laughter out of the Mafioso she was talking to through a dead man's equipment. "I will see you later in the year, then."

"Later?"

"Sometime this winter, I have taken a bit of a… sabbatical, in a way."

Probably how she avoided being killed off with any other associate of his, she hadn't stayed long in any place they could easily reach her.

"October?"

"Around then, maybe."

"I'll buy the next round."

There was a snort. "Very well. Till then, Renato."

A click then dead silence informed the hitman that she had hung up on him.

Well… how rude.

Renato slid to his feet in one movement, ignoring the rapidly cooling body on the floor of the opulent study one minor Don had formerly occupied, tossing the brick of technology behind him.

Time to cover his tracks, but first… some answers.

CXVIII (Thursday the 1st September, 1966 continued. Strasbourg, French Republic.)

Talking to Renato did at least let Sonya put some distance between what she had just done and her mental state.

Taking a deep breath, the thief wrenched the pick end of her Bec de Corbin out of the tangled mess of electronics and allowed it to bleed off the Cloud Flames that made it full-sized. Another of the spinel gemstones cracked, but she had expected that.
The moment she was apparently unarmed, the older woman slapped her across the face.

The Russian figured she deserved that. Still, it earned her an icy look in return. "Do you have anywhere to go?"

"Why? What else will you cost us?"

She could understand the woman was distraught, being held captive for however long had to be stressful. On the other hand, the thief wasn't going to let the older civilian woman use her like a punching bag. "Because I'm going to set this house on fire, madame. If you wish to be inside of it when I set it ablaze, then by all means."

She looked to be on the edge of tears but glared defiantly back at the younger woman even still. "My children are locked up downstairs. Get them free, and I will be entirely too willing to put you and this incident behind us."

"Be warned, you speak of this and even I couldn't prevent your demise."

Vindice officers weren't picky about who they arrested, that was as little as Sonya had managed to get on the shadowy enforcers of mafia life. Just that, and the fact the ones 'arrested' weren't ever seen again.

However, the thief did step to where the staircase down was while gingerly avoiding even looking at the dead bodies she had caused.

Breakdown later, emergency clean up now.

There were in fact three children caged in a small wine cellar the mother called out to get them away from the door. From the looks of it, the older woman had been desperately trying to claw the stout wooden door hinges off in between… whatever she had been doing. She even succeeded slightly too, from the wood shavings she hadn't managed to conceal on the ground.

Not nearly enough to free her little family on her own, but an impressive effort for a civilian anyways.

The blonde didn't bother trying to find a key or another way into the storeroom the children were locked behind. She had a red crystal skeleton key, a dab of her Storm Flames focused through that melted the internal mechanisms enough to wrench the thing open.

A male teenager, a young preteen girl, and a just out of toddlerhood boy stumbled out of the cupboard closet and into their mother's arms.

Sonya drifted away from them as they rather desperately greeted one another, instead pretending to inspect the quality of the wine stocked.

It would prove to be a semi-decent accelerator if it was old enough. Even if it wasn't dusty wood was, and Storm Flames would eat away at everything anyways. A more generous dab of Storm Flames and it would likely go up in an instant and take the rest of the house with it.

"We're leaving." The older woman snapped from behind her, and the thief waved the older biddy off.

The moment the footsteps of the unbalanced mother sounded near the main entranceway overhead, she threw up the little remains of lunch.
Killing… was altogether too easy for her. It was one thing to know, in an abstract way, that she could put enough force behind her hits to shatter heads like rotten pumpkins. It was entirely another to do it, slit the throat of another before he could use that motherly Frenchwoman as a human shield, and then bury the pick end of her war hammer into the chest of a third man.

Taking a deep breath and ignoring the tang of bile from the previous contents of her stomach and the taste of it in her mouth, Sonya drew one forearm across her mouth to scrub any evidence away. She still had to search the place, just to be sure there wasn't anyone else she needed to deal with like she told Renato, but then she'd set the house on fire and pretend nothing had happened.

Then there was the Frenchman, who pointed her in this direction. She had the suspicions the man was the father of this little family unit she was about to make homeless, and if that was true she'd let him go. If not… her body count this day would be four.

She was entirely too thankful they were just about to leave France behind. Another day and the circus would be in the lower reaches of Germany. She'd prefer to never come back, really.

…there was blood on her boots, too. While walking through grass to get back to the circus might wear that off, there wasn't much she could do about the full skirts she was wearing. Something to keep blood stains from setting in would be needed, or a different skirt.

Which she didn't have on her. Cherep would notice the change in clothes, if she sought out something of the older lady’s to wear instead.

Then, no… maybe a bit of wine, to cover the blood?

She could then explain it away as someone spilling wine on her instead of risking bloodstained skirts being noticed.

A cover plan in mind, the thief stole her way up the stairs where three dead bodies needed to be frisked were lying and the rest of the house still waited to be searched.

She couldn't wait to set the whole mess on fire.

It was almost unsurprising to find out the family that had lived in the almost-wrecked house for decades had been the Géroux family, not the Carpentier one she was looking for.

Sonya broke her resolve to smoke less and resigned herself to becoming a chain-smoker for the foreseeable future. The palm-full of Storm Flames she lit her cigarette with was tossed into the wine casks instead of snuffed out.

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CXIX (Friday the 9th of September, 1966. Bern, Swiss Confederation.)

"Are you alright?" Cherep asked her in slightly clumsy German.

It wasn't a language he had a whole lot of experience speaking, even if it was the last one Lisa had helped him learn and they did hear some of the scraps of the tongue around the circus every now and again. In the next few weeks, he'd get that lacking experience speaking it to sound fluent again.

Too many would speak Russian instead to him, especially if they were seeking his help.

Keeping multiple languages straight when you didn't speak them for months on end was a little
trying, especially with the number of them they had. She had it slight worse, given that she knew a
fair bit of nine different ones to his five and a few of those shared words in different meanings
between them.

"I'm fine, just... haven't been sleeping well." Sonya rubbed at an eye, scowling slightly at the gritty
feel.

Thankfully, nothing she was going to be doing for the foreseeable future in West Germany involved
any great coordination. She could afford to be less than her best.

Killing was supposed to come easier the more one did it, right?

She wasn't at all sure she ever wanted to do that again, or to the point she could claim a hitwoman's
title. Stealing would be her limit of selling skills, and if she could get through the rest of her life
without another death on her hands she'd be pathetically grateful.

It wasn't likely, and some of her actions in France might have been her wanting to get that phase of
her life over with already. Tatiana was already 'blooded', made her 'bones', or was a self-made
woman as her red roses tattoos signified.

This thief would not be counting kills as it seemed was popular in the Mafiya, but an
acknowledgement at least would be required. A tattoo touch-up was probably in her future, the
moment she and her sister had some time to kill next Christmas.

'Revolted' might cover what she felt about the trade of violence, the one based on buying and selling
the service of death dealing. However, it was so much a part of the underworld she wasn't likely to
escape that either.

The downsides of her rebirth. She might be able to live again, but death and destruction was so much
part of her trade it wasn't likely she'd be able to go another five or so years before killing another
person.

"Seriously, Sonya." Cherep pulled her out of her head with a touch to her elbow, a slight frown on
his own face. "Are you sure you're alright?"

Depressing herself in public wasn't probably the best idea ever. Especially not in front of her best
friend, who was also her foster brother. He'd want to know, and she was of two minds of telling him
of what she had done.

At least Sonya wasn't so seeped into mafia life to ignore the fact that murder was wrong, even if it
was an inevitable fact of her lifestyle. That bit of mafia brainwashing she had managed to avoid
through her second childhood.

Though, it was entirely annoying that she had to wait to grow up twice.

"I... don't feel like going around drinking this week. Want to play tourist with me?"

"We're here for work, Sonya." It wasn't a no, and indeed her fellow Cloud looked thoughtful.
"Maybe... do you think Master Liam would let us go for a couple days?"

"We'd actually have to ask Madame Crina, honestly." As the old bat was her keeper, in a way.

"To bad it's not October."

The Russian laughed, slightly but she did. "I just said I didn't want to go drinking this week, Cherep."
Octoberfest is just as much as a drinking holiday as anything else. BMW has a headquarters somewhere around here, we could go claim to look at something for your future stunt work."

"...but you hate it when I spend hours to go look at motorcycles."

"I said claim, not that we'd actually do that." The sulky look Cherep pulled in return made his little sister finally smirk. "You know we're not likely to get time off, right?"

"Probably not, but it's nice to daydream."

It was, in more ways than one. If she could get a little time off from the circus, she wouldn't have to run multiple contract heists in the winter for however long she would be staying with the Großes Volksfest.

Heaving a sigh, the thief rubbed her face again. "Get lost, Cherep. We've work to do."

"Yeah, yeah. I should probably..." The purple colored, want-to-be stuntman trailed off as he looked to the end of the fairground the carnies had set up the more mechanical attractions and rides. "Do you feel better, at least?"

Surprisingly, she did.

"You don't have to look so surprised, you know."

"I'm just admiring the fact I can put up with you for months on end. I really don't know where I get the patience to do so from."

Her brother's flat expression was reward enough for her, she even gracefully ignored the punch he aimed at her shoulder for it.

CXX (Thursday the 15th of September, 1966. Salzburg, Republic of Austria.)

It took until Austria for Cherep to realize exactly where their circus was heading, exactly.

Sonya had eventually put her actions in France behind her just as she had with the country itself, with generous amounts of help from multiple puffs of nicotine laced smoke. It still gave her the occasional nightmare, but she was alright with that.

Switzerland was just as interesting as she had thought it would've been, given the reputation the country had for amnesty and neutrality.

Its underworld was similar in respects, as close to 'free-trade' in nature as possible for something landlocked. Possibly the forerunner idea of what Mafia Land was built off from, just a touch more stationary than the island was. Mob Families, syndicates, and formally structured criminal enterprises were startlingly thin on the ground there, made up by the sheer number of unaffiliated that claimed the country as home.

There was also the fact that if you paid just enough it was possible someone would 'erase' your history and hide you away for a couple years. It was a hellishly expensive service, but also a highly tricky one to perform. It was only done by one specific group of what the Russian was sure were Mist users, or at least they had enough quirky mysticism going on to suggest it as a façade to hide whatever it was they did behind.
Austria's underworld was almost an echo of that. It still had a very low number of structured criminal groups, but the few there were normally just ensured everyone was spread out far enough not to step on anyone else's toes as they collected the dues to operate in their territory.

Enforcer orientated, rather than criminal enterprises like the Zolotov clan or a Family one like Vongola.

She still found it easier to find and insert herself into the local mafia hotspots than she had it back in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Most of that was due to the fact they were swinging back around to Moscow and so her tattoos garnered more interest by those that knew how to read them, but also some of it had to come from the fact Austria had less structure to its underworld so foreigners weren't so uncommon.

More to the current point, the thief found that she rather liked the more tavern-themed mafia hangouts she could find the closer they got to the Iron Curtain's southeastern edge. It was a hell of a lot more neutral too, so she wasn't too upset Cherep tracked her down on a night she generally went drinking to freak out about visiting the country of his birth.

Dinner and a show, Sonya thought as she took another sip of the pale märzen she had been forced to order.

The wiener schnitzel she had ordered just to say she had actually eaten it once wasn't all that bad, for how silly it sounded to her once American ear to hear pronounced. She could've done without the beer, but they were curiously out of the hard liquors she tended to favor when ordering alcohol.

The bartender had suggested it instead, but she was never going to trust the man when it came to beer ever again.

No, it didn't taste like horse piss... but that didn't mean it was good tasting either.

"Do you like beer, Cherep?" She asked of her brother idly as she looked into the glass stein, wondering what he was like smashed out of his mind.

She had yet to see him completely drunk and really was interested in seeing how that would result.

"Are you even listening to me?"

"Not really, here." Passing him the tankard, the blonde Russian busied herself with the breaded veal cutlets. "Why is this such a problem, anyways? The... difficulty that happened to you happened years ago, the likelihood they would know you on sight is rather remote even accounting for your wildly noticeable coloring. Additionally, 'returning to the scene of the crime' is more of a fantasy novel gimmick than something criminals actually do once we're done in a location. We tend to avoid doing that, just because it's such a stupid way to get caught."

Cherep already seemed to have realized what kind of place he had tracked her down to, the mention of anything remotely smacking of illegal natured acts didn't have him flinching or looking around like a green newbie and the non-affiliated.

He restricted himself to gripping the handle of the beer stein and glowering at her over it. "I never wanted to go back, Sonya."

"I never wanted to go to Italy in any depth, either. I think Master Liam intends to take us east next year and come up the African coast through the Mediterranean Sea, including Italy in that, and then back to the USSR." She gave an absent shrug, stabbing her next bite and shoving it into his mouth before he could interrupt her. "Point being, we don't always get what we want. Why not make some
plans? You know, instead of panic like a headless chicken?"

Her mechanically inclined foster brother huffed rebelliously, then curiously peered into the beer she had passed off on him.

Sonya suppressed the desire to roll her eyes.

His stupid procrastination protesting thing was getting old, not to mention a rather bad response to things going wrong on him. She had little hope she might get him to do something proactive when he protested in his own little ways, Cloud users were nothing if not stubborn creatures, so she supposed planning for the circus' next country of operation was her responsibility.

"Here you are." The new voice had the thief blinking out of sheer shock.

Really, was it too much to expect the man to refrain from bothering her outside Mafia Land?

"Renato, what brings you to Austria?"

"Sonya?" Cherep chipped in before the hitman could respond, eyeing the sharply dressed Italian warily and then her with a bit of concern.

"He's a… associate of mine. From my other workplace." His fellow Cloud tilted her head back to see the newcomer fully. "Renato Sinclair, meet Bazanov Cherep."
Sonya looked between the hitman and the mechanic, mildly interested in how they would get along. She did expect, and indeed it looked to be leaning that way from how distastefully the two men eyed one another, that they wouldn't care much for the other.

Renato Sinclair was a bit of a snob when it came to the people he interacted with, truth be known. He couldn't keep all of that out of his interactions with the various waitresses and other people she had seen him talk to. He was even that way to her from time to time, as she wasn't a hitwoman or Italian and occasionally he was a charmingly bastard of an asshole.

Over the half a decade the Russian thief had known him, and she knew that just as much as the fact that he favored handheld pistols for his work.

The hitman also had an air of leashed violence to him he wore just as easily as his silk shirts, which would turn off anyone not immune to the mere thought of murder and homicide.

Cherep, her lovable dork of a foster brother, wasn't at all keen on mafia affiliated people.

He could deal with it when it arose, but he didn't favor those kinds of people or places at all. He knew just as well she was more inclined to mafia flavored relations, but he could also deal with that fact rather cleanly for someone only slightly affiliated himself.

They both, rather quickly, decided to merely tolerate the other just so they could talk to her without wasting time to scare the other off and possibly annoy her.

At least Renato did, Cherep just gained a rather stubborn edge to his normally cheerful mien as he took what was probably a pointed draw from the beer she had passed on to him.

The girl caught between them herself sighed and gave up on the wiener schnitzel. “Renato?”

At the prompting, the Mafioso turned his attention to her possibly a little more sharply than warranted.

Vaguely, the thief realized the supposed tolerance was probably more like something to hide some passive-aggressive posturing they didn't want her to catch on to for whatever reason. Why was beyond her, but it wasn't very likely either man would get along with the other for anything less than an emergency.

Oh well, it wasn't like they had to or anything.

Renato seated himself at their table, which gave Sonya the opportunity to notice exactly how tired the hitman seemed to be under that veneer of arrogant confidence he always wore like a mask. He was also a little... travel-stained, now that she gave him another look over.

Not even after that first meeting, when he had been assaulted and punched in the face then used his Flames to heal the damage in seconds, had she seen him even remotely stressed.

She passed the food she had been eating to him, because in such an unknown social setting he probably wouldn't order anything himself.
"How bad was it?"

"Bad enough." The Sun user informed her flatly, suspiciously peering at the food she had been eating before his arrival. "You're one of a few to escape without a scrape, feel special."

The Russian nibbled on her lower lip at the news. Someone had really hated Renato to hunt after anyone remotely connected to him, then. That was a lot of manpower, a lot of money, and a shit-ton of effort to burn through just to hate on one man.

She did kind of wonder who, and exactly how long they lived before the hitman caught on.

Cherep set the beer stein down firmly with a thump, attracting their attention. "This have anything to do with last month, and whatever upset Sonya?"

*Oh dear,* the thief thought.

She had yet to explain that situation to him, actually. Would probably never really admit to what happened even if he asked.

"It was not the situation, Cherep, it was how that situation reached me." Sonya clarified before Renato could comment, digging through the messenger bag that was working as her purse for the time being for her pack of cigarettes. Skirts had a sad lack of pockets, which meant she had to compensate with an easily stolen *purse* of all things, or she'd wear them more often. "That part wasn't Renato's fault."

He gave her a repressive look in return, both for her bad habit and the attempt to clear the hitman of any responsibility. "And you wonder why I don't like it."

"I do not need to wonder, I know. Really." She mustered a sheepish if weak smile for him, one hand paused in the air between them with a cupped palm full of Storm Flames just tiny enough not to cast much light beyond the three of them. Renato was eyeing the backwash of colored light cast on her blouse with a touch of confusion even after she lit her cigarette. "Just... sometimes it does not work out all that well. And when shit goes sour for us..."

Her fellow Cloud rolled his eyes at her, draining the beer to the dregs in the next moment and letting the heavy glass mug clatter to the tabletop. "If you insist. I'm going to head back, Sonya."

"If I do not see you before you turn in, goodnight Cherep."

She got a short nod, Renato got a shifty eye, but the mechanic did leave them alone.

"So... your lover boy?" The *Mafioso* asked dryly, stabbing the breaded veal he apparently decided wasn't poisoned or too suspicious to eat.

Sonya snorted, turning to give a baring of teeth masquerading as a smile at the hitman. "Cherep is my *foster brother*."

He blinked at her, fork still in his mouth.

"Yeah, this better have a good reason behind it. Not that it is all *that* annoying to see you again, Renato."

Swallowing, the hitman let his utensils rest on the plate and leaned forward slightly. "What do you know of baby Mists?"
A faint frown tugged her lips down, and she considered the man seated next to her closely for a long second. "The wispy but lingering Mists that rises from a fresh battlefield or the fog-like Mists that arise now and again on their own?"

"The former."

The Russian thief took a long drag from her cancer stick, deciding what to tell him. He did have a very good reason, then. "I have... some experience in that. Ideally, you'd want a Rain-Storm to help calm a new baby Mist. The water bearing weather phenomenon seems to boost them a little and wash some of the blood out while they gain more substance from what I've seen."

"I'm calling in one of the favors you owe me." The Italian informed her bluntly, stabbing another piece of meat. "Get me in touch with someone who can do either or both."

"Renato, you're looking at a Storm-Cloud."

He froze, flicking a glance to her hands, and she smirked lightly even if the topic of the conversation was a little concerning. Apparently, he hadn't gotten to the point of being even slightly sure of what her secondary Flame was.

"I'm supposed to be traveling a bit farther north for the rest of the fall, but I will have time this winter. Not a lot, but some."

"Is that...?"

"I will consider it included, as long as I get the story behind that little... scuffle this winter too."

Renato regarded her from out of a corner of his dark eyes for a long moment. "Thank you, Sonya."

She shrugged that off, but it wasn't as much of an inconsequential thing as she was pretending.

She didn't like killing. Why not get him into her favor just in case some killing was required in the future?

He was the hitman between the two of them, after all.

CXXII (Friday the 16th of September, 1966. Salzburg, Republic of Austria.)

Renato finished off what he suspected had been Sonya's dinner, the thief herself didn't seem too bothered by his lingering. Instead, she sweet-talked a couple bottles of mead for the price of one out of the bartender for them to share.

The Russian seemed rather more interested in eavesdropping on the conversations around them, which allowed the hitman to consider what he had learned that night.

This was not turning out to be his year.

The unlamented Don of the De Campo Famiglia had gutted his contacts, an attempt to isolate and then corner him. Which was only foiled by one of his once-fellow hitmen getting him word before he died. An old childhood... acquaintance, of a sort.

One of the few he might have been able to call a friend once upon a time.
Working his way around between hits, checking up on the people that either owed him favors or were inclined to assist him every now and again, hadn't been a pleasant occupation. Only a rare few, like the young blonde teen herself, managed to evade or avoid anything too lethal happening to them.

Most of the others had ended up dead in short order. Either not combat inclined or unable to just run for it when it became obvious the men sent after them intended to kill them.

Nearly half of whom were left didn't want anything else to do with him.

Renato had initially sought out Sonya just to get good news. He had already known she didn't intend to distance herself from him or simply stop regarding him as an associate, but after the last couple weeks he had? Catching up with someone at least moderately friendly had been an attractive proposition.

That baby Mist, Shamal, seriously needed help the Mafioso wasn't sure how to give. It was the hitman's fault the kid was now both orphaned and homeless, fixing that and figuring out how to train the brat so he'd survive on his own as an adult was his responsibility now. Shelter and food weren't that hard, the kid was surprisingly self-sufficient for something as tetchy and tiny as he was.

He knew the basics of Mist users, but that was all. They were too flighty for the Sun, he didn't tend to associate with them on average. Asking a Cloud user about them was just him covering his bases.

To be honest, he hadn't expected any kind of help from this quarter.

The Russian was just one of a handful of competent Dying Will Flame users he knew of and still had good ties with, who was just as good to catch what his attribute was in their first meeting. Asking her what she knew of Mists had been just common sense even contrasted with her own nature, which did pay off well.

Although, given his luck, almost tripping right into what little Cloud territorial nature she had to her was probably just his due. Very flexible for her primary Flame type she might be, but he had known she did have Cloud Flames and might have things she would guard zealously like any other user of the element.

The fact the thief had a foster brother probably could've been discovered well before this.

Renato had no other excuse for his ignorance other than wanting to get her to tell him instead of being forced to investigate it on his own. It was the same game over her Dying Will Flame types, he guessed the first one correctly and so he wanted to figure out the rest himself without asking.

By some kind of grace, he had managed not to trip off Sonya's protective territorial aggression.

Even when he cornered her and her brother like an unwary moron. The fact they were somewhere public had probably helped, the kid's disinclination to be overly bothered by it salvaged the rest of the situation.

Though... the brother of a Cloud. Foster brother, even.

That 'Cherep' character probably had a Flame type to him too, Flame users tended to stick to their own, even if it was unknowingly. Guessing what that was might be a very dangerous game in and of itself.

The hitman hadn't missed the flash of purple tinted power in Sonya's normally grey eyes when he made a, in hindsight, stupidly dismissive comment on the teenager.
What little territory she had included something about her foster brother. Probably not the teen in and of himself, because Cherep wasn't a Sky by any measure the hitman had gotten, but something. Par for the course for Clouds, actually.

They were very, very defensive when it came to family. Proactive and aggressively defensive.

That brother of hers probably didn't know how lucky he was to be considered family to her.

Sonya might not be a hitwoman, but that didn't mean she wasn't dangerous herself. Given she cracked open some grunt's head the day they met, with just a pebble and her own strength, that should've gone without saying.

A Cloud, with Storm Flames.

Renato rolled that around in his head. Hard Clouds like her tended to have territory they refused to give up, Storms were intense creatures that didn't give up their motivation or thoughts too well.

A Storm-Cloud?

Possibly explained how Sonya could go without a physical territory yet not be a Soft Cloud. Although that would mean she was probably more stubborn than him, if possible.

Not exactly a bad night, in all respects. The Mafioso had learned a few interesting things, solved a major problem out of sheer luck, nearly got his fool head bashed in by an ally, and actually managed to eat something.

Given how his year had turned out, it was actually a very good night's work for him.

The very thought drew an unwilling snort, attracting the attention of his tablemate.

Sonya gave him a look over one tattooed shoulder, but Renato shook his head, so she turned her attention back to whatever her attention had been on before him.

He had eaten, and she hadn't killed him, so the hitman figured he should stop pressing his faulty luck. "I'll see you in a few months, Sonya."

"Try not to kill yourself, or me, if you please."

CXXIII (Thursday the 15th of September, 1966 continued. Salzburg, Republic of Austria.)

"You are a brat sometimes, Cherep."

"You didn't really expect me to leave you with some man I don't know alone, do you?" He informed her snottily, elevating his nose in the air to round off a rather ostentatious declaration with a similarly pompous expression.

As if that explained why he nearly gave her a heart-attack, lurking around the stout wooden door of the mafia friendly tavern while she let Renato eat something before the damn obstinate Sun Flame user collapsed from exhaustion.

Sonya leveled a narrow look at him as they slowly made their way to the fairgrounds their circus was set to leave from the next day. "I expect you to trust me to know not to get in over my head. Renato's a rather long-term associate of mine, I known him only a few years less than I have known you for."
"I do trust you!" Cherep squawked at first, visibly offended in nearly every line of his form. That changed to silly and campy in the next breath. "But you're also a pretty young woman, sister dear. And I, your dashing older brother, have certain responsibilities to your virtue."

"This entire conversation had become too ridiculous for me to continue." She dug out yet another cigarette, even if she had exceeded the limit she had been trying to keep to for any given day. "Leave my virtue alone, please."

He gave her profile a searching look. "You're not really mad at me, are you?"

She kept her expression as neutral as she could, refusing to look at him. Lighting a cigarette took concentration, didn't you know?

"You're not! Come on, give me a smile."

"I will punch you in your smile if you do not-"

Her fellow Cloud suddenly lunged, sweeping her off her feet in a bear hug before she could raise her arms. "Come on."

"Cherep, I swear I will-"

"You know you want to."

The thief stopped struggling, because he did have a bit more Cloud Propagated strength than she did herself when he wanted it, and bared her teeth at him. "I will bite your nose off if you do not let. Me. GO."

He gently placed her back on her feet lightly. "You know you love me."

"I am blaming genetics." Sonya didn't exactly regret the fact she had dropped her cancer stick but wondered if she should light another one.

"Excuses, excuses." He rather tactfully didn't bring up the fact they were foster siblings, and genetics didn't bear any weight in that argument.

Since he hadn't, she didn't bring up the point that the arm he had tossed over her shoulders was in violation of that demand to stop touching her.

"Seriously, though. What was that all about?"

The Russian sighed, not particularly looking forward to this conversation. "Renato made a... very influential enemy, who had a much greater reach than he probably planned on when doing some pissing off. As far as I know of it, just from my own end mind you, a fair number of people got killed because of it."

Cherep came to a sudden halt, tugging her to follow suit because he did still have his arm around her. "And you got caught up in that?"

"I did not have to be, actually. I spotted the situation before they spotted me. I could have just left and done nothing."

"So why didn't you?"

She gave him a long, sideways look. "A very nice man pointed me in that direction, who I later found out was a father."
"Oh... no."

"And while poking around to ensure I knew the situation, I finally spotted the mother. There were three kids caught up in that. Had it just been the man and the grunts waiting for me, I would not have involved myself."

He knew the price mafia life extracted from the unwary or innocents caught up in it, he had to even remotely utilize his connections to his benefit if it ever came to that. Cherep's expression showed he understood exactly why she hadn't avoided it. "That doesn't exactly fill me with confidence, Sonya."

"Renato might have messed up once, but that will just mean he will be more careful from this point on. Careless members of our lifestyle do not tend to become survivors of it, through either getting caught or other more final means of stopping our activities."

He gave her a dubious scowl.

"I do not bitch over the fact that you are likely to end up almost killing yourself chasing this dream of yours." She patted his chest before shrugging off his hold on her. "You are not allowed to bitch over the fact my connections might end up killing me."

The mechanic had the audacity to roll his eyes at her.

Darkly, Sonya vowed to get him smashed once they were back in Moscow. She'd take pictures, too, just to embarrass him more. She might even dress him up as a girl, she was pretty sure Tatiana would gleefully help if their elder foster sister managed to make it back for Christmas.

With a snort, the thief dug out her pack of smokes yet again.

"...at least I'm not killing myself slowly, one stick at a time."

"Instead you are going to kill yourself slowly, one trick at a time. Leave my smoking alone, I need it to deal with the stress you cause me."

A bark of laughter greeted her snippy words.

CXXIV (Thursday the 6th of October, 1966. Masaryk Circuit, Brno, Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.)

Czechoslovakia was... very different than anywhere else Sonya had seen so far.

Unlike the post-war rebuilding efforts lending an air of cooperation and friendly aid in France, West Germany, and the more western parts of Europe, Czechoslovakia was suppressed and subdued in feel.

More than likely, that had to do with how hard the Soviet Union tried to directly control the subordinate state.

Of course, that repressed feel to the population made a circus, even a Russian traveling Circus, rather popular as an attraction. The only drawback was the sheer mass of unhappy population trying to get happy shifting uneasily under their strict government oversight. It all made a very combustible mix to be dealing with.
There was a glacier slow creep into a more capitalist mindset, despite the fact it was part of the Soviet Union. Only just recently, from the less weathered look of the broadsides and flyers Sonya could catch sight of, had there actually been progress in that respect. Which lessened the risk somewhat, but not by enough to let her metaphorical hackles relax.

It also made her rather sure the Soviet Union probably wouldn't outlast what Rachel had known of it.

Trebon, the rather smallish city they had stopped in first, had some cheerful facades and a lot of tourist hotspots to it. There was the expected petty crime on the streets, pickpockets were as common as they were in the USSR and small-time burglary seemed to be a semi-popular pastime for the underworld residents. What kept the Russian thief from actually fully appreciating the small tourist town was the emergence of the human trafficking trade this close to her home country.

Even by the time they reached Brno, she wasn't enjoying this part of the circus' traveling plans any more than Cherep was.

They both had near-misses when it came to the underworld slave trade, him more closely than her own situation. However, while her brother was more distracted by trying to put his childhood kidnapping well behind him his fellow Cloud was more concerned with slinking her way around the outer edges of that. Keeping tabs on the people she had spent almost a full year working with and taking note of who watched the circus' ponderous way through the country.

It wasn't entirely unheard of for children or young adults to go missing in a circus' wake, and not all of those were runaways.

That thought also made her finally keep a wary eye on Bjørn's progress in following her into the Iron Curtain. Even an annoying tagalong didn't deserve that kind of fate.

The young teen seemed rather capable on his own, even with the higher risk he was running stubbornly following in her wake. Yeah, that was kind of impressive and it did speak rather well of his competence if she really did take the kid on as a kind of personal assistant.

However, he didn't have to.

Again, the Storm-Cloud really did wonder what the hell was driving him so hard.

Speculating about it would only give her unrealistic expectations, so she merely resigned to asking one day.

As the purple colored want-to-be stuntman had said, better for her to conform on her own terms rather than wait until the Finnish boy had a hold over her to get what he wanted.

In his attempts to mentally distance himself, Cherep dragged her to the Masaryk Circuit on one of the few 'down' days she normally went drinking on. When the circus was being set up or packed up and they weren't needed to keep it running.

Well, it was called a Circuit, but it really was only a handful of streets cordoned off for motorist to race on. Rumors held it that an actual racing circuit was in the planning stages, but she'd believe that when she saw it.

Sonya couldn't even smoke while she waited for her fellow Cloud to get his fascination out of his system, her hands had taken residence over her ears. Mufflers needed major improvement sometime soon or she wasn't sure how she would survive her mechanically inclined foster brother.

Her distaste for the loud vehicles and the sheer monotony of watching them speed around in circles
in the hope one crashed made her more inclined to watch the crowd rather than the race. She did have some fun spotting pickpockets working and keeping watch for the reactions as some found out they were robbed.

That allowed her to note that yes, Bjørn had followed her at a distance yet again.

Also, that he seemed to have attracted attention. Ironically, from the local branch of law enforcement. Finally, though the boy was usually more than careful about attracting the wrong sorts of attention to himself.

The Russian only watched for a moment, judging if the kid really did want to keep on following her when a more legal option was offered.

From the way Bjørn was slowly backing away from the spat of Czech aimed in his direction, she figured he was rather hung up on attaching himself to her. When he bolted instead of accepting whatever aid was offered to him, understood or not, the thief sighed heavily and wandered off to recollect him.

Cherep didn’t notice she left his side right away, but he did notice when she planted the Finnish boy right next to him in her previous spot.

Even if the mechanic spoke the local language Sonya didn’t, so he switched to French. Which Bjørn did understand somewhat, more than he could speak of it. "Finally gave in?"

"Something like that. We now officially have a cousin." The thief gave the preteen a slightly disgruntled sideways look. "A very distant cousin."

The Finnish kid clearly knew she wasn't happy with him, but he grinned in his gap-toothed way at her.

Well... if ignoring the brat hadn't worked, maybe overworking him would scare him off.

Sonya fully knew she wasn't likely to be right in that either but trying wouldn't kill anything.

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CXXV (Wednesday the 19th of October, 1966. Minsk, Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic.)

Poland itself was almost a breath of fresh air, even if despite her newer worries involving a Finnish teen and new money troubles she hadn't expected.

The farther north the circus got, the more the vory v zakone principles started re-emerging.

Murder, theft, and the drug trade were popular methods used in Poland’s underworld, but the human trafficking that had so bothered her fell off until the worst of it was the occasional kidnapping and extortion rumors.

Sonya was under no illusions that the underworld slave trade wasn't still attempting to emerge in her second birth country, she had almost became one of many unfortunates that got caged by it. However, it was also much less tolerated and had no foothold or aid in the underworld of the USSR unless someone decided to try being suicidal.

The Russian was just greatly appreciative that she no longer felt like she had to watch her fellow circus folks' backs for them. Nothing might have happened had she not, and it was entirely likely it
never will, but Cloud instincts weren't so easily brushed off. She seemed to at least be willing to
guard those she associated with, even if she really didn't care when she was no longer aligned with
them.

Interesting but not really something she wanted to object to. It was useful, sort of, and something she
didn't mind as a side-effect of her Dying Will Flame use.

The Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, or rather the BSSR, was the second-to-last country the
Großes Volksfest would be visiting that year.

Two more weeks after they crossed the second to last border, then Sonya and Cherep would be in
range to go visit Arseniy and Lisa in Moscow if they didn't mind a couple extra hours on a train.

Only visit, for although the thief would cheerfully steal the British crown jewels for two or three
hours in a bathroom she didn't have to share or conserve water for the next person... neither foster
sibling could claim the house they grew up in as home anymore.

As for the country itself, the Storm-Cloud was sensing a pattern.

The BSSR was, again, suppressed. Almost subdued. A direct and rather disturbing contrast to the
capitalist countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain or even the USSR itself. The Soviet Union
had a heavy hand on the government of SSR Byelorussia, and it showed in ways. Poland had been
easier, although probably only due to contrasting that with the lessening worries they had once they
left Czechoslovakia.

Sonya wondered if she never saw it before because she had become immune to the air and feeling of
a suppressed population, or if it really was just worse the farther one got from the capital of the
USSR. She had spent a lot of time, probably more than was healthy, avoiding everything remotely
social in her youngest years in this life.

Ignoring everything, actually.

It hadn't seemed that bad to her but then again, she had become used to it. Used to the heavy feeling
of oppression and a fracturing social order trying to re-secure itself. It had become normal to her.

It was, now that she had a look at both sides of the equation, clear that the Soviet Union wouldn't
outlive what Rachel had known. It was already breaking down, the Berlin Wall and the growing
social movement in Czechoslovakia would spread out to this country. From here to the USSR itself.

Which, she was semi-sure, wouldn't fall the same way.

The underworld, and more specifically the Mafiya world that was likely greater in number and more
influential here and now, probably had their fingers in a couple pies the fall of the Soviet Union
would ruin.

Mafiya people like Sonya were slightly capitalists no matter the views of their birth countries, they
liked getting paid for their work first then doled out however much for their expenses for their next
job.

However, for all her work in Mafia Land and her nest egg from her jewelry heists, she was still more
communist than anyone in her old birth country would've been comfortable with. Her tithing the
Zolotov clan was just her preparing for any possibility of injury or illness that would make her
bedridden for any significant stretch of time, and firmly within that school of thought.

The vor and their attached people like Arseniy and Lisa were communists through and through, who
tithed the clan their proceeds and were taken care of by the clan in return. Their clan owned the home they raised their foster kids within, the clan also took care of the cost of housing and the food bill in return for their services.

They were all still Soviet Union members, and so they outwardly supported the communist faction so long as their country did no matter the slight capitalist tendencies many of them had. It worked for them, because they were already criminals and didn't tend to fuss where the living expenses and lifestyles of others came from.

Sonya, through the grace of Rachel's once-life, wasn't quite the good little communist Russian girl she probably should've been. Never had been, given she had half expected her birth country to still fall the same way it had in another reality/life.

Which didn't address the problem of Bjørn and the impact the Finnish preteen would make on her finances.

The thief planted her face in her hands and thought hard.

She had only very minor things for Bjørn to do, but since she did grab the kid she was responsible for ensuring he had work or something to do to keep him out of trouble. She had no responsibility to his health or anything outside of what she set him to do until and unless she wanted him specifically trained for something, but she was still in a mostly unstated agreement to provide work.

Which also meant she had to pay for said work.

Sonya had planned on only herself in this little hiatus from theft, which would get slightly bolstered when she went back to Mafia Land and completed a handful of additional contracts.

Herself and a little minion was a different story, for all that Bjørn wasn't constrained by a circus' working hours and could probably run errands to the island for her.

...eventually. Once she or someone else taught him how to defend himself better than just standing there and taking it.

She would not be formally taking the Finnish brat on as a personal assistant or helper unless that changed. Thus, Bjørn had the option to leave her for better work elsewhere without her protesting unless she wanted to be a bitch. Which also meant she still wasn't going to be trusting him with sensitive things anytime soon.

However, she was still employing him which meant he was probably going to run into something she wanted hidden for the time being. Dying Will Flame use was very... visible, unless a friendly Mist was around to conceal it.

The whole situation made the Soviet Storm-Cloud uneasy, but there was little more she could do. Bjørn had already proved he wasn't leaving, she couldn't afford to hire him as a permanent minion, meaning a middle ground had to be found.

To make it worse, she still didn't trust her Finnish or his French to ensure no confusion happened in any conversation. That situation needed time to resolve, and she wasn't entirely sure it would have said time before something happened.

At the very least, she could hope to be within range of Moscow before anything too upsetting occurred.
CXXVI (Wednesday the 26th of October, 1966. Smolensk, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

After half a year playing at being a gypsy woman's fortune teller apprentice in a circus, Sonya's daily life fell into a very repetitive pattern.

Once the Großes Volksfest had arrived in a new town, everyone pitched in to set the circus up. Including Madame Crina and her thief of a draw girl. That would take two days, since everything had to be tested or inspected to ensure it was in working condition or appropriately mended for showing off.

The nights of those two days would be when Sonya went looking for more underworld watering holes or just poking around at the new town to get a measure of its residents.

Day three, which generally was a Saturday, in any town or village would normally be the day the circus opened. Meaning mid-morning to the wee hours of the next morning were spoken for.

The Russian had branched out for that part out of sheer self-preservation, because while she could apparently fake some social interactions well enough she didn't like the press of crowds.

Several hours were reserved with pulling more people into Madame Crina' grips by faking a mysterious air and speaking nonsense in the hopes someone was superstitious enough to pay attention, but that wasn't all she could do for those days.

The stage magic tricks ended up being something she could do without being expected to speak much. Pulling scarves out of pockets in her sleeves, pulling small pieces of candy or coins out of 'midair', and even the odd card trick was usually more than enough to entertain children.

The knife tricks, and knife juggling if she was forced to be honest, was something Sonya reserved for much later.

She couldn't guarantee she would never be knocked into and miss catching a dagger, after all. Best not to risk dropping one on some poor kid.

On the alternating months Faris had a slot juggling or breathing fire in the big top shows, the thief got to ditch being a wandering attraction and instead help him. While not a very visible role, it did help her be less overwhelmed by the crowds and a nice break now and again.

Jiayi kept trying to get her into the trapeze act, and the Russian kept on dodging the tiny Chinese woman. She had more than enough to do already, and she really didn't have any fond feelings for the art.

If they were lucky, the circus would be set up for more than one day. Even if not, after the show hours were over with packing up took significantly less time than setting the circus up.

Moving between cities and towns could be interesting, because depending on where they were affected the method of moving. Rail lines were preferred, as then everything was shipped overnight including the performers themselves. Occasionally waterways were used instead, sometimes a mix of the two if they were just crossing rivers or lakes to a nearby city or town.

Every now and again, though, there weren't any alternate options available and they had to hoof it. Trucks would handle the heavier stuff, the carnival rides and booths but mainly the big top, then alternate shipping would have to be found for the rest of the tents and equipment. They had not, yet,
had to try transporting everything with only the circus folk to do that with, but everyone was aware that might happen if they were unlucky.

Sonya had added Bjorn to her, which meant she needed to pay the kid for enough work for him to afford something hot to eat every day, someplace clean to sleep, and his ticket to the next town via whatever method being used. She eventually started sending him out to locate the underworld watering holes for her, getting him to scour the rumor mill for who was top dog in whatever region, and maybe off to buy things for her instead of going out to get them herself.

Bjorn rapidly got better in French with her demands to try and fulfill.

That first month with him dodging her steps was still hard, because the thief had to independently confirm whatever he was trying to tell her. Half because she wasn't sure how far to trust the kid and half to correct his atrociously spoken and handwritten French.

Immersion was a very sink or swim way to learn a language, a method both she and her brother suffered through under Lisa to gain a competence in foreign languages. Bjorn, who had only Madame Crina that could understand his Finnish until he started working on broadening her grip on his native language, learned that the hard way.

By the time that first month ended, the Grobes Volksfest had returned to Moscow and was starting in on working up the money to afford semi-decent winter quarters for the performers.

At the end of the October month of 1966, Sonya went to Master Liam and gained permission to leave for her winter business. Giving Cherep a hard hug goodbye and a promise to return before the end of February next year, the thief grabbed her Finnish errand boy and dragged him to their childhood home.

CXXVII (Thursday the 27th of October, 1966. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Arseniy eyed Bjorn critically as he ate, who Sonya had sat firmly in the chair on the opposite side of the table from the vor. The street rat from Finland looked slightly unnerved by the scrutiny, but the thief was a little more distracted answering Lisa's questions after suffering through a rib-cracking hug.

"I can't take him with me, Lisa. Until I can actually employ him and be sure of his loyalty I won't risk myself by taking an unknown like him along." She palmed her face tiredly, running her mind through everything she had to do yet that winter. "I've got too much to do, and in order to afford actually hiring him I have to go find something lucrative to do. However, I can't do it when he's with me because I don't trust him that much."

"So, what do you want us to do with him?" Inquired the older woman simply, setting another two plates down so her foster daughter and her tagalong could eat too.

"Teach him to speak fluently in French, please?" Sonya picked up her fork, glancing over to the vor. "And maybe have him run a couple errands. I'll provide the ready cash to pay him from, I just need him elsewhere so I can afford him."

"Any reason you can't just set him down somewhere and come back later?" Arseniy asked idly, which the younger woman didn't trust at all because the man was playing with a knife when he
asked.

A hard or scrambling life on the streets or as a minor runner for whoever had aged Björn more than he had years. Although she now knew the kid was twelve, he did look almost like a gangly if slight fourteen. At a glance, Arseniy's vor outlook pegged him old enough to be responsible for his own actions.

"He followed me from Finland all the way to Czechoslovakia, and I did nothing but prevent him from suffering the rest of a beating." The thief seriously gave some thought to what Bjorn may or may not have been or been up to before she gracelessly tripped into saving him. "I might have accidentally made him a pariah in his hometown, or maybe he just wanted something exotically different to do with his life. We can't hold an in-depth conversation like that with our language skills so diverse. So that's part of the reason why I'm asking."

Lisa pursed her lips slightly, giving the Finnish boy a hard look over of her own. "I can see why you would want that kind of perseverance if he's got a good reason for it, and I understand why you would bring him here to at least try to figure it out. So, I'll say yes so long as you understand you owe me a very good birthday present sweetie."

Well, that was one down. Sonya turned to Arseniy, who looked just as unimpressed as he always was. ":...because you like me best?"

The vor snorted, a very dry smirk pulling up one side of his mouth. "Are you sure about that?"

She nibbled on lunch a bit, nodding slowly. "I'm the one you let take on your name."

"I let your boy do it too."

"Because of me. So, if we had to use our foster sibling relationship as a cover for any sneaky things it wouldn't seem too odd that we didn't share a name." She finished for him, batting her lashes at her foster father. "I need to know if I can trust him, so while I handle my other responsibilities I brought him to people I do trust. Aren't you flattered?"

"It would be very depressing if you couldn't trust us, girl." The man countered, almost lazily.

"True, I would cry." Sonya couldn't quite keep her face straight as she said it, causing Lisa to snicker to herself.

Arseniy's mouth gave an unwilling twitch into a more real smile.

All the kids had learned a happy Lisa was the way to get the vor's approval, and they were Mafiya trained so of course they took ruthless advantage of that chink in his stony armor when they could. That, and the fact the man sucked at handling things when the waterworks appeared which everyone but Bjorn in the room knew that full well, had Arseniy giving in with a sigh.

"No more than four months, right?"

"Probably less." Conceded the former pickpocket thoughtfully, tapping her fork's tines on the side of her plate. "I have a way to pay back a favor I owe an associate for some help he gave me last year, and there's five contracts I need to do between now and February of next year. I promised Cherep I'd be back before the end of February, start of March, so there's that."

"Hmph." Arseniy bit into his pelmeni as if it had insulted him, glowing at Bjorn enough the kid shrank back from the table a little. "I want you to spend a couple days getting used to some of the newer locks and safes on the market, Sonya. Then you might want to present yourself to Aleksandr
"I was going to ask if I could." The thief agreed wryly, pushing the remaining half of her food over to the Finnish street rat so the kid could eat until he wasn't hungry anymore.

Lisa would fix that, too.

If Sonya had the time, she'd investigate maybe scheduling a check-up at the Mafia Land hospital for the kid. If not this year then next.

She set her spine against the chair's back, crossing her arms under her slight chest and looked around the kitchen curiously while everyone else ate.

Not much had changed since she and Cherep had 'run away to join the circus', but it did feel decidedly odd being back here again.

It might have been the lack of Tatiana's vinyl record player cranking out some bohemian pop, no clangs of metal or the odd thump from her brother messing with whatever mechanical thing he had gotten ahold of lately, or even just the fact that Bjorn was sitting next to her.

It was still odd. Rachel hadn't gotten to this point of her life, where she could visit old childhood haunts and feel too big for them, so it was her first experience at it.

She didn't think she liked it much.

CXXVIII (Saturday the 29th of October, 1966. Mafia Land.)

Renato met her on the docks, which earned him a dubious look from the Russian thief.

For one, she hadn't sent word to him exactly when she'd be arriving or what way she'd get to Mafia Land by. For another, the fact he knew anyways was kind of creepy.

No one, not even Sonya, was happy to see a hitman waiting for them no matter where they were or what was promised to said man. "I... would say it is a pleasure to see you again, Renato, but actually...?"

"I'm aware, thank you." The Italian gritted out, shifting back on his heels and uncrossing his arms as she wandered up to him. Dark eyes flicked to the other passengers disembarking with her, some of whom were cringing away from him.

That might have to do with the near air of irritation he had to him, but Sonya wasn't betting on it.

"How soon are you free?"

"I have only a few errands to run. A duck into the Thieves' Hall and checking in with the fences on pieces I have commissioned them to sell for me from old jobs, but that's about it."

She also had to set up somewhere for her to stay at least a week, because she wasn't sure if this would go faster or slower than Usov's situation. That would have to wait until she could get a grip on the situation.

Actually, she could probably cut the visit to her hall for now. Until she knew when she'd no longer be needed at a baby Mist's side she wouldn't have an idea of what deadlines she could abide to.
Renato unbent a bit further, snatching up the larger piece of luggage she had with her. "Where are you planning on staying?"

"A hotel, probably nearby where you live, but I need to see your baby wisp first." That got her a sideways look from the Mafioso, and she couldn't do more than shrug. "Until I know what will be needed or how long it might take, best not to plan too far ahead."

"...you may wish to know..."

"Did he scare himself?" At the almost unwilling, disgruntled, barely there nod Sonya tried hard not to smirk.

His baby Mist had probably all but made Renato's apartment, assuming that was where the hitman has stashed the kid, unlivable. Usov had done the same to a very large chunk of the near mansion/office complex the Zolotov Clan operated out of. Renato's baby Mist had probably done something similar in scope.

"I can fix that."

"Can you?"

"One word, Renato. Disintegration."

"Storms, right." He hefted her luggage over one shoulder and started off, in the direction of the more residential sectors of the illegal island held.

Any hope she had that this wouldn't paint a very big target on herself or him died a messy death the moment she got a good look at the hitman's apartment complex.

His baby Mist was apparently even stronger than Usov had been. The Construction illusions barring the way to him had spread out in a tangled webbing of...

...was that fishing line?

Nets, too, the kind someone would transport fish from boat to dock in. Complete with algae ridden weights and buoys. It laced around the building from specific exits, stringing closed several outdoor walkways and probably clogging up the inner ones as well.

Sonya eyed the building, even from five streets down, and the crowd that had gathered to gawk.

She would privately bet there was fishing tackle and anchors twisted up in there too. It fit with the fisherman theme going on. "Renato..."

"I know." There was a thread of frustration in his voice, and enough disgust it caused her to look fully at him. "But I can't get to the brat to shake him out of this with everything in the way. And if you need to destroy some of the building-"

"Nothing so drastic." The Russian cut him off with an eye roll, shoving the smaller traveling pack that held her overnight things into his free arm. "Give me fifteen, then try to make your way in."

"Three-thirteen." At her inquiring look, the man rolled his eyes back at her even as he set her luggage down next to his shiny black shoes. "My apartment number."

"Mmm... right, wish me luck." She didn't wait to see if he would or not, she immediately headed for the service tunnel entrance in a nearby apartment complex.
She didn't really want to deal with that many people, who would undoubtedly want to know what the hell was going on and who fixed the situation if she could. Renato could tell them whatever he wanted, so long as he kept her or baby Mist brat out of it.

She'd slap him one if he didn't. Hard.

The underground service tunnels were just as clogged up as the surface entrances to the building she wanted, but her contract employee ID was enough to let the service staff to allow her to start using her Storm Flames to eat away at the Mist ones in privacy. There weren't any active users among them, or at least no other Storms, so they crept along in Sonya's wake instead before breaking off to handle whatever.

As it had been a year ago, the stronger the concentration of Mist Flame Constructions were slinking out of the gaps around Renato's apartment door. The closer she got the harder it was, and the more Storm Flames it required from her to clear a way.

She didn't use the red Flames much, and whatever control she got from this would probably weigh in little next to how much easier it would be to call on the destructive fire afterwards. By the time she stumbled into the hitman's apartment, mentally swearing to replace the lock herself after melting it and part of the door off, she was not a happy thief.

She was in fact a very tired thief.

The kid she extracted from the nest of fishing net under the tiny kitchen table was similarly exhausted though, so she decided they were going to crash on the hitman's couch for a few minutes.

Baby Mist kid only stirred after they had laid there in a daze for a while, cracking his brown eyes open to give her a suspicious glare before almost spitting out a question in rapid Italian. "Are you miss Sonya?"

She cocked her head to the side, eyeing the brat sprawled across her chest warily. "Yeah, Renato told you about me then?"

He nodded slowly, still inspecting her suspiciously. "I'm Shamal."

Sonya, bemusedly, shook the tiny hand thrust at her face politely. Then the name registered, and she felt ice slide down her spine.

Shamal?

As in Trident Shamal?

That perverted asshole doctor-assassin the Sun Arcobaleno called up when something medical was needed?

That was this kid?

"Did you have to melt my door?" Renato asked acidly as he shoved it more open for his bigger frame, lightly tossing Sonya's luggage into a nearby corner.

"I did not have to, but melting my way up here was tiring enough I did not have the patience to pick it instead."

She informed him, a little inanely, still caught up on that tiny fact of the baby Mist's name.

...was Renato actually Reborn?
Eyeing the young Russian blonde bombshell sprawled gracelessly out on his probably rather uncomfortable couch, Renato bit his tongue against another sarcastic observation and gestured for an equally as drowsy looking Shamal to the kitchenette part of his apartment.

Sonya was way, way too pale under her recently acquired tan. If she was anything like him then food would help, and something hot and sweet for the time being. She'd probably prefer tea to coffee, but he didn't have anything but the beans in his cupboards.

Luckily Shamal's fear or paranoia inspired Mist Constructs had rapidly faded once he was removed from contact with them and suitably distracted by the thief's appearance. He might have gone a bit overboard scaring the brat into obedience, if he worked himself up to smother the apartment complex with illusions without a clear grasp on what he was doing.

Kids were not the hitman's thing. Especially likely traumatized little boys that decided to leak uncontrolled Mist Flames like a busted pipe. Shamal wasn't quite to the point of being able to control himself reliably yet, and the probably typical nightmares spurred his lack of control to even more unmanageable heights.

"Renato, exactly how did young Shamal end up with you?" Sonya asked quietly, still in Italian, the heel of her left palm rubbing her eye tiredly.

"...I knew his father," Renato forced out between gritted teeth.

If she asked, he was sort of expected to tell her since she was here to help him. That wasn't a story he wanted to spill in front of the kid until he was old enough to think rationally about it.

"So... how old is he?"

That drew him up short, and he shot the brat a look to try and judge the answer from appearance alone. "...five."

Shamal puffed up his tiny chest, but she snorted quietly behind the two of them. "I would've guessed three from how lanky he is."

Baby Mist turned and scowled at her, edging into Renato's personal space enough to gain him a sharp look for that alone. "I'm not a baby. I'm almost four."

"So, three and a half. At most." Spoke the thief levelly, as if it was inconsequential.

It wasn't, not nearly as much as she was pretending. The hitman tried rather hard not to throw his coffee maker into a wall, because that would probably startle the boy.

Sparking another outpour of Mist Flames he would have to try containing before the rest of the island learned there was a very young, very vulnerable Mist living in the apartment building for the time being.

Somehow Sonya was suddenly on her feet and approached him obviously, slim fingers prying his own off the death grip he had on the coffee pot.

"Calm down before you scare him."
The bland smile on her face was a stark contrast to the hissed out words, probably too low for the kid to pay attention to since he was more wary of her person that what she was saying.

Renato concentrated on getting his control over his temper back as she poured them coffee and got Shamal a glass of water. She left his black but repurposed his milk to add to her own.

"Are you Mister Renato's lady friend?"

"I supposed you could say that, yes." The Russian replied calmly, some rather fancy footwork pulling the only kitchen chair around so she could collapse onto it. "I am a girl, and we are... friends... mostly."

Not quite as graceful as she normally was, obviously the expenditure of so much Storm Flames was still affecting her somewhat.

His mind then caught up to what she had claimed and almost choked on his next sip.

Sonya ignored him and any expression he might have been making, setting her mug down and squarely looking at Shamal seriously so he'd answer honestly. "Alright, I'm going to need to know what you know about Mist Flames. What you know you can do, what you guess you might be able to do, and what you want to do with it."

Said baby Mist blinked wide brown eyes at her innocently. "What are Mist Flames?"

Her expression went from politely inquiring to flat.

"...perfect. Just perfect." She shot him a blistering look, obviously annoyed. "Mist Flames are one of the seven types of Dying Will Flames of the Sky..."

CXXX (Saturday the 29th of October, 1966 continued. Renato's Apartment, Mafia Land.)

Dinner ended up being Chinese takeout, because Sonya had to go through the entirety of what Flames were and what they could do with a damn three-year-old.

Excuse her, a three-and-a-half-year-old. Who, like any child everywhere, asked too many questions all at the same time. Which made it take even longer to get through the basics than it should have.

She couldn't decide if Renato had refrained from clarifying what the hell was going on with the kid out of politeness, since she had promised to help him with Shamal, or out of curiosity over what she knew of the subject.

The Russian thief also could not get up the energy to really bother worrying about it either.

Storm Flames weren't her primary ones, or even the easiest to control either. Shamal, by the grace of a young and uncluttered mind, had poured a lot of himself into his Construction based illusions. Probably more than was healthy, too.

Popping Mist Constructs of that kind of purity had been harder, especially since they hadn't been made from unwilling fear.

As apparently, from the story she awkwardly prompted out of the kid, it was something his late father had instructed him to do if he was somewhere he shouldn't have been and uncertain.
Purposely done illusions were stronger than unwilling Constructions, meaning a dab of Storm Flames hadn't been enough by half.

The hitman had told him to stay indoors and away from windows while he was gone, and Shamal had lost his father recently enough to be unsure of everything. Hence why the thief found him under the table in a cocoon of his own Mist Flames.

Sonya had a headache by the time the brat's bedtime came around, and she couldn't decide if it was just the stress of travel, the day she had, the lack of nicotine, or just the situation causing said headache.

"Sonya?"

"The hell are you going to do with a three-year-old?"

Renato shrugged idly, a bit too stiffly to be really that nonchalant. "I know a place."

The young woman sniffed at the non-answer but let that go. It wasn't really her business. "I... need to get some sleep."

He frowned faintly, glancing between her, the clock, and back to the hallway the young Mist had been escorted down when he got way too tired to continue. "You could stay."

She shot him a suspicious look. This was likely way out of the Mafioso's comfort zone, and no one wanted to be around edgy or uncomfortable hitmen.

Then she rethought the situation to include baby Mist boy likely asleep not fifteen yards from her. "...your couch is uncomfortable."

Baby Mist who had no other security than the not-so-obviously stressed out contract killer.

It was entirely out of her comfort zone too.

"I highly doubt I'll be getting much sleep." He responded rather dryly, leaning his lanky frame up against the wall. "You can use my bed."

She blinked at him blankly.

"So long as you don't steal anything."

"I," she insisted with blatantly faked injured innocence, "have never stolen from you."

Which was likely a very, very good thing. Especially if Renato really was Reborn, and she had been unknowingly socializing with a young version of the next Arcobaleno of the Sun.

Why the hell she never made any connection like that in her head before this was something she intended to sit and think about sometime soon.

"You, little lady Sonya, are a thief. The fact you haven't yet stolen from me is suspicious."

Said thief snorted harshly. "This coming from the one that harassed me first?"

Renato waved one hand as if to dismiss the point. "I have no idea what you may be talking about."

Sonya eyed him sourly, then forced herself to sit up. "More seriously, I have to run two contracts before New Year's. Two or three next year before I leave again next year before the spring thaw sets
in back in Moscow. I do not know how fast or slow this is going to be, because your Shamal kid does not trust me."

"At least he listens to me."

"That is not exactly helping me right now, Renato."

The hitman's features twisted, but if it was supposed to have been a smirk or a grimace she wasn't sure. "You've gotten things out of him."

"Yes, but he looks to you first to see if he should speak or not." Rubbing a hand up one side of her neck, the thief set her chin on the palm of her hand and blew out a sigh. "I am also rather sure he has discounted about half or more of what I have already told him as not true, which will make this take even longer."

"Some of the things you've said I haven't heard before." Pointed out the Italian, as if that was cause enough.

"I have references."

He gave her a long look, then tilted his head back slightly. "Ho? Really. With you?"

Alright, tired or not she still knew he was fishing there. "You damage my books, I will damage you."

"With you, then." Eying her luggage speculatively, the Mafioso pushed off the wall and stalked to the middle of his open kitchenette/living room. "You should get some sleep, Sonya."

Huffing, the thief kept right where she was and frowned up at him.

"More complaints?"

"I can smoke in a hotel room." She offered sarcastically, as if that was more important than the effort it would involve to drag herself and her luggage to a nearby hotel. "I also will not have to worry about jumpy, trigger-happy hitmen that might shoot me in the morning."

"It's late enough the night-life is out and about." He countered smugly, not addressing his state of health which probably meant he was fully aware he wasn't in the best condition. "You don't like to be on the streets at this time of the day."

"You know, it is a little creepy how well you know my movements." Spoke the Storm-Cloud as if talking to the air, more than a little disgruntled. "Am I going to have to worry about stalkers?"

"Of course not, it's not like I'd let myself get caught that way."

She gave him the most disgusted look she could, which predictably bounced off his arrogance without leaving a scratch.

"...the small messenger bag in my backpack has a box of gemstones and two books. Leave the stones alone, I don't know enough about gems to tell them apart without labels and those are for Shamal."

"Gemstones? As in...?"

"Ever see those Flame conducting rings?" Sonya gave him a truly sly smirk. "I started out as a jewel thief, you know."

"No, I didn't know." Renato informed her slowly. "But... that is interesting."
CXXXI (Sunday the 30th of October, 1966. Renato's Apartment, Mafia Land.)

The door opening woke Sonya up, and she spent a very disorientating moment wondering where the hell she was and what she was doing in a man's bedroom.

Shamal reaching the bed and his struggle to climb up the side of it distracted her from that mental musing. She sleepily snatched the kid by the back of the oversized shirt he was wearing and sat him on the edge of the bed to get a good look at him once she woke up more.

Computing her location and the events of last night together was proving a bit tricky for her right now.

Baby Mist wasn't content to merely sit though, instead he buried his face in her stomach and started crying in earnest.

Absolutely befuddled, she blinked owlishly down at the kid.

On one hand... did Renato let the kid do this?

Aw...

On the other, she had no blessed clue what to do now.

The Russian awkwardly patted the kid on the back, trying to dredge up from memory what Dmitriy had done when Usov had his crying jags. That baby Mist wasn't nearly as touchy-feely as Shamal was being now, but hugs had seemed to work. She didn't particularly like being hugged or used as a handkerchief, but a three-year-old who recently lost his father was due some consideration.

Excuse her, three-and-a-half.

"Shamal, breath. You're going to make yourself sick at this rate."

Her contralto tones, sleep rough though it may be, wasn't anything like the hitman's baritone. It was different enough to permeate whatever had upset the boy, and Shamal tried to cut himself off.

Obviously, she wasn't who he expected to be in this bed.

The squeak, as if a mouse had been surprised, didn't quite manage to stop the sniffles. Watery brown eyes peered up at her, then the barely out of toddlerhood child rather hurriedly dashed a forearm across his eyes. "Wasn't crying."

"Alright. Not crying." She agreed slowly, wondering why he was denying it. "But you'll still make yourself sick if you keep doing... whatever you were doing."

"You needed a hug."

Sonya stared at him dubiously. She didn't even like hugs when Cherep wanted to give her some. Admittedly, her best friend/brother went totally overboard when he decided to be sappy and practically smothered her normally.

"And you were having a bad dream."
"I was, was I?" No, the thief didn't believe that for a moment.

Shamal nodded solemnly and blinked teary brown eyes up at her, looking as if butter wouldn't even melt in his mouth.

He'd be a damn fine liar in a few years, but he wasn't there yet.

She snorted softly and ruffled his already messy hair. "Fine then. I take it you don't feel sleepy enough to go back to sleep?"

She got a rapid head shake, which almost knocked himself off the bed and onto the floor with the violence of the motion. The kid also looked rather scared, and not of the near-tumble he almost took.

Steadying the Mist, the Russian thief pushed herself upright and stretched out her arms with a yawn. "Alright then, what... err... is there anything you do need?"

"No."

She blinked at the abrupt refusal, aware she was being lied to but unable to figure out what he was lying about. "...is Renato up yet?"

"No."

Eying his expression, which was steadily getting stormier by the second, she gave up.

Three-year-old children were a damn mystery to her, and no one was paying her to do it anyways. "Is there anything you want to do?"

"Can't. Mister Renato's sleeping, we can't wake him up for nothing. It's a rule." Shamal informed her tiredly, as if she was the one being difficult.

"I, little one, am a thief. Stealthy is what I am by trade alone, I will not wake Renato up no matter what it is." Sonya sniffed in offense at his obviously unconvinced expression, swinging her feet out from under the covers and off the bed to stand up. She also snatched him up, because like hell she would let some little brat doubt her skills to her face. "Be quiet and I'll show you."

The brat still looked highly skeptical on the superiority of a thief's silent steps to his own crashing elephant gait, even when she eased the door open quieter than he had managed.

The Storm-Cloud spotted Renato damn fast, the man had fallen asleep on the couch.

One of her own books, the one she had condensed several different books' worth of information on nature of Dying Will Flames into not her master research journal, was serving as a light blocker covering his face while his long legs were hanging off one side of the couch.

The ass had better not smudge the ink in her book, or she'd introduce him to her Bec de Corbins. Forcibly. Using the pointy end.

Huffing slightly as she irritably eyed the hitman, Sonya then cast her gaze around for her backpack and found it next to the couch.

...of course, it would be there.

Shamal's sharp intake of breath when she started moving forward was in violation of her order to be silent, but she didn't do more than throw the brat a sharp look.
When she reached the hitman's side, right before she bent slightly to lift her pack in a method that wouldn't let the stones she knew were inside from clacking against one another, baby Mist brat spoke **loudly** into her ear in what he probably fondly thought was a whisper.

It wasn't.

"Wow… you are **stealthy, miss Sonya.**"

Sonya gifted him with an annoyed stare, even as Renato tugged down the edge of the book he had likely fallen asleep reading to see what they were doing. "**Generally, Shamal, one does not speak when trying to be quiet.**"

The kid, who was practically only just out of toddlerhood on the cusp of being a young child, clapped his hands over his mouth as if that would help take back his words.

The *Mafioso* might have been trying to remain 'asleep' for all intents and purposes, in order not to give the game away… but the snickers he wasn't very successful in suppressing was shaking him slightly. Disgusted with being busted just that far from validating her sneaking skills to the child, the Russian thief picked up her backpack and dropped Shamal onto the hitman's stomach.

Ignoring the fact the man was now outright laughing at her, she dug out a box of gemstones and a pack of cigarettes out of her traveling pack. The box went on the coffee table, the pack of smokes went with her. *"I am going to go have a smoke. You two figure out what we're doing for breakfast."*

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**CXXXII (Sunday the 30th of October, 1966 continued. Renato's Apartment, Mafia Land.)**

*Renato* could easily believe Sonya had done this before, at least once for another Mist.

She didn't get too irritated with Shamal's meandering questions, not even when it went back through the information she had just finished telling him in attempts to trip her up. The thief was irritated nonetheless, but it was more… dealing with a very young child annoyance than a Cloud being forced into close quarters with a Mist aggravation.

Everything the hitman had ever gotten on Dying Will Flame users and the type of people they tended to be insisted that Clouds, by nature, weren't sociable nor tolerant of irritations. Any and all passages that described Cloud Flame users also never failed to hold some kind of warning about their interactions with Mist users.

More to the point, they always warned to keep the two far apart unless a Sky could bridge the space between them.

He had even *personally witnessed* a fight that started between a Cloud and a Mist over a minor slight that had nearly destroyed an entire wing of a manor once. It had been stupidly inane, but apparently the little tiff meant more to the two of them than the good opinions of anyone around them at the time.

That was why he insisted on being present when his Storm-Cloud associate ran his Mist using… *ward* through the basics of Dying Will Flame types and what that would mean for him, as well as an overview of what kind of skills, tricks, and abilities she knew a Mist could have.

Yet… Sonya put up with getting patted, poked, prodded, and tugged on by Shamal. Who was sitting pretty in her lap while she went over how he was likely to fare against other types if he ever found
himself in trouble.

This was the same woman who, at the tender age of thirteen, nearly broke Renato's wrist for grabbing her arm. She always sidestepped any possible brush with even pedestrians on the street, glared when someone tried getting into her personal space, and generally treated people talking to her as an annoyance she wasn't sure if she should beat the tar out of or ignore.

That woman, mainly a Cloud user of some impressively icy behavior, with a kid in her lap. A Mist kid being annoying because he somehow felt safe enough to do it.

Renato was staring. He knew it, and could probably help it, but… still… staring.

"No," Sonya repeated herself for the seventh time in as many minutes, "just because you're a Mist doesn't mean you automatically 'kick the butt' of any Lightning users."

Shamal gave her a disgruntled pout. "But you just said-

"That Mist users, who are properly prepared, can really mess with a Lightning using their unique attention span. But that's Hard Lightnings, Soft Lightnings are harder to fool. It's all subjective, while a tendency means more likely it also doesn't mean that will always be true."

"What does subjective mean?"

The Russian thief sighed into his hair, releasing her book to rub the bridge of her nose. "It means that it depends on the situation."

"Oh... what does tendency mean?"

"That it is more likely to happen."

The brat considered that for a few moments. "What does differentiate mean?"

"I think," Renato spoke up before the twitch in the Cloud woman's right eye got worse, "we may need a small break."

The glare she tossed him contained every tiny bit of aggravation she wasn't letting the child in her lap know about. "We, huh?"

He merely smirked at her, pleased when the twitch got noticeably worse. He hadn't ever really managed to safely irritate the hell out of her before, so this was new to him. "Didn't you say you needed to visit the fences?"

"And the Thieves' Hall, and actually get myself a room nearby for..." Sonya looked at the kid still occupying her lap, "...longer than I'd like to. I don't think a week's going to cut it if we're going this slow."

She shut the book, nudging Shamal off her so she could stand and recollect her things.

Those books were something he rather dearly wished to question.

It was her handwriting, he knew that much at least. One book had great scores through some of the information, as if she had investigated then discarded whatever bit, the other had the bare minimum of information on all seven different types recorded within and a few rare selections on the benefits and drawbacks of certain specific types.

Bare basics, without the slants for or against certain types the Sun using Mafioso kept coming across
in any of the books he found. Without expecting said types to conform or only show to specific personality traits.

Obviously her own work, but what he wanted to know first and foremost was how big of a pool of Flame active people she had worked with to cut whatever available information she started with to those bare bone descriptions. He could guess at least one of Soft Cloud, Soft Rain, Hard Sun, and Hard Mist from what she told Shamal. There were even hints of a young Lightning starting to submit some information, one not able to commit to hard answers yet but able to answer a few misconceptions.

It wasn't something he could ask, because Sonya likely wouldn't let that be included into just one of the favors she owed him. He'd have to find a different way.

Renato slanted a look at the child of one of his old contacts, of whom he was the only one available or able to take in when he ended up an orphan. The young Mist blinked teary brown eyes up at the thief, who did look slightly torn on leaving as she stared back at him.

Even if she was wildly uncomfortable with how clingy Shamal was when he found you didn't limit his contact time with your person.

He wondered if she would answer in her brutally frank way if he got Shamal to ask her questions instead.

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**CXXXIII (Monday the 31st of October, 1966. Mafia Land.)**

*Sonya* didn't quite get around to the rocks she brought with her until the evening of the second day she was helping Renato out.

Discounting that first night, since little of anything really got done.

Baby Mist had, like all children at his age, no concept of patience or limits. It was all or nothing for him, and before they got to the actual attempts on learning de-Construction she'd greatly appreciate it if Shamal wouldn't keep exhausting her limited skills with Storm Flames when she kept his illusions contained for him.

Hopefully, the ease of utilizing a Flame through a gemstone would temper than a little… otherwise it would be incredibly useless for him like the other Mist she had helped through this part of his life.

The thief ran him through the gemstones in the safety of her hotel room, checking first to see that he could use sapphires and had a strange reaction to ruby before looking for a different fit.

Given the fact she imploded a sapphire, she wasn't going to let a young child run around with one.

"Why do I need a rock? You said it probably won't help."

"I said it likely won't help you when you're older. For now, though," she shoved another mineral, a clump of lapis lazuli Usov had favored, into his hands for him to try, "it may prove to be a decent emergency option."

Shamal pulled a little pouty face at the lump of rock, but not even a spark of Mist Flames appeared after a full minute. "Why?"
Breathing in through her nose to calm herself, Sonya vowed to get back at her hitman contact for this shit even if it took her years. "Because a focus stone like the one we're looking for can be used as a decent anchor for your little fishing net trap. Everyone will think you're inside of it, but instead you can sneak away and find Renato while they're distracted."

"I like that idea." Said hitman observing the trial and error testing of various gemstones put in lazily, tipping the chair he had commandeered from Sonya's hotel room even further back so his heels could rest on the top of a small side table.

"You would." She shot back repressively.

The Russian hadn't decided if the touch too complicated questions the kid kept posing to her was his fault or not, but she still suspected Renato was nudging the kid into asking them. It sounded a bit rehearsed to her, too much so to be questions a Mist as young as him thought up on his own.

That, and she was trained to catch that kind of falseness. She may not be always right guessing the why behind it, but she could still tell when something wasn't natural.

Shamal huffed at them, side-eyeing the sapphire she wasn't going to let him walk away with.

Blindly groping for the next stone while so distracted, he didn't notice right away that the oval chunk of turquoise started glittering when his baby-fat pudgy fingers closed around it.

When he did finally give it more of his attention, tiny flickers of darkly blue Flames started spiking up in response.

"I think we have a winner." Sonya informed him blandly, poking the kid in the side. "Even better than the sapphire, isn't it?"

Too distracted to respond, baby Mist kept staring in fascination at the rock glowing with his inner neon indigo fire.

Renato shifted, letting the legs of his chair thump back to the floor, and smoothly rose to his feet in a smooth movement. Taking the few steps to where she had set herself and the kid up on her hotel bed, he peered down at the results. "What is it?"

"Turquoise." She sighed again, rubbing at her temples. "Which correlates with no other results I've gotten just yet either."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone I've tried this test with so far have preferred wildly different stones. Or minerals. Even those that share the same type if not polarization."

Picking up one of the discarded rocks, moonstone the thief identified on reflex, the hitman rolled the smooth round rock between his fingers curiously. "How many have you tried?"

Snorting softly, the thief looked up at him reprovingly. "I'm not answering that."

"Any particular reason you've never asked me?"

Sonya was about to tell him that she frankly didn't trust him that much with the people she did but didn't. Her eyes caught on a bit of tension lacing his frame, in how stiffly he held himself upright and the flex of his shoulders, but mostly she was distracted by the faint flicker of yellow in the rock he was rolling around his fingers.
"No... damn it, that's not even a yellow gemstone!"

"What...?" He followed her gaze down to his hands, and the moonstone now glimmering with a hint of Sun Flames. "...huh."

"Miss Sonya?" Shamal interjected, clutching his own not-indigo stone and sounding both baffled and concerned.

The Storm-Cloud ran a hand down her face, tiredly detailing what that was going to mean for her. "I... need more research... on... oh screw it. Screw color too, because apparently that has no bearing on anything."

Renato twisted the chunk of pale, almost-white but more bluish rock in his hands around, then dabbed a bit of yellow fire on the surface and watched it sink into the semi-transparent depths. "Well... I'm taking this."

"Fine, whatever." There were a few stones lost trying to match one person with a rock, so it wouldn't be too hard to hand wave the loss to Arseniy.

She could at least go poke Tatiana and see if moonstone would work for the Classical Sun as well, so this wasn't a complete back-step.

The color coded gemstone method of searching might not be the best way to match a Dying Will Flame user to a focus stone, but it was a working one nonetheless... and if she had done all that work for it in the first place it had damn well not prove to be a waste anyways.

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CXXXIV (Tuesday the 2nd of November, 1966. Mafia Land.)

Since a baby Mist did have such an obvious episode of uncontrolled Construction smack dab in the middle of the free-floating island controlled by criminals, Sonya had been expecting it to have taken them less time to start asking questions of the uncomfortable kind.

'Them' being the representative of the coalition of mafia groups that ran Mafia Land's day-to-day business. They weren't stupid, no one that remained in control of an island of criminal-types like this could be without being brutally murdered and replaced in short order. Crafty and patient were the more likely culprits.

Four days after the fact, there was an elderly gentleman sitting at the café table she and Renato had typically used for the past five years when they had the time to spare. The thief herself was just thankful the hitman was keeping Shamal close to the more 'family-orientated' and residential sections, neither were present since she had volunteered to pick up lunch from a less 'peaceful' part of the city-like island.

She knew he was there for her, he was staring right at her meaningfully and as she watched one silvered eyebrow rose in expectation.

Considering the situation thoughtfully, she decided this was likely as close to neutral ground as anyone connected to those that ran Mafia Land could get. It was even partially her 'territory', someplace she was known at and well thought of if only for the tips she and a certain Sun user left after they were done with a tea or coffee break.

That being the case, it would've been very rude to turn the invitation down. The obvious suggested
'or-it-will-get-worse' threat the older man's stare was telling her just made that course of action the more prudent one.

The location choice was well thought out, after all.

After a moment to gather her thoughts, the Russian corrected her course to approach him while ensuring it was the more obvious path and he could see she was visibly unarmed. "I take it you wish to speak with me?"

"Sit… please." He gestured to her usual chair brusquely, turning his own around to face her directly across the tabletop rather than sit sideways with it between them as she normally did with Renato. "We have reports that you volunteered to… handle a little issue for our service personnel."

"That would be correct." There hadn't been any other way to get around that, there would've been witnesses no matter what she did. Sonya at least ensured her Flame use was at least revealed in a way that wouldn't come off as her being just destructive with it. "May I ask why you are approaching me about this?"

When the first three days had passed without word, she had assumed that Mafia Land had active Flame users so her showing up as one all the sudden wasn't that alarming. The thief had expected it to be added to the intelligence the island masters likely kept on everyone that visited, but that would've been par for the course.

Nothing was ever for free in their lives. Especially not a 'safe haven'.

This, a meeting taking place after more than twice the time they would've needed to hunt her down for answers or to arm twist her into being an active Flame user for the island on staff?

Was suspicious. Alarming too, if only because she didn't know what kind of allegiances or views the people that ran this place had on Dying Will Flame users.

"It was an accident, correct?"

"It will not happen again, if that is what you are asking." The thief admitted slowly. She'd blow off her circus life it that was what it would take to teach Shamal not to smother a building in Mist Flames again just because he was scared.

Cherep would understand when she explained this to him.

"The interests that I represent are not that concerned of a repeat." The gentleman claimed, straightening his lapels as if to hammer home the point that the people he worked for were too highly placed to be worried much. "We are more interested in… who it is you needed to correct the mistakes of."

In other words, 'whose aid did you go to?'

Sonya was intensely uncomfortable with the direction this 'discussion' looked to be heading to. The frown she was giving him seemed to answer some kind of question, and the man leaned forward slightly.

"There will be no blame laid out," he offered as if that was what was stalling her tongue, "but we do tend to… collect very special young people and offer a sanctuary for them."

Like that didn't sound disturbing at all.
Placed next to her brother's unfortunate experiences being 'collected' and Renato's past warnings of people hunting Flame users, this did not have undertones the Russian was willing to assist with.

"Just… something to think about." He rose to his feet, rather spry for a man of his advanced years, and strolled away as if he had nothing to worry about.

He probably didn't. If he was the only one here from whatever group was pulling the strings, she was a fish.

Slumping back in the spindly café chair, Sonya quickly ran that probing conversation through her head again.

If… if they were making an offer of protection for a supposedly younger Dying Will Flame user to an older one, didn't that mean they were really looking for users that didn't come with pre-existing allegiances?

She didn't know, nor did she really like any of it.

However, the Sun using Mafioso was Shamal's current and likely only guardian. She'd repeat the offer to him, speak up with her concerns, but it really was up to the hitman.

She rose to her own feet, continuing down the street to the restaurant they had picked for the day.

Likely if they knew exactly who she was and where she liked to frequent on the island, they knew what she had been up to lately. That whatever it was had to do with Renato… and possibly a little brown-haired boy that stuck close to both the hitman and the thief.

She'd look for any obvious tails, or anything that smacked of suspicious activity, but playing coy wouldn't do anything but delay the mid-day meal.

Cranky, hungry Shamal was not her favorite to deal with anyways.

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**CXXXV (Tuesday the 2nd of November, 1966 continued. Renato's Apartment, Mafia Land.)**

Renato's features didn't change as she reported what had delayed her to him.

Which was scary enough given her suspicions of who he would become, she could've dealt without the tension that wracked both him and his little apartment the more ticked off he got.

Shamal was already preemptively cringing, not out of actual fear but what seemed to be expectations for something to blow up. He only flinched when the hitman shot his living room lamp to pieces, Sonya almost jumped out of her skin.

Obviously, household expenses for him likely included the odd fixture or three when he got pissed off.

"I know you said you weren't one, but could I possibly ask you to babysit a short while?" The too broad toothy grin he gave her, wreathed by the still smoking barrel of his pistol pointed at the ruins of pottery and wiring, made her more nervous.

"…sure. Take your time." Folding her arm under her chest, the thief gave him the most level look she could muster. "Renato, do please be careful. You live here, and this may not be-"
"Do you really believe that?"

Huffing slightly at getting cut off, the thief glared back at him. "Do you really believe all things are so straightforward?"

That knocked Renato back a mental step, and he considered her thoughtfully.

"It may not be as bad as it sounded to me." The Storm-Cloud finished her original words forcefully. "I only know of experiences that sound similar that were not so great for the people involved. It may be even on the up, and the fact it was a Mist and they tend to pop so young that led to the word choice the man used. So again, be careful."

Before you shoot someone you can't heal, went unsaid under her words. If he heard it or not was something she refused to speculate on.

"...I'll be back by morning."

She sighed as he turned on his heel and strode out of the apartment.

Shamal's tiny, but more importantly sauce covered, fingers fisted into her skirt and tugged lightly. "Is he mad at me?"

"No. Did you wash your hands before digging in?"

The child looked at his small take-away box of beef ravioli smothered in tomato sauce and cheese, at his hands, at the stain in her skirt, then back up to her. "Um... no?"

The thief gave him a highly unimpressed stare.

"Is Mister Renato mad at you?"

"Not this time, no." Sonya peered down at herself, and at the greasy mark Shamal had left behind. "Go wash your hands."

"Are you sure? He looked mad." Baby Mist was also not moving an inch, looking at her stubbornly.

"I've irritated him a time or two, and to be fair he's irritated me a couple times too. Just now? That wasn't my fault. Our... bosses, they aren't being... nice. Or polite. He's going to go... complain."

Of course, that was assuming they knew Renato had some kind of involvement with the young Mist they were sure she knew. It was entirely possible they didn't know the hitman was involved, or what she was doing visiting him so often or why he had been visiting her hotel room lately.

Something about that thought rang a bit off to her, but after puzzling it over a bit she shrugged it off.

There was a kid involved, it couldn't have been because they thought they were sleeping together or something along those lines.

Shamal considered her gravely, with all the seriousness he had to him.

Sonya blinked blankly back, confused over what the kid was trying to say silently.

"Okay then." Baby Mist turned back to the cheap plastic takeout box that held his kiddy-sized portion of lunch.

"What part of 'wash your hands' escapes you?"
A pause, and the brat very pointedly stomped his way to the bathroom.

She sniffed at his back, then glanced at the watch she had strapped to her left wrist when she got dressed for the day.

It was maybe an hour and some change after noon Greenwich Mean Time, meaning that the streets of Mafia Land were likely packed to the point of being uncomfortable. If she took the kid outside for a bit, just so they weren't anywhere anyone watching them would expect them to be while Renato ensured his ward's safety…

Where would they hide, on an island controlled by the people likely to want to do them some kind of mischief?

She didn't particularly want to think of her ultimate temp-work bosses like that… but they were all criminals here. The only rules they abided by was no drugs, no human slavery, and no employee violence allowed to the paying guests.

Kidnappings, abductions, the odd death here and there, all that still happened even in the more 'public' parts of the floating mafia haven.

There wasn't a fully functioning hospital on site just for making up bogus medical histories tailored professionally, or for ensuring the criminals that the island's trade relied on were as healthy as their lifestyles allowed. Its main business was patching up the idiots that thought they could throw down against Mafia Land's best, or worst in this case, and survive without a bloody beating to hammer home how outclassed they were or that and a headshot in the end.

Sometimes it worked out the other way, and revenge hits weren't an uncommon reason to visit either.

Once upon a lifetime, she had put her faith in the inherent goodness of her fellow humans and ended up murdered. The Russian thief that survived from that experience didn't intend to allow herself to fall that way again.

Now?

Sonya put no faith into people she hadn't met, hadn't at least gotten even a half-assed measure of, or anyone she didn't know the reputation of. Until Renato told her otherwise, she'd be assuming the worst and planning for it.

The only problem she could see so far was that the hitman hadn't said anything about if she could take his ward outside of the so far established 'safe' areas.

…two problems, how to leave a message for him that only the two of them could understand?

CXXXVI (Wednesday the 3rd of November, 1966. Mafia Land.)

"Sometimes," Sonya informed Shamal seriously, "we have to make sacrifices in order to get what we want. I want us to be as safe as possible, so we have to do this."

"So... why am I the one wearing the dress when you're the girl?" Baby Mist questioned mulishly, plucking at the straps of his new little sundress.

"Because they expect a woman and a boy, not a young man and a girl." The thief informed him
primly, crossing her newly trouser clad legs in a less feminine appearing way. Ankle over knee, not ankle over ankle.

Thank the ever-loving hell Lisa had insisted on ensuring they knew how to act as if they weren't girls or merely thieves in any kind of social setting. Tatiana might have outshone her in that art, but the blonde wasn't any slouch at it either.

Not a master of the art of disguise, but a semi-decent one even if she still didn't understand why certain actions were only 'acceptable' by one gender or the other. It might have been just Lisa's expectations, or the culture of the late 60s, or any number of other things.

All she really knew was that to act male and at least get the casual observer to dismiss her as one, she had to perform to Lisa's expectations.

Thankfully, Shamal had greatly enjoyed exploring the more 'family friendly' parts of the island's amusement park. It was a decent distraction for him while she collected the odd bits and bobs from tourist-trap spots that allowed her to effectively swap their genders without trying to rely on the baby Mist's Flames to hold for long periods.

She wasn't even sure how well the kid's control extended and given what she already had him doing, making them seem less interesting to avoid scrutiny… it was best not to risk burning him out.

Risky move on her part, but with limited supplies on hand and a threat to try planning to counter?

There really hadn't been much else she could try that had a better chance of success.

Renato would be jumpy enough. If he thought she was trying to take advantage of the fact he left Shamal with her?

While baby Mist was in a dress, Sonya had forgone her skirt and blouse in favor for a pair of the hitman's pants and one of his buttoned-down shirts. Picking up a vest to go with the predominantly darker colors the Sun favored and would suppress her developing chest had been tricky and getting the young Italian boy out of his original clothing and into the slightly too big dress had been a touch harder.

Her bright, shoulder-length, ash blonde hair was twisted up and shoved under the wide-brimmed hat she had bought the same time as her vest. Without makeup, she could pass as a slightly younger teenage boy not quite of the point of being able to shave just yet. With a bit used in unusual ways, she could appear to be anywhere from a couple years to about a decade older.

Shamal didn't particularly like getting his hair styled differently, but the current fad for female hairstyles did currently favor shorter hair and that wasn't too hard for the thief to pull off.

He made a very cute little girl, but it was likely he wasn't ever going to forgive her for this.

She made a slightly androgynous adult/caretaker for him. It was the best she could do, because Sonya was a little too pretty to be really mistaken as fully male. Her small but still apparent bust made that hard to conceal, even under a vest.

All in all, they looked like a caretaker/bodyguard and charge waiting for the rest of their party in the lobby of Sonya's hotel.

The thief really had yet to decide if she should've checked out of her room just to ensure the trail was muddy, but this was the only place she could make a suitably vague hint for Renato to follow to. At least in the lobby they had three different lines of escape, and they were set up to watch for either the
hitman or anyone else looking for a thief and a baby Mist.

Unfortunately, when the Mafioso did eventually track them down well past midnight, it didn't do much for her nerves.

The Inverted Sun was still as blandly tense as he had been the last time she saw him, but he still noticed her and Shamal without much effort she could see.

Sonya wryly assumed she needed a better disguise for herself and tipped her hat's brim up to see the hitman better as he strolled to the sofa where his ward was sleeping.

"I have to get him off the island." He informed her bluntly, nudging Shamal awake. Tossing her the moonstone and turquoise jewels she had left on his kitchenette's counter once the kid was rubbing bleary eyes.

"I can play decoy." She still had to do her last two Mafia Land contracts for this year, she couldn't quite leave just yet. "They have only approached me so far, you should be able to get him on land before they realize I am no longer in contact with him."

He didn't look particularly happy in the first place, but that suggestion earned her a rather dirty look of its own.

He probably didn't like the thought of using her as a shield. Even if he really couldn't do much against any pursuers besides stand his ground and fight, weighed down with Shamal as he would be. It was likely inevitable she would be used as a decoy even if he tried to say no.

The hitman even seemed to know that, because he gritted out a very belligerent, "Thank you."

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CXXXVII (Thursday the 4th of November, 1966. Mafia Land.)

Sonya waited a whole day longer, then ditched her male disguise and checked out of her hotel room.

She visited her storage unit to stash a couple things, wasted a bit of time eating something for breakfast, then did a bit of window shopping. The thief got another contract from her Hall in the late morning and was halfway to the docks before anything remotely concerning happened.

By then she'd put good money on Renato having Shamal free and clear of Mafia Land controlled territory, so she wasn't so jumpy anymore.

"Bazanova Sonya."

It was the same elderly gentleman that had approached her the first time, and she gave him a long look over a shoulder. "Can this wait? I really do need to get on with my job, or I will not have the funds to stay much longer."

"The interests I represent want to know if you have given any thought to what they have suggested."

"You have given me no details of which I can think about." The thief reminded him a little pointedly, because the fact she didn't know what kind of threat made the hitman bail out of a supposedly safe haven rather concerned her. "Only a very vague suggestion that sounds a little sinister."

"They would be willing to discuss terms if you would consent to a meeting in a less… public
Turning to face the man, having him behind her while they talked was a touch unnerving, she gave him a perfectly bland smile. "I have commitments at the moment, but I may be interested in such a face-to-face meeting upon my return."

He gave her a very distinguished looking reproving stare, which made absolutely no dent in her resolve to stall them as long as she could. Sonya even shifted her grip on the coded contract in her hands, because that was a very firm detail to confirm she would be coming back anyways.

She had to, people that tried running off with contracts for Mafia Land jobs didn't tend to last long.

"They would be delighted to, the very moment of your return."

As if that wasn't suspicious as hell, but the Storm-Cloud merely smiled again. "As long as I may refresh myself beforehand, for this is a rather farther-flung contract for me."

"We will be waiting." With that, the gentleman walked off as if he had wanted nothing more than what he had gotten from her.

Sonya turned back to the waiting ships and figuring out which one she needed.

Since she was rather sure the hitman would take his baby Mist back to Europe, as that was likely the place he had more or better contacts than in Mafia Land, she was going to China. Halfway around the world would tie up any kind of investigation into where she could meet or join back up with any baby Mist, and Asia was vast enough to be a real drain on any kind of search.

The only problem with this whole situation, other than her Mafia Land bosses being dicks of a sort, was the contract she had taken.

It was a first for her, because it required her to present herself to the client that requested a thief to get the full details of what she was supposed to steal. Obviously, the risks for this kind of contract were higher than the usual anonymous ones but it was still less of a risk than just waiting for someone that was looking to 'collect' Shamal getting suspicious of her lack of things to do.

It also paid a lot more than anything else. There was even a 'security deposit' the contractors had to pay. If they got the thief that eventually reported to them killed that deposit was forfeit.

Not much of a safety feature, but the Russian could understand that risk.

She also needed the money, for minion-reasons.

This contract was also open-ended, which meant it would take as long as it would take. The only part of that which made her uneasy was the fact she needed another contract done before the end of the year, but she still had two months before New Year's Day.

Overall, it was a very good method to stall any demands on her time. Once she accepted the contract, Mafia Land's own policies would ensure word was passed on to the contractors that their thief was in route.

If anyone in Mafia Land tried waylaying her, those contractors would not be very amused.

Now she just had to figure out how to end the contract in a month's time.
The directions in her contract sent Sonya to a very quaint little tea house, and while waiting she
ordered herself some spiced orange black tea.

Very different to what she normally drank, but she decided it was a good kind of different.

The point that she was in China made the fact that the man who slid into a kneeling position across
her low table obviously Asian in appearance. It was just… red.

After waking up to the possibility that Renato was possibly one of the Arcobaleno, she had tried to
dredge up the rest of that cast of immensely powerful characters and what they looked like.

The details had faded rather alarmingly on her, but she did recall little things.

One of those Seven Strongest of the Era had belonged to the Triads, and mainly wore red. This
wasn't likely the Arcobaleno of the Storm, but if she kept her eyes open…?

"Do I have time to finish and pay?"

A sharp nod was her answer.

Obviously not a very talkative person, but she could deal.

After she had bought her tea, and a bit of loose leaf for when she was back in the USSR to share
with Lisa, Sonya followed her guide out of the teahouse and into the city of Hong Kong.

It only really occurred to her to wonder why one of the Triad groups of China needed an outsider
thief once it was a bit too late to back out, but by the point she realized which underworld group had
contracted her it wasn't something she could realistically question.

From what information she had been able to get from this part of the criminal underworld, there were
several 'Triad' groups in operation. About twelve major ones and a handful of less powerful ones so
far.

And a shit-ton of minor branches that were or were not actually connected to any similarly named
Triad branch.

Which made the fact she was led into an obviously less central location to any main operations rather
worrying… or reassuring, depending on what the situation was.

There was a group of people waiting for her and her escort, one obviously very important person
seated cross-legged in a very tiny office space and a lot of bodyguards. The more 'boss' like man
didn't look too impressed with her, likely due to the fact she was female, but shortly gestured to the
floor before him.

The Russian didn't argue, blink, or dismiss the suggestion, as he was likely her paymaster for the
time being. She folded herself down to sit patiently, waiting for him to speak.

"You are hired to remove or eliminate any information the police have on Triad operations.
Whatever way you may choose to accomplish it." He informed her in a tone of voice that suggested
he didn't care why she took on the job or who she was at all. Which was alright with her, really. "Do
Giving a half-seated bow, mainly to show she would do so and hopefully he wouldn't get irritated if she posed a question, the Storm-Cloud opted to stare at the flooring for a moment instead of glance up. "May I know the worst offenders, so my efforts will be more immediately useful to you?"

"That information will be supplied along with the assets given for you to use." It didn't seem if he was that annoyed at dealing with her, but she still wasn't going to push it.

Sonya could spare a month keeping *Omertà* secure on the Triad's dime. The code of silence failing would attract Vindice attention, and no one wanted that.

The young Asian man, who she wasn't really sure if he was a boss or the next boss or just a highly ranked officer type, rose to his feet and gave her a barely there nod of acceptance. He left the little office room in short order, and most of his men when with him, leaving the thief and her guide alone.

Sonya turned to her guide herself, more settled on the contract she had taken and how likely it was she'd be able to finish it without getting herself killed.

It was more reasonable to her now why they would hire an outside thief for this, with the current unrest and 'Cultural Revolution' on-going the Triad was likely a bit more than overworked with keeping the Red Guard out of their spheres of influence or off their people.

She still didn't know which of the Triads had hired her, but they also didn't tell her or even ask who she was. This was obviously going to be as clandestine as possible, even if they hadn't wanted to admit to anyone in Mafia Land that keeping *Omertà* was proving a little difficult for them.

Getting free with that kind of information was going to likely be tricky, but that kind of risk she had expected.

"I need that information first, in order to ensure my efforts are not in dire need before I can plan to eliminate the rest all at once."

Her watcher/guard/guide gave her a slow nod, obviously rethinking something but she wasn't sure what. "I will take you to the residence you are allowed to make use of."

"Perfect. Then we're going to play tourist. Or actually I am, a rather tacky tourist that will mangle your native language and you get to play my long-suffering translator slash guide."

This obviously confused him, given the furrowed brow and slight frown. "Young miss, you speak my mother tongue rather well for a foreigner."

"I am about to not." She informed him seriously, getting up and brushing off the locally made dress she had bought to make up for her lack of Chinese styled clothing in her possession. "I need a name for you, not your real one."

The look he gave her for that reminder informed her it had been unnecessary, apparently he wasn't quite as green as she had initially pegged him. "You may call me Liqin."

"For the time being, I am Yu."

Mafia Land had wanted to name her 'Sen' for the time being, but she had argued that was Turkish when used as a name and that she needed something different and short to suggest that it was a nickname instead.
Thus, she was 'Yu' for now. A shortened form of Yuliya.

**CXXXIX (Saturday the 19th of November, 1966. Fúzhōu, Fujian Province, People's Republic of China.)**

1966 China was a very disturbing place for Sonya.

The communist power in charge did at least mean a USSR seamstress tourist wasn't given a very hard look or three from the forces in play, but it was still unnerving to be forced to deal with the Red Guard. She was still 'officially' restricted to only visiting certain locations, and she would do so if only to keep up the appearance of a tourist, but that actually only meant she was allowed to be legally noticed within very small parts of China.

The 'rallies' for the Red Guard were worst of all, and the sheer amount of destruction it ended up dealing to historic sites made her itch internally when thinking of all those books being burned, but it was the mass public humiliation and outright torture going on that she despised.

Thankfully she wasn't in Beijing, but the news that reached her anyways painted the streets of the capital city as worse than *Mafia Land's* nightlife activities.

If any of that got out, and she really only knew what was going on because Liqin actually brought her unfiltered news while she was planning a spot of police-related arson, Sonya suspected the *Großes Volksfest* would be changing next year's plans in a fast hurry. She might even tell Master Liam what was going on herself, given what he knew when she reconnected with Cherep.

To that end, she was saving the few newspapers she managed to get a hold on.

Going through this country with the circus was going to be a trial. As it was, since she was here for a job, she had a fair bit of things to get on with while all that civilian unrest and those so called 'political investigations' were going on.

The news that the police were no longer allowed to interfere with Red Guard actives meant she had more work to do, and with more people walking around that might notice her.

That would also return the police's attention to the Triads and other related troubles, the only parts they could now interfere with, increasing the number of people she had to check out to ensure they didn't have backups of certain information.

It took nearly full a month of work, within which she had noticed and gotten tired of Liqin attempting discreet peers over her shoulder and instead deputized him as an assistant. If he was going to report on her anyways, best ensure he knew full well what she was doing and why it was taking her so long to move on it.

There were five different Bureaus involved with anti-gang and Triad business she had to investigate. Any number of officers she had to locate the homes of just to ensure they didn't have personal copies of any Triad records. Several branch offices of each to investigate and locate the main Intelligence Records Offices and where all the hard copies of the information were stored.

Sonya has started with a base of some information, mostly which police headquarters dealt with the Triads more and which officers were the best in each branch, but another set of hands was of immense help to slog through the bulk of the intelligence she needed to pull her 'information wipe'
off.

Since she couldn't actually do the tailing herself, as she was obviously not Chinese and tourist weren't allowed in certain places, she had to get the Triad organization she was hired by to do it instead.

There really was too much for one thief to handle, but apparently this was enough of a big deal that she wasn't going to be the only one working on it. While she was expected to handle the parts where her contracted paymasters were a little too well-known to be seen nearby, they would take care of the farther-flung targets.

Then she had to process the information they sent back to her and try to work up a viable plan to destroy all of it in as little time as possible. Adjusting said plan to changes in police patrols and schedules, and the fact she would have to be both in a visible area when things went up in flames.

Or Flames, as the case was going to be.

Storm Flames were really the only Dying Will Flame that looked like fire in both color and behavior. Hot fire, rather, Skies were the only thing that beat out her Storm in that aspect but she had no Sky Flame.

They were also the only way she'd be satisfied that everything would be destroyed no matter what, it was just controlling it from doing massive damage to other things that had given her pause.

Until the National Police Chief, Xie Fuzhi, claimed it was 'no big deal' that people were getting beaten to death in the streets by the Red Guard. At that point, Sonya didn't care if she accidently removed information they would need for other criminal investigations.

Obviously, they had a very skewed sense of what was right and wrong and she highly doubted the veracity of what information they might have had.

It took longer than she liked, it was edging past the middle of November and she was getting heartily sick of China in general, before she was happy with a nearly eight-hour long plan for everything.

Liqin went with her for the main node of information that had to be taken out, evidently the one in charge of ensuring she did as they wanted and more than likely her murderer if she didn't.

The fact that didn't bother her too much deserved a closer look, but that was for later.

She left her 'guard/guide' outside in a nearby park, sneaking into the main Hong Kong Police Headquarters and to their Records Room. As it was just dusk outside, there was a pick-up of activity in in the lobby as officers either came into work, left it, or brought in some petty or not-so-petty criminals.

Masking herself in that hadn't been too hard, most attention was on the arrivals and departures. With her hair dyed black, with something easily washed out, and dressed in the local fashions ensured she was just one more face.

A face a bit too pale and pointed to be Chinese, but she only really asked for the location of a washroom and that was common enough they likely assumed she was there to make a report of something. She asked in perfectly humble Chinese, a pointed difference from the seamstress tourist Yu who couldn't even manage that much.

Once past reception, it merely took a bit of sneaking past overworked officers trying to tackle paperwork and the odd open office similarly occupied for her to find her way.
It was even labeled for her on the walls.

Sonya merely eased the door open, checked for anyone inside, then entered fully and locked the door behind her. Dabbing the target file cabinets with a touch of Storm Flames each, she willed them to consume everything and warily watched to ensure it didn't burn through the floor.

By the time she was sure everything remotely connected to the Triads had gone up in Flames, using a touch more Storm Flames here and there when it ran out before being done, people were already knocking on the door she had locked. Trying to get in, either in response to the smoke or because they noticed the heat on their way around the offices.

Instead of retracing her steps, the thief melted the bars and glass out of her way so she could dive out a window and up to ground level. Leaving obvious melted parts to suggest the fire had done that, not someone wielding a blowtorch or something.

The only problem with that kind of exit was the melted and glowing hot glass and metal. Sonya had to use her Cloud given Propagation strength to jump through it and outside without burning herself.

It would be hard to explain why a file room or fifteen, the number of places she had to hit up and set a-Flame, burned up without anyone knowing about it. Sonya didn't really care how the police would handle that, they were letting the murder of their civilians go without bothering themselves.

Maybe this way, that Chief of Police letting murder slide would get sacked or something.

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**CXL (Monday the 12th of December, 1966. Mafia Land.)**

**Liqing** dearly looked to want to ask how she burned everything she has been contracted to find and eliminate; paper, glass, metal, everything that needed to be. However, he displayed a remarkable restraint in not asking for the week they waited for the news that everything that had to go was destroyed.

That chief of police Sonya despised got executed instead of just fired, but she was perfectly happy over that.

The Russian accepted her completed contract paperwork from the same young, likely important Triad officer, and agreed to an escort back to the ship she was taking to get back to Mafia Land.

She still didn't know who it was that contracted her, but that didn't really bother her much either.

It was kind of usual for her, especially considering most of her Thieves Hall work was done anonymously. That disinterest likely kept the Triad organization she had been hired by from deciding she was a loose end they wanted cut.

Overall, it had taken a month and some change. Time enough for a certain hitman to have finished covering his and Shamal's trail, if whoever that had been in Mafia Land was waiting on her to sell out the baby Mist.

Which wasn't going to happen and would be interesting in likely lethal ways to see how this would work out.

There was no help for that, she had to return to close out the contract she had taken in Mafia Land's name otherwise they'd still hunt her down for skipping out on them.
Much to Sonya's surprise, it looked as if Renato had gotten himself some fairly-major backup and dealt with whoever it had been that wanted to 'collect' Shamal. When she disembarked, instead of being greeted with the same older gentleman that had so bothered her the hitman himself was impatiently waiting for her.

"We really must stop meeting like this." The thief informed him dryly, coming to a stop next to him and the other slightly older gentleman that wasn't so creepy seeming to her.

The Sun user didn't bother much with pleasantries. "Are you alright?"

"I was in China until about a day ago, under the Triads' protection. Since I assumed you would head to Europe, I went the opposite direction to draw attention as far from you as I could." She eyed the other man curiously but did return her attention back to him. "Is everything…?"

"Vongola took care of it." He indicated the man waiting with him, who looked as stony as he had when she first spotted him. "This is Tyr, the Sword Emperor."

…and the head of the Varia assassination squad, Sonya finished in her head with a measure of both alarm and irritation. She made a curtsy to the older Mafioso anyways, because there was no point in taking her irritation with her asshole of a hitman contact out on a man who ran a house full of assassins.

Not right now, anyways. She'd get irritated later.

"China then?" The master assassin said instead of greeting her or returning the silent salutation.

He gave a sharp nod, more to himself than either of the two standing with him, and turned just as sharply on his heel to walk away.

"Renato…"

"What other choice was there?" The hitman grouched at her, rubbing at his face tiredly. "Just… be happy we got here before you returned."

That didn't make anything of what would've happened sound good, but she had expected that. It still didn't make her happy that she had gotten this close to any part of Vongola, but in hindsight it was a very good reason for a freelance Mafioso like him to have become aligned even slightly with the largest underworld power in his home country if he started off free-lance.

Depending on what this was going to cost him, he would likely be known as one of Vongola's hitmen no matter what happened in the future.

"What did you buy in China, anyways?"

"Silk." For a sewing hobby she didn't mind but wasn't particularly enthused over doing. Sonya would likely resell most of the material she had purchased to support her working cover as a seamstress in China, maybe even for a bit of profit if she was smart about it. "Is Shamal alright?"

"For a certain definition of alright." Renato informed her with a touch of humor, seeming less tense now she wasn't going to try murdering him for this clusterfuck.

"He is alive, anything else will improve eventually." She dismissed that easily enough, picking up her rather bulky luggage and starting to move out of the way of other travelers. Curious how they didn't jostle either the thief or hitman when the master assassin was still there. "Is everything around you so hectic?"
He snorted, following her out of the dockyard and into the terminal she had to return her fake passport within. "I have been reliably informed that chaos follows me everywhere."

"I know we did not quite get around to what this favor was supposed to be for, but I am calling it done anyways." She informed him a touch more stridently than she intended. "You still owe me a story, two of them actually. This little situation I want the details of, if only to be sure I do not need to keep a watch over my shoulder."

Another snort, and he was still following her.

Sonya assumed he really had been irritated he had to hide behind her for the last month and was doing this just to ensure she really was alright. He was a rather womanizing kind of gentleman, but he was enough of one that a female covering his escape must have upset his sensibilities something awful.

"I want to know how you got the information for your books."

"Fair enough."

It wasn't really that earth-shattering, just a touch expensive for mostly useless information and maybe slightly risky at the outside. That trade was a bit heavy in her favor, but the hitman likely knew he wasn't her favorite person right now.
CXLI (Tuesday the 13th of December, 1966. Mafia Land.)

"The... incident this summer actually started about late last year," Renato informed her over the restaurant's table once they were done eating, "I took a hit that ended up being a contract kill for the last living son of some Don with a respectable reach, even if he lacked the power to effectively operate that far outside of his sphere of influence."

That Sonya could easily believe. Someone that had the reach to go as far as France from wherever he had been had to have significant amounts of power. In this world, power was usually in the hands of the heads of various criminal outfits.

Those grunts she had... killed, hadn't been particularly talented ones, but they likely hadn't expected a thief to be more combat capable than any other female they knew.

"Alright, so why did it end up with me getting attacked and Shamal orphaned?"

The hitman tisked, slouching back into the dinner chair he was practically draped over. "Use some imagination, Sonya. Before that hit he was the second to last member of his family, elderly, semi-powerful man. His last hope to pass on his legacy to his own flesh and blood gunned down by some freelance hitman? If he couldn't pass on his famiglia to his own blood, why not take his revenge on who did the hit instead?"

She set her wineglass down, settling her folded arms on her end of the table between them. "I am sorry, I had assumed his efforts would have been better spent finding a new heir so his famiglia would not scum to in-fighting and come to ruin in the event of his death. Instead, obviously, I should have assumed that revenge's temporary satisfaction would have sated his grief."

"Obviously." Renato mocked sourly, glaring downwards intently as if the dinnerware had insulted him personally. "He somehow found out which hitman had taken the contract, a leak I have yet to find or seal up within the Halls I work in. So, with a name and a description, he set his rather considerable network of contacts and men to search out everything about me or those that would associate with me. You can likely guess what happened to most of them afterwards."

She really did wonder about the standards of Mafia Land's security, internal or external.

Eventually, in a couple decades, that blond sniper man would come here and pitch in. Would that happen because standards had fallen to the point even mafia people like the Mafioso across from her or she herself were no longer safer than most places working here, or because someone eventually decided a completely neutral individual had to oversee security?

"...so, since you probably killed this Don, do you take over his famiglia?" Sonya wondered out loud, as right of conquest wasn't a foreign idea to people like them.

It was a rather common thing, in truth.

Planning on being able to pass your newly amassed criminal enterprise to whatever child was more of a gamble than anything, because more than likely someone would murder either you or your kids in hopes to be the only one you could leave your power and wealth to. It was more usual to hear someone butchered someone else and took over their territory than to hear some Don or Boss had stepped down and his so-and-so heir took up his place.
Those that managed something like passing on leadership of some group from one generation to the next were all mostly well-established syndicates… or about to become well-established.

"What there is of it." With a dry smirk for her, which was tinged with more than a little bitterness, the Italian picked his own glass of whisky back up and finished it off. "Most the Mafiosi left alive abandoned the place once their Don was murdered, and those left I wouldn't trust with a pet rock, but I do now own a rather shot up mansion not far outside of San Giovanni in Fiore."

…Renato now had people. Actual, minion-y people. That was… slightly scary to contemplate.

Even if they weren’t good people, it would still enable him to get better ones and branch out from there.

"That Don nearly ran his estate into the ground before I caught up to him." Continued the hitman a touch tiredly, setting the whisky glass down with a thump. "I'm going to be busy hauling it out of the dirt and salvaging what I can, if I don't just sell the place and let someone else bother with trying to salvage anything from it."

"You sell it, and I can easily see other Dons asking you to knock off someone they hate just to sell the home and belongings to them."

"I can too, unfortunately."

If he gained a reputation for murdering the heads of criminal enterprises, he'd get hunted by every other criminal in charge of more than ten to twenty lives until someone managed to kill him.

Not something he'd likely want to deal with.

She wondered if she should ask about the fate of any other contacts the Mafioso had before a crime family's boss started gunning for him, but since that likely would turn this conversation even more sour she abstained.

If she wanted to know she'd look it all up herself, it would take a bit of searching and it was possible she'd never get a clear view of everything… but it was still an option for information she really didn't need to know.

The fact she and baby Mist survived at all was good enough for her.

Speaking of? "When is Shamal's birthday?"

"February. Why?"

Sonya leveled a flat stare at him. "…the…?"

"Ninth." He gave her a suspicious look. "Again, why Sonya?"

"Birthday presents." She informed him, tone suggesting she found him a little slow. "Mmm… I am going to need to find something for Christmas, too… what does he like, anyways?"

CXLII (Tuesday the 13th of December, 1966 continued. Mafia Land.)

"Alright," the thief said a short time later, rubbing her left temple as she spoke, "so that's that. Now then, what the hell was up with the Sword Emperor Tyr waiting with you on the docks?"
Renato didn't really want to get into the deal he struck with the Don of Vongola in return for a bit of indirect help, or what it would eventually cost him, but he did owe Sonya a fair bit.

Had she decided not to help beyond what that one favor had maintained?

Shamal might have been in a little trouble right around now, and the hitman might have only just learned how much of that trouble would be aimed in his direction. Her report of what offer was made to her was really the most he had any right to expect from this association, the fact she genuinely liked the kid was likely the only reason she decided to cover his tracks when he spirited the young Mist off the island.

If she hadn't done that, he would've been in a worse position to bargain with Nono Vongola to deal with the problem. Likely while his ward was in someone else's hands.

Which was rather ridiculous if you thought of it in another way. He owed a Cloud for his Mist ward's safety.

The gallows humor of that thought made him smirk, because if there was anything Sonya represented it was an upset to what was thought of as normal Cloud natured behavior.

"Of the six syndicates that run Mafia Land together, there was one called the Mataraci Group from Turkey. They're enforcers for underground trade routes and generally dealt with security here as well. Since they are originally from the middle of the main drug trade routes, they do know most if not all the ways to smuggle shit like that in just about everything and how to find it."

Sonya blinked at the information, a slight tilt to her head as she listened to him talk. Renato wasn't surprised she hadn't heard of which groups ran things here, that information was kept quiet to keep people or other syndicates from thinking of attacking them outside of Mafia Land for their stakes in the island's operations.

"They, being a security conscious group of complete scum, were the ones interested in finding and training up any Dying Will Flame users they can find for their own purposes."

Her features went suddenly blankly neutral, and when she spoke it rang a couple warning bells in his head.

"They would not happen to have operations in Czechoslovakia, would they?"

"It's... highly likely. They were a powerful group before this, and that's in their general region. Why?"

A twist of distaste made her lips curl in a snarl, and the stainless-steel fork she had been idly toying with in her hands suddenly bent into strange shapes under those slender fingers. "Take a wild guess where my foster brother hails from originally, and how it was he ended up fostered in Moscow with me. Your first two guesses do not count."

Renato blinked at that tidbit of information and scowled as he connected the dots to other bits of information she had given over years ago. Like how she knew some people were looking specifically for Flame users before the age of twelve.

Discarding the now ruined eating utensil with a sigh, the thief finally allowed her posture to slump as she leaned back against her chair's back. "Is there any way you can think where I can substantiate that theory without stepping on anyone's toes?"

"I'll check for you."
It was really the least he could do, and it would assuage some of his personal feelings of cowardice at ditching her on her own to draw attention from people she likely couldn't have fought off him and Shamal. Not alone, anyways.

Cloud she may be, but she was only one person.

"So, the point was to get Flame users young enough and raise them up loyal to whatever. In an attempt to get said Flame users to pull security… likely against other Flame users. Okay, not really a bad plan. Why the hell did they want to go about it in…?" Sonya looked to be searching for a specific word, but eventually shrugged it off. "How did this not trip whatever off as human trafficking? I am pretty sure that is still not allowed here."

"They pulled security, it was nearly child's play for them to ignore their own people abducting young Flame users." Renato reminded her grimly. "Thankfully, they're not in charge of that anymore."

"Are we getting to the point where you tell me what the ever loving hell the Head of the Varia Assassination Squads was doing here?"

The hitman nearly choked on his own spit, sheer surprise that she knew that tidbit making him sit up ramrod straight. It really shouldn't have, given how much other information she tended to know, but it had still shocked him somewhat. "How do you even know that?"

He had thought she avoided Italian affairs, how the fuck did she catch that tidbit?

"I hear things, and I know a lot of random stuff." Sonya informed him blandly, arms crossing over her chest. "So?"

Obviously, she was lying about something, but her posture said she wasn't going to say anything else about what she did or did not know.

"Nono of Vongola contacted the Vindice and got countermeasures against the Mataraci Group condoned by them due to violating the pact the island is held to, mostly to remove them as one of the six syndicates in charge and take their spot." He bluntly informed her, feeling a little vindictive and gratified when she shivered at the mention of the mafia world's enforcers. "The Varia were handed the orders for the clean-up. However, even if I was the one to bring up the breach to someone able to deal with it, I also needed Shamal's safety guaranteed for the duration of this… mop-up. Since I was expected to help guide them to where they needed to go."

She considered that, frowning thoughtfully at her empty wine glass. "Are they at least going to ensure his safe childhood in return for whatever they have over you now?"

"Until he's around ten, but yes. He'll even get instruction for Mist Flames while he's with them. Why?"

"This situation is not that bad, then. You were always going to get tied down somewhere because of Shamal, at least this way there's safety in greater numbers." Sonya suddenly tossed a more forceful scowl at him. "Make sure they do not teach him stupid shit, like Mists must be long-range fighters with no physical strength."

"Stupid?" Renato echoed slowly.

"That pure bull of 'Mists and Clouds hate each other'? There is a tendency for dislike. Hard Clouds do not appreciate frivolous pet-peeves or silly behavioral habits, and most Mists tend to pick those up to deal with or bolster their very active imaginations. Hence it is more likely a Cloud and Mist will not cohabitate well… however, that's not immediately a reason either would pick a fight with another
or something equally as stupid."

The hitman gave his dinner partner a very long look. "Are you going to tell me how you got the information for your books now?"

"It is not earth-shattering." She admitted to him slowly, obviously a bit jarred by the subject change. "I merely got hold of every book I could, rewrote all the actual information into another, and investigated the truth of those claims with my own nature and several others. It is a still on-going project. New information keeps on shifting what I thought was or was not true on me."

"Like moonstones working for me?"

"Do not talk to me about that."

CXLIII (Friday the 30th of December, 1966. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Rumors floating around that the Vongola's Consulenza Esterna Della Famiglia, the CEDEF advisory branch, would be taking over security for Mafia Land due to 'internal problems' earned Renato a kick in the shin the next time Sonya saw him.

The ass could've warned her that was happening when they had dinner earlier in the week to hash out what were the details behind each other's recent actions.

In fact, she kicked him twice because Tyr hadn't exactly left the island yet and the man kept inspecting her like a scientist with a specimen every time he saw her.

The hitman hadn't had anything to defend himself with, he instead huffed at her like an offended cat and stalked off with a slight hitch in his step. Apparently, he found the fact the Head of the Varia's interest in her as disturbing as she did.

Sonya grabbed her last, for the year, less interesting than ever contract from her Hall and vacated the island for two weeks. Returning just long enough to shove a present for Shamal onto Renato and remind him that visiting the kid was something he needed to do, then left for the Christmas meet-up back in Moscow.

She spent a day being the only 'kid' in the house, picking Lisa's brain about better methods to disguise herself, then left the day after to drag Cherep back with her.

The thief then abandoned her best friend/brother to his own devices, because by then Tatiana had shown up and the Inverted Cloud merely rolled his eyes at her behavior. Instead she dragged her foster sister off to test her compatibility with moonstones.

"Why is it such a major matter?" The Classical Sun user questioned when the bluish-white stone flickered yellow fire with a weak response for her. "Your own spinel gems are the worst offenders for not always being purple."

"But there are purple variations of spinel." Sonya rebutted tiredly. "There aren't any yellow moonstones, the closest this stone type comes is pink, a pinkish-orange, or brown."

The safecracker blinked at that news, looking at the gemstone between her fingers. "Oh. Well... does this Inverted Sun user you know have a better match that is occasionally found in yellow
"I don't know yet. We only just found his Mist kid's stone and he picked one of those up." The younger thief nodded to the stone the older one was still holding. "I suppose... that I should give him the entire range to pick from and see if there's a better jewel for him."

"A male Sun user, huh? With a kid, though. Hmm." Handing back the loose 'Sun' stone so it could be put away with the rest of the color-coded kits, the redhead crossed her arms under her considerable bust and regarded her younger sister thoughtfully. "Do I get to meet this Sun user you know?"

"If you want...?" Sonya answered uncertainly, not too sure why the older thief wanted to meet her hitman contact. "He lives on Mafia Land, so..."

"I've been there a couple times in the last two years. Apparently not when you've been there, though."

"I've taken the spring-fall stretch off, following Cherep's little circus dream. I'm pulling out after next year, I don't think I can keep taking this kind of time off."

A fine red eyebrow rose, and Tatiana shrugged slightly. "I'm surprised you managed that even for a year, actually. How in the world are you affording that?"

"I've been saving up ever since Cherep suggested it... but I've been thinking of pulling another heist before returning to the circus for some extra cash." She admitted to her with a sigh. "Likely another jewel heist, since I don't think I can explain why I'd need the Sun gems to Arseniy to his satisfaction."

A twitch of her lips answered the Storm-Cloud. "I thought you said..."

"Shut up, Tatiana."

No, she didn't particularly want to do another jewelry store... but she had the experience in it and the reputation for selling high-end jewelry. As something to earn petty cash for more than just herself to cover a year, it was the best option she had.

Especially considering the extra expenses she had to somehow afford.

"I have one more thing to do, so go on without me."

"Oh?"

Sonya jerked a thumb behind her, and Tatiana peered over her shoulder.

Björn had returned from the errand Arseniy had tasked him with to late last night, making this the first time the younger thief had seen her tagalong since dropping him off nearly two months ago.

The young Finnish teen was also standing right behind her.

"Ah, off I go then." Obviously, the redhead wanted to ask but was apparently going to leave the questioning for later.

Turning around to face Björn herself, she cocked her head at the kid. "So? Will I understand you now?"

"Yes, miss." His accent was still thick, but he followed the words up with a slow nod to be sure he was understood. "Herra Arseniy says to say 'not well', but... ah, good for soon."
She frowned slightly at the teenager, more out of puzzlement than any true negativity. While 'herra' was a word for 'master' in Finnish, now that she was listening closely to how he pronounced it… the thief no longer thought he was. "You're not Finnish, are you?"

"Nei, Icelander."

…Björn was from Iceland? Why in the hell had she found him in Finland?

"I take it there is a story behind this?"

Sonya got a very slow, slightly grim nod in answer.

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CXLIV (Sunday the 8th of January, 1967. Mafia Land.)

Björn's story wasn't exactly unique for the world Sonya had found herself living in.

He had been born in the fishing town Höfn, in the south-eastern part of Iceland. His father had been a fisherman and his mother a washerwoman for whoever would pay. His father got afoul of the local mafia presence, and ended up dead before long due to a sketchy debt he was supposedly in. Then the mafia members twisted Björn's arm into becoming a runner for them in his dead father's place, to pay off said sketchy debt Sonya doubted existed.

Unfortunately, his mother didn't last much longer after that. Either grief or the lack of income from her husband had stressed her a bit too much. She had built up a fair bit of money before her death, working herself to the bone even though her health had started to fail, which he used as well as the proceeds from their home being sold to escape the mafia men that had dragged him into their world.

Even escaping to the mainland hadn't really improved his situation much, despite showing him how to cross borders illegally.

In order to keep himself fed and so no one thought to deport him back to Iceland and to the mafia group that conned him into running things for them, Björn had offered his services to different criminal groups as he wandered around to find someplace that might semi-legally employ a kid as young as him.

He hadn't found one by the time someone got the bright idea to ambush the message running kid for whatever information he had from such-and-such group.

Which was when Sonya accidentally rescued his skinny ass, and then set his broken arm and left him her coat for his own use. Fighting back and winning then not calling the police after that one-sided fight showed she knew the mafia lifestyle, the unwritten rules, and that she wasn't nearly as powerless as him… but also that she wasn't nearly as mean as the people he had been working for before that.

A bit of a loner, but that would just mean he would have no competition to truly worry about if he managed snagging her attention.

Björn knew a fair bit of the mafia practices and customs even though he was pretty much kept on the outside of most of it. He'd watched a fair bit of the internal politics happen as an outsider and grabbed his chance to have a better lot in life through her.
Which… fair enough. She likely would've done the same thing had she been in his place.

Although, understanding what point he had didn't mean she was happy about getting a little minion of her own… or that she had to come up with some way to pay for him to get through the next year before she went back to being a Mafiya thief full-time and could afford a damn extra dogging at her heels.

Sonya had to use all the experience working heists for Mafia Land to pull off two jewel heists in the USSR, one she nearly flubbed due to a new-model safe she hadn't known how to crack and the other she nearly got caught doing when the silent alarm tripped on her and she got surprised halfway through.

She resolved the first one with the safe by prying the door hinges off and literally breaking the bolts that held the safe's door shut closed with sheer brute strength and her trick weaponry to suggest power tools. The second incident took more… creativity to work around, especially since she was halfway through robbing the store when the local militsiya showed up.

Finishing her heist while the police were checking the store's security out wasn't possible, so she snagged what was nearby and escaped abusing circus-level gymnastics with only half of what she had gone to get. She did at least manage the higher paying items first, which was something at least.

The bulk of newly stolen jewelry Lisa was going to sell for her directly through the fences and then pay off her dues for the year, as the clan had already gotten their tax of the proceeds from the solid metals and what petty cash she had managed. Whatever was left afterwards would be waiting for her when she returned to join back up with the Großes Volksfest.

That took her to the week after Christmas, for the USSR anyways. For the rest of the world, it was the week after New Year's Day.

Freshly sixteen and not too long after the start of 1967, Sonya pressed a couple smuggled Chinese newspapers on Cherep to take back to the circus and Master Liam, gave Tatiana and Lisa a hug, a nod to Arseniy, and dragged her little Iceland teen back with her to Mafia Land with about half of the jewels she had yet to sell.

Most of those were yellow gemstones, and a couple sets of jewelry too specifically detailed to be sold in the same country they were stolen from.

Bjørn got kicked into the Mafia Land hospital for a probably badly needed physical, the Storm-Cloud spent four hours waiting for him to be finished while sorting through the yellow gems she'd be giving to Renato to test for a fit.

She needed a check-up herself, but since the pre-teen had not seen a doctor for about three or four years he was getting his done first. When the kid was done getting poked and prodded, she then got to listen to what health problems Bjørn had and how to fix some of them.

The vaccinations weren't too bad, expensive but not unexpected, and she knew he had a bit of damage likely from getting kicked around by his previous mafia affiliations.

She did not expect a Sun Flame using nurse offering to fix some of that old damage. For a price, of course, but that was something she would deal with. Plans of asking Tatiana to try a bit of that herself when they got back to Moscow or not.

However, when did Mafia Land get a Dying Will Flame using nurse?
"Vongola." Renato informed her when she made mention of the Sun in the hospital, poking through the selection of yellow, tan, and gold colored gemstones she had offered for him to test. Each in their own little velvet bag, with a written paper tag naming a number to a stone. "They're putting people everywhere they might help security. Mainly."

It would be easy to get around that little trick, just by getting the gems appraised, but then she'd have no real reason to help him more with the rocks.

Yeah, and Sonya would bet the CEDEF’s other duties was to keep up what the last criminal syndicate in charge of security for Mafia Land had done in looking for more Flame users. Possibly more humanely than the last group, and maybe they could take no for an answer, but she doubted it was anything more than a small upgrade in respectability.

"You know, I've been getting a couple questions on Shamal's… not typical behavior." The hitman started casually, tucking the packet of carefully labeled gems away into his pockets. "And that shiny blue rock he's not particularly inclined to give up."

Sniffing as she pulled a lit cigarette from her lips, a smirk crawled across her face even if she tried for disinterest. "Oh, really?"

"He is entirely too willing to tell anyone that he knows a Cloud and that she's really nice to him, whenever the bullshit you made mention of last year is repeated to him."

"...you know, that's entirely typical for a Mist." She informed him faux casually, leveling a bland smile at her drinking partner across 'their' café table. "They're very… opinionated. And seem to love informing others of their opinions."

"Well… aside Shamal being a bit of a loudmouth," Renato continued in a deadpan, "that bit of turquoise he's got has attracted a fair bit of attention. Especially since it sparks indigo fire with his temper."

"Even matched jewels shatter or splinter if used too much." Sonya warned him, a small bit more seriously. "I pop my own rather frequently when I actually make use of one."

"The point, little lady Sonya, is that some people connected a Cloud Flame user that tetchy Mist user knows and the rock he refuses to be separated from."

Which would explain why Tyr had been watching her after already dismissing her as inconsequential, and what he had been looking for. She considered that information and the ember cherry on the end of her cancer stick, as well as what it may eventually mean for her.

"So?"

She sniffed in his direction, still a little distracted. "So, what?"

He gave her his most disgruntled look, which really wasn't a patch on how well Cherep could pull that look off. "So, can I tell anyone where he got his shiny rock from?"

"You, and Shamal, were one thing." Sonya started off slowly, seriously thinking through the consequences of such a thing and the likely few benefits. "I do not mind assisting you, nor did I mind helping you with a kid you are guardian to. It was to repay a favor, so digging into my own personal
things to help was not an issue. Anyone else? I do not care for, have no reason to aid. First and foremost, I am a thief, not a scientist or researcher."

"You're claiming that after the work you put into those books of yours?"

She clicked her tongue at him, mildly irritated with the subject matter. "I do that for my own benefit. As my foster brother maintains, I am more like the mafia's version of a librarian. I read a book, I question said book, then I find answers among other books. I may occasionally condense that into yet another book, for ease of access or to strip said information of biased slants."

The Mafioso frowned at her slightly, which confused her slightly until he spoke his next question. "You have more books on Dying Will Flames?"

"I have a lot given what is available around here, actually. Most of which is rather useless."

"Then… you also have better books on the subject."

"Of course. But Shamal is a Mist, he needs a base of solid and correct information with little mental restraints to become a very good one. Pigeonholing him in one of a bare handful of ways some other Mist became a great one will do him no favors."

Renato made a face, half-disgusted and mostly thoughtful, as he mused on her reasoning. "…can I see one of your not-so-stripped books?"

Sonya pinned him with a level stare across their little table. "Will you keep my name out of whatever comes up from your little ward's actions?"

"You realize they likely already have your name, right?" The hitman pointed out with a fair bit of exasperation. "Shamal isn't exactly the discrete sort just yet."

"A three-year-old is not a reliable source of information."

"…point. And, if the brat was here," he continued in a markedly more amused tone of voice, "he would insist he is almost four."

"Another month needs to pass before I will call him four years of age." Dismissed the thief with a snort, then thought through the proposal that wasn't really a proposal as she busied herself with another lung-full of smoke.

Renato was being very chary with that last favor she owed him, trying to press for more information without directly coming out and demanding it in trade for that last debt. The curiosity must be eating him alive for him to be so direct about it.

"I… will… trade you access to my research journal in exchange for your help with it." The Russian eventually offered.

With Tatiana and now him, that would be both halves of the Sun Flame Polarization. Like how well the Cloud Flames were already sorted with, now both she and Cherep could contribute information to it.

With a little luck, Polarization would not turn out to be more of a sliding scale of outward/inward intensity rather than a one side of a coin or the other type of thing.

Which… yeah, she didn't really believe that anymore. Not with how hard it was to pin down Polarization of whatever Flame type was being.
She also had the suspicion the Hard/Soft and Classic/Inverted titles for the extremes of Polarization got a bit mixed up or had been mislabeled in the first place.

"Deal."

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CLXVI (Saturday the 14th of January, 1967. Mafia Land.)

Sonya ended up looking for her next three contracts for Mafia Land rather carefully.

Given her near-misses in the USSR, it had become apparent she had lost some serious skill to disuse while in the circus. No matter what acrobatic practice she could put in or small tricks to keep her fingers nimble she tried to cram into each day.

Combing through the Thieves' Hall and the available contracts, she selected a set of three in hopefully increasing difficulty. Mostly so she could measure that decrease in skill. The selection process kept her on the island for five days alone, during which she sent Björn on random errands for her.

Mostly to fetch things to eat but once to her storage unit for her copy of the Dying Will research journal she had compiled for herself and a few other Flame users in the Zolotov Clan, and once back to Moscow with written letters to both Tatiana and Lisa.

While the older redhead thief still hadn't had the time to check if her Flames would heal old internal damage, there was a Sun Flame using nurse on the island who could probably answer that question rather well.

It was going to be up to them who asks, and what they did with that information.

A certain hitman who was after her rather unique information gave the Icelander teen a hard look over, but mostly dismissed him from his attention. Renato was a little put out she wasn't going to let him walk off with her master research journal, and even rolled his eyes when she gifted him with a flat stare in return for that complaint.

Sonya wasn't entirely surprised when Tatiana showed up with Lisa, the day before she would've left to hit two marks in a row and come back for a third contract instead of try arranging everything at once. She had included her possible travel plans in her letters.

The thief was surprised to immediately get smothered in a brief hug by their foster mother, though. Who knew well enough her issues with others in her personal space, so the older brunette kept it brief. "Thank you!"

"Hello to you too, Lisa."

Tatiana made a show of looking around pointedly, then cocked her head at her little foster sister. "So? Where is this Sun guy you were talking about?"

Lisa's eyebrows flew upward, and she gave the youngest of her foster children a hard look as she drew back to arm's length. "Yes, Sonya. Where is this... young man?"

The Storm-Cloud sighed heavily at them both. "Renato's off on a hit this week. I think he said he'd be back... in two weeks? Somewhere around there."
"This guy have a surname?" The only capable Sun user between them asked archly, then frowned a bit as something else occurred to her. "Did he find another gemstone?"

She let her expression smooth out, but the safecracker wasn't above poking her for the hell of it. She wasn't above pulling her older sister's fiery braid either. "Sinclair, and he picked yellow jade of all rocks but likes the moonstones better. Now stop it."

"Girls." As it hadn't been that long since either of them had left home, the redhead stopped poking the younger woman as the oldest one spoke. "We have a hospital to visit, do we not?"

Lisa looked impatient by this point, so after a glance to each other they both nodded.

"Where's Bjørn?" Sonya asked Tatiana quietly as they followed their foster mother.

"Knocked out on one of the beds in our hotel room. I don't think he slept at all on the trip out from here to Moscow or back."

She sighed again, this time pinching the bridge of her nose. "Remind me to tell him about that wonderful thing called moderation."

The redhead snickered, but the blonde didn't really think it was that funny.

Sonya could see the bear named Icelander as several different Flame types by now, a mix of a couple if she squinted.

Inverted Lightning, a similarly polarized if not as extreme Rain, Classic Storm, or any variation within those types for his mule-headed stubbornness alone. He was all sorts of focused when directed through, which put more emphasis on his possible Lightning or Storm. Then there was the inability to be bothered with what she had him doing, which was mainly busy work for now, that spoke of a Rain or Lightning attribute.

Bjørn could even be all three like her, which she really wouldn't wish on anyone.

She was mainly and foremost a Cloud, her innate ability with Flames was drawn from her Cloud nature, and while she could use some of her Storm Flames… she could not get more than sparks for her Sun attribute on rare occasions. That inability irritated her, and so she didn't tend to try for her Sun Flames much.

There was even the possibility Bjørn was a Cloud, but she doubted it. Clouds in his situation would've likely either gotten themselves killed off early by not bowing his neck… or finding something far removed from mafia work to do after he got free.

"Sonya? Did this Sinclair guy write anything in your journal for the Sun Flame section?"

"What he had already, yes." The younger thief informed her, giving the Sun user a sideways look. "I take it you want that information?"

Tatiana fluttered her lashes back. "If you would be so kind."

CXLVII (Saturday the 14th of January, 1967 continued. Saint Julian’s Hospital, Mafia Land.)

The short of it was yes. With a bit of help and a dab of Sun Flames, which Tatiana was obviously
itching to ask about, Lisa might be able to have a biological child of her own.

Problem was, the older Mafiya woman was thirty-six-years-old already. According to the Italian-born nurse, named Celia by her name-tag, now was the latest she had to start any Sun Flame based therapy. To correct some of her internal damage to be able to conceive, before it would become more than just a little risky by nature to try.

Lisa… hadn't exactly informed Arseniy of what this trip to Mafia Land was for.

"Don't tell him." Tatiana begged in their native Russian, on her knees with hands clasped and held up in a begging pose that had the nurse smiling into her hands. "It'll be the only opportunity we have to see him faint."

"And the rebuttal from the good child?" Asked their foster mother calmly, looking over to the blonde thief on her other side.

"Why am I the good child? Isn't that the only brother we have so far?" Sonya wondered out loud first, wincing when the older woman swatted her thigh. "Fine, tell him."

That didn't exactly earn her the older woman's forgiveness, by the look on her face.

"Tell him it's possible, but don't inform him exactly when it's likely to happen." She amended hastily, because Lisa could slap and make it hurt even on a highly active Sun user's skin. "I kind of want to see Arseniy fall on his ass when he hears too. Can we plan this to happen over Christmas break?"

"YES!" The redhead safecracker surged up to her feet happily, grinning a fit to crack her face. "Come on, Lisa! I'll even leave my gang and become a nurse to help you do this!"

She gave a painfully faked exasperated sigh, placing her face in her hands so either girl she had raised wouldn't catch the smirk forming on her own lips. The older woman had taught both too well though, and they did catch it.

Sonya sniffed at her bad acting, turning back to the nurse and switching to her rusty Italian… even if she highly suspected Celia could at least understand Russian perfectly well. "You wouldn't happen to have a phone line to the mainland we could utilize, would you?"

"Yes, miss. A room off the lobby is available for calls, but they do cost…"

"Don't worry about that, just add it to the bill." Thankfully Tatiana was going to split the cost with her, so Lisa wouldn't have to worry about it.

The older woman rose to her full height, giving the younger of her foster daughters a look that reminded her that one of the languages she knew was Italian, and gracefully walked off to place a rather long long-distance call.

"Tatiana?" Asked the younger thief when the nurse moved off to make a few notes in whatever file she had in hand, switching back to Russian because appearances had to be kept no matter what suspicions she had. "Are you really going to leave your gang?"

"I just might. It's fun and all, but I actually like having a permanent roof over my head. Nikolai is better than me at leading the group in tight spots and I tend not to go on very many heists anymore, because it is a lot easier to steal a safe and haul it elsewhere than it is to crack a safe on-site while you might get caught. Nowadays I'm mostly just the one that knows the most about how to handle medical emergencies who can crack a safe on occasion." The Sun user shrugged diffidently, not looking too concerned by the fact she was getting edged out of her old spot of ringleader a little.
"And you're okay with that?"

She laughed easily enough, grinning over at the slighter blonde. "I'm perfectly fine with it. I got interested in medicine on those quiet days when my boys were out, especially since my Sun Flames enable the shit out of healing others as well as myself. I'm honestly interested in becoming a nurse, for the clan or here if I can swing it. Even maybe a doctor, because this? Is pretty damn awesome, not just for Lisa's sake."

"We would love to have you, if you want." Celia interrupted earnestly, clipboard pressed to her chest. Then she seemed to realize they had been speaking Russian to each other, not the Italian she had been pretending was her only language, and blushed heavily. "I mean, um…"

"What would I need to do?" Tatiana interrupted, before the poor girl stuck her foot in her mouth about anything she shouldn't have been saying. "I really only know a little beyond first-aid and how to use Sun Flames on flesh wounds and the odd broken bone."

"Well..." Started the nurse slowly, recovering her mental balance when they didn't press her for her slip, "you will need an internship, for here anyways. Since university level education is rather... hard to get, for mafia people anyways, they do supply the classes to make up that difference as long as you can afford it."

"Otherwise I think you'd have to apprentice yourself to one of the shady docs the clan has a sway over." Sonya offered, thinking of all the shady doctor types she had ever heard of back home.

Too bad Shamal was a little too young to practice medicine... on the other hand, with how perverted he was supposed to grow up to be?

Maybe that was a good thing.

The expression that crossed the Russian Sun user's face said she hadn't heard much good about those types either. She thought it over, ignoring the fact the Italian girl looked to be on pins and needles, and finally shrugged. "I can't just abandon my boys out of the blue, so... it'll have to wait a few months at least."

"I'll get you the forms." Celia gushed happily, clicking away out the waiting room's door and down the hall on her impractical looking high-heels with respectable speed.

Sonya and Tatiana watched her go, then turned to each other.

"Do you think you could walk around all day in heels like those?"

The redhead pursed her lips. "Not me, no. I wonder if she uses her Sun Flames to avoid blisters or sore ankles after a few hours."

"Maybe she's just used to that kind of abuse?" The blonde Storm-Cloud suggested weakly, looking down at her scuffed and weathered but still sturdy knee-high boots.

Tatiana snorted inelegantly, kicking out her own slightly dressy but practically booted feet so she was more comfortable while they waited for the others to come back. "Hard core little nurse, then."

CLXVIII (Wednesday the 15th of February, 1967. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)
Sonya left Bjørn under Lisa's eye, because if anyone could hammer home the idea of admitting when enough was enough it was her foster mother.

Her first heist for Mafia Land of the year was a civilian target, which required more of her gymnastic skills than anything else. Afterwards, a couple rare and mostly whole tablets of ancient Egyptian origin in hand, she decided that skillset was at least up to par.

Even if she was heavily abusing Cloud Flame derived strength to handle it.

The second was a few paper files in a military base of the Albanian Kingdom which, after fruitlessly trying to recall why that country sounded a little odd to her, ended up being not too difficult either. A bit more lock picking, a safe crack that didn't stump her, and a whole lot of sneaking around obstructions like people standing in the middle of the hallway talking or guard patrols.

A little frustrated by the inability to understand where she had messed up in the USSR heists, Sonya returned to Mafia Land to drop off her two completed contracts and pick up the last one and her minion.

Lisa lightly smacked her upside the head when she heard the issue. "You are known for doing jewel heists, which would also mean that those back in the Moscow Oblast and some distance outside of it are aware there is a very successful jewel thief running around. Why are you surprised they increased security in response? Especially after that Cartier job you did with Tatiana, that break-in was all over the news for weeks."

Sonya rubbed the back of her head, smoothing down her hair and edging away from Arseniy before he could offer another slap. "I've not actually... had to deal with that before."

The older woman gave a dismissive shrug, sinking back in the rather plush couch in the Zolotov owned condo on Mafia Land. "That's probably the best part of this place, the opportunity to spread out your work so the locals where you steal don't wise up so fast. That being said, you may have over-worked the jewel trade back home. A decade or two, and it may not be a problem anymore... as long as no one else decides to steal gems."

In all actuality, said jewel thief would greatly appreciate never doing jewelry again... but she had claimed that once before. Honestly, since jewels were what she cut her teeth on in this criminal trade, it was likely always going to be her first choice for a fallback plan if she needed cash quick.

"Or you could steal in other countries and avoid the damn problem entirely, girl." The vor chipped in dryly, looking perfectly menacing even with Lisa snuggling up to his side.

He probably was only putting the effort up because Bjørn was obviously eavesdropping down the hall.

Sonya needed to teach him to sneak better... or she could not. Really, what she needed was to decide what to do with the damn brat for most of next year.

She had nothing for him to do, herself. Arseniy and Lisa had already dealt with him for a decent amount of time already and would keep on doing it for half a month at most. That left...

She wondered where Tatiana went to, or if she should put in a visit to Dimitry.

"Tatiana is immigrating here in a few months, apparently." Lisa continued in a different vein, smiling wryly at the youngest of her brood... so far, at least. "She's rather set on helping with this... ah, therapy."
"Can she do that?" Questioned the Storm-Cloud dubiously, slinking over to sit on her foster mother's free side. The one not occupied by nearly two hundred pounds of heavily muscled and tattooed vor.

"Our Pakhan is not getting any younger." She informed her seriously, looking thoughtful. "I guess the idea of a Sun Flame nurse, or doctor if Tatiana likes the job that much, within the clan is appealing to him. The clan's also paying for this little procedure of mine, with an eye to offer it to others if they prove dedicated enough to our syndicate."

"I thought he wasn't entirely sold on the reliability of Flame users?"

"You haven't been back in a year, sweetie. Things change." Gifting her youngest foster child with a sweet, sly smile, her mother elegantly shrugged. "Your efforts have made us the place for any Flame user to go, some syndicates even opting to forge alliances with our clan specifically for the information you've supplied to help their own people. Young Usov was really just the tip of that, and since it is your childhood efforts that are proving so valuable?"

Sonya blinked blankly at her foster mother, then had a dawning sensation of horror overtake everything else in her mind.

She had political heft in the clan?

What the hell was she going to do with that?

Arseniy snickered wickedly, then broke out laughing wildly at her expression when Lisa attempted to hit him in the stomach for it.

CXLIX (Saturday the 18th of February, 1967. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Leaving Mafia Land for the year wasn't that hard. While she may have only done two contracts, she had the other end of the year to make that up.

Tatiana wouldn't bother Renato as it was, without Sonya neither really had reason to bother with the other. Without the blonde thief to handle introductions, her foster sister wouldn't do more than gather rumor on her own end.

The hitman might get interested enough to seek out Sonya's sister, but the redhead likely wouldn't do anything to harm her little sister's association with a contact.

Dmitriy, the heavily tanned Rain she had left to her clan's Pakhan and his use if need be, regarded her evenly across his desk.

Which… needed emphasis. Her childhood mechanic friend had a desk. In an office. Within Zolotov's headquarters.

He also didn't particularly seem happy behind a desk in an office, either. "Do you realize what kind of mess you left me to handle?"

Sonya paused in the middle of adding a few sections to his copy of her research journal, mostly on Inverted Suns and general additions to both Mist and Storm. "I have some idea, yes. Although, to be perfectly frank, I had not expected this upsurge in Flame users to impact the clan so heavily. No so quickly, anyways."
The Rain, who didn't particularly look much happier at that admission, glowered at her. "So, you did have an idea."

"Dying Will Flame users seemed completely exotic things when I started." She reminded him calmly, only a little wary over his temper. Inverted Rain meant he wasn't as calm and easygoing as Classic, and that his temper could turn into a monsoon if she wasn't careful about this. "Even when you started. Then Tatiana joined us, Usov, my sister's little Lightning assistant, and then I started running into other users outside of the Soviet Union. Yes, I knew this would become something that would need some kind of help to manage and that's part of why I nudged you into this spot."

Dmitriy's expression didn't change. Sonya leveled a flat glare back at him.

"You are also the only male in our little grouping, of age to actually be listened to. You are also a Rain, Inverted though you may be, and you are also the most level-headed of us all. For now, you are the best to handle and manage the clan's interest in Dying Will Flames."

Rubbing a broad hand across his face, the only slightly older man gave a resigned sigh at her reasoning. "You... sometimes, are a trial Sonya."

"Admit it, you'd be bored without me."

Her swarthy skinned childhood friend shot her a look, which informed her that her words weren't really appreciated.

"You could have complained at any time before our Pakhan decided one of us had to be on hand at all times. I would not have liked it, but I would have pitched in here instead of go mostly free-lance outside the Iron Curtain."

"I really should have. Unfortunately, I hadn't expected an upsurge in Flame users either." Dmitriy admitted sourly, leaning back in his rather plush office chair. "That being said however... there are a lot of random people I'm pulling information from."

"I've noticed." Sonya informed him a touch dryly, as there were bits of information he had added to the journal that she hadn't yet had the time to investigate. "How many of what?"

"Two more Mists, both of whom are younger than Usov. We still can't figure out which one is more Classic or Inverted among them."

"You can add another boy Mist to that, three-excuse me-four years of age. And an Inverted Sun and Cloud on my end."

The Rain's mouth twisted with some unknown emotion, and the man sighed. "There's also two new Lightnings, too new to decide more than both are Classic according to your work. A Storm, we can't figure his Polarization out either. Somehow there's four Rains, all Classical."

"When it Rains it pours?" She coughed quickly and smoothed out her expression, and his mouth twitched into what was almost an unwilling smirk.

"Another Sun, Classic, in the same neighborhood we just left. No Clouds though, at least none who've come forward or gotten his syndicate to contact our clan for help." He gave her a sideways look, one part calculating and three parts suspicious. "I wouldn't happen to actually know this Inverted Cloud of yours, would I?"

Sonya gifted him with a mostly bland smile, mostly except for a very sharp edge of too many teeth. "Possibly. No Skies yet either?"
"That..." Dmitriy trailed off, looking contemplative. "I think there is. An older one, actually."

"An older Sky... in Moscow?" Repeating it didn't really make the fact sink home very well, and she did wonder how he came to that conclusion. "Actively a Sky...?"

"No, I highly doubt it. We can't actually do anything with the information anyways, either." The Rain sighed heavily, giving the Storm-Cloud across his desk a contemplative look. "He's over thirty, and a public figure as it is."

"Why does age matter?" Sonya questioned slowly, wondering if that was in any of the books she had gotten or not.

"It seems one is more likely to show Flames during childhood or around puberty, and if they admit they can set themselves on multi-colored neon fire then...?" Dmitriy shrugged that off. "Either way, he's too often in the public eye for him to go missing for a stretch of time without suspicion or for him to suddenly gain Guardians without a lot of questions being asked."

She frowned slightly, but the Rain behind a desk had a point. As much as she'd like to go poke him into her apparently wider than she thought pool of Flame users to draw information from, doing that was way too risky for a Sky unable to actively use his Flames.

Children, on the other hand...

"He have any kids?"

"Two, so far. Very young ones."

She stuck her tongue out at his completely flat expression. "No, I'm not suggesting we go kidnap the poor brats. But... we might want to watch them. Not just for Sky Flames, if they have them. There's just been a big bust of some kind of Flame hunting group in Mafia Land... and if such things went on there...?"

Dmitriy's non-expression twisted into a understanding but disgusted snarl. "I'll arrange something for their protection."

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**CL (Monday the 27th of February, 1967. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)**

"You finished arranging everything to your little black heart's content?"

"Oh, shut up." Sonya hip-checked Cherep, who didn't even have the grace to stumble down the stairs under her non-Cloud Flame boosted strength. "Yes, everything that I needed to do is now out of the way."

"Good. Ah... where's Bjørn?"

"With Dmitriy. Until we get back, he's going to be his office gopher."

"I thought you said-"

"I did not want to formally link him and the Zolotovs, but Dmitriy convinced me otherwise. Claiming it would be cruel to leave Bjørn on the outside of that for another year, when it really is
"What he wants."

"Poor kid." The purple haired mechanic spoke, face tilted to the ceiling. "Poor Dmitriy, actually. Did you see…?"

"Where he ended up? Yes." The thief admitted, pulling her last cigarette out of the now empty pack. "Better him than me."

"It's kind of odd, now. Dmitriy's got a desk-job, Tatiana's becoming a nurse. Or a doctor. Depending." Running a hand through his short hair, Cherep turned to her with a bewildered expression. "You've stolen things recently, but you're also about to go another ten months without doing it again. It's almost like you're all respectable…"

"Except that Dmitriy's job includes training certain gifted people to be particularly inclined to shady criminal jobs using said gift, Tatiana is training to put shady criminals back together when they try to kill one another, and I'm…" Sonya paused, thought about it, then shrugged. "Gaining traveling experience in a safe environment in order to know how to enter and exit other countries better, as well as learning some cultural norms this next year and how to navigate them."

"Sonya…"

"Yes?"

"Stop ruining my childhood dreams."

"No. Your despair is amusing to me." His fellow Cloud user stuck her cigarette between her lips and lit it with careful application of Storm Flames. After a moment, and once she had less smoke tainted air to breath, she looked at her foster brother queerly. "Is that really your childhood dream?"

"It was, once." The mechanic admitted cheerfully, without an ounce of shame. "Of course, that was back when I was an idealistic little kid. Who thought that good equaled right and anything shady was inherently wrong. There was this daydream of somehow convincing you to abandon your life of crime and we'd go… do more legal things for our lives."

"Well… if it helps any," she started slowly, "we are respectable. Dmitriy's in charge of a very in-demand service for the clan, Tatiana's going to become the go-to healer for most of our own that end up in Mafia Land eventually, and I'm… uh, highly respected for some contributions I have helped midwife… apparently."

"Yeah… no, not helping." Stopping next to the front door, of the house they grew up in which seemed achingly empty without Arseniy and Lisa in residence, he turned and gave her a wry smirk. "Anything else?"

"I think I can make a case for another subject, yes. What… legal things did you have us do in these daydreams of yours?"

With a snort, Cherep buried his face in his hands. "No, don't ask about that."

"I am going to guess we went to rescue some princess." Sonya started in a deadpan, waving the hand holding her lit cigarette around for emphasis. "Which, really? Stereotypical. Why not a prince? A handsome, if useless, prince? Of course, I do not think anyone would really want a useless prince… so there is that… is that not technically the kidnapping of already kidnapped royal person…?"

"Sonya…"
"Then we likely fought dragons… before or after the rescuing slash kidnapping of gender ambiguous royalty? Why not a dragon prince? Just to make it all the more life-threatening. Because nothing says you are screwed like the, for some reason that escapes me, legal murder the last or next heir of some ancient and possibly reptilian royal family just because for some reason he, and or she, is evil by some… incredibly vague reasoning that may or may not exist."

Her brother snorted, clapping a hand over his mouth and trying not to let the full-blown smile surface.

"Or did we fight crime in this fantasy world of yours?" She carried on ruthlessly, tapping her lips with the filter of her lit cigarette. "I suppose there is a case of criminals helping police officers catch their old, equally shady, back-stabbing friends. Because apparently nothing says friendship like backstabbing at the last possible moment it could be remotely useful as an option. Even if it is not a very good option."

From how ragged her fellow Cloud's breathing had become, she could guess he was very close to losing grip on his laughter.

"Did we go hunting for some witch in a creepy swamp? Because, you know, persecution for religious beliefs and or lifestyle choices is really mean yet somehow perfectly legal and something no one seems to think should be pointed out as being an inherently wrong thing to do. As is burning of witches for equally racist reasoning, discrimination is not a good thing. Maybe the witch of the creepy swamp just wants her toadstool and toe jam soup and to be left alone, and yet you have us go murder her in some kind of fit of misplaced righteousness."

"Really?" Cherep wheezed out, a little painfully from his expression.

"I am listing off the plots of the books I have read recently, and why they are so stupidly illegal if you look at it in a slightly different way." Sonya informed him blandly. "And if I can realize they are the wrong thing to do in any situation, they have to be really bad plots."

He drew in a deep breath and shook his head at her. "I thought you were guessing for my childhood fantasies?"

"That is how it started." Admitted the thief easily. "I got distracted around the completely legal murder of ancient and possibly draconic royal lines for dubious reasoning."

"I will buy you better books, just… don't do that."

She opened the front door, searching her pockets for the key Arseniy had given her to lock it up behind them. "Admit it, you love my humor."

"Your sense of humor is a little dry, Sonya. And requires some getting used to."
CLI (Friday the 3rd of March, 1967. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Since she knew full well there would be a scarcity of hot water and full bathing facilities in her very near future, Sonya took shameless advantage of the rather rickety but fully functional ones in the woman's barracks their circus was wintering within before they formally got underway out of Moscow.

Rather, that half of their circus was lodged within. The men had their own section of buildings they were sharing with a few other operations, same with the girls of the *Großes Volksfest*. The woman's version was basically a scaled-down carbon copy, merely with the bonus of a scarcity of males within.

With… actual full-length mirrors in a dance studio in the ground floor as well as the showering gym-locker like shower room.

It hadn't been that long since she saw herself through a reflective surface, but she hadn't really had the time to really compare herself now to what she blearily recalled Rachel looking like in a dream-life that seemed strangely removed from this one.

As someone now sixteen-years-of-age, rather than say a ten or twelve-year-old, Sonya looked even more like her thrice-cursed mother than she had as a child. Her nose wasn't quite as prominent as it had been in a life before this one, it was more aptly described as thin-bladed, but it also wasn't small enough to be called 'pert'. Her lips had been thinner in her last life, and she at least had more defined cheekbones than the norm for Russian bone structure.

She had her father's more rounded stubborn chin at least, not her mother's pointed one even if she inherited her jawline.

Sonya didn't fully inherit her mother's frame, either. Depending on how one looked at it, it was either down to her father's genetic contribution or a very robust lifestyle, her body type was still too thick to be considered a classical ballerina's.

Which… given how thin and sickly some ballerinas looked, was likely a good thing. Her bust line was perceivable, if smaller than she had once had.

She at least, even with the out-of-season tan, didn't have freckles anymore. Her ash blonde, shoulder-length hair did have a bit of sun-damage right now. It looked a bit streaky and a little like old straw now, but she knew it would soften to a more natural gold-blonde given enough time out of the sun.

While trying to decide if she liked how she looked or not, Jiayi cornered her with a curiously anxious expression.

"You… were in my home country." The lioness of a woman started needlessly in her native language, coming to a decision and returning her attention to the blonde woman she had sought out first.

"I was." Sonya admitted frankly, as there wasn't really a reason to deny that given what she had Cherep bring to everyone's attention for her.
Nodding shortly at the confirmation, Jiayi's flat Asian features tightened as she braced herself. "How bad is it, girl? Really?"

"Murder in the streets while the police look the other way, condoned torture in the open getting applauded, your cultural history is getting gutted while politicians and even the public looks the other way." She wasn't going to sugar-coat it, as that wasn't something she was any good at and might harm what friendly relationship the two of them had.

Finally turning from the mirror, she could see that their mistress of the trapeze had expected some of it and appreciated the frank reply of the full extent of what she saw.

"It is not all their fault, we are... too used to such things. My people have not had a peaceful century before the Great War. Events afterwards did not improve anything." The older Chinese woman wasn't trying to make excuses but explain why they might have done what they did. At least, that was what she got from the slightly bitter expression and from her tart tone. "We have known nothing but war, famine, and atrocities for an age now. From all appearances, things will not become better any time soon either."

"I... am not as sure of that as you may be, Jiayi." She admitted slowly, thinking of exactly what had drawn her to China in the first place. The Triads, while more than just a little overcommitted and in need of a touch of help, was up to something massive.

The Chinese version of the criminal underworld was a very large organization. Even if you discounted the various fewer illegal branches and home-grown groups, that was a lot of people in every fully criminal branch of the Triads.

Despite that, they had needed a Mafia Land thief?

The excuse of needing someone the local police didn't have a file on was solid at first glance, but a little flimsy on a second look. It was more likely their people were committed to something else, then a small emergency that couldn't wait forced their hands.

"You would be able to see more in that than just anyone, wouldn't you?"

It was the closest anyone in the circus had gotten to admitting they knew exactly what type of individual Sonya was, or if they might or might not have a problem with that. At the sharp look the thief tossed her, the Chinese woman scoffed and glared back fiercely.

"Pretend all you want. I am not as air-headed as most of my flighty green-girls, and neither are some of the other 'old-hands'. You were never just a dancing girl following her brother out of any useless emotion as worry or panic." Jiayi turned sharply on her heel with a short nod of farewell, then briskly strode out of the showering room.

The thief narrowed her eyes on the tiny woman's back until the door swung shut behind her.

That had been... interesting. She wasn't sure if it was a good interesting or a bad one, but it might not matter.

The Russian had maybe nine or ten more months with the Großes Volksfest before she would be forced to go back to the Zolotov clan as a full-time thief. The best she could do was be a tiny bit more careful, but if that little secret was out already there might not be a point to that.
CLII (Tuesday the 7th of March, 1967. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

They were still going to be traveling through the People's Republic of China.

Eventually.

There was the other southern half of the USSR to work through, then China.

Sonya had, before this, very pointedly not taken a very hard look at the government or policies in place in her birth country for a very specific reason. Mainly because Rachel had no fond memories of the word 'communist' or the Soviet Union, nor very good thoughts about it like any other American girl.

That had left an impression on the thief left alive in the aftermath of her death.

Foremost of those reasons was Khrushchev Nikita Sergeyevich, the Premier of the Soviet Union. Rather, to be more truthful, the not very mourned former Premier who died last year.

Thinking about it, the fact the man had been a healthy-looking seventy-three when he was… pronounced dead in office, probably meant he wasn't dead of entirely natural causes.

'Entirely' because she was pretty sure it was perfectly natural to die once you lost a certain volume of blood, or once shot through the head, or even after someone shanked you in the lung. Those may not be a perfectly natural causes of death, but natural enough to die from.

Mafia logic didn't always have to make sense if it was widely accepted enough.

She had refrained from taking a very long look at the United States' history for similar reasons.

Beyond the fact she knew of one very major incident that was entirely against what Rachel had once known, Hitler's assassination and how that had caused certain events in Europe to spiral out of control, the thief hadn't been in any great tearing rush to see how that would've resolved itself in her former birth country.

Besides which, the background information about Rachel's lifetime had faded quite a bit. She couldn't really recall much solid information from her previous life that hadn't directly impacted that life, now that it was comfortably fuzzy she wouldn't have jolts of sickening realization of how it should've gone when looking at how it had.

There would be an increase of uncertain knowing that something was off but being unable to recall why, and the thief was alright with that thought.

Sonya had a few more pressing things to deal with as the circus she and Cherep had joined got underway for the spring.

More specifically, her fellow Cloud's now developed stunt work.

Part of the reason why Moscow was a popular wintering destination for traveling circus was the Moscow State University of Circus and Variety Arts, and the pool of freshly trained performers looking for their first gig. Another part of it was the free trade of information about various routes and the ability to pass on or get warnings of worldwide events, before a traveling circus risked themselves going through the countries involved.

Yet another part of it was pure showing off.
A very tiny bit was left for collaboration efforts, two or more circuses getting together and pooling resources and sharing costs for renting out one of the larger indoor stages for a night or week to generate a bit more cash to wait the icy winter out.

Occasionally there was even a bit of tip and trick swapping, when there was the time available in-between developing new acts for the coming year and fixing anything major that needed intensive repairs that couldn't be done on the road.

Cherep had found other stuntmen during his time on his own over the winter. While Sonya was off in Mafia Land dealing with Renato and Shamal or in China working for the Triads, he had been comparing notes about how their acts were received and what worked the best as far as they knew.

Even well after the short Christmas break, he had been incorporating some of that advice into his long-dreamed of circus act.

She was well acquainted with the possibility of injuring herself and only recently resigned to the possibility of death personally. In her line of work and lifestyle, becoming injured was almost guaranteed and death wasn't much of a stranger to her as she would like.

However, that also meant she was well trained enough to try to minimize the risk of injury when possible. If that wasn't possible, then how to fake not being injured until she had the time and space to deal with it.

Watching Cherep risk his neck, which had been broken once before, on his USSR built motorcycle for the spring opening show... made her almost physically ill.

With fright or worry was entirely questionable. It may even just because it was a reminder of the only stunt she had helped him with. What she did know was that she heartily disliked watching him launch himself in the air and flip around on that deathtrap machine.

He was very good at it, irrespective of her feelings on the matter. From what she could overhear when he had a spot of time to practice on the ramps set up for his and other stuntmen's acts, he was actually greatly impressive for a rookie stuntman with how high he was willing to go or what kind of tricks he was willing to try.

Sonya's feelings on the matter didn't care how impressive he was, she just wanted to rip him off the damn bike and plant him firmly on the ground.

Since her foster brother/best friend wouldn't thank her for that, the thief instead tried to figure out how the hell she would learn to adapt to seeing him risking himself like that. Additionally, if worse came to worse, how to buy his innate Cloud Propagation ability of un-death enough time so any crashes didn't tip of the entire circus or anyone in the audience that the stuntman wasn't killable.

Alarmingly, Sonya was drawing a blank on both options.

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CLIII (Wednesday the 22nd of March, 1967. A cargo boxcar, a freight train, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Have you thought of a stage name?" Sonya asked in English, sounding painfully nonchalant about the whole thing even if he knew better.

Cherep was entirely aware she didn't like his profession very much. That was obvious when she
came back to the circus a little before the opening spring season and he showed her what he had. Even with a tan entirely out of place for her wintery homeland, she had gotten alarmingly ashen watching him do a couple easy trick flips.

It was rather pathetic for them both, this little no-comment on his profession. He had complained about hers for years, but she seemed unwilling to complain about his.

Admittedly, he _may_ have annoyed her a little with his complaints. Purposely. Several times. In a row.

Maybe.

"Cherep?"

Right, she'd asked him a question. "Uh… actually… I was thinking about that all winter."

Sonya peered over at him curiously, letting the pile of cloth she had been messing with fall to her lap but keeping hold of the sharp needle. "Really?"

"You don't have to sound so surprised, you know." He quipped at her sourly, just to hear her snort at him. "I know you rather like the English language… or at least you tend to talk in it when you can."

"Practice makes perfect, and this _is_ a very widespread language for business."

"Yeah, yeah." The mechanic yanked a little too hard on his wrench when the train went over a bump, meaning while surprised it slipped off the bolt he had been tightening he wasn't too irritated at his hand slamming into the part he was currently servicing. The train's rocking motion wasn't helping him at all keeping things unbroken while on the way from point A to point B. "Damn it… anyways. You know how my name translates to skull?"

"Really?" His sister's tone of voice was entirely flat and dryer than a desert. "I knew that years ago. Matter of fact, I am pretty sure I was the one that told you."

"I like it, and that's all that matters." He sniffed at her in mock disdain, finishing off tightening the bolt he had been messing with and tossing the wrench back into a toolbox. "Especially since…"

"Since what?"

Hauling himself up on a nearby crate, Cherep gave his semi-concerned looking best friend perched prettily on it a wry grin. "Since I know you're a little worried about this show business stuff I wanted to do with my life."

"…I do not follow."

"You're worried that my… abilities of a Cloud sort will draw unwanted attention to me." He started delicately, because this was a worry he did share with her. At least a little, anyways. "I figured why not hide in plain sight, then? Draw attention, boast of an immunity to death, that sort of thing."

Sonya didn't immediately protest… but she also didn't look remotely enthused with that suggestion.

"I figure this way most would discount anything too… wild, when it comes to me. Rumors of any un-survivable crashes would then seem more like propaganda rather than a… Flame thing."

Fidgeting with her cloth didn't seem like a good sign. In the end though, the thief merely sighed heavily.

"I cannot actually argue with that. You are right, anything you would boast of would be immediately
discounted at first. After a while that would not exactly aid your efforts to evade the underworld, but as long as you become widely-known as a stuntman no one would be able to risk approaching you or your abduction."

Not exactly a ringing endorsement, but Cherep could work with that. "Going with the 'immortal' propaganda angle, and that I might not want to actually use my real name for performances, changing my name into another language seems the best way to get used to it fast."

"Alright… but why Skull? Why not the French translation of you name, Crâne? It sounds more alike to your real one. Or even Tòu ē, from Mandarin Chinese?" Sonya huffed at him, but it was more confusion based than actual irritation.

He'd irritated her more than enough times to tell. "First off, I can't twist my tongue around Chinese. Yet anyways. Secondly, too similar and I'll never be able to ignore it if I need to. And Skull because I like my name, what it means, too much to really want to give it up entirely."

"This is not going to end up like that childish attachment to a skull and crossbones motif you are all but addicted to, is it?"

"I am not addicted."

His fellow Cloud user wordlessly held up the cotton in her lap, the hellishly expensive and imported patterned cotton she traded two bales of Chinese silk for on his request. Which had a print of purple skull and crossbones on a blue background, being painstakingly stitched into a few pairs of lounge pants because he asked for that in lieu of a Christmas present.

Cherep coughed awkwardly, pressing her hands down to lower the cloth back to her lap. "Current evidence aside."

The look she gave him spoke massive volumes of 'not-impressed'.

"Look, with the scant handful of languages I can speak, my name translates mostly to just Cherep or a similar variation. Skull is the most different yet the same word, so it's what I'm going to go with."

"Fine, whatever." The thief muttered, mostly to herself, as she picked up her sewing once again. "Go with Skull, then. I am not calling you that."

"I'm not asking you to." Mostly because he was sure she wouldn't ever listen to him when he did. He grinned at her, nearly bouncing in place. "Speaking of, though? Are those done yet?"

"Obviously, the pair in my hands are not." Sonya spoke mostly evenly, the exasperation sounding more like an afterthought than anything she really felt. "There may, may I remind you, be one done already."

He did not jostle her, especially not when she had needles in her hands. "Where?"

"I do not know, Cherep. What does one do with Christmas presents before they are gifted?"

"Wrap them?" He replied to her bland question, grinning widely at the dry look she gave him for that.

"Very likely. One would assume such wrapped gifts would be places where another may find them, as well."
CLIV (Sunday the 26th of March, 1967. Chita, Zabaykalsky Krai, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

With nearly a full year spent outside of it under her belt, Sonya could now appreciate exactly how...bland the Soviet Union was outside the larger cities.

It might have been a greater maturity that allowed her to appreciate the severe beauty of her Motherland's harsh winters whitewashing most everything and gilding everything else in silvery ice; the fact Rachel grew up in a heavy industrial society and she was still somewhat used to seeing factories and their resulting pollution; or maybe just nearly fifteen years of living here that blinded her to exactly how drab some of it could be in summer.

It might have even been the fact the underworld did a roaring business in smuggling black market items and luxuries even in the middle of Soviet Russia, and the underworld and the places connected to it was where she spent the bulk of her time.

However, in the more civilian side where the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic's reach started to strain it was almost... depressive.

Just the civilian side, when compared to such places as a faintly lingering impression of a war-torn France or even the less controlled borders of the Soviet Union.

The Mafiya side had a lot more color to it most everything, unless they were trying to hide it.

Now that she had some experiences in different countries to compare it all to, the underworld here was closer to the surface than in most other places. A lot more, even when set next to places like a pocked-marked France, the northern tip of Italy, and the greater north-west region of Europe.

Admittedly Sonya really did need to take a long look at the southern parts of Italy, the heavily immigrated parts of the US, and maybe some more of China's underworld before deciding on how unusually civilian-friendly her homeland's Mafiya was.

There were two ways to get any kind of aid in Soviet Russia, one was to find the correct government division of their oblast or to search out and locate the local group of vory closest to you. There were risks involved in approaching either, beyond the fact one was legal and the other not so much, but generally the difference boiled down to how much one wanted to pay for aid and if they wished to risk their neck or not and in what way.

Notably, it was equally risky either way you wanted to handle it.

However, that showed a marked difference between Soviet Russia and another mafia heavy place like China's Hong Kong, or even what little she had seen of France's Paris. If only because France was still in the middle of rebuilding some parts of its infrastructure, meaning a lot more could be slipped past those in charge, and Hong Kong was... in the middle of something else. It meant the underworld of Soviet Russia could spare that kind of attention for their civilians.

While the rural divisions of the Soviet government might help, they also might just report it to someone else and the wait for that someone to come help you. Which could take months if not weeks. That ran the risk of having your issue reported wrong, having it not reported at all, or having your problem blown out of proportion for whatever reasons and having to explain that to whoever responded.
Conversely, while the vor would help if they didn't react badly to being asked in the first place… you would end up owing them a favor or two no matter how short or how inexpensive whatever fix was.

It was a choice between overworked public servants and possibly violent but more networked criminals, and the balance was leaning more towards the criminals if only because they were more reliable.

Being that helpful wasn't just the vor being good neighbors, it was also motivated by self-interest. If everyone respectable in any section of a city were all indebted to a certain syndicate, then those civilians could be encouraged to look the other way when… less than legal things went down. Beyond whatever skills or aid the civilians could pony up in thanks or to repay any help, that accepted blindness was allowing several syndicates like the Zolotovs to operate more openly than ever before.

The Soviet Union wasn't quite on its deathbed just yet, but the signs were starting to appear.

The breakdown of public services here and there, the occasional uncovered corruption of some uchastoks that may or may not be part of your quarter. In contrast, the public and most of the minor government officials were trying hard to pretend it was all business as usual… even when it wasn't.

There was actually a bit more cheerful air around some of the places affected by corruption, the assumption of 'it was hard, but now it has to get better'.

In the month and a half it took the Großes Volksfest to make it through some of western Soviet Russia, Sonya got a very good look at the more distant rural parts of her home country and the general feel of the places.

The parts that didn't have a strong underworld presence to offset the more strident and harsh government policies that may or may not be hastening the Soviet Union's fall.

The 'Khrushchev Thaw' had started breaking down the isolationist world-view that had been more prevalent before Sonya became an officially working thief, but that ended with the death of the Primer who engineered it. Brezhnev Leonid Ilyich was in the middle of taking office and working through his predecessor's economic and likely foreign relations plans to get a feel of where everything was.

She expected to get some word of how the man would handle his time in office in the latter half of the year, especially given they were almost ready to leave Soviet Russia itself and it might take coming back to Russia to figure it out.

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**CLIV (Thursday the 30th of March, 1967. Urumchi, People's Republic of China.)**

They crossed the border between Soviet Russia and the People's Republic of China in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, just south of the Altai Mountain Range and southwest of Mongolia's southern border. They stopped first in the tiny village of Chi-mu-nai for a night.

Which was a literal frozen hole in the mountains, as far as a village went.

It was only a brief stopover. The circus was headed for the equally tiny city of Urumchi in the southern part of the Dzungarian Basin and the train station there.

Problem was, there weren't very many ways to cross the northern border of Soviet Russia and
Communist China except through the tiny stretch of land bordered by two different mountain ranges and a few stones' throw from the Gobi Desert.

That also meant it would be cold at first, then hot as hell, then freezing cold again.

The border patrols at Chi-mu-nai were not quite unnerving, but stringently through and almost non-compromising. Had anyone been smuggling things into China though that border, Sonya doubted the guards would've missed it by anything other than pure luck.

It was also the point of which her absentminded understudying of Faris' performances became more of a thing than just something to do when really bored. The fire-juggler had a selection of swords and other pointy things he could swallow and incorporate into his juggling/fire breathing act, playing up his native region's reputation for performing exotic feats that seemed hazardous or painful.

The native Egyptian's luggage easily outweighed most everyone else's, just simply because of the amount of steel to it and that it couldn't be used as something else in a pinch.

Master Liam had one silver tongue, but that wasn't really buying the circus more leeway when it came to how much sharpened steel they could bring into the country with them.

Madame Crina looked highly amused at the fact she was suddenly sharing her apprentice with Faris when Liam finally hit on a way that wouldn't make them leave the man's expensive weaponry behind.

The thief herself just really wished she didn't rid her own baggage of any liquor, and that she could've kept a bottle or two of vodka on her.

As the juggler's semi-formal apprentice, at least for the duration of the time they were in China, she was allotted the other half of Faris' allotted steel baggage. Which solved the situation nicely, even if it made things a bit awkward between two of the strongman Jaq's friends for a week.

Jaq mourned Sonya's lack of alcohol too, during those few days on a train when there was very limited privacy.

It could've been said she had gotten herself apprenticed to Faris without even asking or consideration of how hard his act could be, which was where the awkward came from. It wasn't really that way, and a week was exactly how long it took to fully convince the man of that, so by the time the circus reached their first official stop of Ha-mi and set up for a week-end show she could go back to being his assistant with little issue.

By that point Sonya was rather fed up with performers and their moments of dramatics, mostly due to the fact that last upset wasn't even her fault and she had to be the one to smooth it over, so she wasn't particularly understanding of Cherep's bout of it.

Her foster brother had known full well that he was only going to have a stuntman show a month, as that was what Master Liam had granted when allowing him to branch out and add that to their circus, so why he was complaining about the fact to her was beyond her.

She stuck one of her few remaining cigarettes between her lips in lieu of actually addressing his whining, because this was her break-time and damn it all if she didn't get something done during it. The motion didn't do more than buy her a few seconds to light it, and when she looked back at him he was still pouting at her from his spot on a battered camp chair.

Sighing through her nose and enduring the sting of smoke that accompanied the act, she ran her non-smoking hand through her loose hair before picking a language they had in common that wasn't
English or Russian. "Frankly, I don't care."

"That's not very understanding." Cherep was quick to point out in return, in German like her instead of the Russian he stared in because they both needed the practice. "You're supposed to sympathize with me."

"Says who? I don't really like watching you risk your life and bones for an adrenaline rush in front of spectators, nor the fact you seem to want me to support it. I didn't require you to support what I do, why do I have to do it for you?"

Sonya clamped her mouth shut probably a sentence too slow. His mostly-faked pout changed into a smaller but real frown, and in return she shifted awkwardly. Not quite guiltily, but still somewhat sorry for how bluntly that came out.

"You know, sometimes I think Lisa did you a disservice with those acting lessons." Her fellow Cloud started, his light tone at odds with the serious look on his face. "You can fake most things really well, so it's hard to keep in mind that you're not really as understanding of some conversational gambits or why we use them as you seem."

"For the last damn time, I am not socially incompetent."

"No, but you don't really have the tolerance for a lot of social interaction." He countered easily, waving a hand. Mostly to disperse the smoke, partially to wave off her oft-repeated denial. "When you reach that limit, then the nicest you are is socially incompetent."

She finally gifted him with a dirty look, more than tired of trying to talk to people that weren't at least semi-content or indifferent with whatever was going on.

"I wasn't asking you to support me doing something I know you don't like me doing, I was… in a roundabout way, inviting you to complain with me." Cherep pointed out with an impressively straight face, which made it hard for her to understand if he was mad at her or not. "At most, I was expecting you to roll your eyes at me or snort. Maybe even bitch in your dryly witty way that no one ever gets everything they want, and I should be happy enough with what I have."

She eyed him warily, still trying to figure out if he was irritated or annoyed or something.

"Calm down, sister dear." He grinned at her, which just made her suspicious. "Is it just the thing with Faris, or the whole 'we're in China' thing in general that's bothering you so much?"

A waved hand to the opening of the tent he was stuck within in case something mechanical broke down probably meant to incorporate the country they were in.

"Both." The Storm-Cloud tiredly admitted, giving up on understanding and just resigning herself to the fact she had upset him. "Faris and the luggage thing with him was just the latest in what's been bothering me."

"Poor Sonya," he gestured to a spot next to his chair, inviting her to sit, "no one really appreciates you that much, do they?"

"…are you patronizing me?"

"Little bit, yeah."

Sonya supposed she deserved that, if only for snapping at him first.
It took them another week to get out from the borderlands of the Gobi Desert region, which then left the performers of the Grosses Volksfest into the middle of China.

Instead of high and cold mountains contrasted with low-lying near-desert heat, they got to enjoy a muggy wet and nearly oppressive heat of the famed bamboo forests of Asia.

Sonya wasn't sure why that was worse, given they had just been crossing plains of baking grasslands and nearly arid scrubland when not trekking across the foot of a mountain range or two. It just felt that way, no matter how strongly she reminded herself of Soviet Russia's blackout winters or even the mountain ranges they had left behind recently.

The middle region of China was also the point at which things like 'curfew' and 'escorts' became a thing.

She really did wonder what they were trying to hide. Jiayi had already independently confirmed what news the Russian had sent to them via Cherep during the winter, using some of her more far-flung family connections and her obvious nationality to encourage some gossip her way.

'For our protection' her pale white ass, she could probably murder a platoon of those Red Guard members without too much difficulty. Wet behind the ears, utterly puffed up on their own arrogance, little shits that they were.

She wondered if she should feel disturbed over that thought, and then wondered if the fact she didn't was good or not. She eventually decided that moral questions of that magnitude deserved more than a few minutes to deliberate over and shoved it aside in favor for other things to ponder.

The difference between this year of traveling as a circus performer and last year was Sonya's distinct lack of desire to explore or even leave the areas set aside for fairgrounds and the like.

She had already decided she didn't like China, knew well that anything she'd get up to in regard to the local underworld would draw some very unwanted official attention that probably wouldn't be worth it, so she stuck close to the circus' assigned locations.

It wasn't until Crina made a faux-casual comment in Romanian about her normal habits and what she hadn't been doing that Sonya realized a few things.

"So, when do you think it will be safe enough to go back to wandering around like a stray cat?"

Okay, not so much faux-casual as it was bluntly spoken and rather frank. For the two them, on the other hand? It was the equivalent of genuinely spoken concern.

Sonya neatened the stack of tarot cards the old bat had been absentmindedly instructing her on the use of while she thought. "Likely... the moment we are on a ship for our next country."

Her master of all things mystic snatched her pack of cigarettes, stealing one from the thief shamelessly. She had her own lighters, due to the incense she burned when her drinking got a bit out of hand, so the lack of one on the younger woman's person still wasn't a thing to hide.

"You think it's that bad, then?"

"Think?" Her not-so-legal apprentice repeated slowly, giving the crotchety gypsy a measured stare.
"Crina, have you looked around lately?"

The question netted her a shrug, as well as the return of her pack of cigarettes. "I've heard a little from Jiayi, over how bad it's getting. But for us? Those that will leave and possibly spread word to other countries about what's going on?"

"That's part of why I'm being overly cautious. There is little keeping those in power from arranging a 'terrorist attack' or some completely 'natural' disaster that so unfortunately took out a wandering circus troupe."

That earned her a sideways but sharp beady-eye stare. She merely shrugged then returned her attention to try memorizing the meaning of various cards again.

The thief wondered…

Crina's comments now and Jiayi's from earlier in the year seemed to imply that certain members of the circus knew full well what her usual job description entailed. That made her wonder if there was another reason why Master Liam was so accepting of a mere mechanic's little sister joining up with him.

There was… some sense to that logic if so.

Mafia people tended to avoid interfering in other mafia operations unless they knew what was going on. It was easier, not to mention more cost-effective, to let some other group or syndicate to establish a smuggling route or underworld business then take it over by force.

Additionally, more time to plan or gather information to take over said route or business meant it was less likely someone would end up massacring their own people because of some unknown detail or there being more combatants than assumed.

A Russian thief popping up with Mafyia tattoos within a circus would've taken a lot of syndicates near or around the Soviet Union aback at first.

Sonya shuffled the oversized cards, wondering if that was part of the 'why' Master Liam allowed her to tag along after Cherep in the circus and not just as a wandering traveler in their wake.

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**CLVII (Monday the 17th of April, 1967. Mafia Land.)**

**Renato** considered what he had learned carefully as he followed a rather busty redhead dressed as a Mafia Land hospital nurse down a busy street.

A certain someone was picking up Sonya's mail, and she was on the island with him when the thief herself wasn't and wouldn't be for several more months yet.

Mafia Land had some rather strict limitations on who could pick up or handle their employee's personal effects, even if those employees happened to be six feet under. Rarely did any **Mafioso** attach anyone to their personal accounts, not even if they shared a blood relation to another did they authorize them to basically be free to paw through their apartment or storage units.

Much less allow others to handle the sensitive things sometimes sent by mail.

This woman was either someone the touchy Russian Storm-Cloud allowed closer than most mafia
people allowed very many, or she had gotten to Sonya's accounts either through her work or because of him again.

By an average Hard Cloud's typical behavior alone, the first option wasn't likely if she was currently with her brother-figure again this year. Which left the second to be the more plausible one.

Unfortunately, the young woman in question wasn't a typical Cloud in nature. Nor did she really conform to what was usually thought of as Cloud behavior and gained some amusement by baffling anyone expecting it from her.

Renato only had Sonya's Mafia Land employee ID number because he was a suspicious and probably paranoid asshole, he had twisted it out of a particularly slimy clerk in the Thieves' Hall not too long ago after she agreed to help him with Shamal. She would probably not be impressed with him for having it and would likely actually go through with that threat to break a few bones from the very beginning of their association if she learned he knew her number at all.

Even with a recent changeover, security breaches like that could've happened before Vongola got into the island's operations. The redhead could've even gotten Sonya's ID number afterwards or during the inevitable confusion of the switch.

It was a lot easier to keep an eye on the Storm-Cloud's movements if he could use that ID to be alerted to her coming and going from the island. Especially since she preferred sea-routes to what air travel was allowed on the island.

Additionally, the hitman didn't really want to press his luck with how much backlash from his work she would be willing to brush off. There had been more than enough of that to last him a long while as it was.

However, there were limits to what he could use Sonya's Mafia Land employee ID for. Since he couldn't lose a bit more than half-foot of height, nor somehow slim himself down to her lithe but still growing willowy frame no matter what disguise he wanted to try, he couldn't access her records.

Not even through his shiny new association with Vongola, as it was the outside advisory branch in charge of security. Which meant he was stalled on ruling out that first option from being possible.

Given Renato was likely already on thin-ice where the Russian was concerned, a misstep could cost him a contact that was proving to be rather fascinatingly diverse in her knowledge base.

…and Shamal would pitch an annoying fit if the hitman couldn't somehow sweet-talk Sonya into visiting Vongola territory this winter or sometime next year so the baby Mist could prove all those doubters over a Mist tolerating Cloud wrong.

She had to be alive for him to do said sweet-talk, as well as somewhat endeared to him.

Though he was sure mentioning Shamal alone would work there even if she still wasn't happy with him.

Which left him in this particular bind.

The risks were obvious, but the possible results were less clear. His lifestyle as a hitman meant he rather preferred better odds for success, but there were always occasions he could afford ensuring that.

Worst comes to worst, he could always stalk whoever it was until he understood more of who it was.
Somehow, in between hits he still had to do. For both Mafia Land and for Nono Vongola.

Renato raked a hand through his short and spiky black hair distractedly, noting the turnoff the red headed nurse swung herself down and calculating a different route to keep tailing her by.

Just following someone even a few feet back was suspicious as hell, meaning he had all sorts of tricks to pull out to keep a target from getting wary of him.

For all he knew of Sonya's personal life, this woman could be someone important to her. The hitman had, by sheer accident no less, only just last year learned the thief was fostered with a brother in Soviet Russia's Moscow.

Given it had been four years since he met the girl-turned-young-woman, that was... bad.

It was equally likely she was just that good, or they both weren't too interested in more than a casual acquaintance until just recently. The Soft Flame Sun user was leaning more towards deciding he had been badly neglecting a surprisingly interesting information source he hadn't known was at hand.

The alleyway he had been walking down suddenly opened on to another street, the one the redhead nurse was supposed to be on. A glance down the street in both directions informed the hitman she had already taken another street or entered one of the buildings nearby.

Well... this was a rather expensive area, but still a residential one.

He now had both where the woman was working and where it was she likely lived or reported to after picking up Sonya's mail.

Where this trail ended meant little more than he had to be a bit more careful than he had been. This section of the island was generally filled with condos and long-term apartments sometimes sold to various underworld powers.

Meaning if that redhead woman was a friend or more to Sonya it was likely a good thing. If not, then he might be getting into another thing that may prove to be over his head.

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**CLVIII (Saturday the 22nd of April, 1967. Lan-Chou, People's Republic of China.)**

Crina became markedly less popular in a short enough amount of time it nearly gave Sonya whiplash.

While it hadn't been too obvious back near the borders of the People's Republic of China, the further in the circus got the more obvious it was that the superstition a fortune teller relied upon for business dried up.

It had been more of a novelty service than any actual fortune telling business, apparently in more rural China the act of getting one's fortune read by an exotic and genuine gypsy was worth the price for some cryptic babble spouted off at them. That did not extend into more developed cities the further south they went.

She had noticed it as far back as Chiu-Ch'uan, when it Crina's usual draw dipped from the normal rate and Sonya's success rate of acquiring less certain business increased.

That didn't prepare her for the outright scorn exhibited by those visiting the circus by the time they
reached Lan-Chou.

Her master of mysticism rapidly shut down her little tent in response, not three hours into the day.

It was apparently a baffling enough treatment the old bat immediately made tracks to where Master Liam was setting up the later big-top show. Sonya hesitated for a full minute, but eventually decided to default into just entertaining the younger visitors in lieu of her usual job.

She also, just in case, purposely kept an eye on several of the worst offenders that had mocked her mistress' fortune telling.

The Russian had known the Red Guard was being given more and more power, the mass rallies paid for by the government still being talked about last year had told her that much. She hadn't known they would become bold enough to go after examples of another country's cultural history.

The fact members of the Red Guard were here and had gone after Crina, on the other hand, said nothing good about where the upsets in China were about to go.

She wasn't surprised when Jiayi swung around to collect her when she was in the middle of juggling a set of throwing knives for said Red Guards' entertainment in hopes of distracting them from making an even bigger scene than they had already. Extracting herself took a few pointed hefts of the knives and a sharp smile, but they had been impressed enough with her knife skills to 'allow' it.

The old bat the thief worked mainly under was a tough woman. Even though she probably likely knew what might have happened had she not shut down her tent quick enough, she merely looked as crotchety as ever.

Master Liam was stressed looking enough for the both even as he prepared himself to act as the big-tops ringmaster instead of the, currently sick, gentleman that usually did it.

"You may not be able to go back to work, Crina." The circus master informed Sonya's master in all things mystic lowly in Mandarin Chinese when they finally reached them.

He was carefully waxing his mustache, so it would stay no matter how loudly he would have to be shouting in the next few hours, and the man gave a short nod to them as she and the Chinese woman got close enough for him to see them in the performers tent's mirror.

"This isn't the first road bump we've weathered, nor would it be the last of them." Crina scoffed rather loudly in the same language, striding over to her apprentice and holding out a demanding hand. "But this is a different one, and I don't think I can go to selling herbs and the like here."

If Confucius' home and grave hadn't survived the current unrest without damage, then it wasn't likely a lone gypsy's trade would either.

Sonya obediently ponied up a cigarette for her.

"We cannot simply have her as a 'holistic' healer." Jiayi chipped in, looking as fierce as the little lioness the thief tended to think of her as. "They will not accept that either, not if just simple fortune telling started this mess and we already said we had nothing beyond first-aid training among us."

"And she must do something, if only to be of use for the performer's visa she's in the country on." Master Liam agreed with a slow nod, then turned to the three women in the tent with him.

"Suggestions then, ladies?"

"I've got nothing." Admitted the old woman sourly around the filter between her lips, searching her
pockets for a lighter she probably didn't have on her.

Their native expert kept her mouth stubbornly shut, but she looked equally unhappy as the gypsy woman. She tended to handle the acrobats of the circus troupe, so it wasn't really that surprising.

She kind of wondered why she was in this tent for the discussion. Was it because she was 'officially' Crina's apprentice, or because they thought she had more to give over?

Liam turned his attention to her when it appeared the Chinese woman had no idea nor intents on making that clearer. She supposed that answered that question, they were wondering if she could do something more.

"I… have a jewelry making kit."

"I forgot about that." Muttered the old gypsy woman as she peered at her apprentice. "What would you need for it?"

"Copper or silver wire, preferably." She only could do simple things with it, and with a lack of precious stones but for the spinel gems she had on her Bec de Corbins or the red tourmaline key necklace around her neck? "And… a lack of questions on how I do some things."

Without gems for any ornamentation, that would mean local stones if they were going to have more than just braided wire jewelry. Like the natural granite or basalt in the area. Since she didn't have any stone-cutting tools, it would mean she was limited to what kind of control she had over Storm Flames to shape anything.

This was… not really a good idea. She couldn't think of another, though.

The circus master smoothed a hand down fiercely waxed mustachios thoughtfully, considering the Russian carefully. "I feel… uneasy over such a condition, little sister Sonya. But… we do not have the luxury to demand an explanation as well as a service you were not hired to do."

"It's not that I do not trust you," she didn't really, not with this, "it is more that this will complicate a fair few things that do not need to be. For both you and I."

They would likely find out eventually anyways. Cherep wasn't really going to get away with a stuntman's lot in life without a few crashes or broken bones. Sonya decided she was merely… testing the waters before they had to commit to this circus to hide her foster brother's Dying Will Flames and his innate use of them.

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CLIX (Saturday the 22nd of April, 1967. Lan-Chou, People's Republic of China.)

With a very limited amount of time that could be spent outside the circus' designated fairgrounds, Sonya took off immediately.

To avoid more questions that she really cared to deal with, she did it in a way that allowed her to evade an 'escort'. Nominally by simply waiting for a moment or two of inattention to anyone watching her movements, and mostly by abusing Cloud Prorogated jumping and circus level gymnastics to be in places that wouldn't be checked or looked at normally.

Even if anyone did look for where a lowly apprentice was.
There wasn't much of a reason to try sneaking around at night, not only would there be more interest in who might leave or enter the fairgrounds at that time but also the thief didn't really know the area that well and light would be a necessity to find what she needed.

Stumbling around in the dark also didn't really appeal to her anyways.

Sonya took with her a few empty packs and used her limited geological knowledge to find herself some rocks with pretty patterns or solid colors. Getting back into the city of Lan-Chou with three full packs of said rocks clicking and shifting on her took a fair amount of time and the occasional backtrack or three.

Crina stubbornly sat herself down next to the thief when she returned just before sunset, looking mulish enough the younger woman ignored the old bat instead of try protesting the scrutiny.

Her expression when the Russian took hold of her red crystal key and snapped off the teeth with her bare hands was an interesting study of shocked and wary.

Sonya was taking a leaf out of her own book. Since her control over Storm Flames did suck for anything other than complete Disintegration, she needed something to help her not melt whatever rock she was trying to cut into. Instead, she used the sharp broken end of red tourmaline to carve stone.

Which worked surprisingly well for something makeshift. She mourned her poor key but replacing it later wouldn't be too difficult.

"I suppose this would be how you light your smokes without an actual lighter." The old woman mused slowly, fingering the still warm rock Sonya had tested her theory about her Storm Flame control on.

She had carved that bit of shale with Crina's name. Given that it worked, didn't look to be melting any more now that she had stopped applying her focused Storm Flames and was no more crumbly than usual for a bit of shale, the thief decided this really was going to work out.

"You realize you're going to have to make a few hundred of these things, right?" The gypsy continued when her apprentice didn't respond to the leading question.

"...can you get Jiayi to write down common Chinese characters for reference? I do not think I recall all the simple ones I can carve."

"I can do that." Crina admitted wryly, heaving herself up. "They didn't find a lot of silver wire for you, but Master Liam did put in an order for it we can pick up in the next stop. They found you copper, though."

"We will also need string or leather for necklaces if you want to sell them that way and not just charms to wear on such things." The Flame user shrugged the limitation off, more interested in examining a bit of granite and wondering how she would melt enough of it off for a flat surface she could carve and not waste half the rock to get it.

"I've heard stories, a long-assed time ago, about those able to summon an inner fire at will." Posed aloud her master just before she ducked out of the tent they usually lived and worked out of. "Funny how those old stories seem to have a bit of truth behind them."

The thief pursed her lips as the old bat left to find her more things to use in her amateur jewelry making.
That was an... interesting thought.

Did Crina's culture have stories about Dying Will Flame users and their abilities?

She wondered if the old woman wouldn't mind sharing those stories, and how much she would be asked to explain in return.

Her infrequent dips into history hadn't reached any contemporary period just yet, she was currently picking at ancient Greece and Rome. Familiarizing herself to a history that was almost but not quite the same as what she recalled was a little tricky, especially since a fair bit of it had yet to be discovered but she knew some things happened differently from Rachel's school lessons.

Which made everything a rather confusing mess for her. Instead of trying and find differences, she had instead started working on recalling this history as what she needed to think of instead of Rachel's.

It wasn't as if she'd ever actually use that version of history again.

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CLX (Monday the 8th of May, 1967. Shanghai International Settlement, People's Republic of China.)

In the month more it took the Grobes Volksfest to work through the rest of China, the Storm-Cloud made upwards of four hundred little stone charms. The outside edges and a loop to thread a string or a leather thong through in mostly copper wire but some had silver instead, they were little square tiles with a word or two at most carved into the faces.

Crina sold about a hundred of them in each stop, meaning while not really all that popular they did at least cover the lowest base of her usual amount earned. Her apprentice was just happy with that, and the fact they could go back to being fortune tellers with little trouble from now on.

Cherep had to work hard not to laugh when he learned of what his foster sister had been up to while he got a stunt show set up, and why she wouldn't be there for the next one either.

Sonya chucked a bit of basalt at his head anyways.

Frankly, by the time the circus reached Shanghai, the thief was more than ready to put China and her hopefully only stint as a professional jeweler behind her.

Master Liam arranged for a ship with some decent swiftness, obviously to his circus performers if not to anyone outside of it. He also lied through his teeth when the port authorities asked why the haste to leave, citing they were about a half a month behind schedule due to sightseeing and enjoying the countryside... when in fact they were about a month ahead and had done no such things.

Since Shanghai was a British controlled port city, the circus relaxed some of its guard over their performers. Which meant curfew or not, they finally got around to doing the bits of shopping that had been put off while in more uncertain areas of the country.

Her fellow Cloud and a few other mechanics got sent out for parts and the fiddlier bits of machinery that were prone to breaking, Jaq and Faris ended up fetching canvas and tarp repair kits, Jiayi and some of her girls left to find more fabrics for repairing costumes and tents.

Sonya kept herself armed to the teeth anyways, especially after their mistress of the trapeze got wind
of Red Guard groups starting to interfere with the People's Liberation Army installations.

It turned out to be one of her better ideas.

She got suspicious enough to send Crina back with some of the preserved food they had been sent out to purchase, around when the civilians cluttering the streets started to rapidly find other things to do well outside of the neighborhood.

The old bat didn't look entirely pleased with getting sent away but left when she noticed the same thing.

It was when the fishmonger she had been haggling with suddenly ducked out of his stall entirely that she decided that pretending to ignore the reason for the situation wasn't going to cut it.

…and that she possibly wasn't getting the preserved snapper she had been tasked to find.

She turned around and was confronted with the three Chinese men who had been rather impatiently waiting for her to notice them.

Liqin was one of those men, who did at least look a touch apologetic about this. There was a man in a red Gi with a long braid of dark hair, which might be a member of what Triad group her old guide belonged to, and another man in darker clothing with a sour expression.

"May I help you?"

"Miss… Yu, was it?" Obviously, the long-haired spokesman understood wasn't her real name.

She didn't particularly want to make this easy for them. "That will work for now, yes."

To his credit, that didn't seem to faze him. "I was wondering if I may ask you a few questions."

"This have anything to do with a visit I may or may not have done last winter?" At his nod, the thief pursed her lips thoughtfully. "No."

It earned her a slow blink from the man standing front and center, and a cringe from Liqin. The other man, the one standing off to the side a bit, looked irritated.

Actually, he started out with an irritated expression. His face turned rather red and angry at her flat refusal.

"Miss Yu, I really only want to ask a few questions." The first speaker tried again, without a trace of exasperation or irritation in his tone.

Sonya was impressed with his calmness, but that wasn't going to help. "By law, and you know full well what laws, I cannot help you this way. Not that I would be particularly inclined to do so suddenly accosted by three gentlemen out of the blue like this."

"Yu-"

"Stop messing around, Fong." The last man snapped, reaching out one hand to grab her arm. "We don't have the time."

The Russian wasn't amused, nor willing to see where that would go.

Her hand grabbed his and crushed the bones to splinters without warning. That man's knees suddenly hit the planked walkway they were standing on, and he gave out a choked off gasp of pure
She locked eyes with the first man, who still seemed weirdly calm even with her crushing one man's hand to rubbery uselessness in front of him. "I. Cannot. Help. You. If I say anything beyond 'I don't know', then the organization that allowed me to be hired for some job I may or may not have done will have me hunted down and killed for speaking of things they promised anonymity for. Find another way."

"Would you be willing to answer if I did?" Fong asked lightly, still unconcerned by his fellow's pained whimpers.

"Not particularly, no."

Liqin sighed, if in exasperation or tiredness it was debatable.

"Then we seem to be at an impasse." Crossing his arms over his chest, the long-haired triad member regarded the thief thoughtfully. "I must ask, and if you cannot or will not answer…"

"You may be stuck, I am not." Sonya reassured him with a tight little smile, finally letting go of the ruined hand.

"I will not allow you to just leave." The spokesperson of this little 'intervention' warned as he adopted a looser stance, sounding slightly apologetic about that.

The man who had, rather unwisely, reached out to try manhandling a Cloud managed to drag himself away a little bit. Liqin had been standing a way away anyways, wary of a woman that could make metal spontaneously melt on command as well as the individual confronting her.

Sonya was entirely not apologetic about the sudden dunking her former guide/personal assassin and Fong experienced when she jumped with enough force to not only reach a second-story balcony but also to crack and shatter the dock planking under their feet.

She didn't hang around to watch them deal with that, nor long enough to find out if they had more backup even if the target was only one woman.

She got the hell out of dodge, mentally planning a slightly alternate route to meet up with the circus and wondering how to warn Cherep that she had to find other traveling arrangements for the next ocean-going bit.

The thief would meet up with the circus in Singapore, or worst came to worst, India.
Sonya had to give Fong some credit, he was markedly persistent even when taken by surprise.

After getting a message taken to Cherep by paying one of the boys running around the wharf to do it, she had to bolt again to keep him from catching her.

The man chased her up the Shanghai fishing docks, sopping wet and still dodging pedestrians with enviable skill, and down the connected market street, only a bit damp that time, until they started attracting attention neither really wanted to deal with. When the Red Guard members and the Shanghai police started popping up with alarming frequency, the thief ducked into the busier traders’ markets with Fong hot on her heels.

Annoyingly persistent, but at least the Chinese man was considerate enough about the inconvenience as he tried talking her into helping him with whatever in between streets or when scaling a building or two to get around traffic-clogged streets.

She could fully understand why he kept on chasing her, even between the port's midday foot traffic and through Shanghai's oppressively wet almost-summer heat. Beyond whatever it was he wanted to ask or was responsible for asking of her, if she got loose and reported to Mafia Land that the Triad organization she had taken a job for had tracked one of their supposedly 'anonymous' thieves down...

The Triad organization responsible for this little game of tag would be blacklisted from Mafia Land for a few years. One year if nothing else came from this incident and two if anything semi-serious or lethal happened.

From the looks of things, especially since Sonya had to be hired to help keep up Omertà, they probably couldn't afford that.

That didn't mean she was only amused by this little diversion. Rapidly becoming annoyed was a better explanation for her state of mind.

Her brother and fellow Cloud would start to worry when Crina got back to the circus alone, that message of hers may or may not help that much. The stuntman wasn't a fighter, he was way too much of a pacifist to be comfortable harming another person. If he attracted attention to himself and the fact he was her brother got mentioned...

Well, she wouldn't restrict herself to maybe a bit of property damage in response.

It really should've occurred to her to wonder why only three men had been tasked to approach her when they probably knew full well she was at least a Dying Will Flame user of the Storm, or where any other triad members were during that little chase one of their own was doing.

Her general feeling of rapid annoyance changed suddenly to flat out irritated when Fong managed to corner her in a strangely empty warehouse district.

Liqin looked cringingly apologetic behind the first rank of very angry looking Chinese men who likely belonged to the local chapter of the Triads. He was still somewhat damp, the only reason the Chinese man in red with the braided hair wasn't was because of the speed the two of them got up to
while racing up and down a dockside or three.

Fucking fuck nuts.

She couldn't just beat them bloody or murder them, if she could in the first place, without the Triads actively bothering the circus she had been seen with. Cherep was likely to stay with them for another few years, and he might not be able to afford that kind of attention even if he got wildly popular. "I am never coming back to China."

The man who had done most of the chasing slid to a halt a respectable distance behind her, probably only that far away because she did just crush a man's hand in front of him not an hour before.

"I cannot allow you to leave it at this time, unfortunately."

Tilting her head back, to see Fong a clearly over her shoulder, Sonya gave him a wan smile. "Know the problem with assumptions, Fong?"

"Other than that delightful pun thought up by the American soldiers?" He asked pleasantly, and she did admire the fact he wasn't even breathing hard.

She wasn't either, but she had a cheat for that. She was a hell of a lot sweatier than him, but that might be because he was wearing recently damp and loose clothing while she had some leather and a few layers on.

"Other than that one." The thief agreed easily, sliding a hand to the leather bracer on her left forearm.

Fong meant the 'assume makes an ass- out of -u- and -me' saying, which was a play on the English spelling and pronunciation. She had a different one in mind.

"Sometimes, when you assume, you overestimate things. Namely yourselves." Sonya had all seven of her mini Bec de Corbin copies on her, and she slipped a Flame resistant one out into her right palm. "Other times, you do not assume nearly enough. Namely me."

A twist of will, not quite a desire or a demand but a flex of something innate in nature she had long gotten used to doing over her childhood, and in a flair of lilac Flames she had a fully sized polearm in her right hand.

The purple would out her as a Cloud Flame user, but right now that wouldn't exactly impair her any.

Sonya set the butt end on the ground next to her feet and twisted around far enough to squarely face the man behind her. "I really do not wish to damage anything, yourselves or this city, but I really must insist to be let go. You are trying to trap a Cloud, and I should not have to inform you how that typically ends."

His expression was interesting. He wasn't surprised, which meant he had paid some attention when she dunked him into the harbor by shattering the docks from under him. He also didn't look as enthusiastic as he had trying to chase her down earlier, but that may be attributed to anything from her gender to a lack of desire to tangle with a Cloud Flame user.

The man sighed heavily after a long moment, adopting a martial arts stance Sonya couldn't identify.

Not that she had much exposure to many martial arts.

"I am afraid I have to insist you remain, Miss Sonya."
...great. They knew her name.

She allowed a wry smile to twist her lips, turning back to the no-longer-so-angry looking men that were part of this little confrontation. "You... are a very stubborn man."

"I have been informed of such."

"... will let you have this one. I don't really want to deal with angry Triad members actively hunting me."

She could no longer see him behind her, but there was a shift of a soft shoe's sole over hard packed dirt that let her know he had shifted slightly. "Are you giving up?"

Fong was suspicious. Good for him, but a bit too late.

"No, I merely meant I won't report this. So, you no longer have a reason to chase me more." Sonya flashed him a smirk, then gripped her Bec de Corbin in both hands and smashed the hammer end into the earth.

With how dry the dirt underfoot was, a sudden effusion of sheer overpowered force threw up a great cloud of dust and grit.

His aborted dart forward gained him a face full of it, and the consequence of applied force through her swung polearm vaulted the Russian up and forward at a rate they probably didn't have time to adjust to.

She twisted in mid-air and easily cleared the heads of the men that had barred her way forward, then a tuck and a roll once her heels hit dirt meant she was back on her feet and running for the outer edges of the city before they could clearly see what had happened.

Screw Shanghai, she'd catch a boat in another port.

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**CLXII (Tuesday the 6th of June, 1967. Bengaluru, Karnataka, Republic of India.)**

*Given* how worriedly Cherep fussed over her when she reappeared Sonya assumed Crina had reported some of what she had seen, and rumors probably did the rest of informing him of why it took her so long.

Civilians only fled from their usual areas like that for a few things, namely either military or underworld operations taking place in their midst.

Also, the fact that it took her nearly a month and until India to join back up with the circus might have had something to do with it.

She'd had to head south-west out of Shanghai to Hangzhou on foot, catch a lift to Mafia Land and snatched her mail from Tatiana, then catch another boat to Singapore. Then track the circus' route to Chennai, India.

Then she had to skip town almost immediately and head off to Bangalore on her lonesome.

Which she wasn't ever doing again. If she lost track of the circus, they could go on without her.

Sonya told a small fib to Master Liam, claiming the stone carving without actual tools for it attracted
attention she couldn't afford. It did at least prevent any awkward questions of being asked, and she didn't mind lying for *Omertà*.

Actually, she had to figure out if Dying Will Flame use was actually covered by *Omertà* or if it was just something 'everyone knows' but wasn't quite true. If it was, then how the hell did Cherep get away with an innate use of Cloud Flames to survive any crashes in another life?

The Vindice weren't particularly concerned with if you knew the laws you were breaking or not, just if you broke them at all.

She wrote off India as a lost in terms of searching out the underworld, because she had already sped through half of the region the *Großes Volksfest* would be passing through. Which wasn't much of a pity, because the countryside was interesting enough she had more than enough to do.

India only had about a decade and most of another as an independent country anyways, the underworld was probably not quite settled enough for foreigners to poke their noses into it without risking said nose.

Additionally, her brother wasn't interested in letting her out of his sight any time soon. Which was cute of him, but not helpful.

He spluttered at being called so. "**CUTE!** Sonya, you just-

"Stop." She even helpfully held up a hand to get his mind the time to process things again. "Think. You know full well what am. This last month? Will become more and more of a common thing the longer I go on doing what I am trained for. You know this."

"...you can't go back to China."

"Probably not. And when you go back, you are going to have to be a little wary of what you say and to whom." The thief shrugged that off easily, scuffing her boots deeper into the sandy earth they were taking a break on from setting up the circus. "China is a big country, though. I could probably do one-day jumps across the border, but that would be my limit from now on."

Cherep slouched down next to her, gazing in the same direction at the distant city, digging his fingers into the same gritty ground. "I don't like it."

"I will be sure to convey your dissatisfaction to them the next time I see a Triad member."

Snorting, the stuntman let himself fall backwards to stare up at the starry night sky overhead. "Kick one for me instead, yeah?"

Sonya laughed lightly, leaning back to stare up at the same sight he was looking at. "I will. A bone-breaking one even. That will certainly show our displeasure at their audacity."

He kicked out his feet, so he was fully comfortable while they stargazed, and laced his fingers together behind his head. "So... someone missed my last few shows."

"Not my fault. You may blame Crina... or Master Liam."

His next show was the very next stop, and they were only about halfway into their first day in Bellary. Which was, from what she had seen of it on the circus' way into the city, a rather cool city built right on top of the bones of the old city.

The thief kind of wanted to go exploring but there was more than enough to do as is, so she was
putting it off until they broke down the circus again.

"I will be there this next time." Even if she didn't really like watching him performing.

A sharp tug on the back of her vest had her dropping back to lay supine as well.

"Perfect." Came her fellow Cloud's annoyingly cheerful voice. "You can bite your nails to the quick, maybe put some more finger-dents into a metal rail, and I'll... what did you call it? Get myself an adrenaline rush in front of spectators."

Sonya blindly thumped his chest with a free hand. "I said I was sorry."

"No, you didn't."

Blinking, she cast back for what she had snapped at him in a fit of pique. "Oh... no. I did not, did I? Sorry Cherep, I did not mean to take out my frustration on you."

A hand patted her on the head, which was rather annoyingly patronizing. Probably the point.

"It's alright, I had already known you're socially incompetent."

"...I will stab you."

"No, you won't."

"Want to bet?"

There was a pause, then Cherep scrambled to his feet and bolted. With a snort, Sonya pushed herself upright as well and followed him back to the fairgrounds at a more moderate pace.

India was hot country, after all.

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CLXIII (Thursday the 15th of June, 1967. Hubballi, Karnataka, Republic of India.)

Hubli-Dharwad was... strange. Sonya had never seen a twinned city before, and she frankly didn't understand how it worked at all.

However, her inability to understand didn't change the fact it was basically two cities in one massive area. While Dharwad was the administrative headquarters the city it was Hubballi, situated south-east a respectable distance away, that was the commercial center and business hub of north Karnataka.

The Russian thief was also somewhat suspicious of the recently established Hubli-Dharwad Municipal Corporation, which governed the entire thing. That had some of the signs of a mafia cover business, yet... it still seemed too civilian to be really connected to the underworld.

She wanted to poke it a little, so she could understand what it really was, but that also wasn't the best idea ever.

Frankly, she had already had way too much mafia involvement in her little 'hiatus' already, she didn't need more.

The Groβes Volksfest had set up in the more southern city, not only was it closer to their last stop but it did deal with the more trade-central and entertainment orientated services than Dharwad.
Due to the troubles up north, the circus was really only hitting the bigger cities on their way through to Saudi Arabia and then Egypt, Faris' home country. Which did mean longer hours for their performers, but more income was generated.

Sonya kind of wondered whose bright idea it was to go through the Mediterranean and northern Africa in the middle of the bloody summer, but she'd live.

It was very hard to avoid heat exhaustion or a heat stroke, given the mainly Russian and Scandinavian homelands of the bulk of the circus' members. A lot of them had already experience some bad sunburns before they even left China behind, and when she caught up to them it seemed as if Singapore had been just as bad.

There were buckets of water set aside for any performers stuck in the hot sun or performing for the big-top shows, and the biggest cost Master Liam was shelling out a crazy amount of money for was just water.

For the thief herself, she came to love her canteen.

The only thing her minor amount of Sun Flames did, as far as she could tell, was crank up her internal body temp a small bit. It made it hard for her to become sick, and winters weren't so bad for her aside the whole not liking the cold part, but hot and muggy temperatures like the middle of the Indian peninsula?

Sonya was a miserable thief, for sure.

While she watched Cherep gear up into his Skull persona, she was taking semi-regular sips from her personal water source. In between making her foster brother drink some himself, because he was wearing a large amount of padding, she wondered over the changes she was seeing.

It was... interesting, to see him go from a mechanically inclined, bit of a math geek, but more importantly understanding when she screwed up lovable dork of a foster brother into... a reckless and silly daredevil with maybe a bit of an ego that sorely needed to be popped.

Lisa didn't just teach Tatiana and Sonya how to act unlike themselves, Cherep had a flair for dramatics and drama the younger thief just didn't have that the older woman had adored developing.

'Skull' was a daredevil, of course because stunt-work was something only an adrenaline junky would attempt doing for a living. He had an ego, which both explained why he would boast about himself loudly and why he was performing for a crowd. It was also shallow and off-putting, which would hopefully steer away anyone too interested in the man under that mask.

Unfortunately, it also made him a reckless loud-mouth. The silliness made him seem untrustworthy, flighty. Someone that only knew mechanics of motorcycles because 'only the Great Skull can work on his stunt-bike', which would also prevent sabotage as well as allow him to tune his motorcycle to do all those tricks and hopefully catch any mechanical problems early.

She could understand it, and marvel over a mastery of acting she couldn't match... but she still didn't like 'Skull' too much.

Give her plain old Cherep any day of the week.

Skull flashed her a grin when she made a comment to that effect, putting on a heavy silver ring bearing an amethyst carved in the likeness of a skull. She had given him his first birthday in the circus and he loved it to pieces. "I know, bear with it. It's just for the moment, or really, for the show."
"Had I met you like this... I probably would have punched you in the mouth." Sonya informed him blandly, nudging his arm with his canteen until he obligingly took it.

"If you had talked to me at all, you mean." He commented with a self-deprecating laugh, taking a swallow and passing it back. "That's the point, really. It's enough not-me that, even with the hair and eye coloring staying the same, Cherep wouldn't be automatically connected to Skull. Hiding yourself in plain sight, Lisa called it."

The thief smirked a bit tiredly, settling in to watch him poke through the rest of the dressing-tent to see if there was anything else he could incorporate into his 'Skull' personality.

She did wonder how Skull came to be if she had never met the little Czechoslovakian run-away named Cherep, and... if Skull could ever shed being a reckless daredevil and just be Cherep in that other lifetime.

"A-HA!"

Glancing up, Sonya almost dropped her face in her palms out of sheer exasperation.

Skull was holding a tube of purple lipstick aloft, probably a bit of makeup left over from the Arabian Night themed trapeze show from yesterday. He was also beaming at it.

She didn't want to know why.

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CLXIV (Wednesday the 21st of June, 1967. Bombay, Maharashtra, Republic of India.)

"No," Sonya informed him flatly, "we are not doing that."

This year's midway rest-stop was in Bombay, which the Russian thief highly appreciated. Not only was it a highly-traveled international port city, it also had direct service to her other workstation.

Which was decently close for the time being according to the schedule it stuck to, in a few days it would take an additional day by ship to reach land again.

The circus' performers had an entire week off, allowed to go where they wanted and do what they wanted to do without too much worry of where they would live and eat during that time. Next week was a full week of performances and shows, but the rest was appreciated anyways.

They had to leave before monsoon season started, or risk getting set back weeks in traveling time.

Since she had the free time, she wanted to spend it how she preferred.

Especially since Saudi Arabia and most of the Middle East was dry country, meaning no alcohol. Jaq was way ahead of her, and he had given her an open invitation to go bar hopping with him.

Cherep let his knees hit the sand, hands folded before him in a begging pose. "Please? It looks so cool."

"You go learn to surf, I would much rather sit on the beach and watch." She would rather catch a ride into Mafia Land for a few days, but that kind of went without needing to be said.

Tatiana had said something weird was up when the foster sisters met up earlier, and she kind of wanted to know what. She hadn't had the time then, especially since dodging the Triads out of
Shanghai then in a close port to that city ate up nearly two weeks and caused her to miss the circus in Singapore.

He probably knew that and was determined not to let her out of his sight. That, or he knew she was itching for a decently connected bar to drink half her weight in liquor within.

Sonya was knocked out of her thoughts when he wrapped both arms around her right leg, hugging it to his chest and batting big purple eyes up at her. "Sonyyaaa... please? For me? I won't bug you for anything else, I promise."

"I call bullshit." No, not even his wet-kitty pout was getting her to budge on this. "You will bug me exactly fifteen minutes later, about whatever shiny thing happened to cross your path."

"Totally true, yeah. Although in this case the shiny thing would probably be sun glinting off the water and you could just push me in." Her fellow Cloud agreed with a sage nod, then shook his head quickly and yanked up on her leg. "Not the point, stop distracting me. Please learn to surf with meee...?"

Getting fed up with the touching, the thief tugged her leg out of his hold. "Will I get the rest of the week to do what I want then?"

"...that's not fair." He pointed out after a beat, obviously trying to think of something to stall her on. "One day for six? And this day's half over."

"Take it or leave it."

Cherep scrambled upright, because he was taller than her and used that to imply he was being the bigger person. "Three and three?"

"Two." Sonya countered tiredly, for some reason being reminded of her haggling with Renato about how much she'd owe him for a favor outside of his specialty.

Not surprising that her brother was turning out to be the cheaper option.

"Today and tomorrow?"

The thief sighed heavily, because that would mean the rest of her time-off was going to be spent on a boat. "Fine."

"...what are you going to do, anyways?" He questioned after half-pulling her down to the end of the Juhu Beach where some enterprising local was set up to teach tourists how to surf. "There isn't really a whole lot of time you've got, so..."

"Checking up on Tatiana. And probably Lisa."

Her brother came to a sudden stop and peered over his rapidly tanning shoulder at her. "Oh... well, in that case, you can have tomorrow."

"My thanks." Sonya quipped at his back dryly. "That would mean I could possibly rustle up another day free."

"So I get three?" The insufferably cheerful ass commented, as if he won something. "Awesome."

She sighed and punched his back lightly, then swept around him and headed for the little shack he wanted them to take lessons at while he choked on his little chortle.
A slightly wind- and sun-burned thief departed the dockyard of Mafia Land in the late afternoon the day after, heading straight for the condo the Zolotov Thieves Clan maintained.

Tatiana probably had class or lessons right now in all things nurse or doctor like, so the younger would catch up with the elder sister later.

Lisa was very happy to see her, especially since a result of her Sun Flame therapy had just been discovered and she had yet to share it with anyone other than her nurses.

"What are you hoping for, a boy or girl?" Sonya asked as she sank into the couch next to the older woman.

She gave the younger thief a sly smile as she lowered the book she had been reading, and a few bats of her eyelashes as she set it aside. "I, my dear, am just too happy this can happen at all. I won't care, so long as he or she is healthy and has all the correct toes, fingers, and appendages."

Arseniy wasn't in. Apparently, he had been recalled a bit earlier in the week for something the clan needed from him, so it was just her and Tatiana living in this wing for right now. There were a couple vory hanging around, but they were either on vacation or working on something and had very little to do with another vor's woman or foster daughter.

Especially since they valued their lives. One didn't have to be an active Cloud Flame user to be territorial or possessive, and Arseniy was both in spades.

"Is Arseniy hoping for something specific then?"

Lisa shook her head. "Sweetie, we came to terms with my inability to bear children long before we took on foster children for the clan. The fact you found us a way is just..."

"It wasn't me." Protested the blonde hesitantly, wary about hormonal mood-swings and the like which she would probably be woefully ill-equipped to deal with. "I only thought about it because of Tatiana, and it was Bjorn that allowed me to find a fully-trained Sun user. He, badly, needed a checkup anyways."

"But," the older Russian tacked on the end with a smirk, "you did the leg-work. Tatiana probably could've found it had she gone through with becoming a nurse anyways, but only long after the risks would outweigh the reward. Little hint for you, Sonya. You are a smart girl and when you produce results like this? We will appreciate it and show that."

Huffing a little, the thief sulked in her spot.

She felt kind of strange accepting praise for things she really had little to nothing to do with, especially this Sun Flame thing. She couldn't even use her own Sun Flames, in her head Tatiana deserved more credit since the older girl was likely learning how to do it for anyone else back in Soviet Russia who wanted the same thing but suffered from a similar problem.

However, she knew she wasn't going to win that argument. She didn't know anyone that won arguments with Lisa.

"How is Tatiana doing in her... is she becoming a nurse or a doctor?"
"You can ask her when she gets home," her foster mother suggested, taking a backwards glance at the clock mounted on the wall behind her, "sometime soon. So far, as much as I know, she's decided to start as a nurse and expand from there."

"So far as you know?" Sonya repeated dubiously. "Why don't you know? You always know."

"While I am flattered in your faith of my all-knowing mother abilities," she teased gently with a grin, "you girls don't tell me, or even Arseniy, everything anymore. Like say... Cherep's rather unique little Flame type that just so happens to not be that unique to us, apparently."

"...to be frank, that was because I was..."

"A suspicious little girl?" She finished when the thief trailed off, sporting what had to be a magnificent blush on her face from the feel of it. The older woman's grin turned into a wry smirk, and she patted the younger one on the knee. "I understand why you did it, you were protecting him the best you could from something that had once already hurt him. But you could've told us, Sonya. We wouldn't have let him be taken advantage of again if we had known."

"...more selfishly, I also didn't want to tear you two between what you should do and what the clan would've wanted. I didn't need to know that much about Flames back then, and what they could do, to understand how badly Cherep could've ended up if that got out."

The other Mafiya woman shook her head at her. "Not even then, sweetie. Arseniy would've murdered anyone that would have tried it. Even if they were our own, because then we wouldn't have wanted to be associated with them. Had that gotten out, it would've been sanctioned as well."

"Yes, well... I was a very messed up and confused little kid."

"More than that," she agreed with a sage nod, "you were so icy and quiet, at first we thought something really damaging happened to you before you found a way to us. You worried Arseniy quite a bit, you know."

That was so out of the blue of what Sonya had thought of her childhood, and out of character for the man she had thought her foster father as back then, that she stared at the brunette blankly for a long moment. "I did?"

"You did. Why do you think it took him only three years to find your biological father, when the man had successfully hid himself from slavers and the vor of Saratov when they were actively hunting for him, you, and his miserable whore of a wife? He only found the bitch's corpse halfway through that search, the vor of Saratov stopped looking when Arseniy swore to them you were with me."

She planted her burning red face in her hands, desperately resolving to smother that damnable childhood crush of hers somehow. Maybe if she repeated 'foster father' in her head enough times it would go away?

Lisa laughing at her didn't help much. "Your sister will be home in a little bit, and I think I'm going to make something for us to eat while we catch up with another. It's nice to see you again too, Sonya."

"Alright..." Sonya was just going to sit there and nurse a blush until it died down to acceptable levels.

That was, after all, how Tatiana found her little sister when she got home for the night.
"Why a bar?" Tatiana asked dryly as she followed her little sister.

"Why not a bar?" Countered the thief, sniffing in mock irritation as she waved down the bartender.

The Sun user noted that her fellow Russian didn't even have to speak, she got a strange mix of vodka and what looked to be coffee cream over ice with little fuss.

"White Russian," the bartender announced with little fanfare, and was paid accordingly to the prices listed on the blackboard behind him.

Sonya was a drinker, who knew?

...who also could smoke like a proverbial chimney.

The prospective nurse sighed, rubbing at her forehead and taking a seat in an out of the way booth across from her little foster sister.

Why couldn't anyone realize their habits were unhealthy and do away with them?

Drinking she could understand, they had stressful lives in the underworld, but the smoking?

Her fellow thief was at least a very conscientious smoker, if you didn't smoke she wouldn't nearby unless you were outside. She also refrained from smoking in buildings on most occasions unless it was indicated that it was fine to do, because she knew not everyone was a smoker or alright with the habit.

It was still incredibly bad for a person, as recent investigations Mafia Land's hospital was finding out as well as contemporary and unaffiliated ones in Britain.

Sonya sat her half-drained glass of alcohol down and peered over to her through the gloom of dim-bar lighting. "How is Lisa doing, anyways? She seems fine... but I thought this therapy thing would take longer."

"It was supposed to, but the early pregnancy took us all by surprise." Tatiana admitted, feeling rather grateful that at least someone else in the family understood that it was going to be risky. "Lisa won't hear of maybe terminating this one until she's in a better condition for childbearing."

"That's entirely understandable, given how unlikely she thought it would ever happen."

"That doesn't mean I don't worry."

The blonde snorted at her. "Of course not. But given her stubbornness, we'd probably make better use of our time planning for the worst and hoping for the best."

'Pot, meet kettle,' Thought the former safecracker wryly, examining her younger sister's almost grown features and committing the changes to memory.

Coming from someone that started her career at age nine just so she could decide what to do on a day-to-day basis, it sounded a little hypocritical.

Growing up as the older sister of a little criminal genius like Sonya had made Tatiana rather insecure sometimes. Which was stupid, because she was sure the Storm-Cloud didn't realize she had cast that
shadow over the Sun.

Nor what that would eventually mean for Tatiana herself.

She had felt inadequate often through their childhood, especially in lessons where her frightening maturity paid dividends in. Sonya applied herself faithfully to the lessons and skills taught to them for self-defense and combat, she preferred the dance lessons.

The blonde could crack a lock with picks in half the time it took her older sister, could pickpocket anyone that passed her, and kept herself out of trouble all at the same time. Said older sister got herself arrested taking a stupid dare from another girl in their neighborhood.

The Sun user's few areas where she could outshine the Storm-Cloud in had only soothed the hurt, not fixed it. History, safe cracking, and social settings. Things the other girl probably could do without rather happily.

Then Cherep happened.

Tatiana honestly owed her current relationship with that ever so icy and intimidating little foster sister to their foster brother. He highlighted a crack in that off-putting little girl, showing that Sonya wasn't quite so icy or cold.

Just uncertain, a bit lonely, and socially retarded.

The thought made the older Russian crack a helpless grin, because it was funny.

The younger woman had the skills, the maturity, a drive she didn't... but she also could not make a friend the normal way to save her life.

Poor, poor Cherep. He suffered the worst of that inability. Did a damn miracle with it, but still...

"What the hell is so funny?"

"Cherep. Aside him? Just a thought." Tatiana mustered a, probably shoddy, wry grin for her foster sister. Who was peering at her again, this time out of sheer confusion.

Probably caught the lie but couldn't understand why she was lying to her face.

Alas, their brother wasn't a miracle worker for all he pulled a minor one off once before. "Aside plans of depressing nature, what is up little sister?"

"I learned to surf yesterday." Sonya's expression said exactly what she thought of that, and it was enough out of the blue that Tatiana assumed surfing was their foster brother's suggestion for a hobby. "Besides, that? You said, when I was between China and Singapore, that something strange was going on."

"Yeah... I think I'm being stalked." The Sun Flame user admitted slowly, because even if she was sure there was someone following her this was still a relatively small island. It might've just been a coincidence.

Even after being informed of that, the Storm-Cloud looked dubious over any such coincidences.

"There... was... a group actively hunting Flame users. Even here. You've made no bones about being such a thing, and the Zolotovs' aren't... known to be combat orientated."

"You mean because we specialize in stealing things, not piking our enemies on stakes outside our
gates." She had run into that a couple times so far.

It was as prevalent as sexism in the mafia, somehow killers and men were more respectable than thieves or women no matter how you looked at it.

Her baby sister opened her mouth, blinked and jerked her head to the side, then sighed as she shut it without saying what she had been about to say. Instead, she jerked her thumb at a man with dark spikey hair who was rather casually sauntering up to the sisters. "This, Tatiana, is Renato Sinclair. You find out who's stalking you when Arseniy or I'm not here, he might be convinced to take care of it."

Tatiana blinked at the sudden change in their conversation. The man she had pointed out almost jerked to a stop. "You know her?"

Sonya turned to look up at the lanky, sharply dressed hunk she had pointed out. "Renato, this is my foster sister. Primakova Tatiana."

"You have more siblings?" Sinclair asked dubiously while giving the redhead an appreciative look over but turning back to the blonde easily enough.

"Since when do you know Russian?" She asked instead of answering that rather personal question.

He flashed her a sly smirk. "Since around when you learned Italian."

Tatiana... was fascinated. Were they flirting?

It was horrible. She couldn't look away.

No, wait. Sinclair was flirting, Sonya was merely being difficult. It might just be how the man acted around women, but...

...her little sister didn't realize the man was flirting with her, however casual it was or was not.

You couldn't pay for entertainment like this. She dearly wished she had a camcorder.

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CLXVII (Thursday the 22nd of June, 1967 continued. Mafia Land.)

"...another thing, it's a little creepy how you keep on finding me." Sonya continued to snipe at him, looking into the milky dregs of whatever she had been drinking. "Especially when I've not been on the island that long. Maybe an hour and a half, and you can track me down to a specific bar?"

Renato huffed at her admittedly valid complaints, snapping his fingers at the bartender to get them another round of drinks.

The redhead nurse seated across from the thief and the hitman, who he was very damn happy he hadn't gone with his first suspicion and just shot her, was still staring blankly at them.

Sisters, fuck.

That would explain why she trusted the other woman to pick up her mail.
At least he hadn't shot her sister. It would make it damn hard to get the blonde to trust him enough to go visit Shamal in Vongola territory if he had.

Thankfully he hadn't gone through with his latest idea either, to seduce the woman to figure out what she was doing with Sonya's mail. He'd staved off doing so because the thief managed a small visit that seemed just specifically to meet with the nurse earlier in the year.

That would've been... awkward.

He was sure he could've gotten around whatever reaction that would've caused, eventually, but women tended to be touchy about sharing men with their sisters. Unless it was their idea first.

"So... wait. This is that Renato Sinclair?" Spoke up the busty redhead after another long pause, finally actually blinking her baby blue eyes. "The one that's going to collaborate with me on the Sunny side of the research?"

...Sonya's sister was a Flame user as well. Renato wasn't sure why he was surprised.

Sun and Cloud, and the little thief still claimed that relationship being warmer than most others was an old wives' tale.

"That would be me, yes. I look forward to working with you, Miss Primakova." Purred her fellow Sun at her, but like always Sonya didn't even twitch and for some reason the nurse suddenly had a wicked grin.

"The pleasure is all mine, I assure you." It wasn't flirty, but it was still wicked, that grin. The woman turned it onto her little sister. "Sonya, forgive me for this."

Tatiana burst out laughing, almost slumping across the table while she did so.

Eying her shaking form, the younger Russian shrugged when Renato shot her a confused look. "I think she either might be coming down with something, or the strain of her studying is getting to her. It's the second time she's gone strange on me tonight."

"I heard the medic's course at the hospital was hellish." The hitman offered uncertainty.

It was the first time a woman had laughed after he flirted with her, and he found he didn't like the experience.

"S-speaking of..." Offered the nurse unsteadily, sliding herself out of her side of the booth. "I really should get back to that. Sonya, I'll see you later tonight. Sinclair, I've got the Sun's version of her research journal and you can find me at the hospital most days."

"Night Tatiana." The thief offered to her back, more interested in the refreshed drinks a server brought them.

Renato merely offered a nod to her, a little unsettled still.

"So, you told her about me, but didn't tell me about her?" It wasn't surprising, but it still had to be said.

She scoffed at him and his weak complaint. "I trust her more than I had you for the longest time. She knew I knew you not too long after I asked you about a little favor. To be honest, you two probably would've met this winter anyways. Especially since you seem to want to be let in on my research efforts."
It was a little strange to hear Sonya talk in her native Russian. It was faster than her English, and a lot less old-fashioned or proper. Sort of like suddenly hearing a queen swear like a sailor.

Interesting, but a little jarring at first.

"...someone is stalking my sister. A year ago, it was me. While I think you took care of whoever it was stalking me, can you look out for her?" She asked quietly, more to her drink than to him, when the woman in question she was concerned over was well out of the bar. "With the nurse courses, I'm not entirely sure if she can watch her own back and the security I'd trust to do it instead won't be staying for the entirety of her studies."

Well... Sonya's sister had a good eye. A few months of tailing someone would make them suspicious, if they were paying attention. The hitman nodded anyways, even if the culprit was himself.

It wouldn't hurt anything to agree, would make her think better of him, and since that was so... "Shamal wants you to visit."

The thief's lips twisted down, showing she didn't like the suggestion at all. "He can't come here?"

"I... would rather not, truthfully."

She sighed, accepting that as a reason easily enough. Shamal was Renato's little Mist ward, security was his to control.

"Maybe... sometime this winter. I can't stay long right now. I'm actually leaving tomorrow. And since we're probably spending Christmas here, but I've got a fair few major things to handle next year that can't wait any longer."

"Understandable." The fact that she was considering it at all was enough for now. "You know... Vongola hosts a ball on Christmas..."

"A ball." Sonya blinked as she repeated that, then shot him a rather acidic look that questioned his sanity. "A... Vongola Ball..."

"I am, unfortunately, forced to attend myself." Renato agreed sourly with the feelings she managed to press into her statements. "But then I could put you up in the guest quarters. Much nicer than any old hotel, and probably safer as well. A lot of people will be trying to kiss up to Timoteo Vongola, you could probably slip on through and see Shamal without much fuss to deal with."

She didn't look remotely sold on that idea. Skeptical, if he was pressed to be honest.

"...let me think about that one."

That was probably a no.

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**CLXVIII (Sunday the 2nd of July, 1967. Bombay, Maharashtra, Republic of India.)**

Sonya didn't understand Lisa's smirking, or Tatiana's.

She was very confused when she left Mafia Land behind, wondering what the two of them were sharing behind her back that made them so amused.
She would've liked to know. Good news was always appreciated.

Cherep insisted they go surfing when she reached Bombay, and it was only the thief's long years training in ballet and a more recent grounding in circus acrobatics that allowed her not to embarrass him in front of the more skilled natives of India by wiping out frequently.

Surfing wasn't really her hobby. Her foster brother was, unfortunately for her, good with any kind of sport put in front of him. She would've liked that kind of skill, but frankly she preferred less risk to her off-time leisure pursuits.

There was more than enough risk as it was in her life.

The week of circus performances started out as last year's had, it was long hours in hot weather entertaining people who ran the gamut of happy to sourly begrudging to be there. Muggy beach weather this time, but the added water made it all seem worse somehow.

Sonya didn't really mind, she could care less what the crowd thought if they paid, which probably meant she was a bad showgirl. Maybe a good one.

She couldn't decide.

The problem with week-long showings of the Großes Volksfest came with a price the thief hadn't expected.

Cherep had an uncommonly good luck with his performances, as he had gone almost half a year without so much as a hiccup in his ever-developing stunt work. It stood to reason that when he pressed it for nearly an entire week, something finally went wrong.

She didn't hear the crash, but the screams caught her attention fast. She blessed the fact she was a roving draw girl for Crina and promptly abandoned her duties, bolting for the big-top.

The 'Great and Glorious Skull' had a show scheduled for that very moment, and she wasn't surprised his luck finally ran out.

It was... horrible, really. Aside the panic in the stands she ignored as useless to the situation, which the ring announcer was rather fruitlessly trying to quell with rapid reassurances in several dialects of the native language, his motorbike was lodged halfway into the front of the stands that were thankfully raised high enough to avoid getting someone else injured.

Her brother, or rather Skull, was laid out on the 'landing' side of the ramps set up. He also wasn't moving.

Sonya flatly ignored the closest thing the circus had to a medical professional, brushing him aside and crouching down next to her foster brother. His ring was still gleaming strangely, so she knew he was alright.

Or alive. Mostly alive.

...somewhat alive?

One of those.

Maybe if she repeated it enough to herself she would believe it more.

With a lack of things to do anything remotely helpful for this situation she instead straightened out his
limbs, removed his helmet, and pressed a finger to his skull ring. Even if it scorched the pad of her index finger it was a sign that Skull's Flames were still working, and he was still alive.

After this, they were going to figure out exactly how one Flame user gave another a boost of Flames. If only to give her something to do instead of bear witness.

Fingers twitched under hers, and Sonya pinched the skin of his wrist harshly. "Get up. Now."

"...normally, one adds 'please' when asking for something." He cracked an eye open, and the thief rather blessed the fact the medic had left in a huff to fetch Master Liam and probably an actual doctor.

The stuntman's already purple eyes were effused with Cloud Flames. Which was creepy to look at, glowing purple eyes, until he blinked it away.

"...help me up?"

She wordlessly stood, pulling him up when he held up a hand.

Skull heaved himself up using her first as a lever then as a crutch, a hiss of pain escaping him when his ribs left the ground. The announcer seized on his 'recovery' quickly, and the panicking crowd finally calmed down now that they 'knew' they hadn't seen a man die in front of them.

Sonya felt a little cheap, or maybe used, standing next to the stuntman that could have died a little just now. The man in question waved a hand at the crowd to reinforce the idea he was fine and jostled her with his other arm that was thrown across her shoulders.

"I'm fine, Sonya. Perfectly fine. Calm down."

"Who said I am not?"

"Your eye coloring. Which is as purple as mine are." He informed her quietly, squeezing her in a sideways hug lightly. "Calm down before we have to have an awkward conversation with Master Liam about things of a fiery nature."

She just really wanted to murder whatever harmed her brother, which wasn't possible because Skull did it to himself. She couldn't even 'kill' his bike, it was likely not going to be removed from the stands in one piece as it was.

Frustrated, she instead jabbed him hard in the ribs then started pulling him away from all the damn eyes that paid to watch him cheat death.

Besides a painful sounding grunt, which she did regret drawing from him, the immortal stuntman didn't complain.

"You realize we may have to have a conversation of a fiery sort with Master Liam? They likely went to fetch you a doctor."

"Luckily, my talents don't actually spread to clearing up bruises instantly. There will be more than enough to explain a nasty tumble… just they won't be sore, and I won't have cuts or any reason for the blood."

Sonya opened her mouth to say 'good' but changed her mind before she could sound the first syllable. "Your bike is a loss."
"...yeah, I was afraid of that."

"...bloody nose to explain the blood?"

Skull peered down at her warily from the corner of his eye. "Why do I have the feeling you'll enjoy that?"

"...probably because I will."

---

**CLXIX (Monday the 3rd of July, 1967. Bombay, Maharashtra, Republic of India.)**

They did have to have an intensely uncomfortable conversation with Master Liam.

Uncomfortable in a different way than the thief had been counting on.

The doctor yanked from a nearby hospital scolded the unrepentant Sonya in heavily accented English for moving Skull after a 'nasty spill from a motorized bike', but since the stuntman wasn't showing any signs of broken bones or even a concussion he had to leave it at that.

The circus' medic, who she learned was named Vincent, got dismissed after marveling over the fact that a broken arm he knew her brother had wasn't there.

Master Liam turned a puzzled frown on the two of them. *Broken arms that disappear in mere minutes, a fall from thirty feet at high speed that didn't kill young Cherep... I suppose there is a reasonable explanation for this, yes?*

"Depends... on your definition of reasonable." The purple haired stuntman started sheepishly, glancing at the very silent thief sitting next to him. *I didn't know you had an estimated height for that."

*Léonard is a good friend of mine, I have not known him to make mistakes in all the years he has worked for me. He knows the height of the ramps you use, as well as the height of the stand's lower railing.* The circus master informed them both easily enough, naming the announcer Sonya knew he substituted for when the man became sick or his voice became hoarse. *He was sure you were dead, or at least grievously injured; ½ and yet, here you are. Marked, but not broken. Unlike your charming motorcycle, which I am informed is very badly mangled.*

"About that..." Cherep started uneasily, scratching at the side of his jawline where purple stubble was starting to grow in. *I suppose you could say... I'm what one would call a... bit... gifted."

*A great gift indeed... for physical harm to not touch you."

*One thing, Master Liam.* She finally interjected, slowly rising to her full height. She had been sitting on her brother's cot, but now moved herself so she was between the circus master and him. *Cherep may be immune to physical damage... but you are not."

A flash of lavender fire, and then Liam had to tilt his head back in order not to stick himself on the pick end of her Bec de Corbin.

*Any harm comes to him due to you, and you will wish for a death he cannot sustain."

The older man, strangely enough, smiled warmly at her. *So, I was right. You are here to protect...*
your brother in more ways than one. I admire that, you know."

Sonya blinked at him blankly, a bit more than just bemused. What part of her threatening him did he miss?

"Err... Sonya? You... uh, should probably put that away." Cherep tugged on the end of the staff part of her weapon, flicking his eyes warily around to the canvas walls they were hidden behind.

"Little sister Sonya, you need not fear I will lead your brother astray." Nodding grandly when she did finally take the sharp end of her weapon away from his neck, their circus master glanced between them considering first the still armed thief then the stuntman. "But I take it from that little comment of yours that you will not be staying to ensure it yourself."

"...I cannot." She confirmed shortly, still highly suspicious of his behavior and lack of reaction."I have, in the process of certain things, made myself too noticeable to be easily hid or ignored. Cherep may be able to remain free, but as for myself..."

"I am a thespian, my dear. You need not say more, for the unspoken sometimes is louder than what we say. Which is why I was not worried when you held something sharp and pointed at my throat, you see. Your body language said you did not wish to actually harm me." Liam confided to her cheerfully, then looked at his functionally immortal stuntman. "As for you, young Cherep? I am greatly relieved we will never have to arrange your funeral. A bit of warning would not have been amiss, but I was certain that your sister wasn't the only one hiding strange and unusual talents. Even before China, if I must be honest."

"You are taking this... surprisingly well."

His cheerful mien gained a bit of a mischievous edge to it after Cherep's comment. "Unlike what most of the... I suppose we shall call it the world under, seems to believe... the stage was the first place unique and breathtaking skills of wonder and talent first appeared. Rather Misty such things were back in the day, I am lead to believe."

Sonya blinked at him, then at her foster brother. Who looked to be trying hard not to laugh.

Fucking Mists. Dramatic, flighty, aggravating, annoying Mists.

She let her Bec de Corbin's Propagation go, palming her face instead.

...how far back would she have to look to find wildly popular 'illusionist' stage magicians? Mystics with surprising skills in strange fire arts?

Damn it all to hell, wasn't one of the future Arcobaleno something along those lines?

The Mist one?

She really should've seen that one coming.

"How long can you stay with us, little sister?"

"...until the end of fall."

Liam nodded thoughtfully. "And... when were you going to inform us we needed to replace you?"

"...this fall."
The man's smile was wry that time. "I see. I am sure I have taken up more than enough of your time. Miraculous escape of injuries or not, I am sure at least one of you is tired."

"Well..." Cherep offered when the circus master swept out after a courtly little bow. "That was... interesting."

"Suspicious."

"Interesting." He corrected with a measure of asperity, slumping back onto his cot. "You need to get out of that world more often, Sonya. You're always so mistrustful of everything when you spent too much time in it."

"...I would rather my suspicions be unneeded than need suspicion but not apply it." She informed him quietly, playing absently with the slowly shrinking polearm and prying out the cracking spinel gemstone. "Also... he knew."

"Yeah."

"I…. do not know if you can tell him more or not. I would like to check on that before you do so."

Her still alive, it's fine brother yawned heavily and stretched out on the medical cot. "...sure."

She quietly tried not to panic.

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CLXX (Friday the 7th of July, 1967. Dammam, Eastern Province, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.)

Dammam, Saudi Arabia, was exactly as hot and dry as Sonya had assumed it would be.

She wanted to know who it was that suggested this route to Master Liam, then punch them in the face a few times. She was from the icy north, the desert wasn't for the likes of her.

"So... were you ever going to tell me you weren't staying?" Crina asked, her voice as dry as the desert stretching before the circus' intended route.

"Aw, Crina. Don't tell me you're going to miss me." The thief dropped the chest of random 'mystic' things the old gypsy used to tell fortunes next to her, then wiped the sweat off her forehead under her head-scarf thing.

The one thing she did not like about the Middle East was the clothing.

Abaya cloaks were black, and she wanted to know why they had to be. It was a hellish color for a desert people to wear.

Yellow would've worked for her, hell even Cherep's favorite color purple if it was light enough.

The Groβes Volksfest couldn't open when nearly half its troupe weren't allowed to do away with the covering clothing all women had to wear while in the country. They also couldn't pretend all those women were men instead, which was something someone suggested, because those women did not have the contours to suggest so.

Meaning this would be a two-day long trip to Egypt instead.

Thankfully it would be on a train at least as far as Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, but then they
would have to hire trucks to get them to Jeddah. A day on a boat to cross the Red Sea, and then they'd be in Egypt. Faris' home country. Jaq was a little sad they weren't going to go south enough to reach his this time around, but with how much she had risked heat stroke so far she couldn't really say the same.

After Egypt it would be Greece, and after a month or so spent there... Italy.

Which, Sonya wasn't looking forward to.

The thief hadn't investigated India's underworld, and she wasn't going to even try to peek at Saudi Arabia's. This country was harsh enough on their women she just didn't feel comfortable trying while she was with such a large target. Greece maybe, but then Italy's underworld may end up being even worse than anything Saudi Arabia could have.

...maybe it had settled down a little?

She couldn't really risk pissing off Vongola as she probably had the Chinese Triads. Renato knew not only her foster siblings, but he had a fairly good idea of where and when she usually was around certain places.

While she would not bet on either, the hitman or Arseniy, she was still pretty sure she wouldn't like the result of any kind of fight between the two of them.

Blinking, the thief looked back at the old gypsy woman when the silence stretched a bit too long.

"I'll miss your alcohol, not that you had much this time around." Crina offered after another long moment, managing to sound sincere.

It probably had to do with the fact they couldn't see the other's face, so if there was smirking or strange faces being pulled neither could tell.

"I'll probably stock up once we hit Cairo, and you can probably spend the last half of the year soured out of your mind on wine." Sonya admitted candidly. "So how about now that you know that?"

"I really will miss you, girl. Best apprentice I ever had."

"...that you never had."

"True enough." The old woman gave an exaggerated shrug and nod, so the motion was clearly understandable. "But with me, you were mostly out of the way and fairly self-sufficient. You two turned out a lot better than anyone else Master Liam ever took a risk on."

She turned sharply to look hard at her, who waved a robed arm rather gracefully even under the hot body-cloak that got in the way a lot. "Don't be so jumpy. You knew, didn't you?"

"I had wondered why Jaq was so friendly to someone he could barely string a sentence together to talk to, yes."

"And now you're leaving your dratted, overly cheerful brother to us twisted carnie types, how do you feel about that?"

"...a lot better about it, actually."

Her master of all things mystical paused in moving another load of things she generally used for
'creating ambience' and looked up at the thief. "You sure you can't stay? I think we might actually end up getting along one of these days."

"Be still my beating heart." Sonya muttered dryly, snagging the crate of silks and crystals the gypsy was paused over when she barked a laugh. "I am sure. If I didn't, things like China would start to happen more and more often. You all will have enough trouble just with Cherep."

"The more I hear about whatever it is you two of you share, the more I dislike it. What the hell is it about the two of you snot-nosed little brats that is so damn important?"

"Crina, you saw me carve your name into a rock with a fragile bit of crystal. You know full well what it is that Cherep cheated himself out of. Now think of what not-entirely-legal people could do with abilities like that."

The old woman paused, pressing a hand to her back and stretching out her spine as she stared up at the blue sky above them. "...if you need a few months, you've got a spot with me open for however long I last."

"I'm sure you'll be annoying anyone around you with your alcoholism and cryptic bullshit for years yet, you old bat."

She... would probably take her up on that. Sometime in the future.
CLXXI (Thursday the 13th of July, 1967. Qena, Arab Republic of Egypt.)

Faris was happy to be mostly 'home'.

Nearly everyone else?

Not so much 'happy' as 'disgruntled and overheated'.

Being a traveling circus based mainly out of Soviet Russia meant they did avoid some of the strident anti-western discrimination abounding around these lands, but the communist aspect of the operation earned them a very stern look over on their way into the region anyways.

The southern portion of the United Arab Republic, which she knew better as just Egypt, was another mostly-religiously mandated male dominated country. Since the major religion in the region was still Islam, it meant that half of the circus' troupe still needed the black over-robets that 'protected' or 'shielded' their femininity.

In the middle of a desert.

Sonya knew respecting the major religions in different parts of the world was something they had to do, but her tolerance for doing so was rapidly drying up. At least in Egypt it wasn't so uncommon for women to work, so the circus was still performing unlike the Saudi Arabian leg of their journey.

The trapeze artist were shouldering the bulk of the issues, especially since they couldn't wear Abaya while performing in mid-air. Instead, they had to wear wrist-to-ankle clothing and head wraps that didn't flatter their figures unlike how they normally dressed for such acts.

Again, dark or layered clothing in a north Sahara Desert region meant the circus was still shelling out a phenomenal amount of money for water alone.

Once they hit the Nile region, since they would be traveling up it downstream to Cairo, that dress code relaxed a small bit. One of the rare few things she would thank insensitive tourists for.

Crina got them both pass the worst issues by breaking out the bulk of her cotton or silk patterned scarves, which they could drape around themselves in a similar fashion of the Abaya cloaks. Her light-fingered apprentice greatly appreciated it, because the old bat's predominantly brightly colored swaths of cloth shed heat instead of retained it.

For herself, despite the issues she had needing someone male with her in most of any social situation, Sonya was more interested in yet another culture that had a more 'dominant' underworld just under the surface.

Unlike India, where at most she caught a glimpse or two but had to leave them alone, she could spot the occasional thief or... someone that reminded her of her native country's vor in most crowds. She was also pretty sure the port of Marsa Alam, where the Großes Volksfest entered the country, had at least three black markets the circus passed by getting out of the city.

The apparent 'hot' items of them?

Ancient Egyptian artifacts. From sandstone tablets inscribed with hieroglyphs to small jade-inlaid scarab beetle charms, elaborate canopic jars to papyrus scrolls.
Of which, Sonya was at least somewhat sure at least half or more were fakes. She dealt with them once and had a very interesting time waiting for the artifacts she stole to be confirmed as the real deal instead of cheap reproductions. How long it took to be verified as genuine also suggested that either the field was too unknown or swamped for many experts to be ‘corrupted’ and trusted with hot items.

That raised an interesting detail to muse on. How much did the underworld of Egypt appreciate, or not as the case might be, the fact their history was becoming such a major ‘trade’?

They had to know, seeing as in the forty years since the Pharaoh Tutankhamun's tomb had been found there had been a score or more different 'archeological digs' that peppered their sandy countryside. The Soviet Storm-Cloud had dealt with some ancient Egyptian items in her sporadic thieving, meaning they were likely still sought after.

As for right now, most archaeologists were little more than tomb raiders. Very little respect was being paid to the dead, most if not all 'treasure' found went to either paying their bills or sent back to various museums, and they all had wildly different methods to document their digs.

There was a change being trumpeted, but it was still something 'in-progress' with a fair few detractors to such a thing.

Unfortunately, Sonya didn't have the freedom to figure it out now since while the circus had been in Bombay the Six Day, Third Arab-Israeli War, had been going on.

Which... she hadn't really recalled if it happened in Rachel's life.

It might have, but Sonya hadn't known it was coming. She did recall that before America got into the Middle East there was large amount of 'conflict', and if this was that then conflict was a rather unassuming term for the difficulty.

Given the already beleaguered Jewish persecution happening while the Großes Volksfest made its way farther and farther into the country, it wasn't so much conflict as it was on-going open hostility.

She hadn't really had an opinion of the Jewish people and what they were doing ever since the Second World War, she had winced over the greater European death toll that happened due to Hitler's assassination but didn't follow that thought through to a very hostile or aggravated Jewish community.

Which was, apparently, turning on themselves somewhat.

The mess of reports on the Egyptian side of the conflict was mostly biased and slanted on the topic of the 'surprise and unwarranted attack', which was par for the course. Given that United Arab Republic had lost territory to that surprise attack, the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan losing just as much, it meant there was a fair amount of backlash against the native Jewish groups.

Rather, the native Jewish locals that hadn't for whatever reason pulled up their roots and fled to Israel to begin with.

There was still a very large number of them, in fact the rash of counter-conflict arrests were starting to creep up to half a thousand in number. It would probably get worse before it got better, but for the time being it was still in the 'worst' end of that.

It did mean that a circus troupe going through the region was a semi-favorable distraction, if rather heavily scrutinized for any positive Jewish sentiments or communist propaganda.
Which the thief did wonder about, now that she knew the people she was working with rather well for mere acquaintances.

Sonya had thought Master Liam was German but given exactly how good of an actor she had recently found him to be... that could be entirely incorrect.

Given her coworkers rant the gamut of Romanian gypsies to African strongmen, Egyptian sword jugglers, Czechoslovakian stuntmen, and Chinese acrobats... it was entirely possible 'Liam' wasn't what he appeared to be.

CLXXII (Wednesday the 19th of July, 1967. Minya, Arab Republic of Egypt.)

Cherep had a habit of tasting the local cuisine as much as he could.

A habit which Sonya didn't entirely appreciate, to be honest. Especially when he dragged her into it.

The less 'exotic' dishes he wanted to at least taste she didn't mind trying, different meats were okay and sometimes strange combinations of foods turned out interesting, but she drew the line at truly strange food items.

Even as Rachel, she had never tried pickled pig's feet. Which was a southern United State delicacy she once had the option to taste. If she wasn't going there, she wasn't trying the rest of the stranger bits of cooked or not animals or delicacies available around the world.

There was the sheep's head in Norway, which she could've gone her whole life quite happily without knowing how that tasted, to the recent crocodile meat back in Edfu she didn't really mind all that much. Crina had happily informed her that the thief had missed out on the monkey brains and scorpion soup, which her brother had apparently tried just before the circus left China, and the dung beetles from when they got into India.

Sonya would try the maḥshi ḥamām, pigeon stuffed with wheat and spices, but he could keep the fried locust.

She was damn sure dying of food poisoning would be a fairly uncomfortable experience for her fellow Cloud, especially since she wasn't even sure if that would be nixed by his Cloud Flame fueled immunity to death.

Given Cherep's rather bitter, twisted smirk when she mentioned the possibility?

He probably knew he was at least mostly safe from ingesting anything unusual... or at least would survive it.

How he knew that was another thing she didn't dwell on. Renato still had to get back to her about if or if not that once-partial controlling Mafia Land group had operations in Czechoslovakia or not.

That didn't mean Sonya was at all sure of her ability to mimic his immunity at all, especially since she hadn't had the time to suffer a major break and then try Propagating an internal fix.

The stuntman had a comparable difficulty in learning her ability, while he could use her 'super strength' with enough concentration it left him with odd bruises on his hands she never got. Of course, with his immunity to physical damage, he never really kept said 'bruises' for very long, but it was something they both noted.
She had never bruised herself with her ability. She'd sprained an uncountable number of wrists and suffered cuts when whatever she was doing shattered on her but hadn't noticed any bruising.

Since her being able to use his ability was rather iffy, she wouldn't be trying fried dormouse meat patty-thing either.

She wasn't even sure where he got that.

"Street vendor, about two turns down that-a-way," Cherep even helpfully pointed out where with his skewer of bugs, "he said it was something the old Romans ate once."

"Yeah... you got food from a back-alley vendor and did not even question why he was being 'frank' about what his food was made from?" Sonya picked another bit of shredded pigeon and a forkful of stuffing to eat, eyeing his meal of mouse and bugs before trying to maneuver it under her face veil. "Still not touching it."

"It's not bad. Kind of crunchy."

"I wasn't talking about the bugs."

Her brother inspected his shish kebab of insects thoughtfully. "What's the difference between this and sea-bugs like crab?"

"With sea-bugs, they are large enough we can at least clean them before eating." She eyed the same thing he was examining. "With those? You are not only eating them, but what they have eaten recently, whatever else is included in their biology, and what waste it did not manage to rid itself of before getting skewered."

"...thank you so much for that lovely thought."

"You are welcome."

The purple stuntman kept eyeing his food, but eventually shrugged and popped a few more of the bugs into his mouth. Then he eyed the fried mystery-meat in pita bread while he chewed.

Crunched, actually. Lisa would be appalled to be able to hear him eat.

"What are you going to do about your motorcycle, Cherep?"

The question distracted him from his 'fried dormouse', which she really didn't want to see him try.

"Master Liam said that even if I could replace it right away, I wasn't doing any stunts for another month or so." He shrugged that off, only a slight frown suggesting he wasn't happy with that. "For the 'illusion' of recovering from any possible injuries I might have gotten. Going straight back to trick driving after even a 'nasty spill' would've been... not so smart."

That was surprisingly conservative of Liam, given the fact he knew full well the stuntman didn't need any such thing. Cherep had defaulted back to a mechanic for this 'recovery' period, but Sonya had only assumed it was because he had yet to replace the bike he used.

"So, in Greece or Italy I'll have to start looking to replace my poor motorbike."

"Do you have enough for that?" She was honestly curious, because as members of a communist circus they weren't paid a whole lot.

Most of the money generated was put into the circus itself, which was home for a lot of the members
and took care of the living costs for most if not all the performers. There was an allowance given out, especially when passing through capitalist dominated countries, but it wasn't all that much.

"Eh... so long as I buy something second-hand, sure. There's also the scrap metal they got out of my bike before they junked it, which was a neat and tidy sum for the steel and iron that went into it." Her fellow Cloud suddenly blinked at his hands, which now clutched her half-finished pita sandwich of pigeon with stuffing and not his mouse meat patty.

Sonya discreetly tipped the mystery meat into the gutter she was sitting next to, put away her fork for the times she didn't want to mess around with local methods when trying to eat something, and blinked innocently at her foster brother when the silence stretched on long enough. "What?"

He looked at her, skeptically inspected the food now in his hands, and shrugged then took a bite. "You sure you don't want some bugs?"

"I... will be fine, thank you."

CLXXIII (Friday the 28th of July, 1967. Cairo, Arab Republic of Egypt.)

Cairo was a lot different than most of the Middle East the Groβes Volksfest had gone through so far.

Part of it was the fact that most of the cities on the Nile were mostly textile manufactory orientated or food shipping ports, another was the fact that most casual travelers didn't explore much of the Nile River past Cairo.

Another part of it might have been the fact that until recently it had been under British rule, which meant they still had a few British laws on the books.

The Nile River Delta also held a vastly different ecology than just the river's banks had proven to hold, because the desert didn't start a mile or two away and made everything still scorching hot and dry.

Mostly, it was because the women of the circus were no longer required to wear the hot, full body concealing Abaya cloaks. There was a cheer that went up when Master Liam announced they could finally do without them.

They couldn't strip down to the bare basics, as a lot of the girls were itching to do, but they didn't need to conceal everything anymore. Cairo was more tolerant, or more immune, to women not following the Muslim requirements of concealing themselves than most of the country.

It wasn't exactly a wise thing to do, but an allowed one. When leaving the fairgrounds that the circus set up on it was still recommended to be fully covered but wasn't required.

More than the dress restrictions being lifted, Sonya was concerned by the reports of what the United Arab Republic was claiming was the reason for the previous month's' small-scaled warfare.

Namely, that they had received faulty intelligence from the Soviet Union that Israel was mustering up for an attack on their country. Which seemed to be correct from their standpoint, but it was starting to become apparent it was the Egyptian movement to militarize Sinai in response to that information that started the conflict.

That meant those that had a nationality like Sonya's or even a traveling Russian circus like the
Großes Volksfest were not very popular now in Egypt's capital city. It was going to take a bite out of the running costs of the circus, and she was rather sure Master Liam would have to dip into emergency funds to get them out of the country in as little as half a month from now.

It was also the point the Russian finally got into contact with the local underground. She found the underworld pretty much matched the civilian side, if only different in the shades of legal it had to it. There was massive black-market trading, not so much smuggling going on unless whatever was destined for the more interior African countries, the expected but rampant petty crime, and a whole lot of fraud and counterfeiting going on.

Tax evasion and money laundering was apparently another popular side-job for the local underground, she got several offers to help her do it before her first night of bar hopping was done with.

Human trafficking was still a bit of a problem, but then again Saudi Arabia's civilian government only just this last decade did away with the practice of owning slaves entirely. Sonya wasn't sure if that was the remnants of the previous 'legal' routes still trying to gasp out a last breath or two or not, but she didn't really care to find out either.

Again, drawing that kind of attention to the circus she would be leaving her foster brother in the care of was not a great idea. If she took a hard look at what the hell they were doing, attracting attention might end up as the least of her worries.

Instead of possibly getting herself into a fair bit of hot water, the Soviet Storm-Cloud took up Jaq's offer of barhopping with him. Which turned out to be a semi-hidden request to be taught how to move through underworld hotspots and mafia bars, something she wouldn't have minded teaching the ebony-skinned strongman.

He had been a semi-decent friend to her, in a way. Initial inability to properly communicate or not for most of their time as acquaintances.

Sonya wasn't sure if it was her mafia connections that let her brush the implied 'babysitter' insult of his friendship off or if she really did just appreciate the fact that Master Liam had someone watched who he really should have not trusted in the least. Even if it was herself, that kind of caution was something she could appreciate.

The fact that the 'someone' set to watch her had been Jaq wasn't the strongman's fault... but not the reason she turned down the possibility of teaching the man to gather the information she could.

After all, the thief still had to respect *Omertà*. As much as the idea appealed to her, and it did if only because this was Cherep's childhood dream she had inadvertently set him upon so Jaq being able to gather up mafia gossip and news would help safeguard that, she couldn't afford to do so.

There might be a few questions she would've liked to ask a Vindice officer, but only if she wasn't the one getting arrested at the time.

The only way that would work was if the African native took up the Vow of Silence himself, and he wouldn't if only because he would likely report everything he heard to Liam. Who was another that Sonya was sure would not be taking a Vow of his own.

She paused as something new occurred to her, a shot glass of vodka halfway to her lips even as Jaq ordered them a new bottle.

...did Cherep ever take that Vow himself?
The thief took hers at nine, Tatiana at twelve... but she couldn't recall if he had.

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**CLXXIV (Thursday the 3rd of August, 1967. Cargo ship hold, Mediterranean Sea.)**

"**Was I supposed to?**" Cherep scratched at his shaggy purple hair, which was turning a bit on the lavender side in response to the several months spent in the middle of a desert region. "I didn't, Arseniy asked if I wanted to, but I said no at the time."

Well... Sonya really, really hoped that Dying Will Flames and everything about them weren't protected by *Omertà*.

If it was, then she had violated the fuck out of it already telling her brother the bulk of what she knew.

"Sonya?" He prompted cautiously while she adjusted to that fact. "Is it that much of a deal?"

"I... do not know. Yet." It *could be*, but it could also be a bit of a loophole. If the thief couldn't teach Jaq how to pick up underworld news, she might just be able to teach her *brother* how to do it. "I think you might be covered by me... or Lisa and Arseniy's vows, so try not to screw us over for the time being until I can sort that out."

Her fellow Cloud made a face at her as he tapped a random rhythm out on the brick wall he was leaning against. "I'll be sure to try. Not too, that is."

Crossing the Mediterranean Sea had not taken them very long, it was just loading and off-loading that took up the bulk of any transit time.

Master Liam had even hired several locals from Alexandria's dockside to hasten the unloading once they reached Athens, Greece.

That smacked of several shades of suspicious, because that was a first as far as the thief was aware. She was also pretty sure that while the women *did* make up almost half of the circus' troupe, there hadn't been nearly as many of them when the circus *entered* Egypt. Even if she could not, for the sake of her own life, put more than a handful of names to certain faces.

Also... *Sonya* was supposed to be the youngest performer in the *Großes Volksfest*. Who's not-entirely-accurate paperwork claimed seventeen as her age when in fact she only 'officially' had sixteen years in this body. The little kids you could glimpse now and again if you looked hard enough weren't there when the thief boarded the boat.

So... Jewish refugees, more than likely.

It was a very neat little operation. While said 'dockworkers' were a bit nervous, that could be anything from leaving the United Arab Republic to being this far out to sea for the first time. The older women of the circus had 'congealed' around the newcomers and were perhaps chatting a bit too casually with each other.

However, it was the younger children that had been the likeliest to blow that cover operation sky high.

Admittedly, they were anywhere from baby to pre-teen in age. Holding still and quiet for the length of the ferry trip between the ports of Alexandria and Athens was probably an unheard of feat of
impossibility for them.

Which was why, when Sonya pointed it out to Cherep, he got them a lower deck for the kids to play on for most of the trip with only a bit of sneaking needed.

Obviously, a mechanic of the circus they were attached to would need to check over said mechanical equipment. If he asked the ferry workers not to bother him unless the boat was sinking it was more so he didn't surprise himself and slam a head into metal or lose his grip on expensive, heavy, and irreplaceable equipment parts when he was already occupied compensating for the ship's rocking movements.

Not for a group of fifteen kids to play or just be without having to worry about getting caught.

For the thief herself, she just wanted to know why she had to be there too. It had been sweltering hot below deck, not that it had been any better on the main deck but at least there had been a breeze up there.

Also... she didn't really like kids. Hadn't even appreciated being one herself, even the first time through.

Shamal was only an exception because he had been a traumatized baby Mist, who was not anywhere near 'alright' or 'okay' after losing his likely only parental figure and getting stuck under Renato's probably intimidating eye.

Usov had been panicky baby Mist, but he didn't bother her nearly as much as this nor did he make her want to be as careful as she had been with Shamal.

Sonya could deal with a lone little tyke with some difficulty over their need for touching, nearly a baker's dozen of brats in a comparable age range all at the same time made her... testy.

The Cloud siblings had also given up their meager shipboard fair for these kids too, which didn't improve her outlook on anything.

Now that the trip was over with, and they were a few hours from not having to deal with it anymore, she was slowly getting back to 'not-pissed-off'.

The only bit she wished to quibble with now was that she got to play 'swooning maiden'.

Since spending several months in what was literally a desert region, and to explain why some members of the circus troupe weren't involved in unloading that certain people had been hired to do, some of the Groβes Volksfest members were playing lame or frail roles. Sonya, as the youngest but more importantly a slim young female performer, was recovering from the 'vapors' brought on by trying to keep up with her older brother's antics.

It was loudly proclaimed she had heat exhaustion and was now 'recovering her breath'. The kids behind her were sheltered by both her and Cherep taking up the obvious reason why an alleyway was partially blocked off.

Crina was at least equally pissed off as her apprentice, for the moment she was 'too frail' to handle transporting her own damn tent or equipment to the waiting trucks. She was getting her revenge for the indignity by loud and caustic corrections of how her things were getting handled.

It had the happy side effect of distracting the port authorities and making them pity the 'workers' hired out to help the old crotchety woman.
Greece, with a whole lot of islands and the bulk of its landmass farther north than where the Groβes Volksfest had landed to offload their unusual cargo, was another of the countries that would not take them very long to work through due to excessively turbulent political climates. They would be crossing the peninsula of Greece, not island hopping, to reach the shores they could catch a rather cheap fare to Italy from before leaving nearly immediately.

Much to Sonya's dissatisfaction, because she rather liked this country now that she took a look around. Military coup being awkwardly cemented in place or not.

It wasn't just that Greece was a sea away from the desert that made the thief sad they wouldn't be staying long, it was the underworld hangouts. Which was so easy to slip into it was almost jarring.

Better than Norway's little bars, or even France's still recovering cafés, Greece had mafia nightclubs. Which needed to be said again, mafia owned and ran bars and clubs. Where a Russian thief didn't stick out like a sore thumb, because she was no longer the only Russian there.

Sonya kind of wanted to retire to Greece, maybe. If she lived that long.

It was practically warm all year, there were an unnumbered amount of little private beaches and islands dotting the seas around the country, and the nightlife was almost to die for.

After growing up in Saratov and Moscow, in Soviet Russia's icy near-arctic tundra climate, she really wanted a more temperate place to set down 'roots' when she got around to it.

She could've done without the current uproar in the underworld, but she supposed she should pay it some attention anyways.

Especially since some Turkish and Albanian mafia groups were trying to work out some kind of deal with the major Greek 'Godfathers of the Night' to allow their human trafficking rings to go through their territory. The mere fact they were trying to had the faction of Russian Mafiya in Greece up in arms, but it didn't look as if that would be enough to prevent any kind of arrangement from happening.

Russians and Russian policies weren't popular in this corner of the globe. Business dominated Cold War or not, the trouble in Vietnam was still going on and both the United States and the Soviet Union were not making very many friends funding and supplying troops for that conflict.

Especially since the general outlook of most news agencies Sonya had taken a look at seemed to imply that no one but either superpower was happy to hear of any more conflicts after WWII.

Merely the fact her countrymen were trying to prevent Turkish slavery rings from getting a foothold in Greece likely just made it more palatable to the Greeks' native mafia syndicates.

Being able to understand that didn't make the Russian thief any happier to hear about it, or to ponder what would likely happen if the Turkish underground managed to barter out a foothold in the Greek islands from the natives.

If it happened, she might not really want to retire to a private island around the Mediterranean.

There would be no telling what kind of neighbors she might end up having, and she had gotten way
too close to Turkish slavers for her own liking already once before.

A second encounter might not work out for her in the same way again.

"Μην κοιτάς ξινή, μικρό λουλούδι?"

"I do not speak Greek, sir." Sonya informed the bartender flatly in Italian, eyeing the drink he placed in front of her that she didn't order suspiciously.

"Italia's native tongue is close enough." He informed her with a slick smile that didn't reach his eyes. "But I said not to look so sour, little flower. We are here to enjoy ourselves, are we not?"

"Not." The thief informed him repressively. Renato had better lines than him, and she had been hearing him flirt at everything in a skirt since she was twelve. "I am here for the news around the region."

"Oh, indeed? Do you have an opinion you would like heard as well?" The smile dropped as if it had never been there and his tone was a touch acrid, probably already knowing her views on what kind of bed his homeland was about to make just by taking a random stab for her nationality.

"I have no opinion on those that deal with slavery. I merely think they deserve to be dead." Sonya pushed the untouched drink back across the bar, so the man could try selling it to someone else. "Is there any other reason you are bothering me?"

"You are very opinionated for someone that claims to have none on the subject."

"And when you are in chains, waiting for your so called 'master' to decide what he's going to do with you, you may end up sharing the same opinion as myself." She batted her lashes a few times, sliding off the stool she had been sitting on. "Now... I think I shall see if another club has less pushy bartenders. Or at least someplace else that will be less likely for me to wake up as the property of another if I happen to accept the wrong drink."

The man shrugged that off with the air of 'your loss', which she didn't buy into for a moment.

Frankly, if she wanted to listen to someone flirt she'd just go bar hopping with Renato. At least the hitman had a better understanding of when not to flirt and knew how to keep from insulting the women he was trying to chat up at the same time.

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CLXXVI (Saturday the 12th of August, 1967. Former Headquarters of the Campo Famiglia, San Giovanni in Fiore, Italian Republic.)

For all that the previous and unlamented Don De Campo tried to ruin just about everything he had spent the bulk of his life building up, Renato managed to salvage a fair bit of it.

Not just the physical manor or the grounds around it, those had been pretty much unspoiled before a hitman with a grudge paid a visit and shot a couple things up. The nearby township San Giovanni in Fiore, a province of Cosenza, had needed a fair bit of personnel to keep vultures out of the normal day-to-day operations of both the civilian and mafia sides.

With what Mafiosi were left in the nearly murdered to a man famiglia, he had been lucky to keep hold of just the town for a couple months.
Scouring said township for semi-decent individuals and turning them into *Mafiosi* the hitman could trust with more than a single sheet of blank paper, keeping said vultures out of the territory, and ensuring those who were left got up to no mischief?

All while Shamal was getting into things a young boy probably shouldn't have when his attention was split between more than just three or four issues.

Renato had been a very tired hitman by the time Sonya put aside a block of time to help him out a little, and the little thief probably hadn't caught on to how fatigued he had been while she had been working on the little baby Mist at his behest.

Now with the Mist brat safely ensconced in Vongola territory, and a bit more breathing room with their reputation tied however loosely to his own, the hitman had dragged this *famiglia* out of the dirt and hauled it back on track to being *respectable* and not just a loose collection of criminal types.

Figuring out what to do with it now that it was no longer a near-certainty some other *famiglia* would have to take over the territory this one should have been managing was another issue.

The Soft Sun Flame user could probably make a semi-respectable Don. He had practically done it already, he was the one calling the shots and managing the day to day paperwork with a dash of finance juggling while his little 'minions' scurried around carrying his orders out.

If pressed to be honest, he didn't really like it much.

Give him any number of sketchy hits to do, contracts just a touch on the risky side of almost suicidal, rather than days of *paperwork*. Renato was not made to sit behind desks all day.

*Indefinitely* wasn't something he apparently liked working towards. He could deal with a year or two focusing on other things, which he had done long before this and was getting into with being Shamal's guardian, but when it stretched on without an end in sight...

If he kept on being honest, the hitman would admit to grabbing the flimsiest excuses to leave Italia and this headache behind. He probably should've stopped taking hits once this problem got dumped on him. Which he hadn't, because if he had not then more than just a few of his little underlings would probably have ended up six feet under.

Again, he was not made to sit behind desks while others did more interesting things.

Especially when they screwed up things that had been rather straightforward and simple that he could've done *blindfolded*.

Thankfully, now that the worst of the problems were dealt with, he had a small amount of time on his hands to ponder exactly who he was going to drop an entire *famiglia* onto. There weren't very many good 'Don' prospects among the few *Mafiosi* he had built up, and the previous Don's men didn't bear thinking about, so Renato was a little stuck.

...and wondering if Timoteo of Vongola had anyone he would like to 'promote'. It *would* equal out a fair bit of the debt on the hitman's side, maybe enough not to have to swear himself to Nono Vongola's service for the rest of his miserable lifetime. Not a whole lot, as much effort he had put into salvaging this *famiglia* aside there was still *years* of work left to do to turn it into something remotely able to sustain itself again.

Renato tilted the ridiculously comfortable desk chair back a bit, it was a bit back heavy so he couldn't balance it that far back on two legs, kicked his heels up on his desk and thought about that.
If he had to be connected to any famiglia, loosely if he had his way, Vongola wasn't a bad one to be under the protection of. A particular thief of his acquaintance had even admitted that, for all that she seemed dead set on avoiding the massive famiglia entirely. Sonya had, in fact, looked satisfied over the news Shamal was going to be cared for by Vongola resources in return for the hitman's nominal allegiance and a couple favors.

Odd little Cloud, for sure.

Unfortunately, thinking about the Russian Storm-Cloud made him think of her equally Russian Sun of a sister. Who was... he wasn't entirely sure, but he was betting that something about him amused that nurse more than anything he had done really warranted.

Tatiana had been entirely too helpful with her little foster sister's Sun research journal. He was pretty sure it wasn't his charms, because the woman kept smirking when he flirted even a little with her.

Which made everything a bit weird, so Renato didn't flirt with Tatiana anymore.

"Boss?"

The hitman suppressed a sigh, tilting his head to the side to pin one of his better minions with a semi-irritated look. If he had more paperwork to be signed he was going to shoot something.

Probably the paperwork, and coincidentally his desk. He didn't have enough decent people to afford shooting one every time they annoyed him.

"You said to tell you when one of the words you wanted the news scoured for popped up. One... well, two did in the Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno." The man held up a rather ruffled copy of said paper, as if that could shield him from his 'Boss' and any fit of temper that might end up aimed his way.

"Well?" Drewled the hitman after a beat, then held out his hand in demand when the minion hesitated but also didn't open his mouth.

Let whoever was going to be stuck here after him deal with the timidity of these Mafiosi, he had put far too much effort into this famiglia as it was.

He blinked at the paper in his hands, which had been ever-so-helpfully opened to the page in question before being handed over. "How do you feel about the circus?"

"The... circus? Boss?"

Renato ignored his minion's question, folding the paper and tossing it to his desk. "Time to go irritate a thief."

He had been getting a little bored.

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CLXXVII (Sunday the 7th of August, 1967. Bari, Puglia region, Italian Republic.)

"You are ridiculous." Sonya informed him slowly, deciding that taking her mid-morning break early was probably a good idea.

"I came all the way up here to see you, and that's what you call me?" Renato, and she really wasn't surprised anymore when he popped up nearby, sniffed in mock disapproval and straightened his
cuffs fussily. "Ungrateful, that's what you are."

"Yes, very ungrateful." Since they were pretty much in the middle of a crowd, the thief started making her way to the alleyway behind the 'curiosity' tents.

It was pretty much Madame Crina's, a local herbalist that asked to set up a stall, and a couple other knick-knack vendors selling everything from cheap jewelry to the balloons most of the other 'walking performer' clowns used in their street acts.

"Did you really come all the way just to get my opinion on your sense of dress?"

"No. Happy coincidence, that."

She shot him a look over her shoulder, then rolled her eyes at his self-smug smirk.

The hitman was in a three-piece suit. A not-quite-black suit and tie, with a bright yellow shirt and snazzy black shoes with a high polish. Which while interesting, because he had favored dark toned button up shirts and slacks with slightly less shiny shoes before this, was an entirely frivolous reason for him to seek out a non-working thief.

"So... I have to ask, why?"

"Mostly?" He drawled out sardonically as he followed her steps, curiously looking around at the narrow little enclosure when she turned to face him. "To get out and about, really. I've spent way too much time cooped up in the last few months, and my grunts need fieldwork experience."

Sonya blinked at him blankly, then scowled at the hitman as she realized what that meant. "Do you mean to tell me there are more Mafiosi here? And you just let them...?"

"No." Renato gave her the disgusted look he probably believed she deserved for that accusation. "They're paying customers, they have orders not to disrupt anything, and all they are supposed to do is learn how to blend in with a crowd in territory they aren't well known within and find a few things."

That was... not actually a bad kind of thing to try in mostly neutral settings. The Russian rather wished it wasn't this neutral setting, but given who she was talking to?

It could've been worse.

Now there were mafia mooks running around the Groβes Volksfest. Minions of the Sun's, who may or may not be completely loyal to him depending on if he 'inherited' them or not.

She really wished she had managed to find decent vodka somewhere the last time she stocked up on liquor. It was probably going to be needed, if anyone of her current coworkers figured it out and decided to risk asking her what the hell was going on.

"So... what are they trying to find?"

Her question made the hitman smirk again, which just made her suspicious.

"I told them a member of this circus has Mafia connections, and they're supposed to be scouting around to find such a person. Then report back to me who it is, what they do, and where they are."

"So... basically, they're looking for me or Cherep." Sonya summed up flatly.

"In a word? Yes." Renato buffed his nails on his lapel, then inspected them before glancing up at her
out of the corner of his eye. "More you than your brother, but I suppose he does fit within that criteria."

"Me? Sure. Tatiana? Fine, as long as you are careful. Cherep? No. Understand?" She glared at the man until he warily nodded.

She knew her eyes were probably purple, but that wasn't something she had enough experience in to try controlling.

"I'll correct that."

"...at least tell me they are not dressed like you as well." At his suddenly completely innocent look, she sighed and dug around her leather vest's pockets for her pack of cigarettes. "Really? Why would you think that was a good idea?"

"Is it my fault if they didn't think to change before setting out for a..." The hitman gave a pointed look to their surroundings. "...more casual area than they were dressed for visiting?"

"You did not bother to change."

"I, little lady Sonya, have class." Renato informed her prissily with a scoff, holding out a demanding hand.

The thief blinked at him over her lit cigarette.

"Well...?"

"Really?"

He rolled his eyes at her. "I'll buy you a new pack when I see you next. Give me one."

Sonya kept on eyeing him suspiciously and keeping her smokes to herself. "That will not help me now. I have to actually go into town, find a store that sells them, buy whatever is local, and then walk all the way back to whatever fairgrounds we are at in order to have these."

"And they cost you a thousand lira for two packs. Three if you're lucky." He countered quickly. "I will steal them if you..."

He blinked, and she raised an eyebrow at him as he seemed to recall exactly what he was talking to.

"I dare you to try."

"That sounds like a challenge." The hitman drawled, then snagged the cigarette she tossed at his face with a scowl. "Do you always have to be so difficult?"

"Yes. It amuses me." Sonya watched him pat down his pockets curiously. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for a lighter." By the tone of Renato's mutter, he thought that should have been obvious. She lit her fingers with a lick of Storm Flames and held them out. "What is the point of having fire-based skills if you cannot light a fire with them?"

He blinked at her red burning fingers, flicked a glance to her lit cigarette, and scowled again but this time at the one he held. "Ho? Can I do that with Sun Flames?"

"They are Flames, are they not?"
The hitman touched a burning yellow finger to the tip of his cigarette, looking ridiculously pleased when it started to smolder and stayed lit when he removed his hand. "Interesting."

The thief rolled her eyes at him. "Why you never thought of that...?"

"Oh, shut up."

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**CLXXVIII (Sunday the 7th of August, 1967 continued. Bari, Puglia region, Italian Republic.)**

"You again?" Cherep eyed the man standing next to his sister suspiciously. "There isn't anything else you caused that she's going to have to deal with, is there?"

"No." The man, who he was pretty sure had a name that started with an 'R', scoffed and glared at the purple colored stuntman.

"Probably." Sonya countered dryly in the next moment, looking slightly regretful. "Did you see all the men in suits on your way over here?"

"Yeah...? They're milling about over by the concession stands." He informed his fellow Cloud slowly, belatedly realizing those men were probably connected to this other man he was sure was mafia as well. More mafia men themselves, probably. "So... this isn't another Shanghai thing, then?"

"What happened in Shanghai?" The man he still couldn't recall the name of asked sharply.

The tiny blonde being towered over next to him tossed him a pithy glare. "Nothing happened in Shanghai, Renato."

'Renato' eyed her suspiciously, then turned to him with what was at first going to be a severe or imperious look but changed at the last moment to be less demanding at the last second. "Those men, are they just stuffing their faces or actually trying to plan?"

"Or plot, you mean?" Corrected the younger man, sheepishly scratching the back of his head and noting he probably needed another haircut. "Um... I'd say they're just eating. Didn't get close enough to do more than see they were out of place, were kind of messy eaters, and are being rude to the servers."

The news didn't seem to surprise the man hanging around his little sister, in fact it made him weirdly pleased for some reason. "Well then... apparently my men need a little... ah, behavioral correction when it comes to how to treat others."

"Do not hurry back." Sonya informed him with a roll of her eyes. "I will head back to work if that is all you needed from me."

"Actually..." He drawled out slowly, turning back to the thief. "Have you given any thought to what I've asked you earlier this year?"

"The visiting Vongola territory thing?" She clarified slowly, seeming to think about it in a negative kind of way.

The stuntman was instantly curious. If his baby sister disliked something, she didn't normally bother contemplating trying to deal with it unless she had no choice in the matter. She was more of a 'hold it at arm's length and ignore until it goes away' type of person when it came to things she hated.
What did this man ask of her that she disliked thinking of?

More importantly, what kind of draw or interest did she have in it to make her think of dealing with it?

"I do kind of want to see Shamal, and if this Ball thing is the safest way you can think of for me to do it...?"

Okay, who was Shamal and... BALL?

Cherep only realized he had spoken that out loud when Sonya answered him absently.

"Shamal is a kid, about four-almost-five. I met him last winter. And yes, Ball. Vongola's Christmas Ball. Which I do not want to go to, but it is likely safer for me to try visiting the boy while all that is going on."

"Yes, safer." Renato repeated almost blankly, looking highly interested in them both all of a sudden. "So...?"

"...I am still thinking about it." The thief decided after a long moment, looking slightly uncomfortable.

Confused, the stuntman looked between his foster sister and her mafia friend. Whom he had found in one of Sonya's usual haunts, alone together.

His little sister didn't like young children. She could deal with them and older teens decently enough in small doses, one-on-one or with very mature young children, but that was about it.

Yet she thought enough of this one Shamal kid to consider doing something she didn't like just to see him?

"You'll spare me the displeasure of dealing with matronly wives of various Dons' looking to match up their younger daughters with strong husbands." Renato tempted, which made no impact on the young woman's expression.

Actually, the thief looked slightly incredulous. "We are mafia."

"Which is just another way of saying 'those behind the ones in power'. Politics are unfortunately something we have to deal with up on top." He pointed out sourly. "That includes all the jostling for position by flaunting how wealthy or powerful one is."

She snorted harshly in return. "Tell me about it. I have not the foggiest of what to do with my own pull in that."

That was apparently not something this Renato character expected her to have some idea of, by the flicker of surprise that crossed his face.

Cherep, even if he had been here for a good part of this conversation, felt like he was missing something rather major.

"Shoo. You have mooks to corral, I have to get back to work." Sonya even flapped a hand in the other man's direction, turning to the stuntman before seeing what his reaction to that dismissal would be. "Cherep? Did you need something from me?"

"Actually... Master Liam sent me to ask about all those guys in suits, and if you knew what they
were doing." He grinned lightly at the dismayed look that crossed her face.

His fellow Cloud also didn't have the slightest clue how to treat the circus master now that she knew he knew about things of a fiery nature. After having her suspicions confirmed in such a way that derailed her protective hostility over him out of sheer bafflement, she had been left floundering how to treat the man.

Master Liam was in no hurry to help her through it, especially since Sonya didn't suspiciously glare at him anymore whenever he was in range.

"They... are not going to make trouble." His baby sister stated a little woodenly. "If they try to approach you, find something else to do very far away. Preferably after letting me know they're trying to approach you."

That, oddly, made the man suddenly bolt out of the little enclosure made up out of the backs of several tents.

Still very confused, Cherep nodded slowly.

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**CLXXIX (Monday the 8th of August, 1967. Bari, Puglia region, Italian Republic.)**

"Are you sure...?"

"Damn it, Cherep." Sonya sighed heavily, shoving him lightly with one hand as she shoved another crate into the back of a truck with her other. She was heavily abusing her Cloud Flame Propagated strength to make things go faster, but at least they were alone right now. "Stop worrying. This is not another Shanghai thing. I swear it. But this is Renato's home country, I did expect him to be able to find me here."

It wasn't like it had been any difficulty for the hitman to track her down anywhere else, from all appearances. She still had no idea how he found her in Austria of all places.

"Sorry... but, the last time something related to that... other thing you're mired within came up, you went missing for a month."

"I did not go missing," She corrected sourly with a sniff, "I knew where I was. Although... I wish you had not mentioned that to Renato."

"Why?" Her brother asked, sounding genuinely confused. "Wouldn't his knowing be a good thing? In case it happens again, but this next time somewhere like that island you work at sometimes?"

_Dork_, she thought fondly. With only the slightest undercurrent of exasperation. "Renato is not the type to do something out of the goodness of his heart unless it is in his best interest. If I did need his help, I would probably end up paying for it for years. Even if I could handle it myself, if he came after me specifically to help me out of any trouble...?"

That tidbit of news had the stuntman pulling a sour face at her. "Ouch. Never mind then, you go silent for more than a month or two, I'll just tell Tatiana."

"Preferably Arseniy." That got a bark of laughter out of him.

Cherep shoved at another heavy crate of props without budging it an inch, took a deep breath, and
then copied her innate skill of force Propagation to finally move the wooden container to where it needed to go.

Sonya sighed again, damned her foster brother for making a vague mention of their Cloud Flame derived strength to Master Liam, and muscled the next crate around so it could be shoved into place next.

She had to specifically point out to him that Mist did not equate to a familiarity of Cloud, and that any more fishing expeditions the circus master tried on him should be sent to her. The fact Liam was looking for what else their 'extra' abilities would allow was just the man looking out for his traveling operation, but she still didn't appreciate it much.

Hastening loading time with Cloud Flames was edging into that borderland of unknown that Sonya had rather wished to avoid until she got solid answers on if Omertà covered Dying Will Flame use. If so, they were already ghosting the edge of allowed uses even if Liam had turned out to be 'in the know' already.

Although, if not made more sense.

There were all those children, born yet or not, that would pop up with mystical magical inner Flames of various hues who might experiment with said fire. They would technically be in violation of Omertà if that was covered, and since everything she heard of the Vindice had pegged them as uncaring if you knew the law you broke or not...?

There hadn't been any mass 'kidnappings' of children, anywhere. Not that Sonya had heard of anyways.

There were the occasional one or two, kidnappings or runaways, which happens mostly locally she could hear of. Given how Flame users pop up more and more often in groups, with a little work there had been four in her 'generation' of one neighborhood of Moscow and eleven that appeared not long after them, no mass arrest of kids happening had to mean Omertà didn't cover Flame use.

However, it could even be Cherep was covered through her because she did know and was sworn to the Vow of Silence, therefore they were in violation of the law regardless if Flame use was included in Omertà or not.

Figuring that out for sure was something she was nearly itching to solve, but short of contacting the Vindice...?

Sonya wasn't sure where or how to confirm her suspicions on that.

"So..."

"I swear, if you ask one more time..."

"Hey! I just worry, okay?" Her fellow Cloud shot a glare over his shoulder, looking more than just a little put out at her. "This was supposed to be not-mafia related. You know, mostly legal work in the so-called 'civilian' side of the world? Instead you got chased out of Shanghai... and now this."

Sonya eyed him, or more specifically his taut back. "I am sorry about that, Cherep. I did try."

"It's the thought that counts, right?" He spoke rather whimsically, hauling the next crate of what sounded like spare metal parts he would probably be much better at identifying than her. "I never did put a time limit or constraint on that favor I asked of you, did I?"
She kept silent, a bit regretful of how much the mafia had encroached on his dream job all because of her.

Even if she could afford to take another year off, she probably would've had even more trouble than this year had given her to deal with.

"It's fine." Cherep suddenly interrupted her train of thought, turning back and quirking a wry little smirk for her. "This kind of life is driving you up a wall anyways. I know it is, so don't even try."

"It's not the traveling that does it..."

"It's the volume of people and the constraints on you." He finished for her with a nod and a shrug. "So... Acquisitions, wasn't it? Ironic."

Sonya sniffed at him in mock-disgust for his picking on her 'official' Mafia Land cover story.

It was at least better than the hitmen's version of it, they were known as 'Cleaners'.

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**CLXXX (Thursday the 24th of August, 1967. Martina Franca, Italian Republic.)**

**Originally**, the *Großes Volksfest* was supposed to have gone from Moscow to China, then from there around to Africa's southwest coast, work their way up and west some more until Libya, and only then into Europe.

However, those plans hadn't been made to consider two different wars breaking out across Africa's southern tip in the middle of last year. What was being called the Namibian War of Independence, by the locals at least, had sparked a rash of conflicts up and down the coast of the nearby countries.

From what hazy memories Sonya could recall from Rachel, that would end up being collectively called the South African Border Wars. Namibia would eventually gain their independence too, if she recalled right.

Everyone just had to stop being assholes to those with darker skin color first.

Compared to risking two active war zones and all the complications that entailed, risking China had been *tame* in comparison.

However, the unscheduled detour through Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Republic had cost the circus a lot of income. Gained them some time, especially since they no longer had to work through the empty savannas and deserts of Africa, but that time was being used now that they were less likely to risk death lingering around.

Despite how quickly they had gotten out of Greece, and Sonya suspected that was due to the small spot of Jewish refugee smuggling the circus had done and the current military takeover of the country in question, they were *crawling* through Italy.

It wouldn't have been so bad normally, as she was now reluctantly used to slow traveling as it was, except the Russian thief didn't know where Vongola's territory started or ended.

She was pretty sure she was within it, Renato probably lingered on the border somewhere to not trespass on that *Famiglia's* grounds while he had been more freelance. Which meant, since he could spring the time for a visit no matter how small, that the near-coastal city of Martina Franca was
probably within that.

Sonya also knew, from history the hitman had told her no less, that the Isle of Sicily was also part of Vongola's territory.

Somewhere on the southern end of Italy's peninsula was Vongola's headquarters, and knowing she was within it but being unable to tell for sure unnerved her enough she was sticking close to whatever town or city the circus stopped within. She had legitimate, and more importantly civilian-orientated, business being with them.

While that wouldn't really stop any Maﬁosi that were suspicious of her from attempting to do her mischief, it would enable the Zolotovs to get her a bit of revenge... well after the fact.

Which Sonya would like to never have need of, really.

Instead of going back to her usual standby if bored, go drinking at whatever shady bar she found, she unnerved the hell out of Crina by taking the old bat to tour vineyards. The suspicious peering was amusing enough, and the thief found a couple wines she didn't mind drinking, but after the three weeks it took them to reach Naples she was about ready to crawl out of her skin.

"For fucks' sake, girl! Go!"

"Crina."

"You're making me antsy, and I've lived through two World Wars." The old Romanian woman informed her, voice as dry as the desert of Saudi Arabia. "Suspicion has its place, but when you start using it to shackle yourself? You only live once girl, make something of it."

She had to work to not snort in the old bat's face.

She was on her second life, thank you very much. She knew as well as anyone else, except maybe Cherep, exactly how cheap a life could be.

"Don't give me the 'this old fraud knows nothing' look." Crina snapped in her face sourly. "No, I may not know what it is that crawled up your ass. But you're either going to have to grab whatever it is and make it not matter or decide when enough is enough and continue in spite of it."

The gypsy was even gesturing with the wine bottle as if to make her point, and from the sounds of it she had been more than halfway through it. The thief frowned absently, wondering if her brother had a point about enabling Crina's alcoholism.

Then again, the old bat could hold her liquor well.

"Pick one or the other but stop mincing around as if you expect someone to pop out of the dark to murder you."

Huffing, the thief dug around her stuff to find her pack of smokes. Which she was going through with alarming alacrity, but the stress was really starting to get to her.

Crina eyed her severely but seemed content enough to leave it at that.

Sonya wondered if she was blowing this out of proportion. Vongola might have a large territory, but surely the entirety of the southern end of the peninsula and the larger of the nearby islands had to be difficult to control with any degree of finesse.
They had an outside advisory branch, and probably a lot of people like Tyr the Sword Emperor or Renato himself. That also had to mean they had to have a lot of oversight going on over their people. Especially since Vongola had no current rumors of 'weakness' or 'fractures' floating around.

Which just might be PR and rumor control, but she'd never know unless she actually went out to find a couple answers.

Maybe, if she didn't pick a fight with the locals, it would be safe enough.
Sonya mourned the low level of alcohol in her glass. "Please tell me you are joking."

"Mmm... well, it's mostly all just rumors. So, I can't tell you that." The very chatty bartender she had found informed her cheerfully, absently scrubbing at a whisky glass with a rag to dry the insides out quickly.

The thief was pretty sure he was just going through the motions so to appear busy. It was just them in the bar so far, and she wasn't sure why he was bothering with it.

"But Vongola's parties, they're fairly notorious." He continued as if she wasn't looking a moment away from lunging at the bottles of liquor at his back. "I think it's their Don's birthday bash that is the best, rumor wise. We always love hearing how those go, especially who ends up winning."

...how did one win at a birthday party, exactly?

Furthermore, was she really going to try braving such madness all to see a techy Mist brat she could probably visit just as well on his birthday?

Sonya had a weird little itch when it came to Shamal. She wanted to go check up on him at the very least, ensure he was doing okay after their sudden split-up, and the longer she went without doing so the worst said 'itch' got. Making her think of the kid more and more often, which then made her want to see him more, and that cycle didn't seem to be short-circuiting any time soon.

Thus, why she was contemplating braving the lion's den just to ensure the brat of a Mist was doing alright... and ensure no one was trying to teach him stupid things.

It was ridiculous, because the hitman that was now in charge of the baby Mist's wellbeing wouldn't allow any kind of upset to happen to him. Not again. Shamal was Renato's now, and the man was a jealous, possessive asshole where his things were concerned.

She had only asked to see his gun once, interested in comparing it to Tatiana's backup weapon she won in Mafia Land years ago. Notably, it both didn't happen and Sonya had never asked again.

As for the stupid-teaching thing... well, the man was Italian. He had some weird expectations for other Flame users.

In fact, she had been mildly surprised to be asked to help with Shamal at all. It was for the best given how that had worked out, but at the time it was mostly curiosity that drove her to accept the slightly altered trade of favors that canceled out half her debt to the hitman.

Well... that curiosity and a wish to be firmly on the man's better side.

"Any reason you're asking, miss?"

"A... friend of mine asked me to go with him to a Vongola party, and I was wondering what he had asked me to." Sonya informed him blandly, sourly wondering when the asshole that asked her to go with him as arm candy thought she had time to shop for evening wear. "Now I'm just wondering if I should go or not."
She was not what one would describe as a people person. She had learned tolerance, forcibly in the past two years, from being Crina's draw girl. If Renato thought she'd do anywhere near decent in the little chit chat part of social gatherings, he was in for a rude surprise.

...and since she was already trying to plan on shopping for a dress and dealing with whatever difficulties came with attending a Vongola Christmas Ball, she should probably resign herself to going.

Sighing heavily, the Russian thief polished off her glass of what the bartender had called a 'Moscow Mule' and let the glass thump back onto the bar. "My thanks for clearing up a bit of my confusion."

"Well now... I didn't peg you as the type to be attending such things."

"They're not really my type of thing, but... he's a fairly good... friend." With a decent bit of luck, Sonya might get a couple questions answered. Probably any questions she'd get answers to would be Vongola orientated, but even that kind of information was still information she could likely use.

If her suspicions on Renato's eventual cursed baby fate held water, and she was more than sure it would be given she knew Skull damn well, then the hitman would probably linger with Vongola for however long it took for the curse to be reversed.

Decimo of Vongola coming to power and getting around to said reversing, however, was still about three to four decades away still.

That was a lot of time to span. Since she knew the man well, it was possible she'd get dragged into some of it.

"I wish you luck then." The bartender cheerily informed her, brightly enough to be a little condescending.

She wondered why he was wishing her luck, and that might have shown on her face because he continued as if she had directly asked him the question.

"There is usually a costume contest at the Halloween Ball, and a snowball fight battle royal at the Christmas one. Competing in them is generally the highlight of each event." He was grinning broadly now, and the thief belatedly caught on to the sly amusement the man had at her fishing for information. "I look forward to hearing how you do."

Sonya's eye twitched, because sure as fuck Renato hadn't mentioned anything like that to her.

"May I ask you something in return, my dear?"

"...sure. But I may not answer." Even if the man had been semi-forthright about the information she wanted.

"Your tattoos, they have a meaning?" The bartender's grin gained a slight edge, which she figured the answer was the 'real' price of the gossip she had managed to get so far.

"The cat means I'm a thief. Nighttime background shows the time of day I usually work." The Russian brushed her fingers over the corresponding parts, then tapped the next few. "Paw prints shows I wander for my work, and the roses... I need to color them in, but they show I am not afraid of killing."

He pursed his lips, taking a long look at her artwork. Which she pulled up the sleeve of her shirt, so he could see more of it. "Thank you, miss. Anything else?"
"No, that about does it for now." She should probably be getting back, before the bar's regulars started wandering in for the midday rush.

Convincing Crina to let her go for a morning hadn't been too hard, not with how badly she managed to unnerve the old bat in the last few weeks.

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**CLXXXII (Tuesday the 29th of August, 1967. Venice, Italian Republic.)**

Cherep was perfectly happy to drag her along with him to go shopping in Venice, mainly for a new motorcycle.

Especially when a certain little letter from Tatiana reached Sonya.

The Sun had sent on the news Dimitry finally found an Inverted Storm, and the very real possibility that their baby sister's Storm Flames were not Classic but Inverted. Judging by what personality traits and ticks the kid was showing that matched up somewhat to what habits the she had, anyways.

It only meant the Storm-Cloud was likely perfection fixated.

Her work in Dying Will Flames research alone showed signs of that, she got frustrated and irritated when she kept running into things that weren't correct or that she had assumed wrongly until she fixed whatever it was in her own collection of information. Rewriting several books worth of information was a sign of obsessiveness, especially since she was striving to keep them all updated as much as humanly possible.

Realizing what drawbacks Clouds suffered when it came to physical fitness then fixing it with almost single-minded intensity was another. Chasing down what other drawbacks might happen with other types had been part of it as well, especially since she would never have much use for that information.

Supposedly, anyways.

It stood to reason that her book hoarding was likely another symptom of that. Maybe even a sign of her mixed nature.

Her territorial-ness over certain people was likely a Cloud thing, somehow.

Sonya appreciated the new tidbit to puzzle over and the news of Lisa's pregnancy going as well as could be expected... however, that tidbit about her Storm Polarization also meant Cherep probably won their little bet.

Which now meant she owed her foster brother a motorcycle. Rather, the funds to purchase one.

He was a bit too happy over that news, but she wasn't really bothered.

A year and a half of working at a communist circus wouldn't have amounted to a lot of money... but she had been mainly living off 'dirty' money she earned on Mafia Land. All the 'allowances' paid out to keep capitalist countries happy they had no major communist influences within their borders added up to a semi-decent amount.

Cherep's expression when she dropped that on his lap had been amusing enough for her to make up for losing that little bet. He wasn't that upset for long with her wiggling out of a few more years of
circus work, especially not when with what she had given over. With that, the price of a semi-decent second-hand motorcycle in cash at the very least, and what he had from his own shows and the sale of scrap metal from his old bike, the stuntman was dead set on getting himself a 1966 Triumph Bonneville. New.

She was trying to get him to delay a bit, because there was some very strident pressure on Great Britain to lower their side of the conversion of currency again, which meant if he held off for another month or two it might get as low as two and a half grand in British pounds instead of a grand over that.

"We would have a better selection to browse anyways, even if it would be within the Iron Curtain." She tempted again to get her brother to hold off spending an exorbitant amount of money he might or might not be able to afford.

It didn't look as if it was working.

"It might be more expensive now," Agreed her fellow Cloud lightly with a shrug, "but it will also be as expensive in time to wait for later. The show must go on, Sonya, and in order to do so...?"

The thief blinked at the back of his head, a little confused. "Why must it go on right away?"

"I might not have had a following of any strength, but I do have one. A reputation, you know... the one you're banking on me hiding certain things behind." The stuntman waved a hand around in the circle, as if trying to pluck the words he wanted out of thin air. "If I wait too long, it will look like I'm scared of getting back on a bike after the stumble earlier in the summer."

"Or that you actually have a sense of caution?" She countered a bit tartly, because... Sonya really didn't like Skull much.

Who the hell called a near-death experience a 'stumble', anyways?

"Exactly. And no one likes cautious stuntmen." Cherep finished with a nod, turning to look at the salesman waiting for him to make up his mind.

He was also a bit nervous, because little sister didn't seem very happy with him at all and that might affect the sale.

"I think this one will do." He informed the man in clumsy Italian, who suddenly looked very delighted even if it had taken the Cloud siblings a couple long hours looking over the different models available.

A Bonneville T120TT was what her foster brother decided on. she didn't understand what the difference between that one and a T120C or T120R model was but was sure he would just adore explaining it to her if she had to know.

"Very good, sir. Ah... you do realize they cost...?"

The stuntman rolled his eyes, then reached for the military surplus canvas bag his sister had been holding onto for him. "About three and a quarter thousand in British pounds, a little over thirty-eight hundred in euros, and almost five million in lira? We'll be paying in euros."

Walking around with a couple million in lira, even if they were in denominations of a thousand or more, had been something the thief had vetoed a little more stridently than was apparently needed. He had just been a little more than dubious over the exchange rates anyways, and he was a fan of a
European spanning currency with what traveling he was going to be doing for the rest of his foreseeable life.

Sonya elected not to mention it was the mafia he had to thank for that one.

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**CLXXXIII (Thursday 31st of August, 1967. Undine, Italian Republic.)**

The assumption that Vongola probably operated out of the southern end of Italy seemed to have been borne out, especially since the closer they got to Venice the more the *Famiglia* was gossiped about. Once past it, the gossip turned more from rumor to actual guesses of Vongola's strength or aims.

It made a bit of sense, historically.

Given that Sonya knew of a *Cosa Nostra* of another lifetime that spread out from the same general region, she wasn't surprised to learn of it.

What she was more than a little surprised to hear of was how little it seemed Vongola cared about how it was gossiped about even, likely, close to their home territory. Some of it was positive, but just as much if not more wasn't nearly so flattering.

Most of it was about Ottavia Vongola, better known now as Daniela of Vongola since she handed off the reigns of the *Famiglia* to her son.

The fact the Donna had kept in control of Vongola throughout the Second World War and refused to say just who her son's father was, made her a bit of a hot topic even long after the woman retired from being the Boss Vongola.

Nono of Vongola Timoteo wasn't being spared from the gossip mongers much either. While his mother favored a seemingly straightforward leadership style, at least until she seemed to figure there wasn't much of a way to get what she wanted like that, Nono had went in the opposite direction. He was described as favoring negotiation more than confrontation, at least by what a lone Russian thief had managed to overhear.

Which, again, made a bit of sense. Daniela had to lead through a time of war, so she generally had very straightforward opponents to face. Opponents that all probably underestimated her a little due to her gender. Timoteo had both the post-war economic boom as well as the building recession to maneuver around, so his opponents weren't so forthright.

She tried both Scotch whisky and bourbon whiskey, found she didn't really like either and preferred brandy if no vodka was available, while she gathered that little bit of gossip.

Since it seemed as if her current targets to listen in on were a bit more preoccupied trying to guess who Timoteo's father really was, the thief let her mind wander a bit as she contemplated her brandy glass.

Tyr the Sword Emperor, according to gossip, had been one of Daniela's people before she stepped down as Vongola's Donna. He had been left to her son's command, by appearances alone, as an enforcer if her son's own version of mafia diplomacy ever failed.

From the sounds of it, it had a couple times.
It was already to the point Tyr was more than a bit notorious, and there were the whispers of him taking up a leadership role for an entire squad of assassins.

Sonya assumed that was the Varia... and she now knew why Renato had been so surprised she had identified the Sword Emperor as the head of it.

The title was just shy of a year old. The hitman probably learned when he went to Vongola for help, and a Russian thief somehow knowing that before he could make any kind of mention or word of it to warn her not to piss the man off?

That was... she really needed to start thinking before she spoke. Maybe the man wouldn't ask, but she should probably start trying to think up of an excuse before he got around to trying to prod her sources out of her.

Actually... if Tyr was only recently made the head of an assassination squad...?

When Renato went to Vongola to both report a massive violation in Mafia Land's ruling syndicates and get help to uproot it the master assassin was detailed to assist. That had to mean the 'Varia' wasn't very large at this point of time. Likely, probably only around a handful or two members strong if their boss was taking jobs.

Then why did Timoteo send the man off with the hitman?

That spoke of a severe manpower shortage or a bored assassin, at the very least. The Sword Emperor didn't seem the type to allow boredom to happen to him, or to even care. From what little she knew, Sonya would put her money on a shortage of Mafiosi.

Which still didn't answer the question of why Nono Vongola humored a freelance hitman's request for a hasty reordering of the powers in charge of Mafia Land. It all happened within a month, from the point when Renato left the island with Shamal to her returning to it from China.

Said thief was still appreciative she didn't have to find out for sure what had been planned for her, but the entire reasoning behind the help was starting to baffle her.

If Vongola was suffering from a shortage of manpower, a show of strength or three would've been needed to keep anyone from thinking they could challenge its supremacy. The Second World War, in which it seemed as if Daniela had been a major player in keeping Italy from being subsumed by the Axis Powers and the rapid expansion of industry of the Italian Economic Miracle, had to have put a strain on Nono's available men.

Even if they were only trying to cover their expanding territory when the cities and towns developed more to handle the growing population, it would probably outstrip the available Mafiosi from the previous generation. Only around the next five years would the first of the post-war baby boom be of an age to pitch in, which left not just Vongola but several syndicates in various countries strapped for just men.

That was probably the 'why' behind Renato gaining the help he needed to prevent Sonya from venturing into probably lethal confrontations with Mafia Land's ruling syndicates.

A show of power, a reminder of what was and wasn't allowed in the free-floating haven to the underworld at large, and a showing of exactly how well connected Vongola was. Stripping themselves of the bulk of the CEDEF to replace the syndicate formerly in charge of Mafia Land's security was probably a cost Nono decided he could afford.

She eventually decided the hitman had some weirdly bipolar luck.
Lost most of his contacts, ended up a temp-Don and gained a kid. Had to entreat another more notorious Famiglia to help him protect said kid, was in just the right spot in the right time for said Famiglia to help him.

...almost like those radio dramas Crina liked to listen to when they were close enough to Romania to do so. Even the soap operas she could vaguely recall as Rachel.

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**CLXXXIV (Friday the 8th of September, 1967. Belgrade, Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.)**

Instead of heading north to copy the route they took back to Moscow last year, the Großes Volksfest headed for the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Sonya was at least thankful they weren't going to go through Germany, either one, again. It might have been getting better, the West more than the East, but she still had mixed feelings about the entirety of Germany and its people.

 Crossing a border into the Iron Curtain so far south was a new experience, and the Russian thief finally found a way into the Soviet Union she wouldn't mind taking it slow through again.

Although, she was somewhat sure a country named Yugoslavia hadn't existed at the time of Rachel's death... or wouldn't exist. Maybe it would be renamed?

It was a thought that distracted her from really appreciating a satellite state of the Soviet Union so well managed it was a popular country to visit, because it was also the point in which she realized what she had been doing had some drawbacks as well.

Ignoring Rachel's lifetime of slightly skewed history, that is.

She didn't recall how history had been supposed to go anymore outside the main points.

Which was both a good thing and a bad one.

On one side, she could learn the relevant history of this lifetime without recalling a different one's slightly altered reality instead. The Russian would also no longer have a worry of spilling state secrets a decade or two before they became common knowledge, and therefore making a big target of herself.

Flipside of that coin was recognizing something was a little off but being unable to tell what.

Sonya would no longer be able to plot out how things were likely to go and evade the worst of it.

She knew the highlights. 1989 would be when the Berlin Wall was to fall, a few short years after that the Soviet Union would follow, she would probably want to avoid the north-eastern part of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic until the scientists declared it safe, avoid Cuba and Vietnam entirely until a decade or so after the conflicts there were done, and maybe abstain from visiting New York at the turn of the millennium.

Silicon Valley was something to invest in. Google, AOL, and YouTube as well. The emergence of bigger brand-names from Rachel's lifetime should be watched for.

Sometime within that, she might want to find out if there would be a Rachel Victoria Stokes in this
existence or not. If so, then what the hell she wanted to do about it.

Puzzling over it for a few good days merely gave her a headache, so Sonya decided that since she failed to take notes the loss of valuable information on possibilities was her own damn fault.

Not that taking notes in such a massively multilingual neighborhood would've stayed secure. Someone would've known English, even if Lisa didn't know it, so note-taking on another life's history had never really been an option.

All she could really do was hit the history books she had been collecting for years as soon as she could keep one with her without worrying about weather-related damage or it being on some country's banned list. Which she would do the moment her Mafia Land issues were handled, and she had a little amount of time before she had to check in with the Zolotovs and Dmitriy to see if they had anything major for her or if she could go free-lance for a few more years.

Sonya absently sidestepped Cherep, who had tried to throw an arm across her shoulders. "What?"

"You're not doing whatever it is you normally do." He informed her briskly, grabbing her coat from the pile of cloth in one corner of Crina's newly set up tent. "You're coming with me before I go back to stunt work, and we're going to go sightsee or people watch or just get ourselves lost."

She stared at him hard, trying to figure out if he was being obtuse over what she usually did or not. "...why?"

"Because you're probably going to dive right back into that 'world under', as Master Liam labeled it." The stuntman flashed her a grin, tossing her coat over her head cheekily. "So, I'm building up Sonya-time before you abandon me here."

"I am not going to-"

"Yeah, yeah. You'll visit, right?" Her fellow Cloud sounded entirely unrepentant as she pulled her head free of the heavy wool, and from the look on his face he was feeling something similar even with her glaring at him. "Still, I've got what? Three months? Maybe less? Of you here and not being sneaky and elsewhere. We're going to put it to some use."

The thief huffed but did pull on her coat. "It is not as if you will never see me again."

"But not every day. Or whenever I want."

"Well... no."

Sonya had to give him that. With the new spat of Dying Will Flame users Dmitriy was handling and her own thief-reputation to build up, she'd be rather solidly occupied with Soviet Russia for probably a few good months when not working for Mafia Land or anyone else.

Stuffing his hands into the pockets of his grime and oil stained 'work jeans', Cherep quirked a wry little smirk for her. "So, just like old times. We'll go gawp at the scenery, get ourselves a little lost, and maybe buy something local for dinner. You speak a native dialect, right?"

Comparing that to the option of going to sneak a bit of local gossip from stingy bartenders, who were probably on the lookout for any Soviet Union government agents trying the same thing with more dire consequences for what they learned, it didn't sound half bad.

They would only be in this part of the Soviet Union for about a week, anyways.
"I am not sure if Romanian counts as 'native'."

"It'll be a learning experience."

"...fine."

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CLXXXV (Friday the 15th of September, 1967. Budapest, Hungarian People's Republic.)

It wasn't until they were mostly set up in Budapest, in the Hungarian People's Republic, that Sonya remembered.

Italy had been pretty much a non-entity when it came to World War Two. The Mafia Wars had consumed the country from the inside out, preventing anything communist from gaining a hold on them and the rise of Fascist Italy. Nothing really gained a hold on them, but nothing went out of it either.

It seemed stable now, more than she would've guessed since the underworld did affect the civilian side of the world without a major break in Omertà. If that was Vongola's efforts in bridging a gap to control the excess of violence or what was still questionable.

However, that did mean that anything Rachel would've known from World War Two was mostly defunct when it came to Italy or the countries nearby. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Hungarian People's Republic were probably two such countries that might have had dealings with a Fascist Italy in one reality.

Which didn't in this life.

Her spotty education in this world's history was woefully inept for the purpose of answering 'then what happened' question. She had the idea to ask Crina, as probably someone that knew a hell of a lot more than she did about the subject. She had claimed to have lived through two world wars, so it was a safe bet.

The Russian asked during a short break the two of them took after setting up the actual tent they'd be entertaining customers within, but before they got around to decorating the two-man canvas enclosure for either them to live out of for a few days or for the gypsy to tell fortunes out of.

Which, judging by how white Crina blanched, had been a very bad idea.

"You don't have to answer." The thief hastened to tack onto her question in the old bat's native Romanian, feeling incredibly awkward and a little sorry for bringing the subject up. "It was just a wonder."

"Stop cringing, girl." The older woman snapped, almost under her breath as she regained a bit of color. "I wasn't expecting a question like that out of you, took me by surprise."

What was with people and lying to her face about what they felt?

She didn't understand it or knew of a way to call Crina out about lying to her, so she remained silent about the blatant mistruth.

She could counter the other one, though. "Why does everyone seem to think I'm some unfeeling, human-looking robot? I can feel sorry for upsetting you, you're pretty awesome for an old crone."
"Thanks... I think." Crina muttered with more heat, but the banter did put a bit healthier color into her skin.

Whether it was just simply a needed distraction or real amusement that did it was beyond the Russian. The results were fine enough for now, so she concentrated on the other issue.

The one that made the old gypsy look as if someone had stabbed her in the chest without warning.

"You really don't have to answer, I can find out some other way."

Crina snorted softly, casting a quick glance to the pallet Sonya slept on and usually had her liquor stashed nearby. "Didn't your history classes cover it in all its gory glory?"

"Err... Crina? My education was a bit more... targeted than that. History wasn't exactly what you could call a core class."

It was as close as Sonya would come to admitting the mafia of her homeland had homeschooled her, and it wasn't for something as small as a degree in world history. Her ability to steal the contents of someone's pocket was of more value than her understanding of historic events she could learn on her own time.

A sour look passed over the native Romanian's face, which was the first little hint the Russian had ever seen of her personal history bothering the gypsy woman. "Fair enough. What, exactly, did you want to know?"

"Just the basics of what happened in this region, for a general understanding." She would look up the rest herself, if only to not unduly bother her master in mysticism.

Going nearly grey in shock wasn't a good look for the nearly sixty or seventy something old woman.

"Germany invaded the southern parts of this area, tried occupying both that region and invade your Soviet Union at the same time through this part. The split pull on their manpower, between the winter fighting and suppressing the local resistance to Nazi rule, enabled the Allied Powers and the Red Army to bisect the Nazi war machine near the end of the war." Clipped and short, Crina summed up the pertinent information while glancing for Sonya's stash again. "Anything else you wanted to know?"

"No, that covered it." Even if she did have a worry she might be enabling the old bat's alcoholism, the thief pulled out one of her remaining bottles of wine she kept just to bribe the old woman with. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

Sonya slipped out of the back 'room' of the tent, leaving the gypsy to hit the bottle in privacy.

Crina was likely from this region. Romanian, the native language of the Socialist Republic of Romania, was widely known to be her native one. While not a solid bit of evidence of one's nationality, Cherep was Czechoslovakian but spoke Russian as well as she could, it was a good regional hint.

Whatever it was Sonya's question had startled out of Crina, it was likely not a good memory.
What, exactly, did the Groβes Volksfest do during World War Two?

It was a question that only occurred to the thief to wonder well after a midday conversation with Crina, after the circus got through the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic and well into Soviet Ukraine.

It was very late to be wondering, if she was pressed to be honest.

Sonya had only checked into any possible mafia connections this circus might have had before joining up with Cherep, which it didn't possess beyond random happenstance. The underworld would've also kept track of any nasty rumors, if only to take advantage of it to hide their own bloody work behind or to muddy the trail for any police looking for them.

Most positive rumors, at least in the mafia, wouldn't travel very far from where any incidents happened.

Since the question only occurred to her very late, a few weeks from ending her time as a gypsy's apprentice, she wouldn't be able to answer it.

Not without a major lucky break.

Which she wasn't going to hold her breath for. Luck wasn't really her thing, it was more Cherep's.

This show business thing required more than a little, and the man that grew out of her dork of a best friend did fulfil his childhood dream of being a stuntman.

That being the case, she hunted down her foster brother and put that little question in his head. Even if he was gearing up to be 'Skull' and not 'Cherep'.

Skull's only saving grace, in Sonya's eyes, was that he tended to be more caustic and careful when not performing for a crowd. Cherep would've wondered why she wanted to know but do it anyways, Skull would ask questions on why and what she'd do with that information before agreeing.

It probably wasn't wise to treat both sides of him as different people, but the dichotomy would probably help him prevent others linking him and her brother's identities together.

If he really was her foster brother, then wouldn't they get along better?

Getting asked why she wanted to know was fully expected, and Sonya answered with the truth.

"I scared Crina by asking about local history during World War Two. It was a little... concerning, how white she blanched when I asked her about it."

Skull considered that, rubbing one side of his freshly shaven jawline. "Are you asking out of concern? Aw... Sonya, I didn't know you cared that much."

"It has been almost two years," the thief defended herself a little awkwardly, "and Crina's been more than accommodating about me. It is professional courtesy."

"It took you over five to accommodate Tatiana as more than just 'that girl I live with'. Nearly seven to actually adjust yourself or your schedule for her if need be." The stuntman pointed out with a grin, looking highly amused. "This is almost as fast as you adjusted for me."
"Crina's useful."

"And that sounds like an excuse, not a reason." He countered just as quick.

She thought about it, but frankly didn't understand why she latched onto him so fast and therefore wasn't going to attribute whatever it was to Crina. "I think it is more a common ground we share, because I do not like her nearly as much as you... well, Cherep anyways."

That knocked her fellow Cloud back a step mentally, and the man shut his mouth without saying whatever else he had in mind. Instead he studied her a moment, then shrugged it off. "I'll keep an ear out, but I'm not going to go around asking. If they tell me, they tell me. If not..."

"That is fine." It really was only an idle wonder. Had she thought to ask that back near the beginning she might've spent some time figuring it out herself.

"You know, I find it ridiculous how hard it is to shake you off something." He continued on another tangent that made the thief backtrack mentally to see if there was a reason for it. "Like a dog with a bone, you never really give up once you get something stuck in your head."

Baffled by this new conversation's aim, Sonya suspiciously regarded him. "...what?"

"You're so self-honest, you never argue about things I can nitpick to change the subject." Skull clarified, which didn't help his little sister in the least.

At her continued silence, complete with what was probably a lost look aimed in his direction, he sighed. "And I can only do this when you're not interested in learning something."

"I... am confused."

"I know. I did it on purpose." Skull admitted wryly with a snicker. "Just to check to see if I still could."

Well... he was a bit of an ass like this. She shrugged it off and latched on to something else, so she didn't flounder for the rest of the conversation. "I am not self-honest. Trying to be, but I can be blind sometimes."

Rachel had died being blind to her surroundings and the risks she took. The Russian thief she became in death had tried to correct that once she could understand, but it was harder than she had counted on.

She failed more than she succeeded at it, too.

"But you can mentally adjust when something's pointed out to you." He interrupted her musings on the only death she had to her, pulling her attention back to issue he was referring to. "Normally, a person gets a little defensive or disgruntled when their flaws are pointed out."

Sonya blinked at him, then ran their conversation through her head again. "Skull... were you trying to pick a fight with me?"

"Maybe." He showed her his hand, with his forefinger and thumb only a breath away from touching. "A small one."

"...why?" She really didn't understand why he would want to.

"Mostly to see if I could." Skull admitted candidly. "But you're not very confrontational with me
usually, and since Dmitriy and Tatiana solved the question of what your Storm Polarization was I got to wondering what is up with your Cloud nature if you're not what a Cloud is normally."

"Did you figure anything out?"

"You know how a 'Classic' Cloud is usually thought to be a 'lone wolf' at best or a 'territorial aggressor'? You're not, so if you aren't a loner in that extreme then maybe you're more of a 'pack' minded Cloud."

...pack?

"Like Arseniy's the 'alpha', so you fitted yourself under him after an adjustment period." He continued in a thoughtful tone. "But I don't think there's such a thing as a pack of two, so you added in more when you finally understood that. Lisa, Tatiana, and myself."

"Are you suggesting I am a 'domesticated' Cloud?" Sonya concluded incredulously, feeling a bit strange as she followed his line of thought.

Skull shrugged nonchalantly. "A 'beta' Cloud, maybe."

That was... weirdly fitting. "...let me get back to you on that."

"It would mean your 'territory' thing is really people, but more of your fellow pack mates instead of just individuals." The stuntman suggested, as if it would change her opinion of it.

The thief was certain he was pulling this from the local warnings of wolf-packs and how they behaved. She had heard the same thing herself, from Jiayi. "I will think about it."

...but it was strangely apt.

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**CLXXXVII (Saturday the 23rd of 1967. Kiev, Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.)**

**Going** from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to the Hungarian People's Republic and then through the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was Sonya favorite way into the Iron Curtain of all ways she had found herself or had followed as part of the Groβes Volksfest. Even despite what she learned on the tail end of that route.

Yugoslavia, for a border state on the edge of the Soviet Union, was well governed instead of suppressed and feeling like it. She didn't know quite what all happened in that country, and the lack of knowledge bothered her, but since she only had herself to blame for that blindness she refrained from asking around.

As it was now, it was a mostly pretty countryside with many farms and very little political unrest. There was some, and even Jaq could hear a bit of news when he went for a drink after helping set up some of the tents. The thief didn't hear some of what he had but given her tattoos and nationality that had been expected.

Hungary recently had a lot of political trouble that was only now dying away, but the new build-up their government had was proving to be rather popular with the civilians. Frankly, Sonya appreciated the trees and sights more than the local government. It was another country where she didn't really get a whole lot from the mafia hangouts, but she did get to hear a lot about major and current Soviet Russia dealings.
Ukraine, on the other hand, held most everything in terms of mafia gossip she had missed.

Yugoslavia's underworld widely specialized in security, which apparently hailed back to the time it spent occupied under Nazi rule in World War Two. She had found nothing of concern while going through the country because they hadn't wanted her to find anything.

Learning that made her want to either crack open a history book to see what they had to have dealt with or go back and take a harder look. The first would have to do until she had an excuse to go back there, but it was still a jarring bit of information to learn.

Hungary's underworld was still recovering from the unrest only half a decade ago, so Sonya found really nothing in terms of organized syndicates but more freelancers starting to group together again. The fact there was no local information in what she got there would have either been a lack of any to be had or another attempt to conceal how vulnerable the region was.

Likewise, it could've covered the encroachment of foreign syndicates getting into the country.

She felt jarred at how badly she had misjudged territory so close to her 'home' one, but not really surprised. Lisa hadn't been all that encouraging when it came to a lone thief's ability to keep adequately informed, so the Russian Storm-Cloud figured this rash of bad luck in terms of intel-gathering was just proving the woman's point.

At least she hadn't been working and needed that information to prevent herself from pissing off yet another syndicate she wouldn't be able to handle on her own.

Something for Bjorn to do for her. The kid would probably like feeling as if he was contributing, instead of being mostly ignored from time to time. If the Icelander was good at it, then great. If not, then Sonya would figure something else out for the kid to help her with.

She wasn't really surprised it was Ukraine where she got corrected on what she'd missed, the Russian Mafiya was neck deep in this country. Her tattoo worked more than just a picture in her skin and more like the sign she was entitled to some information they were supposed to be for.

Other than as a blatant record of her criminal career and acknowledgement that she was Mafiya.

Sonya did wonder how *Omertà* was kept up if the Russian Mafiya liberally plastered themselves with a normally easily seen record of everything they did. One would think the police would've noticed the color and at least asked about it or noticed a trend.

It was encoded, sort of. However, a whole lot of thieves getting arrested with the same spider web or cat tattoos in various designs should've been at least something interesting to comment on. *Vory* getting busted for murder or fighting back against the police showing up with graveyard tats or police shields on their arms had to be somewhat alarming.

Well... something to wonder.

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CLXXXVIII (Monday the 25th of September, 1967. Kharkiv, Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.)

"Where are we, anyways?"

"Someplace." Crina snapped back, the irritation in her tone almost more reflexive now than felt.
"You made a couple threats of stealing my boots, but if you like them so much I thought you might want a pair of your own."

Sonya eyed the Romanian woman's back thoughtfully as they continued down a little side-street in one of Kharkiv's less affluent neighborhoods.

The pair of boots she was wearing now were in fact old cast-off of Crina's, which were still insanely comfortable for second-hand footwear if a little too broken in now for full comfort. The heels had started to go, so the thief had been playing with if she wanted to get herself her own pair of boots or branch out into different shoe styles.

Boots, anything ankle to calf in length, were popular choices for footwear in Soviet Russia. The winter alone meant sandals or canvas shoes didn't do much to protect the feet, and given how much of Russia's year was comprised of winter or winter-like weather?

Well... it was the thought that counted.

Sonya could appreciate the old bat's attempt as it was.

Her Romanian was very rusty since she had switched back to Russian for the last three months, in fact all she caught was the name of Crina's cobbler when she greeted the man in her native language faster than the thief could keep up with.

Horatiu was a graying gentleman with a pinched expression on his narrow face, making him look akin to a rat or some other pointed snout mammal. It also gave him a semi-permanent glare, or maybe squint, on his cleanly shaven face.

Her inspection of him went unnoticed, because the man was a lot more interested in her feet than her reaction to him.

"Crina... are you really letting the poor girl walk around in boots so old?" Horatiu tossed the gypsy a dirty look, sniffed at the flat expression his was met with, then set his hands on his hips and gave a measuring look to the thief herself. "So darling, I suppose you would like your own pair?"

"If you wouldn't mind." Sonya told him slowly in Romanian, a little bemused. "I take it you work on commission?"

"You would be right, miss. Step inside, lightly now." He waved both master and apprentice into his slightly dismal looking shop, which proved to be a lot different on the inside than out.

She, merely as a thief, greatly appreciated the trick.

Horatiu's shop might be in a slightly run-down neighborhood in a mid-sized Ukrainian city, but it seemed as if the cobbler himself wasn't doing nearly as poorly as the façade of his shop suggested. He had whole skins of leather from various animals on display alongside a glass case of buckles and various finished boot style examples, a very nice little parlor one could wait within, and the whole place smelled of the material he made his boots out of.

_PETA would've abhorred him_, Sonya thought absently, looking around curiously.

She should probably also correct her mental title for the man. Cobbler weren't the type to fashion new shoes from fresh leather, those were cordwainers. There _was_ a distinction, and the man would probably throw a fit if she called him by the wrong professional title.

He seemed to be the type to, a fashionista if she was any judge of character.
"One pair or two, darlings?"

"One." Crina shot over her shoulder, heading straight for that little parlor corner.

"Two. One now and one more this winter, then probably another the year after that." Corrected the thief, still waiting for the man to set her where he would want her to do his work. "Even if these are old, I still would rather wear them than break in a new pair I would not like so well."

She had learned the art of flattering clothing makers at Tatiana's elbow, so she knew how this went for the most part.

"Oh?" Horatiu snatched a couple of things that paid a passing resemblance to the shoe size measuring devices Rachel had used once upon a lifetime, making his way swiftly back to where she was in the middle of his store. "I take it the 'another a year after' is for when you're finally fully grown, but this fall? So soon?"

Sonya ignored the jab at her age, because the man had a point with that observation. "I have a little... party to attend to this winter. I don't know how long it will be, so having a pair of your insanely comfortable boots to ensure my feet won't suffer is an attractive proposition."

She obediently followed his expansively given gesture to a stool setup in back and hauled off her right boot when he made another of those with a wrist flick at the end.

"Do you have a dress?" Free advertising via patrons was likely how the man stayed in business, but the thief wasn't sure if she would direct any attention her boots gained to him.

Becoming a mafia client might or might not hurt his business, and that would be a poor way to repay Crina for this.

"I figured I might as well build an ensemble from the ground up."

It was the right thing to say, even if Sonya was mostly sure she was lying through her teeth and would instead get her foster sister's help. However, this was the way Tatiana had instructed her to flatter her outfitters when you wanted them to think kindly of you.

From the look on Horatiu's face, he knew it full well even if he was pleased she had given the 'usual' flattery.

"How dressy?"

"It's a black-tie event."

"How droll, little black boots then?"

The Russian smiled a bit slyly. "I was thinking more of a little red dress with knee-high boots, so if you think black will work...?"

"Oh... oh." The older man smiled back, just as slyly and a little wicked. "I think we can do something with that idea, and your marvelous legs."

She blinked and looked down at her stocking clad feature in question with a measure of confusion.

In the background, Crina started to cackle.
Sonya didn't know how Crina managed to pull them from the circus for a day but appreciate it greatly.

She might be a tad bit in love with her new boots.

"I really do wonder what that says about you." Cherep commented idly, tuning up his motorcycle while she perched on a crate of miscellaneous circus items.

"I might have a fetish for boots?" She suggested dryly, flexing her calves and pointing her toes. "These are wonderful, though. Even if they are a little stiff still."

"You're not going to get to a Tatiana-level love for clothing, right?" He asked, sounding genuinely worried.

Sounded worried, but from the smirk he was trying to hide by working on his metal deathtrap it was in tone only.

Scoffing, the thief folded her leather clad legs underneath herself and leaned over to block some of her fellow Cloud's limited light in the moving boxcar. "Christmas is going to be in Mafia Land this year."

"What? Why?"

"We don't want to move Lisa." The news had the stuntman frowning thoughtfully instead of nearly panicking. "She's been on bed-rest for a few months already and since the hospital there is the one that enabled her pregnancy, taking her away from that was decided to be an unwise move."

"So..."

"Just for a few days, please. Lisa's baby might even be born by then, and you might be able to come back to Moscow with them if all goes well."

He considered that for a long moment, eventually giving her a shrug. "I can do a few days for Lisa. Do you know what they're going to call him or her?"

"No, Lisa didn't tell me when I asked about what gender she wanted." Sonya watched him tighten down a few bolts idly, absentley digging around in her purse for her cigarettes. "Are you going to be alright, Cherep? Going on without me, I mean."

"I half expected you to bail eventually." Standing upright, or as well as he could in the cramped confines of the boxcar they were 'watching', he leaned back against the crate she was seated on and gave her a crooked grin as he crossed his arms for the warmth. "I knew this wouldn't be a life you'd like, so the mere fact you were here for the beginning is awesome enough. So thanks, little sis, but I can take it from here."

She shifted, just enough to dig the toe of her boot into his ribs to make him yelp. "Seriously, Cherep."

"I'll be fine, I swear." The stuntman amended himself hastily, rubbing at his abused side. "Master Liam knows what I can do and didn't panic, if I need help he's probably the better bet. So, you're not leaving me without any support. I'm sure Crina wouldn't mind telling you all about anything you'd want to hear about in the years to come."
Cherep's expression when talking about Sonya's master in all things mystic was torn between sour exasperation and disgruntled amusement. He had found it somewhat reassuring and annoying that the thief got on so well with the crotchety old bat, after some time that was.

"So, what about you?"

"...what about me?" She parroted back, confused.

Settling back again, the stuntman ticked various people and things off on one hand. "Well, let's see. I'm set for the time being, Tatiana did a switch and is settled in on her new job, Arseniy and Lisa will probably be occupied for the next twenty years raising their little rug rat. So, what about you? Are you really going to try for that title you said you'd get to Dmitriy years ago?"

What title she told Dmitriy...? "The World's Greatest Thief thing?"

"Yeah... that." Waving one hand around, for what purpose Sonya was too distracted to guess at, Cherep continued in an only mildly sour tone. "If stealing for you is anything like my stunt work is for me, I can fully understand why you don't want to do something else with your life. So? Is that what you're going to work on for the now?"

...it wasn't a bad idea. The Storm-Cloud might have only suggested it in a fit of childishness, making light of the skill and dedication such a thing would really require, but given she was an associate for the 'World's Greatest Hitman'?

"...are you trying to support me in stealing things?" She asked instead of comment on her 'childhood' life-goal, a little amused at the change in view her foster brother seemed to have gone through.

"You are my little sister, who supported me doing what makes me happy." Cherep returned dryly. "Even if me doing it gives you fits. Like... denting iron railing fits."

"I replaced those."

He gave her a sideways look for that, a smirk pulling up one side of his mouth. "And why you think that excuses the very act...?"

"...mafia etiquette."

"Really?"

"You can destroy anything you like in Mafia Land... so long as you pay to have it fixed." His fellow Cloud informed him, only a little embarrassed over knowing and making use of that information.

Like Renato's apartment door, which apparently the hitman had replaced within an hour of the thief finally going to bed that one night.

Cherep whistled lowly. "Well... surprisingly thoughtful of you all."

"It really only happens in Mafia Land."

"And there would be the catch."

Sonya sniffed at him in mock-disapproval, finally lighting the cigarette she had pulled out a little while earlier.

"Well...? An answer to my question, please?"
"I just might." It was an overarching goal to work for, anyways. Something to do besides seriously dig into history to see if she could find any mention of the Arcobaleno, *I Prescelti Sette*, or just where this world's history deviated from what little she could recall from Rachel's lifetime.

"...huh." Was her brother's answer to that, looking only slightly conflicted over the subject matter. "Well... good?"

She sighed and toed him in the ribs again then ignored his squawk of protest.

He was still such a dork sometimes.

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**CXC (Monday the 2nd of October, 1967. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)**

Actually leaving the *Großes Volksfest* for the last time was a quiet affair. She had only made a few friends who she really cared for the opinions' of, so the short and sweet farewell suited her just fine.

Checking in with Dmitriy and informing him she'd be finally 'back' officially after the New Year gained her a semi-disgruntled, semi-thankful glare and a neutral look from Galina. The Lightning's presence in the Rain's office surprised her, but she supposed the other female thief might not have wanted to continue without Tatiana's presence in a mainly male ring of thieves and this was a decent alternative until she found a new group.

She did manage a small meeting with Björm, and marveled over the fact he had shot up a good foot and didn't look borderline staved anymore.

In decent clothing and only slightly illegally employed, he finally looked like the gawky young teenager he was. The Icelander was a bit nervous over seeing her again, but as far as the thief could understand it was more of a 'want to make a good impression' one rather than just being unnerved to see her.

Explaining exactly what she had figured he could do for her distracted him nicely, and she left him to plot and plan how he'd work it out with a warning that he'd start as her 'lackey' in three months.

She really did hate the title, but it was what the kid had worked so hard for. Björm looked perfectly happy with it too.

Mafia Land hadn't really changed much, on the surface. There was an slightly alarming change that happened on a more personal level.

Tatiana's letter hadn't mentioned the fact Lisa was on bed-rest within the hospital. Just that Arseniy had solidly decided not to move from Mafia Land until the pregnancy was over.

"I'm fine." The older woman started before Sonya could say anything, a wry little smirk on her lips. "I made Tats not inform you of this, so you wouldn't panic."

Sonya sank onto her bedside, feeling a little out of sorts. Panic would've been a good assumption for what she'd feel over this, and it did describe what she felt now. "Lisa, are you-"

"Tats' asked me that a fair few times already, Sonya." Lisa reassured her calmly, smoothing down the blanket that was spread over her expanded waistline and legs. "This is happening."

Huffing at her stubbornness, the thief sat back and gave her foster mother a look over. "Are you
"You know, it's fairly silly how much you and your sister like to fuss over me at the moment."
Waving a hand at an entire stack of what looked to be fashion magazines, probably Tatiana's offer for a distraction, and a rather lived-in looking armchair next to her bed, the older woman shook her head. "While I wouldn't say no to some of your more frivolous books, I'm fine sweetie."

"Where is Arseniy, anyways?" Sonya asked, mentally trying to recall the titles of the books she had deposited into her storage unit on the island over the last two years. They would be the easier ones to grab, until the foster sisters cleared it out to sort through.

"Out for lunch, he promised to bring me back something with ham in it." Lisa pursed her lips and gave the armchair, the thief was sure her foster father had taken residence upon for the last leg of her pregnancy, a considering look. "I wish I had thought to ask for some pineapple slices before he left."

"I think the hospital could handle the fruit." She suggested, watching as the older Mafiya woman's expression lit up as she reached for the phone on the bedside table. "Anything else?"

"Anything more and I'll start to feel fat." Taking a moment to place an order, for cottage cheese and the pineapple, the brunette gave her youngest foster daughter a more serious look. "Now, how was your little vacation?"

"Alright, Cherep's doing well and has promised to come here for Christmas."

"I'm asking about you, sweetie, not your brother. Although, it is nice to hear a little more about him than his 'I'm fine, whatever country is very hot or cold' messages."

"...I'll remind him to write more when I go fetch him." She promised awkwardly.

"I'll do it myself when I see him." Lisa countered cheerfully. "Now, about you?"

"I've decided I fail at gathering intel and figured Bjorn could do that better than I could." The thief started hesitantly, encouraged by her accepting nod. "I'm... probably going to attend a Vongola Ball right before Christmas, so I'm probably good for distracting Tatiana for a day or two."

"I'm delighted to hear it."

The tart comment surprised a huff of laughter out of Sonya. "I might have pissed off the Triads this summer."

That obviously surprised Lisa, and the woman frowned slightly. "Might?"

"I don't know what they wanted, or if they needed me or just someone I fitted the profile of. I'll let you know when I figure it out."

"Hmm... odd." Offered the older woman but made motions for her to continue without explaining why she thought that was odd.

"Cherep made a suggestion about why I'm not a typical Classic Cloud, which might pan out. If I, or we, ever find another Classic Cloud user to compare it to." The thief wasn't sure if she liked the idea but liking it or not really shouldn't have a bearing on if it was or not. "He was right about my Polarization of Storm, even if his reasoning was rather... stupid."

"Arseniy won't work as another Cloud?"
"He's not active." She shrugged, of two minds about her foster father's disinterest in Flames.

While not diving into that Pandora's Box of issues would keep the man mainly the same without exaggerating his 'Cloud'-ness, it also meant he was a little vulnerable to Dying Will Flame users.

It was a personal choice, so she wouldn't try to get him to change his mind.

"While interesting and all, this wasn't quite what I wanted to know." Lisa interrupted her thoughts, giving her foster daughter a stern look. "How are you doing, personally?"

"...I made a friend? A very crotchety, old crone of a friend?"

"Much better, sweetie. Continue."
Chapter Notes

The story format is going to change after this. While I liked the thousand word shorts at a time for a short story… this isn't going to be short so that's changing. We'll have a ten-thousand word-cap per chapter still, but it will be more 'story' than 'snapshots'.

CXCI (Thursday the 5th of October, 1967. Mafia Land.)

Tatiana, who had a lot more free-time to just explore than Sonya ever had, took her younger foster sister to her favorite gym when she commented on needing to build up some of her lost skills.

It wasn't called such, it was officially a 'dance studio'. Mafia Land was a resort, however unlawfully inclined the normal clientele was it still had the wives and children of various criminals to cater to as well as the crooks themselves.

The Storm-Cloud found that a little sexist, what was she if not a criminal?

The redheaded Sun's favored dance studio was mainly just that, a building full of empty rooms with mirrored walls and a barre in most of them. There was, in the basement, an entirely equipped gymnastic training room… but little else of a more 'gym' bent.

Tatiana ignored Sonya's dubious expression, cheerfully reserving them a somewhat smaller studio for the next few hours.

Well… it couldn't be worse than Aleksandr's underground training room. The former pickpocket turned jewel thief would be surprised if the man had ever cleaned it himself, leaving that up to the younger generations going through his doors.

"So!" The safecracker turned nurse whirled on her little sister, distracting her from inspecting the automatically locking doorknob with an eye to pick it. "Renato Sinclair, spill. How did you meet tall, dark, and snarky?"

"Technically… he met me." Sonya corrected with a measure of bemusement, wondering why she wanted to know and unable to divine a suitably convincing reason on her own.

Curiosity, maybe?

"Back… way back, I think I was eleven. A few months before my twelfth birthday."

Looking entirely unsatisfied with that, her older sister planted her hands on her hips and pouted.

"That's all you're going to give me?"

"Why not ask him?"

"I think he's avoiding me." She informed her cheerfully, as if that wasn't so out of character for her associate it was slightly concerning. "Sinclair made a personal copy of your Sun book, asked me a couple questions about the missing sections, and I haven't really seen him much since."
As the younger woman wasn't all that sure of the etiquette of one's hitman associate meeting a thief's foster sister either, so she supposed that might have been the safer bet until the thief herself was there to mediate. "Oh... okay."

"That's all you're going to say, huh?" Sighing in disapproval, the redhead practically bounced over to the barre and threw a leg up to start stretching. "So disappointed in you, Sonya."

"What? Why?" Baffled, the blonde nearly tripped over her own feet when she was still halfway across the room as she tried to understand what it was her older sister was disappointed over.

Tatiana spun around, looking like she was a breath away from saying something bitingly sarcastic or snarky, then blanched slightly at Sonya's confused stare. "Oh, no. Not like that. I swear."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Relax, Sonya. I was teasing." Holding up her hands, like you would to try reassuring a cornered animal, the redhead tried a slightly timid smile. "Sorry, forgot about your social awkwardness."

Exasperated, and feeling a little sore over the whole thing, she gifted her elder sister with a glare. "Try speaking plainly. Please. I'm a little young for a heart-attack."

Of course, then her sister continued to confuse her completely.

"What do you think of Renato?"

"...he's an ass." The thief started warily, encouraged by the nurse's nod and hand wave to carry on. "Flirts with everything that moves and is remotely female, although... I haven't seen very many ugly women on the island."

"And how does that make you feel?"

Still not following where she was going, Sonya gave her a sideways look as she finally reached the barre. "I... don't follow."

Another sigh, then the redhead elaborated. "Are you annoyed when he flirts?"

"Not really, so long as he doesn't do it when we're in the middle of a conversation." She admitted candidly, thinking back over years of coffee/tea meetings the two of them had for the last couple of years. "That is annoying, because then I have to figure out where his comment to me ended and where his flirting with the waitress begins."

Tatiana sighed yet again, sweeping her loose hair over her shoulder. "Somedays, I really do wonder..."

"Wonder what?"

"Never mind." Answered the Sun cheerfully, then gave her little sister a sly look. "So... are you still a virgin?"

Sonya froze, in a very uncomfortable pose. "...what?"

"You are, tisk. So sad, Sonya." The older Russian in the room grinned widely again, then leaned up against the mirror wall. Blatantly disinterested in getting some exercise in for the few hours they had the room for. "All that time out and about, and you never found someone that you wanted to jump into bed with?"
Scowling, the younger sister unbent and edged away from her. "Tats, I love you and all... but there are these things called sexually transmitted diseases. Some of the places I've been? Would not be surprised to learn they had a few of them lurking around."

"You have an answer to just about everything, don't you? Well... everything you understand, anyways." The redhead mused aloud sourly, batting one hand in the air as if to physically dismiss the point. "What about now that you're not babysitting our dorky foster brother in the wicked civilian world? Are you going to find yourself a man or not?"

"Cherep's not a... well, I guess he is. Kind of." Sonya corrected herself mid-sentence, her scowl fading into a frown. "And why would I need a man?"

"To reach the top shelf, of course." She informed her seriously, rolling her eyes after a moment and huffing a laugh. "To loosen up a little, hopefully. Maybe you won't be as uptight after a wild night or two."

"...how did we get from Renato being an ass to my non-existent sex-life?"

"Oh god." Hand firmly planted across her eyes, the Sun made a dismissive gesture in the air between them. "You know what? Never mind, Lisa can have this conversation with you."

She stared at the elder for a long moment. "...I still don't understand."

"I know. Not much help, am I?" She drew her hand down her face, then gave her a small smirk. "Seriously, put it out of your mind. You wanted a little help getting back in shape, right?"

"Why did you start a conversation just to end it like this?" Sonya asked instead, a little more than frustrated.

"Girl talk, which backfired rather spectacularly might I add." The redhead answered dryly. "You suck at it."

"...sorry?"

"Practice makes perfect." The smirk turned rather nasty all of a sudden. "And I intend to make sure you practice."

CXCII (Friday the 6th of October, 1967. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

After twenty months of little physical training, except the weekly gymnastic and acrobatic training she could maybe sneak in under Jiayi's eye, Sonya wasn't surprised to feel as if someone worked her over with a metal bar after just the first day of keeping up with Tatiana. Unfortunately, she also had to manage three contracts for Mafia Land and not just work on shaping up after her little 'vacation'.

"Actually, you don't." Tatiana corrected, while the foster sisters were taking lunch in Lisa's hospital room. "Since I am currently an employee of Mafia Land too, I have a storage unit of my own. I've been meaning to ask you about my stuff you've been storing, and we could totally just shove your stuff in with mine."

"You also have an apartment of your own you don't use." Their foster mother added dryly, stealing a
little of Sonya's Chicken Lo Mein to supplement her own meal of Sweet and Sour Pork.

The thief let her, since she wasn't the one eating for two at the moment. "...that's-

"Speaking of," the redhead carried on over the blonde, "I wanted to know if you wanted to share an apartment with me. Instead of getting one of the rinky-dink little singles. The doubles are a lot better in terms of space."

"That's -"

"You are kind of homeless at the moment, ya know."

"Tatiana. Let your sister speak." Lisa interrupted before she could carry on, looking faintly exasperated.

"But she'll say no!" Pouting, the Sun batted wide eyes at the older brunette. "Cherep had her for two years, I want some time too!"

"It's fine, Tatiana. If that's what you want to do." Sonya raised her voice at the beginning just to catch her attention, sighing when the redhead gaped at her. "I don't know what kind of roommate I'll be, so if you want to risk that...?"

"What risk?" Tatiana scoffed, looking both a little sheepish and mollified at the same time. "You're a neat freak unless it comes to books, then you might end up entombed by them."

Sighing heavily at them, their foster mother polished off the last of her younger daughter's Lo Mein and set the fork she was using on her hospital bed tray. "Sharing an apartment is a lot different than living in the same house, girls. Sonya, you also have to think of Björn and where he's going to live."

"We'll clean out a closet for him."

"We're not doing that," Sonya corrected in the next moment, faintly irritated. "How hard would it be to get a triple with only two of us?"

"Harder than I think you want to deal with." Lisa admitted a little wryly. "Thirty to forty contracts a year for a thief. Even with Tatiana, whose steady work here would probably amount to the equivalent of five to ten contracts?"

She barely managed five over the course of four months currently, so that probably was not within her grasp right now. "And if I qualify for a double then Tats and I apply to share an apartment?"

"That would be much easier. Very sly, sweetie. Twenty to thirty, but since you're about ready to work full-time?"

Tatiana looked faintly confused. "Then what are we going to do until you pull that in?"

"Lisa? How long can we abuse the Zolotovs' hospitality?"

"You two are Zolotovs, there is no way to abuse it." Their foster mother answered with a serene little smirk.

"We'll try out living in close quarters at the condo," Explained the Storm-Cloud for the redhead's benefit, "Bjorn could live in your apartment until we're ready to move in. If we decide it's not going to work out, I'll still need a double and he'd probably keep your place clean if we remind him to."

"Awesome!"
"You may hate me as a roommate." Sonya cautioned, still feeling rather pleased with herself for settling this. "Or hate my multitude of books."

"I'll hate your smoking." Predicted the nurse easily enough. "And you'll natter at me about cleaning the kitchen, or the bathroom."

"...I don't actually know how to cook beyond the simple basics Lisa showed us."

"Right, you clean and I'll cook."

With a snicker, their foster mother made a shooing motion at them both. "Off you two go then. I think I need a nap."

"Well... after finishing both your own and my lunch?" She ducked the flannel pillow she was certain was Arseniy's before it impacted her face. "Are you still hungry, Lisa? Because I still need to eat, and since somehow I lost all my food?"

Grabbing the younger thief's arm, the Sun ducked out of the hospital room before Lisa reached for the standard issued hospital pillows she was propped up on. "So, you can tease someone, but can't understand when you're being teased?"

"It's easier to get if there's a joke or something leading up to said teasing. Cherep figured that one out." Sonya admitted bluntly. "It's not that I don't understand, it's shifting mental gears to account for it instead of take it seriously. I apparently don't do it quickly enough."

"Noted." Tatiana slated a sly look her way. "Still going to insist you're not socially incompetent?"

"...shut up. I'm not that bad." She muttered sourly. "Awkward, maybe."

"Mmhmm, whatever you want to call it by."

"Don't you have work to be getting back to?"

"Don't you have a gym to be hitting?" The nurse countered cheerfully, with a completely evil looking smirk. "You look a bit sore, Sonya. Want a little help?"

Sticking her nose in the air, her younger sister slightly limped off to find something else for lunch. Tatiana's snickers followed her out of the hospital corridor.

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CXCIII (Monday the 9th of October, 1967. Mafia Land.)

The café Sonya liked had set out a little metal ashtray at her and Renato's usual spot.

It couldn't have been for anyone else, as the ashtray was anchored to the table by a couple artistic looking welds and was present on no other little café table around it.

The thief was a little confused, because it had been a while since she was a semi-regular customer. Appreciative nonetheless, she made a mental note to tip the wait staff a little better than normally and dug into one of the history books she had picked up over the last two years.

It was old, which didn't mean more accurate. Just more biased for the country it was for.
Sonya didn't get into it very far before a certain hitman took the seat across from her.

She had heard rumors of his return before he could track her down for once.

"You still want me to attend that Vongola party with you?"

Renato stole her pack of cigarettes off the tabletop, looking queerly at the Marlboro brand across the side as he plucked one of the premade tubes of tobacco out of it. "Are you still thinking about it?"

"If you made no other plans, I will go with you. I do want to see Shamal, after all." Sighing, the Russian marked her spot and set her book on the table.

The Inverted Sun lit his cigarette with the trick she showed him earlier in the year, tossing the pack back across to her. "Well... who am I to say no to little lady Sonya?"

"I could easily just not go, if you rather?"

With a disgruntled little huff, he sank backwards into the café chair and moodily glared across the table. "You spent all of the year thinking about it, and barely two months before it happens you decide to go along? What, exactly, will I owe you for this?"

"...owe?"

That pulled the hitman up short, and the man frowned as he took a very long drag from his stolen smoke. "Sorry, Sonya. I've had a very bad couple of weeks."

She nodded to the waitress that brought out their drinks but fixed the Italian with a mildly confused look instead of try a sip. "Do I want to know?"

"The famiglia I... for the lack of a better word inherited, had a few dealings before me of which came due." The Mafioso informed her bitterly. "So, I'm a bit... stuck, until I can sort it out."

"Tell them 'so sorry, should not have let them be taken over'?" The thief suggested, surprising a bark of laughter out of the hitman.

"If I wanted them murdered to a man after I was gone, that wouldn't be a bad suggestion."

Renato had a smirk on his face now, which she decided was better all around.

Pissy hitmen were... well, pissy.

Sonya flexed her aching calves absently, finally taking a sip of her rapidly cooling tea. "Right, so. This party, any color I have to avoid or conform to?"

"It's generally a thing to dress in your Flame colors." He informed her dryly. "Which one did you want to play with?"

"I was thinking red, with gold and purple highlights. Mainly in jewelry." She admitted, even if that suggested a Storm more than a Cloud from what he told her about the color choices... and a tiny bit of Sun.

No reason to give a solid warning if she could help it.

"You just adore confusing people, don't you?"

"A little, yeah." It made up for the times she got baffled over other people, so sue her.
Renato snorted at her, abandoning the cigarette he stole from her in favor of his espresso. "I can work with red and purple."

"Are you not going in yellow?"

"For you, Sonya, not me." He corrected her, just a touch drier than his tone had been before. "What are you going to need, anyways?"

"The jewelry, which I have to get done custom." Sonya started, a little confused. "And a dress, but I will get Tatiana's help for that. What in the world do you need to get me?"

"Generally, it's polite to get the lady something for the consideration of attending an evening out with oneself." The womanizing hitman informed her haughtily, with a small toss of his spiky head. "So, what would you like?"

She blankly stared at him.

He scowled back. "Are you going to be difficult about this?"

"...what is wrong with flowers?" She asked after a moment, now really confused.

She had expected that much, but what the hell was up with him?

It wasn't like she couldn't afford her own dress or jewelry, especially since she'd be the one supplying the stones for it.

Renato blinked at her, taken aback. "Flowers?"

"For my hair?" Sonya suggested, more than a little exasperated as she ran a hand through the shoulder length mass. "I suppose I will keep it this long until after this little party, but then I am getting it cut be more manageable."

"Ho... I can do flowers." The hitman gifted her with a bemused look. "Is that really all you want from me for this?"

"I am also taking up your suggestion of quartering me in Vongola's guest suites, so I can see Shamal, so... yes?"

He snorted into his espresso cup, lowering it to shoot her a rather crooked grin. "You might just be my favorite date so far."

"...just to be clear, we are going to spend most of the night either making snarky comments on our fellow mafia members' snooty behavior or mocking their brown nosing, right?"

"Definitely my favorite date."

Sonya was going to take that as a yes.

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**CXCIV (Saturday the 7th of October, 1967. Mafia Land.)**

**Fashions** in late 1967 included mini-skirts only falling to mid-thigh, stockings in styles from fishnet to lace, bare arms and shoulders, *paper* dresses, *box-dresses*, a lot of bright colors, plaid, and vinyl.
Sonya vetoed most of it right off, to Tatiana's face. If she was going to be shelling out the cash for a high-society dress, she was going to get some decent mileage out of it.

She used some of the money she earned hawking a few extra pieces from various jobs over the years to pay for her jewelry, commissioning a set of Nordic inspired pieces in gold plated steel.

Given that it was Mafia Land, the fact the axes on the charm bracelet was requested to be sharp enough to cut flesh wasn't even blinked at. The thief got a weirder look for the Thor's Hammer pendant, which wasn't obviously a 'last-ditch' weapon.

To anyone aside her, that is.

Turning a few of her Bec de Corbins into additional if oversized bracelet charms wouldn't be too hard, except they had a silver sheen to them. She would use two of the tungsten ones as hair sticks, but she wasn't going to obviously wear them.

The Flame-resistant metal was still an unknown alloy, until she found someone that could identify them she'd stick to using the ones she did know what metal made them up.

The sisters argued over what, exactly, Sonya had or didn't have to do. Tatiana was of the opinion the thief would be representing Russian interests, which said thief wasn't entirely sure of. "I'm going as a plus one, not as someone invited on her own merit."

"As a what?" The redhead parroted back, entirely confused.

"A plus one, you know? 'You and a guest are invited to' such and such event, you and plus one." Waving a hand as if to pluck a way to describe it better out of the air, the blonde eventually huffed and resigned herself to doing badly at it. "Point being, I'm arm candy. Renato asked me to go to spare him the matchmaking attempts aimed in his direction."

She pouted up at her, having seated herself on the floor to stretch out her legs. "That's still not a reason to not look smashing."

"I'm not objecting to look smashing." Countered the younger sister out of exasperation, returning her attention to both draining her Cloud Flames through one of her Bec de Corbins and her upside-down stomach crunches hanging off the pole set into the walls by her knees. "But I will not be pandering to the latest craze of stupidity in fashion. There will be a snowball fight, so no one with sense would wear paper."

"So... basically all the mafia Dons' wives, pretty much."

"I don't know, some of them have to have a brain to live like that."

"I've met a couple. Probably minor ones, but they didn't really impress me as serious thinkers." Commented the older Russian with a one-shoulder shrug as she twisted herself into a split. "But you will be probably one of a tiny handful of foreign mafia people at this party, shouldn't you try to impress and dazzle them so they'll think better of Russia's underworld?"

"Next time, I'll tell him to take you." Sonya muttered, a little irritated by the party talk.

She had forgotten how annoying Tatiana could be when it came to fashion.

With a sigh, her elder sister rolled up off the ground with the grace a childhood of ballet training had impressed on them. "Alright, so you've got the boots and are in the process of getting your jewelry done. But we still need to find you a dress. Red, maybe with some purple, and not the 'shapeless
"bags' currently in vogue. Right?"

"Right."

"You know, Twiggy made being shapeless all the rage...?"

The former pickpocket slanted a flat look down at her foster sister. "I'm not Twiggy."

That fashion model had the body type any ballerina would envy, but both thieves in the room were a little too well built to pull the same look off.

"Fine." The redhead huffed, making an annoyed little mope in her younger sister's direction. "Let me see what I've got in my closet. There might be a style you'll like, even if it ends up being a little out of date."

"We can always modernize it a little after we find a style." Shot back the Storm-Cloud with a huff, allowing herself to swing off her polearm acting as a pull-up bar to the ground when she started to feel a slight burn in her abs.

It took her about two hours to drain herself of Cloud Flames now. Sonya wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not, or even what it meant. When she had been fifteen, it took an hour and a half of constant use to do the same thing. She didn't feel any stronger, in fact she had let her Cloud Flames go for the last two years.

Her Storm Flames had seen more use, which did pay off in a tiny bit of control in it. she could light things on fire specifically instead of just watching everything go up in red Flames.

Well... it was progress of a sort. If she ever found out how to use her Sun Flames, then she'd be set.

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 20th of December, 1967. Mafia Land.)

Out of all the dresses and fashion magazines Tatiana had, the sisters eventually settled on a halter-top dress that fell to mid-thigh. A fitted bodice would prevent Sonya from conforming to the 'shapeless' style in fashion, and with no sleeves or shoulders and a bare back it at least fit into the current trends.

With that settled, she raced around from Ukraine back to Mafia Land for her boots and fittings, then helped her sister move her own books and the redhead's old teenager-era stuff into the other storage unit. Within that, she also had to pick up her finished jewelry and find the last few touches for her outfit as well as find something to give Shamal for Christmas.

By the time the week before her birthday, which coincidentally happened to be the week before the Vongola Ball, the former gypsy's apprentice was just barely done with everything she needed to do.

Had she still had to take contracts, she wouldn't have been able to manage it all and her retraining.

"You're still going to pick up Cherep, right?" Tatiana asked the thief as she checked over what she had packed for a few days long visit to Italy.

"On my way back, yeah." Sonya confirmed absently. "We might be a tad bit late, but we'll be here for Christmas. By the USSR calendar, anyways."

The nurse nodded in response, nibbling on her lower lip. "I don't think Lisa's going to go into labor anytime soon, but it might happen. I'll call if it does."
Their foster mother was now almost eight months pregnant. With the uncertainty over the mother's health to give birth, the doctors in charge of her case were sounding out both Lisa and Arseniy for a C-section instead of a labor.

The younger woman sighed, tossing her make-up bag onto her suitcase. "Thanks, Tats."

"Mmm... have fun."

CXCV (Friday the 22nd of December, 1967. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Miss Sonya!"

"Shamal! Get back here, your imaginary friend isn't a reason to disobey directions."

"What the fuck did you just call me?"

A rather harassed looking nursemaid skidded to a halt in the middle of the foyer, openly gaping at the Russian Storm-Cloud glaring back at her while a tetchy Mist brat took refuge behind her legs.

Renato coughed, likely to cover a snicker, behind her. He also, noticeably, didn't bother to try to set either the maid straight on her existence or interfere between his thief associate and the older woman.

With a huff, Sonya dismissed the ignorant woman from her attention and looked down to Shamal. "Kid, why are you hiding?"

"She's mean." He informed her as if the thief was a little slow to catch on to the obvious, tugging at her pant leg a couple times.

She obediently bent to pick him up, absently noting how much he had grown since last year. "That isn't a reason to hide, that's a reason to irritate her until she quits in disgust."

The hitman shamelessly loitering in the background suddenly had an attack of coughs, which he was trying to hide his laughter behind.

He failed miserably.

"Shamal... what's this?" The Russian gently poked the kid's cheek, where a fading bruise was still apparent.

"He fell." Nursemaid that was fast getting on her nerves informed the both of them hesitantly, only to squeak when she shot her a disgusted look.

"I fell." Shamal echoed obediently.

"Try again, brat. I've been in enough combat practice to see what the imprint of someone's knuckles looks like after a few days."

Tetchy baby Mist scowled at her, but he was way too young to really convey any serious disgruntlement. "I got into a fight with Jacopo, but I kicked his knee and he fell on his butt."

She sniffed at the news, then gave an awkward shrug given she had about thirty to forty pounds of kid hanging off her. "Well, so long as you got the brat back for it I suppose it's alright. Next time try to make him think you're closer than you are using your Flames. The best way to avoid getting hit is
Renato huffed, but whether in agreement or to clear his throat after his muffled laughter was debatable. He did reach over the thief's shoulder to use a bit of Sun Flames to clear away the last of the bruise. "Sonya, this lady is Daphne. One of the minders for the nursery Vongola runs."

"Yeah...? Don't care. She's both blind and easily led." Dismissed the Storm-Cloud in the room with a touch of irritation.

"She's also another Mist."

"Still don't care." She reaffirmed, shaking a finger under Shamal's nose. "That is a bad example of a Mist, kid. No imagination, unable to conceive of a 'supposed' impossibility, and way too gullible. Don't turn out like her, I don't associate with bad Mists."

He nodded seriously, which really was a touch cute.

Nurse who Sonya already forgot the name of huffed. "Excuse me!"

"You're not excused. Did or did you not call me 'imaginary'?" She scoffed, giving the appalled woman a sneer. "Maybe we should check to see if you're not the figment of some other Mist's imagination?"

Coughing again, that time to either cover another laugh or to gain attention like he had, Renato planted a hand on the thief's back and gave a light push. "Sonya, Miss Daphne, we're becoming a bit of a spectacle. Thank you, Miss Daphne, but we'll take Shamal from here."

Looking around curiously while resisting the guidance simply on principle, the lone Russian noted that the hitman was right. A fair number of people were gawking in their direction, craning their necks around various doors and halls that branched off from Vongola's grandiose main entranceway.

"The children have history class now." Said nurse who had a backbone if no brain cells insisted, reaching out to take Shamal from the blonde's arms.

She froze when Sonya pinned her in place with a glare that begged her to be that stupid. "He said we'd take the brat from here, miss."

Renato's hand immediately disappeared from her back, and the nurse gave another squeak.

Shamal hugged her around the neck. "You look really pretty, Miss Sonya."

"Thanks kid, but I think you're supposed to tell me that after I get dolled up for this party thing." She informed him with a bit of bemusement, patting him on the back with the arm holding him up. "You're a little early with that."

"But you are pretty."

Blinking, the thief shot the hitman a sideways look. "That sounds like a line."

"I would never tell him to say that." He insisted with fake wounded dignity, pressing a hand to his chest. "That was entirely too tawdry to come from me."

Nurse who Sonya barely recalled a name for gave a gasp and fainted dead away.

Entirely baffled, she stared down at her insensible form then shot a look at the Mafioso that invited her here. "What's wrong with her now?"
"...I have no idea." Renato drawled dryly, giving her a moderately exasperated one in return. "It might be the fact she just had a close encounter with a Cloud that didn't really care for her much, and almost ticked said Cloud off enough to have her arms removed and beaten with them?"

With a huff, Sonya snatched her luggage from the man with her free arm. "I am not that bad."

"You can be, it's just that you're not usually." He countered calmly, entirely unbothered by her actions. "It makes you a little... unpredictable, you know. Your eyes were also purple, when she tried to take Shamal from you."

"Yes, well... she's not all that bright, is she?" She bit back her annoyance over the news the girl did manage to provoke such a response from her. "Where are you sticking me for the next few days, anyways?"

"This way... on second thought, just follow me."

CXCVI (Saturday the 23rd of December, 1967. Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

She had managed to guess the right region of Italy for Vongola's headquarters, if not the right landmass.

The massive Italian Familia was based out of the southern end of the country, just at the very tip of the 'boot' shaped landmass and not on the island of Sicily. The Consulenza Esterna Della Famiglia was based on the island, and the thief assumed that when it came time for it the Varia would probably end up near or around where Renato's inherited syndicate was currently.

In short, basically the entire southern half of the country was practically Vongola territory, counting various alliances and lesser familie that looked to them for protection.

The 'Iron Fort' itself was still in the process from being converted from a fully functioning World War Two bunker-war headquarters into a stately if grandiose mansion. Even if there was going to be a ball in as little as three days, there was still scores of what seemed like personally maintained construction crews reshaping the fortified walls into less bland eyesores.

It would still be an 'iron' fortress, just a prettier one.

Sonya didn't see a whole lot of it, because the staff had a nasty habit of staring at her.

That unnerved her, especially for a foreign criminal in a native's home base, making her both twitchy and a little nervous. She couldn't figure out why they kept sneaking little peeks her way or blatantly gawking at her passing, other than the fact she was a Russian in Italy.

Unfortunately, 'twitchy' and 'nervous' weren't good states for any Cloud. To distract herself, the thief practically abducted Shamal for long walks around the local town while Renato had 'Don' duties to attend to.

Also... to not get herself in trouble with the massive libraries and her little book hoarding issues.

The hitman was still trying to fob his newly acquired familie off on Nono Vongola, if he could only solve whatever little problem that popped up. He got highly busy in the few days they were waiting for the Ball to kick off, making connections for his inherited syndicate and trying to search out a decent candidate to replace him from Vongola's pool of Mafiosi.
Much too busy to spend any time showing her around or just presenting her as his Soviet 'contact', which irked him something fierce.

Since she did recognize he had values and some kind of honor thing tied into his 'ladies' man' persona, she only asked he show up for breakfast with her and insisted she would be fine with the brat.

He was the reason she agreed to any of this after all.

Renato hadn't been exactly happy with that, shooting her a look to say he knew perfectly well what she was doing and that she wasn't really alright, but at least he didn't imitate her Flame type while in those meetings.

Baby Mist was not at all opposed to spending time with the Russian thief instead of whatever school things his Vongola caretakers were trying to cram into the kids' heads before the winter-New Year's break. He took ruthless advantage of her upset state with the Iron Fort's staff and got her to buy his guardian a Christmas gift, guilt-tripping her into it by claiming she had missed the hitman's birthday.

Sonya's sour mutter of 'he was going to forget hers' didn't buy her any leniency.

It was on the return of that specific trip the day of the ball she was there for, with the tiny Mist holding his prize aloft like a victorious soldier returning from war, that she finally met Nono Vongola in the flesh.

The Don of the Famiglia she was staying with was returning from some appointment at the same time the Russian Storm-Cloud and her bratty Mist tagalong were from their walk.

"Miss Nikishina!" Timoteo Vongola called out before the two of them reached the front doors, causing the thief to start and look around for who was calling her by her maiden name. "A moment, if you would?"

Since the man was hosting her in his... fortress, and she was genuinely curious if a Sky had a 'feel', she collared Shamal before the brat could get more than a couple steps further and gently pulled him to a stop by the back of his light jacket. "Of course."

The Boss nodded in acceptance of her acceptance and turned to speak rapidly with one of his Guardians, which one she was too far away to tell but she was pretty sure that was Ganauche either the First or Second.

When the man finally reached her and the Mist brat, Sonya dipped into a curtsy and poked the brat in the back of the head to get him to bow at the right time. "Did you need something from me, Don Vongola?"

"I've been meaning to have a word with you for a few days now, but you seem to be a very active type of woman. Never in the same spot twice, as it were." Timoteo informed her with a small smile, which curiously reminded her of her Pakhan's. Like a shark's grin, a bit too much teeth showing to be genuinely well-meaning. "Is there a reason for that?"

"Your staff will not stop staring at me." The thief admitted bluntly, keeping half her attention on the baby Mist so he wouldn't get up to something while 'adult things' were going on. "While a typical Cloud of my Polarization would not care... I am not typical."

The man, who was arguably one of the more powerful figures in the mafia at the moment, gave her a look over and a slow nod. "I... see. I shall be blunt then, for I know Clouds prefer it. They cannot decide if you are a Cloud or not for you are, as you said, not typical for one."
"...I could knock someone through a couple walls, if you believe that would aid them?"

"You know, my dear, I cannot decide if you are being serious or joking."

"Entirely serious, Don Vongola." Sonya reassured the man blandly, poking Shamal in the forehead before he did whatever it was that required such concentration on the nearby rose bush. "They have irritated me more than enough for me to enjoy it, even if none but that one nurse has actually made a bad impression."

Timoteo's eyebrows flew upward, and the man she was sure was no more than a decade or so older than her rubbed at his jaw thoughtfully. "I heard about that incident. Was it necessary to scare poor Miss Daphne so?"

"Forgive me, Don Vongola, but all I did was glare." The thief was at least somewhat sure he was talking about that fainting nurse. "She was also the one who called me Shamal's 'imaginary friend' when I was standing in front of her."

"Ah... well, I understand then." Nono Vongola's shark-toothed grin was exchanged for a slightly more humor inspired one, which also looked a tiny bit more real on his face. "I would be most upset to be called imaginary to my own face as well."

"Sir, I hate to interrupt... but you do have a meeting in only a few minutes." The man wearing the ring of the Vongola Rain Guardian interjected, sounding completely bland and unruffled at the sudden attention aimed his way.

Well... Rain. He probably had to be one of the best to become a Vongola Guardian out of every Rain that called the Famiglia home.

"Ah, thank you Schnitten." Sonya blinked, but apparently that was the man's name... or title. "Save me a dance, Miss Nikishina? I've been meaning to ask you about how your Soviet Union sees Dying Will Flame users."

"Of course, Don Vongola. Although, I am not sure how much help I will be."

"From what Sinclair had to say, a little more than you will admit to in polite conversation." Timoteo hinted at with a sly seeming smirk, then gave her a nod and the still silent if somewhat sulky Shamal one as well as he finally entered the door the footman had been holding open since the blonde Russian got in range of it.

Huh... the thief couldn't decide if a Sky did have a 'feel' or not. She forgot to check.

CXCVII (Sunday the 24th of December, 1967. Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Renato irritably straightened his tie again in the mirror, not remotely looking forward to the evening's 'festivities'.

At least he had managed to get himself out of next year's Valentine's Day Ball, and hopefully he wouldn't have to attend very many more of these in future years.

While Sonya would improve the quality of the company he was going to be forced to accept, it wasn't like he held much confidence in getting her to agree to come along again. Unless the Russian really enjoyed the night, which wasn't likely for even she didn't particularly like dealing with a crowd
of people.

The hitman spun on his heel, giving the watching Shamal an expectant look. "Well?"

"You look the same as you always do, Mister Renato." The annoying brat commented, idly playing with the box that had held the fedora he had somehow convinced a Storm-Cloud to buy for him. "Can we go see Miss Sonya now?"

Well... if that wasn't a sign of where he fell in the kid's esteem the hitman would give up drinking. Really, Sonya was only that highly thought of because she had more free-time to spend on him than he had lately.

"Yes, fine. Let's go collect a thief." He muttered mulishly, snatching up the rather fetching hat he had been gifted with.

At least Shamal had some taste, even if it was only for what Renato would accept. Maybe the thief had chipped in a little on that end?

It was a rather fine piece of work.

Black felt and with a band of bright canary yellow positioned just above the brim. His favorite colors.

Tetchy Mist brat scrambled to grabbed the bouquet of flowers the Russian had asked for, and practically bounced to the door of the hitman's guest suite. Rolling his eyes, the man himself followed him more sedately.

Shamal had been back and forth from Sonya's suite to everywhere else in the mansion so frequently over the last few days he would have traveled the distance blindfolded, so the Sun user was not remotely surprised the kid reached her door long before him.

He was surprised that she promptly answered the door instead of calling out for a 'minute'.

...so, he wasn't going to have to be fashionably late this evening. Pity.

"Shamal? Oh... perfect. I've been waiting for those."

Baby Mist rather dumbly stumbled into the thief's suite, which made Renato curious enough to pick up his pace.

Sonya was in the middle of picking out a couple red lilies from the flowers he had supplied, turning back to the floor-length mirror in the sitting room to thread the stems into her messy bun. "One moment, I'm almost done."

'When the hell did Sonya grow up' was the hitman's first thought, followed closely by 'damn...'

She really did have very nice legs, and with them clad in black leather to offset her bright red dress they drew the eye almost automatically. Not conforming to current fashions by showcasing she had curves in her fitted dress, she was also obviously female and proud to show it.

Her bicep full of tattoos would be a little out of place, but he didn't really see a reason for her not to show them off since he knew full well they were marks of her accomplishments in her native part of the world.

While she might not be in fashion, she was still shockingly different in a way that was very familiar.
He wondered if she was wearing stockings or garters for the strip of skin between knee and the hem of her dress.

"You look really pretty, Miss Sonya." Shamal informed her seriously, still holding onto the bundle of flowers until the thief took the rest of them and placed them in a nearby empty vase. "Really."

"You know, you use that line too much and it starts to get a tiny bit stale." She informed him a touch dryly, bending down and planting a wet kiss on his cheek. "But thank you."

Her action left a bright red lip mark on the Mist's rapidly reddening face and answered the hitman's internal question. Garters.

Sonya's grin was entirely roguish. "I dare you to leave that in place all night."

"Y-yeah? Well... I double dog dare you to do it to Mister Renato."

She glanced up at the hitman then back down to the kid. "We unfortunately have a party to attend... so maybe later."

Shamal sniffed at her.

"He'll have one by night's end."

"Do I get a say in this?" Renato managed to find his tongue in time to prevent this little counter-dare from going farther, huffing when the Russian shot him a bland smile and pulled her lipstick out of a bag on her couch to reapply the coat she lost to Shamal's still red cheeks.

Recapping the tube of makeup, Sonya cocked her head at him. "Are you dressed up? You look like you usually do."

The hitman glowered at her, which turned into a glare when she tossed her pack of cigarettes and her damn lipstick at him.

"What? This dress doesn't have pockets."

...no, no it didn't. At least, not one that wouldn't crush whatever was kept in it. "Why didn't you buy a clutch?"

"I don't do this kind of thing that often to recall every bit that goes into it." She waved that critique away with a shrug of barred shoulders, pulling a sheer red shawl out of her suitcase to loop around herself. "Also? I find it a tiny bit suspicious you know what that word means."

Renato glared at her harder, but the damn thief merely blinked back at him innocently as she attached a gold charm bracelet to her left wrist.

...were those axes?

Odd choice for jewelry.

Shamal, the brat, snickered.

CXCVIII (Sunday the 24th of December, 1967 continued. Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)
Sonya took a sip of her entirely too sweet champagne and then winced again as her eyes protested the sight of yet another party-goer. "Nine o'clock, the girl in the box-dress of neon pink and green."

The Iron Fort's ballroom, or one of them anyways, was a very beautiful room. High walls with mirrors inlaid on the wall that didn't have expanses of windows, three crystal chandeliers spaced evenly apart overhead, a theme of gold and orange in the decor offsetting the massive evergreen dressed up as a Christmas tree behind the orchestra pit.

It was a glittering high society showcase for a room full of major criminal puppet masters and their better socialized enforcers.

There were a good hundred or two people already within the ballroom before the hitman led her in, and it seemed as if there was yet another hundred or so more to go before the Ball really kicked off.

"...almost too easy." Renato informed her almost lazily. "Candy Cane reject that auditioned for Easter. The gentleman three groups away to the back-right."

Humming, she considered the man in houndstooth tweed for a moment. "A Sherlock Holmes wanna-be with too much pork. Same group, the man in blue."

"Someone who desperately needs Sherlock's pork instead of him. A group one closer to us from them, the girl with the hat."

"Which one? The girl with too much love for birds on her head, or the one that looks like a mourner in her Sunday-best?"

He huffed a light laugh, tilting his brand-new fedora up with one long finger to get a better look at the both of them. "Well... I suppose that counts as two."

"Why thank you, kind sir." She snarked back, slitting a sideways glance to him and taking in the smirk he was wearing. She was rather happy she could amuse him so, considering the last couple days he had been elbow deep in syndicate business he apparently didn't like much, and this was fun. "The bitch holding up the line."

Glancing over to Don Vongola and his current issue, the hitman snorted in disgust. "Croc-zilla. I actually know that woman, she's been trying to set me up with her eldest daughter."

"Not your type?"

"She looks like a horse," Renato muttered darkly, "and has all the personality of a dead mouse."

Sonya hummed noncommittally, ensuring her staring in that direction wouldn't attract attention by scanning the entire greeting line either waiting to say their few words to Timoteo Vongola and his Guardians or working past them to other famiglia Dons and their sons and daughters or seconds who had an alliance with Nono.

"I believe that will count as an extra, given you gave me both ladies a round before." The younger girl behind 'Croc-zilla' really did look like a horse.

"Much too kind, little lady Sonya."

"Probably." She agreed a touch dryly.

"Twelve o'clock, the lady in green." A new voice interjected, causing both hitman and thief to turn to see Tyr the Sword Emperor standing slightly behind them fully.
Sonya glanced that way, frowned, then took a slower look across the area the master assassin pointed out. "I actually can't get an impression of her, although I do see her."

With a puzzled sniff, Renato had to admit the same thing. "Odd... Mist?"

"Why hide it, then?"

He gave her red dress a pointed look. "You are."

"I am, only for this rumored snowball fight." She shook a red painted nail under his nose, ignoring the disgruntled look that passed over his face. "I didn't want to get multiple requests to help whatever team or group."

"You know, you weren't supposed to know that before attending." The hitman drawled, batting her hand away irritably. "Takes some of the fun out of it."

"Please, you're the one taking a Cloud to a snowball fight."

Renato sniffed in mock-disapproval that time. "My cheating isn't what's on the table, little lady Sonya."

"Right." She muttered in his direction, then looked back over to the master assassin still lingering on her other side. "Did you want to join our little game, Sword Emperor, or was there something else?"

Tyr slanted a sideways look at her of his own. "...do you have any ranged skills, Miss Sonya?"

"What, for the lady Mist in green? Range isn't really my thing." The thief admitted honestly but looked around anyways. The ballroom was large, but she wasn't really that far away. "One second."

Raw cranberries bounced, right?

Snagging one of the little berries off the table decoration behind the three of them, the Storm-Cloud placed it just so in her fingers, so she could flick the fruit with one hand, and took careful aim.

"A cranberry?" The hitman scoffed at her, sounding rather dismissive over her choice of weapon. "What kind of damage do you expect-"

He cut himself off when she flicked the berry, her Propagated force easily driving it the needed distance. It impacted the Mist woman's forehead a little high and bounced off with only a red mark left behind, she slumped to the ground in what appeared to be a faint in response.

"Oh dear, the lady in green seems to have been a little overwhelmed." Sonya commented idly, fighting hard to keep a smirk off her lips. "Master Tyr, does Vongola have anyone that can take her out for a bit of air?"

He gave her a deadpan stare in return, because one of the waiters was already moving to help the lady.

"What is with you and throwing things?" Renato asked tartly, taking his hat off to run a hand through his spiky hair once. "That rock when we met, now berries that you flick?"

"If I need range, I throw things." Sonya dismissed that with a shrug of bare shoulders. "With my strength, I don't need a gun to kill from more than ten paces away."

Huffing at that crack against his favored weaponry, the hitman all but sulked for a moment.
"Save me a dance, Miss Sonya." Tyr requested from her in his even but silky voice, giving them a short nod before striding away.

"Well... that's Nono Vongola and Master Tyr I owe a dance to." With a sigh, the thief regarded the low level in the champagne flute she had set down to fuss with a piece of fruit. Probably not safe to take another drink from, she had ignored it for a small bit and she was in a ballroom full of criminals. "There is not enough alcohol in this glass."

"When did Timoteo ask for a dance?"

"This afternoon. We, Shamal and I, met him coming back." She set her flute down again and looked around for the waiters circling with bottles of various liquors. "Do you think there's any vodka in the room?"

In the most unfair thing Sonya had seen yet, Tyr didn't really look at that dressed up either.

Why did she put so much effort into dressing up if the men weren't going to do it too?

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CXCIX (Sunday the 24th of December, 1967 continued. Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

While Renato managed to use dancing a turn with her to dodge the previously nicknamed 'Croc-zilla' and her daughter, Tyr cut in for the next number.

"You are not easily anticipated, Miss Sonya." The master assassin informed her in perfect London-accented English, demonstrating both knowledge for her preference in languages and very smooth movements on the dance floor. "I have worked with Hard Cloud Flame users before, but you are nothing like them."

"I wonder about that sometimes." Sonya easily admitted, keeping up with little difficulty in the waltz. "I used to be worse, or more Cloud-like, in my childhood."

Lisa had ensured they all knew how to dance, even Cherep. Admittedly, Tyr was a bit taller than her brother and a bit smoother in motion. It was an interesting change.

Her fellow Cloud was a touch more durable, which did make dancing with the Italian fair a touch nerve-wracking.

"Any reason for the change?"

"I have some theories, a few I puzzled out myself and a couple suggestions."

The Sword Emperor's lips twitched, in either a still-born frown or smile it was hard to guess. "Do I need to ask?"

She huffed through her nose, wondering why he was so interested to be as direct as this. "A few of them are slightly obvious. A Cloud can raise another Cloud, their children who follow their parent's Flame type are example of this. With varying degrees of success, but still. I also moved, around my fifth birthday. If that disrupted whatever 'territory claiming' a young Cloud does or not is questionable, and so is the results for a Cloud that does not establish a territory of their own. A few others are more personal, so I will refrain from speaking of them unless they prove true."

"The problem would be finding a Cloud early enough to test that." Commented the master assassin
neutrally, spinning them around to avoid a less graceful pair. "Your type is... not easily found."

"Are they? Or do only the 'strongest' Clouds within each region become the only active users of it and their 'patrolling' suppress any others so it merely appears that way? I know another active Cloud, my foster father would be if he chose to, and another vor I know of has the same type and isn't actively a user either. Is that 'rareness' really because Clouds are rare or because we are less eye catching or eccentric when young and rarely get the chance to grow into it?"

"Those are good questions," Tyr admitted after a few beats of musing over her queries, then pulled them to a smooth halt when the orchestra finished the piece with a flourish, "ones I look forward to hearing how they are answered. Thank you for the dance, Miss Sonya."

The Russian curtsied as he gave a half-bow to her before walking away, wondering if that last comment meant he wanted to be kept informed or would be watching her to see when she could answer them.

It wasn't really clear, and it could be that both were correct.

Looking around at where the master assassin left her Sonya couldn't see Renato in the nearby crowd, but she could see Don Vongola and his Guardians.

Timoteo spotted her practically at the same time.

"Miss Nikishina, I believe you owe me a turn on the floor." He informed her a touch loudly, smoothly disengaging from a knot of other men his Cloud Guardian apparently named Visconti moved to block from following him.

"Nono Vongola, I believe I do." The thief greeted and admitted in return, wryly musing that this was probably why Tyr left her there instead of in range of the hitman she was attending the ball with.

"Imagine that, the next number is about to begin." Taking her offered hand, he whirled them out onto the dance floor just as smoothly as the head of the Varia could. "Forgive me for using you like a shield, but I really could do with a break."

"According to Renato, that's pretty much my main function for this party." Sonya informed him with a dry smirk, noting that in closer quarters Timoteo did have a 'pull'.

One that made her spine snap straight and gave her an... odd feeling.

A Sky like Nono Vongola apparently made her want to do something probably foolish. She squashed the urge with some difficulty, because not only was now a bad time for anything like that but the man already had a Cloud Guardian.

"You two aren't dating?"

"What? Oh... no, I've known Renato for a while now, he's... well, we're trying to be friends." With an only slightly awkward smile for that comment, the thief shrugged her bared shoulders. "We started out as casual drinking partners, even if the choice of poison back then was tea and coffee. Or espresso, for him anyways."

The Sky apparently hadn't known that tidbit, as he hummed as he considered the news.

"Um... Don Vongola? May I ask a question?"

"As long as you do not mind I will ask one in return later."
Fair enough... even if he already got a question in. "Aren't you married?"

If he was, his wife had been missing all night. Sonya hadn't caught a glimpse of anyone that could've been Mrs. Timoteo Vongola all night, and that bugged her slightly.

"My Fiorella is currently pregnant with our third child, my dear." The man informed her willingly enough.

She blinked in surprise. "Oh, I see. My foster mother is also pregnant, so you have my sympathies. As well as my hopes she has a safe birth."

"Thank you." Timoteo graciously accepted with a nod, spinning them to a halt right next to a very vexed looking hitman. "Renato, your lovely date."

"Thank you, Nono. Especially since Tyr didn't quite have the manners to bring her back promptly." The man kept the snark to a minimum, but the tacked-on sentence sounded a little bitchy.

Probably because there were two middle-aged women standing near him currently eyeing Sonya as if their disapproval would matter to her. They had probably been trying to get his attention, either on their person or to try to get the man interested in their daughters.

The Russian gave them a sharp, toothy grin and the two biddies promptly found something else to do.

Probably because she purposely allowed her eyes to glow with Cloud Flames. She had the time recently to at least figure out how to specifically cause that, which might help her prevent it happening unconsciously.

Timoteo turned what was probably a laugh into a very convincing cough and handed the thief back over to the hitman with a nod of his head. "You are very talented, Miss Sonya."

"Thank you, Don Vongola. You aren't half bad of a dancer yourself."

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**CC (Monday the 25th of December, 1967. Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)**

*Given* the hitman decided unilaterally that she had been remiss in her 'shield' duties, Renato didn't let Sonya go very far from his person for the rest of the night.

Which, although the two dances she owed to Tyr and Timoteo were the cause, the thief didn't really mind all that much.

She didn't know even a percentage of the native Italians crammed into the ballroom, meaning any conversation she would be getting for the night was either with the hitman or with people she didn't know and probably wouldn't care for the opinions of.

The Russian blessed her Cloud Flames more than once before the Ball finally closed for the evening, because not only could she keep up with a Sun hiding out on the dancefloor but Clouds were 'discouraged' from actively participating in the snowball fight afterwards.

Mid-winter at a tropical climate or not, Vongola imported snow for their 'traditional' snowball fight. Cloud Flame users were generally in charge of making snowballs, and greatly abused their ability for Propagation to do so.
Cloud Flame snowballs were a little slushy, but if it had been a touch or two colder there might have been a way to slightly refreeze them using the coolers... probably hence why Clouds were discouraged from actually pitching their snowballs about.

Including Sonya and Visconti, there were six Cloud Flame users at the Ball. One man she was fairly certain was one of Tyr's people, a man who she was sure had been hanging around Don Bovineo, and two others she didn't recognize at all.

The Russian did figure out that Cloud and Storm Flames mixed into a snowball made them explode. Into warm water, but they did splash everyone nearby when they went off. Renato gleefully monopolized her recent findings in 'snow-warfare' for the fight, even nailing 'Croc-zilla' in the back of the head with one.

Clouds weren't very social people, so the continued silence for most of the snowball fight suited Sonya just fine even with her slight Storm natured influence.

It wasn't until the fight was over, read 'everyone that hated someone else was done trying to soak them to the bone' so it took until the early hours of dawn, that she overheard a comment that made her start.

"Wait... we weren't supposed to be armed during this?"

Ganauche, the First apparently, gaped at her. "You are armed? Where the hell are you hiding it?"

He even gestured to her tight red dress, probably alluding to the fact she had zero pockets where something bigger than a card could be hidden.

Sonya scoffed at him and his crude gesturing. "You need imagination."

"Sonya... really?" Renato asked with a smirk, apparently still close enough to overhear her conversation with Nono's Lightning Guardian. "...what is it?"

She gave him an equally disgruntled glare, plucking at her bracelet of mini axes. "You can't guess for yourself?"

"Those things? They're tiny."

The thief twitched at the dismissal, shooting the Lightning a dark look of his own again. "How much do you want to bet on that?"

"They are tiny. What were you going to do, papercut someone to death?" Ganauche insisted, actually having the gall to look insulted.

His yelp when Sonya ripped one of her ax charms off and re-sized it with a flair of Cloud Flames before burying it in the ground a hair's breadth away from his toes was satisfyingly high-pitched.

"Repeat that, I dare you."

"...you brought a battle ax, to a ball." Renato clarified for everyone suddenly looking in their direction, sounding as if he was repressing his laughter by sheer will.

"I prefer polearms, but those are a little too long to wear like charms." Admitted the Russian blandly, touching her bun to ensure they were still there. "So those are in my hair instead."

The hitman grinned darkly, taking her broken charm bracelet from her to inspect the other six gold axes still hanging off it. "Anything else?"
"My pendant, although that would be a rather awkward hammer to try and wield. I was planning on throwing it if I had to."

"So... you weaponized your jewelry." He summarized gleefully, letting her bracelet dangle in the air so Nono Vongola could get a good look of his own in. "Really Sonya? I didn't even bring my gun."

She shot him a dry look. "The gun you 'didn't bring' is strapped to the left side of your chest. Right this very moment."

Renato coughed sheepishly under Timoteo's level gaze, and the Russian shrugged when the man turned it on her.

The Ninth head and current Sky of Vongola sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I wonder if I should bother feeling surprised... or be more irritated my security missed the both of you sneaking weapons in."

The hitman jerked a thumb at the thief. "She's the one that snuck in her own armory."

She flipped him off. "You're the one packing heat."

Schnitten chipped in with his own two cents. "The armory is a little more impressive, actually."

"I would think a gun is of more concern." Bouche Croquant, the dark-skinned and redheaded Mist Guardian Sonya only met an hour before this, countered in his deep voice.

When Timoteo started to laugh as his Guardians started to bicker which one was 'better', Sonya actually has some hope they weren't going to get into trouble for this.
"I actually don't really see the point," Sonya admitted, threading her fingers through her hair and pulling both the red lilies Renato got her and her Bec de Corbins out of it, "as you can't really completely disarm any Flame user worth their inner fire anyways."

Ganauche took the flowers from her while also juggling her broken gold ax-charm bracelet, a steadily shrinking golden ax, and her hammer pendant in his other hand. "So, what? Have you been armed this whole time? All week?"

"Of course I have." She informed him blandly as she ran a hand through her now loose hair, seriously wondering why he would think she would give up any weaponry without prompting in the first place.

Visconti took possession of the two mini-polearms that had been holding up her bun. "We will return these when your visit comes to an end, Miss Nikishina."

She blinked at him, looked at her two of three tungsten Bec de Corbins in his hands, and tried for a non-awkward smile to give the Ninth Generation Vongola Cloud Guardian.

From the flat look he aimed at her over those sunglasses, the Russian probably wasn't going to get away with it.

"Sonya? Anything you would like to share with the rest of the class?" Renato asked, still highly amused even if he had to give up his own weapon to Coyote Nougat.

It had been under his dress shirt, which had been how he had snuck it past casual security screening in the ballroom even if the thief could feel it just holding his arm like a proper piece of arm candy.

The gun now in the Storm Guardian's possession had a strip of moonstones inlaid on the grip.

She couldn't decide if she felt flattered he had adjusted a holdout weapon for what she had inadvertently showed him or a little annoyed he pointed her out as the one who helped identify them as his stone.

Since they arrived days early and had been already within the Iron Fort before the Ball, they had also escaped the normal strict searches all guests were subjected to at the main doors. The Sky of Vongola had been a little chagrined to learn that was how they snuck their weapons through initially.

Unknowingly or not.

"...I may or may not actually have seven of those things. Two with me, the rest in my rooms."

Ganauche choked on his own spit, edging away from her slightly and dumping the rest of her jewelry into the Cloud Guardian's hands. Including the now hand-ax sized battle ax still shrinking into its pre-Propagated dimensions as her Cloud Flames bled off it.

He then made a beeline for the abandoned tables, seizing the first opened bottle of wine he found and necking what was left in it.

Timoteo Vongola sighed, rubbing at his mouth likely in an attempt to hide his stubbornly lingering
smile. "I think I am very happy Clouds are not particularly common."

"Since I can, as Renato so charmingly put it earlier this week, 'rip off someone's arm and beat them with it' with my bare hands, no Cloud can really be called 'unarmed'." Sonya tacked on in a conversational tone, reaching over and fishing through the hitman's pockets for her cigarettes and lipstick. "Not so long as we still have arms."

Renato huffed at her, still buttoning up his dress shirt after giving up the gun that had been strapped to his chest under it. Which had been why she didn't bother asking.

Since the party was over, most of the sopping wet Mafiosi and their dates for the evening more interested in getting dry and warm than remaining to talk after a midnight snowball fight that lasted until dawn, she had no problem lighting up especially since she had abstained for most of the ball. Taking a long drag before continuing to try and clarify why it was she never thought to even ask if having weapons was allowed.

Other than the fact the man who invited her here had done it too.

"Where I am from we don't actually disarm for anything, so we assume everyone else is armed as well. My foster father even used to wear a garrote wrapped around his arm to bed, until my foster mother made him stop because it started to chafe her skin badly. She got him a knife he could strap to the small of his back instead in compromise."

Timoteo opened his mouth, closed it, shook his head, and gave a slightly unwilling huff of laughter. "That... that is fascinating, Miss Sonya. And I suppose it would explain a few things, but next time...?"

"If there is a next time, I will give up my weapons to whoever is at the door." Sonya agreed, only a tiny bit sheepishly.

"What, you're going to abandon me to the masses just like that?" Asked Renato, seizing her wrist to snag her pack of cigarettes and take one for himself. "I'm hurt, little lady Sonya."

"Parties aren't really my thing." She reminded him a little pointedly, letting him take possession of her smokes because she knew arguing about it could take a bit longer than she really wanted to linger for. "I only came along this time for Shamal, really."

"You like the brat more than me?"

"Yes."

He glared at her for the bluntly honest answer.

With another huff, and a smirk that just wouldn't let itself be smoothed away, Don Vongola checked to ensure that his guests really were either gone or on their way out then gestured for everyone to follow him. "I think we should end this night on that note."

The hitman twitched, scoffed as he ground the half-finished cigarette under his heel, and stalked along after the Sky. The slightly chilly Russian did the same before following the men, fingering her tube of lipstick thoughtfully.

Since it did look as if Timoteo was going to escort them back to the guest suites they were living in for the short term, probably to ensure she did give up the rest of her weaponry and the hitman didn't have any more, she wondered if she minded the audience for the last thing she planned on for the night.
Shamal had double *dog* dared her, after all. She couldn't let that go without at least attempting it.

There were more than enough ornamental mirrors scattered about the mansion to ensure she had a very fresh and thick coat of red lipstick, with only Schnitten of Rain and Coyote of Storm to become curious over what she was planning.

She knew full well the tetchy Mist brat would likely either stay up all night or try to be awake when they came back, Renato wasn't amused to learn he had actually asked one of the maids to wake him up for it when the kid stumbled out of the thief's suite.

Shamal blinked brown bleary eyes up at them all, still sporting a smudged makeup imprint of her lips on his cheek, then scowled cutely at the hitman glowering down at him. "**Hey… Miss Sonya, didn't-**"

The Inverted Sun caught on only a split second too late.

Sonya planted a kiss to his cheek, ducking away quickly and grinning at the bright red lip mark she left behind. "**Merry Christmas, Renato.**"

From the dark glare she got in return, he didn't share the sentiment.

"**Eww… she got you too, Mister Renato.**" Baby Mist chortled, eyes widening when the Storm-Cloud grabbed him in response. "**NO! Miss Sonya, you already got me!**"

"**Well… you shouldn't laugh at other's misfortune. Where they can hear it and plot revenge, anyways.**" Pressing her still red lips to his cheek again despite his squirming, she smirked at his pout. "**You're going to need a nap, brat.**"

Said brat grumbled over her 'nasty' makeup, rubbing at the new lipstick stain on his face and merely smearing a new red mark all over himself.

Timoteo cleared his throat, pressing his lips together and pointedly looking between the thief and her guest suite. He also looked highly amused, especially when Renato pulled out his handkerchief to try scrubbing the thief's lipstick off of his face. "**Miss Sonya?**"

"**Right, weapons. One second.**" Shifting Shamal to the side to sit on a hip, she opened her door and made a beeline for her suitcase.

Through the open door, she could faintly hear the Lightning Guardian's voice as she dumped the Mist brat on her temporary couch. "**If she didn't scare me a little, I would totally ask if I could have one too,**"

One what?

A lipstick mark?

That was kind of… stupid. He could do it himself with any tube of the stuff, why ask her for it?

Digging out her remaining Bec de Corbins after telling the sleepy brat to climb back into bed without her since she needed a shower, the thief retraced her steps and was promptly baffled at the sight that greeted her.

Ganauche had a new bright red mark on his lightly tanned face, somehow acquired while she had been in her guest suite living room. He was also pointedly keeping the Rain Guardian between himself and Renato for some reason.
The hitman was ignoring him just as pointedly in return, but he also had her lilies in his fist now instead of the man she had given them to after pulling them out of her hair.

Entirely confused over what was going on, Sonya handed over her remaining five Bec de Corbins to Visconti to add to the rest of her 'arsenal'. "Erm… is everything…?"

"We are fine, Miss Sonya." Nono Vongola informed her as if she hadn't caught him trying to give one shameless Inverted Sun a reproving look. "Good morning, and Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Don Vongola." She parroted back, flicking her eyes from Renato back to the man's Lightning Guardian. "Good morning, gentlemen."

She got a various array of responses back, and her flowers from the hitman along with a curt 'Sonya'.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 25th of December, 1967 continued. Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Shamal only really let Sonya have a four/five-hour nap, he was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed before ten and ran out of patience about ten-thirty.

The party ended around five, but she didn't get to bed until around six.

At least, ten was when he woke her up and demanded his presents the first time.

The second time the thief groggily informed him Renato had to be awake first before they could do presents. When baby Mist darted off she blinked blearily after him a few times, wondering if she should risk going back to sleep or drag herself out of bed.

Sonya did, eventually, stumble into her guest suite sitting room. Tiredly curling up on her couch to wait for what was going to happen next, and somewhat dozing a little in the meantime as she warmed up her corner of the overly stuffed cushions.

Shamal pulling an equally groggy, probably grumpy, half-dressed hitman into her rooms was at least expected.

The kid huffed and puffed out his still slightly chubby cheeks, looking highly exasperated. "Why'd you two have to sleep in different rooms? You're making me do more work."

"Alas, the whine of all children everywhere." She got in before Renato could do more than just generally glower around, limply waving a hand to her suitcase. "Now fetch your presents, I'm too tired to do it myself."

The outraged look she got in return was at least making up a little for baby Mist's general lack of patience.

Throwing himself to the other end of the couch she was curled up on, the shirtless Sun muttered something probably uncomplimentary about the kid under his breath. Then he glared over at her. "Isn't that my shirt?"

A squeak and a crash of pottery had both thief and hitman craning around to see one of the maids with a fire-engine red face standing over a mess of broken crockery and spilled liquids.

She had probably been alerted to them being awake when Renato and Shamal entered her suite and tripped or something across the threshold.
Sniffing at the mess, it wasn't her floor so she didn't really care if someone wanted to make a mess of it, Sonya looked back at the man. "Yes. You failed to ask for it back, it's mine now."

He was enough of a clothes snob to have been wearing silk shirts from the first time she met him, and this one was nicely broken in and very comfortable. She liked wearing it to bed now, ever since she wondered what to do with the outfit she had stolen from his closet, so she wasn't giving it up.

"Steal." She tacked on after a moment of complete silence.

Somehow magically sensing the mess, a footman appeared at the thief's door with a mop and broom. He swept up the broken pottery, mopped up the mess left behind on the hardwood floors, and then a little less than gracefully swept away.

There was probably a kitchen station somewhere nearby, because that was also around the moment another maid ducked past him carrying a new tray also past the still heavily blushing maid standing stock still in the entryway.

She didn't really care about the audience she somehow acquired. They had Spiced Black Russian Tea and was pouring her a cup, everything else was pretty much secondary.

The next unknown that entered her suite wasn't similarly ignored, but that man dismissed both maids with an arched look while handing the hitman a wrapped box done up in gaudy Christmas colors. That man, who she wanted to label either a footman or a butler, shooed everyone that didn't need to be there out when he left, finally pulling the thief's guest suite doors shut behind him.

Well… so much for the morning show.

Renato tossed the present, which she assumed was for Shamal, onto the coffee table so he could clutch at his espresso. "Don't expect anything then."

"I hadn't anyways." Scoffed Sonya, actually expending the energy to pull herself somewhat upright and balance her teacup at the same time. "Front pocket, Shamal."

Baby Mist brat guiltily lowered the makeup bag he had been investigating back into her suitcase, unlatching the front pocket instead.

The hitman blinked at the two plain wrapped parcels the kid surfaced with, shooting the thief a dryly amused look. "A book, Sonya? Entirely predictable, coming from you."

"…shut up." She managed around a yawn, blowing out a sigh as Shamal brought his prizes back over to the couch where the two of them were. "A copy of my Mist findings, in Italian. More for his education than for Christmas, but I never did really manage to help him much last year."

The dreaded 'education' word had baby Mist handing the suspiciously book-shaped package to his guardian quickly, pulling the second one free of wrappings with an overabundance of haste and a minimum of fuss.

Shamal spilled a collection of small turquoise figurines out into his pudgy palm, ranging from horses to dogs to actual figures of people but mainly in various sea-themed creatures.

"Merry Christmas kid. Go wild with them, and I'll replace what you shatter later."

"But I broke the piece of this you gave me before, Miss Sonya." He protested, looking a bit unwilling to actually try anything with the carved rocks now in his hands.
Rather sweet of him, but a little silly too.

"I figured you would, the gems we use like that don't tend to last very long." She admitted with an absent shrug. "The shards can still be used, slip one into the possession of someone bothering you and they'll start hallucinating on Mist Flames. Then you can either mock them or get away clean. I know a Rain that does the same with Tranquility laced sapphire shards."

Baby Mist suddenly looked evilly contemplative of what she just told him.

Renato pulled his nose out of the kid's copy of her research, opened his mouth for something but seemed to realize something else, then blinked a bit wildly as he shut his mouth without saying what he had originally wanted to say. "Don't do it to anyone in Vongola, Shamal."

"Aww… but-"

"No." The hitman repeated sternly, side eyeing the thief lounging on the kid's other side. "Not until you're ten or so."

Sonya didn't have an opinion on that, so she sipped her tea silently when the brat looked to her for some help to change his guardian's mind.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 25th of December, 1967 continued. Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Don Vongola, you wished to see me?" The Russian Storm-Cloud asked as she was led inside the man's office by one of the timid-seeming maids.

Instead of gawking, which half of them finally stopped doing and started being professionals, some the Vongola staff was now cringing around her. It was fast getting on her nerves even worse than the staring had done.

That was probably showing in her expression, because the maid made some fast tracks out of the room.

"Miss Sonya, is there any way you could stop unnerving my people?" Timoteo asked a touch dryly as she swung her gaze back to him.

"I now stand still and they will flinch from me, I fail to see how I might affect that in any positive manner."

The Don gave a very put-upon sigh, which she really was only half-certain was faked, setting his pen down on a blotter and leaning back in his chair as he studied her.

Raising an eyebrow at the action, and only idly wondering why he was doing it, the thief flicked her eyes around at the office instead.

Because… books.

Built into the wall behind him, Timoteo had an entire wall of bookshelves she was itching to investigate and maybe abscond with one or two. He had a very nice big window she could probably sneak through.

Which would've been a bad idea, not only was this an office of a Sky but likely the room was heavily guarded when he wasn't in it as well.
Three of his Guardians were even in the office with them too.

Coyote Nougat was apparently guarding the man's back, Ganauche was doing some kind of busywork, and her fellow Cloud Visconti had apparently been helping his Sky deal with his work.

Tyr the Sword Emperor was also lingering against the wall behind her, if she wanted to just overlook the Flame users in front of her in her estimation of the security of this room.

"Miss Sonya," Timoteo called her attention back to himself after a long moment, "I was wondering if you wouldn't mind discussing your research into Dying Will Flames with me."

Sonya blinked at the man, wondering why he wanted to know. Italy had to be far ahead of her in terms of knowledge base, she barely started a decade ago. "...I suppose?"

"Renato had a few things to say about your research, including the reasoning behind the jewel you gave young Shamal." He started, giving her a mildly expectant look.

...she didn't quite know what it was he wanted, since that wasn't a question. "Yes? And?"

"Young Shamal ended up doing a few things I had previously thought outside the range of a Mist that young, including but not limited to very..." the man considered for a moment, then continued when he found the word he apparently wanted, "...robust creations that ended up terrorizing some of his equally young contemporaries while your jewel lasted. He now seems to be a bit ahead of where he should be for his age."

"...and?" She repeated herself, still confused.

Shamal was a very skilled little Mist for his youth, even stronger than Usov had been when he started tripping over his Flames. While slightly proud a Sky of Timoteo's age and experience was impressed with the baby Mist's strength and skill... that also wasn't a question.

"Oh... I also gave him a few more this morning, so you may wish to watch for that happening again." Sonya tacked on after another beat.

Ganauche's forehead suddenly impacted his Don's desk, entirely baffling the thief.

...that guy not only had a bad habit of choking on air, but apparently liked to damage himself. She couldn't see any Lightning Flames either, so that will probably leave a bruise.

Wasn't there supposed to be three Ganauches?

Maybe Ganauche the First ends up unwittingly killing himself?

That would be pathetic.

"Miss Sonya, are you not going to explain why you gave Flame focuses to a child that young?" Timoteo tried again, sounding a little stern that time.

"I gave Shamal that first rock for defensive reasons, if he weaponized it then it is your own fault he does not feel safe here or is bored." The Russian returned, frowning slightly at the Boss that was not hers trying to sound disproving over her actions. "If Shamal doesn't feel safe, I'm sure Renato or I could find somewhere else for the brat to stay for the rest of his childhood."

"I am sure he was only bored, and maybe a little irritated at the repeated claims that you did not exist told to his face." He reassured her evenly, lacing his fingers together and giving her a level stare
over them. "I am also sure that problem is now solved, with your visit out here to see him."

She felt another twinge of that odd feeling a Sky like him gave a Storm-Cloud like her, reminding her that not only was this Vongola's Don but she was supposed to be on her best behavior.

"So, the brat's bored? Huh." Baby Mist needed to put some time into learning to read.

Sonya could before the age of four and the kid was almost five. Admittedly she had completely cheated in terms of maturity and already knowing how to read English but learning to read Cyrillic had required some effort on her part.

Renato only told her that Shamal wasn't yet reading by himself when the kid got preoccupied with his Christmas gift of shiny new Lego bricks to build houses for his new turquoise figurines with and leave underfoot.

Those fucking things hurt.

She was halfway convinced the hitman had given that as a present just to have a good laugh at her swearing a blue streak in Russian when she found that out firsthand. Not very graceful of her, but she had less than five hours of sleep and just wanted a little more damn tea to wake up properly.

Also, Sun Flames being used on one's foot felt weirdly ticklish.

Shamal had looked so sorry about her getting hurt Renato healed up any possible bruise just to avoid the waterworks.

Maybe it was the hitman touching her foot?

That had been kind of weird.

A sigh, pitched just a touch too loudly for her to believe was real rather than merely attention catching, drew the Russian out of her thoughts.

Timoteo was rubbing at his temple, looking strangely exasperated as he sank backwards into his overly ornate looking, burnt orange padded chair.

Why did he look exasperated?

She had answered his questions so far, hadn't she?

She was being nice and trying to make the good impression Tatiana had wanted her to do.

"How did you stumble onto the jewels you gave both Renato and young Shamal, Miss Sonya?" The Sky asked pretty bluntly.

"I started as a jewel thief." Hadn't she told the hitman that too?

Why was he asking if he likely already knew that?

"You steal them, then give them out?" Ganauche tried to clarify out loud, earning himself a deadpan stare from the thief.

"Of course not, those are from my collection of gems to try fitting to Flame users."

Visconti gave a little cough, stubbornly gazing sedately out the window when she glanced in his direction. In response, Coyote Nougat dug out a couple high denomination bills in lira from his
wallet to shove at the Cloud in disgust.

Sonya wasn't sure what was going on but had the idea it was something to do with her.

Especially when the Lightning Guardian sighed himself, dug out his own wallet, and threw a large wad of money he rolled up over the thief's shoulder likely to where Tyr was lingering.

Nono Vongola pinched the bridge of his nose, now looking strangely amused as well as a little long-suffering. "Miss Sonya, how did you stumble upon the idea of these gemstones you fit to other Flame users?"

"Mafia Land, they sell these rings for Flame users and I wondered what stone they held."

"Did you ever find out?" Visconti asked, thumbing through the Storm's money and pocketing it when he was satisfied with how much was there.

"I think they're sapphires, or a similar crystal type."

The Cloud Guardian nodded, to show he was still listening to her even if he was watching his Sky's expression. "Personal experience?"

"Unfortunately." Frowning, Sonya thought back to the glimpses she had gotten of the Flame rings in Mafia Land and compared them to the results she had gotten from various stones. "I cannot be certain just yet, so don't quote me on that."

Sapphires didn't scorch, which was the only other feature she had yet to match to that gem-type to be certain.

Actually… maybe the Flame rings were made out of industrial sapphires?

She had yet to try those instead of jewel-quality ones.

"Unfortunately?" Echoed the other Cloud, shifting his gaze from Don Vongola to her.

"Sapphires implode under heavy use." The thief explained, holding up her left palm where she still had several small scars from the first sapphire she ever tried. "I don't hand them out for that reason, too risky."

"Do you have a method to sort others to certain gems?" Visconti asked next, after getting a good look at her palm.

"No, everyone I've tried prefer wildly different stones. Even if they share a Flame type."

Polarization might explain that, or the degree of it. Sonya had to start over with the new knowledge of the color of the stone not mattering much to what type of Flame she was testing, and her personal theory that Polarization was more of a degree of inner or outer demonstration of Flames than an either-or thing.

"Sapphires are the only type of gemstone that will reliably work for everyone I've tried, but it's not something I would recommend actually using for anything."

She probably needed to pull another jewel heist or three to either substantiate or reject the theories. Joy.

"Would you mind informing us when you find out a reliable method?"
Likely, this was what the whole conversation was driving to. The thief wondered why it was it took a Cloud to get to the point when the Sky was supposed to be 'Harmony' incarnate.

Shouldn't Timoteo have understood a Cloud, even one like her, wouldn't appreciate roundabout conversations?

"…*Shamal and Renato are one thing,*" the Russian repeated her words to a hitman almost more than a year ago in a neutral tone of voice, "*I have no reason to go out of my way for anyone else just yet.*"

Just yet, because the future was a very perilous thing to plan on. Giving them the hitman as a possible link to her because it was the man's fault she was here at all. Hopefully this would enable Vongola to assume they had whatever they wanted from her and would mainly leave her alone after this.

…yeah, she wasn't banking on that either.

"*Thank you for taking the time to answer a few questions, Miss Sonya.*" Timoteo told her in an only slightly pained tone of voice, also for some reason looking mildly amused. "*I heard you may be leaving in a few hours?*

"*I have to get back, hopefully in time for my foster mother to give birth.*" She confirmed with a measure of bemusement.

He only asked four questions, and half of those were during the 'small-talk' part of it. Was that all he wanted to know?

"*Tyr will return your weaponry.*" The Sky informed her, glancing to the assassin himself behind the thief. "*I hope you enjoyed the Ball, my dear.*"

"*It was surprisingly fun, for something that had way too many people for me to really enjoy attending.*" She responded obediently to the conversational gambit she did recognize from Lisa's lectures and giving the man a small curtsy. "*Thank you for hosting me, Don Vongola. Merry Christmas.*"

"*Merry Christmas, Miss Sonya.*" He repeated, now for some reason looking strangely resigned.

Tyr opened the door of the Sky's office, allowing the thief to pass him into the hall first.

"*Tungsten, steel, gold, and spinel?*" The Sword Emperor questioned quietly halfway to her guest room suite, holding out a hand full of precious metals and jewels to her.

"*A Flame-resistant metal, a less resistant but still durable metal, something shiny to qualify as jewelry, and my personal stone.*" Sonya answered with a touch of amusement as she took her 'arsenal' back, wondering if he sent someone else to get her weaponry appraised or if he went himself.

No comment about the Flame-resistant metal, so either he was opting to ignore it or didn't have those checked. Which… slightly irking, if he was going to check on the rest of her jewelry why didn't he identify what alloy the original Bec de Corbins were?

Tyr in a jeweler's store asking about her tiny gold axes or the tungsten Bec de Corbins should not be that funny of a mental image. It should be scarier, the man was an assassin, but was he as polite to everyone else as he was to her?

It made him seem a lot less intimidating.
"I can use red tourmaline as well, but my last piece with it was broken this past year and I have yet to replace it."

The master assassin hummed, a small lilt at the end informing her he was interested. "The key necklace you used to wear?"

"Well… it was a key, wasn't it?" Sonya asked in return, strangely fond of something that had been really more of a joke than something necessary.

"What thief needs a key?" Tyr asked blandly, looking at her out of the corner of his eyes.

"I didn't, thus the joke." She admitted sheepishly. "It was more of a timesaver than actually ever needed as a key to what I couldn't unlock."

The man frowned, thinking it over, then looked at her fully. "That, Miss Sonya, is a bad joke."

A thief in possession of a master key, which would never see much use as a master key.

"I know." It really was a terrible joke. She blamed Cherep for infecting her with a bit of his dorkiness. "Since I failed to say so last night, Merry Christmas Master Tyr."

The Head of the Varia nodded shortly in return, tilting his head as they came up to the hallway she had lived out of for the last week. "I do not qualify for a Christmas Kiss as well?"

…oh, was that what Ganauche wanted last night?

Sonya blinked as she realized it, since it made more sense that the Lightning wanting a makeup smear on his face, then considered the comment. "I have my lipstick in my room, if you wish?"

The assassin merely smirked at her, the first real facial expression she had seen on him. "I will abstain this year. Merry Christmas Miss Sonya."

(Monday the 1st of January, 1968. A Mafia Land Ferry.)

Cherep was entirely bemused to learn she had attended the mafia ball, after filling her in with all the circus news she had missed since leaving, but at least did seem accepting of why she did so. "Right, Renato. I keep forgetting his name."

"How hard is it to recall it?" Sonya asked out of confusion. She never had a problem like that, did he crack his head open practicing for his stunt work next year or something?

"He's not… someone I like very much, so I don't put effort into trying to remember." The purple colored stuntman admitted casually with a shrug. "With luck, might never have to deal with him again so why bother?"

"…because he's my friend? I think…” At what point could she call the hitman a friend?

Hadn't they reached that point yet?

"You… don't sound too sure of that, Sonya." He pointed out a little needlessly, kicking his duffle bag back more squarely under the bench they had monopolized for the ferry trip out to Mafia Land. "Why? Haven't you two gotten to the point of stalking each other?"

"He stalks me, doesn't that count?"
"Wait… what?"

"Renato can show up in the strangest of places, sometimes not too long after I reach either Mafia Land or in the middle of nowhere." She elaborated blandly, pulling her pack of cigarettes out. "It has gotten to the point I am no longer surprised. I think that does count."

"Sonya… stalking someone is not a sign of friendship." Her fellow Cloud informed her slowly, wide-eyed. "I know that was how we became friends… but that's not really socially acceptable behavior."

"…I thought it was?" The thief managed around the filter of her cigarette, frowning as she really thought about it. "I wanted to spend time with you, because you were interesting and not quite the same as everyone else I knew of. Since you were not exactly predictable in your daily habits, I had to find some other way to do so if my own schedule did not allow for convenient times to meet. Is not following someone to gain an understanding of their preferred locations stalking? Do not friends who wish to spend time together find a place they both like in order to do so stalk one another for such a place?"

The stuntman considered her, frowning thoughtfully as he mulled over her words. "Well… while interesting and somewhat informative to know in terms of how your head works, and yes it is and sure why not, this Renato dude does have a meeting point with you. I'm pretty sure you've told me that. A café on this island we're visiting? Since there is one, anything outside of that is odd and not really healthy behavior."

"Maybe it is mafia friendship behavior?" Sonya wondered, because Tatiana would've said something.

Right?

"Besides, 'outside of that' would also include anything that would change a relationship from 'casual acquaintances' to 'friends'."

"If it is? That explains sooo much." Cherep muttered with a slightly strangled sounding laugh, planting his hand on his forehead then raking it back through his newly cut short and spiky purple hair. "I don't think you're really able to see this that clearly, Sonya. He started popping up when we were in Austria, which is weird no matter how you look at it."

"Renato was chasing down the damage to his contact network, which I was part of." Defended the thief, confused over what she had thought to be a fairly good relationship with the hitman and not appreciating the corrections. "So, no, Cherep. That one is explainable."

"When we were in Italy?"

"He is from there and likely does have a very good network that would inform him of anything new."

"Okay… you know what? I'm going to talk to both Lisa and Tatiana about this and see what they say. Agree to abide by what they decide?"

"Sure," Sonya agreed, scrapping plans to ask their foster mother herself, "as long as if they say it is not strange you drop it."

"I'm mentioning this to Arseniy." Cherep muttered, grabbing the strap of his bag as Mafia Land's docks appeared on the horizon.
"Why?"

The stuntman gave her a sideways look as she flicked her cigarette over the side of the ferry. "Just trust me on this one, Sonya. Arseniy needs to know."

She frowned, wondering if she had missed informing the vor of something majorly important. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No." He gave her a brief sideways hug, letting go just as quickly out of respect of her intolerance for extended contact with others. Her brother's way of trying to reassure her using his preference for tactile touch while not upsetting her own sensibilities. "No, you haven't done anything wrong. You're just kind of dense sometimes."

"Hey…"

"So, this kid," the stuntman continued in an obvious change of subject before she could protest the slight on her social awareness, "Shamal. He's kind of like my nephew now, right?"

Letting the change go, because arguing about that was already old, the thief considered the new question. "No? I mean, I am not his mother or anything. Shamal is just… a kid I know."

"And actually like." Cherep tacked on for her, shooting her a grin over his shoulder as they made their way to the middle of the deck where they could disembark the ferry from. "From what you've told me of him, he's an orphan. Right?"

"…yes?"

"And this R-dude only told you about the death of the kid's dad before he got him?"

"Renato, and…?"

“So, you're pretty much likely the only mother-figure he knows of." The stuntman finished, finding them a place next to a wall because she got itchy when people lingered behind her too long. "Or at least the only female-influence he's got that he likes very much. Shamal sounds like a brat, you know."

"He is a brat." Sonya confirmed a bit wryly, thinking back to the dare the hitman had still been glaring at her for when she left Vongola's Iron Fort. "Do you have a point, Cherep?"

"Wouldn't all that make you, by default mind you, this Shamal brat's mom even if he doesn't call you that?"

"…um." Was her oh-so intelligent answer, wondering the same thing now. "…I do not know."

"You might wish to inform Lisa she may have a grandkid… before she learns of some other way."

"…then by that reasoning would Bjørn not count too?" She countered, trying to find some way that didn't leave her a teenage mother.

That was bad, at least she was pretty sure teen-moms were not good things. Didn't Rachel's lifetime have a lot of bad versions of those mom-types?

"Nope! Bjørn's mom sounded completely awesome, but the point of fact there is the kid can recall his mother and doesn't need an older female role-model in his life to supply a mom-like feel for his childhood." Cherep explained cheerfully, now full out grinning at her.
Sonya glared back, well aware he was exaggerating something if not able to divine what.  

Damn it all, he was doing it on purpose too.

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(Monday the 1st of January, 1968 continued. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

She might have neglected to inform their foster brother that Lisa was on bedrest in the hospital.

"Don't start." The older woman told Cherep with a pleasant little smile, patting him on the arm and motioning for him to set himself down on one of the chairs that had migrated into her room. "So, how's life been for you since last year?"

"Okay," the stuntman fumbled, making his little sister wince and his elder smirk, "broke my old bike, and then got a new one."

Their now heavily pregnant foster mother exasperatedly sighed, smoothing her hands down over her very big baby bump covered by her thin green hospital blanket. "What is with you and little Sonya? I want to know about you, Cherep, not your work."

"Oh." He inanely responded, but then actually managed to pull a cheerful smile out of somewhere for her. "Alright, really. It's been a bit weird since Sonya left the circus, and I keep getting questions from her friends about how she is doing every month, but other than that it's going fine."

"Friends, as in plural? She only told me about the one, the elderly Crina lady."

"Crina's one of them." Cherep, the total traitor, admitted with a smirk and a nod. "There's also Jaq, he's the African native strongman she went drinking with a couple times a month. And Jaq's friend the Egyptian native Faris, who taught her to breath fire and juggle really hot or really big pointy things. And then there's Jiayi, from China, who's the coordinator for the trapeze acts."

Lisa slanted an expectant look at the youngest of the foster siblings, who could only sheepishly shrug. "Sorry Lisa, I didn't know they cared that much."

"You and I need to discuss what terms 'being friends' covers then." The older Russian dictated neutrally, pointing a finger from herself to the thief and back again. "That is a bit more than just an oversight, sweetie."

"Yes, yes you two do." Chipped in the stuntman, sprawling out his long limbs as he got as comfortable as possible in a hospital waiting room chair. "Ask her about this Renato character's so-called 'friendly' habits while you're at it."

"Oh?"

"We're not having this discussion now." Sonya refused flatly, crossing her arms over her chest and shooting him a dark glare. "Lisa? In other news, Cherep seems to think I may have made you a grandmother."

"WHAT?" Tatiana almost slammed her forehead on the cupboard shelf, pulling her head free in the nick of time and almost spilling the tea leaves she had gotten up to fetch all over the floor. "You're not pregnant or something too, right?"

"Would it be a 'seem' if I was?" The thief snapped irritably, disgruntled at the automatic assumption. "No, it's this kid I know he's convinced I'm the default 'mom' for."
"How is someone a 'default' mom?" The nurse questioned curiously as she checked the teapot to ensure it was clean.

"By being the only womanly influence in his life, from all accounts." Cherep informed her over the blonde's head, ignoring the flick of nails she hit his ribs with. He turned back to their highly amused foster mother with a grin. "I am right, right? If she's the older female in the relationship, it's being this kid's mom by another name."

"He's pulling your leg, sweetie." Lisa clarified for the scowling young thief, giving the stuntman a light backhanded smack to his shoulder. "Unless this child's other parent asks you to be, or the kid does himself, you're not his mother. You could be the older sister figure, or maybe an aunt instead."

"I like aunt, can we go with that?"

"Only you, Sonya." Tatiana gave her two kopeks, leaning up against the counter as the teakettle started to boil. "Only you could somehow acquire a kid without dealing with the fun, messy hormone-involved activities that usually goes into baby production."

The door to Lisa's hospital room had opened while the redhead gave her opinion, and Arseniy blinked a few times trying to sort out why that was the current subject of discussion. "…I'm going to come back later."

"Bye Arseniy!" Cheerfully called out the Sun user as the door closed.

Cherep buried his face in Lisa's bed, near their mother's hip. His shaking shoulders nearly rocked the pregnant woman's entire body as he tried not to let his laughter out.

Sonya looked at the older brunette. "I don't get it."

"Fathers don't particularly like to hear about their daughter's sex-life or contemplating if they have one at all." The ever helpful Mafiya woman tried to clarify for her. "You should have seen what Arseniy did to Nikolai, just before Tats left home."

"No, I got that part." The young blonde clarified, waving a hand to dismiss it and privately thinking it wasn't that funny. "But why did he leave again? He just got here."

"Sonya... did you know I was seeing Nikolai?" Tatiana questioned curiously.

"Everyone knew, Tats."

Cherep nodded a few times in agreement as he sat back up straight, smoothing a hand down his slightly red face. "We did, sorry Tatiana. It wasn't much of a secret."

The redhead pulled a pout at all of them, sniffing and pulling the kettle off the hotplate to make the tea Lisa had asked for.

The woman herself shook her head with a smirk. "To answer your question, Sonya? Arseniy left for two reasons. The first was to adjust to the idea that the youngest girl is really a young woman now, without glaring a hole in the wall and making any of us uncomfortable as he does so. The second was to escape any further uncomfortable realizations before he had to deal with it."

"So... Arseniy is hiding?" She tried to clarify. "Why is that funny?"

"It loses a lot of the humor when you have to explain it." Cherep informed her brightly anyways. "But Arseniy's a big guy, right?"
"…right."

"You wouldn't think anything normal or mundane would stump or intimidate him, yeah?"

"…sure?"

The stuntman nodded again. "So, we can agree he's a masculine man, not particularly the type to get stymied or scared of anything. Yet he fled pretty damn fast when he overheard a comment about the possible dating life of his youngest, and forgive me but, very feminine daughter. Slim and tiny Sonya making big bad Arseniy flee for his sanity. It's funny."

"But how would he know we would continue to talk about it?" Sonya protested in exasperation, as that was the part she was confused on.

"There are three girls in this room." Pointed out her fellow Cloud dryly. "Why wouldn't you keep on talking about it?"

"Girl talk." Tatiana labeled with a smirk, handing the first teacup to Lisa.

"What does that make Cherep then?"

"A necessary sacrifice." He answered for himself, slinking down in his seat. "He's abandoned me here… the bastard."

"Do you want some tea too, Cherep?" The nurse asked brightly, giving Sonya the next cup. "For this little tea party going on?"

"Hell, why not? Let's go all out." Accepting the cup she passed to him, he saluted their foster mother. "Well what do you know, Lisa? You've got three daughters all of a sudden."

"Are you gay?" The youngest thief in the room asked him, completely seriously, making Cherep spit his first sip of tea out on the floor.

Tatiana was overcome with a fit of giggles that made it too hard for her to manage the teakettle, it made a hasty stop on the counter as she tried to recover.

Lisa coughed a couple times, blinking rapidly. "Sonya, sweetie… were you joking or being serious just now?"

She took a sip of her tea before answering. "Joking, I know Cherep's not gay. I've seen him flirt with girls before."

"Oh my god." The Sun using nurse breathed out, the occasional snicker escaping her. "That was epic, Sonya. I love you so much right now."

"That… was a low blow." Accused her brother in the next second, coughing slightly to get the tea he accidently inhaled out of his lungs. "I will get you back for this. Tatiana! You've corrupted Sonya, this means war."

"What are you talking about?" She denied, peering over her shoulder at them. "Sonya's just more human now."

"What is with people and thinking I'm a robot or something?" The thief herself questioned aloud, looking into the bottom of her teacup and absently reading the leaves drifting in it. Omen of death, omen of death, omen of love, omen of money… or was that one 'harvest'? "Lisa, make them stop."
With a sigh, the older Russian woman put a hand to her temple as her foster children started to squabble. "You want to clarify on that 'seeing your brother flirt' comment, Sonya?"

"He flirts with some of the girls in the circus, which was the other half of the reason I didn't associate with the trapeze girls very often." She readily admitted with a shrug. "Other than the fact they were all a bit too flighty and gossipy for my tastes. I didn't want to know if he slept with one or two while we were both there."

Cherep made a wheezing noise, dropping himself back into his seat and clutching his cooling tea. "Damn it Sonya, you're not supposed to tell her that."

"Why not? Personal things, Lisa told me she wanted to hear personal news out of us and I do believe that qualifies."

"So, Cherep, now that you can no longer try to distract us with Sonya's ongoing social problems...?" Lisa gave the stuntman a sharp grin. "Care to fill us in on the rest of how your life is going? Is there a serious girl you're seeing maybe?"

"This is where you got it." He accused the thief, pointing at their foster mother. "That inability to be shaken off whatever subject."

"That's nice." Sonya patted his knee absently, letting Tatiana refill her teacup. "You should probably answer her."

"Yes, yes you should."

Cherep gulped as Lisa beamed at him with maybe too many teeth showing.

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(Tuesday the 2nd of January, 1968. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)

Sonya eyed her foster sister warily in the early morning light the next day. "Tats… are you losing weight for a reason or just because?"

"It's stress." The redheaded nurse supplied, rubbing at her face tiredly. "Lisa said no for the C-section, not unless things go really bad, so the doctors want one of the Sun active nurses on her all the time just in case. Given that there are two of us, and it's Lisa?"

"And where, exactly, are you getting the time to study in that?" Cherep asked absently, gnawing on a bagel as he pulled his head out of the fridge. "I thought you wanted to be a doctor?"

"I am going to be one." Tatiana all but snapped irritably, snatching the other bagel from the stuntman's hand and biting into it viciously. Frowning as she tried to understand the reason why she couldn't be, the thief shot a confused look to their foster brother from her spot at the Zolotov's condo guest room kitchenette table.

"Tatiana? Is there something wrong?" Asked the stuntman instead of addressing her confusion, which probably meant he had no idea either.

"…there are some sexist assholes in the hospital, and I just so happen have the luck to be assigned to work a floor with a couple of them stationed there." Clarified the redhead through her bread grimly, sighing and rolling her neck to loosen stiff muscles. "Don't worry about it, I'll live. And show those utter asses that I can do more than just look pretty."
"Erm… okay?"

Tatiana glanced over at Sonya, then rolled her eyes with a huff. "Don't worry about it, being able to light my hands on fire pretty much guarantees me protection from most of the shit like that. It's just… aggravating sometimes."

"That does not address the weight loss." The younger thief clarified hesitantly, eyeing her sister's much reduced frame from what she recalled from two years ago. "Tats, this doesn't look like a recent problem. More an ongoing issue."

"Sonya, it's just the medic's courses." She tried to reassure the both of them tiredly. "Your friend Renato wasn't kidding when he called them hellish. I crammed what amounts to four years of formal education and learning basic hospital duties all into one year, then this year is the basics of pharmaceuticals and biology lessons after work with a side order of medical emergencies and maybe a dash or two of weekly difficult patients."

"…hellish indeed." Cherep managed after a moment of blatant staring. "Why are you doing that to yourself?"

"Universities might be a lot less intensive, but I don't have the records for that or the inclination to take five to six years to do it." Their elder sister raked a hand through her long red hair, wincing when her fingers snagged on a few stubborn tangles. "This will take three, four if I'm unlucky. A couple more years to build up experience aside, it's quicker and a lot less questions will be asked over why I don't know some things or what I'm going to do with it."

"So… you're cramming a few years of leisurely study into a shorter term of working study?"

"This is also a place I won't have to take the Hippocratic Oath." She agreed with the stuntman, giving him a dry smile. "You'd be surprised how many assassins come out of the hospital's study-work course."

"No, no I don't think I would be." Cherep muttered, giving them a backhanded wave as he left them to get dressed for the day.

Tatiana looked back to Sonya, who was back to nibbling on her toast. "Any other concerns?"

"I thought you were becoming a nurse first?" The younger Russian posed after swallowing, glancing at the clock to see if she could go visit Lisa yet or not. "Then a doctor?"

"I am a nurse, Sun Flames cheating all over that."

"So why not stay a nurse a year, then start in on learning to be a doctor?" She asked, because that weight-loss wasn't just ten or so pounds.

It was more like thirty and then some.

"I might be able to become a nurse faster with Flames making me all the more special, but I do have to work up the knowledge base I skipped formally learning sometime." Answered the redhead wryly, stretching out her arms over her head to loosen up the muscles of her back and shoulders. "So right now, I'm making that up. Learning the basic first-year stuff any hospital intern needs to know and taking the courses I'll need to start in on a doctor's license. Well… a mafia one anyways."

The phone on the wall started ringing, distracting them before Sonya could pose her next question to her elder sister.
Tatiana sniffed, glanced up at the clock, and then frowned. "Who the hell calls at this hour?"

As the redhead got up to answer it, because in order for their suite's phone to ring the number had to be specifically dialed in order to not get the main suite's phone instead, the Storm-Cloud drained her teacup and wondered what to do today.

The nurse had to work, Cherep would likely hide out in his room, and she didn't really feel like going out and about herself.

Maybe a book?

"Lisa's gone into labor." The Sun shot over her shoulder, hanging up the phone and darting for her room. Likely to get dress so she could run to the hospital and relieve or assist that other Sun nurse. "I'll see you there, but you may want to wait an hour or two!"

The thief blinked, a little worried. "Why?"

"It's probably going to take a few hours!" Tatiana practically fell over herself coming out of her room, shoving her sweater down with an irritated motion and scooping up a random pair of shoes to wear. "Spend some time elsewhere, instead of pacing a hole through the waiting room."

Sonya was pretty sure those were Cherep's, actually. "Erm… Tats?"

"No time! Baby sibling to help bring into the world!"

…she should probably bring her a pair of her own shoes.

Sonya looked down at her empty teacup and plate, then at the dishes piled in the sink from the nurse's own breakfast. Lastly, she glanced at her fellow Cloud's temporary bedroom door.

Which was actually her room he was living in while the sisters shared one to accommodate him.

Wait a few hours Tatiana said. Doing what, exactly?

All she really wanted to do was head to the hospital too.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 2nd of January, 1968 continued. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)

Cherep winced as Lisa's scream petered off. "Well… this is…"

Sonya gritted her teeth as the next shout nearly made her rip through the book she couldn't muster the interest to read.

"…really unnerving." The stuntman finished, hunching his shoulders uncomfortably. "Are you getting the same urge to bust into there and maybe murder the doctors too? As if that would help Lisa?"

Exhaling through her nose slowly, the thief put her book down before she destroyed it. "Yes."

"I'm pretty sure that's-" They both winced again as Lisa shouted something intelligible at Arseniy in a very loud, pained voice. "-not quite normal."

"It is not." A new voice interjected.
She snapped the arms off of the chair she had planted herself in, dropping them to the floor and glaring over at the newcomer. "…Fong…"

"Miss Sonya." The Chinese man returned evenly, arms behind his back and bouncing slightly on his toes. "I must admit, I did not expect to see you here."

"This is a very bad time, Fong." The thief informed him needlessly. "Leave, before my restraint snaps."

"To be frank, I am a little surprised it had not already." Fong informed her warily, still keeping the bulk of the room between him and both Clouds. "The hospital has called in any Flame actives currently on the island, however. In case two snap, is what they informed me before I came here. I do believe you two are unnerving them."

"…both of us?" Cherep questioned him, looking both highly suspicious and a little green.

He inclined his head only low enough to confer agreement without breaking eye contact with the younger Cloud. "Both. You both have very purple eye coloring at this moment."

The stuntman managed a huff of laughter, a very dry one. "My eye coloring is always purple. And?"

"Well… I suppose that may not have a point with you, other than very suspicious shining being apparent. Miss Sonya, on the other hand…?"

"Is starting to get pissed off." The younger of the two Clouds in the room answered for herself, remaining in her broken seat by sheer will alone. "Go away, Fong."

The Chinese man did back away slightly, closer to the doors he likely entered the waiting room by. "I will, as long as you promise me a moment of your time later."

"…fine. Leave."

Fong swiftly did so while telling someone, was likely a hospital coordinator lingering out in the hallway, not to allow anyone else into the waiting room if he did not want deaths to occur. In rapid fire Chinese, actually.

The two Clouds sat in silence for a long moment.

"So… the screaming stopped, at least?" Cherep tried, with a sickly looking smile.

Sonya heaved a sigh, looking up at the bland tiled ceiling. "You wanted to know about Shanghai? That was one of the men that tried cornering me there."

"Oh… why…?"

"I broke someone's hand, then I dumped him and two others into the sea by shattering the docks."

The stuntman gave her a sideways look. "That doesn't explain why he wants to talk to you."

"I never found out why, Cherep." She tiredly admitted, rubbing at her forehead. "He tried cornering me, I did not appreciate it."

"Well… at least you can ask now?" He tried, shrugging when she glared at him. "What? He seems to be the type to be annoying about it if you try dodging him. Actually, all the men you know in the mafia seem like that… wonder why?"
They both snapped their heads around to the doors to the operating theater when Tatiana shoved it open to poke her head out and give them both a tired grin. "Hey, we've got a little brother."

"Is Lisa okay?" Her brother asked before Sonya could.

"She's lost a lot of blood, but other than that?" The Sun nurse shrugged wearily as she stepped out into the waiting room with them. "Touch and go for a bit there, but you won't believe it."

The stuntman frowned at her, puzzled. "Won't believe what?"

"Lisa broke Arseniy's arm in three places." Tatiana answered, a crooked smirk on her face. "That's why I'm so tired, healing him while she kept breaking him was kind of tricky."

"And thus why Lisa scares me sometimes, worse than Arseniy occasionally."

"Sonya? What happened to your chair?"

The thief glanced down, at the broken arms that were now lying on the floor. "...I will pay for that."

"Doesn't really answer the question, little sister."

(Friday the 5th of January, 1968. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

Primakov Valerian Arsenevich was born mid-morning on January 2nd, 1968. Lisa was still on bedrest three days later.

"Everyone's going to forget Sonya's birthday now," Tatiana offered to the weary looking Lisa with a bright smirk, "we'll be too focused on little Lera's and completely forget her."

The new-mother did not look impressed as she shifted her baby closer to her neck instead of cradle him across her chest. "Did you wish your little sister happy birthday last year, Tats?"

"No, no one besides you two did." Sonya informed her with a shrug. "Then again, it's a little hard to remember it's my own birthday on the road, so..."

The thief was kind of concerned how pale Lisa still was, but the nurse in the room insisted everything was fine and the pallor would fade given enough time.

Cherep suddenly bodily tackled her, being careful not to jostle the hospital bed their foster mother and new baby brother were on. "Happy seventeenth birthday, Sonya!"

"Put me down or lose something important."

"No rough housing around the baby, until he can move himself anyway." Lisa informed all of them stridently, rubbing said baby on the back to keep him asleep while his siblings shuffled around.

Arseniy, who had situated himself carefully to be just out of reach in case his lover decided to break his arm again, pulled the redhead back to her feet by the hold he had taken on her sweater and finished her command with a threat. "Or I get to finish it."

"I thought you were eighteen now?" Asked her elder sister as they vacated their foster mother's room, so she could get into the wheelchair the hospital supplied to get her home in.

"My paperwork says eighteen. In reality? Seventeen." Sonya answered with a shrug, checking around to ensure a Chinese man she didn't want to see again wasn't lurking about. "I would greatly
just appreciate finally finishing growing into myself, because I'm tired of looking coltish."

She might be dodging him out of spite but knew perfectly well she would have to talk to Fong sometime soon. If only to finally get the man off her back.

"Don't think you're going to get much bigger, or broader." Tatiana informed her, running a skeptical eye down her form. "You do look fully grown, if slim. You could use more chest, though."

"Well," Cherep interjected dryly, staring at the ceiling, "this just got awkward."

Lisa looked incredibly happy, and a tiny bit better, when she wheeled herself out of her hospital room. "Oh, thank heavens. I thought I was never going to get out of there."

The vor, who looked a bit irked to be the one carrying both baby and the baby bag the siblings had assembled for their foster mother since she was on bedrest, ambled out after her. "Worth it."

"Even me breaking your arm?" Lisa asked self-deprecatingly, more than a little sheepish over both what she had apparently threatened him with and the actual breakage itself. "Three times?"

Her lover and now father of her baby shrugged, depositing Valerian on his mom's lap and tossing the bright pastel baby bag at Cherep's head. "I've had worse, don't worry about it."

"This was a very, very bad idea." The stuntman muttered to Sonya, having barely caught the pack of baby supplies wrapped in garishly pink shades and gesturing to it so she knew he was talking about their choice in baby fashions.

"We didn't know the gender, consider it revenge." She glanced at both him and the bag in turn. "That may have backfired… on you at least."

(Saturday the 6th of January, 1968. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Jesus -oh-fuck!"

A yelp and an oath, and it was a very girly yelp, distracted Renato from some of the last bits of paperwork he would ever have to do for the famiglia he had obtained before a new Don took over.

Curious over what was bothering one of the ladies of the house and one of Nono's men, the hitman gleefully abandoned the half-finished papers and strode out of the study Timoteo had graciously loaned him for the time being.

He wasn't the only one attracted by the now identified Lightning Guardian's raised voice, there was a gathering of a couple other Vongola servants as well as Tyr and Coyote Nougat.

Ganauche had a hand fisted over his chest, right over his heart actually. He was gawking in the direction of a distinctly familiar image. "Miss Nikishina! I… uh, didn't know you were still here."

"Idiot." The Storm leveled a disgusted look at his fellow Guardian. "Miss Nikishina left a week ago, that's not her."

There was a very tiny exhale of relief from the gathered watchers.

With a derisive snort, Renato inspected the two victims of this little prank. "Shamal, what are you doing?"

"She was being mean, and Miss Sonya said to make her quit in disgust." From under one of the
fainting couches, set up in various halls for the occasions one or two of the maids became a little overwhelmed by audacious criminal behavior, popped up the named baby Mist.

Shamal dusted off his pants and completely forgot his slightly wavy brown-now-grey-streaked hair, edging around until he was standing before his guardian and not in arm's reach of any of the other bystanders come to gawk.

"Nothing else worked! Not spiders in her hair or bugs in her clothes but she was scared of Miss Sonya, so I tried using her instead."

Eyeing the brat and noting he did have one of the turquoise figurines he got from Sonya for Christmas clutched in a fist, the hitman hummed as he turned to inspect the Mist Flame image of that particular thief. "Not bad, brat."

A footman was trying to rouse the nursemaid Daphne, who had likely fainted again when she came face-to-face with a glaring Russian Storm-Cloud that had frequently dismissed her as inconsequential and repeatedly forgot her name if not her face during her visit. Sonya had made it pointedly clear she didn't like the weaker Mist at all, while simultaneously spoiling the baby Mist almost without thought at the same time.

The duality had completely baffled the bulk of Vongola's housekeeping staff.

They were educated on Dying Will Flames even if they couldn't use them in order to anticipate or avoid triggering any errant traits that might make their jobs harder, so they had thought they had known how to deal with users of the various Flame types.

While a Cloud disliking a Mist on sight was pretty much par for the course, that same Cloud heeding the whims of an entirely different Mist willingly enough didn't mesh with that prior knowledge base.

"I think Sonya would be a little irritated to know you used a half-dressed version of her, though." Renato tacked on when Shamal had his moment to preen at the praise, waving a hand to the outfit of the shirt the thief stole from him and the drawstring pants she had been wearing Christmas morning. "Why did you pick that?"

"So it'd be extra scary, 'cause Miss Sonya's always grumpy in the mornings." Baby Mist brat reminded him with a pout. "And specially until she really wakes up. How can someone 'really' wake up if they're already awake?"

"The word is especially, and the answer is caffeine." The hitman corrected then informed his ward blandly, having to agree with the kid about the Russian's early morning temperament. She had nearly kicked him in the face when he grabbed her leg to heal her foot. "Pronounce your words fully."

It really wasn't a bad Mist-likeness of her, although the features were tilted a little off because normally Shamal was looking up at the thief and not straight at her.

"You need more practice with faces. Work on that."

"Okay..." Shamal agreed, then kicked his little shoe against the carpet runner. "Does this mean I don't have to go back to class?"

"What's being taught today?" If it was math, he could handle that. Probably better than the tutor teaching the various younger children of Mafioso and the Vongola servants.

"World history."
He could handle that one as well. "You know, Sonya likes history too? She likes to read, and lately it's all been history books with her."

Tyr leaned forward a bit, imposing enough that the slight action was more than enough to center attention squarely on him. "Young Shamal, could you unmake your illusion before Miss Daphne wakes? I think."

An entirely different scream, not matching the tone of the yelp that accompanied the Lightning Guardian's invoking of Jesus, rang out and the nursemaid fainted again.

Shamal unraveled his Mist Construction a bit sheepishly, a little too late to not scare the woman again.

Speculative attention turned to Ganauche, who flushed beet red under the disbelieving scrutiny as the onlookers put the earlier girly yelp with him as the cause. "What? It surprised me. She's fucking scary, okay?"

"You're only saying that because she nearly chopped your foot in half with a battle ax." Coyote scoffed, turning on his heel to stalk off to wherever he had been heading before the Lighting loudly swore.

"You'd think so too if you were the one she pulled an ax out of nowhere to threaten you with!"

"It wasn't out of nowhere, Ganauche." Renato reminded the man derisively, flicking his ward in the head and jerking a thumb in the direction of his temporary study to get the brat moving. "The damn things were in her hands when you just had to needle her into actually showing she could defend herself with them."

"Hey! I was doing my job, making a threat focus on me." He defended himself. "And you didn't know she could do that either!"

"I wasn't stupid enough to try mocking them... especially to her face."

Sonya had a nasty habit of being surprising, after all. Bringing a battle ax or seven to a mafia ball, sneaking them and another set of weapons in under everyone's nose by accident?

...heh.

Seeing he was getting no help from either the hitman or the assassin, or the tetchy brat now glaring at him behind his guardian's leg for the news of how he may have treated the Russian he adored, the Lighting huffed irritably and crossed his arms defensively. "A little solidarity between men would be appreciated."

"With that little girly scream of yours?" Renato mocked over one shoulder, nudging his unwilling ward to start moving. "Are we sure you're a man?"

"Hey..." Ganauche scowled at the man's back, then frowned harder as something else occurred to him. "Hey, Sinclair! You didn't tell your brat not to do it again!"

"Not going to! Live with it!"

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 6th of January, 1968 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)
"The... fuck man." Running a hand through his short curly hair, the Lighting turned to the assassin still observing the ongoing events. "What? You've got something to say too?"

Tyr leveled a flat look at Ganauche. "You should have disarmed Miss Sonya, then asked how she could utilize a miniaturized armory of jewelry in her defense."

"Fucking... yeah, Timoteo read me the riot act too." Edging away from the assassin slightly, he rolled his shoulders uncomfortably. "I heard it, okay? No insulting armed guests, especially if they're guests we want good relations with."

"Especially when she might be able to save us a fortune in the cost of Flame rings in the near future, if we no longer have to go through Talbot and can manage our own supply organically." The Sword Emperor tacked on dryly, narrowing his gaze on the cringing Lightning. "Or may eventually agree to follow our Don or have children with her unique Cloud-Storm Flame mix who might do the same."

"Isn't Master Sinclair and Miss Nikishina in a relationship already?" One of the maids asked of another, a puzzled expression on her face. "They seemed to get along really well at the Ball."

"I think they're hiding it." That maid confided to her quietly. "For young master Shamal, so he won't lose another set of parents if either ends up in more trouble than they can handle alone. Like what drove Master Sinclair to request Don Vongola to help him last year. They do seem to share custody of him since neither had to clear what they were doing with him to the other, and they tend to bend to the young master's whims."

The footman, who had given up trying to rouse Daphne again and merely moved her to the fainting couch, gave the two of them a chiding look. "Stop gossiping about Don Vongola's guests. If they are or are not in a relationship is entirely their business. Particularly if it's to protect their joint-ward."

One maid defended herself as merely sharing news, because Miss Nikishina had been wearing Master Sinclair's shirt Christmas morning.

Ganauche slanted a confused look to the Head of the Varia. "I thought Miss Nikishina told Timoteo they weren't dating?"

Tyr raised his eyes to the ceiling for a long moment, then stalked off with one word of explanation. "Gossip."

"Well... yeah but... is it true gossip or not?" The Lighting Guardian muttered, scratching at the back of his head.

Sinclair had punched him in the face at the end of that night. Was it because he had inadvertently said he wanted a kiss from his girlfriend?

Was Nikishina more his female friend and technically his ward's mom-figure than an actual girlfriend?

Was that why he got punched in the face?

Utterly confused, Ganauche started off for Timoteo's office to report back in after his diplomatic trip to another famiglia. His Sky probably knew he was back, and what happened in the hallway.

Coyote left in that direction.

Damn it, he was never going to live that high-pitched yelp down.
Lisa's haste in having her long wished for biological child did result in a complete inability to have more, even with Sun Flame therapy, but the older Russian did not care. "I have my baby, Tatiana. It's fine."

Little Valerian sneezed in response to the baby powder in the air, blinking his apparently likely to change blue eyes in bewildered surprise and tearing up as he decided he didn't like the sensation. He hadn't particularly liked the wet-diaper feel either, so he was probably of the opinion that the last half hour of his life pretty much sucked.

"Aww… little Lera, don't cry." Tatiana cooed to the baby, lightly tapping him on the oh-so-offensive nose to get baby attention on her instead of his upset. She then held out one of the various stuffed animals she had bought in the past few months and wiggled it back and forth in an invitation to play. "Look, your big sister got you fuzzy things to play with."

"Stop calling him that." Lisa sighed, strapping the baby's new diaper shut and starting to wrap him back up in a swaddling blanket. "That's a girl's nickname, Tats."

…and they called the Sun by a nickname that referred to ink embedded into skin. Sonya didn't quite see the issue there, other than being perfectly happy she didn't have one herself.

"Here Sonya, hold him a moment." Gently placing her baby in the youngest foster sibling's arms, the older woman hoisted herself upright off the floor a little painfully. The thief held herself very, very still. Hoping beyond hope Valerian didn't decide to blow out eardrums all of a sudden.

Her brand-new baby brother shifted, as much as he could do wrapped up as he was, but apparently decided she would do if mom wasn't holding him.

"Okay, he screams at me but likes Sonya just fine? Unfair."

"Maybe because I'm not trying to saddle him with a girl's nickname?" She posed to her elder sister dryly in a soft tone, feeling kind of good about not somehow bothering the baby into crying.

For what amounted to an armful of almost non-interactive human, Sonya decided Valerian wasn't too bad. He stunk sometimes and had an impressive set of lungs for being the son of two people that never seemed to need to raise their voices, but he was kind of cute in that useless chubby puppy way. Admittedly it had only been a day, he could get worse.

He apparently decided she wasn't that bad either, gripping the thief's blouse in the next to useless hand that snuck out of his swaddling and shoving it into his mouth messily. Just so he could drool all over her naked collarbone.

She was going to need a new shirt.

Lisa snickered at the sight the two of them made, stretching out her limbs one by one. "That's too cute, Sonya."
"Lisa, you shouldn't-

"I'm fine, Tatiana." The older Russian claimed a bit tiredly, now rubbing at the small of her back. "Spending a few months lying in bed will make anyone restless. I would like to simply stand, I promise to do nothing but stand here."

Their foster mother looked even worse than Tatiana did, still exhausted and a bit drawn even a full day outside of the hospital and into her new role as mother of a newborn. She didn't look quite as bad as she had yesterday, or just fresh from her very difficult labor, so Sonya kept silent and just patted the newborn on the back lightly to keep him content with gumming her blouse collar.

...and leaking a bucket of drool down her shirt.

"Where is Arseniy? He wouldn't let you do this." Demanded the eldest sibling, warily keeping an eye on the brunette for any overt signs of pain.

"He and Cherep went for lunch, before we pack up the rest of our things." She admitted calmly, flicking said eldest on the forehead in reprimand. "Arseniy has no say on what I'm allowed to do, young lady."

No, but Lisa had a habit of gleefully snuggling up to the vor when he sprawled out on a couch.

That would get the woman off her feet and nicely prone, thus the nurse's wondering of where her man was.

"They're certainly taking a while." Suggested Tatiana a little petulantly, pouting for a long moment before getting up off the hardwood floor herself.

She swiftly cleaned up the evidence of little Valerian's third diaper change in his life, without even a wrinkle of disgust crossing her face at handling baby produced biohazardous waste.

Sonya wished her the joy of it, perfectly happy to be the one supporting Valerian instead of help clean.

The menfolk only returned well after the baby mess was completely cleaned up and Lisa tired herself out of wanting to stand. The thief wondered if one of the other vor hadn't been keeping a discreet eye on them and warned Arseniy when it would be safe to come back.

Cherep looked entirely too cheerful, even if he was the one managing the various take-out containers for all five of them. He made a beeline for the coffee table and placed the boxes of food down.

"Ladies, having fun?"

...yeah, she was now sure the two of them had been waiting for an all-clear sign before coming up.

The vor suddenly loomed up behind her armchair, which she was half-reclined into while his son did his baby-doze thing on her chest. "Sinclair?"

"Renato Sinclair, Italian Mafioso, somewhat of a friend... I think." Sonya clarified slowly, feeling a bit confused.

Her fellow Cloud had said she hadn't done anything wrong, right?

"A hitman I met six years ago."

"Sun user! He's the other side of the coin from me." Tatiana tacked on cheerily, plating up Lisa her
portion before serving herself. "Tall, dark, and snarky."

Cherep snorted, unfortunately attracting the nurse's attention.

"Wait... Cherep? When did you meet the man?"

"Austria and Italy. Last year and the year before that in reverse order." The stuntman supplied readily enough, taking a quick bite of the fried pork cutlets on his plate before continuing. "Sonya seems to think his stalking of her is a good thing."

That earned her two incredulous stares and a dark one from over her head, her older brother eating more than staring like the rest of the family, and the former pickpocket sighed. "I stalked Cherep for two months and it wasn't a problem then."

"You were also like, seven. Stalking an eight-year-old boy. That was cute, this is...?" Clarified the nurse unhelpfully, sitting back with a full plate of Korean food to munch on. "Seriously, Sonya? No, wait... back in the bar, you even said it was getting a little creepy how he could keep on finding you. How often does it happen?"

"Once or twice a year, but I really only think he keeps on doing it to annoy me. Besides, I know him."

"And that makes it alright?"

"If I know who it is stalking me? Sure." She shrugged, carefully holding a hand to baby Valerian's back when he decided he didn't like the motion happening under him too much and let her know with a fussy little grunt. "If I don't, then it's outright concerning rather than just mainly annoying creepiness."

Tatiana sighed theatrically, giving their foster brother a droll look. "I can't tell if that's a double-standard or just her being oblivious."

Sonya privately thought they had the double-standard, if it was alright for her to stalk Cherep back when they were kids and Renato stalking her now wasn't.

"Sonya, sweetie, does this Sinclair ever make you uncomfortable?" Lisa drew her out of her thoughts by asking, with an actual thread of concern in her tone that the blonde gave it serious thought.

"No? I mean, everyone makes me uncomfortable at first until I get used to them. He's just... annoying. And likes to annoy me. Annoying him in return is just..." She shrugged again, giving up Valerian to his father when the baby decided he really didn't like the motions of a shrug and started fussing louder. "Renato's a shameless flirt who does so even in the middle of conversation with me to the waitress or some female passerby, but I do like talking to him because he's at least amusing when he's in a good mood."

"And when Mister hitman isn't in a good mood?" Cherep asked between bites, looking a bit disgruntled.

Probably over the fact he was only learning now that the man was a hitman.

"I can usually nudge him into one if I mock whatever it is he's gotten pissy about. If he tells me what it's about, otherwise I ignore him."

Shifting herself, Lisa took Valerian back from Arseniy and let the vor slide in behind her. Handing off her plate to the man in favor of fussing over her unhappy baby. "Well... it doesn't sound too bad.
"I would like to be kept apprised, sweetie."

"…about?" How their friendship was going?

While Sonya could probably do that easily enough, reporting every meeting to her foster mother would get old fast.

"Anything that he does that confuses you. Or that you may not understand right away. If you have to think about it, I want to know." Their mother specified, tucking her son into the crook of her arm and tickling his belly to shift his attention to something new. "As a matter of fact, any male you know and are confused by I want to know about."

"Okay?" Well… did that mean every male she knew of, even Cherep?

There were a few things from the Vongola Christmas Ball she was kind of confused by still.

"Lisa? Is there a reason for choking on nothing? Or slamming your head into a desk?"

"Surprise, and maybe exasperation." She answered in a cautious kind of tone, looking puzzled. "Where is this from?"

"Ganauche, the Lightning Guardian of Vongola's Sky Timoteo. He was kind of… weird." Sonya considered her few interactions with the man, frowning a bit. "Why would he be surprised then? He already knew I was… or… was he exasperated with me? How rude."

Tatiana's expression lit up, but Lisa gave her a quelling look. "No, Tats. Only if Sonya asks you for help or is willing to talk about it. It's her life, she may live it how she wishes. Sonya, I hope you will remember that I am always available to help you if you need it."

"She's not going to mind! She barely cares half the time." The nurse dismissed the implied reprimand, still grinning at her younger foster sister. "Sonya, sweet sister of mine, how did the Ball go?"

Arseniy blew out a sigh, looking both irritated and a bit disgruntled himself now. Given he was still holding the plate while Lisa nibbled from it and played with her baby, she could understand why. "This Sinclair guy, when is he around?"

"All the time usually." Sonya pounced on the subject change gratefully, not wanting to admit to the fashion-inclined Sun that she spent the bulk of the ball picking on the fashions other people were wearing with Renato so she didn't really remember what everyone was wearing too well. "He's got some business to do back in Italy, so I'm not expecting him to appear for a few months more yet."

That apparently wasn't what the vor wanted to hear, glancing down at his lover and newborn son then back up to her. "He ever makes you uncomfortable from now on, I want to hear it."

The thief nodded slowly, wondering if what she had been telling them about her life before this hadn't quite been enough. Were these specific requests from that mistake? "Alright."

Arseniy shot a look to Cherep, who silently gave the man a salute then ignored the questioning look she shot him in turn.

"Are you going to eat, sweetie?" Lisa asked curiously, shooting the nurse a stern look of her own to get her more interested in her food then grilling her younger sister for news of a party she could get another time.
"I… have a Chinese Triad member to go talk to. I promised." Under duress, but Fong really had looked surprised to see her in the waiting room.

That man had terrible timing, and a very unfortunate skill in edging into rocky ground when it came to Clouds. At the very least, she should probably go see what he wanted before leaving for Moscow. Who knew what else he'd trip into if she put it off.

"The… that guy from the hospital? What was his name, Faugeu?"

Sonya blinked at her foster brother. "…was your mouth full or something? It's Fong."

Her fellow Cloud stuck his nose in the air, sniffing in mock offense. "I don't speak Chinese, Sonya. Fawng."

"Now my ears are cringing." Tatiana claimed, smirking. "Say it with me Cherep, F-ong."

"I will be back in a few hours." The thief told their foster mother, who looked pretty amused at the stuntman's butchering of Chinese names.

"Have fun, sweetie." Lisa informed her pleasantly, letting Valerian grasp at her fingers and tug to his little heart's content. "Let us know how it goes."

…but this would be business, not personal. What…?

Sonya nodded absently, trying to figure out why she wanted to know. Eventually, before she even reached the main doors, the thief gave up and just resigned herself to telling her everything that happened from now on.

That would just about cover anything Lisa would want to know.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 8th of January, 1968 continued. Mafia Land.)

Fong did not make himself easy to find. Sonya eventually had to backtrack to the hospital to figure out where he had been before getting called in yesterday then spread out her search from there.

In the end, she found him in one of the dojos that allowed for practice rooms to be rented out by the hour. It wasn't a small one, which rented tiny personal rooms, but one of the more mid-sized ones that rented out halls to groups of people that wished to practice whatever fighting style against another's with spectators and judges around.

The man she had been looking for was not the only Triad member in the hall, and a fair number of them seemed to recognize her. She flatly ignored her old temp-aid/guide/personal assassin Liqin as he cringed slightly in place, even if she took a seat on the floor next to him to wait for the man who asked her for a word to be done.

Fong had a red Chinese dragon tattoo curling up his left arm to his shoulder, she wondered if it was like her feline one. Did it have a meaning behind it?

Since the martial artist, or at least the hand-to-hand combat specialist, was in the middle of his practice, the thief had been perfectly content to sit and wait. The stances were pretty interesting, if nothing like ballet moves.

Liqin, apparently, was not content to wait. "Miss Yu-"
"Sonya, since I'm sure you already know my name I see no reason to pretend." She corrected flatly, glancing at him from the corner of her eye. "If this has anything to do with the last time we saw each other, I don't want to hear it."

"I must apologize anyways, Miss… Sonya." The man insisted a little stiffly, appearing and sounding slightly distressed. "I... we, knew the rules and discarded them anyways. You did not deserve that."

"Funny, because I'm pretty sure you had no problem with carrying out said violation of the rules until you realized I wasn't exactly what you thought." Sonya returned, already irritated and fast moving on to ticked off. "Was there at least a reason why your Triad group decided to approach me like that?"

"That was a bad miscalculation on our part." Fong interjected for Liqin calmly, smoothly withdrawing his limbs into a resting pose and glancing at her with what seemed to be naturally red colored eyes when he came to a halt. "We assumed you were a Storm, not a Cloud."

"Three men cornering a young woman does not suggest anything good, Fong."

"You were not alone until you sent the elder woman away."

She wasn't remotely sold on that being a mitigating detail. "She was civilian, who knew nothing of my mafia connections. And, as you said, elderly. Since our little meeting did end up slightly violent, I still believe I was justified in sending her away."

Crina hadn't known for sure, anyways. That was the Russian's story and she was sticking to it.

"...ah." The half-dressed man did finally looking something other than pleasantly bland, a slightly sheepish grimace made itself known for a split second before he smoothed it away. "We may owe you more than just an apology."

"Yes, yes you do." Sonya informed him tartly, folding her arms under her chest. "However, I don't particularly care to hear it. What do you want, Fong?"

"I would like to give said apology, and to ask you a few questions." Holding up a hand before she could do more than glare, he tried for a smile. "I will also explain our actions. If you decide then that you want nothing more to do with us, then..."

"You'll try to leave me alone but will unable to uphold that because either you or your bosses still want something from me." Finished the thief for him dryly, sighing through her nose when his smile turned a bit wry around the edges. "What do I get out of allowing you to, however politely, harass me more?"

"Lunch?" Fong suggested, the hand he had been holding up making a sweeping gesture to the floor-to-ceiling windows on the eastern side of the dojo. "It is around that time."

...Sonya had skipped out on what Arseniy and Cherep brought back in order to do this little meeting. "Fine."

"I know of a good steam bun vendor. Or, if you would rather, there are some decent teahouses around."

"The vendor will be fine." She had tried Chinese steamed buns, back when her brother got interested in what duck blood and glass noodle soup was like. The buns weren't bad, just not something she ate very often.
The broad and slightly tanned hand held out to her made the thief blink and stare.

Fong had watched her crush a man's hand in front of him, with only her own hand to do said crushing. Why the hell would a martial artist risk his livelihood in such a way in giving her an easy target to crush if she got irritated again?

He didn't twitch under the dubious look she shot him, actually giving her a small smile when she accepted the help up.

Well… he had good manners, at least.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 8th of January, 1968 continued. Mafia Land.)

Long story short, China's Triad organizations were still hoarding any and all Flame users they found, had, or discovered. If one wasn't with a Triad, they were 'asked' to join up when found.

Sonya went and made herself special, in her haste to get back to Mafia Land to ensure Renato and Shamal had gotten away clean and continue distracting the former group in control of security.

A competent, highly skilled Storm selling her skills in the ultimate criminal temp agency known as Mafia Land?

The Russian had used her Storm Flames not only to burn to cinders only what she wanted gone, but somehow had the control to carve rocks into delicate tiles then carve a character into them without melting the rest of the stone.

Most Storms, even decently experienced ones like the man who informed her of all this, were more arsons in nature. They could start fires, and obliterate a large chunk of area if asked, but usually their Disintegration was too uncontrolled to be handled in close quarters or urban areas.

With her control, on the other hand…?

Apparently being a competent thief already trained up and the ability to somewhat control her damage made her downright valuable.

Fong's Triad group had been trying to recruit her before any of the other groups involved in the Omertà-safeguard job, thinking she was freelance since she worked for the island and not one of her native syndicates. Cue misunderstandings between Cloud vs Storm behavior and her elderly civilian company, which ended when she got fed up and actually destroyed a good few yards of road after shattering a dockside wharf.

While the proper way to go about it was to use her personal identification code in Mafia Land and request a meeting she could then accept or refuse, Sonya had been spending most of the year outside of it. Worse, before they could decide if chasing one lone thief down would be worth it she had popped back up within their country.

With a civilian circus, carving rocks into jewelry.

Fong had gotten interested at that point, because being a Storm himself he knew perfectly well how their Flames behaved normally. The best he could do, he informed her without a trace of chagrin or care, was obliterate whatever he used his against and most of the nearby acre if things weren't handled carefully.
She was still not amused. "I am not freelance, Fong. I belong to the Zolotovs of Moscow."

At least as long as Arseniy was.

She really had no feelings about her Pahkan or the rest of her clan, besides maybe some fondness for Dmitriy and Usov. However, so long as her foster father, mother, new baby brother, and sister were loyal the former pickpocket turned jewel thief would stay with them.

That would likely change when she actually had the time to get to know her fellow Zolotovs better now that they and she were grown adults, but that was yet to come still.

The martial artist accepted that easily enough with a nod. "We have become… aware of that."

…was this the 'odd' that Lisa commented on?

Had Fong, or one of the members of his Triad, encountered either of her foster parents?

Sonya considered it, and squarely decided on that she was annoyed to hear it.

Her mother had been pregnant, she had not needed any further stress.

Either feeling the glare that was being drilled into the side of his head or being acutely aware that any Cloud would not appreciate the news that their family had been approached for whatever reason, the Storm lifted the order of steamed bun he purchased for her into her sights. "Hungry?"

If only because he had paid for it as part of his apology, the thief accepted the plate. It would probably be boiling hot, so she didn't try picking it up. She had watched it be made and cooked, she knew it wasn't tampered with.

"So… what exactly did you expect from that confrontation? As far as you had known, I was a freelance thief for some reason hanging around a civilian circus."

"I was ordered to bring you back with us," He admitted easily after swallowing his first bite, "as you did not seem happy with where you were. Unfortunately, you never did let me actually talk to you instead of chase around Shanghai's streets."

"If you are expecting an apology for dunking you into the sea, you're not getting it." Sonya informed him flatly, testing her own food with a fingertip.

It was still boiling hot, how the hell was he eating his?

"And as far as you could have known, I was perfectly happy with where I was."

He shot her a perfectly skeptical look.

"…alright, maybe not, but maybe it was just the country. China's gotten a little… hot."

That made his features flatten out back into neutrality as they started wandering down a few streets aimlessly with their food.

"While I will admit we misjudged that situation, and my homeland is currently in the middle of some unrest," he ignored her snort, "I personally had wanted a word with you even if you had refused the offer."

"The man whose hand I crushed." Sonya reminded him tartly. "He did not seem intent on giving any 'offer', more like an order."
"They had to amputate his hand." Fong countered calmly. "You mangled it too badly to be healed."

"...that has nothing to do with what he tried which refutes some of what you've said."

"Gen always was a little... brash." He temporized after another bite, likely using the food to buy him thinking time.

"One should not try to grab a woman they do not know," Shot back the Russian, yet again checking her lunch's temperature and still deciding it was too hot, "especially not one who is a known Flame user. That was more than brash, that was stupid."

"...agreed." The martial artist offered slowly with a nod that made his braid bob into her sights and let her catch sight of something going on behind them.

Sighing, she shoved her plate at him then lunged for the kid that was trying to pickpocket the martial artist when he took it. She went slowly enough that the brat bolted before she got her hands on him, ensuring she didn't have to actually deal with him as well or see what the other Storm would do to someone trying to steal from him.

Sonya snatched her food back when Fong scowled at the kid making fast tracks away from the two of them. Deciding her food had cooled enough, she nibbled on the bun to ensure she didn't burn her mouth and took a small bite when she was sure it wouldn't.

It wasn't that bad, actually. Better than the ones she tried in Ha-mi.

Wiping off the trickle of pork juice that escaped her lips, the only downside to letting steamed buns cool was that they got drippy, the thief licked it off her finger then checked the time.

If she was going to catch the ferry with her foster family, or most of it because Tatiana was staying, she had to get a move on.

…and she was pretty sure this watch was Cherep's, she should probably give it back before he returned to the circus.

"Was there anything else, Fong? I do have places to be."

"...um. Yes, actually." He sounded distracted enough she glanced back at him curiously, but whatever it had been had passed and the man was now fishing something out of his pocket. "There is this."

"...I'm pretty sure I gave that to Crina." Sonya informed him flatly, her gaze flicking from the broken teeth end of her red tourmaline crystal skeleton key to the equally red eyes Fong had.

No wonder she hadn't seen it since Shanghai, the gypsy had lost it... to the Triads.

"You have a control over Storm Flames I have never seen." He defended himself, or explained rather, with a one-shoulder shrug. "A control I am interested in acquiring. Even with the discipline my fighting style requires, I have not gotten to the point I can only burn away what I want instead of everything in range."

"Yeah... that's pretty much par for the course." She admitted blandly, then frowned at the man and snatched her crystal back.

Tried, actually. The much taller Chinese man closed his fist before she could actually retrieve the broken key piece. "Please?"
"Ever think it has to do with Storm Flames themselves?" She demanded, holding out her free hand for him to return the crystal.

"I would not think you were so interested in getting this back if it was."

"It doesn't work for you very well, does it?" It had looked a bit more cracked than the last time she had seen it, so all the damage wasn't from her snapping it off the rest of the crystal.

"Well… no." Fong admitted pleasantly, raising his clenched fist over his head and well out of her reach when she reached for it again. Likely realizing she could probably pry it out of his hand with brute strength if need be. "But since you know that, you know where I could find something like it that would work better."

Sonya needed different stones, and to broaden her search parameters. She had specifically settled on red tourmaline because it had been a bad focus stone.

"Storm Flames overwhelm, Fong. Everything. That's basically all they do."

That tidbit had the martial artist inspecting the broken crystal curiously in the strong tropical mid-winter sunlight, which she used to her advantage and plucked it from his grasp with a little jump. Uncaring if the sharp edge cut him or not.

"It's red tourmaline, which you could have gotten from any jeweler appraising this." She jabbed her finger into his chest to help make her point, then tucked the piece of broken crystal into her pocket. "Try using the least bit of Flames possible, dabs and trickles. Now, leave me alone."

He looked entirely unbothered by her poking, merely giving her a pleasant little smile. "Ah, but Sonya… if I have more questions, where else would I take them?"

She rolled her eyes, finally getting around to eating her lunch and flatly ignoring him as she walked away.

Yeah… she'd be seeing him again.

(Thursday the 11th of January, 1968. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Valerian's first night in Moscow happened at the Zolotov Clan headquarters. Mainly so his mother could show off the son she had finally been able to bear one of their vor and partially so Cherep and Sonya had the time to completely scrub down their home.

A year and a half worth of grime and dust wouldn't do the baby much good.

Tatiana's old bedroom was also turned into a nursery, being the one closest and next door to Lisa's and Arseniy's own room. Her fellow Cloud's mechanical skills did at least translate over to carpentry skills, but he still got irritated with the directions to assemble the baby crib enough to politely ask her to burn them with her Storm Flames when he was done.

Mostly politely, but there was that rather concerning tick in his left eye when he asked. The grin as he watched them crumble to her red Flames was also a little disturbing.

Their foster mother's delighted laugh the next day when she realized she wasn't going to have to
juggle Valerian and a deep spring cleaning at the same time was more than enough of a reward for them.

The vor sheepishly scratched the back of his neck when she turned that amused and delighted gaze on him, still holding the napping baby in the crook of his arm. "I asked the kids to do it for my Christmas present. Since they did the baby shopping for your own."

"I suppose that is why Tatiana said she'd be the one to clean out our rooms back in Mafia Land too?" She asked dryly, a smirk she could do nothing about still twisting her lips up.

"...yeah."

Lisa pecked the father of her baby on the cheek, then looked over to the two foster siblings watching them. "Well?"

"Can I stay for a month?" Sonya asked, flicking her hand in the direction of their headquarters. "I've got to catch up with Dmitriy about the Dying Will Flame research and what tidbits I've recently learned. You can think of me as a live-in nanny."

"You freeze when I give you Valerian, Sonya."

"Well... yeah. He screams."

With a huff that did nothing to cover her amusement, Lisa gave a nod then looked at Cherep expectantly.

He held up his hands, shaking his head. "I probably should go back to work, but I'll try and visit on the free weekends to ensure Sonya doesn't terrify little Val."

"I would not-"

"I like Val, better than Lera anyways." The older Mafiya woman interjected before her youngest foster daughter got the two of them into an argument. "Sonya, if you're staying then the usual applies. Let us know where you'll be, at least generally, and if you're not going to be sleeping here whichever night."

"Sure."

"What about Valera?"

The suggestion got their foster mother to pause before she went up the stairs as she thought about the nickname her lover offered. "Well... Tats won't pout about her suggestion being nixed. Even better, thank you."

"How are you going to handle that?" The vor ask of Sonya while Lisa probably checked out the nursery they had set up, patting his son's belly absently as he woke up. "It might be your work, but he's the one putting the effort into it."

"So, it's ultimately up to him." The thief finished with a shrug. "I told him last year that if he really wanted I'd come back and fill in for him so he could do whatever, but if he doesn't want to give his position up I'm not going to argue. I'd rather that, actually."

"I have to get going." Cherep interjected before that could continue, replacing the watch she had given back to him into his jeans' pocket. "I'm overrunning it by a bit as it is, Arseniy."
Their foster father gave the stuntman a nod, and a pound to the back, before shifting the now awake Valerian higher up his chest. "Don't be a stranger, Cherep."

"I'll try not to." He responded, blinking a bit and flexing his back with a wince. "Sonya, see you later."

"Oh wait, give this back to Crina." The thief dug out the crystal bit she had gotten from Fong, tossing it to him. "And be careful."

Her brother knew perfectly well where the jewel bit was from, giving her a strange look. "Back? Did she lose it or something?"

"Or something." His fellow Cloud agreed sourly. "Don't ask."

He accepted that with a nod, giving the both of them a wave as he left through the still open front door and shutting it behind him.

"I swear to high hell, if he crashes not a street or two down from here..."

"That sounds like ill-wishing." Arseniy informed her dryly, Valerian still trying to figure out what the ever-loving hell he was doing with dad rather than mom as he wiggled to get comfortable.

Cherep had some decently good luck, with his bike and stunt work anyways, so Sonya accepted that. Baby Valera decide he didn't like the noise that accompanied the stuntman's bike any more than his sisters had years ago. He then let dad and one of those sisters know it by wailing.

They responded by cringing, in tandem.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 11th of January, 1968 continued. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Dmitriy glared at Sonya, who looked to Galina, who shifted her gaze to the Inverted Rain again.

The office hadn't changed much since the first time she saw it, done up mostly in dark wood and shades of dark blue. There were a few new touches of green, again a dark shade of it, here and there she did wonder about.

Brass accented fixtures were new, at least. It was a very nice... ugly lamp on the desk.

"Well?" The Storm-Cloud asked, settling back into the seat across the Rain's desk. It was blue too, and the one next to it was green.

"You are a colossal pain in the ass, Sonya." He informed her flatly, kicking his boots up to set on the corner of his desk.

Galina sniffed in disapproval of the action, clicking her way to the bookcase set up next to the windows of the Rain's office. "I believe we will be staying in charge, Sonya."

The thief herself was gazing at her high heels, wondering how the ever living fuck she could stand to wear those for hours. She was a Lightning, no instant-heal for her to bullshit her way through it.

Did she Harden her ankles or something?
"Alright." Seriously, was there some kind of secret she and Tatiana were never let in on? "So then, next order of business is the few new things I've found."

"You were with a civilian outfit for two years." Dmitriy reminded her in a blank tone of voice, looking highly skeptical.

"Not the entire time." Sonya waved that off, rubbing at her temple. "Last winter, when I borrowed the Mist gems? The Inverted Sun who was guardian to the Mist brat found out he could use moonstones. Since they don't come in variations of yellow, closest would be brown, the color of the stones probably doesn't actually mean much."

"Fuck… do we have to rematch the kids?"

She frowned at that suggestion, shaking her head after a moment. "Not until they have some kind of control, I think. You're starting them all on what? A matched color gem?"

"It works better than sapphires in the long run, even if those give better results quickly." Admitted the Rain with a short nod. "The shattering, on the other hand…?"

Her left palm twitched at the reminder, and she smoothed it down her jean clad thigh. "I know. I think we're going to have to rematch at least all three of us, and Tats, but the kids can wait until they have reliable results without a gemstone."

Galina let a couple heavy books slam into the former mechanic's desk, which made the owner of said desk jump enough his boots slid off it. "We will be recording results this time, to ensure a stone for one Flame user will not work for all."

"Except for Mists." Sonya corrected, shaking her head when the Lightning glared at her. "Look Galina, I'm not even sure any Mist even needs a stone, much less can actually make use of it like another Flame user can. Usov ended up with a mineral, the other Mist brat I fitted ended up with turquoise. Which, again, is a mineral."

"That's… still going to be a lot of rocks." The only male in the room informed her slowly, jerking a thumb over to a heavy chest set up in the corner of his office. "And we're already running low on a few of them already, ran out of a couple too."

"I will resupply the gemstones needed." Which would likely mean even more jewel heists and, since there wasn't a limitation or a sorting method found yet so that meant all gems she could find in any one place, a lot of risk if she did it within the USSR. "For both us to test and for fitting any new Flame users."

"Better you than me. We're going to need Cherep and a few other Flame users. Like an Inverted Sun, both Skies, even if we're nixing the Mists from the official results we should probably at least test them."

"Can you tell between a Classic and Inverted Mist?" Sonya asked of him dryly, shoving a hand through her hair and mentally reminding herself she still needed a trim. "I can likely pull an Inverted Sun, probably around the time Tatiana's free for a little rock testing. I might, might mind you, be able to ask a Sky to help us. Classical, I think."

What was Tyr?

She was pretty sure he was a Flame user as well, if not really confident on what he was.

What the mere act of asking and getting said help would cost, on the other hand?
She wasn't entirely sure she wanted to do that at all. Renato would be enough of a headache.

Dmitriy whistled lowly, eyebrows raised. "How the hell did you manage to meet a Sky?"

"I was invited to Vongola's Christmas Ball, as arm candy. I met Vongola's Sky Timoteo there." She admitted wryly, still musing on the logistical and supply problems such massive testing would cause. "I think... we may wish to test several of each, not just one of every type and Polarization."

Galina, who was jotting down their conversation into an actual plan to implement gave the look of her list-like notes, looked up sharply at the thief. "Why?"

"I think Polarization might be a degree instead of an either-or thing. Outward or inward expression of Flame."

"You're the one getting the rocks, you want to do that much work...?" The Rain shrugged that off, looking at the Lightning's neat rows of handwriting. "This will take a couple years anyways, so you might as well not ask those outsiders for some help. We might just have the types on hand when we're ready for new testers."

"Fine." It likely would've cost her more than she was comfortable giving, so it didn't bother her in the least to scratch any plans to ask for help from Italian Flame users.

Again, Renato was enough of a headache on his own. Actually, giving the hitman what he probably wanted while also owing him more?

Owing Vongola and its Sky favors?

"Second order of business, this nature shit." Dmitriy snagged the master copy of her Flame research journal and waved it in the air. "The 'such and such Flame user hates/loves/will not care for such and such Flame user'... you sure about that?"

"No." Sonya informed him shortly, irked at the reminder of the disinformation she tended to run smack into. "It was a warning included in most if not all books about Flame types. However, Classic Cloud I may be, I get along fine with non-stupid Mists. As an Inverted Storm? I should have major issues with Galina, which we don't."

The Rain nodded sharply, flicking through his well-thumbed copy. "Yeah, figured that one out myself. Rains get along with everyone my fucking ass."

"Well..." The Lightning drawled out cooly, with a sharp smirk. "...that might be due to being Inverted, Dmitriy. That gaggle of Rains, all Classical mind you, do tend to be the less disruptive as a whole."

"I still think they're all high on their Tranquility." He shot back quickly, with a scowl. "We really should separate them out, because I'm pretty damn sure if they're not doing it to themselves they're doing it to each other."

That sounded like an old argument. "You are the Rain, Dmitriy. You would be the one to know."

"See! Even she thinks I should deal with them."

Galina rolled her eyes, giving Sonya a sideways look. "They're not, I checked."

"He'll be less stubborn if he can at least check in his own way."
"I'm right here."

"Last order of business," the Lightning continued as if she hadn't heard the only male Flame user in the room, gesturing to her books, "I took notes on all the brats as they developed into Flame users. You get to help us sort out what is Flame related and what is not."

…her wrist already hurt just looking at the heavy pile of paper and journals.

What did Galina's Lightning nature bolt to when it kicked in?

Shouldn't it have been Tatiana, or something about the thieves' ring she was part of?

Maybe the tiny bits of paperwork that had needed to be done?

The Sun using nurse that was her elder sister wasn't exactly fond of paperwork.

"...fuck."

Dmitriy snorted. "Tell me about it."

"Less talking, more sorting," Galina demanded, handing out the piles equally to all of them.

An Inverted Lightning bureaucrat with a fixation of paperwork. That was kind of scary.

(Saturday the 10th of February, 1968. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Even as Rachel, she never did manage to get a nine-to-five working job. The best the college student had was a waitressing job that didn't pay nearly enough.

Sonya never wanted to do anything like it again.

Besides learning all about teenage Flame-boosted angst and drama about people she didn't particularly care for nor would have the time to get to know, and the wrist cramps she suffered through from week one to week four, she and the other two Flame users got maybe a page of information for each type over the course of a month of solid work.

Mostly in the many different ways the preteens/teenagers thought to utilize their various Flames. The most interesting so far was one of the baby Mists basically 'enchanting' mirrors to show what the onlooker desired.

The month did allow Bjørn a very good crack at attempting to plan out ten different jewelry stores Sonya could rob in a row, accepting the corrections the thief supplied using her knowledge of how hard or easy it would be to smuggle hot jewels across certain borders and trying it again.

It was midway through that second try when they finished the paperwork, on the Classic Storm that Sonya would probably get to know. Who, unfortunately, shared a name with her biological father.

Mikhail the younger had fixated on the idea of becoming/being a vor, which while all well and good actually grated against her a bit.

Might be because the boy didn't look too convinced she was a Storm until she shoved a fistful of red Flames under his nose. Even then he seemed a bit dismissive of her, if for either the fact she was a
thief by trade or because she was female was questionable.

As it wouldn't matter in the long run, Storms were more the type you pointed in a direction and then got the hell out of the way of as they burned everything to the ground, she dismissed the issue for the most part.

Milos Zolotov had little to nothing to do with the efforts of the Flame group of his thieves' clan, but he did check in on them a few times. Mostly due to the fact she was planning a crime spree to 'restock', and the logistics of getting her illicit goods back to the clan was an issue. Their Pahkan was a bit more silver around the edges than the last time the thief saw him, but still spry and as shark-like as ever.

His son, on the other hand, was a lot more expressive of his doubts about their skills as he followed his father.

Gedeon Zolotov had apparently become friends with Dimitry, even if the Inverted Rain was about half a decade younger than him. Sonya really had no room to wonder, given Renato was about four years older than her. Galina didn't like him much, but the Inverted Lightning apparently had issues with non-essential people looking over her shoulder.

Hence why the woman didn't stay with her former gang after Tatiana left the group, apparently.

The thief really did wonder exactly what happened at the end of that.

Thankfully, for her sanity if nothing else, she also had to finish the last of her retraining and deal with new parents at the same time as a distraction. Pitching in for Lisa at least got her some major experience in the kitchen, and after burning a meal or two a day for a week straight she did graduate into being a halfway decent cook.

As long as it was breakfast.

"I am never taking a hiatus again." The blonde muttered into her arm, shaking Valerian's rattle absently for baby's amusement.

He looked entirely unconcerned by her comment, trying to smack the noisemaker out of the air so he could both investigate and drool on it.

"How did you...?" Lisa trailed off, looking highly confused over the char mark on her biggest pan. "Sonya? Did you use your Storm Flames on this?"

"If I had, you would no longer have a pan. No, that was... I got distracted because Valera needed a new diaper."

"Better you than me." Arseniy offered blandly from behind his newspaper.

Somehow, the vor not only knew when to dodge soapy pan wielded by his baby's mother but could do it without ever looking. That took some real skill, or intimate knowledge of his lover's habits when irked.

Looking a bit irritated himself at the nice big wet spot on the paper, her foster father folded it up and looked over to where she was amusing his son. "You said a month, Sonya."

"Not that we don't appreciate the help." Lisa hurried to tack on, giving her likely ruined pan a hard look. "Mostly."
"Bjørn and I leave in two days." She offered calmly, shaking a rattle again to regain the attention she lost when Valerian got distracted by soapy water flying from over in the kitchen. "We're hitting up Mafia Land first, where he's getting that Lackey title he's been after for a few years, then a bit of a crime spree will occur."

"Oh?" Arseniy asked, moving from his spot at the kitchen table to amble out and see both her and his baby better. "Where to where?"

"Francoist Spain to Austria." Spain would be a new country, but she had gone through a large part of France and some of Switzerland already which laid between Spain and Austria on the route they would take.

It was going to be uncomfortable no matter how she wanted to do it. The research needed more stones, Sonya needed the money, and if the USSR was still too hot for jewel thieves then outside of the Iron Curtain she went.

At least afterward she would have the money to splurge on a hotel room of her own, instead of crash with her foster parents for another month or however long Dmitriy wanted her help with.

Bjørn would at least get some time to season, even if they were about to do six to ten jewelry stores on the fly. Taking a leaf from the circus' traveling arrangements, she planned on maybe two each week at best in the capitals of each country.

Anything more would entirely be up to how much she was pulling and how hard it was becoming.

Well… that was the plan anyways.

She knew perfectly well plans didn't always succeed, or go according to plan, but she needed a better look at what she had proposed to do from the city she would be stealing from before making any big judgement calls.

"Good luck." Arseniy offered, leaning up against the doorjamb between the hallway and the living room.

"We'll be rooting for you!" Lisa called over her shoulder from the kitchen.

Valerian misjudged, or didn't care about, his next swing and slapped Sonya's cheek.

…she couldn't tell if that was another encouragement or a sign he thought she was trying for too much.

---

(Tuesday the 13th of February, 1968. Madrid, Kingdom of Spain.)

In Madrid, Spain, Sonya made a rather startling discovery.

"There are white sapphires?"

"They look kind of blue to me, Dama Sonya." Bjørn commented from her elbow, peering at the same display she was looking at.

…she had to give the kid that one, they did have a bluish tinge to them even if they were mostly clear.
Bjørn's Russian was indefinitely better than it had been the year before, and she guessed that the Icelandic words that slipped in were mostly on purpose. 'Dama' was probably not a title she'd ever get him to drop, so it was another thing she ignored.

If it made him happy, he could keep on doing it as long as she didn't have to acknowledge it.

The display she was sourly eyeing was part of a rather smaller scale jewelry store, not one the thief had decided would be the main jobs to pull but one to hit if she managed the time to or if she badly botched the other jobs and needed something quick.

Her brand new 'Lackey' marked the store down as a likely target if they had the time in a weird mash of Cyrillic and a jumble of the Roman script she learned a lifetime ago. His writing was cryptic, in a code he could read easily, and entirely headache inducing for her to look at.

At least it wasn't immediately suspicious, even if the sheer difficulty of reading it would make anyone linger over trying to decrypt it.

"Right, I think this will do it." Spain was, even if they suffered a fair bit of backlash from Italy's non-involvement in World War Two and it was about a decade later, still a militarized state at this point. Sonya wanted her Lackey off the streets and safely tucked away in a hotel room long before she started working. "You do remember what I told you, right?"

The face Bjørn pulled at least reassured her he did, even if he was making it a point that he was busying himself with his notebook.

He was not happy the official cover story for them included him as her 'brother' and her posing as a 'streetwalker'. A whore, in other words. If someone asked why he was alone in their hotel room, he had specific instructions to imply it indirectly.

She wasn't entirely thrilled with it either but didn't quite get why he was so upset.

It was, at most, a one-use kind of thing. After that one use, which she would have to bust out her little aide afterwards and scrap just about anything else planned on in the country, she'd figure out something different.

Romanian may not be a language that would escape scrutiny entirely this far into Europe, but since he could only speak that, Icelandic, Russian, and a smattering of French and German it was going to have to do.

At least until she could work on him with other languages, but Spanish and Italian had a fair few differences that kept tripping her up too.

---

(Wednesday the 14th of February, 1968. Madrid, Kingdom of Spain.)

Spain, which had still been a dictatorship of all things somehow until a few short years ago, was still scrambling to prop up their government after the recent assassination of Francisco Franco Bahamonde, the El Caudillo of Spain.

The scramble did help Sonya a fair bit, there was a curfew in effect that got the bulk of any possible eyewitnesses off the street and the military had much more important things to do than guard jewelry stores. It also hampered her, in that there wasn't a nightlife she could blend in with and any guards would likely be military instead of civilian.
In response, the Russian took to the rooftops and put her gymnastic and circus training to some actual use.

Her only problem with that were crossing the bigger streets, she had a choice between tightrope walking across likely live wires and pole-vaulting across. Eventually, she settled on vaulting. If only because she wasn't sure how secure those wires were going to be.

A few awkward uses of her Bec de Corbin later, and Sonya reached her goal.

An older, if still somewhat popular, jewelry store in the middle-class sector of Madrid. She didn't know what brand it was, as it really wouldn't matter to her much in the end, only that it had very big windows she needed to avoid attracting attention through and weirdly had a selection of scarves.

Which… okay. Scarves?

Whatever, padding for any loose rocks and metals then.

She spent a good five minutes of her heist rewiring the outdoor security box, cutting and hot wiring it into redundant loops to monitor so it wouldn't trip halfway through her heist. She had no desire to be surprised again, especially not in a land she had no real support to fall back on if she got into trouble.

Since she wasn't entirely sure it would work as she wanted, or that she did it correctly at all, the Russian thief used the next half hour watching the patrols on the streets. Estimating gaps of time where no one could be looking through the show room's big ass windows and trying to see if they were able to be timed.

However, Sonya had broken her last wristwatch.

That had been why she stole Cherep's to use in Mafia Land. The store likely had a couple for sale, and she could use them for the night, but she really did have to buy a non-hot one for herself sometime this next week.

While she was pondering what kind of watch to get, someone did come around to check out the store she intended to loot.

A probably really ill-advised contortion hanging half-off the building’s roof later, and she could see the watchman shine a flashlight through the windows a couple times. He moved on after that, but the mere fact her was there at all was concerning.

Was it a local watch-guard, or a guard responding to weird reports from her hotwired box?

She didn't know, so she resigned herself to waiting another hour or two in order to be sure of what he was up to.

Sighing, the thief resettled herself back against the lip of the roof. Checking to ensure her Bec de Corbin was about back to its original size and she hadn't cracked the spinel stone.

Really?

She had better things to be doing than wasting time on a roof.

(owo0000oo)

(Wednesday the 14th of February, 1968 continued. Madrid, Kingdom of Spain.)
A very irritating night of stealing and playing keep away with flashlights and marching patrols later, Sonya almost buried the sleeping Bjørn under her ill-gotten loot. "Wake up."

The Icelander, who had promised to sleep through the night and did seemed to have kept it, scrambled awake and away from the heavy pack that nearly landed on him. "Dama Sonya? What-?"

"We've got to sort this in a fast hurry and send it off." She snapped, tired and probably cranky from her miserable waiting on a roof and the dodge-happy heist. It had started to rain while she had been waiting, so she was both miserable and wet. "I'll pry the gemstones out of settings, I need you to keep what's what straight and ensure they end up packaged together or if you can't tell they end up in a package that will be appraised later. Then we have to go find something for me to 'acquire' for Mafia Land that would need shipping in the first place to hide it all in."

All the metal would be sold, even the bar of tungsten she would rather keep to play with. She got some petty cash out of the store manager's safe, as well as the cash register and a weekly deposit that had yet to be deposited at whatever bank, so she could send in something at least marginally useful.

As an 'Acquisitions' agent of Mafia Land's umbrella corporation, the Soviet Storm-Cloud could literally send the island anything from glassware to bedding to food to even live animals.

It would either be used or sold off again, but the main reason why she could was for smuggling. Her hot items would be hidden under the more legally acquired items, and when it reached Mafia Land, as long as it was packaged correctly and labeled with where it had to end up, they would reship it elsewhere for her.

If what was hot and obviously wasn't part of the 'legal' shipment was left as is, or even if it wasn't labeled correctly, it would be fenced and her business account credited with what money was made after the island's fees were taken off.

All the metal she didn't need for her Zolotov dues would end up that way. The watches, everything not jewels in nature, the thrice damned scarves she was still confused over.

Sonya didn't have a lot of credit on that service just yet but would likely end up with a lot by the time she was done with her little crime spree.

Bjørn scrambled for the packaging material she had bought with the very last of her money the day before, pulling the smaller boxes and padding out of the pile. The Russian herself reached for her pack.

Which was a backpack with a couple extra straps added on for extra stability but held a lot of random stuff if she needed it.

Right now, it weighed about sixty to seventy pounds. Most of that was the metal at the bottom, but at least half or more was in jewels.

Dumping it out on her bed and stripping off the dark, skin-tight clothing she had worn for the night, the thief decided she was fast getting sick of glittering gems and metals.

She pulled Renato's shirt on over her clammy skin, if only because she would like to be comfortable while her damp skin warmed up, and grabbed the labels to fill out with the address for the house she grew up within.

Her little Lackey gaped at the small mound of precious gems and metals put a bit of elbow grease to spill out on his bedspread.
"Don't look too impressed, we have yet to sort it. Trust me, you'll get sick of the sight too."

He shot her a disbelieving look which she snorted in the face of.

It wasn't a particularly big haul, just one she could do in a fast hurry to get the cash they would need to keep going. Mainly to ensure this wasn't going to be too different from her previous heists and because, again, Sonya had needed the money.

End of the week, when she hit the bigger chain store, and he would likely be just as sick of the sight as she was.

(Friday the 16th of February, 1968. Mafia Land.)

"Where is your sister?" Renato demanded of Tatiana when the nurse practically skipped down the steps of the hospital.

Sonya had said she was done with whatever the hell she had been doing with a circus of all things, the hitman had expected the thief to be more available rather than missing more.

How the hell was he going to entice the Storm-Cloud over to his side of the island if she wasn't even around to be tempted?

"She's… a little bit busy." The Sun Flame nurse claimed, a little smirk on her face. "I've a question for you, Mister Sinclair. What, exactly, is your intention in regard to my little sister?"

The other if Inverted Sun blinked at her slowly for the off-the-wall query, scowling as he picked up on something he wasn't sure he liked all that much. "What kind of question is that?"

"An important one, because… Sonya will listen to me. Even if she doesn't quite understand why." She informed him, that little smirk still present but somehow gaining an edge of utter nastiness. "So I would like to know, as a very concerned big sister mind you, why it is Sonya isn't too concerned by you stalking her."

Six years after he met the girl, and only now was her family becoming concerned? "Flame users, back when we met, were still being hunted, Miss Primakova. I kept an eye on Sonya, if only because she was twelve and a Cloud."

"Out of the goodness of your heart, then? Please."

"No, Clouds are rare. I know it might not seem that way to you, given your sister's nature, but they are."

The redhead pursed her lips and considered him seriously with those bright baby blues for a long moment. "Mister Sinclair, bear with me a moment. I may not be half the fighter or the thief my little sister is, who could break bones by age nine and started her criminal career around the same, but I'm a nurse. I make my country's vory feel better. If I ask those mean, violence-inclined men to pretty please take care of this Italian Mafioso who's bothering my baby sister…?"

…for a nurse, that was a respectable threat.

"I would rather not do it. Sonya likes you, for whatever reason." The Hard Sun user continued pleasantly, as if she hadn't threatened to sic a large number of hardened criminals on him. "And if I
Clouds and Storms were the types to hold grudges to insane degrees.

"Miss Primakova, I'm insulted you think so lowly of me. I am a gentleman, if a lady says no then a lady says no." Renato returned with a purr, sweeping the fedora Shamal got the lady's sister to buy him off his head before giving the young woman a charming smile. With a bit of an edge of his own, as he didn't really appreciate the insinuation she was hinting around. "But Sonya's more than just a young lady, she's currently someone who helps me out when I ask without asking for something in return. Who is adored by my tetchy Mist brat ward, because she spends time with him without looking for something in payment. Why would I mess that up?"

"Why indeed." She remarked in a bland tone, before shrugging. "Sonya is currently on a bit of a crime spree, look into Spain if you want to see how she's doing. I'll see you around, Mister Sinclair."

The nurse walked off down the street without another word or so much as a backwards glance.

Huffing, the hitman replaced his hat and stalked off for the newsstands.

Spain, hmm?
Chapter 23

(Saturday the 24th of February, 1968. Madrid, Kingdom of Spain.)

Sonya let the two members of the Policia Local into the hotel room, still trying to bolt down what was left of her breakfast as she spoke thickly in Romanian around it. "Bjørn, the receipts for the nice gentlemen."

Her gawky little Lackey made a dive for his notebook, pulling the various receipts from different stores out of it and ordering them quickly. "Here, Dama Sonya."

She gestured to the uniformed men instead of taking possession of them. Her mouth was full and her fingers were sticky, her handling paper would do nobody any good.

"Gracias, la señorita." One of them muttered, pulling out his own little notebook to markdown what she was buying and sending from their country.

The other looked at her expectantly. "¿Qué pasa con las entregas?"

Sonya slowly worked through that as she swallowed, as her Italian was not up to translating Spanish very well but it was the closest language she knew. "I do shipping, gentlemen, not receiving. I sent my last shipment yesterday, as I did not know there would be more than just customs that would need to look it over. Pottery and house fabrics, mainly."

That, apparently, did not translate well. "¿No hablas español?"

"Not my usual port of call." She explained, flicking a hand at both Bjørn and her hasty made-up packing corner. "I normally get northern Europe."

A different voice interrupted. "English, then?"

"Oh, thank god." She really did have to either learn Spanish, or make her assistant learn it for her. "Yes, English will be easier all around."

"I can do English as well." The police officer with the receipts offered, handing the slips of paper back to her Lackey and flipping his notebook closed. "Repeat all that, if you would. No sense on trying to rely on bad translations."

"I do not normally get Spain to handle and have not learned Spanish. But as I do speak a related language in Italian, and my company's clients wanted Spanish goods now not later when the usual agents are available again, here I am. My last shipment was sent off yesterday, checked by customs. I did not know you would want to look at it, no one said, and so I do not have one for you to inspect."

"We expected that." He admitted, waving the problem off. "All we wanted was a look at what it is you are doing, and since we have that we shall leave you to it. Thank you for the cooperation, miss."

"Of course." Sonya dipped the two of them a small curtsy as they left and looked at her little assistant when they shut their hotel room door behind them. "Breathe kid."

Bjørn's breath left him in a little wheeze, clutching at the receipts from their entirely legal purchases yesterday. Wide-eyed and a little paler than normal, he sank onto his bed shakily. "Dama Sonya, can we not do that again?"
"They'll probably want at least a look at another of my shipments, so... sorry. Once more." The thief informed him dryly, huffing in amusement at his groan of pain. "We'll need to talk to the Mafia Land customs agent to get him to slip the next few jewel shipments in after inspections and pay him off to do it."

At least she could give the man warning what she was doing was stirring up law enforcement interest in his nominal sector of work, which might actually knock some of the price off the top.

Two jewelry stores down, two more to go.

...actually, only one. It was getting a bit hot in Spain, but she wanted those white sapphires.

Sonya had a plan for those.

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(Tuesday the 27th of February, 1968. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"**First shipment!**" Lisa called out cheerfully, bouncing baby Valerian in her arms and proceeding Arseniy, who was carrying a medium-sized crate himself with a measure of visible strain.

Bright and early a morning barely a month after Sonya had left them to resupply, actually.

Neither in the office had really expected any news for another month or two, even if the thief *hadn't* run into trouble getting what she and they needed.

"**First?**" Dmitriy questioned as he looked up from Galina's newly amended training schedule, wincing when the vor dropped the heavy box on his desk with a slam.

"*Sonya planned a spree, this is only the beginning.*" The older Russian woman in the room informed him, patting the upset baby's back when he let her know he didn't appreciate the loud noise the box made.

His 'secretary' uncapped her pen, shoving the nib into the crack between the lid and the rest of the crate and wrenching it off with a flash of green Lightning Flames to protect her writing utensil. The lid came loose with a faint screech of nails against wood, revealing a number of brown paper wrapped packages.

Grabbing the freed wood before it broke anything, like his lamp, Dmitriy dumped it on the floor next to his chair and scooped up one of the packets to look at.

Neatly printed in a familiar hand, the word 'emeralds' in Cyrillic was listed under a Moscow address. Ripping the paper spilled out a number of green jewels all over the Rain's desk with a multitude of little musical clatters.

"*Any malachite?*" The Inverted Lightning commented blandly, plucking one of the smaller oval cut emeralds from the package he was still holding and inspecting it closely. "*I need a new one.*"

"*Where the hell are we going to put all these?*" He asked aloud instead of answer her, digging through the box's contents of little packages one handed for another to see what it held. "*Is Sonya going to drown us in jewels or something?*"
"She didn't really intend to do very many more jewelry stores after that first one. I think she intends to be sure you never need any more. Ever." Lisa informed him, still cheerful. "I think we could get you a couple boxes to put these in."

The Rain swallowed uneasily as Arseniy informed him that he had better not ask for that. Silently, with the power of his glare alone. "We can do that much, Lisa. Thank you."

Even if it had been a couple years since the vor taught him the ins and outs of Mafiya life, the man still scared him a little. He distinctly remembered what happened to that upstart that had tried to go after the vor's lover, and dismembered hands were still a private nightmare for him.

Galina tossed another package of emeralds onto Dmitriy's desk, still looking for her stone-type. "I take it this is more than only one heist?"

"Probably." The older Russian woman informed her, picking up one of the lighter colored emeralds to amuse her son with the sparkles. "Mafia Land ships things out in bulk, usually at the end of the month. So, this might be the contents of two or more stores that Sonya robbed."

"This one…?" Enquired the younger brunette, lifting a larger than normal package merely marked with an address and a question mark. Peeling the paper back slowly revealed an entire jumble of jewels in different hues and colors.

"Sonya had all the stones she wasn't sure of appraised before giving them over to the clan's use." The mother of the thief in question informed them both with a small smile of vindictiveness. "Since she's in the middle of something, you're going to have to get those identified yourselves."

He opened one of his desk drawers, sweeping the loose emeralds and the two packages of the rocks into it. With a less cluttered desk, he started pulling all the small packages of various jewels out of the crate. About halfway down he found the Lighting her package of preferred gems, but it was the very bottom layers that gave him trouble.

"Oh… I should probably inform you Sonya likes to pay her clan dues in gold and silver. Gold and silver bars, I mean." Shifting baby Valerian to a more comfortable position and putting the loose emerald back on the desk, Lisa smiled prettily at Dmitriy as he strained to pull two heavy packs from the depths of the crate and from under a few more packages of rocks. "So that's probably the bars she's marked out for the clan."

The heavy bundle of metal clashed to the desk with a heavy thud and a clang, startling the baby in the room into messily smothering his new bout of crying into his mom's shoulder.

The Inverted Rain ripped the paper off one end of the bigger pack, revealing the four bars of gold and four of silver. As well as a note tucked into the package on top of the metals.

Plucking the note out, and sniffing at the torn edge from his disgruntled tearing of paper, Galina read off the message. "Not sure how much this is total, sent extra to be sure to cover my and Bjørn's dues for the year and their take from the jobs. Kept the loose cash, sold the bulk of metal. Will total it up and calculate everything out when I'm back. Galina, I rather appreciate Bjørn's new bookkeeping skills. Sonya."

Arseniy opened the smaller pack of metal, but that one didn't have a message. Just another four bars of gold and silver.

"Well… at least someone appreciates clerks." The Lightning announced with a sniff, looking rather pleased with the note in her hand.
"We'll take the clan's cut to the treasurer. You kids have fun." Lisa announced before Dmitriy could do more than glare at Galina for her snippy and a little bitchy comment, jerking her head at the father of her baby to prompt him into taking possession of their foster daughter's dues. "Try not to drown."

"This is your fault," the only remaining woman in the office remarked, smirking at the owner of said office once the door closed behind their mid-morning guests, "you did tell Sonya we ran out of jewels."

"A few of them, and we might be low on a couple others, but this is... what the hell does she expect us to do with all of this?" Shoving a hand through his short-cut brown hair, the Rain looked from the pile of different packaged gemstones to his drawer and back to the still half-full crate. "And, since the girl isn't back yet, she's probably going to send us even more."

"Lisa said Sonya intends to not have to do any more jewelry stores." Galina shrugged, opening up the pack of malachite and picking out a new stone for herself. "I don't think we'll need more for a couple years after she's done."

(Friday the 1st of March, 1968. Madrid, Kingdom of Spain.)

"Money does smooth out a lot of bad translations." Sonya informed the very same English-speaking police officer with a shrug, idly shifting on the loose gravel for better footing. "If I cannot find another language to speak with suppliers with, usually a written translation of what I want to buy helps."

"It just seems... a bit of a hassle." He commented as they waited for her shipment of Spanish fruits to be inspected and cleared from both customs and the police.

"It is," the thief admitted with a sigh, "but we are done in Spain. France is next, but at least we speak French."

"Ah... I've been meaning to ask, but the kid?"

"My cousin. His parents are... well, they are not with us anymore. I got him a school-sponsored internship with my company and will probably set him up with a job with us when he is a tiny bit older, but it is only for the now until a more stable home can be found for him for a year or two."

"Lucky kid to have a cousin like you." The Spanish police officer commented, marking down a few more notes into his little booklet of notepaper. "That's all we need, you're free to go señorita."

"You are not going to wait...?"

"I'm pretty sure you're not trying to smuggle anything with fruits." He told her over a shoulder dryly, waving the offer to wait for the end of the inspections off. "No, I'm pretty satisfied with what we've found."

"Trying that would ruin the fruit..."

He laughed, shaking his head as he made a shooing motion to his partner to have him get back into their police car.

Entirely worth the slightly exorbitant cost of having her real shipment hid and another offered up for customs to inspect, complete with receipts and all.
Sonya was actually sending Mafia Land machinery parts, figuring that the moving island would like the replacements if needed. Some just general hardware replacements that she knew her brother had fussed over for the circus' few mechanical rides, some more for industrial standard replacement parts, and a bit of specialized car parts she was sure would end up sold more than used. Her last Spanish jewelry heist was already packed away in that, meaning she didn't have anything illegal on her at all.

Bjørn was slowly getting used to being both criminal and interacting with the police, at least. He looked a lot less shaky and pale than the first time around as the law enforcement officer walked away. Still nervous, however.

"He's not going to somehow magically know, kid." She informed him in Romanian, because it was still entirely less suspicious than Russian this far into Europe. "Your expression, on the other hand, might let him know something was up."

"It's nerve-wracking, Dama Sonya." The teenager defended himself, clutching his notebook to his slowly filling out chest.

Two years of decent food and care had turned the scrawny street rat from Iceland into a healthy-looking teenager, the combat training all members of the Zolotovs were encouraged to at least attend occasionally gave him the beginnings of muscles. Bjørn's Slavic origin gave him dirty blond hair, blue eyes, a blunt nose, and a square jawline as well as an unfortunate need to start shaving early.

He could easily pass as a short sixteen or seventeen-year-old even if he was only barely fourteen, his years on the streets would likely always make him seem older than he was. That kind of stress was... difficult to shed from one's features.

"It's not, really. He has his work to do, and as long as I do mine correctly he'll never suspect me. Therefore, there is nothing to worry about." Sonya had gotten over her nerves years ago, now she was either immune or used to the stress.

That might not be a good thing, actually.

"You have nerves of steel, Dama." The Icelander muttered rebelliously, checking his seemingly ever-present notebook for something he wrote down. "I am to remind you we have a three-fifteen train to catch, and that we still need to eat."

As it was two in the afternoon, and they were still stuck watching a shipment that wasn't really Sonya's be inspected in the late winter afternoon. The thief was pretty sure she was going to have to run to catch that train.

However, there was no reason for Bjørn to have to do the same. She dug out her wallet and her cigarettes from her purse, handing him a handful of peseta coins she had. "Head to the public entrance for the station and pick us up something to eat on the way. I'll meet up with you there."

She had more than enough euros to cover their traveling expenses, he could probably use the Spanish coins up before they left the country.

"Anything left is yours to deal with."

He accepted the money with merely a nod, having gotten over his surprise at being handed large amounts of money from her over the last two weeks. "Anything in particular you would like?"

"As long as it's not too odd, I'll eat just about anything. Avoid mushrooms, though. I don't like those."
She never had, not even as Rachel. It wasn't so much the taste, because mushrooms didn't really have one, as it was the texture that got to her.

Sonya actually used a lighter, because this was so civilian it sometimes made her want to wince, and then tapped her lit cigarette on boxcar next to her as her little Lackey walked away.

Train stations were not pretty affairs, at least not past the reception rooms and into the shipping part itself. There was nothing to look at besides the trains themselves or the train cars, and that in front of her was just a train car full of fruit. The sky overhead was near-boiling with steel grey clouds from the recent rains, even if they had dumped most of the humidity out of the air and back into the groundwater tables, there was a shit-ton of gravel and steel tracks laid out every which way.

A whole lot of buildings and train cars around to hem in one's sightlines, a couple engines puffing this way and that, and… almost nothing else.

The thief's grey eyes slid to the not-really-a cargo loader, seemingly watching the inspections going on during his mid-afternoon break. He gave her a toothy grin back, revealing the small number of gold teeth he had.

Her shipment was sent. Good to know.

(Sunday the 10th of March, 1968. Paris, French Republic.)

"Well, you're a restless one. Aren't you?" Sonya muttered to herself, slinking backwards into a vent as the guard she was trying to work around got up for yet another wander around the store he was guarding.

She was fast coming to hate restless guards. They were unpredictable, even if that frequent movement meant she could likely… adjust things to her liking and he wouldn't notice it on average.

A slight, minuscule dab of Storm Flames had the last stripped screw melting away once it was safe, the broken metal reduced to ash with only a scorch mark and a little uncomfortable heat to deal with. With the vent cover that had decided to give her difficulty finally out of the way, she bent it in half to get it up past her and stuck it up into a branching vent for safekeeping.

A quick check around, to ensure Mr. Guard wasn't in range, and she slipped to the ground.

There were only few ways she could cover up her Flame use in this job, and that was by making it seem as if she hadn't somehow snuck a blowtorch in with her and the guard never noticed the noise or light.

She'd appropriate another screw from a different vent cover and reaffix the vent once she was done. That crease she made in the metal would still make it obvious how she got in, but with four screws and four screw holes and a bit of cleaning it wouldn't be too obvious that she burned her way in.

However, that was a lot of detail work to do. Sonya didn't feel like doing it around a guard's patrolling.

The restless guard was about to take an entirely unanticipated nap.

(ooo000ooo)
"At least we did not have to deal with the police this time." Bjørn commented sourly, poking his pasta a few holes so the ravioli would cool down a bit quicker.

"Stop playing with your food, cut it up if it needs to cool." Sonya informed him from the other side of the restaurant table, reading the police report on her first heist of France. "And yet, you mean. They might want to ask us some questions too."

While her little Lackey could speak a respectable amount of French, this wasn't a conversation to be overheard by any civilian off the street so it was still Romanian. Which wasn't quite as foreign to this country as she would like, but since her Icelandic still sucked and he didn't know a word in Chinese it had to do.

The thief folded up the newspaper and tucked it away for later, content in knowing her Flame use was adequately hidden. The guard she knocked out wasn't even going to be fired, since he was 'assaulted' before the store was robbed.

He just had no explanation of why he never heard a thief or thieves break in.

The local Paris police were operating on the assumption there were two thieves that were responsible, breaking in from the rooftop air duct exit and leaving the same way, given the volume of gemstones and metal stolen from the store.

Which, okay. Sonya was a little stronger than the average woman, or even a male twice her size. She would even accept the estimation that she was stronger than two or three bodybuilders put together when she really wanted to be.

However, how did that translate to doing the work of two or three thieves?

Whatever, it was a neat cover for her stealing. A lone woman with a bratty tagalong would not instantly equate a thief and an assistant thief so she might even be overlooked in this country.

She was contemplating scaling up the volume of what she was stealing, because she had yet to run into anything too major that might upset her work entirely. If she stole more, if her equipment could take it, would the local law enforcement assume there were more thieves running around when it was just her?

…she would likely need to reinforce her backpack, at least. It was showing some wear, from the heavy loads put into it.

Maybe a new one?

A bigger one, if she wanted more loot to handle. She might want to look into a purse… a new one, as she was running out of room in that dratted thing too.

Well… they were in Paris. "We're going shopping after this."

"Dama?"

"I'm giving you my old pack, so I need a new one." Sonya informed him after swallowing her first spoonful of lobster bisque. "A more… sturdy one."

She'd have to alter it a bit too, sew on an extra buckle to go around her waist as well as another one to secure the shoulder straps in place when worn. All things she could do while waiting for Bjørn to
attempt scouting out a store on his own.

Most if not all in-country attention was more on the Winter Olympics happening to the south east, in Grenoble. While the possibility that the police might catch on the thief from Spain had moved north around the time they did themselves, the fact it was now assumed to be more than just one might actually keep her work in Spain and her more recent heists in France unlinked.

She could maybe afford to run another job here before they had to move on.

(Saturday the 5th of May, 1968. Bern, Swiss Confederation.)

"Really?" Sonya asked with a touch of amusement, cradling the wired phone receiver between her ear and shoulder as she fed the pay phone box a few more Swiss franc coins.

"They're none too pleased with you at the moment. But even I have to agree, the second shipment was a touch over the top." Lisa confirmed, sounding entirely cheerful about the fact and a bit tinny from the phone line. "I think young Dmitriy is regretting allowing the store of rocks to fall so far, and for relying on you to get them more."

Hey, unintentional revenge. "Are they good? I mean, if I don't have to do these last two stops then I won't. There was… a bit of an upswing of general suspicion crossing the border this time around. Landlocked areas are just harder all around, too. No convenient ports included, alas."

"Don't risk it if you don't have to." Her foster mother agreed a touch more seriously. "They're good so far, sweetie. You go too far overboard, and someone might get suspicious. But, since you're out there, why not take a look around for something a bit different? You said you didn't want to do anymore, but you've really haven't put effort into finding something else."

"That's… not a bad idea, Lisa. Not too sure if I have time for that instead of just some sightseeing, but thanks."

"Have some fun with it, sweetie. We'll see you in a couple weeks."

Sonya gave her own farewell, hanging up once she knew the older Russian had done so too.

Björn looked up expectantly as she stepped out of the phone booth, but the thief shook her head at him. "What do you want to do?"

"Dama?"

"I mean it, anything you'd like to do? Go see? We're free, for the time being."

She had more than enough money, and if she could sell some of the more common but less responsive jewels she had stolen the last two months then she'd probably be set for at least a year or more. Not that she was going to stop working for another year, but it would be a nice nest egg just in case.

The teenager perked up a bit hesitantly. "Can we go see the clock tower?"

"Sure." With a shrug, the thief jerked a thumb behind her. "It's this way, come on."

Bern, Switzerland, had a medieval clock that really was quite a work of art. Sonya had first seen it with Cherep, and it was still really cool to watch it tick away. Björn probably just wanted to see it ring the hour, because that was done by a clockwork man-figure as a couple other clockwork figures put on a show.
The Old City of Bern was a bit confusing in layout, even if it was a pretty place to get lost in, only because the streets followed the curve the Aar River imposed on them since that part of the city was built almost four centuries ago. It was still a bit of a nippy walk, as they were solidly edging into spring, while the two of them wound their way further into the city.

There was actually a crowd wanting to see the same thing, so she set them on the edge of that and turned to her Lackey. "Okay, here's the thing. We're going back to Moscow in a week or two, for another month or so while a few things get sorted out. I'll get us both a hotel room. You need to pack up everything you want to keep for the next few years, I'll store what you won't need for you, then we're heading back to that island. The one we went to in order to get your medical files straightened out."

As he had none until she took him to Mafia Land, that should be more than enough of a hint to ensure he didn't require a clarification.

"Are we staying there?"

"For the most part," the thief agreed absently, digging out her cigarettes again, "and for the foreseeable future. You know what that place is like, so you need to be a bit careful, but you'll have your own place for a year or two."

"Really?"

"Until I can afford us an apartment for us all, yes. My sister, the redhead? Tatiana agreed to allow you to stay in her apartment while I pulled that in, then we will live together." She pointed a finger under his nose, shaking it sternly. "You will keep it clean, and at least somewhat in good repair. Do you hear me?"

Bjørn nodded hurriedly but got a little distracted as the clockwork across the street started to move.

A small spinning plate showcased a few animal figurines, statues of knights, and what she was sure was a flutist as a jester pulled on two ropes to get the bells over its head to ring. When the figures stopped spinning and the ringing stopped, the rooster on one side of the façade waited a long moment before crowing in musical tones.

"Two minutes."

Her Icelandic Lackey was barely able to rip his eyes from the spectacle. "Dama?"

"The main bell rings in another two minutes." She pointed back at the clockwork figures. "The old man in front will turn the hourglass, then he and the figure on the other side from the rooster will nod in time to the bell ringing. When they're done, the rooster crows again. Watch carefully."

It happened exactly as she said it would, but Bjørn was entirely happy just watching the show.

What was with all the easily amused men in her life?

First was Cherep, who was just happy covered in grime and mucking about with gears and machinery. Renato could hold an entire conversation by himself, even if she did no more than snap something once or twice for his every thirty or so words. Shamal just liked hearing her talk, apparently.

Now her Lackey?
(Wednesday the 29th of May, 1968. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"You know, I think we've done this before." Sonya remarked idly, folding her hands together and resting them on her knee.

Dmitriy was glaring at her from across his desk. It was getting old.

Galina looked up briefly from Björn's notebook, and the estimation of what was stolen and the general price a halfway decent fence would pay for it all. The Lightning flicked her dark eyes from the Inverted Rain to the Storm-Cloud then back again, but the woman returned to checking her Lackey's work on estimated prices and clan dues of five different jewel heists instead of comment.

"Since it seems we have more than enough supplies to last us this year, the year after, and likely the year after that," commented her old childhood friend sourly, still glowering, "we should probably finish up here."

To get rid of you for the year was left unsaid but clearly heard.

"Cherep is…?"

"I'll get him next year." Sonya informed the Rain easily, uncrossing her legs and accepting a pen and blank notebook of her own from Galina. "He and the circus he works for already left the city."

The young man grunted, getting up himself and rounding his desk to the far corner of his office.

Which had been taken over by a number of little boxes piled on more boxes sitting on yet more boxes. All of them had a different type of jewel sitting in them, some types had more little cardboard boxes to them than others but there were easily a hundred of different sorts.

"Right… start from the top?" Dmitriy posed after they had a good look at the work ahead of them.

"I suppose… but I don't expect anything from diamonds."

Folding herself down on the floor in a neat tailor fashion, Galina grabbed for the box of said clear rocks. "I don't either, but we're looking for both a uniform and a complete set of results from each of us. To be through, we're starting with them."

"So… I count as both Classic Cloud and Inverted Storm, right?"

The twitch the Lightning gave at her comment confused Sonya, until she turned to glare at her.

"…right then. Test both Flames one at a time rather than both at once." That was going to be exhausting, but the other woman intimidated her a little.

"Hey, Sonya. Those white sapphires you wanted us to leave apart?" Dmitriy shook the box of them, showing the few handfuls of only lightly blue tinted stones the thief had acquired. "What are these for?"

"Sapphires give the best response for untrained Flame users." She reminded the Rain, plucking a few of them out of the box and holding one up as she flooded it with her Flames.

The mix of Storm and Cloud Flames made it throw off red and purple light, even as the sapphire
acquired an ill-placed crack down the middle under the stress that widened the longer she held on.

"I think I can use these to figure out who is a Flame user and what type they are without taking a couple stabs in the dark."

"You think." The Lightning repeated, passing out the diamonds they were starting with and accepting the cracked sapphire in return. Already knowing how easily they fractured under Flames, she didn't try touching the stone with Lightning Flames.

"I'm going to test it out on Bjørn first. We'll see about it, anyways." Sonya mused, a diamond in each hand as she called on her inner Flames to try gaining a response.

"Ow fuck hot!" Dmitriy suddenly shouted not a moment later, dropping the diamond he had been testing with Rain Flames to clutch at the burn now present on his hand.

She and Galina exchanged a look, then looked at their own stones bathing in their respective Flames. The Inverted Rain's was making a char mark on the wooden floors of the office but didn't seem about to start a fire.

There was no flicker or waiver of the distinctive watery Rain Flames either, or the sharply jagged Lightning in Galina's, or the thief's own more fire-like two Flames in either of hers.

"Non-responsive?"

"Agreed."

"Fuck you both."

Sonya finished marking down the agreed upon results, tossing her diamond back into Galina's box of them. "Next?"

"Rubies." She informed them, glancing at the Rain still glowering at everything. "Go really slowly with these, Dmitriy."

"Yeah, yeah. I know, alright? Just as bad as sapphires. Just more risk of burns."

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 29th of May, 1968 continued. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"You know," Sonya informed Galina, who was nursing a massive exhaustion headache from the testing, "I don't think sapphires actually aid control or anything."

"How would that make sense?"

"I think they're amplifying Flames." She admitted slowly, rubbing at her burned and nicked fingertips with the burn ointment Bjørn had fetched them on her request. "Which would be why they shatter so easily under our hands but coax out the slight amounts any newbie user might grasp, like how Dmitriy could once learn to use his Flames on them but can't use them now. And why they don't scorch, just shatter."

"Would explain why the more facets it had the faster they exploded." The Rain sourly commented, glaring at the marks in his office's ceiling and tending his own injuries clumsily.
She coughed sheepishly, since it had been her Storm testing that caused that violent reaction.

They were all very lucky the gem blew outward from the flatter face facet rather than the pointed end of the brilliant cut sapphire.

It was also very lucky they were so cautious of sapphires to begin with, meaning they had picked different corners to test them in so as to not harm the others with any mishaps.

Sonya had a weird little burn mark from the pointed end of the sapphire she used with her Storm Flames, one that actually had eaten into her hand before she felt the pain and the rock exploded on her. There was a nice little pockmark in her palm now, that didn't particularly like the continued testing and let her know it by aching something fierce.

Why was it always her right?

"Well… it's a thought." Likely the only reason Galina wasn't writing it down was because she had her own burns and nicks littering her fingers, and probably didn't have the energy to grope for her pen and paper.

She wondered if she could use her Cloud Flames like Cherep did to cover that pockmark. The flesh around it might be a little… well-done, but surely she could at least cover it up.

Right?

A trickle of Cloud Flames responded to her will, slowly replicating her skin and flesh in a very painful fashion.

How the hell did Cherep do this to himself?

Unconsciously?

Was he always in pain?

Sonya let her breath out, hissing between her teeth, and gripped her right wrist with her left as the injury faded from sight but not her awareness.

As a burn, it had ached. Now like this, in twanged in a decidedly more painful manner. Like it had been rubbed raw, actually. Every little bit of it.

Like in her life before this, as Rachel, the one and only time she got into her father's chemicals brought home from the lab. Acid burn, just without the acid and tingling like someone was scrubbing with steel wool and a dash of bleach.

"Fuck…"

"How do you have more Flames left?" Dmitriy demanded, as if the mere fact was a slight on him or something.

Flexing her not-really healed hand curiously, she watched her palm flicker with lavender fire as the area she had pockmarked stretched and contracted a few times. More so near the edges, where she had supposedly healthy cells not barbecued by a glassy rock. "I'm… um, not sure. I just do?"

That still hurt.

Fuck, Tatiana could heal it up, screw Cherep's method.
"She started before us," Galina informed the Rain tiredly, rubbing the pads of one hand against her thumb as Bjørn switched to her other to tend to, "of course she's stronger than us."

"But I'm not any stronger, actually." Literally not any stronger.

She had always been able to do pretty much the same things always, ever since getting a grip on her Cloud Flame born strength. Sonya's Storm Flames might have, but they had seen more use… didn't they?

Well… wouldn't her strength be a continuous use of Cloud Flames as well?

She abused the fuck out of that, all Clouds did.

Sonya knew she wasn't getting any 'stronger', no matter how much she used or didn't use her inner Flames, she was getting… "I have a lighter touch with Flames, I think. I don't use more than I have to anymore."

That was, apparently, news to the other two Flame users.

"Explain that." Galina demanded, straightening herself upright and waving Bjørn off when he tried to follow her movements to finish bandaging her left pinky.

The thief gave her a mildly reproving look, because damn it all the teen was her Lackey and he wasn't going to be mistreated for shit. "Storm Flames, and even Cloud Flames if I must be honest, overwhelm. It's pretty much how they work. I want something either bigger or made again, I either pour the Cloud Flames I need into something to make it grow or pool my Flames into a similar shape right next to what I want duplicated. Storm Flames? Just obliterate, I had to actually learn that soft touch just to stop destroying everything it brushed against."

The Lightning frowned as she absorbed that bit of news. "Well… if constant use doesn't make us stronger, that what would?"

Willpower, probably. It had to be called Dying Will Flames for a reason, right?

Sonya posed that to the Rain and the Lightning, but that avenue of discussion eventually petered out without any of them having something new to add.

(Friday the 7th of June, 1968. Mafia Land.)

Sonya returned to Mafia Land at the start of summer with two new stones, one of which didn't match the color of her Flames at all.

Galina had taken her theory on industrial stones possibly reacting differently than jewel quality ones and ran with it, using the bulk of the diamonds and other jewels they now had in excess to hawk. Mostly to pay off the clan's 'fees' for hiring a thief for stealing the gems for them in the first place, but also in order to buy up a few testing lots of semi-precious and industrial stones.

Much to their exasperation, there were an uncountable number of those compared to jewelry grade ones.

No, industrial sapphires didn't really act much different than jewel sapphires. They just crumbled into dust faster. They also weren't as… stable.
Which was saying something.

A bit of green feldspar called Amazonite, which got her the clearest results for her Cloud Flames, and a piece of Cinnamon Stone garnet, for her Storm. One was a semi-precious rock, the other a gem.

She was going to send Galina her geology books, to see if the Lightning could narrow down the 'why' to any physical property of the rocks giving different results. There had to be some kind of difference between the various bits of garnet for her to get wildly different results from two different pieces.

A garnet would actually match the red stones of a Storm Ring, at least. However, there were apparently at least two different types of garnet that gave similarly different results. Possibly more.

The Russian showed Bjørn Tatiana's still empty apartment, promising to take the teen shopping for the bits of things he'd need to live there for a year or two later and left him to make plans for the next few hours.

Instead of anything else she really should've been doing, Sonya wandered over to the café she met up with a certain hitman at. It was mid-summer, it was freaking hot, and all she really wanted was an hour or two of non-exploding-gem risking sitting time.

She really had to rethink these bracers, leather in hot weather didn't equal comfortable wrists.

He greeted her with four little words. "You forgot Shamal's birthday."

"I did not..." …yeah, yeah, she did. Pursing her lips, and feeling incredibly sheepish, she glared at the smirking hitman. "…what does he want?"

"Really? Sonya, you bitched at me about not forgetting the damn date last year." Renato huffed at her, cradling his espresso between his long fingers and still smirking up a storm. "And you are the one that forgets?"

"I, Renato, am more like his damn aunt. I can forget and send really expensive presents as a way to make it up." She returned shortly, slumping down into her usual chair with a sigh. "Now, what the fuck does Shamal want for his slightly late birthday present?"

"Slightly late? It's June."

Shamal's birthday was at the end of February, meaning she had missed it by a couple months. Quarter of a year, actually. "I was busy, and in Spain, for his birthday."

"Excuses, excuses." The hitman dismissed with a prissy sniff, folding the newspaper he had been reading into quarters and setting it on the table. "You're not the one Shamal pouts at."

Sonya glared at him again, moodily wondering what she could get tetchy Mist brat that would give the asshole a migraine to deal with.

"He wants you to visit."

"I was just there!"

He rolled his eyes at her. "He's five, it's not like he has any great grasp on time constraints or needing to work just yet. Shamal would like you to visit him, it's all he said when I asked him what he
wanted."

Sighing, she cradled her forehead in her hands and winced as her right protested. "Aw... hell's fire. Really?"

"Yes... Sonya, what did you do to your hand?"

"I burned a hole through it." And then tried to Propagate a fix over it, she really wouldn't recommend anyone else try it. "Think you can heal it? I would ask Tatiana, but she's working right now."

"Then you should've gone to the damn hospital to get it fixed. Give it here." The Sun gingerly sized her reluctantly extended wrist, inspecting the lavender Flames that could be seen through the cracks of her little patch-job when she so much as flexed the area. "...what the hell is this?"

"Cloud Flame skin, it is not what I would suggest relying on if one had to." Sonya willed it to fade, or more to the point stopped willing her Flames to cover the injury, wincing when the inner part of her hand stung viciously when exposed to the salty sea air.

The Propagated flesh had a bad habit of winking out of existence on her, when she got distracted or slept or even occasionally when she was trying to remember there was a hole in her hand. Sometimes she didn't notice until it started pouring blood on everything. It made her respect the hell out of whatever Cherep was doing to himself with his own Cloud Flames, especially since she sucked so badly at trying to copy him.

"There is a hole, in your hand."

"Yes, I said that."

"Sonya, it's about a teaspoon worth of flesh missing hole."

"I burned it, I said that too."

Renato shot her a dark look for that, pressing a finger to either side of the gaping wound in her palm.

"This is what happens when you try to use sapphires at our level." Sonya informed him blandly, trying not to let her hand twitch under the Sun Flames pouring into her injury. Itchy. "I do not recommend it."

His dark eyes fell to the slowly closing gap in her palm, inspecting the rate it was closing off closely. "Noted. Was that what had you so distracted you missed baby Mist's birthday?"

"Something like that. We needed more stones for empirical testing purposes as well as the usual reasons. We're trying to find something that would give a uniform response for each Flame type." The thief commented tiredly, thinking back to the five in a row heists she did from Spain to France to Switzerland. Thankfully she only had to do those five, ten probably would've burned her out or something. "And since I am the jewel thief...?"

"Shamal will be thrilled to learn he takes second place to sparkly rocks."

...that sounded like blackmail. She shot him a suspicious look, and indeed the Italian was smirking at her again as he let go of her newly healed hand.

"Next year, don't make me late for his birthday too." He informed her, plucking his espresso cup back up.
The Russian flexed her right hand, feeling the difference between Propagated flesh cover and actual Activation healed skin, scowling. "…give me a month to get two contracts for Mafia Land over with, then I will go see Shamal."

Bjørn could probably use the time to settle in and learn his way around a bit before starting in on managing her Mafia Land business. The bits he could handle as her Lackey, anyways.

"Be prepared to deal with pouty little Mist brat, then."

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(Saturday the 8th of June, 1968. Mafia Land.)

There was a bazaar in Mafia Land that was, quite frankly, bizarre.

All those random things thieves hid their smuggling within had to be sold somewhere, and if it wasn't sold off again in bulk to the civilian sector immediately when it reached the island or used by the island's maintenance workers and staff, it was sold in the open-air markets.

Sonya was pretty sure all of it wasn't the results of only just the thieves of Mafia Land, because the bloodstains on a couple items didn't look like they came from any thief. Did the hitmen and assassins use the same service for their own work?

What for, grisly trophies?

Proof of kill?

Actually, the latter sounded more likely. Especially in their lives, with how suspicious and backstabbing a great number of them could be.

…eww.

Aside materials needed for questionable smuggling reasons, this was also the dumping grounds for anything the fences needed rid of to make room or for the island's various services to sell off unneeded or old supplies. Everything was basically on sale all the time and, as long as you could ignored the questionable bloodstains that would never come out or the occasional knife or bullet hole, a decent place to find anything you might need ever.

"Right. I would suggest you be very wary, and clean the fuck out of, anything you get here." She informed Bjørn, digging out her Mafia Land charge card from her jeans back pocket and handing it over to her Lackey. "I highly doubt you could reach the end of my credit in any possible way, so get what you know you need no matter what it ends up being."

She had actually exceeded the max amount allowed of business credit in as little as three months, or so the woman who confronted her in the Thieves' Hall informed her. The island had chipped off an extra twenty percent off the top, before their fees were taken off of course, but she got most of what went over back. Now she had a shiny new bank account as well as maxed out credit with the island, the account which she intended to split in half at least the next time she got to Switzerland.

Keeping a bank account on an island full of criminals just seemed… ill-advised. A Swiss account sounded so much better.

He accepted the card curiously, likely never having seen one before.
It was basically a forerunner to the credit card, but American Express didn't exactly have a branch office in Mafia Land. It was also made out of metal, painted over to be mostly white with raised black lettering.

"The merchants will make an imprint of that on a sheet of paper, then you need to sign it with the name you're registered as my Lackey under. You don't want to know what would happen if you tried to sign the receipt any other way."

Sonya would get the bill at the end of the month and pay it off then, but this at least prevented them from being mugging targets.

"Additionally," she continued before the kid realized she had basically given him a small fortune to spend on his temporary apartment, "that is yours to hold onto. I prefer to pay in cash, but I can actually make anyone attempting to mug me regret it greatly. With that, you can buy anything you might need or want here without walking around with a thieves' target on your back, but I will be looking over what it is you're buying every month. Ensure you can justify it if you spend it."

The Icelandic teenager looked like he couldn't decide between being scared of the card, scared of her, or excited over the fact she had basically given him free-reign to live how he liked on her dime. Within reason.

He did, eventually, start wandering away to see what was available, so Sonya found herself a bench nearby and lit up a new cigarette.

Björn would either be an impulse spender or an extremely frugal kid, according to Lisa. Since the thief did now have the money to blow, they'd see what kind of marks his life on the streets had left him. She could afford it, and then she'd know to either put strict limits on her credit line or if she wouldn't have to worry about the kid living on an island full of shady swindlers and other criminal types.

She had her money on him being frugal, if only because debts had been how the teen's father ended up under the thumb of a local faction of the mafia. It wasn't exactly a certain thing, hence why she just gave him a large amount of money to go spend.

She spent most of the time she was waiting people watching, even if that was a risky kind of thing to try in Mafia Land. Sonya wouldn't be needed as muscle, the merchants had ways of ensuring deliveries reached where they had to go… especially if that address was on the island.

In the end, it turned out she and her foster mother were half right.

The teen was frugal with her money, but everything he had scraped together from either living in Moscow or from tagging along after her had been spent when he found something he wanted.

That couch needed a deep bleaching session and might change colors to eventually be less of an eyesore, but who the fuck was GoldStar?

It was obviously a company that made color television sets, which the Icelander had blown most if not all his personal money getting for himself.

TV, great. It was a very nice set, she supposed. Clunky and blurry and entirely a piece of technology of this particular era.

When did she turn into such an electronics snob?

She barely used anything like them anymore.
While Sonya was dubiously staring at the, powered off, television set, Bjørn had finished shoving the rest of the random things he bought into their approximate spots. "Dama Sonya? We would normally turn that on before staring at it."

Her Lackey was becoming a smart-ass. The Russian thief was now sure it had been her that rubbed off on Cherep, and now this teen.

"Tomorrow, eight in the morning, I'm taking you into the Thieves' Hall. I'm picking out the next couple contracts, and you'll watch me do it, so eventually you can line things up for me while I'm gone."

She also needed a check-up, too. At least she managed to get her damn haircut, in Paris.

Why was it called a bob?

A little too short for her liking, but it would grow out again.

"Is that what I am to do for you, then? Mainly?"

"Yeah. I would prefer it if you could slot things in a row to hit either on my way out or back. Oh, but leave the weeks before and after, as well as the week of. Christmas free for the foreseeable future. And," because she didn't intend to forget ever again, "the last week of February and the first week of March."

Sonya would probably get an ear-full from Tatiana if she nixed going back to Moscow for Christmas and for Valerian's birthday. Also, Renato bitching at her for forgetting Shamal's birthday should never happen again.

Ever, thank you very much.

Bjørn dove for his notebook, hastily scribbling down something. Either her orders or ideas, whichever.

"If you can find related mafia gossip or news about whichever area I am to be stealing from as well, I would greatly appreciate it."

The teen gave a few nods, still scribbling down what he wanted. "Um… Dama? Anything else I should know of before starting?"

"Avoid China for the time being, I don't want to go back there. Italy too, I know the people likely in charge all over there and don't intend to piss them off. And… avoid most if not all of the Middle-East. Muslims are… just no. Religious police are a headache I don't want to deal with."

She would have to dress up as a male again, which… she wasn't entirely sure she could do without major padding to mask her curves or bumps. Major padding in a desert was just way too hot to contemplate.

"Anything else we'll have to see about in the near or far future. Any more questions?"

The gangly blond teen looked contemplative, then gave a slow nod. "When you're not here, and I have time of my own?"

"I don't care what you do. You can literally go anywhere in the world from here, see anything you might ever want to gape at, and probably get yourself killed doing anything too stupid." Sonya admitted with a shrug. "As long as every year until you're eighteen you go into the hospital for a
check-up, you don't overrun whatever little vacation and make me wait more than a week or two, and don't spend all my money, you can do whatever you want."

"Really?"

"I will eventually find out what you're up to. I handle the bills, kid. Either get shameless or be smart about it, because I will know."

Having put a damper on any wild kiddy-plans to tour the world, the thief made for her Lackey's front door.

"I… am going to the hospital for my own check-up. You have the rest of the day to yourself. If I'm not at the hospital, you'll find me at the condo we spent last night in."

"Have a good day, Dama."

She flicked a wrist in a farewell, musing on if she could get Tatiana to give her the physical she needed or not.

She counted, right?

Tats was a nurse.

(ooo000000)

(Saturday the 8th of June, 1968 continued. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

Sonya didn't really like hospitals.

They smelled, for one. No matter how much bleach or ammonia was used, it still smelled sickly and had the faint tinge of blood and bile lingering around. Fluorescent lighting was irritating too, they sometimes buzzed in her hearing and flickered annoyingly when they needed to be changed.

Bland color schemes, very few things to look at, shiny tiles with dull walls and weird fake ceiling foam tiles made it all very depressing.

The thief had known all that from spending time in Mafia Land's hospital when Lisa was pregnant with little Valerian, this time around she found more things to hate.

She didn't really like the doctors and their touching. Getting poked and prodded with needles was fine, blood-pressure measuring cuffs were irritating. Stethoscopes, when used properly for their original intended use, were cold. Those ear and nose lights were odd, as well as the fact she had to be blinded in both eyes by a pen light.

The reflexology test was just stupid, however. "Look, you really do not want to do that."

The doctor's little examination room was cramped, the likelihood of her kicking something through a wall or two was high.

"Miss Bazanova, it is required." The hooked nosed doctor insisted shortly, waving his little ax of rubber around as if that could magically change her mind about it. "I must test your reflexes, and this is how it is done. Stop controlling your involuntary reflexes."

Sonya merely glared at the ass, having already said her piece.

"Doctor Kappel, I think you shouldn't."
At least she knew German too, having learned it with Tatiana herself.

"Nurse, enough. We are not going to reward difficult behavior from any patient." He snapped at the thief's foster sister, even more irritable than he had snapped at her. "Now, Miss Bazanova, let us try that again."

Doctor asshole bent gingerly, then tapped Sonya's right knee just above the kneecap.

The thief kicked his counter, which sat across from her, smacking it through the wall and into the **next** little office room. A broken brick teetered precariously before it tipped just a tiny bit too much and joined the rest of the broken masonry that made the two examination rooms a bit less than sterile.

"...yes. Well. I see." Clearing his throat uneasily and tucking away that little rubber ax into a lab coat pocket, he refused to meet her eyes. "Excuse me a moment, nurse, Miss Bazanova. I must see the maintenance workers for a nonce."

Tatiana held it in until the man left the room and sharply shut the door to the little physical office behind him. She burst into giggles, trying to smother them with one hand ineffectually. "You did that on purpose."

"Yes. Well, I see." The thief admitted in Russian, looking at her now bruised and swelling toes. That really hurt, but strangely not as much as Propagating her own hand had. "Tats? I think I broke my foot."

Bouncing over to the doctor's rolling chair, the nurse lifted her little sister's foot into her lap to lavish it in Sun Flames. "You probably shouldn't have done that, but thanks. I needed a laugh."

"Is he always as much of an asshole as he seems?" Sonya asked, idly watching plaster and another brick fall out of the hole she made in the wall and impact the little pile of rubble on the floor with a puff of grey and red dust. "Because I probably would've either killed him by now or broken a fair few more bones. Preferably his."

"Doctor Kappel is a bit of a self-important asshole, sure. But he really knows his stuff, instead of merely assuming he knows it. Kind of strict, and he's right about how you went about refusing to do a test. You really should've told him you were likely to break the walls in it instead of just refusing."

Tatiana shrugged the questionable nature of her assigned doctor off, tugging each of the thief's toes and pressing against the ball of her foot to ensure she got all the breaks. "He learned his stuff through most of World War Two, he defected from the Nazis and joined the Allies in the war. But, since he started out as a Nazi doctor, and defected? No one else would hire him once the war was over."

"You sound kind of..." Gushy. Was this another crush?

Like Dmitriy and Nicolai?

"He's also one of the fair few doctors that doesn't think I'm here as eye candy at best and an occasional extra hand at worse." She admitted, only a bit sourly. "So, I'd rather keep this doctor, if you don't mind."

"No brutalizing or scaring Doctor Kappel. Got it."

"I'm delighted to hear it, ladies." Said doctor announced through the hole in the wall, in perfect St. Petersburg accented Russian. "May we then finish Miss Bazanov's physical? Without further structural damage to the hospital?"

Right, the other door had been open. He probably heard all of that.
Tatiana coughed sheepishly, likely embarrassed to be caught gossiping with her sister about the man himself.

Sonya merely shrugged. "We have the room now for reflex testing, so sure. Why not?"

Kappel didn't look at all amused at her flippant comment, peering over those half-moon spectacles she wasn't even sure he needed to see with.

"Sonya, Miss Bazanova," The elder sister corrected herself, clearing her throat under the man's still unamused look for the informal mode of address, "is what is referred to as a Classical Cloud user of Dying Will Flames, doctor. Extreme physical strength, an unfortunate habit of not relying on their musculature, and a very ornery outlook in regard to orders she doesn't agree with or are given by those she doesn't respect. Mainly, anyways."

The German doctor looked a bit more interested than irritated or annoyed now. "Another one? I had heard Flame users were rare, yet it seems as if more and more of you are showing up every day."

"Surprise." The thief shrugged unhelpfully again, having thought the same thing ever since the Vongola Christmas Ball.

Maybe it had just been because Soviet Russia's underworld was a bit isolated?

Well… Lisa had said there had been a dip in reported users, hadn't she?

Then there would likely be a pick-up in Flame users appearing, too. Urg, she should probably have a plan for that, or pass it on to the Rain back in Moscow to give him a bit of a head's up.

"Right, well then." Doctor Kappel took a few ginger steps over the pile of destruction the younger Russian had wrought on his office, ducking the upper lip of the damage and taking up the spot the redhead had been in only moments before he started to move. "Again, then. Without the kicking of holes in walls, if you please."

…she was coming to hate that little rubber ax.

She was proven right. Her reflex test would've ended with the hole in the wall anyways.

Kappel's fascinated look at the flick of lavender Cloud Flames his light hit caused down her calf probably didn't mean anything good for her, on the other hand.

Tatiana sold Sonya out shamelessly, informing the former Nazi doctor that the thief was the one to clue in on possible drawbacks a Flame user might encounter. For the younger Russian herself, she just really wanted her pants back before getting drawn into any discussions that didn't need to be made while she was in a hospital gown.

"I would like to be your main physician, if I may." Kappel informed her at the end of her check-up, noting down a clean bill of health for her medical records. Both the one the hospital maintained and the doctored up 'civilian' version. "I think someone should probably document the health impacts these 'Flame' things cause. And, as your physician, you will not encounter the same issue twice. I can be taught, unlike some of my contemporaries."

"There are seven types of Dying Will Flames of the Sky." With possibly weird mixes of one or two or more that would cause different issues if it did at all. "I have three; Cloud, Storm, and Sun. Mostly Cloud, can use Storm Flames, and never gotten the hang of Sun."

"Understood. Your answer, Miss Bazanova?"
"He is a really good doctor, Sonya." Tatiana chipped in, as if she hadn't sold her sister out just minutes before. "You might end up with someone worse next time."

Shrugging, the thief buttoned her jeans under her flimsy hospital gown then stripped the paper clothing off. "Fine."

"Sonya! Put a shirt on, or at least a bra!"

"He's a doctor, he's seen it all before Tats. I don't think I've got anything he hasn't seen yet."

"Not the point!"

(Monday the 24th of June, 1968. Mafia Land.)

There had been a reason why Sonya hadn't really contemplated living on Mafia Land before Tatiana suggested getting an apartment together.

Occasionally, once or twice a year or so at the least but upwards of every other month sometimes, the island of criminals was invaded.

Cue various amounts of destruction, hyped up criminal types, and delays all over the place.

After so many years ducking in and out during the winter months, or just not being here for it, the Russian had forgotten about it. Forgotten how annoying it was, how destructive it could be, and the general way most of her fellow mafia members tended to respond to it.

She was not entirely amused to be stuck in the dockyards for this next round of idiots trying to take over the island. Especially since they decided to attack by boat. Right after she disembarked from her transportation, which was also a boat.

She was very, very not amused to be nearly hit with a bullet either as she walked into the site of the latest idiot flavor of the month attempting a hostile takeover.

Sliding her gaze from the bullet hole next to her head in the beige painted concrete wall to the idiot that decided to try intimidating her, the thief cocked her head. "Is that it?"

"Look, lady. I ain't sure how they do it where you're from," slick and greasy informed her haughtily, "but where we're from? Dames usually hit the deck when the bullets start flying."

That was… no one talked like that anymore, right?

What was he, an import American but not a native?

Trying to impersonate Elvis or something?

Sonya was not remotely impressed with the man, the outfit he was with, or the fact they had come from her old birth country. She tossed her paperwork on the ground, dropping her purse on top of it to ensure it would still be there when she got back.

Then she turned, planting her hands on her hips and considered the ass thoughtfully. "So… are you... what? Some kind of impersonator? That's a very… bad, Bronx accent."

He might've been trying to sound like he was from Chicago, actually. Badly, but… maybe she was
just unused to American accents now?

Slick and greasy developed a tick over one eye, and he took a deep breath and smoothed one hand over his greased hair. Flicking oil off his hand, he re-cocked his gun and leveled in squarely at her chest. "Ain't telling you again, lady. Get on the ground or feed the fishes."

"Cute..." There was no way in hell he was actually prepared to deal with a Flame user, she bullshitted with Propagated speed and slammed the hammer end of her suddenly full-sized Bec de Corbin into that gun before he could aim right.

It fired once, while shattering under the force of her blow. The bullet hit the wall behind the Russian while slick and greasy's hand pretty much splattered all over the floor.

"Where I am from, sugar, threatening someone invites reprisal." She informed him calmly as he clutched at the ruin of his right wrist to try and stop the blood spurting out, her fingers itching for her smokes but unwilling to actually turn her back to these idiots to fetch them. "And since you did threaten me, I own your damn fingers. Payment is due, jackass."

She flicked her, likely glowing purple, eyes to the other gawkers. Half of who looked to be slick 'n greasy and missing his hand's close and personal buddies.

They had probably been left behind to secure either their way into the island or their hasty exit plan. The bulk of whatever fighters they had with them were probably already trying to work their way into the island.

"Who else wants some?"

The best they were armed with, now with the gun in shattered fragments?

Switchblades, a baseball bat, and a few pairs of brass knuckles.

Against her warhammer?

Sonya was almost disappointed, really.

What were they, the dregs off New York City's streets?

A bullet almost impacting her left calf attracted the Russian's attention to the fact these younger brats hadn't been left without a babysitter or two. Mister Babysitter was still a shoddy shot, his hand was shaking way too much to actually get a bead on her even standing still.

She easily evaded the first shot, almost avoided the second, and drove a double-handed swing of her hammer end into his stomach.

...whoops. She didn't mean to break the man's spine. Tats could heal that, maybe.

Lightly kicking the broken man, just to see if he was alive or not, netted her a pained sounding inhale-gasp thing. With a shrug, he was alive and that was all she really cared about, Sonya stomped down on the second gun to render it into non-use as well.

It was really bad for her boots, though, so she only did it once to flatten the barrel.

Absently rubbing at the fresh, bleeding nick across her right shoulder, the thief turned back to the really young criminal babies guarding a boat. "Anyone else, gentlemen?"

(ooo000ooo)
Bjørn marked down a few more lines of reminders in his notebook, while he wandered to find his patron's sister.

'Check the hospital or nearby eateries', he had been told. If he needed help, the nurse was a better bet than trying to gain aid from the Zolotov vory that were on the island or the related people with them.

It was around lunchtime, the Icelandic teenager found Tatiana Primakova at a strangely set up salad bar restaurant. It wasn't French, it actually looked American in style.

She looked highly amused at the little jewel Sonya had left with him and told to try out while she went to complete a contract she picked up.

Bjørn hadn't quite understood, until it started to sparkle with lights that didn't come from the sun or lamps around him. With his patron gone off on business, the only one that might know what she wanted him to do with it was her sister.

"Lightning Storm, hmm?" The red headed nurse commented idly. "Sonya was betting more Lightning than Storm, but she had also bet Rain would be more apparent too."

"Is… that good?" Was not being a Rain cause for concern?

"You are what you are." Tatiana offered unhelpfully, flicking a hand to dismiss the issue. "Sonya will be pleased to know the white sapphires do work to identify new or possible users."

That did not help him very much, other than at least knowing he had succeeded with what his boss had wanted from him. She was a very difficult person to please, and if he wanted his quality of life to continue improving he probably should ensure the Russian was pleased with him.

This island of criminals proving to be better to live in than the streets of Finland was probably very ironic but really, he was just thankful for that. It was even better than Russia, in that he was no longer the outsider but one of many Lackeys doing their patron's errands.

"You'll crack it if you keep doing that." Tatiana pointed out, her leafy fork jabbing in the direction of the mostly clear but naturally tinted blue stone in his fist.

Bjørn almost dropped it, but the nurse snatched it out of the air with a quick snap of her hand. Showing the speed and skill she had as a thief of the Zolotovs, even if she was not one any longer.

The white, slightly blue, jewel suddenly threw off a bright yellow light… and developed a crack down one side even as he watched.

"See? Oh, don't worry. I'll tell Sonya I cracked it." The nurse reassured him, tossing it to the table and picking up the fork she had dropped to snatch the jewel from the air. "You'll break a lot of gems in the near future. We all have. Sonya still pops spinel ones all the damn time when she feels like being threatening. I had to stop using mine for healing because that was getting expensive even if I can heal more with one."

"Ah…" Well… as long as Sonya wouldn't be too irritated with him, he didn't mind.

"Sonya will sit you down and tell you all the risks and benefits for continuing with this," Tatiana nudged the now cracked stone sitting innocently on the table, "but for right now... when was your last check-up, Bjørn?"
"Last year…?"

"So, you need a new one done." She continued, inspecting him closely. "Well… Doctor Kappel did wonder what the difference is before and after a Flame user becomes active. He'll be delighted to have a subject to study."

What?

"Come on! Let's go to the hospital!" Tatiana gleefully abandoned her lunch, sized him around the bicep with one hand and snagged Sonya's stone with her other.

…at least he had his boss' charge card on him still. Hospitals were expensive…but she had told him to get a yearly check-up, so hopefully she wouldn't mind the cost.

A siren went off, startling the Icelander and making him walk right into the nurse's back when she slammed to a halt just before reaching the restaurant's doors.

"Björn, when was Sonya due back?"

"Today? Sometime either today or tomorrow." He admitted warily. It had been two weeks, and that was what she had claimed to need for a theft involving a mostly unoccupied manor/vacation home and several paintings.

"Ah… well, fuck." Tatiana spoke, her voice almost drowned out by what seemed to be an island wide proclamation in various languages, announcing 'free-violence' towards the 'American Genovese Crime Family'.

"Is this a bad thing?"

The redhead let him go to ruffle her loosened hair thoughtfully. "I don't know. Hey, you saw her after a fight, was she… Cloudy?"

Björn blinked at the woman's back, entirely baffled. "…what?"

"Do you remember anything odd about Sonya when she rescued you?"

"Other than she was very calm? No."

"Great… well, let's hope no one pushes her buttons." Tatiana informed him with a wry little smirk. "I don't particularly care to try cleaning up after a berserk Cloud's rampage."

"Is that…?" A real concern?

"I have no idea. Sonya's always been very self-controlled ever since I first met her." She admitted with a careless shrug. "I think she might be due for a complete breakdown of that self-control, if these idiots do managed to press her buttons in the worst way possible."

He still didn't understand very well, but knew they were talking about a very bad thing happening. "Maybe she's not here yet?"

"Well, we can hope." The nurse admitted as metal shielding suddenly slammed down from outside of the glass windows and the doors they had nearly gone through. "Come on, we're going to have to take the long way around."

…there was a long way?
Chapter 24

(Monday the 24th of June, 1968 continued. Mafia Land.)

"I thought you Flamers were supposed to make this shite easier!"

"Do shut up, your ignorance is showing." Renato drawled out nastily to the grunt lying prone to maybe present less of a target, pressing more bullets into his recently emptied clip at a steady rate. "And it's revolting."

It wasn't like he was the only Dying Will Flame user about, the other side had a couple too.

This was not a great time to be running out of ammo, but the hitman was down to the last handful he had on him. Expectations were everything in this line of work, but it had been a long time since he got caught out in a scuffle on the streets like any common thug and needed more than three full clips and at least three reloads of loose bullets. All he had on him usually was merely enough to mow down maybe a squad of idiots, and another handful of rounds to use in hunting down any that helped said possible hit team.

In other words, a very bad days’ worth.

A surprise attack, one that his admittedly badly gutted contacts on the island hadn't known at least a few hours beforehand of it occurring, meant he was a little less than impeccably armed for this.

Which wasn't doing all that much for his mood, truth be known.

If this kept up, he was going to have to resort to using his Sun Flames as ammunition instead of keeping it in reserve to heal himself of any inadvertent injuries.

Even worse was the position he was stuck in. This street was one of the few main straight ones that left little cover to be had down long stretches.

Ending up in a tight spot with two random grunts did not improve his outlook of this little situation. The second grunt didn't even had ammunition he could appropriate if needed.

It wasn't bad, but he'd likely take a few nasty hits just to get out of it before his luck ran out.

Slotting the last clip home, Renato twisted back around the storefront he had taken shelter behind and took careful aim at the damn Lightning that was giving them such trouble. The man was likely Italian by descent, if not by birth, which really was a pity.

The Sun's bullet hit but ricocheted off the Lightning's skin with a crackle of acidic green Flames and buried itself in the thigh of another standing just before the 'tank' of a man.

"Well… that's just perfect." He ducked back in a fast hurry, evading the spray of return fire that almost put a hole in his hat.

Shamal was pouty enough about his fifth birthday with no thief of Russian descent being present, putting a hole in his Christmas present from the two of them would make everything even worse the next time he went back home.

"Now what, genius?" Random grunt number one he had gotten stuck with snarled, yanking his head back behind cover as the others expressed their distaste for the recent injury on their side.
Since he was armed with knives and Renato had some damn guns, he really was a bit more than moronic to keep pressing the Sun user's buttons like this.

"Now? Plan B." He snapped back, hitting the release catch for the clip he had just loaded.

"What're you going to do with an empty gun?"

"This." Leaning out of the dubious shelter of a clothing store's corner, the Sun took careful aim as the moonstones under his hands heated up.

His Sun Flames were stronger than that Lightning's Hardened skin, the shot of pure yellow fire narrowed down by his iron pistol melted a hole through the man's will and forehead. The shot, in fact, burned through his head and the shoulder of the man behind him before impacting and melting a bit of steel shielding a window farther down the street.

Well… he really liked these moonstones. They made that easier to pull off, to say the least.

"Any questions?" The hitman asked sarcastically as he spun back around to reload his gun to conserve his Flames.

Moronic grunt number one wisely shut up, his buddy slightly less moronic grunt number two swallowed audibly but did make himself useful. He put down the opposing grunt with a thigh wound and the one with a hole in the shoulder in succession with a few shots from his own overly compensating hand-cannon of a handgun.

Unfortunately, Renato had proven himself a bit too well. The mafia men on the other side recognized the same thing and decided taking him down would be worth the deaths it would likely cost. His higher position suddenly gained the bulk of attention, bullets chipping away at the corner he had taken refuge behind with a vengeance in hopes one could penetrate concrete and steel to hit him.

The Sun using hitman could maybe take a hit or two and heal it while he keep going, but enough hot lead would still put him down for good if he wasn't careful.

Almost underneath the continuous spray of automatic gunfire came a markedly different sound, and Renato paused after slamming his clip home to clear a jam as he tried to place it.

Cracking bone?

"Fore!"

A ballistic missile of two hundred pounds of likely former human crashed into the idiots standing mid-street trying to gun down a couple loose mafia men blockading their way. Much like a bowling ball scattering a badly set up lane of pins.

Actually… ballistic missile man was still alive, somehow. Moaning in pain and trying not to clutch his badly deformed jaw, but alive. Probably was going to be drinking his food through a straw for the rest of his life, however.

Might have cracked or just broken a fair few bones on landing too, so he might not stay that way.

…was that Sonya?

She had never participated in this kind of thing before, what the hell had these idiots done to piss off the unusually even-tempered Russian Storm-Cloud?
He kept himself half hidden behind a storefront, knowing better than attracting a violence-lusting Cloud's attention by taking their targets. Even if those targets had been his before she showed up. Clouds weren't exactly understanding of such mix-ups. Intentional or otherwise.

He might have a good relationship with that woman, but that was no guarantee of safety. It was possible she would decide the idiots scrambling around mid-street were not enough of a challenge for her and come after him for a better one.

The hitman hadn't seen her being purely Cloud in nature yet, and he kind of wanted to see where this would go.

"Gentlemen," Sonya all but purred out, steadily advancing on the still armed but disorientated men in the street gawking at their former-missile fellow, "do put up a better fight than the last group. Please."

Stomping a heel down on moronic grunt number one's chest before he could do more than open his mouth, Renato gave the less idiotic grunt kneeling beside his buddy that he was stuck with a motion to keep quiet.

That grin she had looked a tiny bit disturbing.

Especially on the lips of a woman that had seemed to only have maybe three or four facial expressions at most. As a matter of fact, he could clearly recall that grin from the Christmas Ball when she scared two middle-aged mafia wives off his case.

Glowing Cloud Flame eyes and all.

Idiots one through seven realized they were armed with automatic weaponry around the same time, and that the steadily advancing Storm-Cloud only had a very wicked looking spike and slim hammer on one end of her polearm.

The thief had accounted for that, once they swung those weapons in her direction a bounding stride had her ten feet forward and to the other side of the street before they opened fire on her. Another that took her clear over their heads got her well within range to lay about with that warhammer of hers.

Renato had to wince, because Sonya wasn't being remotely nice or neat about it. Very, very messy… but then again, that might be why the woman was so considerate of her temper.

Everyone that had a gun pointed at her ended up with broken or simply torn off fingers when she smashed a couple pounds of queerly dark metal hammer into the automatic machine guns with unreal force. A twirl of the equally dark metal pole smashed the pike end through the chest of someone attempting to ambush her back with a knife.

Off-center, likely only puncturing a lung and breaking a few ribs. If he didn't bleed out, the idiot would live.

Yanking her weapon free, Sonya clocked another man trying to tackle her to the ground in the jaw with the butt-end. One last sweep of the hammer end around, and idiots one-through-four weren't likely to wake up any time soon as they impacted the armored storefront on the left-hand side of the street hard enough to dent metal.

Leaving a crime scene's worth of blood, parts of fingers, and at least two soon-to-be-corpses. As well as a small armory of shattered rifles and handguns, most too dented and warped to be used as
anything other than scrap metal.

"Renato?" The Russian called over her shoulder, hefting that warhammer over the other as she turned to see him. "You owe me a pack of cigarettes."

"I… yes, I do." From when he visited her in that circus thing she had been doing, he had forgotten about that. "Don't have any on me right now, little lady Sonya. Very sorry."

"So, you steal from me but I cannot return the favor?" She asked with a touch of annoyance, allowing her weapon to slide off her shoulder to tap the end of it on the street. "That is very rude."

Paved streets should not show crater marks from a woman absentmindedly hitting it with a pole a few times. No matter what weird metal said pole was made out of, he made a mental note to ask about that… later.

Renato shot a demanding look to less moronic grunt number two, who shook his head. He did point to moronic grunt number one shakily, slowly. As if that would prevent the Russian from noticing him.

Grunt number one at least would prove somewhat useful rather than just irritating. Another stomp had him wheezing for breath, allowing the hitman to relieve him of his half-crushed pack of cigarettes without fuss to toss at Sonya.

She looked slightly amused as she caught them. "Why thank you, kind sirs."

Since the Cloud-woman didn't seem inclined to either continue with a spree of violence or try her luck against the hitman, he took a few steps to the side so it didn't look like he was hiding behind a store. She, still standing in the middle of the road, brazenly lit up the stolen cigarette with a flash of Storm Flames and tossed the pack back over to the two grunts.

"Sonya, do me a tiny favor? Since I did heal your hand?"

The thief gave him a disinterested glance, which he couldn't tell if he found insulting or relieving. One hand, no fight with a feral Cloud he didn't want to kill. The other?

Did she not view him as a threat too?

"Sometime today?" Sonya asked, pulling the lit cigarette from her lips.

The closer he got, the less pale her normally grey eyes became. Which answered that question, Miss Storm-Cloud didn't view him as a target but as an ally. Which was… strange.

Normally that would only happen between a Cloud Guardian and their Sky's other Guardians.

Did Sonya have a Sky?

Renato was pretty sure she would've mentioned having one before now if so. Then again, he was fairly certain the fact she could keep the existence of her foster family so well hidden after several years' worth of small-talk meant she could keep her mouth shut about whatever she wanted reliably.

He was admittedly rather nosy, he might be still a bit put out over how well she could do non-comments to him to the point he missed even the suspicion of it.
"Make me a couple handfuls more of these?" The hitman asked pleasantly, holding up one of his last few loose bullets and striding over to her as if he wasn't stepping on shattered automatic weapons, the odd bit of finger, as well as the gore he and grunts one and two had painted the streets with splattered over with her own contribution. "I'm rather uncomfortably low."

He didn't even have enough for another clip, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

"Sure." She took one from him once he got close enough, flicking the lone bullet around her fingers and ending up with a nice handful of more in a steady flicker of Cloud Flames when the original ended up between her middle and pointer finger. "How many do you want?"

"Enough to see me back to the weapons' district." Renato claimed, pocketing the first handful of Cloud Flame copied bullets. They'd work in a pinch, which this was, but they would also disappear the moment her Flames ran out. He had no idea how strong she really was, in Flame terms, so better to be careful with them. "Two more handfuls."

He'd keep one around, just to see how long it would hold in the end.

"It is over with, right?" Sonya questioned as she made the next handful. "The fighting? I did not run into very many pockets of it on my way out here."

"The fighting's probably shifted to a more central spot." Agreed the hitman with some distraction while sorting out what pocket he wanted these bullets to go in to, so he'd remember they were short-lived copies. "Maybe another hour or two before the mop-up begins."

"So…" Her head did turn in the direction he mentioned, but she turned back and flicked her cigarette instead of start wandering that way for a better fight. "…I should probably go pick up my stuff before I have to chase down some ass that decides abscond with it all."

Renato blinked at her as he un-holstered his other, empty pistol to load. Not a typical Cloud response to being pointed in a new fight's direction. Sonya actually looked unhappy about her own suggestion, too.

"Why not stay and pitch in a little bit more?" He suggested helpfully, which netted him a dubious look as the thief shifted her attention from him and the possibility of a new fight to the… rather gory results of this one.

"I did not actually intend to go very far in the first place." Admitted the Storm-Cloud, a touch sheepishly as she eyed the man clutching the hole in his chest scooting away from any weaponry to show he was giving up. "It was just… it has been a while since my last, actual fight. I got a little… distracted."

She was… embarrassed. Actually embarrassed, fiddling with the bullet she wasn't making more copies of, flicking it around her fingers and lit cigarette absently as she eyed the damage she had done with the warhammer in her other hand.

"I forgot how much fun it was." She continued, as if she wasn't acting like a shy schoolgirl.

…alright, that was a typical Cloud response, but the shy but bright grin she flashed him wasn't a typical Sonya response.

"I should go… I broke a couple people that I did not intend to. Tats should probably have a look at them."

"Why bother?" The idiots had known what they were facing, in attacking Mafia Land. The broken
and dead that resulted were par for the course, but it wasn't as if it was any real deterrent to it happening again.

"I did not mean to break his spine." She clarified with a shrug. "I intended to take the other mook's hand off, though, so I am not going to bother myself about that one."

Sonya pushed his bullet in-between her breasts, placing her cigarette between her lips, and used her free hand to pry a glittering purple stone out of the head of her warhammer.

Speaking of which… warhammers, hmm?

"Erm… Sonya?"

"Hmm?"

"My bullet?"

"I have to keep this one, if you want the others to last." The thief informed him absently as the gem popped loose. Her weapon shrunk in a flash of bled off purple Flames, and she pocketed both it and the jewel. "I will give it back later."

She flicked a hand in farewell, strolling off without much care for what she was stepping on or whose body fluid she was trekking through.

Renato couldn't decide if he wanted that bullet back or not.

"So… if that yellow stuff was plan B, what is she?"

"Plan C." The hitman informed less moronic grunt number two blandly as he strolled in the other direction to get a few more of the attacking idiots. In return of the sheer affront of getting him stuck with said moronic grunts. "Plan B for Sun bullet, Plan C for intervention by Cloud."

That had been… strangely non-lethal for a Cloud's involvement.

He shot Mister hole-in-chest through the head before he could throw the grenade he picked up from one of his insensible buddies at his back.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 24th of June, 1968 continued. Mafia Land.)

"Err… Sonya?"

"I broke him, fix it."

The nurse looked highly unimpressed with both her demand and the random guy she was holding up for her to see by the collar. The dim lighting around where they were probably wasn't helping much, but the guy looked pretty half-dead already when she went back to pick him up.

"He's part of the attacking group, isn't he? Who cares?"

"I do. I didn't intend to break his spine, Tats."

"You did more than just break his spine, little sis." Tatiana informed her bluntly, eyeing the bruised and distended part of the abdomen visible under the hem of the guy's wife beater tank-top. The thief's grip on his Yankee's jacket the only thing keeping him upright. "I think you might have burst his
internal organs. Most if not all the digestive tract, maybe part of his stomach too. He's already dead, just not quite there yet."

…shit.

"Is this your first kill? Kind of messy of one, but it's not really a bad thing." The Sun user tried to reassure, which didn't work at all with the smirk on her face as she eyed the insensible mook likely about to die from a septic infection or organ failure from the damage her foster sister had done. "We can go get your tattoos touched up after this."

"Not my first kill, thank you very much." Sonya informed her sourly. "I just didn't want to kill him."

"So why haven't you gone to get your roses filled in?" She demanded, hands on her hips instead of healing the man her sister had brought her. "You… you really need to stop trying to shelter Cherep, you know. He's a big boy, he'll understand."

The thief crossed her arms and glared at her sister. "I was not sheltering Cherep. I just forgot, okay?"

Accidently letting go of the man made him crumble into a weird flopped half-backwards position with a scream.

"…whoops."

With a sigh, the nurse bent down to check him for anything else wrong. "You know, you probably did worst things to his damaged internal organs by dragging him around to try and find me. I'm recommending a mercy killing at this point."

Irritated, and really a bit sorry, the younger sister sighed herself. "Fine, whatever. Back up a bit."

"For?" Tatiana did give her room even as she questioned the reasoning for it.

She reached down and snapped the man's neck, wincing as he gave a jerk in response before going limp and unresponsive. Instead of weak coughing wheezes and the occasional twitch response.

It was an improvement… sort of. He was dead and out of pain's reach, at least.

"Well… I was also going to suggest overdose of painkillers, but that works too." Looking around the underground tunnels Sonya had located her within, the nurse snapped her fingers to gain the attention of a few jumpsuit wearing handymen. "Another body, boys."

Having long since lost her high from actually getting herself into a full-out fight, the thief now felt a little mopey and depressed. Which was also irritating her, because of one slip of control that killed someone she hadn't intended to kind of ruined the whole fight for her.

Now she had to figure out if not feeling all that bad for killing someone was something she could live comfortably with, or if she was thankful she at least felt sorry for it in even the most remote way.

…or irritated that she still had that hang-up over killing.

He had tried to shoot her, she wasn't wasting much pity on him when he likely wouldn't have held any for killing her. Same for mook with a clunky grenade launcher she smashed the jaw of in and launched backwards a couple yards.

Who the hell brings a grenade launcher to a floating island?

…did she kill that guy too?
She had been pretty sure she hadn't hit him hard enough to kill… just maybe shatter bones, but that had been his head… and there was that guy she slammed a few inches of pick into the chest of.

"Is this really that much of an issue? So he's dead, why do you care?"

"With my strength, Tats? Losing control isn't much of a good thing."

"Oh." Tatiana bit her lower lip as she considered that, and probably some of what Sonya had been like as a freakishly strong little girl who could occasionally splinter the furniture when she tripped and grabbed hold too hard. "Ooh… I get it now. Shit, sorry Sonya. But my healing him wouldn't do anything about your self-control, just hide the results for a few until you slip again."

Yeah, that was… the Storm-Cloud either needed to gain a grip somehow or get herself in a lot of fights and try not to go overboard at the same time. She could also resign herself to killing part of any group she fought, instead.

Which… what was better?

Leaving her opponents alive but broken, or removing any and all future attempts at revenge by killing everyone that tried to kill her?

"Hey, don't stress over it. You didn't kill anyone too important, and at least now you know. Right?"

"I suppose." Sonya's fingers itched for her cigarettes, but she abstained simply because she was trying to cut back. Giddy post-fight smoke break included.

"There's a tattooist on the island, we can get your roses painted red here. Or you can wait until we can see Boris about them." Her older sister suggested, edging herself so her little sister wouldn't get distracted by her latest dead body. "Or… when was your first kill? Do you qualify for pink?"

"I don't, actually. I just haven't really thought about my tattoos enough to recall I had to get them… adjusted." The thief would probably just go with red anyways even if she could get pink. Legally fifteen on her paperwork or not, she had really been fourteen when she killed those grunts in France. "We can do it here, if you want."

"They're your tattoos, Sonya." The nurse reminded her with a touch of exasperation. "What I want shouldn't matter."

(Wednesday the 3rd of July, 1968. Thieves' Guild Hall, Mafia Land.)

Sonya's bad mood lasted all through her next Mafia Land contract.

A pirate's treasure hoard?

Those were still things?

Which made her not appreciate the uniqueness of her latest contract and merely complete it with minimum fuss involved.

She'd likely regret that later. Pirate treasure hoard. How often would she get a contract that involved stealing that outlandish before an actual archeological team managed to find it?

…hopefully those holes in the cavern system would be overlooked as natural damage from both time
and the tides. Not a thief checking for false walls or getting fed up with half-rotted traps she might set off if she wasn't wary.

It wasn't really much of a hoard, more like a very heavy chest of gold, papers, and trinkets. The fact the chest broke was because it had been waterlogged for years and most of the wood had started rotting, the treasure spilling out had just been part of that.

When turning in the job, because she had to get the treasure smuggled in, she turned the slip from the Mafia Land agent in Haiti and her contract paperwork to the lobby receptionist of the Thieves' Hall.

"You were requested to retrieve it intact, not in pieces." The snooty receptionist informed her, not even looking up from the papers before her as she stamped, filed, and marked up a new set of post-heist paperwork for her files. "If there isn't a damn good reason for this, we're going to have to count this as a half-completed job."

"Yeah… about that," Sonya dumped a couple planks, a plank with a broken lock still lodged in it, and a pile of rusty metal on the woman's desk, "seventy to a hundred years of water damage, corrosion, and all sorts of things eating the wood kind of ruins the container. It. Broke. In-transit."

"That is not-" Miss snooty sneered at the mess and looked up, then blanched bone white as she shot to her feet. "Miss Bazanova! I didn't know it was you. No, of course you couldn't have met the requirements, they were very unrealistic."

…okay… what?

"I'll have a word with the agents, you won't be penalized for this." The receptionist tried for a smile, but it just looked painfully faked and mostly fear-inspired as she slowly back up to the wall behind her.

Sonya gave her a searching look, which strangely made her cringe.

"…don't kill me?"

"What?" This was… very different.

"Look, I'll mark it down complete. See?"

"Are you trying to set me up to be killed?"

Bribing, coercing, or just threatening the administrative workers of Mafia Land to fudge their work earned everyone involved an automatic hit. The Russian had no intention of ever getting Renato on her ass, because that would end up all sorts of awkward for them. However, she also had no idea whatsoever of what was going on.

"NO! I would never! I just don't want to die."

Much to the thief's alarm, Miss snooty now seemed on the verge of crying.

"Um…"

"Miss Dillard, take a break." Gentleman with some idea of what seemed to be going on suddenly ordered from behind Sonya, looking very reproving over the woman's behavior.

He gave her an equally disapproving look, which made the thief raise her hands in innocence as the receptionist hoofed it with respectable speed out of there. "Look, I have no idea what is going on.
She was fine until she looked up, then started practically hyperventilating."

"We did not know you were a Cloud, Miss Bazanova." He informed her as if that would make some kind of difference.

"…and?" What was with people making comments that had no obvious responses?

Sonya never quite got the hang of these kinds of conversations. Not even in her last life.

He gave her a level look. "Are you implying it will not impact your work?"

"I have been a Cloud Flame user since I was nine. If you checked my records, you would know I have worked for this island even since I was eleven." The Russian pointed out flatly, feeling confused over the entire situation and not appreciating the fact. "It has not impacted my work here yet, and I do not appreciate the accusation that I would let anything like that happen in the first place."

That had not, apparently, been what he had been expecting to hear.

"Could someone just please explain what changed from two weeks ago?"

Miss snooty had been… well, snooty and prissy then. Not tearful and in fear of her life. She didn't feel any different, maybe a bit tired and travel worn.

Certainly not nearly as bad to have someone afraid of her murdering them out of the blue. She wasn't even really all that mad, just a bit mopey and a bit introspective for the last couple weeks.

What the hell was going on?

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 3rd of July, 1968 continued. A Mafia Land Ferry.)

Renato about burst a rib laughing when he heard.

"It is not that funny." Sonya snapped sourly, glowering at her cigarette over just glaring around in general.

With her luck, the ferry operator will take a dive off the side of the boat if she did.

The hitman had, rather courteously, catered to her dislike of flying on airlines and was taking the ferry with her to Italy to see Shamal. Again.

They had done this last winter too, for the Vongola Ball.

It was warmer this time, at least.

He tried to stop laughing, and indeed managed it for all of a second. Rolling her eyes, the thief made a dismissive gesture to inform him he could carry on without risking reprisal.

That shit-eating grin on his face made any attempt to be serious kind of moot.

"Sonya… you are a very unusual little Cloud." The Italian informed her as if he didn't tend to call her that usually, trying desperately to regulate his breathing. "You aren't like all the little horror stories of Hard Flame Clouds and their terrifying behavior, and frankly you're doing these people a disservice by that."
"How so?" Wouldn't it be better?

Sonya wasn't really bothered by much, and to be honest she hadn't thought twice about how she behaved in respects to all those storybooks for mafia brats she once devoured whole said Clouds behaved.

"They meet you, and once they realize you are always this way, they think 'oh, not so bad'. Then they end up meeting a less even-tempered Cloud, and instantly get brutalized for trying something you'd ignore but they won't due to whatever." Renato explained with a dismissive flick of his hand. "Frankly, you behave yourself better than a Cloud does under their Sky's eye. Almost as well as Visconti does. I've been wondering about that, actually."

"I do not have a Sky." She had… actually, thinking about how she used to be compared to how she was now… Sonya had a Cherep.

Everything, her more social behavior to the relationships she had now with her foster family, all happened after she met a Czechoslovakian boy with bright purple hair and eyes and enough Inverted Cloud Flames to defy death itself indefinitely.

…huh. That sounded a lot cooler than just saying the purple dork she found with no sense of self-preservation or the inclination to get any.

"You really should have expected this."

The Soviet Storm-Cloud shot him a sideways look. "Really? I should have expected to terrify the secretaries and random pedestrians for something I have been for years and which had never made an impact on my work before?"

"Well… yes. You could not hide it for the rest of your life."

"I was not hiding it. I just did not go about announcing it to all and sundry."

"Call it what you will," the hitman waved off her tart reply, "fact of the matter is it would've gotten out eventually. If not this past idiotic invasion attempt, then in future ones to come. Take some advantage of it, Sonya. They're going to realize you're probably the most even-tempered Cloud in existence sometime."

"I am not." Cherep was, not her.

Renato blinked, then shot her a queer look. "Repeat that?"

"What? I am not the most even-tempered Cloud in existence."

"…and you know that for sure."

"Yes?"

"…huh." Shoving a hand up under his hat to scratch at his head, the Mafioso smoothed both his spiky hair and the fedora back down with a puzzled expression. "Odd. Sonya? Do you… normally speak whatever crosses your mind?"

"Usually. Most of the time yes, unless it is sensitive information I should not be sharing." The thief replied, a bit bemused at the sudden subject change. "What would be the point of not?"

"To not give offence, or to… right, forgot who I was speaking to."
…that was possible?

How?

She was standing right next to him. The only other people around were giving them a wide berth, and they were right next to the ship's railing in order to provide that berth everyone wanted to keep between the Storm-Cloud thief and themselves.

"It just is, alright?"

"Renato? I did not say that out loud." She was pretty sure of that, actually.

He opened his mouth, likely to snap something at her, but paused as he seemed to realize something else. "…oh."

That was inane, and not very helpful. The man looked alright, a bit dazed but well enough.

Sonya tentatively decided not to ask, unless he said something else about it.

Maybe he read the question off her face?

If so, that was new.

"…never mind." The hitman muttered, a frown now pulling his mouth down at the corners.

…okay. "So, what has Shamal been up to since this winter? Pouty Mist behavior since I missed his birthday and all?"

"Ah… that." Renato started smirking again, which she decided was an improvement. "Nono would like to request you don't give the brat any more turquoise to terrorize his staff with."

"Any more." Sonya repeated slowly. "So… just replacing what he shatters is still an option?"

"…yes, yes it is."

(Friday the 5th of July, 1968. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"I am so sorry I missed your birthday, brat. I was unavoidably working for it." Sonya informed Shamal honestly, trying not to wince at the baby Mist pout aimed at her.

That was scarily effective, even better than Cherep's wet kitten looks. He looked like a kicked puppy, instead of an offended cat. There might be Misty things at play to make him seem more pitiable but he was entirely entitled to pouting at her, so she ignored that.

"…you forgot-" Renato cut his mutter off when she glared at him over the brat's head, adopting an innocent look instead of the smirk.

It wasn't working too well for him.

The thief swept baby Mist up into her arms, turning her back on the hitman pointedly and gave her attention instead to the brat. "Renato only managed to get ahold of me this summer, like barely a month ago, so I didn't know you wanted me to show up to it. I finished up what I have to do, and the rest of the year is mine, so I can totally spend a week or two here if you really want me to. To make
up for missing your birthday. We'll do whatever you want."

"You can't miss my birthday again, Miss Sonya." The kid in her arms insisted wetly, placing tiny hands on her collarbone to give her his most serious look possible through his puppy pout. "And you have to be here for Christmas too."

"…just this year for Christmas?" She would get bored of the Ball thing if she did it too many times. There was only so much snark one could amused themselves with before it got tedious, and she didn't really know that many Italians.

"All Christmases." He corrected, or more like demanded, those tiny hands now waving around wildly to emphasize his point. "All of them ever. I don't get to see you much, Miss Sonya. Mister Renato would probably like to see you more too."

"He sees more than enough of me as it is, kid." They both now lived in Mafia Land, not seeing one another almost every month was going to be hard to pull off. "And we'll see, but that's not really up to me in the end. This is Don Vongola's home, kiddo. He may not really want a Russian thief lingering in his halls so much."

Maybe she wouldn't have to do the Ball thing every year? Would Nono mind if she was here but just didn't go and amused Shamal instead for the night?

There was a weird funny little cough thing from Sonya's other side, and she turned her head to finally notice the doorman. Who was holding a tray and looking very amused. "Your weaponry, Miss Nikishina."

"…right." She had to set baby Mist down for it, because she had to remove both bracers and her necklace she finally got replaced back in Moscow. Seven Bec de Corbins, a handful of extra jewels in various shades from her pockets, and a red tourmaline skeleton key were placed on the tray. "Master Tyr will probably want to see the key, but I would like it back eventually."

The doorman suddenly gained a bug-eyed expression, flicking his eyes from her to the key pendant lying innocently on his tray. "…of course, ma'am."

"Why would Tyr be interested in your necklace?" Renato asked, frowning at both her and the doorman.

"He asked about it this last Christmas." Sonya informed him with a shrug, picking baby Mist back up.

He was at least bigger again and getting into the lankier part of childhood. While weight didn't really mean much to her when picking things up, he was bigger than he had been half a year ago and sustained strength was an iffy thing for her.

"It's a very… useless necklace. Now, Shamal. What would you like for your very late birthday present? I can probably get you just about anything, and if I can't I can likely steal it."

Baby Mist didn't even need time to think for what he wanted. "Can I have a baby brother?"

"…okay, I might be able to do that too. Hey, Renato, can-" The thief cut herself off when the doorman suddenly made some fast tracks out of the Iron Fort's entrance way, and the hitman seemed to look a bit pale under his natural tan. "…can I steal him for a week or two sometime?"

"For?" He managed to grate out, a wary look shot her way included.
"My foster mother gave birth? The baby's a boy, so Shamal can go and get his fascination with all babies out of the way in a relatively risk-free environment."

The answer might still be no, because it seemed as if Renato was being very careful about Shamal's security ever since the scare in Mafia Land. At least this way baby Mist would be upset with the hitman and not her.

Vory weren't... well, weren't what would call careful or caring around children, but at least they wouldn't normally do anything too violent to anyone under the age of thirteen. Arseniy would at least try not to upset tetchy Mist brat with his usual sour grumpy-ness until the kid was more used to him, and Lisa likely wouldn't mind meeting Shamal herself or showing off her baby.

Valera probably would not care at all.

She was also somewhat sure her foster father wanted to at least meet Renato, although she wasn't sure of why.

"Ah... maybe next year."

"Sorry kiddo, anything else?"

Baby Mist brat was pouting again, but since it wasn't aimed at her she didn't really mind the expression.

"You have to spend all week here, then. Every second of every minute of every day. With me," He blinked wetly up at her, then pointed to the hitman that was raising him, "with us, I mean."

"Well... as long as I'm not the only one suffering through a week of kiddy entertainment."

"Hey! I got you your damn present." Protested the brat's guardian, waving a hand at the five and a half feet tall blonde woman holding said baby Mist. "Leave me out of this."

"You were late with it, though." Sonya reminded him wickedly.

Shamal gave a couple nods. "Yeah, Mister Renato. No excuses, remember?"

The outraged look on the hitman's face when tetchy Mist brat used what was probably his words against him made up of any number of days the man had a good laugh at her expense.

"I'm going to remember this." The older Italian vowed darkly, jamming that hat further down to shade his eyes and nearly radiating outrage. "When you're all grown up, I'm going to recall this and make your life a living hell with that phrase."

"No, you're not." The thief disagreed with a smirk. "I bet you Shamal will always find a way to wiggle out of whatever it is you try, and you'll never actually manage to hold to that."

He shot her a seething look from under his brim. "You're on, woman."

Yeah, he was going to lose that.

Baby Mist was a damn Mist. Aggravating, annoying, and conniving was their entire business.

A new throat clearing in a grab for their attention had hitman, thief, and Mist look up the grand staircase. Timoteo Vongola gazed levelly back at the three of them. "As amusing as all this is, I must wonder if you have to do this right in front of the doorway."
There were other entrances, right?

It wasn't like they were blocking any possible entrance or emergency exit way. Sonya, in fact, opened her mouth to ask just that but Renato's hand was suddenly plastered over her lips before she could sound the first word.

"Forgive us, Timoteo. We'll start moving." The hitman actually lifted her off her feet with an arm around her waist and forcibly moved her aside when she dug her heels in to resist his maneuvering of her person. "Damn it Sonya, stop being difficult."

She dug her nails into the hand over her lips to utter one sentence. "Remove your hands or lose them."

He jerked away from her gratifyingly fast, with a sniff in his direction the Russian strode across the foyer and started scaling the stairs with Shamal still in her arms.

"Don Vongola, I think I must beg a bit of your forbearance. Shamal, since I have missed his birthday, would like me to stay the week with him. May I?" She even held out pouty Mist brat, who gave his best shot at a begging expression.

As a boss of an entire criminal enterprise, but probably more importantly the father of two or three young children around a similar age himself, Timoteo was entirely unmoved by another child's entreating expression. Instead, he looked expectantly at her more than Shamal.

"...I may or may not actually have a candidate for the Storm Ring stone with me. Or rather with the doorman that has my weaponry and extra jewels. I brought it with to see if your Storm Guardian wouldn't mind comparing it to his own ring."

"I think we can easily house you for the week, Miss Sonya."

"It's the reddish-brown stone, a Cinnamon Stone garnet. I brought extras, so he may keep one if he likes."

Suppressing a wry smile, the Don gave her a regal nod and continued on with whatever it was he was after before getting waylaid by their blockading of the main doors.

"If you had a bribe ready to go," Renato drawled as he followed her up the stairs, "why did you waste time trying to sway Timoteo with Shamal's pouty face?"

"Manners are never a waste of time." Sonya informed him dryly, then reconsidered her words. "So long as the one your manners are aimed at aren't being stupid, moronic, or just plain suicidal."

"So basically, ninety percent of everyone in existence?"

She had to give him that one. "It really does seem that way sometimes, doesn't it?"

(Saturday the 6th of July, 1968. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Why would it matter? He's five."

"He's not going to like it, that's why."

Sonya scoffed, already busy doctoring a cup. "If I make it right, he'll like it just fine and we won't
Renato's flat expression could've been used to iron his immaculate suit. "I didn't even think of that. You're dealing with him for the next few hours, Sonya."

"Yeah, whatever." She gave Shamal a mug of coffee, or rather a mug of hot milk laced with some coffee creamer and a tiny splash of the Mafioso's espresso for the flavor. "There you go, kid."

She was pretty sure the older Italian's irritation was more for her stealing a little of his drink to do this, but eh.

Baby Mist looked entirely satisfied with life as he cradled the cup of 'adult drink' the hitman never let him have. The first sip earned her an adoring look. "It's really good, Miss Sonya. Thank you."

"See? I told you he'd like it just fine."

Vongola did a buffet-type breakfast for the entire household, at least when there wasn't a late-night party going on that made most if not all the guests and usual residents sleep in the day after. As 'guests', because Renato had finally managed to rid himself of an unwanted famiglia and didn't count as 'business guest' anymore, they were encouraged to eat within a certain time slot.

Guests weren't expected to know or figure out how to deal with the Guardians of Vongola's Sky in the early mornings, after all.

Given both the hitman and the thief were Flame users themselves downgraded that 'encouragement' to 'strongly recommend'. They still got the evil eye if they were late or lingered too long, however.

Tyr the Sword Emperor entering the ground-floor dining hall outside of the famiglia's usual times to feed their people attracted a whole lot of attention.

Since he had a familiar glitter of red between his fingers, and was headed straight for their little table, Sonya was pretty sure he was there to either return her necklace or ask a few more questions about it. "Master Tyr, good morning. Care to join us?"

The master assassin flicked his eyes from her, to the suddenly wide-eyed and gaping Shamal, and then to the slightly disgruntled looking Renato still nursing his 'wounded' coffee. "Another time, perhaps. Your necklace, Miss Sonya. While I do appreciate the look, it was unnecessary to give it up as well as your usual weapons."

Sonya didn't take her necklace back when the man held it out for her. "Are you sure about that, Master Tyr? I was told to leave all my weapons at the door."

"As you told Don Vongola, Miss Sonya, it really is next to impossible to disarm a user of Dying Will Flames. Even a moderately motivated person without them could be just as much as a threat. While I can imagine a few ways this could be used as a weapon, it isn't intended to be one is it?"

"Point." The Russian agreed wryly, allowing the thin chain and crystal key to drop into her upraised palm.

"Good day Miss Sonya, Sinclair," the man even gave the still gawking baby Mist a nod of his own, "young Shamal."

Pursing her lips, she gave the man a moderately hard look for the last acknowledgment. He merely smirked faintly before striding away again.
Tyr having his eye on Shamal was slightly alarming. In the 'she was certain baby Mist was supposed
to be mostly freelance not Varia' way.

…right?

Well… what happened would happen, she could really only wait and see.

"So, brat. What do you want to do today?"

Shamal's reply was a bit delayed, given he was trying to decide between copying Renato and his
zealous nursing of his espresso cup before eating and her and her actually eating food breakfast
habits.

"Can we go to the park again, and go see a cinema?"

"We can go to the park and see a film at the cinema, yes." Sonya replied wryly, wondering if Mist
brat actually meant to go and watch a building that showed movies or to go see the movies such
buildings provided. "I think… a Disney animated film called 'The Jungle Book' was recently released
and should be showing around now."

It was about an orphan, right?

Hopefully he wouldn't focus on that part.

"I'm abstaining, have fun." Drawled the hitman, smirking wickedly as he elaborated why he wasn't
going to be forced outside for a few hours to just sit and watch Shamal run around a playground. "I
have to register Shamal for school in the fall."

Baby Mist's betrayed expression was hilarious and trying not to snicker at it made the thief focus on
him more than the kid between them. "Is that possible? I mean, he did go a bit wild from what
you've said."

The brat apparently had terrorized that weak Mist nursemaid Sonya didn't like with a Mist construct
of the Russian and various other only vaguely human-shaped images, catching a lot of other people
in the crossfire from all reports she had heard. It had gotten him into some trouble, with both the head
of the Vongola staff and Renato himself.

Nurse-whoever apparently had more than enough, she had gotten herself reassigned elsewhere
where she didn't have to try to wrangle a baby Mist stronger than she was.

Why did Vongola stick a Mist on a Mist, when a Storm was a better Mist-wrangler?

Frankly, even a Classic Lightning would've been better than Mist lady of no imagination.

The hitman had confiscated the brat's turquoise for a full month, until he not only promised to stop
terrifying the staff but also to get a grip on his spamming of Mist Constructs… and apologize to the
head of the staff for the disturbances. Shamal still found the entire thing unfair and had told her his
side of the story her very first day with him while she was unpacking.

"It's a homegrown type affair. Private, local, and very used to Vongola linked students pulling weird
or just crazy stunts. Which he knows better than to do around those not prepared to deal with it."
Renato informed her blandly, eyeing the level of espresso he had left sourly. "It will, at least, give
him something new to do instead of run wild."

Sonya merely shrugged when Shamal turned those big brown puppy eyes on her. "Sorry kid, I have
to agree with him. You'll at least get to learn all sorts of things I don't know."

That possibility apparently did not jive with what tetchy Mist brat seemed to believe. Skeptical didn't quite cover the extent of his expression. "Really?"

"I was homeschooled. Finding and eliminating the gaps in my education is kind of tricky," especially since a lifetime worth of history she knew was not applicable in this life, "so this way? At least you'll start from a solid base to build off of."

Shamal did not look sold on the idea of attending formal education.

"Lucky him." The hitman commented neutrally, dropping his empty espresso cup to the tabletop between them and finally getting around to eating something.

(Friday the 12th of July, 1968. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

The Iron Fort saw a lot of traffic that wasn't originally Vongola in nature.

Other Dons, their various guards/grunts/enforcers, their wives on occasion, local people that wished to entreat the Famiglia for either protection or intervention, there were a lot of bodies wandering in and out on any given day.

That didn't include their own people, which might even reach far into a couple thousand in number.

The point was there were a lot of 'time wasting' rooms on the ground floor that didn't get Sonya a very firm but polite maid or footman wishing to relocate her. There was a library not too far from the guest suites, and the thief had wrangled tetchy Mist brat into starting to learn how to read with her most of the mornings of her week-long visit.

Even if Shamal's level of energy couldn't hope to equal Cherep's childhood levels, the Russian didn't really feel like trying to tire him out the same ways she had tried to tire her foster brother out on his more annoying days.

Her very last day of visiting, she had been trying to teach tetchy Mist brat how to read and write his name in one of the little reading nooks.

Slight problem, Shamal couldn't remember his last name.

Baby Mist who was also an orphan freaked out about forgetting his father, or any part of his life before the hitman, and she reluctantly allowed herself to be used as a handkerchief for said waterworks.

Renato actually looked a touch apologetic about asking for the kid's legal last name so late into his guardianship of him.

"Why the hell do you not know it?" It was lucky they were in a private library, in a public one they would've been hounded by the librarians for the noise and she would've gotten arrested for threatening them to back off with her weaponry.

"The brat's dad did his business with only a handle. I never bothered to remember it, only his location, why the hell he was selling information, and the usual threats that might go in his direction. He wasn't that interesting. It's somewhere, I just don't remember it." He all but snarled back,
apparently not willing to actually glare in the direction of the bawling brat in her lap but at the paperwork that needed last names to be filed by. *Shamal, it's not that important. I can look it up later, okay?*

"Oh yes, that is going to help. Tell the *orphaned boy* the name he shared with his father does not matter." Sonya rubbed the hiccupping Shamal on the back awkwardly, including a few pats when it did seem to lessen the outpour of water making her wet. *Kid, think of it like going undercover. They're civilians, so you need to ensure they don't think anything too odd of you. A different last name will help. Like how everyone here calls me Nikishina, even if I had that changed a few years ago."

Teary brown eyes peered up at her wetly, the young boy sniffing and still leaking, but didn't comment.

"*You can use mine, until Renato finds yours.*" The thief promised, a touch desperately. She didn't actually mind touching the brat very much anymore, so long as she was the one doing said touching, but this was a bit far out of her comfort level. *I'll even sneak in to fix it for you if you want me to later.*"

It earned her another snotty sniff, and the kid did look like he was considering it instead of just being mopey and depressed over his sudden realization on the fallacy of human memory.

"You're not sneaking into a mafia affiliated school, Sonya. That's a stupid risk to run for something I can just file new paperwork on without a problem."

"Then I will sneakily file said paperwork in broad daylight, I never said I was going to break in."

Renato gave her the look he seemed to think it deserved, turning back to the paperwork he had been filling out for Shamal's future primary school attendance. *Shamal, pick one. Use Sonya's name, or leave it blank.*

He at least had the decency to wince when she threw him a dirty look for the borderline demand. She wasn't remotely comfortable with bawling baby Mist either, but the kid deserved at least *some* consideration.

Sonya might have no good opinion of her biological father, but she rather liked her foster one. If Shamal's father had been anywhere near as dear to him as Arseniy was to her now, then the kid was entirely entitled to his crying jag.

Slowly, the hitman skipped over the name section to fill out the rest of the forms while baby Mist deliberated over the choices he had.

Eventually, he tugged on her entirely too wet blouse to gain her attention. *Can I use your name, Miss Sonya? For a little bit?*

He didn't look happy with the asking, but he probably figured it was the better option than admitting he didn't know his own name to people.

*Sure kid, want to learn how to spell it?* They had a couple extra blank sheets, the Russian pulled one over to them and picked up her pen again. *Here, N-I-K-I-S-H-I-N.*

*…I thought your name was Nikishina.* Renato remarked quietly when Shamal got distracted investigating the shape of the letters making up the name, likely intending to *not* forget this one too.
"I'm female, he's male. The –a drops when my last name is used in reference to a male."

"Russians."

"At least my language doesn't assign gender to inanimate objects and forces one to learn three different definite articles to use with them."

"Barbarians." He returned with a slow growing smirk now that the stressful part was over with, quickly filling out that intimidating blank spot with the male version of her surname. He hesitated over the 'Middle Initial' blank, side-eyed the brat still sniffling in her lap and skipped it. "You're rather good with it, though."

Sonya couldn't decide if that was smart or cowardly of him.

"I cheat."

"Ho?"

She merely smirked, not intending to inform him exactly how she could cheat when it came to tricky bits of other languages.

The hitman eyed her suspiciously but got sidetracked on the basic medical history and vaccinations form. "…shit."

"…yeah, good luck with that one."

The look he gave her over Shamal's head would've curdled milk.

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(Sunday the 21th of July, 1968. Lille, French Republic.)

_Coyote_ Nougat eventually got back to her, right before she left, that the garnet she had wanted him to take a look at would make a respectable B-grade Storm ring.

Sonya hadn't known those rings for Flame users came in various grades. She never made any mention of being interested in buying one, so all she really did know about them was that they were somehow color coded and scorched as well as shattered after enough use.

Quite frankly, it wasn't really good news.

Instead of just seven or fourteen or so rocks, she was looking at upwards of twenty-something or more depending on how high or low the grades went.

Aside news of undesirable sort mixed in with a bit of confirmation she and the others at least found something they wanted, and Shamal's very best attempts to waylay her from leaving, she left Italy the week after she arrived with little issue.

Heading north instead of straight back to Mafia Land.

It had been half a year, she wanted to see how Cherep was doing on his lonesome.

Oslo, Norway, was likely the midway point for the _Großes Volksfest_ this year. She took a random stab in the dark of where they'd likely went next and tracked them down quicker than it had taken her last year when Fong cornered her in Shanghai.
The thief also, unfortunately, located the traveling Russian Circus just in time to catch one of 'Skull de Mort's' stunt shows.

First off, while she did recognize the damn name, de Mort was French. 'Skull' was English.

What the ever-loving fuck had gone through her foster brother's head to think that was a good idea?

"This is France, is it not?" Skull reminded her unhelpfully, smirking like the ass he was and waving a hand to the back of the dressing room tent to take into account the country they were currently in.

Sonya managed to sneak her way into the prep tent, even if she had to give Jaq a bit of a bribe she intended for Crina to get past his guarding of the entrance since she was refraining from inhuman feats in broad daylight, and glared at the alter ego of her best friend. "Please at least tell me there is a better reason than that."

"To make anyone looking into 'Skull' head to the western parts of Europe instead of eastern. Or even the States, if I'm lucky." The stuntman offered with a dismissive shrug. "And it sounds a bit obnoxious, doesn't it?"

"Some days, you worry me."

That earned her a flash of sheepish Cherep instead of arrogant Skull, but the stuntman eventually batted a hand at her lazily and grinned. "Well... good. You worry me a lot too, you know. Especially now you're on your lonesome doing all sorts of nasty things to people."

"Usually, they are already nasty people before I get called in to perpetuate a feud or arrange and steal a comeuppance."

He snorted softly, gaining a wry, bitter edge to his smile that just made her uncomfortable. "And that makes it all better, I'm sure. What about the other half of that usually?"

She had no good answer for that one, so instead she changed the subject. "I am not on my lonesome, anyways. I am going to be living with Tats. We even have a phone number, which I wanted to give you."

"I was there this Christmas, I remember it."

"No, I mean we got a private line installed for both Lisa and Arseniy that you can use too. Instead of deal with Mafia Land operators that would otherwise give you a run around."

Skull accepted the slip of paper with a raised eyebrow, snorting at the complicated number sequence it took to get a civilian's land line to hook into the underworld's private network of radio towers. "That's... freaking awesome. Well, at least with Tats I don't have to worry about what you're eating."

"I am not that bad of a cook."

"I really beg to differ. I can't even die of food poisoning and I'm still scared of your cooking."

Sonya gifted him with a disgusted look. "I got better this spring, under Lisa's direction. Arseniy ate it just fine."

"I think he's got a cast iron stomach. You can't use our foster father as an example, anyways. You're his favorite."
"This from the man that will eat just about anything, especially if it grosses out his little sister?"

The alter ego of her fellow Cloud dismissed that with another of those limp wrist waves, smirking again. "You may have a point, but I'm not acknowledging it."

"You are an asshole."

"That's my point." He returned cheerfully, snatching up his slightly battered helmet when Jac gave a sharp rap to the pole holding up the flaps of the tent. "And that's my cue. You going to stick around for it?"

The thief had been about to say no, because she hated watching him risk his neck. She reconsidered before she said so, figuring that she had better see how popular of an act Skull's stunt work was becoming.

She may hate the show itself, but the crowd might just be reassuring in a way.

"Yes, fine. This once."

"Or twice? Because I'm pretty sure you've said that before. Once or twice. Possibly. Might be more than that, actually."

"Skull, unless you would like to make an attempt at the world's farthest human cannonball record without the cannon, get moving."

With a bark of a laugh, he did just that. Jamming the birthday gift from her on his head before running out of the prep tent into the big top.

Sonya followed him out more sedately, giving Jaq a friendly wave as she passed the ebony skinned strongman.

He saluted her back with the second bottle of rum she brought along to use as a bribe to get Crina to tell her of anything unusual or wrong with the circus.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 21th of July, 1968 continued. Lille, French Republic.)

"I don't particularly like your replacement." Crina informed her old apprentice sharply, who was cringing and trying not to watch her brother as he let go of his motorbike in mid-air.

"That's nice, Crina." Sonya muttered absently, putting a hand up to shield her view of the stunt ramps. "You didn't like me either in the beginning, so I don't see your point."

The old Romanian snorted in exasperation, as the girl had even paid to watch the show but practically refused to actually watch it.

Privately, she bet the Russian was keenly tracking the circus' stuntman even if she wasn't watching him. Her former apprentice, in her own strange little way, adored her big brother greatly. Even if she masked it with some bland sarcasm and a lesser version of that indifference she usually applied to everything else.

This was probably the only apprentice Crina was actually slightly sorry to see the last of.

She had gone through a lot of them, too.
Most of her apprentices ended up being criminals, and in the most baffling manner.

Rarely were they joining a circus to continue whatever life of crime they intended to do, but for a few months of relative safety and maybe to get in or out of a country or two. They would do exactly as much as they had to, and generally weren't the nicest of people, but as temp workers go they weren't actually that bad.

That, she would insist, artificially inflated the number of apprentices she had gone through over her lifetime. Those rumors she ran off her apprentices wasn't appreciated at all.

Maybe just one or two, but those were nasty pieces of work.

Crina couldn't get a good read on her latest one just yet. She was as baffling as Sonya had been, until the Romanian realized it was exactly as the two of them claimed.

In a skewed manner of speaking, anyways. Not just 'little sister following big brother out of worry', more like 'little sister might just be the bigger threat ensuring her big brother didn't have problems'.

She really did wonder if the two of them were really siblings, or if that had been as much of a cover as Sonya's claims to be trained to be a ballerina.

Which was true… but not the whole story.

Ballerinas did not wander about with impossibly hidden, full-sized polearms stored somewhere on her she could whip out to threaten people with. Nice dancers also did not know exactly how to carve into rocks with a tiny red crystal. Good, law-abiding girls from Soviet Russia also did not prove to be good help in smuggling people out of a country as well as being entirely nonchalant about the very act.

"Crina," speak of the devil, "your break is long over."

Sonya glanced over at the new voice, and for half a moment the old Romanian woman hoped the girl would get downright stubborn and refuse to allow her to leave.

Her newest apprentice was a damn slave driver, especially when money was involved.

What was slightly disturbing was she had been pretty damn sure the new girl hadn't known Romanian at first, but not a week into her working for the circus she could speak it as well as the native from the country could. Sonya had taken a few good months to learn.

A bottle of her favorite brand of rum was shoved up under Crina's nose, greatly distracting her. "Do as the nice lady says, Crina. I'll catch up to you later."

Bless this girl. "I really do miss you."

"Yeah, whatever. My price is information, though, so don't get too hammered."

"Drinking on the job?" Apprentice slave driver scoffed, which only earned her another of those dismissive glances from her predecessor.

"Strangely, Crina's more popular when she's slightly tipsy."

The old gypsy held her breath, but all that happened was Viper considering Sonya's comment seriously then giving the older girl an absent nod. "Mou… we'll see about that."

Damn it. Why couldn't the Russian girl get stubborn when Crina wanted her to be?
"Do those tattoos have a meaning?" The former apprentice asked idly, still trying to fruitlessly ignore the risk-taking her brother was doing in front of a few hundred people.

"Do yours?"

"Yes."

Viper rubbed a finger down one of the upside-down triangles on her cheeks. "…they do, actually."

The crowd gasped, which made Sonya flinch. "…ah. That's nice."

Tugging a lock of her vibrantly bluish-purple hair, the new apprentice slanted a demanding look at Crina.

She shrugged the whole messy situation off, not seeing anything she had to worry about from just introducing the two. "Viper, this is Sonya de Mort. My former apprentice and Skull's little sister."

"Cherep's, I am Cherep's little sister." Sonya corrected with a touch of exasperation. "And I have more than enough names, you old bat. Stop adding more."
(Monday the 22nd of July, 1968. Lille, French Republic.)

**Skull** de Mort was now a thing, and Sonya didn't quite know how she wanted to feel about it.

How long until that thousand-or-so-year old shopkeeper man gathered up the strongest Flame users of each type?

How much time did the thief have, to figure out if she wanted to try to prevent her dorky foster brother from becoming the Cloud Arcobaleno or at least try and warn him about the baby-looking curse of the damn things?

…or find a way to help him support himself without taking a nasty and sudden nosedive through the underworld's worse dregs?

Crina's new apprentice decided to linger with her during and after the stunt show, which made the Russian slightly suspicious.

…because first of all, she was very damn well used to the 'feel' of Mist Flames and had just come from visiting a baby Mist. Secondly, those tattoos were very… distinctive. Identifying.

At least this area was slightly abandoned, as most attention was at the front or the side where the prep tent was standing. In the twilight, well after a show, near the time another show was lined up to start for the slot after the stunt show. Perfectly deserted enough to have confrontation of the fiery sort without too much risk.

Cherep, still scrubbing the last of Skull's makeup off with a wet paper towel as he almost tripped his way around the back of the big top tent, flicked his purple eyes from the thief to the new girl but decided greeting his sister was more important.

"Little sister!" Sonya got glomped then pulled off her feet, and she twitched as he mashed their cheeks together. "Aww… you came to visit me. I feel so loved."

"You saw me not an hour before this and about to feel extreme blood-loss. Put. Me. Down."

He did so, grinning even with a threat of bodily harm aimed in his direction. "You still have an issue with touch? It's not a bad thing, Sonya. I will keep doing this as many times as it takes to help you get over that. Feel the love, sis. *Feel it.*"

"You are being creepy, get away from me." Sniffing, and taking a couple steps backward to remove herself from touching-distance, the thief lightly smacked his hands away from her sides. "I do not have an issue with touch, I have issues with people touching me when not expecting it. As long as I do it, or I know it is coming, it is fine."

"Your double standards are appalling." Cherep informed her seriously, even if he still had that affable grin.

She puzzled over that comment, trying to figure out if he was being serious about that or just yanking on her chain.

Damn it all, she swore he was doing this on purpose.
"So… Viper, right?" The stuntman continued in another direction, looking at the Mist. "The old bat's new girl. I don't think we've met yet. Hi, Cherep Bazanov. Occasionally Skull de Mort. General mechanic and occasional stuntman."

"Charmed." Viper intoned in a completely blank tone of voice. "I have a question."

"That is nice, we have one for you as well." Sonya shoved her right hand laced with Storm Flames through the Construction of a massive spider before it could leap upon either of them, seizing her replacement by the front of her outfit with her left and hoisting the Mist off her feet. "So… question."

Viper's eyes were locked on the hand of Storm Flames about to touch her nose, her hood knocked off in the scuffle, a scowl on her fully visible face. "…fine. What?"

"Is whatever you are running from going to endanger the circus, Crina, or more importantly my brother?"

The Mist flicked her eyes to Sonya's own, and sneered with an insulted expression. "Of course not. I made certain of that before approaching such a civilian outfit. Can you put me down now?"

"Please. I don't want to have to figure out where to hide the body." Cherep chipped in dryly, entirely unconcerned with the sharp points aimed at his back but gripping hafts of the ones that almost impacted the thief's.

She scoffed, lowering the Mist to her feet even as she turned back to her foster brother. The Constructed spears behind his back faded into indigo Flames as the tension between the Cloud siblings and the unknown faded. "Enough Storm Flames and she would not leave a body. That is not a good protest."

"I don't want to know where you'd ever need that kind of information." He informed her, rubbing his temple tiredly.

"Excuse me, I believe it is my turn." Viper interrupted dryly, adjusting her bright and cheerfully patterned clothing to darker shades with less frills in a few distasteful flicks of indigo fire.

Strangely, she also got a whole lot less feminine looking but was still wearing a long sleeved and skirted dress. "Is there a reason a Storm Flame user's brother is hanging around a purely civilian outfit? From what I've been able to find out, one of you is a former performer and the other is still ongoing without any intents to change that."

"Not entirely a Storm." Sonya informed the girl blandly, suspicious of how she got that information given the stonewalling she received when she started. "Cloud."

"Cloud." Cherep agreed, or echoed, with a shrug. "And yes, there is a reason."

That finally got some surprise painted across Viper's tattooed face, and she flicked her eyes from one sibling to the other. "…the both of you are Clouds?"

The thief gave the woman a hard glare, to show she wasn't at all pleased with the direction she was trying to go in.

"Yep!" The stuntman confirmed cheerily, the idiot.

"If that gets out from you, I will hunt you down and rip out your spine to beat you with it." She snapped at the Mist, turning the full force of her glare on her foster brother. "Why would you tell her that?"
"Why not? The first show I crash in she'll know full well, and this way we'll know which way she's going to jump on that information."

"She may not have been here for that. You do not have that many injuries from your work so far, and you had better not be purposely causing them. I swear to hell, Cherep, if you are I am going to murder any and all motorcycles you ever get."

"I'm not! I swear!" Cherep yelped in panic, grabbing hold of Sonya's hands and not letting go even when she dug her nails into his wrists. "It was only a thought, to see what Viper would do, I'm not going to do it. Ever. I swear to you on the grave of my first bike! Don't murder Betsy."

"...Betsy?" Questioned his fellow Cloud slowly, distracted enough she stopped trying to get him to release her hands.

Did he name his bike?

The embarrassed flush crawling up his face answered that question.

There was a snort from the Mist, and Viper smoothed a hand across her lips when the siblings glanced at her. "Mou… as amusing as all this is, do you have another question for me? I seem to have found a few more for the two of you."

"Please, your brain broke trying to process the fact you were looking at two Clouds."

"That's not the way to make friends, Sonya."

"I am not friends with Mists of no imagination." She snapped at him irritably, tugging at her still trapped hands. "They have to be at least somewhat intelligent for me to like."

"Your Mist friends are both under the age of fifteen." He countered dryly, and pointedly not releasing her. "And one is even younger than that. Doesn't he not count as a friend then? More like a kid you're mothering?"

"He's five, thank you. No, and," she corrected tartly, stomping a toe to get him to let go, "stop touching me."

"Why is my little sister so violent to me? All I want to do is help you make a new friend." Whined Cherep pitifully, actually contorting and clutching his steel toed boot as if that had done more than dent the very top of the metal toe-cap in warning.

"Because you have no sense of personal boundaries. Or self-preservation. And maybe I don't want to make a friend, ever think about that?"

Viper conjured herself a bag of popcorn and started munching.

"Friends are good things, maybe if you got one a normal way you might be less of a damn spaz. And I do too! It's just different, alright?" The stuntman defended himself, shoving a hand through his hair and frowning at her. "And leave my sense of personal boundaries out of this, you have just extreme ones so your sense of them are skewed all to hell."

"I am not a spaz!"

"I should charge admission for this." The Mist mused to herself idly, popping a few more kernels of popcorn into her mouth. "I'd make a killing."
"Can you even taste that?" Sonya asked curiously, derailed from her argument with her foster sibling.

It was Mist Flame food, basically food made up out of illusionary fire that did not really exist.

Wouldn't it just taste like fire?

Or did Viper's Flames also mimic the taste of food?

"Are you male or female?" Her brother asked in the next second, looking slightly frustrated. "Because you look female… but you also sort of look male sometimes. Like right now."

"She is dressed as female. Unless otherwise requested or informed differently, you would refer to someone like this as what gender they are conforming to at the time." The thief snapped yet again, backhanding him in the gut hard enough to make him wheeze. "And you call me socially incompetent."

"…how? Why? How do you even know that?"

Rachel's lifetime had a transgender community that decided on that as the best way to refer them as. Well… that or gender-neutral terms that would just confuse everyone if she used.

"Never you mind, Cherep. That was beyond rude, though."

"It's alright, I've heard it before… except the method of sorting out gender labels." Viper waved the rebuke from the younger sibling away idly, allowing her Construct of popcorn to fade from existence. "And I can, actually, taste the food I conjure. It has no nutritional value but saves me the hassle of actually buying whatever food I wish to eat as long as I have tried it once before."

"…huh."

"…sorry." The stuntman offered sheepishly, scratching at his messy and likely sweat-soaked hair then smoothing it somewhat straight… ish.

With another shrug, the Mist turned her attention on Sonya. "At least he asks instead of tries harassing the answer out of me."

"Well… true. I suppose."

"My question, then. Is this not your territory?"

"I do not have one."

"Yes, you do."

She sighed heavily, directing her gaze to the sky where the stars were starting to show under the encroachment of twilight. "Cherep is of the opinion my territory is actually the people I am closest to. Even if not, I do not have a physical territory. Before you ask, he does not have one either."

A line of stiffness in Viper's thin frame relaxed slightly, which the Russian belatedly noticed had been hovering over the edge of a 'flight or fight' response.

…wow, she really was a very strong Mist. Even her familiarity of Mists and their Constructs didn't help her notice this Mist's more gradual preparations for any further violence.

"…mou, I suppose that is relieving to know." She settled on after a long moment, flicking dark violet
eyes between the two of them again. "Next question."

"I do not have any more." Sonya refused flatly, already more than fed up with what information the Mist was going to be walking away with.

Cherep cradled his chin in one palm, looking thoughtful. "...you know, I don't have any more either. I just really wanted to know what gender to call you by, so I didn't offend you or something."

Viper blinked, then blinked again. Finally, she frowned while looking slightly irritated. "Nothing? Then how am I to get answers of my own?"

"Guess. Or suffer. I do not care. As long as whatever you are doing will not harm my brother, you are not that interesting." Even if she was or was related to the future Mist Arcobaleno.

"And you were doing so well, too." The stuntman sighed, aiming a mournful look at his sister. "Really?"

Sonya shrugged it and the look off, not feeling remotely sorry for whatever it was he was now exasperated over. "I am going to go bribe Crina for information. Would you like to come to dinner with me while I do that?"

"Eh... sure. Why not? It will probably be better than the 'leftover' concession stand fair I'd eat otherwise. Even if Crina is going to be there."

"The old bat is not that bad."

"The old bat is a crotchety, sour old woman. I have no idea why you like her so much."

"Well... I somehow like you too, and now I wonder what that says about you."

Cherep gave her a deadpan look. "That you have some moments of pure sanity?"

"Or insanity, if you think about it."

"Ouch, really feeling the love here. Just... wow. So much love." He paused, looking back at the frustrated Mist. "Hey, you coming?"

Viper gave him an odd look.

"I'll pay, think of it as an apology for insulting you."

"...I suppose." She allowed after a moment of thought, following along after them as the thief lead the way out of the little alley and into the circus' main thoroughfare. "Your sister is very... straightforward."

"Yep."

"And you are not."

"That is still a line of enquiry, and if he answers I will gain my return answer in a manner you may not like." Sonya called out to the two behind her.

"There's a reason for that too." Her fellow Cloud answered in a way that wouldn't end up with the Mist owing the Cloud a favor of unnamed information. "Sorry though."

There was a smirk audible in Viper's voice for her next comment. "I have all night, I can probably
find a way."

"You'll piss her off, and I would rather you didn't do that."

"…mou, fine. I demand an expensive dinner for my apology then."

She came to a sudden stop as a wonder occurred to her. She glanced behind her at the two of them. "Freebie, what does alcohol do to you? Or just a normal Mist in general?"

"Is there a reason why you are asking?" The Mist user countered with a quick frown, her features readjusting to appear more feminine as they approached the crowds.

"Firstly, because we will likely be drinking tonight. Secondly, he was correct about the ages of the Mists I know, and knowing what to warn them of before they try liquor the first time is something I am interested in."

"I can accept that." Viper mused aloud, cradling her chin in her left hand in a thoughtful manner. "More creativity, less substance when it comes to others. It is easier to disbelieve a Mist's Constructs if they are drunk, usually because they tend to be sloppier as well."

"Huh… right."

The Mist user likely turned a demanding look on the stuntman, because he huffed lightly with good humor in the next second. "We're Polarized differently. Like extreme opposite ends differently."

"…ah."

(Tuesday the 23rd of July, 1968. Lille, French Republic.)

Calling into Mafia Land just to check in with how her sister and Lackey was doing before she took a month or two off to try and find a long dead Arcobaleno proved to be a very good thing.

"What you do mean he picked up a contract for me?"

"I mean you have maybe half the usual time to complete this next job, is what I mean." Tatiana informed her over the phone, sounding stressed already and they had barely just gotten past the greeting part of the conversation. "I informed him not to do it again unless you were going to be expecting it or told him he may, but…"

Defaulting on contracts were not good things even in the civilian half of the world and in the underworld, it could get downright lethal.

"Give me the details." Then Sonya was going to have a very sharp conversation with her Lackey about when and where using his authority over her schedule was appropriate or not.

Rattling off both an address, city, country, and target in rapid succession, the nurse sighed heavily after the thief confirmed she had it written down. "I think… someone confused him into doing it. I'm not too clear on who, or why, because he's keeping his mouth shut about it. But Bjørn's not that great of a liar, nor does he have the personality to have done that intentionally to you."

"I'll figure it out when I get back." In… a week.

Sonya had to go and transfer the notes inked onto her hand to an actual piece of paper or something,
then wash off the details of a criminal heist from her skin. Then she likely had to go catch a plane, even if she was still highly wary of flying in this day and age.

It was the only way to get from France to the US in time, and that was only if she used two or three days for said heist then flew back to Mafia Land.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Sonya was going back to Rachel's hometown.

She didn't know how she felt about that.

On the other hand, she could go surprise the hell out of people that some girl from Europe could pronounce the Native American names correctly. It might be worth a snicker or two to purposely mispronounce them.

She would not be looking for either her/Rachel's parents. It was still a few years early yet, there wasn't much of a point. They both were probably in high school still, or only just made it into college.

That was still something she had yet to figure out what she wanted to do with too.

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(Thursday the 25th of July, 1968. Pabst Theater, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, United States of America.)

Sonya spent the flight mostly looking over the extra details she got just before getting on the plane, more notably more than just 'a chandelier' at 'a theater'. She also spent most of it either trying not to allow herself to worry or mentally cursing out Björn in her head.

The teen needed to do some serious detail work for future heists.

'A chandelier' in 'a theater' didn't quite cover the pertinent details.

Memories from another life told her that in Milwaukee's Pabst Theater, above the main auditorium, was a frankly massive chandelier of crystal. From what Sonya could dredge out of Rachel's memories, it wouldn't yet be the couple ton chandelier of Austria crystal... that was still a decade away, but even with her strength she wasn't even sure she could steal whatever was hanging before that.

That wasn't even counting the fact the bloody thing was suspended over a two-story auditorium... or was it three?

Either way, the thief was going to have to get creative in a fast hurry.

Milwaukee, thankfully, was a port city. The Russian Storm-Cloud loved these cities, especially since it also was a main train station in the US train lines.

Since she could use Mafia Land shipping/smuggling services to transport her illicit goods and buy a hell of a lot of beer while she was here to cover it, her attention went mainly to the damn mess of crystal and metal she had to steal.

While a show was going on.

The theater was almost sold out, doing a midsummer production of Fiddler on the Roof. There were
both day-shows of different productions and night-shows of the main feature, meaning the
auditorium was likely being cleaned for the few 'off-hours' between the last show of the night and the
first show of the day.

Over the heads of about a thousand people. Thousand and a half if the actors putting on the play and
the musicians were included.

This was probably the riskiest thing she was going to attempt yet.

Sonya, strangely, was excited the moment she laid eyes on her target.

It wasn't something she would've picked to do herself, not with the risks she knew would come with
it. It was a massively ornate thing, it was going to be unwieldy and hard to move, likely possible
she'd get caught doing it, but she still was mentally planning out exactly what she would need to do
in order to remove and steal the damn thing silently while the room was full.

Two days' worth of traveling, and the one or two day return trip, left the Soviet Storm-Cloud with
three days to work with.

"Miss…? The show is about to start." An usher helpfully reminded her, causing the thief to glance at
him instead of stare at the massive chandelier three stories above her head.

"Ah… sorry." She took the last few steps fully into the theater and nodded her thanks when he
pointed her down the aisle she needed to go to find her seat. "Thank you."

"Enjoy the show, miss."

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 25th of July, 1968 continued. Pabst Theater, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, United
States of America.)

The chandelier was actually connected to a hoist and pulley system, supported by the heavily
reinforced theater ceiling. It was lowered for cleaning, which ruled out maintenance access as a
possible way to it. While that would normally nix any attempts she could’ve made to get it from the
top, the Pabst Theater also had an incredibly old-fashioned air conditioning system.

Old-fashioned in that massive blocks of ice were once imported and set in a room at the very top of
the building, then two massive fans would blow cool air down ventilation shafts to the audience in
summer.

Sonya loved ventilation shafts. They were so useful.

It didn't quite remove the issues a solid ceiling gave her, nor did anything about the weight and mass
of what she was about to steal, but it provided a way it could be done. Given she had two days left to
work within, the same night she visited a show to get a good recent era look around, she also slipped
away from the crowd exiting the theater and did a bit of cautious poking around.

Finding a ventilation shaft took her barely two minutes, as they were rather ornate things and she
knew what she was looking for but getting into one without raising suspicion took her nearly two
hours.

With a method in mind and a general feel of the scope of the heist figured out, she called Tatiana
back her second day from a phone booth downtown.
"Do I have to steal the entire thing, or would just the crystals do? The rest of it is metal, possibly even a ton of it."

"I don't think anyone expected you to steal the whole thing," the nurse replied wryly as a shuffling of papers sounded, "I'm not sure what the fact you assumed the whole thing of ton weight was what you were to steal says about your head. No, according to the paperwork, they want the... glass? Or crystal dangly stuff."

"Is that seriously the term used on that paperwork?"

"No, Björn got the paperwork in Icelandic and I'm working off a translated copy in his handwriting. It sucks, by the by. For two years of learning, his grammar can end up all over the place. Might want to work on that with him when you have the time."

Yeah, this was the last time she'd ever be doing a contract without actually reading the damn thing herself.

"Sonya?"

"Hmm?"

"...what are you thinking?"

"I kind of wonder if I should not steal the whole thing anyways."

"HOW? It's a ton or so of metal, you said that yourself."

"It would have to be done in pieces." Agreed the Cloud almost absently, thinking hard. "But the contract has no limitations on damages to the item, right? Since it was so large in volume?"

"Well... no. But, ton. Of. Metal."

"The production being performed is a good two hours and some long. Almost three, actually. I might just have time to not only get the crystals, but everything else including the pulley end as well."

"Oh my god." Tatiana whined into her end of the phone, making the thief yank it away from her ear and give it a strange look. The nurse's voice continued after a long pause. "My shy little sister is an exhibitionist. I never saw that one coming."

"...I... what?"

"You just want to steal it in order to giggle in your stilted silent way over the baffled head scratching as people wonder how you did it, don't you?"

Well... "...yes."

"Really?"

"It will also unnerve and possibly upset whoever it is you suspect has fooled Björn into accepting that contract on my behalf. As... well... as... allow me to stop being a jewel thief and actually start thieving other things."

"From jewels to crystals isn't much of a jump, little sis." Tatiana informed her bluntly, sounding slightly exasperated. "Are you sure you can do that?"

Honestly? "Yes. It will be tricky, but possible. I think I can do it, anyways."
"...I'll get the bail money ready."

"Very funny. I'll see you soon, alright?"

There was a snort from the other end. "One way or another."

Sonya wasn't intending to do anything like this again, but since she started thinking as 'whole thing' rather than 'little parts of it' she might as well keep on with that.

Admittedly, she'd only try for the full damn thing if she could get everything her contract stipulated first.

Best to be careful, at least.

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(Saturday the 27th of July, 1968. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, United States of America.)

The night of day two in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Sonya spent on a dry practice run just to be sure she could do what she wanted to do.

Mainly, finding and locating not only the method of which she would be getting a ton of oversized lamp disassembled but snuck out of the theater without getting caught.

A ton was stretching it, even for her strength. If she didn't have to find out at the last minute that she couldn't support that kind of weight all at once, she would prefer it.

In her further investigations of the old ventilation system, she ran across the method used to transport ice blocks before the advent of electric air conditioning. It included a set of railroad tracks in the attic to move said ice of old, but also a freight elevator.

Investigating to see if that worked or not netted her a way to actually accomplish the heist as she wanted. For something almost seventy years old, it was in surprisingly good condition. It also needed an oiling in the worst way so as to not screech or clank in all sorts of disruptive manners, and she had to sneak out and back in again with a few bottles of machine grade oil to slather everything that moved with, but immediate transport was set.

While she was at it, she also started carving into the ceiling of the auditorium with a trowel she picked up from a hardware store. Getting the bulk of the work out of the way, like cutting the vent's metal open more than wide enough for her purpose and starting in on gouging away the concrete until she had a very thin amount left to prevent the façade from cracking or just falling apart on her.

The pulley system used to raise and lower the chandelier told her exactly where she had to stop, at least.

One wouldn't normally be able to cut metal with a small little hand spade, but Sonya cheated all over the place.

With that mostly set up, she then had to think of how she would get either the crystals she was contracted for or the entire damn chandelier from the theater to the dockside. In the end, she rented a heavy-duty van.

Legally. Then she stole it.
From herself.

Reporting it stolen did carry some risks, as in her current fake name and description would be linked to the theft if only in a 'victim' way. However, in it being stolen and her 'official' business was acquiring a lot of beer for an Octoberfest party arrangement wouldn't necessarily raise suspicion of its own, it was a risk she had to run.

Since Bjørn accepted the contract on her behalf, he might have to turn it in as well. It was possible she would not be leaving America on time.

After stashing her truck close by once a few 'adjustments' she learned from Dimitry were made, Sonya got some sleep.

Then bought an ungodly amount of beer that she would not be drinking, bright and early the next and last day she had before her contracted time limit ran out.

It took up most of the morning, because there were two main breweries she had to decide between. Pabst itself and Miller. The Russian eventually went with Miller Brewery Company just because she would be having a Pabst item in that shipment. Illegally, but the point remained.

While the shipment was being assembled, she took the legal paperwork she would be smuggling things through to the dockyards and found the local Mafia Land contact.

That would be her alibi for the night, the man here well used to handling shipment details to Mafia Land by himself and claiming otherwise.

She really had no idea how effective of a long-range thief she would be without this network of dockyard crooks.

(Sunday the 28th of July, 1968. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)

"I cannot believe you did that." Tatiana moaned as if she were in pain, tossing the newspaper from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on their dinner table.

Headlining news was the 'Mysterious Mid-Show Disappearance' of the Pabst Theater's massive chandelier. Sonya couldn't quite get the pulley system at the same time, but she was alright with that.

"I can't believe it actually wasn't that hard." The chandelier had to be taken to pieces with a screwdriver while the show was going on, and she had to improvise a way to prevent the cables that held it up from slacking under its lessening weight, but she not only stole the damn thing… she got away on time as well.

The van she reported stolen likely would never be found anytime soon… since she drove the thing off the less maintained dockside and into Lake Michigan. Thank the gods for automatic transmissions.

Stealing it whole instead of the crystals first had prevented any of the gawkers from noticing the glitter of the chandelier disappearing bit by bit before they got fully distracted by the show.

Which, while not the plan, actually cut off maybe an hour of time from the job.

In fact, the Russian thief actually managed to leave the scene of her crime a full half hour before the
lights went back on and the outcry over the missing chandelier started. The police hadn't even interviewed her in any way connected to the heist, her only out of pocket cost was the insurance on the van she stole from herself.

Sonya pressed the landing ticket for the stolen chandelier into her packet of paperwork, holding the original contract as well as the relevant information Mafia Land's intel brokers had on the job location and subject, then turned to the guilty looking Icelandic teenager. "Now… take me to this person that recommended this job."

BJÖRN gave a few rapid nods, still looking a bit sickly pale under his recently acquired freckled tan. "Yes, Dama."

He had already bent her ear with apologies, until the thief snapped at him to save it for later.

She really just wanted to know who the hell had the gall to mess with a Lackey of hers.

Ignoring the, still ongoing, wary watching and avoidance of her person by most if not all the normal residents of Mafia Land, the thief stalked after her aid musing on what she wanted to do to whoever it was that tried screwing her and BJÖRN over.

By the closest thing Mafia Land had to laws, she could fully justify killing the asshole to everyone. Sonya didn't want to do that, but something had to be done before this was attempted again.

The thief might not be able to figure a way out of it next time.

At any other time, the silence that spread from her entrance to the Thieves' Hall would've either irritated or annoyed her. This time, it gave her the perfect range to overhear someone talking to Miss Snooty.

That asshole clerk that once set her on a home invasion job had his back to the doors and was a lot more focused on the secretary than wise. Said secretary looked just as uncomfortable with him as she was afraid of the Storm-Cloud's entrance, which got her dismissed from said Flame user's attention.

"I wouldn't worry too much, Beth. That uppity little bitch is either panicking or long dead."

"…uppity little bitch, am I?"

A tiny bit too late to save himself, or at least attempt to scramble for a cover story that wouldn't lead to his likely brutal and bloody death, the clerk whipped around.

Then probably suffered some brain-loss from how fast the blood drained from his face.

"BJÖRN?"

"Da, Dama." Her Lackey quickly agreed, clutching her paperwork to his chest as scooting away from her a little. "Dat is him."

"I don't like him anyways." Miss Snooty informed her hurriedly, ignoring the man's weak little start that might have been outrage if he had the blood to actually process anything. "He's sexist, and rude, and really can't take a hint. I'm about to get married, and he still tries to flirt with me."

"Why do you think I care?"

"Just saying!" She waved her hands in denial of any motivation for offering her personal information, while also keeping them as close to her body as possible. It made a rather awkward
looking flailing gesture. "Can… c-an I go?"

Sonya gave the woman a flat stare but did glance at the paperwork in her Lackey's possession that was due today. "I believe there is some work my aide has that needs to be filed."

"I'd be happy to help." Indeed, she looked entirely too happy to seize any excuse to go elsewhere. Miss Snooty turned only just far enough to make it obvious she was addressing Bjørn, but also so she could keep an eye on the Storm-Cloud herself. "Files, right? Archive or completed contract?"

"Icelandic, Russian, or French. He doesn't understand a lot of English yet."

Miss Snooty gave a shaky nod, then babbled out a string of Germanic sounding syllables that made her want to twitch. It made no sense in German, but she apparently was more than fluent in the teenager's native language since he babbled back while opening that folder.

…she really did have to learn more than a couple phrases in that damn language.

"I don't believe you're a Cloud Flame user." Asshole clerk rallied himself finally, apparently regaining his marbles a touch too late to really help him much. "I think you're just doing it for the attention."

…how the hell did that make any sense whatsoever?

Flame users were known by their Flames, which were practically color coded for convenient identification.

Taking her silence as some kind of admission of guilt, he stuck his nose in the air and glared at her. "You are just some farm girl from Russia getting her kicks out of terrifying her betters and needs to be taken down a peg or three."

Sonya dug out her cigarettes, and his expression when she lit it with her Cloud Flames was… interesting. "Do go on, I am absolutely fascinated by this outpour of stupidity. And, actually, I am a city girl from Russia."

He stuttered, without actually making a sound so his mouth was moving but nothing was coming out, wildly glancing around the hall-filled lobby seeking some kind of aid.

It wasn't forthcoming.

As a matter of fact, their audience seem almost gleeful. Whether it was because he was unpopular or just the possibility that they were about to see some violence being committed was debatable.

"…w-well, you're not a very good Cloud. Are you? You are nothing like the old stories, which has to mean you're weak."

"Want to know how to tell how strong a Cloud is?" She asked idly, rolling her smoldering cigarette between her pointer finger and thumb.

Frowning, because he had to know there was bait in that question, the clerk gave a hesitant nod when she refused to say anything else.

The Russian backhanded him across the face, the force flinging him to the side a respectable distance and making him impact a wall face-first. "With one like me, it's how physically strong I am."

The far wall was a good twenty feet away from her. There was still a crack in said wall, spider
webbing out from the point of impact and flaking the paint away from the heavy reinforced bricks that made up most of the buildings here. Since she didn't really want to murder him, just yet anyways, she stuck to a force that was non-lethal but still greater than her muscle mass suggested she could do.

If that enabled others to continue to underestimate her, then good.

Sonya stayed in place as she took a long drag from her smoke, merely watching him roll feebly around clutching his battered face. There was a set of footsteps approaching, and in a deathly silent room it was irritatingly loud.

The very same gentleman that confronted Miss Snooty about her lack of spine not barely a month ago approached her from a direction she could clearly see him from. She was only somewhat sure this was the man in charge of the people working to set up contracts for the Thieves' Hall, and who she was waiting for.

"This is the second death threat I have received from your people in a month. Is this how you treat all Flame users?" The Storm-Cloud asked with deceptive mildness, flicking a hand to include the now whimpering clerk in her count so he would know why she was getting violent. "If so I will gladly spread the news to the others, so they will avoid this place."

He froze for a full second, then carefully regarded her seriously. "That will not be necessary, Miss Bazanova. Also, I must ask you to put that out."

"If you want your people dead, then all you had to do was say so." The thief replied, still in that even tone of voice as she dropped her lit cigarette to crush with a booted heel. "I suppose I could just kill him instead."

It really only took a flick of her wrist to get one of her Bec de Corbins to fall into her palm, then it was literally child's play to enlarge it to full-size as it swung behind her for the room.

"Miss Bazanova, please. This is entirely unnecessary."

"Is it?" She finally snapped, turning to glare at him instead of advance on the man with the now broken face and pointedly not putting her weapon away. "So how many more times must I deal with before it becomes necessary? I am warning you now, one more death threat and I will eliminate you and put my damn Lackey in charge. At least with him I will no longer worry about threats trying to use everything they can with this service against me."

Björn looked entirely terrified of that possibility, once Miss Snooty translated the parts he didn't understand for him.

The older man inhaled deeply, then gave her a nod. "Understood. I will personally ensure these people understand and appreciate the cost of attempting such things. Now, may we calmly discuss this?"

He likely didn't know what had vexed her this time, but he did know full well she was oddly rational for a Cloud. Possibly, he was trying to bank on her strange non-typical Cloud behavior to get this situation smoothed over quickly.

Sonya snapped her fingers at her aide, and the Icelandic teen scrambled to put the contract file in her hands. "Fine. Calmly explain to me how it is my Lackey ended up accepting this contract in my name, when it is far outside not only my usual range but also a few grades higher than what I am currently qualified to do through this island."
It was his turn for the blood to drain out of his face, and he gave one dismissive glance at the man whose face she had ruined before obviously deciding to throw him to the wolves. "That will be a fascinating discussion. Elsewhere."

There was a stir through the on-looking thieves that hadn't decided to be somewhere else while a Cloud, however rumored to be even-tempered or not, rampaged through their Hall. They likely didn't want the show to end, not without seeing how it was going to end.

She had no pity for them or their desire to see how this played out. "Lead on, then."

Already, she had done a bit of a blow to the reputation of this service they were going to have to work hard to mitigate. If she didn't want it to backfire on her, as in make enemies with her kind-of boss, she had to let it be solved by that boss.

In the end, she might even be able to wring a few concessions out of him in return for not carrying through with her threat to warn off any and all Flame users she met. Not likely, but it was remotely possible.

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(Monday the 29th of July, 1968. South Beach, Mafia Land.)

With that taken care of, and one man's life likely ruined for good anywhere there was a criminal who could visit Mafia Land, Sonya detailed to Bjørn exactly when to accept contracts for her.

It was still half his fault, the man with the now flat face couldn't have assigned her that contract without his help.

The only bright side was that she hadn't failed that contract, and she did get one concession out of the Thieves' Hall guild master.

Two contracts a year left no one with warm or fuzzy thoughts about her thief skills, but that last job? She got an upgrade to her already maxed-out business credit line and an array of more 'mid-risk' contracts opened up for her rather than mainly the 'minimal risk' ones she had been taking up to this point.

They would cost her in either more in time or targets than her usual and carried a greater risk for being arrested or killed, but it would at least be interesting.

With the added stipulation that she would be helping him select contracts for her until at least the New Year break, Sonya left Bjørn to only investigate how the Thieves' Hall worked and a reminder that details were important so he should probably get to know the Intel brokers as well.

"So, it was just stress… right?"

"Yes." The marginally healthier looking Tatiana informed her dryly, looking scores better than she had at the start of the year. "I'm actually putting on weight again, little sis. You don't have to look so pinched and worried when shooting me looks anymore."

"You were really unhealthy looking, Tats. I will not apologize about worrying for you."

"I'm not expecting you to. Frankly, I appreciated it." The nurse returned, licking melted ice cream off her fingers before continuing. "But the worst is over, mostly. I have another year or so of instruction,
maybe however long of residency for the experience, then I'm a doctor."

"Hooray…" She muttered around her cone, nibbling on the soggy parts to get to the rest of her treat. The boardwalk of Mafia Land was sweltering hot, and it was melting everything it could with a vengeance. "Do you want me to stay with Doctor Kappel?"

"Since treating my own sister might get interesting in all the wrong ways, yeah. I wouldn't mind the occasional emergency you aim my way or maybe a consultation about whatever, but you probably should remain with him." Tatiana waved the offer off, relaxing back on the sun warmed bench they were watching the shoreline on. "We should get a tan. Since we're here and dressed for it."

They had gone swimming, just for something to do that day. The nurse didn't get much off-time, so this was her idea.

"Do you have vacation time?"

"Yes? Why?"

"The beaches in France, I kind of wanted to go back anyways. Some of them are nude beaches, others allow you to go topless. We could avoid tan lines there."

"Ooh, France it is."

"Um… ladies."

Sonya sighed, looking back over her shoulder at the slightly chagrined looking Chinese man clad in red. "Fong, did you need something?"

"Not need, no." He temporized, those red eyes flicking between the sisters until he decided to give his attention to her. "I was wondering if I could have a word with you."

Tatiana gave him a long look over, from the braid to his skin color and then down to his black canvas shoes, then turned to the thief with a deadpan expression and addressed her in Russian. "I hate your luck with hot men."

"You can have him, I think he's annoying." She glanced back at the martial artist. "Is it important, or can it wait?"

"You both realize I understand Russian, yes?"

"Yeah, and?"

The nurse hastily muffled her snickers, without a trace of guilt or sheepishness.

Fong's expression was an interesting one, torn between the chagrin from before and wry amusement. "I see. Sonya, can I have a word?"

"Again, is it important or can it wait?"

"Well…"

"Actually, will I think it is important or it could wait?"

He gifted her with an impressively flat look.

The thief shrugged it off. "I have no reason to be nice or helpful. Deal with it."
"Do you want her to have a reason to be?" Tatiana asked idly, tossing the empty and half-eaten cone into the trash can nearby. "Because if so, I might have a recommendation."

"Really?" Sonya asked of her sister flatly before Fong could say anything about the offer.

"If Mister eye-candy wants to hang around, I'm all for it. I get to ogle that ass, though."

There was an odd wheezing sound from the martial artist, who was eyeing the elder sister warily.

"You are selling me out for eye-candy." The thief stated blankly.

"Yep."

"This is the second time you have done this, Tats." She pointed out in exasperation. "First was Doctor crush, now Fong?"

"Doctor…? Oh, no. I don't have a crush on Doctor Kappel, he's not really much to look at. Like a gawky stickman. Might have a crush on his brain, though." Clarified the nurse thoughtfully, sticking a sticky finger into her mouth to clean it off then glancing backwards once most of the sugar was gone. "I just like Fong's muscles. As a matter of fact, I think that's what I'm going to call him. Hi, Muscles."

"Ah… hello?" He shifted away from her a bit more, putting himself right behind Sonya's back instead of standing a bit more between them.

The thief didn't appreciate the movement, but before she could snap at him to move further or just go away something ice cold dripped onto her bare thighs. "Shit."

Snickering, Tatiana accepted the remnants of her vanilla cone to toss as she tried to figure out what to do with the cream on her skin. "Lick it off."

"I am not that flexible… I think… I might be able to do that, actually." It would be incredibly uncomfortable, as well as a bit awkward, but maybe possible.

"I meant scoop it up with your fingers then lick it off, twit." The nurse actually laughed when the thief gifted her with a disgusted look. "Or you could go wash it off in the sea. Just trying to be helpful, sis."

"Yeah, some help you are."

Fong finally got out from behind her, standing now to Sonya's other side and looking a bit long-suffering. "Miss… ah…?"

"Primakova. Tatiana Primakova. Sonya's older sister. I already know who you are, and the fact you chased my little sister around Shanghai."

"I apologized for that." Defended the martial artist, as if that meant anything but the thief had the upper hand in that situation, slanting a gaze to the younger blonde then getting distracted by the mess she was dealing with before snapping his naturally wine-red eyes back to the redhead. "I… you have a suggestion?"

"Sonya needs some help with her self-control." The nurse declared wickedly, smirking when Sonya glanced at her in confusion for the tone as Fong blushed.

Was Tatiana flirting with him for a reason, or just to make him more uncomfortable?
Additionally, how the hell was that flirty?

The tone was a flirt one she had heard her sister use before, but the words did not make much sense as a flirt. Maybe she was just too used to hearing a male flirt and wasn't used to a female doing it?

"I need a new sparring partner." Clarified the Storm-Cloud slowly, solidly sure she missed something about this when that seemed to help him regain some control over himself. "But, Tats, Fong is a martial artist. I would probably break him too."

Her elder sister gave her a level look.

"I am not so fragile to break in a friendly spar."

Sonya gave him a dry look of her own as she managed to scoop up the greatest amount of the white mess on her thighs off. "I can bend and shatter steel with my bare hands."

"Well, you are a Cloud. I still will not break so easily." Fong returned stubbornly, glancing down at those hands and then yanking his gaze back up just as quickly. "You cannot break what you cannot hit."

"Mmm… we will see."

Tatiana snickered when he jerked his gaze away from her as she started sucking the melted ice cream from her fingers. "Ah… I'm going to hell. But oh, the price is fantastic."

She gave her a strange look for that comment, but she waved off explaining it to her.

"So…" The Chinese man stubbornly kept his eyes on the sky instead of actually look at either sister. "A spar in exchange for some information?"

"…sure. In a month." Sonya managed around her fingers.

"Don't talk with your mouth full." Tatiana quipped with a smirk.

"…why a month?"

She pulled her fingers from her mouth with a wet pop, glaring at her sister. "Because we are going to France, I believe you overheard why."

"I'm pretty sure you two could fit in a spar or several if he came with us. Maybe on the beach?"

"There are a lot of people on the beaches in France… maybe either really late or really early in the day…"

"That… will not be necessary. A month from now is fine." Fong hastened to say, still not looking at them. "I will see you then. Sonya, Tatiana."

"Aww… don't you want to help rub sun tan lotion on us, Fong?"

"I must abstain. My apologies." The Triad member gave them both a jerky little bow, then turned and walked away at a respectable clip.

She pursed her lips and pinned her foster sister with a flat look. "What did I miss?"

"He thought we were going to ask him to fuck you a couple times." Tatiana cheerfully informed her shamelessly. "Then that invitation to come to France with us? Pretty sure he was thinking you'd be
either topless or naked for that spar on the beach."
"…pervert."
"Hey."

"Not you, him." The thief snapped irritably, rubbing her slightly wet fingers together absently in hopes they would dry faster. "Really? Who the hell spars either naked or nearly so?"

She snorted, a smirk twisting her lips up. "Oh god… Sonya, never change. I adore you this way."

"Now what?"

"Pretty sure that's called sex by another name, little sis."

"…oh." She scowled as she blearily recalled something like that from her last life, then sighed heavily. "I give up. So, did we accidentally proposition Fong a couple times or what?"

"Or what." The nurse confirmed brightly, a lingering smirk aimed in her direction. "We actually invited him along for what seemed to be a wild month of sex on the beach."

"…we did?"

"With the both of us, but mainly you."

Sonya gave her a sideways look. "Really? I'm not that dense, Tats. I'm pretty sure I would've caught that at least."

"Okay… maybe not really, but it sure seemed that way to him."

"…so, he really is a pervert. Huh."

She didn't quite understand why Tatiana burst out laughing at that comment.

She just really wondered if she really wanted to deal with a perverted sparring partner.

(Wednesday the 31st of July, 1968. Mafia Land.)

"Miss Sonya!"

"Shamal?" The thief questioned in bemusement, bending down to pick the brat up when he held his hands up in a silent demand. "What are you doing here?"

The dockyard of Mafia Land was an entirely unexpected place to meet the kid.

"Who's this?" Tatiana questioned in slightly clumsy Italian, putting the last piece of luggage they were taking to France with them down next to her feet. "Hi, kiddo."

Baby Mist blinked at her from the safety of Sonya's arms, then looked up to her with a silent question.

"Shamal, this is my sister Tatiana. Tats, this is Renato's little ward."

"Hi baby, I've heard so much about you. Nice to finally meet you." The nurse told the kid honestly,
Frowning, Sonya actually turned to see if she couldn't spot the hitman himself. That was odd, and a bit out of character. "Renato!"

There was a sudden swath cut through the crowd, and the visibly peeved Italian himself stalked through the usual traffic nearly as well as the Storm-Cloud could when she walked around the island lately. "Shamal… what did I say about running off?"

"Not to? But it's Miss Sonya!" Baby Mist defended himself, pointing at her as if that was excuse enough. "She's safe, you said so yourself."

By the fact the man's eyes narrowed even more, Sonya was pretty sure that excuse wasn't going to fly.

"Kid, please." She tugged a hank of Shamal's dark brown hair to gain his attention, then gave him a level look. "You should've known better and just pointed me out instead of run off on your own. I might be safe, but this place isn't nearly so. Don't do it again."

It earned her a puppy pout, but she ignored it and turned to the hitman. "So, what brings you both here? I thought you weren't letting Shamal out of Italy?"

"Medical records." Renato admitted flatly. "Mostly vaccinations, but since I don't have anything he needs aside a reissued copy of his birth certificate? I figured going through Mafia Land for them instead of Nono would cost me less. Miss Primakova, would it be possible for you to recommend a doctor for him?"

"You're missing a lot of things for him, aren't you?"

"They burned the brat's house down and I picked him up after dealing with that, it was kind of unavoidable."

"You could probably use Sonya's physician. Tell Doctor Kappel the kid is what he is, and he'll make an exception." Tatiana chimed in before that conversation could go anywhere else. "He's trying to document any and all health risk Flame users are subjected to, so he'll take the kid on even if he's not a pediatrician."

She switched to English for her next question, out of respect to how much upset the topic had already caused the child in her arms. "Did you ever find out his last name? Or is he still using mine?"

"I found it. He promptly misspelled it with what little he recalled of your writing lessons trying to memorize it and now everyone thinks his last name was tridente and not Tringali. Trident is now his middle name, we're still using yours for his schooling." Sighing, the older Italian swept his fedora off and raked a hand through his spiky hair before pressing it back on firmly. "We will fix it later, when he's old enough to understand. Now… what is this about your physician's interest in Dying Will Flame users?"

"You are not allowed to harm or intimidate Doctor Kappel. We would like to keep him, thank you."

Renato attempted an innocent look.

It wasn't working any better than the last time he tried that on her. "Sonya did that intimidation thing already, breaking the poor Doctor's office walls with a kick."

Tatiana confided to the hitman in an overly loud voice, which made even Shamal look at the thief in
surprise.

Scowling, Sonya stuck her nose in the air. "Reflexology tests are stupid, especially when you do it to a woman that has and can shatter concrete with a finger. I tried to tell him that."

"No, you didn't. You just refused to cooperate." The redhead countered wickedly, hand on her hip and flicking the other hand to dismiss that attempt to justify herself. "Don't be a difficult patient, kid. Sonya broke her foot doing that."

Shamal looked torn between maybe obeying the redhaired lady and copying his adored Miss Sonya.

"Listen to Tats, kid. She's a nurse."

"Going somewhere?" Renato asked, toeing then lightly kicking one of their suitcases.

"France, for topless and or nude sunbathing with a side order of swimming. I need the break." Tatiana informed him cheerfully, a smirk crawling up her face. "Hey, want to come with? The last guy we asked along to rub suntan lotion on us refused."

"...what?"

"I thought we invited him along for a month of sex?" The younger foster sister asked of the elder, a bit confused. "I mean, I know you also asked him to do that too... but he had refused to come with before that."

The nurse beamed at her. "Oh Sonya, I love you so much right now."

"...WHAT?"

"Stop shouting." Sonya snapped, irritated. "And what are you shouting 'what' for?"

Renato gaped at her, dropped his eyes to the very confused brat in her arms, looked back up at the irritated thief, and then shut his mouth.

Huffing at that unhelpful reaction, she looked down at the confused baby Mist herself. "We're leaving shortly kid, sorry. Behave for the doctor, though. And stop running off."

"Aww... do you have to, Miss Sonya?"

"I actually have something to do in France I've been meaning to get around to for a couple years now, yes." She confirmed bluntly, giving him a squeeze before setting him down. "I'll probably see you this winter, okay?"

"Ladies... I wouldn't happen to know this man, or could get his name... could I?"

"Nope!" Tatiana cheerfully denied, then gave her little sister a sideways look. "This isn't a heist for you, right? I was pretty sure this was just supposed to be a break."

"It is a break, but there's something I've been interested in that came from that country which I have never been able to find myself. So, I'm going to hire a private investigator while we spend the month on the beach to do all the running around instead of me."

"I like that plan." Bending to scoop up her luggage, the nurse shifted it to one hand in order to waggle her fingers at both Italians. "Gentlemen, if you will excuse us. Our ship leaves in only an hour."
Sonya pressed a kiss to Shamal's forehead herself before picking up her own suitcases. "Behave, brat. I will hear of it if you don't."

"Okay Miss Sonya."

"Sonya... are... is...?" Renato rubbed the back of his neck, looking slightly conflicted. "...have fun?"

"Thanks. Oh, before I forget." Dropping one of her cases, she dug the hitman's bullet out of her pocket. "I kept on forgetting to give this back to you."

He picked it up, then dug an exact copy out of his own pocket.

"Yeah, that should last a couple more days at least."

"...you can make indefinite copies?"

"Of course not. As long as I have a reminder of what they should be, they last a couple months. If I don't, a couple days will make them fade."

"...you sure I can't get the name of this man you invited along? I really only want to ask him a few questions."

"I do believe Tats said no, Renato." The thief reminded him bemusedly.

_________________________

(Thursday the 1st of August, 1968. Antwerp, Kingdom of Belgium)

"Aww... leaving already?"

Viper gave a brisk nod, the rest of the stuff s/he had to his/her name packing itself in a use of Mist Flames Cherep nearly didn't believe.

Why were all the other Flame types so much more interesting than his?

At least he shared them with Sonya, which made him at least fond of his own Cloud Flames.

"This was only temporary, however interesting the diversion became." The users of those Mist Flames informed him blandly, scorning the one bright and cheerful outfit s/he had been given when s/he joined.

Cherep needed a better gender term for him/her. He couldn't really bring himself to call the Mist an 'it' even if only in his head. "I am sorry to see you go, you were pretty interesting yourself."

"Says the Cloud Flame stuntman wasting his immortality on show business?" The illusionist smirked over at him. "Mou, I can think of so many other ways to use that immunity to death if you would-"

"Nope. Pacifist. Besides, Sonya would hunt you down and commit heinous acts with your corpse if you tried anything with me and she found out. Which she would, the moment she checks in with the circus again."

"Hmm... well, even I would have to admit that is a respectable downside. She doesn't even need to disbelieve my Construction, she just tore through it." Admitted Viper sourly, Shouldering a pack of his/her things over his/her shoulder. "It was... unnerving."
"I'll convey your compliment to her." The stuntman promised in a deadpan tone.

"Do so, she does have interesting advice occasionally." The Mist informed him with a sharp nod, turning to the exit of the little tent Crina both lived and worked out of. "Mou… she was almost as interesting as you are."

"Yeah well, that's my little sister for you. A bit too interesting for her own good." Curious enough to kill a cat actually, as well as socially blind as a bat.

Not to mention entirely unapologetic about anything and everything.

"Will I at least see you around, Viper?"

"…anything is possible."
Chapter 26

(Friday the 2nd of August, 1968. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

Renato waited for Doctor Kappel in a waiting room to get done with Shamal, fully aware he was scowling hard enough to disturb the nurses and other patients but not really caring too much.

Two hot, gorgeous Russian sisters asked him along to a month of near or fully nude beach time and possibly a very different sort of exercise one shouldn't do on a public beach… and he was stuck taking care of baby Mist brat instead. Shamal had no idea of the things he had to put up with in order to keep him safe and healthy.

Some days, he really hated his luck.

On the other hand, he knew one of those sisters since she was twelve. That can of worms was… wiggly.

Sonya should not have grown up to be that hot. It was not fair.

She was a thief, they were supposed to be nasty and backstabbing but mostly greedy creatures. Entirely willing to steal anything and everything not nailed down, just to make a bit more money.

It had only been the fact she had been a Cloud that made him interested in her at first, he really had expected her to go violent like all Clouds in the end and scorn the thief's life for a hitwoman's lot instead in a few mere years.

The worst she had stolen from him was a shirt… and it wasn't even off his back. More like out of his closet. All to keep his own damn ward safe and secured for him, so she had more than earned the right to that shirt she stole.

While he was entirely appreciative she wasn't much like her fellow thieves of Mafia Land, he also had no idea why she was sticking it out as a thief and not showing any interest or inclination to wander to something a bit more violent. The Russian Storm-Cloud could wreck some decent carnage if she wanted to, but oddly didn't seem too inclined at all.

One of these days he'd actually get around to trying to tempt her with something violent and possibly bloody. Maybe she just needed an excuse?

She didn't tend to be violent unless you touched her without permission or someone was specifically pissing her off, at least according to some brand-new rumors floating about.

Renato really did miss out on some of the best things when dealing with Shamal's needs.

Different hall or not, he would've paid to see that incident happen when Sonya bitch-slapped some no-named paper pusher hard enough to crack a wall on the far side of the room.

Now the hitman had to figure out if perving on the closest thing he had left to a childhood friend was something he could live with.

He had been what?

A handful of years younger than Sonya was now when they met?
...and what kind of useless excuse of a man turned that kind of invitation down?

He had to let that offer pass by. Even with his mixed feelings about one of those sisters, he probably would've taken them up on that offer had he been alone. Tatiana was beautiful redhead spitfire of a pin-up girl herself, if a little too bouncy and conniving for his taste with a genuine unholy glee in messing with a man's head.

Pale and a bit drawn looking lately, but she had selected for herself a very demanding job and had fully earned a month of rest and relaxation on France's beaches for having stuck it out. A decent credit to Sun Flame users in and of herself for that alone.

Aiding her in whatever she needed to destress was the least a gentleman could do, for her dedication to learning the healing arts if not because she was a lady in her own right. Since it was a joint offer ignoring one sister in favor of the other was just rude and not something a gentleman should do, but...

Sonya herself was... a near perfect cross between a leggy blonde and a dancer without a care to high-maintenance behavior that made her seem more real than just plastic. Entirely willing to scorn uncomfortable fashions for personal comfort but donning them if needed and possessing an endlessly amusing habit of weaponizing her jewelry.

Renato had also known her when she was a gawky pre-teen girl, mostly elbow and knees and very little else to her.

...and now he felt like a pervert again.

Damn it all, this should not be that hard of an issue. He appreciated beautiful women, they were certainly that and then some.

Active mafia women. Actually useful as well as pretty, and a side order of deadly when it was called for. One was a highly valuable contact he actually trusted, entirely willing to help him out if he needed a small favor or two or provide the womanly touch he didn't have when it came to his own damn ward. The other was a professional mafia nurse.

Why did Shamal have to be with him when they gave that invitation?

Seriously, who the hell did the sisters give that offer to before him?

There could not be that many candidates. Sonya was not sociable in the least, unless she already knew or someone she knew indicated they knew whoever she was dealing with. She was barely polite to Timoteo, and only because Renato actually respected the Don of Vongola.

Tatiana spent most of her time around battered and bleeding mafia men, with the occasional mafia wife and kids chipped in now and again.

If they had needed a man for anything, why hadn't he had been their first choice?

"Mister Sinclair, are you quite done glaring the walls into submission?"

He shot the entirely suspicious German doctor a nasty look, straightening up from his slouched sprawl into something a bit more attentive seeming. "For now."

Said doctor had some balls, he didn't even bat an eyelash over the surly Italian's behavior. "Your child."
"Ward."

"Whatever. Young Shamal is perfectly healthy, he just needs his vaccinations done then he will be set for public schooling. I'll have his records fabricated, birth certificate included, to be perfectly near-legal." Kappel sounded entirely disgusted with the very idea, or just scornful in general at the fact he would be doing so for a young child. The box in the man's hands was held out for the hitman. "They will be sent on to your current registered address when completed and hospital agents are able to insert Shamal's new records into the civilian system."

Renato accepted the box gingerly, curiously cracking it open carefully and eyeballing the vials of various liquids and the few needles provided suspiciously. "...aren't vaccinations done here?"

"Hospital policy is to allow the parents... or guardians, to do a child's vaccinations wherever they feel most comfortable." The doctor informed him flatly. "Cuts down on the damage panicky, overprotective parents cause when accusing the staff of trying to slip poisons or incurable viruses to their sprogs."

He gave the man a sceptical look from under the brim of his fedora.

"Of course it doesn't prevent it, we just won't have such parents smack dab in the middle of the hospital goring berserk. Now they try it at the reception desk, which has its own enforcers around to ensure no one does manage to harass the ones on duty."

Getting to his feet, the hitman nodded once to show he understood and tucked the box under one arm. "Is that all then?"

"My temporary nurse is getting him dressed now." Kappel agreed with a tiny sniff, using one long forefinger to press his half-moon spectacles higher up the bridge of his prominent nose. "I feel I should warn you not to use Sun Flames on him after administering your ward's vaccinations. At least until he's fully healthy again on his own."

"Ho?"

"Nurse Primakova found that Sun Flames have a slim chance to re-activate the almost dead viruses in any vaccination. Instead of merely enabling young Shamal's own immune system to recognize and fight off a severely weakened virus, you will chance actually infecting him with a fully viable one instead."

...well, he owed Tatiana a drink or something at the very least. "How?"

"Personally. Thankfully it was a booster shot and not a new vaccination."

A very damn good drink. "Understood."

The German gave him a long, level look. "And when was the last time you had a checkup of your own, Mister Sinclair?"

Never. "I, doctor, am a Sun Flame user. I do not require a medical check, ever."

There was another very long moment of silence, when the ballsy doctor gave him an entirely unimpressed stare over his spectacles. "For your young ward's sake, I dearly hope that is true and not just more of these 'rumors' that turn out to be not so true after all. Like how all Clouds are violent psychopaths or Lightnings having no sense of self-preservation."

Renato scowled at the man, irked that nothing he did intimidated the spindly looking physician. If he
went any further than just glares or scowls, Sonya might just throw a damn fit at him. She had specifically told him not to scare or break her doctor.

"I treat the only Cloud that calls this island home. When you watch a woman kick a wall in with a bare foot and regard the broken bones she suffered as irritating as a papercut, then finish giving her a physical? Glares are not that intimidating anymore."

The doctor might have a point with that, but it didn't mean the hitman was happy with it.

"Mister Renato! Can we go see Miss Sonya now?"

"She already left, brat. Yesterday." He did not need a reminder of what kind of offer he had to let pass him in favor of taking care of said brat.

…and whoever it was that the sisters had offered it to first.

Shamal looked entirely unconcerned by that fact as he scurried over to the two men, a little ruffled but now with the medical records to allow public schooling. "Miss Sonya and her sister went by boat, didn't they? You said flying was faster. So, we can go fly and then see Miss Sonya."

…right, baby Mist had wanted to fly out here and pouted when the hitman decided to take it safer with the brat with him. This way, he would get both a chance to fly and get himself pampered by a Russian Storm-Cloud… likely her sister too. While the women were half or fully naked and on a beach.

Conniving little shit. He wasn't even old enough to fully appreciate that view yet.

Renato had yet to figure out if he wanted to see Sonya in any other way than the thief who sometimes spoiled his damn ward to hell and back and allowed him a few precious liberties with herself.

God damn it.

As a young woman who stole things and could pop weaponry out of the strangest places, who let Shamal use her as a comfort object with minimal flinching and cleaned up really nicely with mile-long legs…

….mother of fuck.

The hitman gave up, slamming a hand down on the top of his fedora to push his hat over his eyes as he took a deep breath. Then he tried not to think about it anymore. "We are going back to Italy, Shamal. The girls are on vacation and aren't expecting us."

"I happen to know which hotel they intend to stay at."

"Not. Helping. Doctor."

"I wasn't aware I was supposed to." Kappel informed him bluntly. "Frankly, I'd prefer it if you gave those vaccines to Nurse Primakova or even another nurse entirely to administer. I do hate the policy that forces me to give over such things to people that barely have any idea how to use them correctly."

He shot the man a seething look under the brim of his hat, already irritated and rapidly approaching ticked off. "…give me the damn address."
He'd figure it out later. When irritating doctors or tetchy brats weren't around to interrupt or confuse his thought process.

(Saturday the 3rd of August, 1968. A hotel, Marseille, French Republic.)

"So, I have a question."

"Hmm?"

"Why do you occasionally break your own bones sometimes, but not others?" Tatiana questioned idly, waving a forkful of pasta around in a little circle as she attempted to find a way to phrase her inquiry better. "Like with Doctor Kappel's wall, you broke your foot. Then again that one heist for Cartier, you broke your hand getting us out of there. But… only then? If you think about it, the force you exert should end up doing you a lot of internal damage when it impacts something and that force ricochet off back into you… but I've seen you shatter things without a mark on you afterwards when you really should've at least cracked a knuckle if this 'I can hurt myself' thing is true."

They had swept their hotel suite for bugs just after checking in, then ordered room service for dinner instead of wander outside Marseille proper to see if they could find a decent restaurant of if they wanted to just go with the kabab vendors near the beachside of the city.

Sonya was perched crossed-legged on her bed, since her sister had claimed her desk to eat on.

Now the thief put a piece of her grilled chicken breast into her mouth to chew while she thought.

"I think you expect to hurt yourself, so you do." The Sun user continued, pointing her now cleaned fork tines at her foster sister. "But if you don't think about it, you don't hurt yourself."

It made some sense, in a way. What was Dying Will Flame use other than an extreme exercise of one's will over reality?

If she wasn't willing herself to be uninjured after some of her riskier acts, then was that all that really stood between her and more broken or cracked bones?

"That needs experimentation… in a month."

"In a month." Agreed Tatiana brightly, deciding she was done with her seafood and white wine sauce covered pasta and abandoning it to bounce onto the thief's temporary bed gleefully.

Sonya picked up her plate almost too late to save the rest of her dinner, fork stuck in her mouth, so she would have the hands to do said saving of good food.

Her older sister was entirely unapologetic in the face of her glare. "Don't be such a stick in the mud, Sonya. We're in France, about to spend a whole month doing nothing more taxing than putting on suntan lotion or eating. Make a mess, sleep in for half a day, let loose woman."

"Don't you have your own bed to jump on?" She inquired blandly after taking her eating utensil from her mouth, setting her food down again. "Why must you mess up mine?"

"Because I want to."

"I fail to see why I should behave in any manner than the one I want to, even if I am on vacation."
Insisted the thief, sticking her own fork on the last of her chicken to give more of her attention to her sister. "I am going to raid bookstores for something to read on the beach, hire a private investigator tomorrow, and generally be lazy in not stealing or thinking about how to steal something for a month. Cherep will be so proud of us."

Snorting, the nurse stretched out on her bed and hooked her hands behind her head. "Yay for our dorky foster brother. What are you looking for here, anyways?"

"An Arcobaleno. Well... a dead one."

"A what?"

...that's really what worried Sonya. No one knew of them, or at least talked about them, anymore. "An Arcobaleno. A member of I Prescelti Sette about three hundred years ago."

"...again, a what?"

Sighing and giving up on her dinner the younger sister toed her elder to shift over, so she could lay down too. "One of the strongest seven of an era, strongest Flame user of each generation. They were... they used to exist. I have mentions of them in one of my books. But no one seems to know who or what they were anymore. I've been through France twice now, and even knowing the full name of this one Arcobaleno and that this was his country of origin...? I have never found mention of him."

Tatiana aimed a frown at her. "Strongest Flame user, huh? If he was so strong, why isn't this guy remembered for it? I mean, we all have heard of Primo of Vongola and his Guardians. They're like... the mafia's heroes of old, or what every Flame user wanted to be like themselves. Italy still churns out grunts in certain molds in hopes to recapture that generation."

She crossed her arms and set them and her chin on her sister's abs, frowning thoughtfully out the window with a damn good view of the darkened beachfront they would be frequenting soon. "I know, which worries me. I understand we're mafia, and Omertà would've covered just about anything about his life... but even birth records? No family survived him? He predates Mafia Land, actually I think the Arcobalenos stopped assembling shortly before the island's first concept came into existence, so I understand why I hear nothing there. But if France once had the strongest Storm Flame user of any generation, why isn't he held up like the original Vongola Sky and Guardians? What about the other six Arcobalenos of his generation? The ones before him? After?"

"...if they don't exist anymore, why wonder?"

...because they would exist again in only a few short years, and the strongest Cloud of their generation was that dorky foster brother of theirs. To defy death itself... indefinitely?

Cherep might not be able to do much else with his Cloud Flames, but he was also highly unwilling to incase it might hurt someone. He'd copy her strength, but only if he could apply it to practical things like frozen tent poles, a stubborn screw or bolt, or the lid of a jar of whatever preserves he was trying to eat. He'd make Cloud Flame copies of needed extra machine parts or tools, but those normally only lasted a few minutes for the tools to a few days until he could replace them for the parts.

Even so, he was still stronger than Sonya was.

She couldn't, or likely wouldn't be able to, take the Cloud Pacifier from him even if she could in the first place. Cherep, Skull, had been the weakest of the next Arcobalenos... and if she couldn't even touch on how strong he was...
Next plan, to find out as much information as she could to arm him with enough to make an informed decision about it.

Even if he was more Skull de Mort and less Cherep Bazanov, the stuntman was still a pacifist. Unwilling to harm another, even if in the name of his own survival.

He'd live through just about anything, anyways. Why hurt someone unnecessarily?

Sonya could understand that, if not like it very much, so she never had tried to press him into learning more than just ways how to escape a nasty situation if needed.

That pacifistic nature probably meant he would likely go along with the 'corner of the universe anchoring' the Pacifiers were supposed to be. Even if it killed him. Because he was nice like that, and if the consequences were really that dire he'd do his goody-two-shoes thing.

She might know it wouldn't, because Vongola Decimo would end the curse chain of Pacifier Bearers for good barring two or three Skies between now and then, but she still didn't want her brother to even contemplate needing to die.

Willpower over reality enabled him to live in spite of everything, and if she had it her way that would never be a wonder he'd have.

"No." Tatiana poked her little sister's forehead repeatedly, harshly. "No worrying. Next month you can worry. Hire the damn investigators if it's that important to you but put it aside. We're on vacation. My personal mission is to get you laid and get a line-free tan. Worry later."

"...really? Your personal mission for the month is that?"

"Objections?"

She seriously thought about the suggestion, and anything that might be relevant. "Actually? I'm not really sure what I'm attracted to."

"You're sexually active, we know that. That cute little childhood crush on our foster father proved it." Teased the nurse wickedly, snickering as her finger was finally batted away from the thief's face. "So, we just need to figure out what turns your motor on."

"I get veto rights." She insisted firmly. "No matter what."

"Well of course. I want you to be both comfortable and screwed silly for once. I think it will do wonders for you." Assured the older Russian cheerfully. "We'll find you something, don't worry."

…should she be scared of that promise?

(Wednesday the 7th of August, 1968. A hotel, Marseille, French Republic.)

Tatiana had a horrible taste in men.

Sonya was now fully dreading of what else the redhead would try dumping off on her. The man from last night had been a little too eager to see what a Russian girl was like in bed, and way too crass and upfront about it.

Maybe she was just too picky?
The thief's already hesitant motions preparing for a night out slowed even more as she considered it.

Their first day in France, while the blonde went to find and hire a semi-respectable private investigator who was only slightly curious why she wanted to find a dead man, her foster sister made a few arrangements she likely knew her little sister would've flatly refused had she known.

Not even as Rachel had she ever gotten a pedicure or a manicure, and while it wasn't bad… the touching made the Storm-Cloud uncomfortable all over the place.

The resulting nail color was pretty, she supposed. Easily chipped and cracked, so not something she'd do again.

On her minimally scarred up, slightly crooked fingers from once shattering her right hand.

Pretty, useless, and why did people shell out money for something they could do at home themselves?

After that afternoon on a beach they had planned on, the Sun had surprised her sister with the suggestion of a night out.

Sonya, at least willing to try something once if her siblings wanted to, went along innocently enough like sheep to the slaughter.

Nightclubs she could deal with, she preferred bars but she could deal. Dancing, as a casual social activity?

The thief preferred things with choreographed steps. Preferably. She had a sense of rhythm, but it didn't mesh with unstructured dancing. Tatiana pulling her out onto a club's dancefloor merely made her uncomfortable and awkward.

She couldn't dance like that.

Ironic, given she was trained in ballet.

However, she had promised her sister a week trial of the 'night-scene'. Three days into it, she was dearly regretting promising her foster sister that.

The men that the older Russian kept finding were alright. They were handsome men, for sure, but… Sonya didn't particularly care for them. Not enough to try and put aside her dislike for being touched to see if there was any chemistry or attraction on her end, and a few of them…?

Tatiana went for eye-candy first, manners second. A few of those men were outright sleazy but could hide it for all of five or ten minutes.

The phone ringing jostled the thief out of her sour musings on her sister's deplorable taste in men, and she went to answer it curiously.

It had been less than two days. Her PI couldn't have gotten results this fast and no one else should have a number to reach either sister.

"Bonjour?"

"Miss Sonya!"

"…Shamal? How did you… wait, let me guess. Renato gave you this number?"
"...erm... no?" Sheepish sounding Mist brat answered, then hastened to tack on what he thought was an acceptable answer. "He got an address from the doctor person, when we were at Mafia Land, and put it in his wallet. He wasn't going to call you though, which was stupid. Why get it and not do anything with it? So, I got it out of his wallet when he left it on the table and now I'm calling you!"

"I... see. Shamal, did you happen to talk to a nice operator lady before me?"

"Um... two nice ladies."

The operator and likely the person on duty at the front desk. Shamal likely didn't know what name they were registered under, even if it was her legal one, so he likely described them in order to get this extension.

Hopefully Nono wouldn't mind a long-distance call from Italy to France being made.

With a wry little laugh, Sonya pinched the bridge of her nose. "Alright brat, what did you want to say to me?"

"I'm sick!" Shamal informed her way too cheerfully for the subject matter. "I got shots, today. Mister Renato said it would make me sick, so now I'm sick."

Shots that would make one sick would be vaccinations. Poor kid, he probably wasn't feeling it yet. "Is that why Renato left you alone in a room with both a phone and his wallet?"

"...no? He's been really... mean, lately. And forgetful. And shooting a lot. And... very... glare-y."

She had no clue what that was supposed to mean. Renato was a bit of an asshole, glared a lot when he was irritated, but forgetful?

Was there something serious distracting him?

"Mean... and shooting a lot. Indoors?"

"No, there's a fiery-ing range outside. He goes there a lot. Which is where he went just now."

"A firing range, brat. And if he's already irritated, it's not going to help that you took something out of his wallet."

"I put it back!"

Yes, because that made it perfectly alright. If Sonya returned the Pabst Theater's chandelier surely she'd be forgiven for stealing it too, right?

There was another voice, one too far away from the phone for it to pick up with any audibility, and suddenly Shamal wasn't the one she was speaking to anymore.

"May I ask who this is?"

"Master Tyr, nice to hear you too." Baby Mist brat got busted. "Shamal made a long-distance call, unfortunately. He might have placed it collect, and if so I'll pay for it, but if he didn't then I'm sure Renato wouldn't mind picking up the tab."

"Miss Sonya, surprising."

"Renato apparently somehow has the address for my hotel. If said hitman would stop leaving his
wallet in strange places, the brat wouldn't be able to fumble his way to me."

"…I'll be sure to inform him so."

She wished she could hear what Shamal would try to keep out of trouble for this stunt, but she had probably tied up the Iron Fort's lines too long as it was. "Can I say goodnight to the brat?"

"Of course. Good evening, Miss Sonya."

"Goodbye, Master Tyr."

A moment's pause, and baby Mist brat was babbling quickly in her ear.

"Kid, slow down."

"…sorry? I didn't mean to get in trouble, Miss Sonya."

"Mean to or not, you still probably should've asked before placing a call like this. Or not have gotten caught in the first place. I'll talk to you later, Shamal, but I really do need to go."

"Aww… but-"

"Goodnight, brat."

"…night, Miss Sonya." Sulky Mist brat echoed back to her, probably what was a nearly audible pout aimed down the phone line at her.

Sonya hung up, rolling her eyes at ridiculous Mists.

A vastly amused Tatiana was standing behind her. "So… now that the Italian side-feature is over with, who’s Tyr?"

"Tyr the Sword Emperor, an assassin of Vongola's." She answered absently, wondering how the hell she was going to dodge out of another night of matchmaking attempts. "Why?"

There was a slow nod. "I've heard of him… he's hot too, isn't he?"

Blindsided, the thief blankly blinked at her sister a few times. "…I suppose? If you're into older men. He's… distinguished looking?"

There was yet another pout aimed at her, but Tatiana's expression didn't have a patch on Shamal's kicked puppy looks or Cherep's offended cat-ness. "What is with you and hot guys? Hot, older guys?"

"…I'm sorry?" The sheer exasperation in the expression aimed her way made the thief feel a bit sheepish for whatever it was she had done wrong now.

"Sonya, you're not comfortable with going clubbing."

"Well, no." Not even remotely.

Tatiana sighed heavily, throwing her hands up in the air. "Alright, I give up. We won't have to go out for the rest of the week."

Thank GOD.
"Next week, though, we're going to try something else."

…damn it to hell. "Tats, I don't think I'm cut out for something as quick as a one-night stand. I don't do casual, at all."

"So, what? Are you waiting for 'Mister Right'?"

Snorting at that ridiculous thought, the thief shook her head. "No, that would be stupid. Just… I need something more than just 'he's cute' or... whatever."

Rachel had died without ever meeting her 'Mister Right', and Sonya wasn't holding her breath for it either. She wasn't a good person and in this life?

With mostly civilians around to pick from, that would mean she'd have to hide most if not all of her life from them to do anything within the month.

What would be the point of trying to establish a relationship if it had no longevity?

That would be a lot of effort for very little reward.

Tatiana sighed gustily, looking vaguely irritated. "Of course, you would. You barely let me or Cherep touch you as it is. It's mostly you touching us if it happens at all. Well… I'm not giving up. I'm going to get you laid, one way or another."

…that kind of sounded like a threat. She wasn't sure if she should be worried or not. More importantly… "Can I get out of this dress now?"

"Yes, fine. Ruin my hard work in making you sexy." Complained the redhead. "I suppose you also want to stay in and read a book or something."

"Yes. Actually." The thief informed her flatly, already unzipping the almost too tight black dress in order to wiggle out of it.

"…do you have no body shyness at all?" Tatiana questioned curiously, taking off her own jewelry since they wouldn't be going out tonight. "This is the second time you've undressed yourself in front of someone without even hesitating."

"You're my sister, you've seen me naked before. Like this afternoon before. Doctor Kappel has likely seen better, too."

"Not the point, little sis." She replied, following her into their hotel suite's bedroom. "Would you undress in front of… say, Cherep?"

"Sure? I mean, he's our brother. Pretty sure he wouldn't look, and if he did I'd expect him to feel awkward about it, but if I had to I would."

"What about your two hotties?"

"…my two what now?"

"Tall, dark, and snarky for one. And Muscles makes two." The redhead explained, smirking slyly over at her sister as she dug out something comfortable to wear for the night. "…and isn't that a man's shirt?"

Sonya glanced down, at Renato's old button up silk shirt, then pulled it on. "Yes."
Tatiana's eyebrows flew upward. "...and yet, somehow, you're still a virgin. Anyways. Yes to both questions, or just the one?"

"To both. I'm pretty sure Renato's seen better too, and there's no way I would be their first naked woman. Not entirely certain why I would want to, and it would have to be a damn good reason to get me to undress in front of Fong, but again if I had to I would." The thief shrugged and snagged her latest book. "Don't really see why I would ever want to, though."

"It should not be this hard to get someone like you laid." Declared her older sister irritably, hands on her hips and almost glaring as the thief happily curled up in bed. "Enjoy your reprieve, little sis. Next week though...?"

"I await with dread."

"Ha, ha, very funny."

(Thursday the 16th of August, 1968. Sartre Detective Agency, Marseille, French Republic.)

"De Mort? Any relation to-?"

"Skull de Mort? Yes." Sonya interrupted her PI shortly, wondering if using her brother's stage name for civilian things had been really as much of a good idea as it seemed at the time. She took a seat across his cluttered desk, carefully because it looked a bit grimy to begin with. "You said you had something?"

The man's office/study room was a bit messy, but as it had been neat when she hired him she supposed it was just a sign of how busy he was being on her behalf. A few phone books, a few notepads of scribbled upon paper, and a whole lot of coffee mug stains littered the cramped space.

A flick of something sheepish crossed the detective's face, and he dug out a manila folder from his desk drawer. "Yes, although I have no idea why this man was ever mentioned in your books. Pierre-Antoine Carpentier was born three hundred and twelve years ago in Bordeaux, to Marie and Joseph Carpentier. Was a mason by trade, journeyman level, never attained a mastery. Until about sixteen-eighty-one, when any reports or mentions of him vanish."

A Storm mason?

That was... interesting.

Dockyards and ports were havens for criminals, though that much she probably should've guessed on her own. "One of my books mentions him as a friend of my own country's Regnant Sophia Alekseyevna, in sixteen-eighty-five."

The man could only shrug. "Then he wasn't here for those years, or if he was I have yet to find anything about it. I can tell you he didn't remain in Bordeaux for those years."

Well, the vacation was only just barely half over with. Sonya was happy enough she had a beginning point at least, and she knew where her next heist would take place if at all possible. "I will continue to pay you to check into it, at least for another two weeks. Even if you find nothing else, I am well satisfied with what you've found for me already."

It wasn't likely there was more to find on the civilian side, but it was possible there might be
"Looking for anything in particular? So I know what to focus on?"

Valid questions, she supposed. Sonya wouldn't be telling him anything really interesting, but…

"Foreign friends of his, preferably those he met or was noted for dealing with after this disappearing point. Carpentier was part of a highly secretive group of individuals I am interested in, but I only have his name to work from."

"I have to admit this is probably the strangest assignment I've ever taken, Mrs. de Mort." Rémy Sartre, the name of her private detective she probably should remember, admitted as he marked down her interests for later review. "Locating a long-dead man? Wouldn't this be more of a historian's field?"

"I could go hire one of those, if you prefer?"

Sartre gave a wry little chuckle. "Please no, I rather like the easy casework you want to pay for. Much easier than most of my usual."

"I'm on vacation, you can do the footwork for me while I am." Sonya admitted blandly with a shrug.

"Happy to do so."

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(Tuesday the 20th of August, 1968. Marseille, French Republic.)

Sonya tiredly glanced up at the next visitor to her little café table, getting rapidly fed up with Tatiana's drive to find her a man, and was pleasantly surprised.

"I don't know if you knew about this or not but thank you for being male this time."

A remarkably manly appearing Viper looked highly amused as he slipped into the seat across from her, using French just as fluidly as she could. "Mou... you're welcome, I suppose. I didn't expect to see you around these parts."

"We're on vacation, don't worry about it." The thief sighed, flipping a page in her book. "Me and Tats, our elder foster sister."

"The redhead." The Mist asked, or more like commented, with a tilt of his head to where the woman in question was.

"Mmm."

No wonder Viper didn't have to scare or unnerve yet another guy in order to do whatever this was supposed to be, Tatiana had gotten distracted from trying to set her little sister up on a semi-decent date by the latest arrivals to the café.

She looked entirely too happy to flirt with the newest visitor to the little coffee shop, and he looked perfectly willing to flirt back.

Sonya wished her the joy of it, but she would just like a few minutes of uninterrupted reading time.

"I think I am going to continue to associate with your brother." Viper informed her bluntly, the
liquid in his teacup making lazy circles without any obvious reason for it. "It's rare enough I find someone that isn't bothered by me switching between genders at will, and one that amuses me is even rarer."

She gave him a blank look.

"No objection?"

"You probably know full well he's a pacifist by now. With him you'll never have a 'monster' in your pocket to intimidate or cow others with."

"I am aware, thank you." Was the short reply, and the Mist inspected her for a long moment. "Is that it? No threats, warnings, attempts to intimidate?"

"He's his own person. If he wants you as a friend, then so be it." Sonya remarked idly, waving the semi-accusation off. "The only warning I am ever giving you was already given, there is no point to go back over old ground again."

It was actually good news for her, that Cherep might be getting another criminal as a friend. If he really had a serious problem with criminal types like or worse than her that he had been biting his tongue about for whatever reason, then he wouldn't be amenable to Viper's friendship.

Not a worry she had held for years, but reassurance was always nice.

Viper snorted, harsher than the thief could make the same sound as even with her slightly husky voice. "I think I like those of your type, so straightforward and unfussy. You and your brother are spoiling me for normal social conventions, mou."

"And to think, everything you've probably read or heard about us warned you to stay very far away."

"Very true. I will admit to a moment of anxiety when I realized you both were being honest about what you were."

It was the thief's turn to snort. "Your brain broke."

"It was surprising." The Mist defended himself pointedly, and with a touch of irritation. "I had never before met any of your type, and those old warnings are very specific about what would happen between those like you and those like me."

"I suppose that's reasonable." Sonya was forced to admit after a moment. "I feel I should warn you both my brother and I are unusual for our type. He's even rarer than I am, and I am enough of another to be less… violent, than the norm."

"Obviously." Viper intoned dryly with a wickedly sharp looking smirk. "I understood that not five seconds after you were finished 'bothering' with me."

Waving that off, because for one it was true and another she didn't really care if it had offended him or not, the thief silently turned back to her book.

With Viper in the seat across from her, Tatiana would likely assume either she had a really girly taste in men or finally met someone she didn't mind being near her. Either way, the nurse would leave her alone for however long the Mist decided to hang about.

"...nothing to say?"
"I fail to understand why people must insist on making conversation with statements that have no real answer or reply for them. So, no."

"Mou… having a full conversation with you must be annoying."

"Thankfully, you're not trying to be my friend. Just my brother's. Lucky you, hmm?"

Viper gave a prissy little sniff, raising his cooling tea to his touch too full looking lips. "Lucky me, indeed."

Sonya probably would never come to like him much, but as long as Cherep was happy with it she'd at least try for being non-hostile to the Mist user. If he could be useful, she might even go so far as to be mildly friendly.

Viper seemed to have as little interest in her in return, so it balanced out.

(Friday the 23rd of August, 1968. A hotel, Marseille, French Republic.)

"This should not be this hard."

"Tats… maybe I'm just happier this way?"

Tatiana glared over at her, visibly disgruntled. "But you never look very happy, little sis. I want to see you blissed out, or sappy sighing I can tease you over, or just even just willing to smile more often than… that."

"That' what?" Sonya asked in confusion, because all the redhead was waving at was her entire upper body.

"Your blank face. Or I suppose it could be called 'I can't care less' face. The expression you normally have on when doing whatever."

"Because I don't like people?" The thief suggested honestly. "Most of them are… eh."

"You have to go through some coal to find a diamond, Sonya."

"While that's nice and all, I'm seventeen Tats. I have time to look, in a broader pool than just whoever is close by at any one time." As long as she didn't die shortly after she turned twenty again.

She didn't intend to die anytime soon, but that hadn't really mattered much in that first ending.

Flouncing onto her bed, Tatiana took Sonya down with her into a pile of limbs and hair. "Le sigh, fine. Be the old spinster in a young body. If you get a whole houseful of cats, though, I'm going to bribe one of your hotties to screw you a couple times."

"I don't really like cats much. Maybe a dog." The thief suggested idly, picking strands of red hair out of her mouth and trying to shift away.

Cherep had been adorkable and all as a kid, but Shamal's puppy looks still beat him out by a bit.

The nurse wasn't letting go, however. "That's not reassuring, Sonya. I want you to be happy."
"I am happy. I get to spend time with you. The manhunt thing is irritating, but it's still time with you."

"...that's sappy. And awesome." Tatiana commented slowly, squeezing her squirming sister.

"You know, the more you try to foist a man off on me the less time we have together."

"It's amazing you think that way, but not getting you off this hook." She informed her cheerfully with another squeeze. "Now, what do you like to see in a man? Not just for kinky fun, I mean in someone you wouldn't mind maybe interacting with."

"...not a wimp." She decided on solidly, trying to make herself comfortable now that her sister wasn't in the mood to let her go without a fight. She could maybe put up with it for a little while. "Not someone who would be scared of me either, once they know about the Cloud thing or that I can crush bones with either hand. I've had more than enough of that as it is."

"Tough one..."

"Yeah... I know. Someone I can talk to, not just because of Omertà but if I want advice or to share something I don't need to think of different ways to sanitize my life in order to do so."

"...that nearly completely takes any and all civilians out of the question, you realize. Maybe a few rare ones on the edge, but..." Tatiana sighed gustily into Sonya's hair, pressing her face into the back of the thief's neck. "Yeah, okay. I can see that one too. Anything else?"

"Not really, no. I don't care much in the first place, Tats. And making myself get over it in order to actually bother caring takes too much effort for short flings with no-named men I'll never see again."

"Why do you have to be so logical about this? It's lust, it's not supposed to be logical."

"That's nice." She suddenly slipped out of her hold, ignoring her sister's yelp of surprise and bolted for her own room. "Not the point, though!"

She got halfway across their suite before the nurse recovered enough to give chase, and she did managed to close and lock her door before her elder sister crashed into her.

Sonya forgot her bathroom was connected to both her bedroom and the main living room though, and the redhead darted through before she could remember that. "Got ya!"

The thief huffed a wry laugh as they hit the floor, which wasn't nearly as comfortable as Tatiana's bed. "Ow... really?"

"But I love you, Sonya. I want to show that love, isn't it wonderful?"

"You know, Cherep tried nearly the same line a few months before this. Want to know what I told him?"

"I think I can guess." She admitted with a laugh, even so not letting her go. "But Cherep's a dork and you love me best, right?"

"...well, Cherep's not the one holding me hostage on my own bedroom floor."

"I see how it is. Fine then, we'll have to see if you're ticklish."

Sonya blinked up at her sister. "I actually don't know. I flinch too much from someone else touching me as it is to find out."
"...well, this just got depressing in a fast hurry."

"But it was fun, right? Why would we need a man for this kind of fun?"

Tatiana pursed her lips to try and hide a smile. "You really are adorably sappy sometimes, Sonya. Fine, we don't need a man for you. We're still finding out if you're ticklish or not."

"Um..."

"Not a good response. Let's start with the feet, shall we?"

"If I kick you, it's your own damn fault."

"...damn it."

(Saturday the 31st of August, 1968. A Mafia Land Ferry.)

Rémy Sartre, her PI, couldn't find much else as interesting or as helpful as what he had managed halfway through the month Sonya and Tatiana were spending in France.

Frankly, the thief didn't really care too much about the lack of things he was able to supply her with beyond the basics.

Birthplace and his parents were more than enough to start with. She even had Pierre-Antoine Carpentier's civilian occupation, his master in masonry, and some of the projects he had worked on officially. It was twice the amount she had figured he'd be able to give her.

She made a note about the detective to give to Björn, if they needed anything out of France a civilian could help with in the future.

Sartre did good work for so little available information. Too bad he was a former law enforcement officer.

"I owe you an apology, by the way."

Sonya blinked, and jerked her head up from the folder of scant few details Sartre had given over when she paid him. "What?"

Tatiana looked highly amused, and a touch regretful. "I... uh, forgot."

"Forgot what?"

"That you didn't share much of your preferred leisure activities with me. Like back when we were kids, Sonya. You didn't really like playing with me, because I always wanted to play dress up or tea party and you would've rather read quietly for a couple hours." The nurse admitted sheepishly, sinking onto the bench next to her on the ferry taking them back to Mafia Land. "It's been a couple years, and I had forgotten to remember you are a lot more self-contained than I am."

"It's fine, Tats. It was interesting, if slightly irritating occasionally. I got a few things done I've been meaning to for years, you got a healthy amount of weight finally, and we got our line-less tan, right? Goal reached."

Her elder sister smirked wryly. "And got to spend uninterrupted time together."
"…mostly." She snickered as the other woman playfully knocked their shoulders together, jostling what she was trying to read over. "Doing things that were weird, and strange, and I have no idea why you would pay someone to do your nails… still. Why do people do that?"

"To be fussed over, or pampered. You get your haircut at a salon, don't you? Same principle."

Running a hand through her now shoulder-length hair, the thief snorted softly. "That's different. A hair cut will last months, nails only last a night or two."

Slouching into her and ignoring the pinch to her side in retaliation, the nurse huffed back. "Then for the pampering aspect."

"Why pay someone else when I can do it better?"

"…really?"

Sonya took her sister's hand into her own, inspecting her nails. "Yeah. I'd charge you less, too."

Tatiana's flat look was confusing. "…if you do pedicures as well, I will declare you the best little sister ever."

The thief looked down at their feet. "…we wear boots. Mostly. Why…?"

"Don't worry about it. Well?"

"…I can learn, if it means that much to you."

Throwing her arms around her, the nurse smashed their cheeks together. "Bestest little sister ever. I'm so sorry I ever used your social incompetence for a laugh. Or three… or seven."

"…wait, you did what?"

"Yeah… about that offer I told you we gave to Fong, and you brought up in front of Renato…? Uh… I should probably tell you something about that…"

(Monday the 2nd of September, 1968. Mafia Land.)

"Do I need to formally invite you to Vongola's Christmas Ball this year, or what?"

Sonya blinked up at Renato in bemusement, lowering the history text she had been reading in order to give him more of her attention. "Do you think Nono Vongola would mind if I did not attend the party but was there anyways?"

The flat look the hitman aimed in her direction told her nothing about whatever he was thinking. "…yes. Yes, he would mind. Well?"

"…I suppose I will go with you this year too." At least until she could get that permission to skip the festivities somehow. If she could.

All Christmases ever, bratty Mist had demanded. Not likely going to happen, because all of them ever would be a lot of years to cover and physically impossible aside.

He'd probably forget about it in a few years, and she could maybe go back to sending him presents
instead of attending social events she didn't want to attend.

"Thank you for not jumping for joy, or anything."

"You are welcome? Why thank me for that?"

He huffed at her, sulking in his chair.

She was utterly confused. What was eating at him now?

He had been weirdly irked the whole five minutes they had been here, either glaring at her or the direction of the café's kitchen. Shamal had said something about this… but it was very odd to witness for herself.

She made a mental note to tip their waitress very well, she was at least not cowering under the pissed off hitman's glare. That kind of dedication to her job deserved a reward.

Sudden movement made the thief return her attention to her tablemate, who had straighten up in his chair and was looking a touch apologetic until he noticed her stare. "What?"

"…nothing."

Ignoring the new hole being stared into her, she returned her attention to her book.

Miss Iron-guts delicately placed a cup of Spiced Black Russian Tea and a cup of espresso down before them, giving the two of them a timid smile before leaving them to it.

Maybe not iron guts, but a steel spine?

Some brass ones, for sure.

Renato snorted into his drink, putting it down quickly before he burned himself. "Sonya…"

"Yes?"

"…did you have fun?"

"With Tats? Sure. Even better when she stopped trying to set me up on dates for random one-night stands." She also got information for her research and something to replace her bracers with.

All in all, a good little mini-break for Bjørn to calm down within.

"She… you…? …I have to see this. Give me your arm."

The thief gave him a flat look. "I did not say that aloud either."

A queer expression crossed his face, half suspicion and half incredulous. "…I will deal with that in a moment. Give me your damn arm, woman."

Sighing, the thief held out her left arm.

Renato carefully pushed up her loose sleeve to see the thin steel chains linking from a bracelet to a clasp on her bicep, which had several mini weapons of war stuck on the strong magnets linked into the chains.

All in neat little rows, from a further reduced in size set of Bec de Corbins to a series of hammers and
a couple axes and halberds.

The hitman burst out laughing.

With another sigh, she tugged one of her new Bec de Corbins off the magnet that kept them secured to the chain and nearly effortlessly enlarged it. It originally was about the size of the tip to the first joint of her thumb and making that into a six-foot long polearm was surprisingly easy.

She had thought the smaller they were, the harder it would be to make them full-sized. In actuality, since there was less mass to deal with it was just more of her Flames in nature instead of metal and more Flames imbuing that as well as the needed Flames. A third less difficult, in other words.

Tatiana challenged her to prove if it was harder or not, and so she had extra mini-weapons now.

As well as her original seven miniaturized Bec de Corbins she still had tucked into her pockets. Sonya wasn't sure where she would ever use the axes, other than intimidation or for cutting things in her way, but since she could throw a hammer with the force of a speeding car?

It wasn't like blades made her deadlier. It was actually just more useful.

The halberds were Tatiana's suggestion, since she had hammers on a pole already. Pointing out a Bec de Corbin was a pick, not a hammer, didn't gain her a lot of understanding.

She got the axes on a pole as well.

All she needed was a maul, and she'd have most everything that could be stuck on a pike.

…except for a spear, and a gun.

Again, she could throw a hammer with more force. As for the dagger on a pike… no.

There were sharp ends on her Bec de Corbins, more than enough for her.

Sonya really did wonder how Cloud Flame copies actually hit something. Her new weapons, once resized, were basically barely a fraction of metal. The rest was what?

Will-fire?

…if Tatiana's suggestion on her hurting/not hurting herself dilemma proved true, that was very… interesting.

"Sonya, stop admiring your arsenal of jewelry."

"Really? We are still calling it my arsenal?"

The hitman snorted dryly, a lingering stubborn smirk on his face. "You have more than enough weapons to wage a small-scale war, in close-quarters no less. What else could we call it?"

"But they're not jeweled." The thief protested, showing him the sides of her Bec de Corbin's head. "And I am not limited by the reach of my weapons, I throw some too."

"…and that's terrifying," Renato commented slowly, eyeing where he likely marked out her hammers were, "but beside the point. I bet you plan on bejeweling them."

Well… "…yes, and?"
"That's my point. It's an arsenal of jewelry."

She considered it for a long moment. "…I have more points than you do, and I do not wish to call it that."

"…touché, little lady Sonya." He admitted wickedly, unbothered by her claim. "But I can assure you it will still be called so even if you don't want it to be."

At this rate, everyone on Mafia Land will end up afraid of her damn jewelry box as much as the thief herself.

…there was irony in there she did not appreciate.

He almost choked on his air, slamming a fist into their table and almost upsetting their cooled drinks as he hacked out a rather painful sounding laugh.

Sonya was alarmed enough to let go of her weapon's Propagation and look around for Miss Brass Ones, for a glass of water or something.

Well, he had espresso still. It was likely cold now, it was edging into fall and Mafia Land itself was far enough south it was rather nippy outside.

That, unfortunately, made her remember the last week of sunbathing in France. When it had rained suddenly with a weird cold-snap that chilled the skin. Tatiana had not appreciated it and plastered her front to her sister's back for the warmth.

Which was stupid, because as a Sun she had a higher body-temp than the Storm-Cloud did.

The hitman almost choked on what little air he had again.

…what the ever-loving fuck was wrong with him now?

She hadn't even said anything... oh.

Renato went weirdly still, holding his breath to stop the jerking his diaphragm was trying to do.

"...huh."

He gave her a wary look.

"...you need more practice not reacting to what you lift out of someone else's head. I was not aware you could do that with memories just as much as random questions or thoughts that popped into my mind."

The hitman stared at her for another long moment. "...that's it?"

"Should there be more?"

"In my defense, you are a very blunt woman." He pointed out without a trace of sheepishness for getting caught picking up her thoughts. "Like most Clouds, really."

Did he have to keep comparing her to a pure Cloud Flame user?

She wasn't, she was pretty sure that was a solidly well-known fact by now.

"I didn't know it bothered you."
"I rather intensely dislike the 'all Flames of this type must be…' junk. It is not true, and yet it keeps being repeated to my face as if it is fact. Like I am deformed or a freak for not being a true Cloud."

He looked thoughtful at her protest.

"Like saying all Suns must be healers. It works for Tats, but I do not think you would like to be one yourself."

"Point." Renato admitted sourly. "I've heard that one a few times myself."

Sonya would just appreciate it if people would stop repeating propaganda to her face and actually consider why it was 'widely-known' that certain Flame types did certain things.

Almost everyone in Mafia Land avoided even brushing up against her now, and while she did appreciate the no longer being jostled thing… she hated the fact people flinched from her. If she hated that they did so, she was irritable and not happy if they had to interact with her.

An unhappy Cloud meant one unwilling to behave or compromise, meaning they were stubborn and rude back to the cowards flinching from them.

Thus 'all Clouds were violent and abrasive'.

How was she any different than a year ago?

Two?

Had she snapped and murdered someone for being rude to her then?

"I didn't quite catch all that… but what I did makes sense." He informed her with a thoughtful frown. "But you're going to be fighting against popular opinion to try and change that… and humans all hate being proven wrong."

"I am not going to." She was a Cloud, even if only partially. She couldn't get the motivation or energy to try and re-educate someone or lots of some ones without violence being added to the mix somehow. They were being ignorant and stupid, so she couldn't bother herself over them.

Vicious circle, that.

"Speaking of, try staying out of my head. Please." Sonya informed him tartly. "I do not mind the occasional answer or such, but that is a little rude."

"…I'm trying. But I need practice, and the only way to do so is reading a mind or two and figuring it out from there." Renato admitted with an absent kind of shrug. "Since you are so blunt, it's easier with you to try gauging how well I'm doing. Shamal works too, but he's… childish. And all over the place."

The thief flatly stared at him. "You could have just asked."

"And you would let me poke about your thoughts just like that?"

She raised an eyebrow, and he held up a finger.

"Point."

"Just do not try for any fishing expeditions about me or my family. Do so, and I do not care."
The Sun snorted at her. "Like asking how you ended up with Tatiana and purple boy…? Oh… fuck. Sonya, I'm-

"Shut. Up."

He did so, and she really was only half surprised by that.

She breathed in heavily through her nose, then pushed herself to her feet when that didn't help at all. "I need a moment. Excuse me."

"Sonya-"

The still sharp end of her very tiny Bec de Corbin punctured flesh when her fist clamped down on it in a rather desperate strive for control. "Excuse me, Renato."

"I… sure." The hitman settled on finally, pressing the fedora down further on his head as she walked away. "…shit."

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 2nd of September, 1968 continued. Mafia Land.)

"You are bleeding."

"I am aware of that, Fong."

The martial artist easily kept up with the strangely stilted behaving Russian Storm-Cloud, wondering what had set her off.

Not that he had much to go on about her 'normal' behavior, other than rumors he was certain barely had a glancing contact with truth.

What little he did know, using his own childhood behavior before he learned to control himself, was that she was likely heading away from the more populate parts of the island in order to reduce the likelihood of collateral damage.

Fong was a little impressed. It had taken him years to learn how to do it when enraged, and he only had one Flame type.

Sonya had Cloud as well, which should've made her uncaring of anyone that got in her way if angry enough.

…and yet she was still heading to a hopefully unpopulated area.

There was little of that on a manmade island, but there were the training fields and a whole stretch of island forest that would be suitably out of the way. He really did wonder if she would make it.

From the cracks that were starting to spider web out on the asphalt from her footfalls, he doubted it.

Thankfully this was at least much different than their last few meetings. He wasn't sure if not meeting her eyes was because he didn't want to suddenly be a target for her or if because of what he had not been able to avoid thinking about when…

"I believe I owe you a spar." He blurted out possibly a touch too quickly.

She came to a jerky halt and shifted grey eyes to him. "…now?"
"Why not?"

"…then I really hope you were not overly optimistic about your chances to dodge."

Fong blinked, then sharply dove out of the way when a couple pounds of metal whistled through the air where his head had been.

It, whatever it had been, hit a semi-dilapidated building a few meters down the lane and caused it to cave in on itself with an ear-splitting crash before he got a decent look at it.

…and that was new.

Maybe he should've gotten a better, fuller, estimation of what she could do before challenging a violently pissed off Storm-Cloud to a spar.

Well… this would be interesting.
A blur of red had an ax thrown at where the head should’ve been and in a way, Sonya was vaguely glad Fong really was hard to hit even as half the shattered palm tree crashed to the ground under the force of the impact.

Vaguely.

Really, all she wanted was to cave in his skull.

Knowing that was not really the best idea and separating out her desire to do it as bad was a touch hard right now.

The Triad member might be an expert in martial arts and all that, but he had a bad habit of not watching his surroundings just as much as his opponent. Fong managed to get himself clear of her next swing with a one-handed flip, skipping past the halberd's bladed side by a hair's breadth.

However, when the ax head buried itself into the ground it nicked a water main and the man ended up throwing himself backwards through the likely painful spray of dirty water to avoid the Bec de Corbin in her other hand about to impale his stomach.

Annoyingly fast apparently described him all over.

Her trick with the pipe almost let Sonya remove his head with another hammer. Almost. He dodged it the last second possible, letting it shoot off into the overgrown palm and bamboo forest instead of trying to catch it.

He had tried that only once, his own hands clad in red fire, and was keeping far away from any of her other 'leftover' weapons since.

Fong uttered a rather nasty swear word in Chinese under his breath, dashing the rusty water out of his eyes. "Where are you keeping all of that?"

Not in the mood to answer or even just stop, the thief Prorogated a new ax to replace the halberd in her left and tried an overhead swing with her pick on a pole aided by a little jump.

By 'little jump' she really meant one only a story or so in height.

Ducking under her, the Triad member finally closed into her guard but only managed to kick away her new ax before the staff part of her Bec de Corbin impacted his stomach and threw him away from her again.

His expression, a crossed between disgruntled and resigned, when he looked up only to see her hefting a new hammer made her crack a smirk.

"This… probably was not my best idea."

"Giving up?" It would be a pity… even if this wasn't making her feel any better the high from a good fight would at least help a bit.

"No… I think I can keep going." Fong reassured her evenly, slowly rising back up to his full height.
"And, since you are rational now, I will no longer hold back."

"Now?" Sonya echoed a bit hollowly. "Fong, I am always rational."

"Now," he reaffirmed strongly, "you are at least thinking instead of just trying to hit me with anything pointy or lethal. The trick with the water pipe, for example."

The thief huffed, wry amusement clashing rather painfully with a large dose of irritation and a tiny bit of hurt. "Bring it, then."

Fong's next kick broke through the haft of her latest Bec de Corbin. Sonya dropped the Cloud Flame leaking ruins and multiplied a new one once his leg was clear, only mildly annoyed she missed the man's shins with the hammer end.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 2nd of September, 1968 continued. Mafia Land.)

"You… did… WHAT?"

"I may have pissed off your sister." Renato repeated himself irritably, rubbing at the back of his neck sheepishly under the redhead's surprised gape. "What would be a good 'I'm sorry' present she won't cram into someplace uncomfortable if I have?"

Tatiana stared at him flatly for another long moment, then glanced over to the far end of the island where a couple suspicious dust clouds were starting to rise.

There were the occasional shakes that made footing slightly unstable, like the tremors that usually only happened when the floating island hit rough patches of sea. Which made it rather pointedly clear someone was doing some unscheduled demolition work in the old sector of the island.

It had been intended to be leveled out and redeveloped anyways, as that was the original site of Mafia Land's port city before the new sea/air complex had been built half an island away.

Occasionally some weapon testing went on over there. There might even be a few corpses or body parts left to rot dotting the ground. Although it generally was mostly abandoned.

He wasn't really sure what that said about Sonya's temperament or self-control, but he wasn't going anywhere near there unless he had major backup or a really good excuse.

From the expression on the nurse's face right now, she wasn't supplying him with either. "My little sister, Sonya? You pissed off Sonya? …how? She barely cares most days!"

The hitman wasn't really sure how he did either.

Obviously, the main part would be that he went and did something she had asked him not to. The only thing she had ever asked him not to, but even what he could sort of lift out of her mind…

The rage hadn't kicked in on her own memories, which was where Renato was a little confused.

If not pissed he now knew her sordid little history as an abandoned little waif, and Tatiana's own history as an orphaned girl only sparked irritation?

Their foster brother's situation, which he only got a bit of a sickening type of horror out of Sonya's head, had to be what made the thief shut her mind down. It was also probably why she had asked him not to, which…
Yeah, just an 'I'm sorry' probably wasn't going to cut it.

All he knew of the thief's likes was she preferred spicy tea to coffee, ate mostly plain or buttered toast for breakfast if she couldn't have eggs and bacon, enjoyed spoiling a baby Mist with whatever he wanted to do, and reading and endless series of books. Most of that was of no help to him, and hiding behind Shamal was just... no.

The damn brat might just throw a fit at him for upsetting her as it was.

God only knew how many books she had, and what kind she preferred. Getting her the obvious also was rather... tawdry, and cheap, and might not mitigate some of the damage he had just done.

"Oh... God. Look, you're talking to the wrong sibling." Tatiana claimed desperately, putting a palm to her forehead to hide the slightly pained expression. "I've never dealt with Sonya in so much as a bad mood, it's like she doesn't have any. Or if she does, she internalizes it until you can't tell. Cherep-
"

"I know about your foster brother." Renato supplied when she cut herself off sharply and almost bit through her tongue. "Met him, even. Twice."

"...and she didn't kill you for that." The nurse commented with a measure of bemusement, her attention more inward than on him. "Huh... yeah, that's right. How the hell did you pull that one off?"

He stared at her blankly. Somehow, she was practically radiating a keen sense of curiosity.

"Sonya's always been weirdly and overly protective of him." She explained with a shrug, waving one hand when he didn't feed her curiosity. "Like ever since we were kids and the two of them met. At first Sonya didn't even like sharing her best friend with me and I'm her damn sister, just became his too. If the two of you met more than once, and she didn't threaten to disembowel you if you breathed a word of his existence to anyone, she must really like you even if you did manage to piss her off."

"That is of no help."

"That's the only help I'm giving you." She snapped in a rare fit of temper. "You ticked off my baby sister. No one has ever made it up to Sonya after they've pissed her off... but that might just be because she tends to break finger bones when irritated. And that was just with fellow thieves."

His own fingers twitched, but if it was the thought of a vexed thief breaking them or in wish for his gun to shoot something with was debatable. With a deep sigh, and settling his hat more firmly on his head, the Italian tried to think of anything Sonya might appreciate enough as an apology present that she wouldn't try physically harming him with it.

"I'm going to go see what the damage is." Tatiana claimed irritably, giving the hitman a narrow glare. "If you managed to make her cry... so help me I'll... I'll... I'll tell our foster father."

"That has to be the most pathetic threat I've been given yet."

"You don't know our foster father. Where do you think Sonya got her 'break their hands if they piss you off' tick from? Again, we're mostly thieves."

...and this was a man that managed to make a Cloud, however strangely behaving, respect him enough to emulate in her own way. Actually, that might be a better than average threat on second thought.
The nurse tossed him one last pithy glare, then all but bolted her way to the distant but still audible crashes and thumps going on halfway across the island.

That… had been of little use to him. Renato gritted his teeth and stalked off for the hospital, mentally calling himself three different kind of an idiot for finally managing to find one of Sonya's few hot buttons then slamming it hard.

He'd report Tatiana as dealing with an issue, family or syndicate or whatever would help the girls more. Whoever would want to get short with him about the whereabouts of one of their nurses could go try to deal with pissed off Russian Storm-Cloud with her.

What did she gift him with as an apology all those years ago?

…candy. Toffee filled with espresso liqueur.

He drew a hand down his face, thinking hard as he walked. He was mostly sure there wasn't any kind of candy in existence that used the Russian's preferred drink as a flavoring, and she didn't really like sweets that often anyways. At least, she turned down sampling Shamal's tooth-decay inviting concoctions rather easily.

Why did he have to tick off the most practical woman in existence?

Had it been anyone else flowers or a shiny bit of jewelry probably would've done the trick… but Sonya only viewed flowers as occasionally useful and she was a thief so if she didn't have everything she already wanted in jewelry she could just go steal more.

He blinked as an idea occurred to him. Which, frankly, would either go really badly or really well in his attempts to find something to bribe Sonya with into listening to an apology without trying for his head.

…but in hindsight, possibly irritating her sister and maybe insulting the scary-factor of her foster father probably wasn't going to win him any points either.

Good thing this would take a few days. Letting her cool off from a rare bout of rage sounded like a smart move all around.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 2nd of September, 1968 continued. Mafia Land.)

A less violently enraged Storm-Cloud meant Fong was no longer risking decapitation by Sonya's multitude of weaponry, but also that she was using the environment just as much as her steel to trip him up.

He really, really wanted to know where she kept all that.

At the current count fifty-three hammers, twenty-six gold-bladed axes, eleven halberds of , and nineteen of those pike-ended long hammers in various hues had made an appearance and he was able to note. He still couldn't tell which ones were real and which weren't.

Some had been shattered into wisps of Cloud Flames, some just broke on impact, most of the hammers had ended up being thrown, and the Russian was still pulling more out.

She took the brunt of another kick onto the flat edge of an ax. Letting it slip from her hands easily enough, but a flash of Cloud Flames replaced the ax with a hammer that Fong had to backflip in
order to avoid getting clocked in the jaw by. He kicked that one out of her hand again, and instead of risk a broken wrist or hand she merely let him without a fuss, again.

Normally, one tended to try avoiding being disarmed in a fight. His latest opponent didn't bother trying to avoid it.

Especially since she could apparently make more on demand.

He really did wonder if she learned how to create specific types of weapons in an instant just to fight with, or if she had copies of those weapons on her. If she had copies, he couldn't spot them.

Back flipping to avoid another of those long and slim warhammers with the pikes as it crashed down hammer end first, he tried for a leg sweep.

The thief pole-vaunted back out of his reach before he made contact with her, and when he kicked in the shaft of her seemingly preferred weapon she just made a few twisting flips of her own to springboard off a palm tree's stout trunk and come back after him with a long-handled ax.

Fong jumped backwards to get clear, he had to. The ground had a nasty habit of conforming to her wish, and unstable footing tended to work more against him than her.

Unfortunately, that also meant he lost sight of the Russian as dust and dirt flew up in response to the force used. As a thief, Sonya could likely sneak up on just about anything. He was proving no real challenge to her sneaking skills as it was, once she started using them too.

Mildly vexing thing to learn mid-spar, but at least it was a spar and not a real fight. Additionally, he should be just happy she hadn't thought to try it when she was still mainly aiming for his head with those hammers.

He barely jerked out of the way of an overhead swing of her favored weapon that shot out of the cloud of dust concealing everything, a split second too late not to get nicked by the sharp pick on the face. She reversed her grip, yanking the metal downward with obscene force, and he only belatedly caught on to the different sheen of metal in this one compared to the rest of her arsenal before it impacted the ground.

Again, he got the hell out of the way. He lost sight of her again, but at least that new crater didn't have him at the bottom.

"I… recognize… that… one." Fong forced out evenly, using the next few seconds of grace to recover his breath as he tried picking her out of the dust cloud.

"You should… I used it against you in Shanghai." Sonya returned blandly from right in front of him, still barely breathing hard. "I have three… on me."

He slid backwards to duck under her swing at his upper body, coursing Storm Flames through his palm in order to catch the shaft of this weapon.

It was different, might mean trying to overpower her Flames with his own might not end up exploding the copy in his grip.

Weirdly, the metal actually rejected his Flames and refused to melt or dispel the newest Cloud copy. He actually expected it to explode again, but the non-reaction took him off-guard.

The Storm was left flat-footed and holding onto the pole of one of Sonya's weapons, and she was physically stronger than her frame suggested. She threw him away, heaving him up off his feet and
over her head without so much as a grunt of effort.

He hit the ground hard, using his momentum to roll into a somersault and back up to his feet before the queer metal polearm impacted where he had hit. She darted in shortly after that, retaking possession of the weapon and just yanking it up out of the hard-packed dirt without issue.

After it had been sunk into about a good foot of solid earth.

There was something entirely unfair of a woman that slim being able to do that.

At least his opponent was a bit awkward with the weighted ends of her staffs still, he only made the mistake of breaking the head off one once. Once was more than enough as far as his ribs were concerned, but he was curious enough to want to see her actually use a staff instead of the polearms she favored now.

Ducking under her next swing, Fong tried disarming her again. The heel of his palm hit the shaft of this weapon, but Sonya didn't let go as easily as she had for the rest of her weaponry. A jolt of pain went up his arm as she held her ground, and the force behind the blow forced him backwards instead.

Then he had to fumble a rather graceless stumble backwards when the thief recovered her balance before he could and swung it at him again.

Was he actually getting somewhere in trying to tire her out?

He had no idea, but the appearance of a 'real' weapon and her unwillingness to part from it might be suggesting she was finally reaching her limits.

It could also be that was a favorite weapon, and she didn't want to go hunting for it later.

Before the martial artist could get back on both feet she slammed a booted heel into the dirt underfoot, breaking it up and causing him another graceless tumble in response.

"SONYA!"

The thief paused, a puzzled expression appearing on her dirt-streaked face. "…Tats. Sorry, Fong. I think we… are going to have to… call it good for now."

"I am… alright with that." He claimed lightly, since now that there was a much longer pause his injuries were starting to complain.

Like the probably cracked ribs, and the burns on his left hand and side.

He hadn't managed to dodge everything she had thrown at him in a fit of pique. He had originally tried using his Storm Flames to melt anything that got too close, but that had only made them explode in his face. His Storm and her Cloud apparently did not like to mix well.

"Like holy f-ing crap, woman! What the hell? Did you decide to make your way to the other side of the island or something? I could've waited for you back at the hospital at this rate!"

The woman in question peered back the way they had come curiously through the settling dust, wincing at the wide swath of broken trees and crater impacts that now dotted the landscape slowly becoming apparent. "Err… shit."

An entirely too painful to be worth it snort escaped Fong, and he tried breathing in deeply to keep
himself from continuing.

Sonya was a very destructive fighter, especially when it came to her surroundings. Her sister was likely just following the trail of destruction right to them.

Tatiana's fiery red hair did finally stumble into the newly made clearing with the rest of the nurse, and she planted her hands on her hips and inspected the two of them. "Hello, Muscles. Tell me where it hurts you two."

"I think I might have done something wrong to my knee." Started his opponent blandly, still standing exactly where she had stopped when she heard the older Russian's voice but now leaning on the haft of her weapon for support. "And… my foot, but that wasn't my fault."

He had stomped on it to prevent a decapitation by ax earlier on, and with her wearing boots he might have done it a bit too hard to ensure she felt it enough to jerk away.

"I… have broken ribs. And burns." It was the worst of his, besides a litter of tiny cuts and bruises from shrapnel back in the abandoned urban part of the island.

Broken dirt rarely had anything more than a handful of pebbles, which had been why he lured the Storm-Cloud out into the undeveloped part of the island instead of deal with collapsing buildings as their arena.

"Ooh… ribs, I have bruised ones… I think." The thief continued, breathing in deeply to check the feel of hers. "Yeah… bruised at least."

"I… may have broken something in my hand." Fong chipped in, inspecting the palm he had tried knocking the last weapon out of her hands with.

That was going to be an ugly bruise in itself, and since Sonya refused to budge under the hit he may have cracked something.

"Okay, the mutual injury admiration society will need to adjourn for a bit." The nurse snapped only really half as irritable as she sounded, since the martial artist was sure most of that was worry given the glances she shot her sister. "Take a seat, Sonya. I'll get to you in a moment."

She blinked at her, looked around at their slightly unstable surroundings, and simply sprawled out on the dirt instead of risk leaning up against an unstable palm tree or jut of crumbly dirt. Her weapon flashed a purple tinted fire before something fell into her palm with sparkles of glitter.

Feeling a lot less embarrassed over his own tiredness, he stopped trying to sit himself up as Tatiana picked a way across the three craters that made this clearing up to him.

"I have no idea what the hell you were thinking, but thanks." She informed him quietly as bright yellow fire of her own flickered up her hands, and the nurse applied it to smoothing away the aches and pain he had acquired in distracting her sister from whatever had enraged her. "Sonya's always felt better after a semi-decent fight."

"I am not sure if I should be flattered or a little insulted." Spoke the martial artist wryly, mostly to the sky.

That was not something he was in a fast hurry to do again, be a ticked-off Cloud's target. Sonya was entirely deceptive in appearance, stronger and faster than she should be, and had a sort of ruthless intelligence and creative applications for it that made her an entirely respectable opponent.
He was just simply happy he survived right now. Although the Chinese man was not sure if he started on a more even footing against her, or at least had some idea of what she could do with her Flames in the first place, if he would have won a spar or not.

A tie against an enraged Cloud didn't sound too bad in the end.

"I think this is ruined, by the way." Tatiana spoke up after a moment, plucking at his formerly red changshan. It was now tattered, mud and dirt encrusted, and rather brownish-grey looking in spots.

"I have more." Fong shrugged that off, regretting the motion when his ribs protested.

"Take it off, I need to get at that too."

He shot her a suspicious look, but since it seemed as if Sun Flame users needed to actually see what they were doing he did as asked.

"Look you have very tasty muscles, but right now those muscles are in pain." Snapped the nurse irritably, smoothing her Flames down his side to burn away the ache there. "There are limits to where I'll go, thank you very much. And right now I want you healed so I can go take care of my sister."

The Triad member accepted that rebuke silently, merely watching closely as she pressed more Sun Flames into various cuts and bruises. Mostly out of curiosity, but slightly because he really didn't know her that well even if he understood this was out of gratitude for distracting the thief from her rage.

"There. Doctor's orders, eat something high in iron and protein then go to bed. You'll end up feeling the tiredness from healing after a few hours, be somewhere secure before that." She gave him an absent nod, then shot to her feet and over to where her sister had refused to move from.

He flexed his newly healed hand, just to see if it would twinge or even protest the movement when moments before it had been in the process of swelling up. Glancing over at the sisters, he decided to give them some privacy and remain where he was.

He would like to learn of what had twanged the Storm-Cloud's last nerve, just so he wouldn't make the same mistake in the future.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 2nd of September, 1968 continued. Mafia Land.)

"You okay?"

Sonya hummed absently, staring aimlessly at the sky and idly flicking her de-jeweled mini Bec de Corbin around her non-broken fingers.

Another shattered gem, but since she was replacing them anyways it wasn't too irritating.

Good news no one was dead, and Tatiana might be able to straighten out some of her fingers.

Bad news… how did you thank someone for not dying when you really were trying to bash his head in?

Also, the thief was pretty sure this wasn't going to help that whole 'being treated as a leper' thing going on.

Finally, ow.
Fong hit hard.

She was pretty sure she had a sprained if not broken wrist, and a few other rather irking injuries from getting kicked around that bled off the little enjoyment she had gotten from not holding back.

She was pretty much back to normal, now. A little more irritated than the norm maybe, especially at a particular Italian Mafioso of her acquaintance.

Jackass… she had specifically asked him not to do that. If he had to know of her history, she would've told him. It wasn't that shocking or horrible, she was both alive and mostly free after all, so other than really kind of a sore topic she didn't mind if others knew.

Tatiana and Cherep, on the other hand, we part of no deal she would ever make. What she knew of their family history before getting fostered with her was something she fully intended to hold Renato responsible for.

The thief did not appreciate being used to endanger her siblings. Even unintentionally.

The asshole was still a hitman, she did not ever intend to give him more help than necessary if he was ever going to go after her or her family.

"Sonya? Honey, please. Are you okay?"

"...'m fine. Tired."

"Fong managed to tire you out? You're a Cloud, shouldn't it be the other way around?"

A lack of reliance on her own muscles meant someone who actually regularly used his had more stamina in the long term than she did even after years of cheating with Cloud Flames. Sonya didn't have the energy to tell her that, so she merely limply waved the question away with her mostly shattered hand.

She still had a martial artist to deal with. At least he was being polite, in waiting for the nurse to declare it was safe and everything.

She still had a martial artist to deal with. At least he was being polite, in waiting for the nurse to declare it was safe and everything.

Slowly pushing herself upright, gingerly because her aches had aches and battered was a polite term for how she felt, the thief eventually reached a sitting position and quirked a small smile for her sister. "I'm fine. I swear. Now, anyways."

"Uh huh, that's why you're keeping to short sentences and are so limp, right?" Tatiana snorted harshly, reaching out with yellow fire licking her hands to straighten out Sonya's right fingers before they healed crooked again. "I want an explanation, sister dear. You've never been one to have a hair-trigger and we just came back from vacation, so I know you weren't bottling anything up."

"Renato is an asshole sometimes and no, not even I'm exempt from that." The thief informed her slowly, taking a deep breath after spitting the whole thing out at once.

Her ribs were bruised, for sure.

The nurse placed her hands there next, after yanking up her shirt to see her abs, and she had to breathe through the warm and itchy feeling of Sun Flames knitting bone back together.

Nope, broken ribs.

"Dearly beloved fuck, the two of you made a mess out of each other." She muttered, mostly to
Sonya's kneecap as she focused on her Flames to provide her with some medical aid. "Tall, dark, and snarky said he might have managed to piss you off, but this…? Next time I see him, I'm going to slap that ass."

"…do you mean you are going to slap the ass who is named Renato, or slap Renato's ass?" Questioned the younger Russian in bemusement, trying to sort that through her head.

With a dry little laugh, the nurse flashed her little sister a wan grin. "Both, if I feel like it."

There was an awkward cough from behind Tatiana, and Sonya gave her older sister a mildly reproving look. "You should probably stop doing that to Fong, Tats."

"But he reacts, and it's funny."

"But right now, we are very grateful he let me try to take his head off with sharp and pointy thing. Especially since he did not die doing it."

"Technically, they were mainly flat and mostly hammer-shaped. Not so much pointy and sharp. And you are welcome." Fong chipped in as he made a slow meandering path to the sisters around the craters, taking more than enough time to be waved off or stopped if need be. "Speaking of which, will you need some assistance re-collecting all of those?"

"No."

Best thing about Cloud Flame copies, she would never have to pick through a battlefield to find them. They'd disappear on their own.

Sonya realized that might have sounded short and possibly irritable after a beat of awkward silence, so she tacked on a slightly sheepish, "but thank you."

He accepted that with a slight nod. "So, as to my questions?"

"Tomorrow." Tatiana interrupted firmly, shooting him a pointed look. "Shower, nap, eat something. Not necessarily in that order. Then you two can do whatever it is."

"Noon," she added idly, inspecting her rather ruined blouse and wondering if she should try to save it or not, "meet me at the hospital. We'll go get lunch or tea or whatever."

Not, she had more than enough of sewing things for the next decade. She'd rather buy a new one. Besides, the stains alone would be a bitch and a half… adding sewing or patching up the holes would make it three bitches.

Fong pulled a slight face as he considered it. "Tea, please."

The thief blinked at him curiously but accepted that easily enough. She really did owe him something for… well, not dying.

That would've sucked majorly.

She felt a bit sheepish and a little irritated with herself now. Sonya had known violence wasn't going to help anything, but after Renato got something on her siblings out of her head?

She had needed a distraction, Fong had provided.

Probably out of a desire to get his answers to whatever question, or to get her to owe him something, or…
Nope, she didn't care.

Reasoning weren't quite as needed as the results, and frankly the thief was just appreciative the martial artist had decided to make himself her target instead of wait to see what kind of one she might find.

…and that he really was annoyingly hard to hit.

She pushed herself up to her feet, ignoring Tatiana's huff for stressing out her knee before she could get to it. "Later and for tea it is."

She wasn't meeting his eyes because she was really tired. Really.

The nurse snagged hold of the thief’s pants before she could take a step to where she had appeared from. "Other way."

"What?"

"You two pretty much worked your way around the island, little sis. Other way, it'll be faster."

Oh… oops.

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(Tuesday the 3rd of September, 1968 continued. Mafia Land.)

Sonya eased herself down in a seated position with a wince, ignoring Fong's wry little laugh at her expense.

Cheating with Cloud Flames bit back in the worst ways sometimes, and this was just one of them.

She wasn't used to using that much of her muscles all at once, so she was as sore as hell.

Tatiana was unsympathetic, especially since the issue was one the thief not only knew of but hadn't been keeping on top of.

"I take it that is another reason why you wanted a sparring partner?"

"Unless I work on it specifically for hours, I can't get a decent workout in. Spars, or just a flat-out fight, are actually a more efficient use of my energy for the same benefit." She admitted flatly with a heavy sigh, getting as comfortable as she could on a little cushion seat the teahouse provided their customers. "Everyone is so afraid of Clouds, but frankly they also don't realize how much a pain in the ass it is to be one."

Mafia Land had various little 'towns' from various regions in it, and there was an entire 'Chinatown' sector for the Triads. She was pretty damn sure his Triad group either outright owned or at least provided security for this little shop. It hadn't been a place she visited much, and it was kind of interesting to walk down the streets here to say the least.

"I think, if we ever do that again, I must insist on a limit for how many weapons you can bring." The martial artist informed her with a small smirk, shaking his head slightly. "Preferably less than twenty, if you could."

Sonya blinked, rapidly counted how many miniature weapons she had on her and wondered why he thought limiting how many she had to make copies from would limit how many she could use. "…
Fong wasn't slow, he gave her a suspicious look.

"Cloud Flame copies. As long as I have one...?"

"They were all copies?"

"Mostly, yeah. Except that last one. That one was... real... ish." The thief touched her right hand to her left bicep, making a new hammer to show him. "As long as I hold it, it will remain this size, but if I let go..."

She set it down gently, since this was a teahouse and their hardwood floors might be expensive to replace, but a few seconds after she let go of the handle it started to waver until it dissipated into a shimmer of Cloud Flames.

His expression turned a touch disgruntled as he eyed the place her hammer once occupied. "I take it trying to disarm you is an exercise in futility, then."

"You could try, I suppose. I've never actually run out of Cloud Flames before."

He shook his head again with a short laugh, another wry smirk on his face. "Then I should also assume that was why you refused aid in recollecting your weaponry again, instead of any attempt to keep the design or technique you used for them secret."

"Well... they're not finished yet. But you're right, that's why I said not to. Tell me you sent Liqin out to try finding one."

He gifted her with a skeptical look.

She rolled her eyes at him. "Please, of course you would. I would've done the same thing in your shoes. I also might have a tiny little grudge against Liqin."

"...I must admit some truth to your words, but your grudge is unfortunate. Liqin rather highly respected the work you did on our behalf."

"If I was going to hold someone responsible for trying to waylay me in Shanghai, and it wasn't going to be the Triad group you belong to, then it would have to be the one that should have stopped it. He knew better and did it anyways."

"I see." Fong considered either or both her and her comment, then shrugged the issue on behalf of his fellow off. "I will not try to change your mind, as I am rather thankful you didn't attempt to report that."

"Attempt? Fong, please." Sonya waggled a finger at him, slightly amused. "Like there would have been anything you could have done in return."

"A year's ban would have been irritating, but you know they would have ordered me and the others to hunt you down for the embarrassment."

"Which had been why I decided the slap on the wrist would not be worth it." She admitted with a shrug, waving it away. "Especially since it might just have taken you to kill me, and the bounty you would've gotten...?"

Now looking highly amused, the martial artist leaned backward as their tea was served. "Do you
really think your work would amount enough to threaten me?"

"Given my last heist netted me a cool two million in US dollars for three days of work? Yes. This would've been around the time you were free to come back here, too."

Mafia Land would've matched another two million to it since it would've been their fault she came to the Triad's attention, and the Triad member before her would've had a bounty of four to try outrunning. She was at least somewhat sure Renato would've snatched it up, if only because of Shamal, and frankly she would probably bet on the hitman to survive that confrontation even if she was still pissed off with him.

Fong froze mid-reach for his tea mug, and the serving girl gave a weird little hiccup.

Sonya tipped the spout of the teapot back up before her mug overflowed and flashed her a small smile. "Thank you, but I think we are good."

"Y-yes, big sister..." She stuttered out, blinking wildly first at her then at her table mate, then shuffling off at a high clip with the teapot.

The Storm across from her gave her a considering look over the rim of his tea.

The thief smirked back. "Assumptions are bad for you, Fong."

"I am beginning to realize that." He admitted dryly, saluting her with his Oolong tea.

She took a careful sip of her own tea which wasn't her favored type, too herbal for her, but they had some good Spiced Orange tea she might come back for. Then she set the cup down to cool. "You said you have questions."

"How am I to use less Flames? All I have been able to do is a mass of Storm Flames all at once, never less than that."

"You recall my terrible habit of smoking?" Sonya asked idly, pulling her current pack out of her pockets. "I'm trying to quit, because Tats can be very annoying when she puts her mind to it, but I used to light them with Storm Flames. Do the same with a match, if it flares up higher than simply striking it would cause you're doing it wrong."

He took them in favor of his tea with a dubious expression, flicking one into his hands. "How long?"

"It took me about a year to do it without an obvious ball of Flames in my palm, until I could light one with a flick of my finger." She shrugged the terrible beginnings of her Storm Flame use off. "At first, I had the same problem as you. I kept Disintegrating everything I applied Storm Flames to no matter what it was. Until I realized that Storm, and Cloud if I must be honest, work in the general same way. They overwhelm what they are applied to. For different purposes yes, destruction for Storm and multiplication for Cloud, but what we do is pour our Flames into whatever because that's how they work."

"Counter intuitive, then?" Fong sighed heavily, re-sloting the cigarette back into her pack and tossing them back. "I begin to understand how you stumbled upon this."

"I had a little more help, actually." Claimed the thief without chagrin as she pocketed it. "But to start with, it's a good exercise."

"The necklace?"
"Sort of. It's really a bad match for a Storm, or at least a Storm like me. But since it won't channel my Flames very well it works as a sort of limiter."

Picking his tea mug back up he glanced to the new one hanging around her neck, and a wry expression passed over his face. "And what, exactly, would it cost me to get you to find me a similarly bad match?"

"More than just letting me try to smash you into pieces, and thankfully not dying during the attempts." She informed him blandly, tapping her nails on the low table between them. "Although I really do appreciate the fact you didn't die, I hate it when I kill people unintentionally."

"You are welcome." The martial artist informed her with a weird little smirk, including a slight nod of his head after his next sip. "However, exactly how much would it take."

"I would have to go back to my clan, somehow convince those in charge of it that testing an Inverted Storm other than me is something of a good idea. Then take a pair of every Storm-possible gem in a method that wouldn't let them get mixed up and bring them back here. Lastly, we'd have to spend a few good hours seeing which ones you shatter and which you can use. More goodwill than what you have now, to say the least."

Fong gave her an incredulous look.

Sonya was entirely unmoved as she picked up her now only warm mug of tea. "I am the one that has to replace all those. I'm also more than a bit tired of looting jewelry stores."

"…understood."

Unfortunately, she was pretty sure she was going to be seeing him with some regularity now until he got what he wanted. The thief wondered why it was everyone was either afraid of her or thought irritating her was somehow a great idea.

She could not win at all, and it was annoying.

Although, she did have to find some way to thank him for not dying on her. It was just… she wasn't sure what level of appreciation that should earn him.

It wasn't 'he was grievously injured and survived'… right?

She might have nicked him up badly, but it wasn't anything life threatening. He had returned the favor, to say the least. Nor was it 'risking himself on her behalf'… because she had been the threat he risked. Frankly, unnecessarily too.

However, she did appreciate the spar even so. Breaking inanimate objects weren't nearly as satisfying as going after a moving target, even if she missed.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

"They're not very good," She admitted flatly, peering into the bottom of her mug but there were only fragments of tea leaves to read and not enough for a full reading, "I keep going in circles."

"Sharing might help." He informed her cheerfully, setting his cup down since it was empty.

…how the hell could he do that?

Without burning his mouth?
This was the second time he had done it, and she was pretty sure that a burned mouth for her would still equal a scorched tongue or something on him. Unless he was used to that kind of abuse… but she didn't really think so.

The thief narrowed her eyes on that mug.

"Sonya?"

"You bloody cheater. You're using Storm Flames to counter the temperature, aren't you?"

He blinked at the sudden subject change but ended up smirking slightly as he realized what had distracted her. "Well… yes. We are immune to our own Flames, and I bet my Storm is hotter than anything I could try eating."

…so he what, coated his mouth with his Flames?

Wouldn't that just make what he was eating even hotter?

Or… did it eventually turn into 'own' heat instead of heat from a disassociated hot object?

That was really creative, in an application of Dying Will Flames. Not useful for more than a party trick, but then again lighting her own cigarettes started that way too. "Alright… I might not mind talking with you more, Fong. I must admit, I never thought of that."

"Thank you. I must admit I will continue to bother you until I am satisfied with my control, so knowing you aren't as likely to become irritated with me as whoever it was yesterday is relieving to know."

Sonya pursed her lips to hide a wry smile, giving the still cheerful martial artist a flat look. "Somehow… I'm not surprised. For future reference, I don't care if you want to bother me. My siblings on the other hand, I will brutally murder you for going after."

Fong gave her a nod significantly more serious nod. "Understandable. I will attempt not to."

'Attempt' had to be good enough, because the future was a very chary thing.

"You've been warned."

"I will not expect another."

(Saturday the 21st of September, 1968. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)

The next two heists Sonya did for Mafia Land were pro-bono, but she didn't really mind.

The swath of palm forest she destroyed at the 'prow' of Mafia Land actually acted as kind of a wind-breaker for the rest of the island on the other side of the fake volcano, especially when said island was moving. It's other use, other than as something to keep the island's breezes as breezes rather than gales, was to provide a ecology for the man made landmass.

Even Mafia Land had mosquitos, beetles, centipedes, and spiders. There were also all the tropical birds, lizards, various small mammals, and other such creatures that needed insects or fruit trees to survive.
Having destroyed about a mile long stretch of palm/bamboo forest meant some emergency landscaping needed to be done to prevent the critters from unbalancing the ecology in response to becoming homeless all of a sudden.

She paid for it with the contracts she ran almost back to back, but since it was her temper that caused the damage she didn't mind at all. Fong was more of a 'bystander' and 'emergency Flame expert' on the scene, even if she had half-used him as a target to do most of that breaking.

Those two heists Bjørn picked out for her ended up being a lot more interesting than just lifting one or two items, because she was now getting directions of where and when to lift them. It made things trickier, and also more interesting to try and figure out.

A last possible minute heists of a business mogul's prized solid gold office chair, which baffled Sonya by merely existing, and a theft of a Korean mafia group's own freshly stolen shipment of computer parts relocated to a different group later, and the thief had paid off what she broke.

Seriously?

A solid gold office chair.

She raked a hand through her short blonde hair in exasperation as she wandered down the hallway in their half of the condo for where she and her sister lived for now.

People were confusing. It wasn't even very comfortable, why the hell would someone want that enough to order one much less commission someone to steal it?

She stopped dead on the threshold of the suite she and Tatiana shared once she opened the door.

A suit jacket-less Renato was sitting on the couch, rubbing the left side of his face and glaring a hole in her foster sister's back as she made herself dinner.

Well… this was new.

"You are a jackass."

"Occasionally, yes." The hitman agreed sourly, looking all sorts of disgruntled as he dropped his hand. "It's a character flaw of mine."

"Okay, I even knew that and am willing to overlook the occasional. That was more than just the usual." Sonya pointed out bitterly, feeling strangely hurt and irritated all over again. "I do not appreciate you using me to get at information about my siblings. At all."

Tatiana dropped the wooden spoon in her hands, and it landed back in her pot of stew with a wet plop. "Wait… what?"

"I didn't intend to." He snapped as he shot to his feet, then paused and shot her a queer look. "Wait… that's it? Not that-"

"I do not care if you know of my past. I would have told you had you asked." She snapped back just as sharply, frowning as she checked to ensure she wasn't severely tempted to throw a hammer at his head. She had enough temper control issues this year to last her a decade as it was. "Tats and Cherep, on the other hand, that… just no. You ever do it again…"

"You'll break my fingers?" Renato suggested sardonically. "Kill me?"
"…Shamal needs you alive. So no, until the brat is at least fifteen or so I will make your life a living hell." She considered it for a long moment, weighing the suggested actions against her irritation with him. "Then I will probably try to kill you. Maybe. Depends on if I am still pissed off or not."

The Classical Sun in the room gave a low whistle, then busied herself with tasting her stew when the thief shot her a questioning look.

With a heavy sigh, the hitman took off his fedora and tossed it to the coffee table just so he could run his fingers through his spiky black hair. "Fine. Am I forgiven?"

"No."

"The… fuck, woman?"

"Try starting with an apology." Sonya tossed over her shoulder, trying really hard not to stomp on her way to her bedroom. If she could crack asphalt in a fit of temper, then wooden and even concrete floors wouldn't hold up anywhere near as well. "Might help a tiny bit!"

"You-!" Renato made a growling noise, then apparently whirled on her sister.

Who interrupted whatever he had been about to say before he could say it as the thief got further down the hallway. "You better fix that. I let you in here because you said you were going to make it up to her, and this isn't making it up to her. In fact, I think she's even more pissed off now."

She ignored whatever it was he replied with, shouldering open her bedroom door and tossing her luggage to her bedside then taking a seat on it to unlace her boots.

Frankly, Renato could go screw himself somewhere else until she felt less hurt every time she even thought of him.

Cherep was civilian, completely by choice even knowing the world she was part of. Sonya, as the mafia member closest to him and the one that pulled him into the world slightly, was actually sort of responsible for his safety from her world. Anything that happened to him because of her…?

Like back when they were kids, except on a broader scale. He was her weakness, and anyone that had issue with her would go after him.

Viper was his own risk. Additionally, given how they met, the Mist never would've been responsible for his security. Again, Cherep's choice to have them as a friend. However, he and/or she was responsible for the risks any association with him/her would cause the stuntman.

The thief was his little sister, and best friend before that. Cherep was hers, and she didn't quite know how to deal with this kind of threat to him.

Renato was a friend… sort of. Maybe?

"Yes, we're friends. Now stop walking off on me."

"It is either walk away or try making you a head-less hitman." She refuted hotly, toeing off her other boot before shooting the man a glare. "And it is not quite Halloween just yet."

"Cute." Renato snorted dryly, then curiously looked around her room for a second.

Since she hadn't been back in about a month, it was a bit dusty and rather neater than normal. Done up in shades of blues, purples, and greens rather than just purple and red.
He really couldn't tell much from it other than she was neat, but he was also giving the stack of books against the far wall a wary eye too.

Sonya really had to buy a bookshelf or something, but those would be put in storage the next time she remembered so it never really got done.

"Ho? Really."

"What did I say about staying out of my head?"

He shot her a wary glance for the aggravation in her tone. "You also said you wouldn't mind helping me with it."

"At the moment, I mind very much."

He gave her ceiling a beseeching look, for why she had no clue, then shoved his hands through his hair again. Which made it even more spiky and wild than it was normally even after a few hours under a hat. "Look, Sonya. I'm sorry, okay? I didn't mean to… hurt…?"

"Surprise, I have feelings." Sonya shot back bitterly, irritated that he couldn't seem to keep out of her head when she asked.

"It's harder with you. You think loudly." He muttered sourly, rubbing at the back of his neck. "You, young children, and mostly animals."

She snorted at him, vaguely wondering if it was an Activation skill or just something he could do.

"My Sun Flame ability is actually bullets." Refuted the Mafioso, deciding he had enough of standing over her and gingerly seating himself on the far end of her bed. Other side of her luggage and out of reach, just in case. "Using empty casings or just the leftover gunpowder in a gun, I have at least one extra shot of pure Flames. More depending on if I had used my guns recently or haven't had the chance to clean them."

That was… unusually specific of an ability.

"I was seven, and it was my first kill."

…ah. Sort of like how she got a knock-off type of super strength, then.

"Super-strength?"

"I Propagate force near unconsciously. Sustaining it for long periods is harder. Broke a couple vory so my brother and I could get away and report them as drunk off their asses and messing around in the wrong territory."

"…I thought your 'initial' skill was the weapons?"

"I learned how to do that specifically. I favored poles and staffs in our combat classes… but hiding one is a pain."

"Our?" The hitman echoed absently, frowning slightly. "Sonya? Do you… belong to a syndicate?"

"Yes. The Zolotovs of Moscow. Thieves' clan."

"…why am I only now learning of this?"
"You never asked… and we do not like to advertise the clan's existence if we are out and about
away from them." Sonya explained blandly with a shrug. "Why do you think Tats and I live here for
the time being?"

"I figured they owed you a favor." Renato informed her absently, visibly measuring the space she
had in her bedroom alone. "It's nicer than my apartment."

Well… yes, it was a condo.

"Am I forgiven yet?"

"No."

He knocked his head back against her headboard, then gave her a mildly irritated look.

"…really?"

"You are the one that pissed me off, deal with it." She also didn't know how long until the hurt wore
off, so it would be a learning experience for the both of them.

She didn't normally care enough to get hurt when other people did asshole-ish things. Not
appreciated in the least.

"…you know, on second thought? This mind-reading trick of mine is kind of irritating." He informed
her irritably, rubbing at his temple. "It was useful enough when it was just feelings I could pick up,
and I think I would prefer just that again."

…Renato was empathetic?

Well… in a world populated with things like Mists, Skies, Flame users conforming to certain mental
patterns, and other such mental bull-shitters, Sonya wasn't sure why she was surprised.

"Not a Mist. Or Sky."

"You sure about that?" Maybe he was that much of a Sun Flame beast he could Activate something
far away from his person?

There was that Classic Sun back in her old neighborhood who could turn on electronics from a
distance. He was stronger than Tatiana, they knew that much.

Was he comparable to the hitman then?

"Pure Sun, through and through." Renato boasted with a sly little smirk.

How would they test to see what it was?

If it was just a natural ability…

The thief lightly kicked him in the thigh. "No, damn it. Stop distracting me with things to poke."

He seized her by the ankle, yanking her down the bedspread. "Little lady Sonya, I have a much
better idea to poke at if you'd like."

She planted her other foot in his abs, lifting the asshole off her bed and setting him on the floor with
one leg. "I am still pissed off with you, so no. And stop touching me."
Looking rather disgruntled with either her flat refusal of whatever it was or from the abrupt removal of his person from her, the Sun rolled his eyes at her as he fussily straightened his dress shirt and tie. "Are you at least less angry with me?"

"You are still an asshole, but that is just you naturally." Sonya clarified, rolling up off her bed too. "And you ever do something like that again I will ensure you regret it."

"Creatively, I can assume."

"Stating the obvious, Renato."

He huffed at her, dropping his hands to shove in his pockets. "I got you something, as part of my apology."

Tossing the box he pulled out of a pocket at her, the man stalked to the door.

She was slightly distracted by opening said little box and smirked at what she found. "Mauls? Heh… cute."

Fong’s expression when she pulled these out next would be something to see.

"Wait… who? Cute? They're weapons, woman. They shouldn't be cute."

"They are miniature. Therefore, they can be." She corrected, wondering where on her chains to put them. Next to the hammers?

No, other side of the axes. She'd confuse them until she got used to it, but it would be better than needing a short-handled hammer and getting the longer one instead.

"…hey, Sonya?"

"Hmm?" The thief put the box on her nightstand to add in a moment, giving the hitman a mildly curious look.

"If you weren't pissed off with me… then would you-"

"Goodnight, Renato." She even helpfully pushed him out of her room, maybe a touch hard because she was still irritated with him.

Slamming the door in his face was just making her feel better, even if he had tried to bribe his way out of her bad side.

Asshole. She'd seen him enough to last her a month or two, maybe when the Vongola Christmas Ball rolled around again she'd be less irritated with him.

Shit, she still had to find a new dress for that. Jewelry too, since she was pretty sure they'd be inspecting hers closely now.

Sonya sat herself back on her bed, already reaching for the upper-arm clasp that held the chains close to her skin. After unhooking her attached bracelet, she spread them out to pick and choose where the new mauls were going to be.

Tatiana flounced into her room a bit later, when she was almost done, with a very irritated expression on her face. "What do I have to do? Tie you up in ribbons with a big bow over your ass? Slather you in honey?"
"…what?"

"That was the perfect opportunity for make-up sex! With a friend you already didn't mind being around! And you turned it down!"

"I did?" Did Renato really think of her in that way?

She absently finished attaching the last few axes back onto the magnetic links as she puzzled over that.

"…I don't think so, Tats. I think you're pulling my leg again."

"NO! No, no, no, and finally no. I swear on… what's sacred between us?" The nurse puzzled over that for a moment, then continued. "I swear on Lisa's health, her and baby Lera, that he really does think you're hot. And entirely screw-able."

"I've also known him since I was eleven, Tats." The thief informed her slowly, trying to fit that into any interactions she ever had with Renato. "That's kind of… weird. And Lisa settled on Valera, by the way."

"It's called being jail-bait for a reason, little sis. And you are. Well… not anymore, but you were. And I know, but I'm keeping with Lera."

"Lisa's going to smack you for using it." She warned her, coiling up the chains to set them aside for tomorrow.

"Mmm… I know. But until the bitter end, I'm using Lera." Tatiana shook her head, then bounced on Sonya's bed now that it was clear of pointed or sharp things with a wicked smirk. "But still, progress! One of your hotties, well both really, are interested! Well?"

"Well what?"

"Which one do you like better?" The Sun user pressed, composing herself to both appear and look highly interested in the answer.

"Right now? I'm pissed with Renato and Fong's a pervert. Neither."

However, the Triad member was also surprisingly interesting to talk to and as a bonus was hard to kill. The Italian hitman she had known longer, was likely equally hard to kill, and… had Shamal.

…baby Mist still won.

"Shamal." Sonya settled on decisively. "I like Shamal better than either right now."

Even if she was still pissed off with the kid's guardian, she was still going to attend a boring-ass party just to see the brat for a few days.

"…wait, that kid Shamal's like what, five? Almost six? That doesn't count!" Tatiana protested, flinging her arms out and nearly smacking the thief in the mouth. "Fine. Tell me who's hotter, then."

"I'm not playing this game with you, Tats. I still think you're pulling my leg, and frankly it doesn't need to be any more awkward between me and the both of them." Refuted the Storm-Cloud flatly, tugging her sister up and over to her bedroom door to push the second unwanted visitor out of it that same night. "Goodnight, Tats."

"Aw… but-!"
"Goodnight, Tats."

The thief shoved her sister out of her room but didn't slam the door in her face too.

(Thursday the 26th of September, 1968. Vilnius, Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic.)

Cherep blinked blankly at the sight before him, then blinked again when it didn't change.

…that… was…?

"…excuse me, ah… Libby." The stuntman gave the girl he had been chatting up a slightly insincere smile, too distracted by his thoughts to make it honest, disentangling himself from her hands easily enough. "Just remembered something, sorry."

"But Skull! Where are you going!"

He vaulted a railing, which thankfully the floor below got cleared of bodies at Libby's voice, and dodged through the crowd to reach the bar doors. He flashed the bouncer a smirk but didn't stop as he bolted out of them.

Skidding a bit, he almost tripped making a hard left to the nearest dark alleyway.

Normally he wouldn't do this, but right now he was pretty sure of what was lurking about in here.

"Really? Viper, come on. That wasn't nice."

"Mou… you asked me to. Suffer. Or pay up." The Mist informed him sourly, tugging on the cowl of his/her cloak as she walked towards him. "Either would be good about now."

The movement revealed a skirt though, which gave the immortal Cloud the gender of the day. "I'm already paying you in dinner whenever you want, Vipes. What else would you want to never do… that again?"

He honestly didn't need an image of his little sister as a Siberian husky puppy ripping up fully grown palm trees in chase of a red-clad monkey man or her growling at a lizard-man who smelled of burning sun. He'd get the whole story later, if he could get it out of Sonya without admitting he got Viper to keep an ear out for any news of her.

"Speaking of which, that was weird. How does an illusion smell of Sun?"

"You'd be surprised at what I can do with a mind." Viper informed him prissily, a tiny little sniff punctuating her statement. "...and I have no idea how you took Sun Flame user and turned it into 'smells of sun'. Maybe you just have a very weird mind, mou."

He pointed a finger in her tattooed face but paused for a long moment trying to think of something to counter that with and eventually came up with nothing. "...not the point. What do you want to eat?"

"...I'm feeling a need for… Italian."

"Vipes, we're in the Lithuanian SSR."

"And?" The Mist demanded testily.
Cherep rolled his eyes at her, knowing full well she probably knew exactly where an Italian restaurant was around here. "Was there nothing else but news of my little sister's ongoing struggles to fake normal relationships?"

"Not about you or the circus, no." Viper explained irritably, rolling her shoulders. "Mou… if anything, I'd say you hid yourself well. No one has become suspicious of you or how infrequently you have 'major' injuries."

The stuntman glanced about, but even with it still just twilight out they were pretty much left alone on the streets. "Are you…?"

"No one will hear of anything from me."

"Are you alright, Viper?" He finished his statement stubbornly, eyeing his latest criminal friend and how twitchy she was. "If you want to bitch at me, feel free. I've done it enough to Sonya to know it helps a bit."

"…mou. I got into a bit of a scrape earlier. It's nothing, really. I am just not made for physical confrontations."

"Assholes." Cherep chimed in, tucking his amusement away so the Mist hopefully wouldn't notice.

No such luck, Viper gave him a pithy glare from under her hood. "Muscle bound morons who can't tell a gun's barrel from the grip."

"Complete and utter idiots." He tacked on cheerfully, grinning as she visibly stewed in irritation.

"…I am going to demand dessert at this rate."

"You always do, I don't see why you think that's much of a threat."

Viper went ramrod straight and fully glared at him as wisps of indigo fire shimmered into existence around her sensibly booted feet. "Mou, are you calling me fat?"

"I'm saying you don't eat enough, and I let you weasel your way into dessert anyways because I worry how thin you are."

"…oh."

Cherep waited a bit as she absorbed that, then provided bait to get her moving again. "Something with strawberries? They're in season."

"…that sounds nice."
"I'm just saying it's getting a bit... irritating," Sonya informed her sister over lunch, playing with her fork more than eating. They both had to get back to work soon, so this would be their last lunch together for a few months at least. "I don't understand your fascination with my sex life, nor why you keep on harping on about its non-existence."

"There is something entirely unfair about this conversation." Tatiana mused aloud dryly, taking another bite of her salad and munching it for a moment before continuing. "Can't decide what it is."

"Did you hit a dry spell or something? Is that why you're so interested in mine?"

The nurse coughed awkwardly around her next mouthful, blinking hard until she managed a swallow partially in thanks to the glass of water next to her wine glass. "Ow... err, Sonya? Do you even know what that means?"

"That you have been getting no sex." The thief rolled her eyes, then handed off her little water glass when she gave a weird snicker-cough and choked again. "Frankly, I don't understand your fascination with the act. Nor why I must have some now."

She pushed aside her plate with a wry expression, then gave her little sister her full attention. "Mainly? For stress relief. You're always so bottled up, and repressed, finding you options to let loose without carving up another mile-long stretch of palm trees might just be a very damn good idea."

"I can get a spar with Fong that would do the same thing, and if I'm not pissed off this next time it might even be better." Sonya waved that away irritably. "Also, this thing started back when we were on vacation, so you can't use my momentary lapse in control over my temper as a reasoning."

"Momentary...? Wasn't that fight like... an hour long? Okay, then because I want you to get out more. If we let you, I'm pretty sure you'd be content to be an old granny wielding books for the entirety of your life."

She scowled at her sister, about to ask what the hell was wrong with that plan, but eventually sighed instead and let that pass without a scathing comment.

…1968 was not anywhere near the 2000s.

Current prevailing school of thought while the foster siblings were growing up in Moscow was that a woman could have a career and everything… they should give it up the moment they had a man or a kid and be happy with that.

Sonya would probably murder someone trying to do that, so no.

It grated her sensibilities, inherited from Rachel's time and era, enough to be flatly ignored by the thief… but Tatiana might actually fully subscribe to that school of thought. It had been near about everywhere in what they read, heard on the streets, even in what little homegrown entertainment the Soviet Union produced.

Like propaganda.
She was also probably being a little unfair of that mental outlook, but she also didn't really care.

Lisa was a woman that would have scandalized the Soviet Union had her life ever been widely known. To wait until her late thirties to have her kid, aside whatever difficulty in actually having or that baby eventually caused, and be happy with only the one?

The foster siblings evened it out to what was more popular to have, but as far as the greater parts of Soviet Russian would've been concerned… Lisa wasn't a very good woman or role-model mother.

Sonya was also pretty damn sure her mother would laugh herself sick if anyone tried to shame her on that… or murder them. Possibly get them to have a little 'chat' with Arseniy, who got downright disgruntled when someone tried upsetting his lover and baby's momma.

The last idiot that tried groping Lisa ended up losing their hands a la ticked off vor, so she was pretty sure of what that outcome would end up being.

"Look, Tats, I can understand why you might think it'd be good for me… but I'm rather happy taking it very slow. I still have issues figuring out when you and Cherep are kidding around or being serious, and if I try adding yet another person to that I will just end up more confused. Let me figure it out at my own speed, please."

"You know, the fact you're so rational is sometimes very irritating." The redhead informed her tartly, pouting a bit at her wine glass.

"I... actually think you're going too fast." She suggested a touch hesitantly. "I also think your taste in men sucks. Why not take a break from men and find what makes you happiest, then try to find a man who shares it or wouldn't mind helping you with it?"

They were in-between that 'older teen' and 'young adult' period of life, again for the thief, and getting caught up in all the things adults are allowed to do without censure was entirely possible. Rachel had managed it with a couple stumbles before her death, so while Sonya was sure she could avoid the worst… Tatiana didn't have that kind of experience with it.

The Sun Flame nurse crossed her arms a little defensively and gave her a rare scowl. "I don't think I like the way this conversation is going."

"As your little sister, and someone who put up with you trying to find me a guy I didn't want for weeks on end, I'm asking you to take a break."

"...seriously?"

"I want you to be happy, Tats." Sonya quoted her own words back at her smugly. "Try finding out what that is without these men you rarely see more than once, for me. Please."

"Really, really don't like the way this conversation went." Quipped the other Russian flatly, glaring at her little sister. "Entirely unfair."

"So was dragging me out a week at a time into places I normally like just fine to make me uncomfortable with sleazy men." Countered the thief blandly, picking her fork back up. "Quid pro quo, sis."

"You are an entirely ungrateful little sister."

"I'm pretty sure I told you this before. Little sisters are either sweet and loving or conniving and evil. No way in hell am I sweet, so evil it is."
"You can be sweet occasionally, I refuse to accept you're evil. Conniving, maybe."

"We're criminals." Sonya reminded her dryly.

" Doesn't mean we're not human."

Well… true enough. "Your word, sister dearest, that you'll cool it for a month or so."

"Why a month? I only had those few weeks…"

"And then tried it again the very moment we got back here." She tacked on tartly, with a huff of amusement at the face Tatiana was pulling at her. "Come on, if I can put up with you trying to set me up with random men and even my own friends…?"

"Yeah, fuck, fine." She grudgingly agreed moodily, drumming her fingers on the restaurant table between them. " I still say Renato wants to do you."

"And you're perfectly entitled to that opinion." The thief retorted dryly. "However, I don't."

She was pretty sure Renato was just being himself, if that had been flirting he was doing. He flirted with everything in a skirt, and occasionally Sonya wore skirts. Therefore, the hitman was just flirting because the thief was there and female.

It hadn't sounded like him flirting with all those waitresses and passing women she had listened to for the past few years, which was why she was pretty sure he wasn't flirting with her.

If so it was flattering, but she was still pretty sure her Mafioso friend wasn't being serious about it if it was happening at all. Not if it was nothing like how the hitman normally flirted.

(ooo000oo)

(Friday the 27th of September, 1968 continued. Mafia Land.)

"Sonya!"

Curiously, the thief came to a sudden halt in the middle of the port's wharf, peering back over her shoulder.

He probably knew full well she didn't really want to see him… but he also sounded a tiny bit stressed out.

Renato rather rudely shouldered his way through the crowd to reach the little pocket of no one around the Russian Storm-Cloud, already looking irritated and shoving a folder into her hands. "Take care of this."

"Why the hell are you shoving…”

…a parent-teacher conference notice?

"Brat's school requires them, but I'm swamped." The hitman snapped at her, taking a deep breath and trying again with a marginally less irritated tone of voice. "I can't exactly turn these hits down without a damn good excuse, and I'd rather not bring him up as such if I can help it. Even if it takes that last favor, I need you to handle it."

"Renato… I am not sure I can handle this."
Sonya dug out her own set of contracts to check the dates and where she would be around the night of this school thing of Shamal's.

The real contracts were in Bjørn's possession, but since it was a string of heists the thief had gotten coded and mostly faked 'order invoices' to remind her of what had to be lifted when and how. Best thing about these was not only a paper trail the police could follow back to the shell company Mafia Land did its civilian business through, but also could occasionally work as an alibi or distraction of their own.

Also, they were order forms for things the island really did need. This way she wouldn't be sending in things that had to be sold off under-marked if at all right away.

"October… nineteenth… is…" She would be in the SFR Yugoslavia, which was a sea away. It was a rest day, though, the heist would be done the night before. "I might, might damn you, be able to make it. Do not count on it."

If she skipped the country without issue, and without raising suspicion. The thief wasn't sure of being able to do that, though.

"One of us has to be there."

"Why me?" Sonya snapped irritably, looking over the details of the conference thing. She was homeschooled in Soviet Russia, what did she know of school subjects taught in Italy?

Or for that matter, classroom etiquette?

Renato rolled his eyes at her as he shifted to take better advantage of her little 'no-touch' zone. "And I never went to school as a child, so you're still better off than me. I put you down as the brat's other emergency contact. Anything happens to me to the point I can't take care of him, he'll go to you."

…oh. Aw, how sweet.

"Sweet?"

"If you do not like what is in my head, stay out." She snapped absently more than irritably, inspecting the posted date for the flyer.

It had gone through not only the Iron Fort but Mafia Land's mail system and had started as a piece of civilian correspondence. The thief had all and everything she ever got rerouted through Lisa for repackaging before ended up in the mafia's version of public mail services. No telling how many people had read this on its way through the system if this was how he got it.

The flyer had also been posted barely two weeks ago from the stamps and mail marks, and he probably just got the damn thing.

"I did. Damn school posted this shit at the last possible minute, I suppose." He informed her flatly, shoving the brim of his hat down over to shade his eyes just to scratch at the back of his head. "I accepted my next set of contracts yesterday, then got this thing bright and early."

Which was why the hitman couldn't back out to take care of this, his number were on the hits already and Mafia Land wasn't the most understanding of employers.

There was no way to account for family emergencies, maternity leave, or anything else in that general category. It wasn't like there was a union of criminals in existence, the closest they got were the Guild Halls. That was more of a temp-agency than anything.
The two of them were also getting into the part of their careers where getting requested by name or ID number was possible and turning down those requests were dicey propositions.

"Fine. I will try, but if I am doing this so are you. Be there."

"...if at all possible." Renato reluctantly agreed slowly. "I have a hit that date, so I'll be late if I even get to it."

"Then be there in time to pick me up afterwards. I do not care, just do not leave me to try floundering my way through your country's school system requirements by myself."

"I'll look up the details for you."

"Send it to Bjorn at least by the week before."

"Fine. Am I losing that last favor or what?"

"Yes. Even if it is for the brat, I am still pissed with you." Also, jumping countries without a hitch was going to be damn near impossible given she had a heist there.

Delays were something she had to account for in getting out of places she stole from, but even that might not help her here. Sonya likely wasn't going to be crossing the border legally, just to make it to Shamal's school in time.

That alone would put a whole lot of kinks in her plans, so she was entirely justified in canceling out that last favor she owed him.

"I can accept that, I suppose." He informed her grumpily.

The thief rolled her eyes. "Oh, shut up, we are friends. After this, I do not think we will owe each other favors ever again no matter what we need."

"...really?"

"Unless it is business related, I think so."

Renato gave her a strange look she had to shrug in the face of.

"We do not have much use for each other's main skill set anyways. Even if we continue trading favors, it will be rare when we ever use them."

"...you may have a point with that."

It had taken him half a decade to use two from her as it was. She wasn't sure how or if ever she'd get around to using a favor from the hitman herself.

He walked off with a tip of his fedora, and the thief continued to her own awaiting ship thoughtfully.

He hadn't commented on her musings of how many people could've seen he had a minor dependent by that flyer, so either it had come in an envelope or he hadn't picked up on it.

Still... probably not safe to think about Rachel's lifetime when the man was around.
Sonya's first heist out of a set of five she had helped her Lackey put together was in the Moldavian SSR, another of the satellite states of the Soviet Union.

One she wouldn't mind, again, to visit more leisurely if she ever could. Pretty country, a non-oppressive feel to it, frankly it matched up better to some of the other satellite Soviet Republics she had visited.

It's somewhat decent rate of recovery from rather heavy-handed Soviet Union governance policies aside, it was a second-world country edging into first-world state due to it heavier than the norm insistence on developing its industry beyond agricultural or basic processing.

Which… didn't mean it exactly had first-world kind of security.

She had ducked in and out of countries in a traveling Russian circus, crossing borders on her own was proving just as easy. She was pretty sure that wasn't a mark of how good she was getting at being a 'globe-trotting' thief, more of a sign of how tepid this so-called 'Cold War' was going, but it was something.

If her passport wasn't Russian she was pretty sure it would've been a touch harder, at least.

Her target was a mostly newish kind of thing, she never had to break into a hospital before. Actually, the Noul Neamţ Hospital was a Monastery before the Soviet Union repurposed it.

Sonya never had to break into a church either and wasn't sure which she preferred.

The thief was at least somewhat sure whoever ordered the heist either once worked here or was a descendant of someone who had lived here before, because the cache of religious artifacts she was there to steal had a hand-drawn map straight to it.

Other than slipping around the orderlies and various late-night doctors, it wasn't really that difficult of a heist. What she stole wasn't going to be missed, at all if ever, so she took the leisurely way out of the country again.

She took a quick detour to Ukraine for a new pair of boots, and to get her 'classy' ones adjusted for her year's growth, then backtracked back across Soviet Moldavian to the Socialist Republic of Romania.

Which, as a country, was nearly entirely opposite from the Moldavian SSR as could be that it nearly gave her whiplash.

She was pretty damn certain she didn't like Nicolae Ceaușescu at all, the current General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party. She didn't want to pass judgement on some head of state she didn't actually know all that well… but he was turning into something… not good.

Ceaușescu was actually a maverick of a head of state, for a part of the Soviet Union. He kept his country out of the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw forces earlier this year, was rather moderate in his governance of the people, but some of his policies were a bit off.

Speaking of which, she had to talk to Cherep about what the Großes Volksfest did this year. Did they risk going through that or did they go around?

On the surface Romania looked good, almost liberal actually.
In reality there were a lot of kids on the streets, a lot of sick kids. More like what you would see after a war or local uprising got most of the adults killed, not when those adults were perfectly alive and going about their business on those same streets.

She really only needed a few discreet pokes around to realize most if not all of them were still orphans, and even so most actually slept on the streets themselves due to overcrowded orphanages.

Sonya didn't particularly like people, but she did stop for a day and teach a couple of the healthier brats how to pick a pocket. If the government wasn't going to do anything for them, then they were going to have to do it themselves. She could at least teach them a moderately fail-proof way, as long as they didn't get caught, how.

She stopped when the brats tried picking her pocket, figuring if they were bold enough to attempt that they would be fine.

That same night she robbed a bank.

The National Bank of Romania, for their old bullion coins, then the dies and molds to make more with. She also helped herself to a generous amount of gold and silver bullion bars, to pre-pay for her and Björn's clan dues for the year after this next one and the year after that one too.

The faster she could amass that before scraping the bottom of her savings again, the more flexibility she'd have in the future.

Around the legs and militaristic sweeps of the guards, around three canine guards outside, over or under the noses of the few clerks and managers counting the cash, and against the blindingly bright ass white marble.

She pole-vaulted over a main street to the building, nearly sticking the landing but having to roll to prevent broken ankles in the end, and ended up partially dismantling a skylight around the security wiring with a bit of Storm Flames to get in. A bit of abuse of circus-level acrobatics got her down to the main floor without anyone the wiser, and without a rope. Going back up to get out again was going to be a massive pain in her ass.

Bank robberies were irritating. A lot better guarded than museums, required creative packing methods to prevent metal clinks from being audible as she wound herself around patrols, and ended up with no less than three awkward situations where she had to take cover behind non-human shaped objects or get caught.

Once she had to balance upside down halfway up a pillar and carefully skirt her way around it as a guard investigated a possible sighting of her, hoping he didn't notice a few of her lock picks lying on the floor from when she abandoned her work hastily to avoid him. She also had to hope the bars of heavy metal in her backpack weren't going to fall out and clonk the guard in the head, since she would have no hope of hiding her heist for a few hours in that case.

Not something she'd like to do again.

If she had to, preferably a branch bank instead.

Getting out of Romania, when the breaking news of the bank robbery was getting blared from every radio and newspaper headline, proved vexing. Since the thief had her shipment already on the Dâmbovița River before even returning to her hotel, she didn't protest or raise a fuss over her things getting searched as part of a city-wide hunt for the looted money.

The sheer weight of what she stole again forced officials to conclude there had been more than one
thief, meaning while she was slightly suspicious there was no 'obvious' accomplice to bring more 
unwanted attention down on her. The week she had been asked to wait to get cleared of suspicion 
she met with no-one, made no calls, and generally spent the time reading in cafés.

Still… likely the beginning of a rap sheet for her since this was the second time she had been 
'delayed' in connection however remote to a theft, even if there was no way the Romanian or 
Spanish police could connect her to the heists. Either the next few times she visited either would 
have to be completely legit, or she should avoid the countries for a few good years.

A week behind schedule was not really damning for her, but still rather concerning. She had hoped 
to have a day or two more to work with in order to be absolutely sure she could make it to the 
southernmost end of Italy's main landmass, but it didn't look like she'd have any luxury of time to 
work with.

Sonya had ensured her heists would at least be a few weeks apart, more towards two than one if she 
could help it, when plotting it out with her Lackey. That week of grace-time had been eaten up 
already, and she was only a bare few days from the date of October nineteenth.

The last thing she had to steal before attending Shamal's parent-teacher thing was a large volume of 
random things from the Nikola Tesla Museum in Belgrade, Yugoslavia.

Which… huh.

Tesla was a name she knew of, Nicolai Tesla did energy and electrical things back with Thomas 
Edison at the turn of the century. Back in the States, and yet the museum was in Yugoslavia?

Curious, the thief actually paid to peek into it the very day she arrived.

For a museum, it was badly guarded. Badly preserved, too. Respectably big building, it had to be to 
contain the inventor's rambled mass of notes, journals, blueprints, and other such records.

Sonya was pretty damn sure the roof would start leaking or something eventually, and without glass 
display cases for the bulk of the paper-based pieces there was going to be some water damage in a 
nasty enough storm.

Which gave her an idea.

She had to get out of the country on time, better than on time actually. Already she was cutting it 
close, and she had given her word she'd be there to Renato. It was also for Shamal… which made 
her stubborn about attending the damn thing.

Instead of just steal what she was there for then hightail it out of the country like a bat out of hell, the 
thief sabotaged the museum.

First, she bought a lot of paper. Using some of the tricks Lisa and Tatiana used in forgery to age and 
scribble various lines and doodles into them, then ensuring they were illegible with water-damage.

She might have gone a bit overboard with 'fakes', but… books.

She was running out of things to read. Again.

Slipping into the museum once it closed for the day proved to be no harder than merely waiting for 
the building to empty once night fell and prying open a window. The thief spent three hours picking 
through the dark building, snagging the patent records and designs for the Mafia Land contract and 
picking out various other books, treatise, and designs at random from spreading patterns from what
she had to take.

The likelihood she'd keep most of it was high, so long as it was somewhere that wasn't likely to be searched by law enforcement. Say her rooms or storage unit in Mafia Land.

Replacing it all with her 'damaged' fakes until she ran out, the Russian then carefully applied some of her Storm Flames in small increments to flake away not only the ceiling but the walls in thin spots very carefully. Cracking a water pipe near the ceiling just before she left out the same window she got in by.

Detouring from her projected route, the thief immediately left the city with no-one the wiser anything had been stolen. A lot of castration going the museum's way for the water damage done to their displays, but no suspicion in her direction.

She had maybe thirty-six hours to get to Shamal's school, and at least eight of that would be spent sleeping while another three-four would be finding something to eat and actually eating it.

It was a little over a hundred miles to the coast from Belgrade going east, maybe half that going south.

A train south, a ship going even farther south, and then maybe another twenty to thirty miles of Italy to get through in as little as a day's time.

Sometime in there, she should probably call up Bjorn to see what the hell Italy's private schools taught to their brats.

(Friday the 19th of October, 1968. Convitto Nazionale Tommaso Campanella, Reggio Calabria, Italian Republic.)

"**Hold** the damn elevator!"

Renato's hand shot out, preventing the doors from closing and wrenching them back open for a thief to slide in under his arm and huff exasperatedly once she was safely within the contraption with him.

"**Cutting it a bit short, Sonya?**" He asked of her dryly as the doors slowly shut again.

"**Shut up, I said I didn't know if I could do this or not.**" She sourly bitched at him, prying open her rather worn-looking massive purse-bag in her hand.

Fair enough, the hitman had been surprised he could actually make this little meeting too.

He was about to ask what the hell she was doing when she shoved the bag on him just before she stripped out of both her jacket and the rather high-necked light sweater she had been wearing.

"The... **HELL, woman?**"

"**Turn around if you don't want to watch.**" Dropping her sweater and jacket, she also wiggled out of her knee-length skirt and pulled a red sundress out of that bag before the hitman recollected his wits and spun around to give her a bit of privacy. "**But I've been on a damn boat all last night and this morning and a freaking taxi cab all afternoon. I am tired of smelling sea-salt.**"

Renato had really nothing to comment on that with. He did appreciate knowing Sonya preferred dark purple lace for her lingerie, had the mauls he gifted her with on that brace of weapons wrapped
around her left arm, and still wore garter belts to hold up her stockings. "Stay on my right, if you could."

"You can turn around now. And why?"

He glanced over first, just to check to see if it was clear or not. She had reversed her jacket for a paler grey and was in the process of pulling it back on, to cover up her weapons and her tattoos, before taking back her purse. "Got stabbed in the thigh. It's healed, but if you can keep that rip or the bloodstain from being noticed I'd appreciate it."

The thief stuffed the sweater and skirt combo into that bag and digging out a… sewing kit in exchange. "Let me see it."

She was on her knees and peering at the two-inch cut in his slacks when the elevator dinged and slid open the doors for the second floor.

He shot the entirely disgustingly civilian family of four a sardonic look for their gaping. "Do you mind?"

Sonya jabbed the 'door close' button rather hard, then threaded a needle as the doors slid shut again. She didn't even jab him with it as the elevator lurched up to take them to the third floor, where they were supposed to go to meet with Shamal's teacher after-hours. A few neat stitches, and it would pass a casual inspection if not anything more.

"There, can't do anything about the blood other than cover it up."

He gave the thief a hand up, tugging lightly on his pocket to see how much give the stitching gave him. "Thanks. Suppose I can't say you've never done anything for me now."

The look she shot him would've curdled milk.

The hitman supposed that answered the question if she was still mad at him or not. "How many times do I have to say I'm sorry?"

Internalize it until you couldn't tell, Tatiana had claimed. He fully believed that but wondered how far the Russian Storm-Cloud's self-restraint actually reached if she could keep a lid on her irritation even from his sketchy 'people-sense'.

"I know you're sorry," Sonya snapped at him as she tucked away her little thread and needle kit, "that's not the problem. Can I trust you not to do it again? Should I even bother?"

…because if I have to try controlling all my thoughts around him… ever? Might not be worth it.

Renato rather irritably pressed his fedora down to shade his eyes, letting that sense of his go.

He had to give the woman that point even if he didn't really like the thought. Part of the reason why Sonya was the only one to know of his mind reading thing so far, right on up until he tickled her off she hadn't minded the thought of actually helping him try to control it.

The Russian woman repeated 'do not care' like it was a personal mantra. It really did seem as if she didn't mind anything, so long as it didn't affect her siblings. Which wasn't strange for Clouds, they were hard to involve on any level without a deep personal connection to something about it or if whatever subject was dear to them… or there was a Sky behind them.

She might not like being compared to other Hard Flame Clouds, but she could damn well act like
one when she wanted.

Who knew how anyone else would take the news, likely he'd end up in some deep shit if it got out he could sort of read minds. He hadn't breathed a word to it to anyone else and was a bit stuck trying to come up with some way to hide it.

"What else do you have in that bag?" He asked instead of actually address that issue as they reached their floor.

The hitman allowed her to proceed him out of the little box-room courteously, after reflexively checking to ensure no one was lying in wait for them. They weren't anywhere near someplace secured enough for that kind of chat, nor did he want to poke harder at Sonya's nursed feelings of hurt yet again.

She pulled out the flyer for this little appointment from the seemingly bottomless thing, giving him a dismissive one-shoulder shrug. "Everything I might need over a day that I didn't want to pack into actual luggage and leave at a train station's security lockers for a few hours. Useful things, purses. Except I hate that they're so steal-able."

"A book?" Renato inquired sardonically, shooting a glance down the hallway turn offs they were passing.

He was paying a near fortune for Shamal to attend this little civilian hell-hole, and at least it looked like the school was fully aware they had better give visitors or even the tetchy brats themselves something classy in return.

High polished tile floors likely cleaned the moment the students were turned loose for the day, golden-oak paneling on the walls, neat as a pin now with the lack of said grubby children messing around. Half opened doors gave glimpses of dark classrooms set for the next day's lessons, an entirely depressing feel about the near-empty building.

"One out of the Tesla museum, just before water damage rendered a lot of things there unreadable. Pity that, my book is rather... fascinating."

…it sounded as if that book had been purchased at the museum before their stock had been ruined, but Renato was pretty damn sure Sonya stole it. Probably also 'arranged' for the misfortune that was only just hitting the news. He only saw an article about it because he checked the obituaries to be sure he killed who he needed to last week.

Mostly, he was sure she stole it because she was radiating a kind of smug pleasure over the sequence of events that earned her that book.

The thief knocked on the door that corresponded to the much creased but surprisingly preserved flyer in her hands. Opening it when a call for 'come in' in an emasculated voice echoed out to them.

"Ah... Mr. and Mrs.... Nikishin?"

"I am Sonya Nikishina. It's Russian." The woman stressed her female-version of the name to what was likely Shamal's teacher, jerking her thumb over one shoulder to where the hitman was lurking over it. "This is Renato Sinclair, the brat's guardian."

The mousy-looking teacher blinked at them owlishly behind coke-bottle glasses. "So... mother and...?"

"Godparents." She corrected him shortly, a sour type of resignation emanating from her.
Renato mentally stalled out for a moment, the word 'guardian' still on the tip of his tongue.

When the hell did they adopt the bratty Mist?

Shamal's teacher, now that he was close enough to pick things up as the man rose up behind his desk to shake their hands, made a mental connection between the brat's unwillingness to talk about his home life with a recent upset in who was caring for him. Which was true enough, in a way.

The brat had lost his father, even if there had never been word made mention of about Shamal's mother ever from him.

…and now the teacher was rather bitterly wondering why it was all the mothers, or godmothers, of his students were not only hotter than the women he could date but also solidly off the market. Even as he finally got around to greeting them and explaining why the invitation to talk to him had been issued as if they couldn't figure that out themselves.

The Mafioso suddenly didn't mind the entirely vexing automatic assumption most people held upon seeing them together, that he and Sonya were either involved or secretly married and were just pretending they weren't. Sitting there as Mister Mouse tried to incompetently flirt with a Russian Storm-Cloud far outside his class would've been irritating.

He had yet to find who started that series of rumors in Vongola's housekeeping staff or find a way to stop it. It made it rather hard to chat up the maids for anything, they kept thinking they were 'helping' him keep his secret relationship under wraps and only 'played along'.

Entirely irritating situation, that.

Renato had yet to figure out if he wanted to be involved with the thief, which was a moot point until he figured out if she even wanted anything more than just someone to occasionally talk to from him.

Sonya had been completely unconcerned when Tatiana gave that offer earlier this summer, merely correcting a fact of what kind of invitation it was. Either she did find him attractive but was used to him enough not to dwell on it often, didn't remotely care about it one way or the other, or thought of him as a 'friend' only.

At least, before he pissed her off.

…or was she more interested in her sister?

Tatiana was a bouncy Sun user, very hands on. She actually accepted a bit of fussing directed at her before moving out of the way of her sister.

This was probably not something to think about when dealing with Shamal's teacher.

The dumpy little man that taught children for a living was blathering on about something to do with future school productions, so the hitman toed Sonya's left boot to get her to glance at him then shot her a blank stare. She blinked at him just as blankly, until the wonder if he had been paying attention crossed her mind and he gave a small negative shake of his head.

With a small huff for his inattention and a quick frown, the thief interrupted the teacher. "Excuse me, Mister Grillini. I was homeschooled, so this is a bit over my head. Can you take this a tiny bit slower, please?"

"Of course! But... ah, may I ask why you didn't homeschool...?"
Renato was about to snap a no, but she beat him to it.

"We are both very busy people, and at least a school with other children will prevent Shamal from having nothing much to do while we are busy. Furthermore... can I ask that we be warned of any events or other such school sponsored things more than a month ahead of time? Our schedules can get locked down a few weeks to months on end, we almost didn't make this. I actually have to hit the road right after this again."

Grillini scribbled down a jot of notes on his own paperwork, nodding a few times at the thief. "I can certainly do that. Schedules don't really change much from year to year, I can have the office send on a general plan for any events your young... godson might be involved with."

"Thank you. Now... I'm hopelessly lost, so can you start from the beginning again?" She asked, sounding genuinely contrite but from what Renato could pick up was feeling anything but.

The heel she stomped into the top of his foot made it clear she did not like playing a dumb blonde... or that she was still irritated with him just because.

Damn good acting skills though. If he hadn't known her, he would've thought she was really sorry... even if the amount of times he ever heard her actually apologizing could be counted on one hand.

...how often did she use those?

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 19th of October, 1968 continued. Reggio Calabria, Italian Republic.)

Sonya wasn't exactly sure what had crawled up Renato's ass.

From the hole the man had spent the whole parent-teacher conference into the teacher's head... she might not want to know.

Mr. Grillini hadn't seemed too bad to her, and at least somewhat competent in his job at least. He had a lot of things to say about Shamal, which were phrased politely as 'highly imaginative' and 'keenly curious'.

Which probably meant the brat hadn't calmed down much with this whole school thing going on.

The hitman had been fine right on up until actually meeting the teacher... was there some kind of problem with him?

Was it his next few hits that distracted him so much?

They never did managed a mid-spree meeting before, maybe he was that spacy when plotting how to kill people?

Poor teacher, the Mafioso guardian of one of his students had unnerved him something fierce.

Sonya was pretty sure her attempt to explain his silence and her lack of knowledge over Shamal's recent doings as they traveled a lot for work wasn't really bought too well.

Renato could have at least helped her with that, instead of aping a gargoyle in a particularly foul mood.

"...sorry." The Italian Mafioso himself spoke up suddenly, twitching fingers straightening his tie as they exited the school building. "Are you sticking around long enough to at least see Shamal?"
She scowled slightly and came to a stop at the edge of the parking lot, highly tempted but knowing full well that she was supposed to be well on her way to the Republic of Austria or already in it scouting out her next heist.

"It's not that late," he continued in an only slightly forced tone, "we could steal him for dinner or something."

"Isn't it almost the brat's bedtime?"

"Well yes, but who cares? We're not likely to be forced to deal with him tomorrow, or if we do we can just call the brat in sick."

Biting her lower lip, the thief weighed that against a day or two of being behind schedule. "...fine. Dinner, I'm starving. I do have to get moving after that."

"Give me a moment." Renato claimed, digging a set of car keys out of his pocket. "Borrowed a car from Vongola to make this damn thing."

She wondered why she needed to know that as he walked off for wherever he parked his temporary set of wheels, reflecting on how awkward it might become between them when he got a fair distance away from her.

It was partially her fault, but she really couldn't control what she felt. She never had really fully trusted his word and manners before, because when you boiled it down they were still criminals after all. The newer split-second of hesitation before actually considering wasting a bit of time with the hitman was starting to make things a bit stilted.

The thief didn't really like that, as she rather liked her friend when he wasn't being an asshole.

How to fix it was stumping her, however.

…maybe Cherep would have a suggestion?

That would be something for later then, when she met up with him after this Ball thing she was attending again.

She was no expert on Italian made cars, or any of them really unless her foster brother bent her ear in new and twisted shapes about them beforehand, but… that was a little low to the ground for even a sports car.

Heavily armored, maybe?

The car was, as she expected, very noisy.

"Where do you want to eat?"

"A diner will work for me, I need something that will actually stick to my ribs for a few hours."

Renato tipped his fedora to her as she buckled herself in and shut the passenger door. "As you wish, little lady Sonya."

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 19th of October, 1968 continued. Reggio Calabria, Italian Republic.)

Shamal waited until Miss Sonya left them at the booth to go 'powder her nose or whatever it was
women spent so long in bathrooms for. Which... he didn't really understand why she didn't know what it was she was supposed to be doing in a bathroom.

After she was gone he gave his guardian his best impression of his serious look.

From the amusedly mocking eyebrow raise he got in return, the kid figured he had probably better work on it.

"What did you do to Miss Sonya? She's not very happy."

"Sonya is rarely if ever happy, brat." The older Italian wryly reminded him, drumming his fingers on the table between them. "The best she gets is 'not irritated'."

He scoffed at him, sulking in place a bit at how dense the man could be even when the kid knew he was actually really smart. "That's only if you don't pay attention. She likes to hold me and argue with you, it makes her happy. But she's not arguing."

Miss Sonya actually got a bit mean when someone or something interrupted what she liked to do, which was how you figured out if she liked something or not. No one was allowed to take Shamal from her, touch whatever big book she was reading, or interrupted her arguments with Mister Renato.

He knew from that alone she liked him, reading, and Mister Renato... but she wasn't arguing with him now.

"Eh... I may have pissed her off a few months ago." The man informed him absently with a lazy roll of his shoulder. "She'll... probably get over it."

Shamal blinked a few times as he absorbed that news. 'Pissed off' meant 'made her mad', right?

Why would Mister Renato make his lady friend Miss Sonya mad?

He didn't want her mad, because then she might not spend time with them anymore.

"Brat."

Shamal tried really hard not to tear up, because boys didn't cry, but... he didn't get to see Miss Sonya very often already. If she was mad at Mister Renato, then she wouldn't want to spend time with them. Then she'd stop coming to visit him, and he'd never get to see her anymore.

That wasn't fair, he didn't even do anything to make her mad.

"Shamal."

He didn't remember his mom, Miss Sonya was probably the closest thing he'd get now that his dad was gone. Shamal didn't want to lose her too.

A hand gripping the back of his jacket and bodily pulling him up out of his seat made him startle, and he blinked wetly at Mister Renato's slightly irritated expression. "I'm fixing it, she's not going to disappear. If anything, even if I managed to make her unwilling to actually talk to me... I'm sure Sonya would be stubborn enough to keep visiting you even so."

"...oh." Shamal managed dumbly, which made him scowl because Miss Sonya did not as-so-ci-ate with stupid Mists so he couldn't be stupid since he was a Mist.

"I think she might forgive you that one." The older Italian commented neutrally, considering him a
long moment then hauling him across the table and whipping out a handkerchief from somewhere to
give him. "Wipe your face, if Sonya thinks I made you cry…"

He didn't even have to finish, the kid grabbed the fabric and scrubbed as ordered in a hurry.

Just in time too, Miss Sonya came back from the bathroom in different clothes than her pretty red
dress and grey jacket. She looked a little bemused at the seating change. "Something wrong,
Shamal?"

The Mist thought up an excuse in a fast hurry. "My nose is itchy."

Mister Renato snorted quietly, but then shot Miss Sonya an acidic look. "If you even think the word
cute…"

"You'll what?" She shot back archly, settling back in her spot across from them. "It's my head, my
thoughts, and if you don't like them…?"

Shamal blinked and sniffed hard. That was a new argument, but at least she was arguing again.

They both shot him a stern order to 'blow your nose' before making more digs at each other about his
lack of impulse control and her unreasonable grudges. It ended with Mister Renato scoffing and Miss
Sonya rolling her eyes, but that was normal.

"Shamal." The Russian woman asked after a moment. "Want to tell me what 'highly imaginative'
and 'keenly curious' means when your teacher says it?"

…oops. He fiddled with the cloth in his hands nervously. "…no? Not really."

She gave him a flat stare with her pretty grey eyes. "Don't get caught, then."

"Okay."

"I think we might be doing this wrong." Mister Renato suggested wryly as he plucked up a glass of
water to sip. "Isn't it supposed to be 'don't do it'?"

"…and what are we, again?" Miss Sonya asked of him just as dryly, waving one hand in a slow
circle. "He might just need that extra bit of practice working around those kinds of people sometime
soon, so best he knows how to do it instead of fumble it when it's important."

The older Italian rolled his eyes at her, but also didn't make another objection.

Shamal got to plotting how to keep Mr. Grillini from catching on to anything else a non-stupid Mist
might like to do when school got boring.

"If I get called in for another of these asinine meetings…" Mister Renato informed him shortly with a
stern look as he set the glass down sharply. "…you will not like it."

Wide-eyed, the young Mist shot a pleading look to Miss Sonya.

She looked entirely unsympathetic. "Don't look at me. If they try calling me in…?"

Eep.

"Are you all ready to order?" A waiter asked hesitantly, hovering nervously behind the blonde
Flame user's shoulder.
She shot him a glare, which had him flinching back slightly and making her eyes narrow at him even more. "Come back in five minutes."

Mister Renato snorted softly as the waiter scurried away. "Coward."

"I hate it when they do that." Miss Sonya agreed sourly.

Shamal narrowed his eyes on that waiter as he ducked into the kitchens.

He should get some practice in before going back to school, right?

Maybe he could even impress them, though they were kind of hard to please people.

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(Tuesday the 5th of November, 1968. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)

Tatiana gave her little sister a flat glare in the early morning, watery mid-fall light of their Mafia Land condo kitchen.

Sonya blinked at her a few times, then spooned up another mouthful of her oatmeal with a curious expression. "...yes?"

"You. Are. A. Brat."

With a spoon sticking out of her mouth, a bewildered expression on her face, owlish grey eyes, and still sleep rumpled from crashing out after getting back from running about the world stealing things, the younger thief was adorable.

Unfortunately, her older sister had a bone to pick with her adorable little sister.

"You know I'm a Sun, right? Well, blowing off excess energy is kind of a required thing for Suns if I don't use it up at the hospital." She informed her blindsided flat mate shortly. "I blew off mine through sex, but then you asked me to not for a month. You want to know what I had to do in order to sleep at night?"

"...I bet you're going to tell me anyways." Sonya hesitantly offered over her breakfast, warily eyeing her.

"Damn straight I am." The nurse proclaimed loudly, slumping to the dinner chair opposite of the thief to pull her boots on. "I had to take a walk that first night, which did nothing for me may I add. I ended up running into Muscles."

"Fong?" She blurted out, honestly surprised.

"He's chewing through the dojos on the far side of the island, learning the styles like you read books." Waving to said part of the island where all of those were located, Tatiana shrugged that off as she slipped her right heel into her footwear. "I got to flirt with him a bit, but eventually he turned it around to what I was doing out so late at night when he knew I had shifts to pull at the hospital the next day."

"...okay."

"I told him about what you asked of me, and that even though he had tasty muscles I couldn't do anything with him by order of my little sister. When he stopped looking at me funny, he suggested
maybe working out to tire myself out instead."

Sonya blinked at her, looked down at her cooling oatmeal, then spooned up another bite and returned her attention to her big sister.

Tatiana glared back at her. "Stop eating."

"I'm hungry, tell me while I eat."

She rolled her eyes at her and grabbed the left boot. "Fine. It wasn't a bad suggestion, but since I usually dance to keep myself in shape and that's more like a light work-out I asked him to recommend something for me. What to know what he did?"

"...suggested something?"

"No, he took me to the dojo he's working out of for the time being, had me demonstrate what little I remember from combat classes back in Moscow, then suggested something."

"Okay. And?"

"...and I think this might work better than sex." Tatiana concluded grumpily, stamping her left foot fully into her boot before messing with the laces, fully aware she was sulking but not caring. "I'm learning Fut Gar, have been for the last month and a half. Didn't even go back to picking up men after that one month you asked of me."

"Learning what?"

"A form of Shaolin Kung-Fu some of the other day workers here take for basic self-defense." She supplied irritably, then gave a sniff. "They teach a staff-version of it too."

Sonya blinked at her blankly.

"If you'd like to get more formal training in staff-weapons, because I know you asked Aleksandr for more but he didn't know much else but the basics."

"That's... not a bad idea, actually. As long as they don't mind that I work for months on end sometimes."

"Wait. You mean I actually found something we can do together that isn't a day to week long lounge on sand?" The nurse asked out of sheer surprise, since that had been a personal goal of hers since she realized the younger Russian didn't actually mind having her as a sister.

"Sure. Sounds fun." The thief supplied around her spoon. "I could actually get more spars in myself too."

A bit bewildered herself now, Tatiana stared at her little sister as she kept eating with a thoughtful expression.

"I think that earns Fong a bit more goodwill. Damn it, at this rate I'm going to have to help him out."

"I think that might have been the point, but aside Tasty Muscles and his points hoarding... what does he want?"

"Control. Well, more control." Sonya informed her slowly as she thought. "Storms are... really just about destruction in nature. Shit... well, if my bad match didn't work at all for him... maybe my
"match now would be a bad one for him?"

"Should we be worried about Fong's intentions?" She interrupted with a bit of concern, because using her to get to the thief was all well and good until actual outside motivation entered into it.

How did the two of them meet up anyways?

She knew Cherep knew the Chinese man after the thief encountered him, but not really anything about how Sonya and Fong met except for a chase happened in Shanghai.

"Unless he tries to talk or convince you to go to China, no. If he tries, then yes."

"That's weirdly specific."

"The Triads are still hoarding Flame users. I figured that out personally when Fong tried to keep me in Shanghai against my will."

"And that's alarming."

"He didn't know I belonged to the Zolotovs, just that I was a random Storm of surprising control." Sonya supplied without much of the concern that had been in her elder sister's tone. "I was also with Cherep and the circus for that. A civilian outfit, with a full-blown Flame user?"

Tatiana narrowed her eyes at her baby sister, wondering if Fong was another man that needed a pointed suggestion that anything bad happening to Sonya would be met by the ire of a large number of vor. However many she could bribe, beg, or seduce into helping her and their foster father out a bit.

Sonya pointed a finger at the redhead. "You're in just as much danger as I am of it, you're a full Sun."

…did the thief think any and all interest Fong had in her was due to that Flame thing only?

Oh, dear lord. If it was, her sister was dense. The man had issues keeping his eyes off her, even without the Sun's help, and the most Sonya thought of him in return was that he was a pervert who wanted to get her for her Flames?

Tatiana would be giving herself brain surgery via a wall at this rate.

"Aside Tasty Muscle's questionable motives, I'm still mad at you."

"What? Why?" The thief's attention snapped back to her older sister, a frown on her face. "Is this another of those girl-talk things you like to try confusing me with?"

The nurse held up a hand and waggled it from side to side after she finally finished tying her laces. "Kind of, sort of. I hate that you might have had a point. It's very annoying of you."

"…okay, I understand know-it-alls are very irritating but that makes no sense." Sonya pointed out after a long pause. "I didn't get mad at you for the whole 'find a man' motive behind our vacation. Why get mad at me for making you do the opposite?"

She might have been wrong about trying to encourage that, even discounting the Storm-Cloud's dislike for casual contact. Frankly the Sun couldn't figure out which she liked better, a few hours put in with her martial arts practice either alone or at the dojo… or sex.

…hmm, maybe both?
Point was it was very de-stressing and the thief's normal go-to for physical conditioning Tatiana had and kept scorning in favor for dance back when they were kids, up till now.

Sonya had a very irritating habit of showing her up, that's why the older sister wasn't very happy. Of course, she was never going to bring it up in a smug manner or rub it in. Which made it hard to actually sustain that irritation with her.

The thief didn't see a point in intentionally irritating her family members, since more than enough irritated her as it was anyways.

"Just accept that you're a brat."

"...fine, I'm a brat." Sonya echoed in bemusement, slowly going back to eating after giving her elder sister a strange look.

"Oh... you're no help." Tatiana huffed in wry amusement, stretching a bit as she got up from the chair. "You going to be okay today? No injuries I should look at while I'm here?"

She'd heard the thief get in last night, late. If she stuck to her usual habits, today was a day for lazing and double checking that everything on her contracts were accounted for before turning them in and taking a week or two long break.

"Mmm... I'm fine. I got a new book, so I'm going to finish reading that."

"Say no more, I'll know where to find you for lunch." The nurse quipped lightly, rounding the table to give her sister a brief hug now she was finished with her food. "I'll see you later, okay?"

She actually didn't flinch from the hug this time, progress.

"Have fun at the hospital, Tats."

"Oh yeah, fun."

(Wednesday the 6th of November, 1968. Mafia Land.)

1968 fashions were rather… erg.

Pantsuits or box-dresses with wide belts were all the rage now. While Sonya appreciated the fact that fashions were starting to ease away from making a girl wear a shapeless bag, it was rare if at all anything had a waist if it wasn't skin tight or caused by belts. Some even had an empire waist, which the thief just thought made someone look like they were trying to hide a pregnancy.

Evening gowns and cocktail dresses were starting to evolve into more of what Rachel had known, so there was that at least. Starting, as in would need another decade to be she would prefer.

Why did Shamal have to demand for her to visit over Christmas?

At least she wouldn't be too out of date when it came to fashion this year, especially since she could now actually have more than a scrap of fabric for a skirt.

She stuck with a Mafia Land tailor again, getting her fittings done while Björn put a few months of work into actually picking out a contract for her. Only the one, and it would only be accepted when she went to go approve of his choice, but it was kind of a test to see if this little arrangement would
Sleeves were now apparently optional things, and the fashions were still pretty much summed up as long-and-shapeless or short-and-boxy. There were things referred to as drapes, which were pretty much like someone took a heavy drape that existed on a window and threw it over their shoulders then wore what was left like a toga.

It was progress, at least.

She pinched the bridge of her nose and flatly refused the tailoring woman's suggestions of a more tent-like dress.

Progress. Just not very fast progress.

She refused the suggestion of a tent-like evening coat too.

She had the tailor eventually worked out a design for an actual dress, not a toga or bag. In a dark purple, without migraine-inducing pattern including both electric green or fluorescent orange in geometric or floral designs. She also turned down the suggestions for sequins, beads, lace, fur, and feathers in equally eye-gouging patterns or for covering large sections of the dress but stalled out on the offer of laced sides or a hem to mid-thigh skirt slit up one side.

Thank gods that came back finally.

The only problem with a halter-top, fitted, ankle-length dress with a slit up one side to mid-thigh was that her boots weren't really going to work well with it. She needed actual high heels, as well as a clutch/purse, jewelry, and everything else.

Well… she had a dress and could probably raid Tatiana's almost-alive closet for other bits before actually buying something she'd not likely use very often.

…and buy actual jewelry, not weaponized ones.

Deciding she had spent more than enough time trying to find a dress she'd actually wear, Sonya wandered over to the Thieves' Hall to see where her Lackey was.

Björn had been skittish and entirely too eager to please for the last few months, part of the reason why she had skipped out for the last month and a half even if she really didn't actually need to do anything but help him familiarize himself to Mafia Land's inner workings. He Lackey knew perfectly well that he nearly got them killed and she didn't appreciate it, but the startled deer looks at her arrival and the hesitant fawning were getting on her last nerve.

It was at least better than the flinching and the fear she got from random clerks, so the thief might just be leaving contract finding up to her Lackey if he could avoid trying to get them killed again.

She sort of caused that, with her very public show of distaste for that asshole clerk that tried killing her. She'd put up with it only as long as it took for a better arrangement to be figure out.

Sonya also had to sit the teen down and talk to him about his Lightning-Storm Flames. Sometime soon, so she could figure out if she wanted to tap him for the gemstone experiments that would happen after the start of the year again.

Galina had a collection of two hundred different rocks that needed testing now, an array of precious, semi-precious, and/or industrial crystals and just plain minerals or metals. A lot more than the mere fifty the Storm-Cloud had already done. The Inverted Lighting had also made some noise about work or not.
expectations and color being entirely arbitrary and how she found a way around that, but it would all have to be done again.

Frankly, the thief wasn't looking forward to it. At least Cherep and Tatiana would also be tapped so she wouldn't be the only one scorching her finger tips.

She didn't quite understand why metals were being included, but assumed Galina knew what she was doing and would try them too if only for a more complete result.

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 6th of November, 1968 continued. Mafia Land.)

Björn fumbled his pencil when he realized Sonya was watching what he was doing over one shoulder, having not heard her enter the little study/working room Lackeys were allowed to utilize.

The thief gave him a completely bland look as he scrambled to catch his writing utensil, but at least she didn't narrow her eyes at him for the less than graceful reaction to her presence.

"Dama, I didn't hear you come in."

She gave a slow blink, then huffed at him and returned her attention to the contract he had been perusing.

He was... somewhat sure a non-reaction was a good sign. For him, that was.

It wasn't the 'avoid looking', a semi-hostile glare, or a narrow look levels of vexation she had held with him the last few months. Björn was pretty sure that was basically a descending list of how irritated she had been with him ever since that near-lethal contract taking mistake of his happened.

He never wanted to see her that ticked off again. It didn't really look much different than how she was normally, but something in the pit of his stomach insisted he had been pretty much 'prey' around a starving predator when she had been stalking him back to the Thieves' Hall to confront the man that insisted he take the contract for her.

The Icelandic teenager was half surprised she hadn't just kicked him to the curb for that mess.

Those mafia men he had started out under would have, or worse, even Björn himself probably wouldn't have forgiven someone for a mistake of that magnitude.

Honestly, even if his first 'employers' had survived his screw up with as much grace as Sonya had he probably would've still ended up dead anyways.

They weren't forgiving people.

He wasn't even sure if the Russian had forgiven him for it.

"Björn, stop daydreaming." A slim hand forced his head down, to the point the contract he had been looking over was the only thing he could see and held it there with iron control. "I said no Italian targets."

"It's a French owned company, Dama."

"...and?"

"Upper Italy, outside Vongola claimed territory."
Sonya released his hair to get a better look at the contract again herself. "Outside any Vongola-aligned territory?"

"That I am not sure of, Dama, so I was checking it."

"Hmph." Was the only comment she gave before giving him a demanding look.

Bjørn dug out a different contract out from under the paperwork he had bargained from out of the Intel brokers in exchange for information about something that might be used to bribe off the only Mafia Land Cloud resident to date. He wasn't sure why that had become a bargaining chip, nor why everyone seemed to think she was always irritated or angry, but he took advantage of it anyways.

This other contract was in Bordeaux, like the thief had asked him to find for her but hadn't been a destination for any heist until recently. It was a contract that asked for a thief to steal the recipe for Absinthe from one of the various liquors making companies that used to produce it.

"Absinthe is a drug, Bjørn." Sonya informed him in a flat tone.

"...it is?"

"Technically classified as one, even if the rumors about it being a hallucinogenic is greatly exaggerated." She explained in the same tone, still perusing the contract even so. "Since it's not really, that might be how this got through the other clerks, but still possible to get me in trouble for dealing with a drug's recipe."

That didn't really solve the issue he suddenly had. "How do I make sure?"

"Try researching what a contract asks for me to steal. This needs to be double checked by one of the other clerks before I will take it. Otherwise, not a bad choice."

The Icelandic teenager wrote that down hastily on a pad of paper he was using as a notebook, a reminder to change his checklist to hopefully catch mistakes like that one he just made. He had checked it, but a recipe for alcohol hadn't particularly struck him as dangerous.

"Check it, then if it's not going to get me killed why not. Find another two, at least, on any possible route there or back again I'd have to take to get there." Sonya demanded blandly, tossing him the contract back. "Not Italy for now. England, Spain, well... maybe not Spain, Norway, Greenland... Iceland."

Bjørn hesitated.

"If you have something you'd like me to pick up or relocate for you there, find me a contract in the region and I will try. Or come along with me and pick it up yourself."

"Not Iceland, Dama, Finland. My mother's jewelry."

She pulled a slight face but shrugged. "Then find me something in Finland, and the address of the place you pawned it off at."

Sonya gave him a moment to process that, then continued.

"Finland is for next year, however. Pack up for now. What do you know of Dying Will Flames?"

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 6th of November, 1968 continued. Mafia Land.)
Bjørn knew nothing beyond what the Zolotovs had told him about Dying Will Flames of the Sky, Sonya wasn't surprised by it.

From what she knew of her own Storm and Fong's behavior as well as Guanche's and of Galina's Lightning tics, the Icelandic teenager was Classically a Storm and an Inverted Lightning. Which one was stronger was a coin toss, as he wasn't exhibiting any real personality traits of constant users.

…and didn't that make it sound like some kind of drug usage.

She also ran him through the natural drawbacks, the fixation/attention problem he would develop beyond or inclusive to something about his lifestyle. With both Storm fixation and a Lightning's super-focused attention span that could develop in equal measures he could turn into even more of a freaking fan-boy-like Lackey of hers.

Which was, frankly, rather disturbing as a mental image.

She had introduced him to Dmitriy's method of learning about his own Flames for two reasons. Her childhood friend was still the most level-minded Flame user she knew of aside his Flame being Rain, and the slow exploration of the teen's own Flames would allow a talent or trick to develop naturally instead of his initial skill be something combat orientated.

Renato's Sun Flame bullets, her knock-off super-strength, Cherep's un-death, weren't all things that could be typically useful from day to day… or rather shouldn't be. Learning another trick or innate ability was also like pulling teeth to figure out, or at least that second one was.

The hitman had a bitch of a time learning to heal himself up, she had issues actually sustaining a Propagation of her Bec de Corbins at first, and the stuntman fumbled her strength ability for years on his own until he revealed he could copy it to her.

She could have also given her Lackey a piece of paper to Disintegrate or Harden in a Tatiana method, but she was also pretty sure that method was really only going to be useful for Mists or Suns, maybe a Sky, at best. They had the stubbornness and the Flame flexibility to work with that, more so than any other type she could think of.

That didn't mean she thought it was impossible, just maybe not fit for generalized lessons.

Bjørn might not have known about the bulk of the information before she told him it in his tiny apartment that actually belonged to the nurse, but he did reveal he had been trying to draw his Flames out on his own.

Half a year of trying, he claimed he still wasn't much good.

"No, actually, that's not bad." It took her a year to consciously do it, herself. Slow, steady work on it did seem to be the faster method to gain control rather than an instant use/no control route. "That's more than enough for right now. After the first of the year, head back to Moscow."

"Dama?" The teen asked in a startled tone, the weak flickers of red sparks in one hand and the fitful flairs of green in the other winking out at the distraction.

"There's a… testing kind of thing going on. More Flame users means more results to work with, so go pitch in there when the time comes. I'll be there, so will Tats, my brother, and a few others you might remember from your year working for Dmitriy and Galina."

Sonya tapped a nail against the back of one hand.
"Work on that. It'll be draining, and exhausting, and there's over two hundred things to test so far. The stronger you are the more you can do in a day, and the faster it will be over with."

"So... you're not sending me back?" Bjorn asked of her hesitantly.

The thief blinked at him blankly. "Technically I sort of am, but send you back for what?"

"...because I screwed up?"

"Everyone screws up, eventually." She snapped irritably, weirdly nettled by his lack of faith in her. "It's a part of life, kid. You screw up like that again and I'll drop you, so just don't do it again."

"Yes, Dama."
Chapter 29

(Thursday the 7th of November, 1968. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)

Sonya had sort of gotten to know Galina a little better over the past year than she had the entire time the Inverted Lightning was one of Tatiana's gang members. It wasn't a really warm relationship, more like the casual camaraderie between two people that shared a gender who worked together.

Getting a call from her wasn't exactly usual, but it wasn't exactly odd either. The subject matter this time, however…

"...are you sure that's a good idea?"

"No." The woman informed her bluntly over the phone, sounding sarcastic. "But it's what we're doing anyways. The information will be encoded, and do you know how much of a bitch it will be to do that?"

The thief's right wrist and fingers tingled in sympathy, and all she had to do was nothing. "Yes, I wrote it all down for you in the beginning. Several copies worth, and all the rest of you did was add in bits and bobs on the end."

The Zolotovs would be publishing Sonya's work in Dying Will Flames.

She didn't really know how she felt about that. It wasn't entirely her work anymore, so if the others were alright with it Sonya wouldn't be the one protesting. She didn't remotely think it was finished, or at any decent point of putting out a 'first edition' of. The thief was also pretty sure that a month or so after her clan did put the book out however it was they were doing it… a 'second edition' would be needed to cover the latest fallacy correction someone tripped over.

"Oh, that's right. And you did it all by hand. It was very quaint. I'm getting a typewriter to do up the master copy, myself."

"...you are a colossal bitch some days."

"Yes, I know. You adore and put up with me if only for my filing system. Dmitriy does, anyways. If that man could even find his own damn ass with both hands but without a map I'd be surprised."

Sonya made a deductive stab in the dark, especially since Galina didn't normally sound like this. "He's abandoned you to do it all yourself, didn't he?"

"The fucking jackass." The Lightning hissed out sourly in agreement from the Rain's office in Moscow. "I don't mind taking all the notes, his handwriting sucks ass all over the place. I do mind when I get lumped with all the damn paperwork."

"Then make him regret it, using it." Sighed out the thief, running a hand through her short blonde hair. "About this publishing thing… how the hell are we getting that around Omertà?"

"Hippy love shit. It'll obviously be one of these 'spiritual self-healing guides to inner peace and free love'. I'm getting hives just thinking about it."

"Um... is that going to work?"

"It should. Whoever reads it will either get a head full of free-love rainbow bull or will understand..."
the colors represent Flame colors and can work it out from there.”

"…okay."

"…is that it? I expected you to refuse on the basis 'it's not complete'."

"It isn't complete." Insisted the younger Russian shortly, because she was sure they were maybe a week to a month away from running into yet another brick wall and having to backtrack on something yet again. "But obviously someone, or some ones, don't care about that. If you and Dmitry don't mind, and I don't think Tats will either, then I'm what? One out of four of the main researchers and or test subjects. Think I might be outvoted anyways."

"Your mind is a fascinating place. One day, I kind of want to live there. It sounds so simple, yet… not that simple." Galina huffed a prissy little snort down the line, giving a sigh of her own in the next second, "Sonya, you started it. We might have built off it, but it's your initial effort. Therefore, it's your intellectual property. Communists we may mainly be, but it's going under your name."

"Why my name?"

"Because I would not have had the patience to sit and read through children’s stories to glean the basics stripped of the bull. Nor to be an impressionable child and look at the bulk of it then decide 'screw that 'have to be' shit, I'm going this way'. Dmitry might be a decent teacher for Flame use, but he never would have bothered had you not dangled a bit of sapphire under his nose. He'd probably still be a mechanic right now instead. I followed your sister and would still do so happily if she wanted me even now, but Tatiana is not what one would call an intellectual that challenges the status quo of what everyone thinks. Also, if we didn't give you the credit for your work I think your mother will have us all messily murdered in our sleep."

Sonya blinked, took the phone away from her ear to give it a strange look she couldn't give the Lightning, and replaced it. "Galina?"

"You are entirely confused what point that had, aren't you?"

"…yes."

"Like I said, I want to live in your brain." She claimed seriously enough the thief wondered if she should be concerned about the woman actually trying to figure a way to do so. "Do you have any further corrections or additions I should know of before actually tackling encrypting this über mess of epic proportions?"

"I'll send you mine and Tats' master copies for Sun and Cloud and get her to write down anything she might be thinking of adding." The Storm-Cloud informed her slowly.

The Storm copy was already back in Moscow, since reaching the 'not entirely totally destructive anymore' point with her own Flames she was a little stumped on what else to do with it.

…well, there was Fong's little temperature trick, and she should probably detail out how to use less Storm Flames than what one instinctively did naturally.

"I need the Sun, to do after the bare minimum we have for Sky, fairly soon. The point of that was had you not started it, it wouldn't have been done at all." Galina pointed out in a flat tone, papers rustling on her end of the line. "The best I would have expected was a few people thinking about doing it, but never getting around to fleshing it all out and actually opening up new things to investigate."
"...okay."

"You still don't see my point, do you?"

"No. It's not done, I'm not the only one working on it anymore, and frankly I don't appreciate being given the credit for another's work." Sonya clarified shortly. "Your name had better be on the damn thing, even if only as 'edited by'."

"Sure." The now highly amused sounding Lightening promised.

"And on the Lightning category. Tat on the Sun, and Dmitriy on the Rain." She tacked on after getting over her slight surprise at the easy agreement. "As a matter of fact, there had better be a list of damn names in that book. Everyone we pulled information from."

"You realize to any civilians who might pick it up will think we're all hippies if I do, right? I'll ask if they want to be, but if they say no..." Galina suggested in a wry tone of voice, then got a bit more serious. "Even your brother?"

"...I'll ask him if he minds or not, but probably not." Cherep was a big boy, he could decide for himself. As a matter of fact, she should probably go ask Renato if he minded his name being put in too. "Or you can ask him, the circus he's with should be back by now. I might have another name, I'll figure it out before I send off the Cloud and Sun journals if so and tell you then."

"Fine."

"...Galina? Are you putting in the rock tests too?"

"No, it won't be done in time. Besides, anyone that wants the results can do their own damn work in figuring it out."

Fair enough. "Is that it then?"

The thief had expected maybe questions about Storm things when she picked up the phone and heard the Lighting on the other end, or maybe even news they finally had a new Cloud in. Even more rock related news, not 'you're getting published'.

She still didn't know how she felt about it. That was... pretty much par for the course with her and new things.

"How many copies do you want sent to you?"

"Erm... two for both me and Tats for sure." Sonya had to think about it for a moment, but eventually shrugged even if the other woman wasn't going to be able to see it. "Two more on top of that. You might not even have to send it, we'll be there at least this spring if not by mid-winter."

Renato did deserve something for pitching in with Tatiana, even if he seemed to rather loath actually spending time with his fellow Sun. He wrote things down and gave it to the nurse instead of actually talking with her, but since that seemed to work for the two Suns the thief hadn't exactly asked about why they did it that way.

She wasn't sure what she'd do with that last copy, but it would be helpful to have on hand if she needed another bribe for Nono Vongola or maybe even Fong if the man kept making himself useful. ...speaking of which...
"It's not going to take me that long, I have a format to encode with and most of the information in front of me right this moment. When I get your two journals for you and your sister's Flames I'll take less than half a month to write it all up with a sprinkle of hippy-love liberally smeared within. December, maybe."

"...I'll be in Italy at the end of December."

"I'll have one sent, just so you can see for yourself." Galina promised wickedly. "I'll talk to you later, Sonya. Congratulations, by the way."

"Erm… thanks?" For what was she being congratulated for?

The Lightning in Moscow hung up before the bewildered Storm-Cloud could ask.

Feeling confused and a little bit cheap, Sonya hung up her own end.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 7th of November, 1968 continued. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)

Fong snatched a glittering thing pitched at his head out of the air, slowly allowing himself to recover his stance to the 'ready position' for Tongbeiquan katas he was ingraining into his muscle memory. Then he looked at what he had in his palm.

"Cinnamon Stone garnet." Sonya informed him flatly as she approached him. "My current match. See if it works for you."

"I thought you said."

"I'm not going to sit around so you can test upwards of two hundred rocks for what you want." She snapped irritably, shooting the dojo's attendant that showed her in a suspicious glare for his hovering near them. "I have way too much to do as it is. I can toss a couple your way until you either find a bad match or you stop."

"Stop what?" He asked, rolling the little gem around his fingers.

"Stop trying to be helpful. I appreciate you found Tats something to do." The prickly Russian Storm-Cloud gifted him with a flat look. "However, I also understand that for her to have met you late one night on an island of this size means it is either a very convenient coincidence or a coincidence made to happen."

It really had been by chance, but he was mostly certain she wasn't going to believe him if he said so. Instead of try defending himself, he turned his attention to the dark reddish-brown jewel.

The martial artist had little luck with her last one, the red tourmaline. He had been moderately surprised the jewel hadn't just crumbled into dust under the force of his own Flames like everything else had, but aside a rapid lightening of color where he prodded it the gem had proved to be mostly useless for him.

This one proved to be only slightly different, although with his new experience in holding back the full force of his Storm allowed him to actually see this jewel almost wick the bright red Flames into it.

It glowed momentarily with an inner fire borrowed from the Triad member, then a crack suddenly
split the garnet into three pieces.

"...a really bad match then. Not quite." Sonya didn't sound surprised as Fong allowed the gem pieces to fall into his palm. "Ever try those Storm Flame rings?"

"Once." Actually... the garnet behaved just like that ring had, glowing for a split second before it too shattered. Not quite as cleanly as this one had. "Is this...?"

"Possibly. I don't know." The thief also didn't sound remotely interested either, but if she had asked in the first place that had to mean it was something she'd want to know. "Pity about that."

Fong ran the pad of his thumb along the new sharp edges and thoughtfully regarded her as she considered the jewel fragments he now had.

A nominally minimal range of physical expression meant he was generally guessing in the dark as to what she felt or really thought, and the woman was blunt enough to need some mental adjustment to get used to. A handful of meetings did not a good rapport make, nor did it give him enough experience to try figuring out what it was she was thinking about.

Two hostile, two semi-belligerent, and only one other occasion she had refrained from glaring at him meant this was still new ground for him when it came to her.

"Tatiana isn't defenseless." The Russian informed him after the long pause with a narrow look. "As a Sun, they have this thing called 'self-healing'. Trying to knock out or drug her will only irritate her, and I swear to high hell if you try... I don't care if I have to go through your entire Triad, I will kill you."

"Are you sure you can?" He asked after a pause, because female and a thief aside... she was still a Cloud.

Threats from one were entirely respectable things to take in consideration.

"I only have to kill if I fuck up a heist, Fong. And I've never had to kill to cover my tracks."

Sonya had also used that stealth against him once before when her temper snapped, and she ended up carving a furrow into the island almost using Fong himself as a shovel. He hadn't exactly fared too well against it, although they both had been tired by the time she thought to make use of her career given stealth.

She plucked the broken bits of her jewel out of his palm, a slightly wry cast to her lips that showed she was aware he let her do it without much trouble. "You're somewhat fascinating, if rather annoying. I'd be disappointed if I had to try my hand at assassin's work."

"I will try not to disappoint." At least, not until he was sure if she ever had a reason to try killing him he'd at least stand a chance of catching her before she knifed him in the ribs.

He was pretty sure learning to fight blind would help in that respect. If the woman was a little less stubbornly standoffish, he might have rather banked on the idea of befriending her to the point she wouldn't try murdering him for any offense.

He was just as stubborn, however. While he wouldn't rely on any overtures of comradeship to net him results, he was still going to try if only to see which of them was worse in that respect.
"...de Mort?"

The thief blinked in surprise, since she had only used that name in conjunction with the Großes Volksfest or her private investigator. It was France, Bjørn hadn't managed to find her another one or two contracts in the general area in time so she had a decent amount of time to kill and had been wasting it by looking around a port city built on the Garonne River.

...what the hell was his name again?

"Detective." Sonya temporized instead of admitting she didn't recall the man's name, glancing to the side instead of the shop window display she had been considering. "Hello."

The Frenchman gave her a wry grin, scratching a bit at the stubble on his chin. "Didn't expect to see you here. In Bordeaux, I mean. It wasn't too long ago I talked to you last."

"Well... kind of here for work, but mainly to follow up on the information you gave me." She admitted, her attention returning to the display.

High heels just looked like a bad idea. Who the hell put stilts on their heels and wandered around in them?

She couldn't decide if she wanted to actually try a pair out and see if it snapped her ankle or not.

"And doing a bit of shopping on the side?" The man asked with audible amusement as he got close enough to see what she was pondering.

"I have a company party to attend in a month, so unfortunately."

"Ah... so... where is your husband?"

Sonya jerked slightly, then peered over at the PI in bewilderment. "My what?"

"Skull de Mort?"

"...is my brother."

Sartre, she finally recalled the name, suddenly looked a little surprised himself. "Oh! Oh well... that, I see."

From the look he gave her, she doubted it.

"We're foster siblings. We were raised as such, not biologically." The Russian informed him dryly when his glances to her hair became a bit more than obvious. "Bit of a fan?"

"I've caught a few of his shows, when he was just starting out." Admitted the detective without an ounce of shame, a rather charmingly boyish grin on his face as he stuffed his hands in his pockets. "He's really good."

"I'll have to take your word for it, I worry too much to actually watch one all the way through."

"Well, little sister. I can understand that."

She gave the man a sideways look. "Did you just stop to say hello, and for a possible chance to meet my brother?"
"Slightly." Sartre shrugged with another wry grin, not ashamed at getting caught out by her. "I will admit to possible ulterior motives behind talking to you, but now that I know… would you like to get some coffee?"

"Aren't you in the middle of something?" She asked with a touch of confusion, because she knew his office was based in a different city.

"Ah! …shit." The man swore, looking around and more intently down the street. Almost taking a step away from her but pausing and turning back quickly. "About that coffee?"

"Maybe, if you find me again before I leave the city." Sonya agreed in bemusement, wondering what the hell he wanted from her if he now knew her brother wasn't around.

"I can do that, de Mort." Sartre agreed quickly, sticking a hand out but kissing the back of hers instead of shaking it. "Until later."

The thief stared after him, then looked at her hand. She didn't know people still did things like that. She hadn't thought she was that far back, honestly.

With a sigh, she gave one final glance at the store display then entered the damn shoe store.

The worst that would happen is twisting her ankle, and she was not only a slightly rusty ballerina but also a circus trained acrobat. Stilts shouldn't be that hard, right?

…right?

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 11th of November, 1968 continued. Bordeaux, French Republic.)

Apparently, the trick was not to walk on your heels when wearing high heels but more on the ball of the foot and rest on the heels when needed. Sonya still couldn't decide if she liked them or not.

Strappy little black heels aside…

Bordeaux was, again, a river-side port city on the western side of France. Wine country, old-style architecture reaching as far back as the eighth century, lots of bridges, and oddly planned out streets that didn't so much as intersect as cross over one another at angles.

She got lost in Bordeaux very easily. When a city block wasn't a square but more triangle in shape following a curve of a river, she confused her counts of what side of the block she was on and her orientation of what direction she was going in a lot.

She could deal with curving roads, dead ends, and roundabouts. Those were all easily accommodated or navigated around. Angled streets just screwed with her, and she had started to suspect it was a very insidious kind of tourist trap mechanic.

Still a very pretty city to get lost in, but when your intent was to find where you were going and not sightsee… it got irritating fast.

When she ended up on the Pont-de-Pierre Bridge for the third time in as little as an hour, the thief was about ready to give up and ask around for directions.

"Lost, de Mort?"

"I do not have the greatest sense of direction, but I suspect this city was made this way to entrap
those used to more solidly square-shaped urban areas." Sonya admitted to the private investigator with full honesty, folding up her map and giving the Frenchman a considering look. "Help?"

Sartre had found time for a shave and a change of coat at least, before he tracked her down again. "Of course, where to?"

"Rue Fondaudège. I can find my way from there."

"...that's up near Notre-Dame." He informed her wryly, jerking his thumb down the street that led straight away from the bridge she was standing next to. "Down until the street comes to an end, a right on up until you see the cathedral."

"I know that much." Admitted the thief sourly, glaring down the main road she was coming to hate. "It's just the kinks in that road throw me off, and I end up going in circles or doubling back along the wrong angle-road because I think I missed it."

Nominally because she was concentrating more on not tripping in heels than counting streets or watching what angled street she was wandering down.

"Why not hire a taxi to get you there correctly?"

…because if Cherep ever heard she had to resort to that he'd never let her forget it. She sighed, packing away her map and giving up on making her own damn way. "I suppose that would be the best idea."

"Can you do coffee today, or must I take a rain check?"

"I am running behind, this was only supposed to be a quick stop for familiarization and a large order for French wine." She admitted sourly. "Another time, Rèmy."

She had to dig through her wallet for his business card in order to recall what his first name was.

"I will hold you to that, Sonya." The man gave her a grin, another kiss to the back of the hand, then walked off.

…that was flirting, right?

It was more like what Renato did when he wanted to charm such-and-such out of their pants.

Sonya considered it but shrugged the whole thing off when she felt no desire to escalate that into anything, even if it would cause her elder sister to facepalm.

He was still prior law enforcement. It wasn't like that could go anywhere.

The thief still had to order Mafia Land a shipment of wine, steal a recipe, and do a little breaking-and-entering of a private residence left to do. Right now, her main concern should be figuring out where the hell a recipe for Absinthe was.

…and not breaking an ankle on her two-inch heels.

Impulse buying was a nasty, horrible thing.

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(Tuesday the 12th of November, 1968. Bordeaux, French Republic.)
Wine ordered, and a likely location figured out, Sonya turned her attention to the ancestral home of a three-century dead Arcobaleno.

Private residence security hadn't gotten any better over the years and unfortunately the Carpentier family had sold and moved from the childhood home of Pierre-Antoine, former Arcobaleno of the Storm. The original house had also been condemned, torn down, and a new house built over the ruins of the old over three hundred years.

The Russian thief's intent wasn't to steal anything from the family that lived in the house built on top of the location of Pierre-Antoine's former residence, but to poke around to see if the Arcobaleno had left anything behind on the lot.

It was the basement that netted her something, the ancient stone mason had either made or repurposed a small cache behind a corner brick that lined the walls. Five hours of poking around the back garden and four of actually searching the house's ancient foundations later.

She knew it had to be Pierre-Antoine, not very many would identify themselves with ‘la tourmente’.

It was embellished into a plate on the box of lacquered wood she withdrew from the niche behind the basement wall.

Unfortunately, it also wasn't well preserved.

Part of the box crumbled to dusty wood fragments in her hand, the half-corroded metal plate that held the French word for tempest falling out and hitting the brickwork under her knees. The papers inside had weathered the centuries about as well as the rest of the container. That was to say… badly. Some of it was fragmented, others damaged by water, and a few just had blotchy patches of faded ink instead of words.

Scoping it all up and packing it away carefully in one of the resident family's freshly washed sheets, the thief put it into her backpack and snuck her way out of the slowly waking house.

She'd take a look at it all later and figure out how much was useless to her and what might help. All she needed were more names. However, she also had a recipe to steal and no real good excuse for remaining in Bordeaux after her 'business' was finished and her wine shipped.

…instead of stealing the damn recipe, she was going to take a picture and a handwritten copy of it.

A break-in was much less suspicious than a theft.

(Saturday the 21st of December, 1968. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Less than a month of working on it, and Sonya still didn't really like her high-heels much.

They weren't bad, but they could hurt if you wore them long enough. She decided heels were only for special occasions, because she was sure as hell not going to wear them into a fight or anyplace she might be doing a lot of walking again.

Getting lost might have been the cause, but blisters on one's feet were still not fun regardless of reasons.

One more night, then she could kick them off and ignore she had them… for most of a year until and or if she attended Vongola's next Christmas Ball.
Tatiana bemoaned the fact the thief's feet were so small, it meant the nurse couldn't steal her little sister's shoes. Her fashionable, French shoes.

Sonya was still bemused by the entire thing when the sisters split up, one heading for Soviet Russia and the other to Italy.

They were little torture devices attached to the heel, why did the Sun want to wear them so badly?

Sonya was a little surprised to get a personal greeting from a bouncy baby Mist brat at the Iron Fort's door again. Given she had rather recently seen the kid, she hadn't expected a personal reception.

"Miss Sonya! You came!"

"I said I would, brat." The thief informed him blandly, eying the kid beaming up at her.

Shamal was now up to her upper abs in height, which she could've sworn the brat had been waist high to her only two months ago. He also wasn't tugging on her to get picked up, which she supposed was a good thing. While she could pick him up, it would look a bit odd to do so with a kid more than half her size.

Taking off her brace of weaponry proved easier with the left arm chains, the doorman's twitch when he realized there had been a reason she was taking off her bracelet was mildly amusing.

"But that was before Mister Renato made you mad." Shamal informed her like she hadn't known that, fisting a hand into her calf-length skirt. "I... was a little worried."

"Don't be. Yeah, Renato's an asshole sometimes but that's not your fault. And you were the one to ask me to attend this thing first." She dug her slightly crooked right fingers into Shamal's wavy brown hair, ruffling it lightly. "Technically... I suppose I'm your date."

"Ho? Am I being stood up?"

She shot the hitman descending the staircase a dry look and a smirk. "Tiny bit, I don't think Shamal's going to be able to stay up that late."

"I can too!" The baby... well, she supposed he wasn't a baby anymore, bratty Mist insisted loudly in excitement.

"Let's not and say we did, I don't want you stunting your growth." The thief informed him with another ruffle to already messy hair.

"Aww..."

"Sonya, do you need the doorman for anything else or are you remaining there to make a point?" Renato asked archly as he practically sauntered down the last few steps.

"Oh, right." She looked to the man, who was still eyeing her collection of sharp/pointed/blunt weapons in disbelief. "I'm expecting a package from Moscow. They really should have gotten it to me before now, but I suppose something delayed them a bit. It will likely be transported by a vor, which I would not recommend you answer the door for. They might just decide to break a bone to see if you flinch or not. I'd suggest you send a Mafioso to deal with them instead."

"...very good, Miss Nikishina." The man managed, after a moment of paling at what was probably the idea of random Russians breaking his bones out of banal curiosity. "Would you like to be informed when or if such an individual arrives?"
"They probably won’t relinquish the package without me there to take it, so yes."

"Of… course…" He glanced to the tray that held her weapons, to the door he finally shut behind her, and then at the thief herself. "Excuse me, I will have the maids take your luggage to your suite in a moment."

"What package?" Renato inquired shortly, giving her a semi-suspicious look.


"Why am I not sur-" He cut himself off to yank his shin away from bratty Mist's kick. "The hell, Shamal?"

"Be nice until she's not mad anymore." The kid demanded quickly, grumpily scowling up at his guardian and fisting his other hand into the thief's skirt so he had a two-handed grip on her. "I want her to stay."

"I can't exactly live here, brat." The thief quipped blandly, knuckling his head a little just because it was within her reach. "Speaking of book package, I never did manage to ask if you wanted your name included before the deadline the editor demanded. They temporized and put in your initials instead."

"My…?" Repeated the hitman blankly, then suddenly blinked and looked at her thoughtfully as he probably lifted the details out of her head. "…really."

She arched an eyebrow at him in silent demand.

"…thank you for not putting my name in a hippy book, aside whatever other things it may be." He drawled after a moment, placing his right hand on the crown of his hat and concealing any facial expression behind the brim that might have told her what he really thought about it.

"You're welcome." She informed him flatly, slightly irritated that he was going to be of no help in sorting out what she thought of having her name on a hippy book.

Again, aside whatever else it might really be.

Shamal glanced between them suspiciously but didn't see a reason to try assaulting Renato again in the end.

Sonya huffed at them both, disentangling his hands from her skirt. "Now, where the hell am I staying for the next two nights?"

(Monday the 23rd of December, 1968. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Renato very carefully arranged the situation the moment he heard a Russian male of likely criminal origins reached and passed the port of Catanzaro and was headed rather determinedly south.

The stage, a library room Sonya was known to frequent when a resident of the Iron Fort. The cast was himself, the woman in question, a bratty Mist, and various other maids as well as Visconti looking up some tidbit of recent history.

He had maybe less than half an hour to draw a certain thief into a leading conversation where
someone of Nono's could overhear and understand the relevant information.

"...published, though?"

The thief gave him a considering look over Shamal's head, who was rather intently powering through a few Cyrillic alphabet exercises she had given him. "Yeah, it surprised me too. I didn't actually think about it myself."

"You did all that work for nothing?" Renato prompted, maybe a touch half-heartedly.

If she didn't go into detail, or ended up unwilling to talk about it, he'd stop pressing.

He liked Timoteo, and he'd try to help the Don in return for stepping in when the hitman's troubles got over his head. Sonya was equally as valuable if on a more personal level, however.

…and he was on thin ice with her already.

"Not for nothing. If it helped my foster family, then I did something." She sunk her fingers into Shamal's hair again, that was turning into a habit, which earned her a beaming smile before bratty Mist returned to puzzling out her native language's written system. "I made what I had available to my clan since we had several Flame users popping up like daisies, and I guess it all snowballed from there to… this. Remember, I helped another Mist before this brat with his own Flames. That was kind of part of it."

The hitman got the mental impression of another Mist child that liked to touch the thief a bit too much out of her head, a half-recalled impression rather than actually formed thought. "So, did they jump over your head with publishing your work on Flames or what?"

"Not quite. I'm no longer the only one contributing to that anymore." She batted that thought away absently, stretching her legs out under the table Shamal was still hard at work on. "There's four main… um, test subjects? We're not really researchers, but more like… the ones that deal with it more, who add in more information as we expand the pool of Flame users we know of. I wouldn't have published it myself, it's not even remotely near complete since we have yet to find a Sky we can use for it, but… I wasn't the one in charge of that."

"It still sounds as if they went over your head."

"...do you think so?" She questioned curiously, her attention more inward than out which enabled Visconti to discreetly slip out of the library without her knowing.

…and possibly she didn't care what her fellow Cloud was up to. Renato wasn't betting on it though, he had already tripped one of her hot buttons and this was as far as he'd go to warn or tip off Timoteo about what his thief associate was up to.

Don Vongola was a Don and powerful in his own right. Sonya was practically Shamal's mother-figure just because Renato asked for a bit of help from her.

"How much of this book is going to be pulled purely from your own effort?"

"I think… Galina said the forward is about word-for-word my views on the basics of Flame user personalities, and the fallacies inherent in that. Why it is everyone seems to assume Clouds are violent and aggressive normally when they're really just a bit judgmental, Mists being entirely deceptive in Flame user terms and really just as powerful as their imagination can stretch, those sorts of things. Bits from other Flame users on their personalities are going into that, so not entirely me." The Russian Storm-Cloud puzzled over it a bit more, either too distracted or ignoring she had
not only Shamal's attention but several other of the lesser Mafiosi that had been hanging about as well. "The seven chapters on each Flame has the beginning pulled from what I sifted through about thirty children's story plots to condense, but that's about a quarter of the whole thing. Most of the Sky chapter, though."

"So... almost half of it is still purely your own work with a couple add-ins from others." Renato summed up for her, earning a blank blink for his trouble.

When the hell did she start that thing?

She was only eighteen, about to be nineteen, according to the records Mafia Land kept on her. She had been what, sixteen when she admitted she knew how another Flame's beginners behaved and could help Shamal for him?

A Flame type that, historically, she was supposed to dislike on sight?

The thief had known of her own Flames before the age of twelve and could use them at will. Possibly half a decade of effort at least, upwards to a full decade at most if she had a very early start like the hitman himself.

He wasn't really surprised to hear she had finally gotten her work published but was a little bemused that she seemed to not think much of it. Then again, he was only hearing about the tail-end of that little situation, the details were a bit more than murky from where he sat.

"It's not really all my work, though." Sonya protested, both weakly and irritated that her defense was so weak. "There are others and, since I only have two usable Flame types and one last one I never got the hang of pulling on, the rest of that information is something I would never have gotten on my own."

That sounded like someone else already had this argument with her already. She didn't think of that last Flame type, which was a bit of a pity.

"First come first serve." Renato tried instead.

Whatever it was she would have responded with was interrupted by a maid hesitantly poking her head into the library and almost tripping over herself when she spotted the thief. "Miss Nikishina, a vor is here to see you."

Sonya hauled herself upright in a smooth movement, using the couch the hitman was sprawled out on while she taught Shamal how to read and write basic Cyrillic words. "Did he give a name?"

"He said his name was Arseniy-"

"Oh!" The Russian suddenly bolted, from standing still to flat out running in less than a second. Twisting deftly around the surprised maid in the doorway on her way out without another word to anyone else, even the brat.

Keenly curious, Renato unfolded himself as well and stalked after her. Shamal scrambled to follow, clutching his little worksheet and just as curious. Maybe a touch jealous of whoever it was that stole the thief's attention from him so thoroughly.

The hitman had to hide a smirk at the pout on the brat's face he caught sight of in one of the various look-around corner mirrors on the way to the Iron Fort's foyer.

He came to a stop at the top of the staircase Sonya flat out ignored and simply leapt over. Just in time
to see her all but throw herself into the arms of an unknown man coming through the doors after shooting Tyr a suspicious look.

…who the fuck was that?

"Arseniy! I didn't know you were coming!" The thief chattered in rapid fire Russian, still not letting the man go and seemingly perfectly happy when he hugged her back.

Completely unaware or uncaring of the fact the very act of doing so seemed to have crashed the mental processing power of everyone that had become curious over yet another Russian criminal's impending arrival.

Mostly to see if Sonya was just that unusual or not.

Seriously, who was that?

The thief barely put up with her own sister touching her, and yet this…?

"I volunteered." The much older Russian rumbled back in the same language in a voice barely loud enough to carry, casting a grim look over her blonde head at everyone gaping at the Storm-Cloud's behavior as his arms dropped from around her. "Wanted to see what you were blowing us off to do."

"I'm not blowing you all off, it's just…” Sonya frowned slightly, finally letting the man go and switching back to Italian. "Hey, Shamal! Come down here."

His first impulse was to say no, but tetchy Mist brat was already past him and tripping his own more moderate pace down the stairs to the thief. Reluctantly, the hitman followed. If only to figure out what kind of relationship the two Russians had.

Sonya wouldn't risk Shamal anyways, if the man was a threat she wouldn't have called for him.

He wasn't particularly happy with that thought, but he knew it was true.

She could probably break the 'vor' in half if he tried anything she didn't like. If she didn't like it.

That also wasn't a thought he was very content with.

"Shamal, this is Arseniy Pavlovich Bazanov." Renato almost missed a step as he recalled that was the name she had been going by in Mafia Land. "My foster father."

…not quite what he expected.

The hitman recovered his balance before anyone could notice he lost it for a second, strolling up to the tiny group lingering in the doorway in his brat's wake.

Apparently blocking the door was a Russian habit, because the vor didn't look too bothered to budge. The poor doorman was torn between asking the heavily muscled and tattooed Russian and his Storm-Cloud daughter to move or keeping his mouth firmly shut to not draw possibly hostile attention.

Shamal was a bit too occupied himself to notice anything strange going on, staring up at the man his adored Miss Sonya claimed as father. The older Russian male was peering back down at him in a scrutinizing manner.

As for the thief herself, she glanced between the two of them looking mildly expectant.
"You're really big. How do I get that big?" Tetchy Mist brat blurted out without an ounce of shame, still gaping.

Arseni gave a slow blink, then huffed and answered in a voice that sounded like he gargled gravel, gasoline, and a few rusty chainsaws for the hell of it every morning. "By drinking your damn milk."

Shamal apparently interpreted any Russian's bland stare or tepid response as either an invitation to cuddle or a promise of guaranteed safety, because the brat fearlessly went up to give the Russian bear of a man's thigh a hug. "Hi, can I call you grandpa?"

"No." He gave his daughter a semi-irritated, slightly narrow look, but the most she did was all but beam back at him expectantly.

"Please?"

"You're no long my favorite." Arseniy grunted out at her in their native language, patting Shamal on the head once and switching back to his heavily accented Italian. "Hello brat, and no."

"I will always be your favorite, until Valera actually has a personality and can do more than mess his diaper and toddle about." Sonya claimed pleasantly to him in Russian with a shrug. "After that he'll be your favorite, so I should milk my current position for everything I can while I can."

The expression that crossed the vor's face was a mix of exasperation and grudging agreement of that opinion.

Bratty Mist slyly peered around the trunk of a leg he was hugging to his chest like a treasured stuffed animal. "Can I call you mamma then, Miss Sonya?"

"...here, I suppose you can. Just not anywhere else." Sonya agreed flatly, after a moment of staring at the kid's mainly hopeful and slightly devious face.

Renato was a little disappointed he had picked a spot far enough away he couldn't get what she really thought of that request out of her head, but he also didn't want to attract her father's attention before he was damn well ready to.

...the man almost about Tyr's height, and the master assassin was taller than the hitman by a few inches. The vor was also about a few inches wider than either Italian was, more than most of that was pure muscle.

Little Russian Storm-Cloud also seemed perfectly willing to heed to him regardless of what orders he might just give.

That might just be the more disturbing fact about the little scene going on.

Sonya missed the memo of his desire to remain at least somewhat unnoticed for a time, she gestured straight to him to attract the vor's attention. "Arseniy that is Renato Sinclair. Shamal's... godfather, and my hitman friend."

The Russian vor shot the Italian Mafioso a considering look, then grinned darkly.

Renato played off his lingering a bit far away as giving the little family unit some privacy even if he was still part of the traffic pile of people that had either been there from the start or heard and came running to gape. Arseniy stuck out a hand, and he took it with only a slight hesitation.

The reason the older man was happy to meet him was because he now had what he looked like and
a name. If the creepy stalker of his youngest daughter ever did anything to hurt her, he would have less trouble hunting him down to skin alive… like how the vor had hunted down Sonya's biological father to castrate for hurting and abandoning her as a little girl.

…he was torn between being insulted, admiring that kind of dedication to his family, highly amused the man was only slightly against letting Shamal call him grandfather, and… being slightly wary of this Russian.

As well as a little disgruntled her brother Cherep happily sold him out as the creepy stalker of his sister to their foster father.

Renato would dearly love to have words with the stuntman, but the thief wasn't exactly happy with him at the moment so that would have to be delayed a bit.

"Nice to meet you." He drawled out wryly instead of anything else he might have wanted to say. Like the fact he wasn't a creepy stalker of women.

"Likewise." Grunted Arseniy, then looked at his daughter. "Have a moment?"

"As long as I get my..." Sonya snatched the book-shaped package the vor produced from his inner coat pocket. "Yes."

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 23rd of December, 1968. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Even if it was masquerading as hippy spirit mumbo-jumbo, Sonya was always adequately distracted with her nose in a book. It gave Arseniy a bit of time to take a few impressions in while she was mostly ignoring everything else.

Lisa had offered the opinion that little Italian Shamal their youngest foster child was so hung up on might be a child either in a situation similar or relatable to her earlier years before them. That was why their notoriously prickly and standoffish youngest foster daughter would go out of her way for the little brat.

The vor couldn't see it, now that he finally met everyone involved.

The kid did end up transplanted into a criminal lifestyle due to losing his real father, and Mafioso Sinclair actually showed some honor in taking him in. That was about it for any parallels.

Shamal was perfectly happy with his life and how it was going, not nearly scared out of his wits and repressing anything remotely vulnerable hard enough to ice over, especially with Sonya and the Italian hitman ensuring he had a life to be happy about.

He was also perfectly happy sitting in the thief's lap as she read, occasionally interrupting her reading with a question of how to read such-and-such Cyrillic word. Shamal also got away with doing it.

Arseniy, who had literally watched her raise hell for Tatiana even dislodging her bookmark from its place once, was entirely fascinated by the sight.

Not exactly happy with it himself, though.

Why was she saddling herself with a kid this early?

Furthermore, if she had to have a kid why pick one that came attached with an Italian Mafioso?
He would've preferred it if she got herself involved with one of her generation's upcoming vor if she had to, rather than some foreigner he didn't know and couldn't reach easily.

Since the vor was sure Sonya attaching herself to the Shamal kid wasn't pity or sympathy related, he figured it was probably Flame related and not something he'd be able to understand without a bit of help.

One of the best sources for any Flame related issues they had also probably wouldn't be able to see herself clearly enough to figure out why she was so attached to a kid totally different than her in both situation and personality. His younger foster daughter also had a strange little blind spot when it came to herself, like she wasn't or couldn't be affected by whatever was going on unless she was aware or chose to let it.

Which, to be fair, she rarely was wrong in that. Digging past that little coat of ice around her had taken him and Lisa three years to get through so she could at least understand they were not going to hurt or discard her as easily as her biological parents had. Tatiana had taken five to reach her little sister on a level they both understood was sisterly then several more years so they were both comfortable in it.

The only exception had been Cherep, and now this little Shamal brat. Both she had met when they were young Flame users, and both somehow gained one vicious champion/fussy guardian angel in her.

Again, Arseniy didn't like it. However, he knew his entirely stubborn daughter wouldn't give up something she liked easily or without a massive fight. Sonya liked Shamal, so she would not be giving him up either.

However, maybe he could get her more interested in the vor back home before she brought home some foreign man. Like the hitman lurking in the corner keeping most of his eye on his ward and the other half on his damn foster daughter. "Dmitriy got arrested."

Humming absently, she placed a finger on the text and looked up at him. "I was wondering how he managed to duck Galina for a month or two long project. How long has he been putting that off?"

He snorted at her dry observation, smirking at the familiar wit he hadn't heard in nearly a year. "You should've heard her bitch about it. Three year sentence, battery and attempted murder. Which was bullshit because there was no intent to murder, he was merely shaking up one of our debtors and allowed himself to get caught an hour later. He should've gone in a few years ago, but he was needed where he was."

"Who's in charge now he's out for prison time? Galina?"

"I am, because it is technically a training course." The vor corrected her with a shrug. "I'm leaving it up to her, because I still don't understand this fucking fire shit you do. You might want to go pitch in a little bit when you make it home next year."

"I will-"

Sonya cut herself off when Shamal placed his hands flat on the pages he had been puzzling at and nearly clocked her in the jaw with the top of his head when it shot up in alarm. "But you have to make it back for my birthday, mamma!"

"I will do that too, brat, calm down." Shifting her book so the kid's hands fell off, the thief huffed at him as he sank back down on her lap with a rather impressive pout. "It shouldn't take me that long.
Dmitriy's not stupid. He would've left his plans for the Flame users he was teaching Galina and I can follow somewhere obvious."

"She found them." Arseniy informed her, eyeing the kid in her lap and the mulish expression there. "Why don't you bring the brat up to meet the rest of the family?"

Lisa would be endlessly amused at her bringing yet another stray home with her, so long as it wasn't her own blood kid before she hit twenty. 'Grandmother' wasn't a title his lover was going to accept, however. Maybe he could get out of being considered as 'grandpa' at the same time.

Fuck, he wasn't that old just yet.

"I would, if someone wasn't so god damn paranoid over his safety." She claimed, shooting the so far silent Italian Mafioso a look.

Sinclair simply shrugged that off, tilting his head to the side to peer at the younger Russian from under the brim of his hat. "Other than you, I have no good contacts in Soviet Russia. I don't even understand how the Soviet underworld works. If something happens to you when Shamal's there, the brat would be more than a little exposed."

"Your faith in me is astounding." She huffed dryly, returning to her reading.

"I have plenty of faith in your fighting skills, I've seen a bit of it." The hitman drawled out sardonically. "Cloud you may be, but even you would have some difficulty against enough numbers."

"I've not pissed anyone off to earn a great number of people trying to kill me." Refuted the thief, allowing something to distract her from her reading yet again. "Frankly, outside of our clan, I'm not exactly well known."

"You are now." Arseniy interrupted the two, nodding to the book in his foster daughter's hands. "A thief is all well and good, we're a clan of them. No matter how good you are, you're just one more in a sea of them. An expert on Dying Will Flames of the Sky? Different as night is to day. There's been some noise back home of a few people wanting to meet the Cloud of the Zolotov Thieves Clan."

"You have got to be fucking kidding me. I am no expert." Sonya practically spat the word, an affronted look on her face.

"Try telling them that." He offered idly, mildly amused.

"...maybe I will."

"So..." Shamal twisted himself to actually be able to see Sonya's face instead of just sulk in her lap. "...can I go see where you grew up, mamma?"

"Still up to Renato."

The kid peered over at the Mafioso.

Sinclair huffed, glanced between the thief and the vor, and heaved a sigh. "Maybe. Depends. This summer at the earliest, but it might not happen at all. Don't get your hopes up."

The child looked back up to Sonya, who rolled her eyes at him. "Brat, there was an invasion up north in Czechoslovakia. We'd have to pass near that to get to Russia, and if Renato doesn't want to risk you anywhere close to that mess then that's his right."
"Aww…"

Snorting, Arseniy got to his feet now his curiosity was satisfied and she had her delivery. "Your siblings are home, hurry it up girl."

"I'm going to be the last one in for the next couple years, from brat's demand for me to be here for Christmas." She informed him without an ounce of shame, giving a wry little smirk instead. "May as well get used to it."

(Monday the 23rd of December, 1968 continued. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"So… say I'd want to bring a friend home for Christmas. Not this one, next one."

"A girl friend?"

Cherep paused in his repetitive and mind-numbing motions, wondering how to phrase 'nope, a gender-ambiguous friend that likes to switch a lot' in a way that wouldn't cause Lisa to smack him for being crass, rude, or just for the crime of attempting to confuse her. "Err… something like that. A friend of mine, who I'm not even sure has family of their own."

"And you care enough about this friend to want to drag them all the way out here?" Tatiana asked from his right side, hands submerged in soapy dishwater to scrub clean the dishes he was rinsing.

It was a bit odd to not have Sonya on his other side collecting the plates and such to put away, but the stuntman had unfortunately become rather accustomed to not having his baby sister around. Lisa had taken the empty spot and was just as deft as the youngest girl sibling in catching what he might have dropped in his absent-minded wool gathering moments.

…and right then. Damn it, tools were so much more durable.

Their foster mother heaved a sigh, setting the glass he nearly dropped on the counter to give him a stern look with her hands planted on her hips. "If it's that important to you, bring them around so we can meet this person you're being very vague about the gender of. I make no promises, because unless this person is someone you are really interested in? We will not play nice for them."

"I'm pretty certain my friend wouldn't care at all, think Sonya-level of irrelevance paired with a very inventive sense of humor."

"...please for the love of everything holy, tell me this person isn't as dense as our baby sis." Begged his older sister, staring up over the rooftop visible from the window over Lisa's kitchen sink. "I don't think I can take another romantically thick person."

Hello opportunity. "That bad?"

"Sonya finally blew up," the nurse informed them as if that wasn't at all concerning, "like completely lost it to the point there were footprints in the roads she took to get away from people. Carved a great stretch of the island's headway forest up and everything. In other news, as long as Sonya likes someone she won't hold a bitter grudge against them."

Lisa and Cherep exchanged a look, then turned back to the Sun Flame user.
"Sonya did? What happened?" The older Russian woman asked, enough concern in her tone Valera's attention was snagged and he babbled out near-toddler-but-still-baby-talk noises at her either in demand for more food or for reassurance she freely gave him.

"I still haven't gotten the whole story. From what I do know tall, dark, and snarky got a bit of information on either me or Cherep using Sonya herself somehow. Our ever so vicious little sister snapped, did previously mentioned emergency landscaping anger management, and Sinclair practically had to beg for her forgiveness." Tatiana paused, handing off the last plate to the stuntman to rinse and dry then flicking the soapy water from her hands in an absent manner. "On her way to bust up some trees, she ran into Tasty Muscles. You'd know him as Fong, Cherep."

Yeah, he remembered him. The Chinese man with the impossible name that cause his fellow Cloud user a month and a half long disappearance after trying to delay her in Shanghai. "And that's relevant why?"

"She arranged to spar against him, for her conditioning since pure workouts don't exactly benefit her very much anymore, in return for a bit of Flame related help. Muscles volunteered to be a Storm-Cloud's punching-bag. From what injuries they had afterwards, he gave as good as he got but was still flagging a bit behind Sonya when I caught up to them. I'm not exactly sure who would've won if they fought it out to the end, and I don't think they know either."

Cherep wasn't surprised when Lisa whisked the last bit of pottery out of his hands before he fumbled another bit, merely handing over the hand towel before she snagged that too.

…he wasn't quite the same as Sonya was, but he was still a Cloud. The stuntman also had never been truly angry before either. Would he have temper issues when pressed too hard as well?

How the hell was he going to figure that one out before he did something violent and Classically Cloud-like?

The closest he ever got was mildly irritated, and that had been with Sonya herself way back in the day when he had still been living out of that nasty flophouse.

"So that's hottie number two, and I'm pretty sure she's got yet another Italian stud hidden away somewhere else."

"...wait, what?"

Lisa leaned around his bewildered form, giving the Sun a mildly reproving look. "Really, Tatiana?"

"Lisa, you haven't met them yet. I kid you not, they are hot." She defended herself, actually sounding slightly exasperated over it. "And I am pretty damn sure they both want her, but she does not realize it. Or if she does, she explains it away as something else. She only thinks of Sinclair as a friend who might just flirt because she's female and flirt is what he does, or that Fong just wants her Flames for his own reasons."

Actually… from what little the stuntman knew of both… "...isn't that true, though?"

"Well... yes. But they both check her out and everything."

Cherep tapped his chin, tentatively deciding he didn't really need to be too alarmed over either just yet. His little sister might just require a thick two-by-four to the head to realize anything was going on, well before anything concerning happened with them. "So, who's this last Italian you think Sonya knows?"
"I don’t think, I know. Tyr the Sword Emperor. She talked to him on the phone in France, and she sounded downright friendly." She pulled a slight face, half disbelief and half bemused. "Might have been because she was talking to the baby Italian brat as well, though."

"The Sword Emperor? …Vongola's head assassin?"

The stuntman twitched violently at that bit of news and gifted their foster mother with a wide-eyed look. "Please tell me you’re joking, Lisa."

"Sorry Cherep. I have heard of him, and Tyr is an assassin."

An Italian Mafioso hitman, or an equally Italian assassin, or a member of the Chinese Triads?

Cherep really hoped he wouldn’t get anyone like them for a brother-in-law. It probably wasn’t really likely Sonya would settle for a civilian man, because she rarely if at all interacted with any for very long, but he could hope.

…brothers-in-law.

Turning to the redheaded sister in question, the stuntman gave her a semi-joking hard look. "You know, I can’t help but feel suspicious all this talk of Sonya’s non-existent love life is meant to distract us from yours. Bite the bullet, big sis."

"We already heard Cherep may or may not be gay, and Sonya’s not even here to defend herself against your accusations she’s amassing a harem.” Lisa agreed pleasantly, ignoring the Cloud’s squawk of offended dignity and the Sun’s suddenly wary look. "Spill."

"...I’m taking a break from men, actually." She claimed, sourly enough he was actually tempted to believe her at her word.

"...I am not gay." He defended himself to their foster mother in the next second.

"Of course you’re not." Lisa agreed pleasantly again, slapping his cheek a bit harder than what could be called gentle. "Next year, write home more often or I will do worse than embarrass you in front of your siblings where they can carry tall-tales to others."

"...yes ma’am."
Chapter 30

(Tuesday the 24th of December, 1968. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Sonya skimmed through her book just to get a decent understanding of what it covered, intending to do a fully in-depth read later once she had her more burning questions answered.

Finishing it gave her no real help in if she appreciated it being published or not, other than a deep understanding for Galina's claims of even thinking of writing it giving her hives. "Okay, so… whose idea was this?"

Renato, who had been scrutinizing Shamal's progress in multilingual reading exercises far enough away to not pick up her internal read of a book at the same time, gave her a more neutral than normal look and an arched eyebrow. He picked his farther than normal seat specifically, because apparently her reading gave him a headache if he listened in on it.

"It wasn't mine, Tats', Dmitriy's, or Galina's, because we're not really the type to care." As awesome as it was seeing 'Bazanova Sonya' on the author's line of a book, right over Galina's 'edited by' line and easily twice the size of that, it was still… an entirely bemusing prospect.

Aside the fact she could truthfully claim to be an author now if ever asked for what she did aside acquire unspecified items for a mostly imaginary company that only really existed on paper.

Spiritual Fires of the Inner Soul wasn't exactly an imaginative name, but the thief was pretty damn certain she wouldn't have done any better trying to pick something a new Flame user would attempt to pick up in desperation.

It also wasn't as… conclusive as she had expected.

The Inverted Lightning apparently took her comment of 'not done' to heart and ensured they wouldn't have to backtrack on what they put out. Which would have been tricky to do, given these kinds of books never did things like that and actually doing so might attract the wrong kind of attention to it.

Galina had stripped everything back down to the bare basics and built up the whimsical hippie free-love first before adding in different bits and hints to finish padding the book's page-count and chapter thickness. Frankly, if Sonya hadn't known full well it was about Dying Will Flames of the Sky while overlooking both the rainbow of colors 'one's spiritual fires can attain' and their very specific characteristic identifications… she would've ignored it.

Bare to the bone descriptions every one of her research journals started with. A bit of sprinkled tidbits they found out later you'd have to excavate from the bull in order to use. Lots of hippy nonsense waxing on almost lyrically about the benefits and drawbacks of different colored Flames and their effects on lifestyles.

It was basically as much as they gave most of the beginning users and very little else of substance.

…sans a sparkly rock.

No mention of how said Flames tended to interact outside of her forward paraphrased refuting of certain 'widely known traits' in suitable hippy-esque language. While certain Flames were identified as either being fixation, territorial, obsessive, deceptive, diplomatic, energetic, acceptance orientated and so on… very little time was spent in explaining why in their individual chapters, favoring
suggestions for coping mechanisms or utilizing them instead.

For fuck's sake, she gave Shamal more details when she tried to help him before that scuffle with the old Mafia Land group happened and made them split up.

It at least wasn't a children's story book, so there was that at least.

Galina didn't have to butcher the characteristics of her and the other's Flame types to make two-dimensional characters that were easily understood to be a Flame user which likely would've ended up either flat or non-relatable. Then think of some kind of plot to have any story be about, which normally reads as clichéd and incredibly stereotypical in what there were of those kinds of books.

A small step up from pro-mafia children's propaganda, and at least not restrictive in how expressive each type could be.

Sonya supposed it was progress… but…

"I am the wrong person to be asking." The hitman sidestepped neatly, giving her slim book the bulk of his attention rather than Mist brat's work.

She didn't think it was any Zolotov Flame user's idea, because they were a bunch of god-damn thieves and this was just… giving something of value away for nothing in return. Which left just others in their clan, and that meant it was either political or something the Inverted Lightning didn't think she could refuse doing without more trouble than it was worth.

Given Dmitriy flat out bailed for a few years of prison time instead of be involved even for a month, maybe even both.

The thief was now pretty damn certain she didn't really like this much.

It was bait, pure and simple.

Anyone who stumbled upon it on their own, with little to no connection to the mafia, would look between children stories written decades to centuries ago they may or may not be able to find and a hippy book on soul fire that rather closely identified and clarified each Flame. Even if it didn't go into much additional detail of what the hell it was, enough of the painfully obvious points were hit to ensure anyone with a slight Flame problem would recognize something that pertained to them.

Then they would likely figure that the best way to get a bit more clarification on their random personal surprise immolation habits would be to contact the author.

There were a handful of other names included, but mainly everyone seemed to prefer initials if at all. Even Cherep had been disinclined to have his real name in it, and his initials under the 'Violet Soulfire, free-spirit against territorial natures' section had been 'СдМ' for Skull de Mort instead of 'ЦБ' for Cherep Bazanov. While she appreciated him keeping his fingers out of things that could come back to bite him, that didn't exactly give anyone more options to go to if they really needed help.

Sonya's legally registered address was the Zolotov's main headquarters building, like most of her fellow non-vor members of the thieves' clan. Which only technically qualified as an apartment building because a couple people did live there.

If anyone went looking for her, that was where they would end up.

In the lobby of the Zolotov Thieves' Clan Headquarters.
Again, *bait*.

For all the Usovs out there, there were also a handful of others that weren't so lucky to find an adequately informed mafia connection to get help. There were also all those in situations similar to Cherep's childhood one to think about as well. Her own spotty Flame awakening, even.

The book was in Cyrillic, so mainly a Soviet Union kind of thing at most. She barely expected much if any sales, and that all would probably go to the clan instead of her since they were the ones putting it out.

"Well... I suppose it's interesting and all, but... not really all that enthused with it." She informed him slowly, trying to fully sort out her feelings.

Sonya really just felt kind of used, mostly. Again. She had barely given an okay for it using her name, and that had been mostly a last second kind of thing when Galina called her up to get the last two bits she needed to reference from before starting it.

"Is it really that bad?" Renato asked curiously, reaching for her book but jerking away his fingers before she swatted them with said bundle of papers.

"I am not done reading this yet."

"Little lady Sonya, I just watched you finish the damn thing."

Shamal snorted, peeking over at them both mischievously. "But Mister Renato, mamma never lets go of her books."

"Besides," she interjected before he could comment, "we've got to get ready for this party thing now."

"It's three hours from starting." Snapped the Mafioso in protest, glaring at her. "You don't take that long to get ready."

"It's my excuse and I'm sticking to it. I have to wear heels this time, so I do need a bit more time."

She was all but begging for a broken ankle with them. She hadn't suffered anything worse than blisters so far trying them out, but that just meant when it happened she'd be already suitably convinced she wouldn't have problems walking in two- or three-inch heels.

"I feel flattered you're going outside your comfort zone just for little 'ol me." Drawled Renato sardonically, looking more than a little miffed. "I promise to catch you if you take a tumble down some stairs. Or you could just jump them entirely again."

"I'd really break an ankle doing that in heels. I rather not suffer a broken leg for Christmas." She scoffed dryly, ruffling Shamal's hair as she got up. "I'll see you two in a bit, I have to go make myself pretty."

Bratty Mist gave her a semi-exasperated look over his Cyrillic writing exercises. "But you are pretty, mamma."

"That still sounds like a line, brat, but thank you."

He gave the hitman a fully disgruntled little pout. "Maybe if you say it she'll believe me?"

"I'm not getting into this." He refused flatly, stubbornly slouching down in his spot for what looked
like a good old-fashioned sulk. "Now, if Sonya could be a little less OCD about her damn books... I might talk."

"Nice try." She tossed over a shoulder with a backwards wave, tucking said book under one arm and turning around to walk backwards in order to give him a superior look. "But I'm not insecure enough to need constant flattery every day to bend under that kind of bribe."

Shamal suddenly launched himself at his guardian, trying to plant both hands over the man's mouth. "Mister Renato! I said don't make her madder!"

Bratty Mist strength against a full-grown Italian Mafioso's was so unbalanced it was unfair, he caught the kid before he fully landed on him. "Damn it, brat. We argue, it's a fact of life. Get over it."

The pout the brat pulled really should have warned him, because a rather swamp-monster like Mist Construct finished the muffling Shamal suddenly couldn't do.

Someone had been watching either terrible horror flicks or very strange cartoons.

"I'm going to murder Ganauche for letting you watch those movies." Renato swore viciously as he ducked the monster-thing, a handful of Sun Flames proving to be not as good as Storm for unraveling Mist illusions.

The man practically had to overload the Construct with his own Flames before it bubbled apart, unlike the tidbit of Storm she needed for a more sedate unraveling effect.

"It was fun, and silly." Shamal enthusiastically informed him as if that excused everything else about the incident. Entirely unconcerned that he had just tried assaulting the hitman and was currently dangling in the air by the man's grip on the back of his shirt. "There was chocolate sauce and ketchup everywhere."

"Try not to break anything, boys." Sonya interjected before bratty Mist's flailing arms could knock over a probably priceless vase sitting on a stand. "I'll see you both in a few hours."

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 24th of December, 1968 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"So... did you see it?"

Renato shot the ceiling a beseeching look, hoping that Sonya would hurry the hell up and he could ignore Nono's Lightning Guardian for the rest of the night. "Since I was there when her foster father handed the damn thing over, yes Ganauche. Yes, I did see Sonya's book."

She knew where to go this year, so had informed him he didn't need to pick her up from her rooms again. Shamal had taken the flowers he got her to the thief, and she'd likely deal with instructing the brat not to try waiting up for them this year.

Coyote Nougat obligingly reached over and smacked his fellow Guardian upside the head. He was closer than Brow Nie or Schnitten Brabanters were, and more inclined to physical chastisement than either Sun or Rain.

"Hey!" Ganauche snapped, jerking away from the contact and scowling at the Storm. "All I was trying to say is that it's weird, alright? Since when did the Russians care a wit for Dying Will Flames?"
"When their children started bursting into Flames." A Russian thief informed the Lightning flatly from the hallway behind him, a bit preoccupied with attaching some dangling mess of little metal rods to her ears. "Arseniy alone was a slight bit alarmed when I did it."

Checking her feet as she got closer, just because Sonya tended to favor knee-high boots and he was curious of the change, the hitman got a bit distracted by the split up one side of her skirt. Mostly due to Shamal pulling on it, absently fascinated by how much of her long legs he could reveal depending on how hard he tugged.

"Shamal, stop it."

"He's not hurting anything," the Storm-Cloud finished attaching her earrings and gave the bratty Mist a considering look, "and if he ruins this dress I can blow off the rest of the night and spend it with him instead."

Shamal's face lit up, taking a two-handed grip on the skirt in his hands before Renato snatched it away from him.

Which left him holding the hem of Sonya's dress, who looked highly amused at his action. "Really Renato. If you wanted me in a shorter dress... you only had to say something."

He knew, since he was kind of in her head this close to her, that she was talking about the quality of eye-candy he got to fend off middle-aged mafia wives with. Not that she was willing to allow him to dress her up, or that she cared anything for what he thought of how she dressed herself.

Unfortunately, it didn't exactly sound that straightforward.

The only real reason he never did mind helping a lady shop for clothes was to see them partially undressed or help them find new lingerie, and that just reminded him the color she was wearing rather closely matched that one set he had seen her in when she stripped in an elevator in front of him.

"It's fine." He let go of the dark purple fabric, straightening his cuffs and tugging his jacket down.

Also trying not to remember exactly how short the thief didn't mind her skirt getting, or the flashes of her garters he got when she so much as moved slightly too quickly last year.

"...lucky asshole." Ganauche muttered, mostly to himself but loud enough for them all to hear it.

Sonya shot him a look, actually wondering if the Lightning Guardian was defective or not since he really was nothing like any other Lightning she knew of. She even was going to ask, but the hitman changed the subject quick to stave off that particular conversation from happening.

Lord only knew what the dandy-boy Lightning Guardian of Nono's would do if flat out asked if he was defective. He'd rather it stay unknown.

"How is the Russian mafia structured?"

Renato was fairly curious over the subject anyways and knowing a bit of how a vor became one or what they did would only just help him in cultivating Soviet Union contacts. It wasn't an area he ever had any before her, and the thought she may be perfectly typical for Russians was a fairly jarring thought.

Arseniy had been... interesting, summed up in a word.
Obviously, someone she adored. If she even conformed her way of expressing displeasure to match his… according to Tatiana.

"Um… it's kind of a mess, actually." She answered him honestly enough, a thoughtful frown now on her painted lips. "Frankly, it depends on where you are and who you're dealing with. A vor, from… say, St Petersburg's Grekov Gang is somewhat different than a Moscow Zolotov vor, who are all slightly different from a typical Kazan criminal. All you really need to keep in mind is that if referred to as vor, they spent time in prison and likely won't see a reason not to either brutalize or murder you for any perceived slights."

"That's… interesting." Schnitten interjected with a wry little grin, stretching out his long legs while they waited for the Don of Vongola, his wife, and the last two Guardians to arrive. "So what makes a vor a vor?"

"Prison time." She informed him flatly, giving the Rain Guardian a considering look before elaborating. "All vory serve time, it's kind of required before anyone considers you one. Normally, with us at least, you start out stealing or working for the clan until you finally get arrested for it before gaining that title."

"Your… friend? Dmitriy? You said he had been putting it off."

The thief shrugged a bit absently, checking to ensure she hadn't damaged her dress and that Shamal wasn't up to anything too bad. "He… had been a bit stuck. Needed where he was, but not quite respectable enough to hold his position. Finally letting himself get arrested was kind of overdue, really."

"Let himself?"

This time Brown Nie earned himself an actual frown touched with a bit of suspicion. "…Dmitriy is a Rain, had he not wanted to be arrested it would have been child's play to Tranquilize the militsiya and get away. Either it was finally a bit too much for him to bother, or he wanted to finally get that next step in his career over with on his own terms. Either way, he's in prison now and when he gets out will likely attain that vor classification."

Given the Storm-Cloud was becoming a bit belligerent, and well as possibly unwilling to talk further, the Hard Flame Sun started a conversation with the Rain Guardian instead of press further. Renato wasn't sure if he was surprised or not. She had issues with him at first, and from the sounds of it even with Tatiana as well.

His date for the night was incredibly tolerant for a Cloud in some ways, incredibly backwards in others.

Besides, Shamal had become a bit more interested now that his 'mamma' wasn't sounding very much like what she did usually. He had seen more than enough cut-rate horror film monsters for the week, much less for the day.

Sonya blatantly changed the subject, with enough of a hard look to inform him she wasn't going to be speaking anymore on the subject of her native land's criminal ranks. "I have a personal goal tonight."

"Ho?"

"I would like to meet at least one or two other Italians I wouldn't mind talking to." She paused, looked at each of the Vongola Guardians lingering in the hallway with them, then gave him a slight
"Other than you, Shamal, and Tyr, I mean."

"What? Hey lady, what about us?" Ganauche demanded loudly, a little affronted.

He was promptly kicked in the shins by tetchy Mist brat. "Don't yell at my mamma!"

"I've talked to you exactly how many times?" She asked, uncaring of the assault going on or the now hopping Italian Mafioso's current difficulty. "You're all not exactly my kind of people, and I highly doubt I'm yours."

Coyote sighed heavily, reaching over and plucking Shamal up by the back of his shirt before he could make a few more bruises on the Lightning's legs and they had to keep listening to the man swear under his breath as he tried avoiding assault by brat. "Why don't you keep your mouth shut, for once? If…"

The Storm trailed off, distracted by suddenly having Sonya's completely undivided attention on how he was treating the hitman's ward. When she narrowed her thankfully still grey eyes, he very slowly lowered Shamal back to the floor and released him.

Bratty Mist sniffed in offense, giving Ganauche and Coyote a dirty look each but scampering back to his self-claimed 'mamma'. "Meanies."

Suddenly no longer interested in the Storm Guardian, the thief neated up the preening kid's hair as much as she could with only her fingers and looked back to the mildly surprised Renato. "Well?"

"...I don't think I like this prospective change to our evening. What's wrong with what we did last year?" He asked instead of anything else he wanted to say.

Which was summed up as… what the fu** was that?

She had both looked and had been fully willing to rip Coyote's arm off and clock him a good one with the soggy end if he had kept on holding Shamal up a good three feet off the floor. She never was bothered when Renato did the same thing, so he wasn't sure what that was.

She apparently didn't think there had been anything strange to her behavior, she was now musing more on the people they had seen last year than the Vongola Storm Guardian. "If I can find someone I don't mind talking to, you won't have to play attendant to me all night and can do a bit of networking of your own."

"Again, what was wrong with what we did last year?"

"We can then make suitably sarcastic comments about how well their personalities match their atrocious fashion sense once done with them."

"...sold."

Ganauche, who ended up hopping slightly behind the Storm-Cloud after getting assaulted by a half-pint Mist, and Brown Nie both looked a bit more than just envious of Renato's freedom to be less than the perfect hosts. Possibly even the fact he had a date that didn't mind him making new contacts rather than spending all of his attention on her.

Coyote and Schnitten were warily eyeing said date, trying to figure out what it was the Storm Guardian had tripped off. She was fine now, from what the hitman knew it really had only been a spike of pure irritation.
He also wasn't sure if he should be smug over netting Sonya as a date or be a little insulted she didn't seem to think he'd keep her attention all night. They had done just fine last year, hadn't they?

…this actually would be the longest they had interacted since he ticked her off, barring interacting with Shamal's civilian teacher. Pressing his luck with her temper didn't really sound like much of a good idea if she didn't want to.

(Wednesday the 25th of December, 1968. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Stop introducing me as a Flame expert."

"Like it or not, little lady Sonya, you are. Published and everything." Renato informed her in an insufferable tone, following her rather aimless wander very far away from the last group. "You should probably get used to it."

Don such-and-such and his insipid wife, who had an actually marginally intelligent son but little else of note. Unfortunately, said son pretty much kept his trap shut while his father waxed on in what he probably thought fondly as lyrically on the subject of prostitution rings and how they worked. While eyeing her like a slab of beef.

She had not been amused, but at least the hitman she was with had been equally disgusted with the subject matter and got them out of there neatly.

Sonya was starting to wonder if she had already met any Italians of note.

Her date for the evening suddenly stopped, looking to a group that had just walked into the Iron Fort's ballroom. "Can you entertain yourself for a few? I've been meaning to talk to that Mafioso."

She didn't bother to try and see who he was talking about, she'd never be able to pick an unknown individual out of the crowded room without a description and a direction. "Sure. I'll be by the buffet tables when you're done."

He touched the brim of his fedora in salute, strolling off with enviable skill in weaving between the aimless traffic currently packed into one room.

Sonya picked the buffet tables not because she was hungry, she was but they would be eating in as little as another half-hour, but because they were rather firmly situated on the east side of the ballroom. Just as they had been last year. As something to wander her way to, and possibly find something alcoholic to dull her headache with, it was a decent landmark.

Picking her way through the crowd wasn't too difficult, although unlike Mafia Land it seemed as if no one believed her dress color represented her Flame type. Some fancy footwork in two-inch heels were needed to keep herself unmolested, and from getting smacked when venturing too close to various knots of people.

Strangely, it was kind of nostalgic. For the point in time before every criminal on a free-moving island knew exactly what her main Flame type was and avoided the hell out of her.

Irritating, but nostalgic.

She ended up musing on which was worse, the irritation she got when people flat out avoided her or her irritation when people crowded her.
It distracted her well enough on her ponderous way through the press of criminals and corrupt government officials rubbing elbows with likeminded people, until she reached the fringe groups that surrounded the buffet tables.

…and walked right into someone else's conversation.

"would not work. While a Hard Flame Lightning and a Soft Storm might get along, we would need either or. No Hard Cloud would tolerate a Mist for very long, regardless of what kind of Mist was involved. That alone would mean we can't get a whole range of users."

Trying really hard not to roll her eyes, the thief sidestepped the platinum blonde woman in blue that nearly smacked her to continue on her way.

"Have a different opinion then, miss… ah…?" Regardless of her lack of knowledge over who she was, one of the women in the knot in a dark indigo pantsuit reached out to try grabbing Sonya's arm. She put up with it, if only because she was pretty sure Nono would be very vexed at her if she resorted to snapping finger bones. Even if it would be very satisfying, she'd rather not have to bribe her way out of the Don's bad side.

The woman who tucked the smaller thief's fingers into the crook of her arm patted said fingers and tugged the disgruntled Storm-Cloud over to the group she had tried to bypass.

Miss Silver-white blonde, the one that nearly smacked her, eyed the Russian thoughtfully. "Um… Bella…?"

"Hush, Nilda." Miss Way-Too-Forward-For-Her-Own-Good quipped at her. "Now, where are you from? You're not Italian."

"Moscow."

"Soviet Russia? How exotic." She tweeted with visible amusement, which she hadn't been aware was actually something human vocal cords could do before this. "Do Soviet Flame users do things differently that made you dismissive over our chat?"

"…to say the least." The Storm-Cloud allowed slowly with nearly visible reluctance, wondering how much of her hand being in the possession of another she could stand before physically prying the woman off.

Sonya's blatant unwillingness to talk, the color of her dress, and her tattoos made the other three women standing around rather wary of her.

Way-Too-Forward-For-Her-Own-Good proved undeterred by the Russian being taciturn and affecting her fellows. She squeezed her fingers and addressed one of the others as the thief eyed her as one would a particularly irritating bug. "Nilda, where were we?"

"…trying to decide if a joint gift from all of us would be possible or not." The platinum blonde answered absently, apparently deciding if the thief wasn't overtly objecting she didn't have to worry too much and returning to the subject they had been on. "It is just a question of the mechanics right now, since we are a bit… eclectic of a group."

"For Ottavia's Fifty-fifth birthday, dear." The lady who had possession of her fingers informed her in an aside. "We're going to put on a little show, but the suggestion was to have one girl of every Flame type participate. I figured the danger inherent in such a thing would give us a bit of a step up."
"Do Russian Flame users gather together in one spot, or do they still prefer their own groups?"

She eyed the speaker in a dress of eye-watering yellow shades warily, who batted big eyes at her probably in an attempt to integrate herself or beg for the information.

It wasn't endearing, nor did it make her magically willing to talk.

"Bella, I really do think-"

Miss Way-Too-Forward-For-Her-Own-Good which was really a mouthful, so the thief mentally renamed her casual touch-assaulter as Miss Tweets, huffed once sharply to get Miss Silver-white to shut up. She then looked squarely at the slim Storm-Cloud whose hand she had possession of.

"Please? We're not asking where this may or may not happen. Only if it is."

"...yes, not very often."

The one she was pretty certain was a Sun user from the yellow trying to give her a migraine pulled a face. "All at the same time? Any Rains scattered through that group?"

She gestured to Miss Silver-white, who rolled her eyes back at the Sun.

"...only one older one, and four younger."

"And that would be why you're unwilling to talk about it. Young ones, delightful." Sonya's temporary keeper announced as if that was surprising news, again patting the fingers she held trapped against her arm. "Don't you worry, we will not press where, how, or why."

"Um...?"

"Will, NOT, press." Miss Tweets repeated stridently to the last girl, who the Russian was mentally labeling as Miss Timid.

She certainly quailed under the stern look aimed at her, even if by the color of her dress she should be a Storm. She and Fong had more spine than that.

"We're getting a rather rare glimpse into another cultures' underworld, we are not going to botch it. My last question, dear. How many Clouds, and do they behave themselves? I do not need to know the age or identity of them."

"Two." One of which she was clinging to stubbornly, and she had behaved herself well so far. The lady didn't have a bloody nose from touching the thief. "They rarely have anything to do with the others, so far."

"See? Not even in Russia do Clouds tolerate Mists at all. We're not going to be able to do it." The Sun who wasn't quite as perky or bouncy as Tatiana dismissed the whole thing with a huff of her own.

She silently held up her free left hand, letting her fingertips light up with her Cloud Flames for a full second.

The four women stared at the steady Flame of lavender licking up her fingers, then they all looked to Miss Tweets who was looking at the Russian speculatively. Which neatly confirmed her suspicion she was a Mist.

"...Miss Rosabella..."
"I tried to tell you." Miss Silver-white cut Miss Timid off, dismissively batting an impatient hand. "I didn't think she wore that color by mistake."

The Sun who was nowhere near Tatiana's level, or Renato's for that matter, seemed to be hyperventilating a bit too hard to muster any words to add.

"Are you going to be available on the ninth?" The Misty Miss Tweets asked suddenly, looking for all the world like a cat sighting a particularly plump pigeon.

"No."

"Oh, come now. It's just a small favor."

"I will be in Moscow by January ninth." Sonya flatly refused again.

She pursed her lips, eyes narrowing on the Russian Storm-Cloud. "...will anything I try change that fact?"

"My family celebrates Christmas the first week of the new year. I will be in Moscow for the ninth."

"...I think I might just hold this against you."

She gifted her with a pointed stare. "Then I get to hold this assault of my person against you."

Reminded of how she had gained the Russian's attention and was still keeping her in place by, Misty Miss Tweets looked down at the fingers she had tucked into the crook of her arm. "Well... I must concede the point, I think."

Miss Silver-white snickered, sharp white teeth biting her red painted lower lip to muffle it.

That proved to be Miss Weak Sun's undoing, she fainted into a pile of boneless lump at their feet.

Sonya sighed out through her nose, wondering if that was from lack of air or from an overload of terror. Seriously, she had done nothing to deserve that reaction.

"Well... that was... fascinating." Misty Miss Tweets spoke after a silent moment. "Does that normally happen around you?"

"Unfortunately." The thief admitted blankly.

Miss Silver-white shot her a skeptical look. "All the time?"

"She's not the first to scare herself into a faint around me. I don't even have to do anything for it, either."

"That's depressing." Her captor announced stoutly, looking fairly irritated at her admission.

As for the Russian herself, she had been trying not to feed the common assumption that all Cloud were violently aggressive creatures without due cause and yet... she was starting to wonder if holding herself to different standards would net her anything at all. Certainly, her restraint was really doing little else than terrifying those who held different views on what a Cloud should be.

"Well... no, still depressive." Misty Miss Tweets sniffed after a moment, glancing to Miss Silver-white. "Nilda, would you please go fetch Gisella a glass of water?"

"And pour it on her?" The Rain, more than likely a Soft/Inverted one, tacked on dryly as she moved
to fulfill the Mist's request anyways.

That left Miss Timid, Miss Weak Sun still laid out on the floor, and Misty Miss Tweets still holding Sonya captive.

"Miss Sonya."

"I didn't do it." The Russian informed Tyr without so much as twitching, which her clingy Mist hanger-on did rather noticeably. "If I was going to knock anyone out, it'd be Miss Tweets here simply by virtue of her touching and being closest to me."

"...Tweets?" The Mist repeated faintly, finally letting her fingers go if only from sheer surprise.

The master assassin gave her a measured look, then glance to the returning Miss Silver-white holding a wine glass of water. The Rain gave him a bland smirk, unceremoniously tipping the contents of the glass out on the fainted woman's face.

Miss Weak Sun came to with a splutter, gaping rather unattractively at the shiny Italian leather shoes now in her field of vision. Slowly, she looked up Tyr's long form until she could fully see the man staring back down at her... then passed out again with a little whimper.

"...I see your point, Miss Sonya." Concluded the Sword Emperor after a long moment, twitching his fingers for a pair of subdued dressed Mafiosi to collect the Sun and escort her somewhere she could recover without passing out again. "May I ask you to save me a turn on the floor later?"

"Of course. Although, Renato would like me to remind you returning another man's date after stealing her is considered polite."

Tyr's mouth twitched into what she was pretty damn sure had been the barest hint of a smirk. "Surely he does not think I require a reminder."

"He can be an asshole sometimes, so... not too sure about that."

"I'll be sure to mind my manners, then." He informed her, and she could not tell if that was said sarcastically or amusedly.

Sonya considered it but decided she didn't want to know what bone of contention lay between the hitman and assassin if they were resorting to petty fights like this... although, she was only semi-sure that was what was going on. It could just be an 'I'm better than you' contest that somehow got her snared up in it.

The Sword Emperor gave her a slight bow, a nod to the other ladies, and left them sans one Miss Weak Sun.

"Alright, I think you might just be the most interesting creature in this room right now." Miss Tweets announced into the slight awkward silence left in the master assassin's wake. "But, since I was horrendously rude in not doing this before now, my name is Rosabella. Not Tweets. The Rain to my right is Nilda, and the dear wringing her hands together is Debora."

"I was aware of everyone but Miss Timid's name, thank you."

Rosabella gave the thief a long look when she refrained from adding anything on to that. "You just spoke more to Master Tyr than I heard from you in an entire conversation. But you will not elaborate on these little petty nicknames?"
"...your first impression with a Cloud counts for more than most assume. If you make a bad one, they will forever recall you as 'such and such' instead of by name when reminded."

"...I take it we made some bad ones?"

She gave it an additional moment of thought but had to shake her head in the end. "Actually... compared to what I think of my own family members, you made fairly neutral impressions. Except for Miss Weak Sun and Miss Timid over there."

Given what she generally tended to think of her own damn brother?

Misty Miss Tweets was actually a rather... benign nickname. Miss Silver-white was more out of respect for Nilda's hair coloring than her personality or some trait that irritated the Russian, but that was a true neutral designation.

The thief was fully aware she was a judgmental person, she didn't need Miss Timid's sour mutterings on the subject to know it. However, she was also perfectly alright with that fact. A difficulty socializing meant any and all methods of sorting out who to even bother with or not was fine with her.

"I don't think I like it." Misty Miss Tweets announced, as if her expression hadn't told her that.

"You originally were Miss Way-Too-Forward-For-Her-Own-Good."

"...you're determined to be obstinate about this, aren't you?"

Sonya gave the woman a measured look, cocking an eyebrow.

Misty Miss Tweets looked entirely unperturbed, until Miss Silver-white heaved a sigh. "Bella, you not only assaulted a Cloud but also got a tiny bit of information from her. Why not count your blessings and give it a pass? While you still have your head attached?"

"That is annoying." She suddenly snapped, giving the Rain a rather dirty look. "Exactly what have I done that would make you assume I rip heads off? The worst I tend to do is break fingers, thank you very much."

Nilda was entirely taken aback at the sudden irate turn she took, but actually held her ground and gave the Storm-Cloud a thoughtful look. "I was referring to a saying. To 'rip one's head off' is to verbally assault someone. I did not mean to imply you beheaded those that irritated you. Did it translate badly, or did you not know that?"

...she knew that.

Huffing, then glancing from the Rain to the Mist and then to the rather spineless Storm who squeaked at suddenly getting a Storm-Clouds attention directed at her, she gave the other woman a pointed look. "Frankly, if everyone would stop flinching near me I'd stop assuming the worst right off."

"I can see how that may prove irritating." Miss Silver-white admitted, glancing out the corner of her eye to their red clad fellow. "You have my sympathies."

With a sigh, she decided this was a bust and she desperately needed something alcoholic. As interesting as it was meeting another Mist she'd rather not deal with but could stand if need be, having one person pass out mid-conversation and the other spineless and hostile made it rather... not so great of a conversation.
"I think I will leave you all here," she informed them all flatly, shooting the Storm and Mist ladies separate looks of either wariness or disgust, "I need something… fortifying, if I am to get through the rest of the night."

Nilda gave her a bland smile, reaching over and putting the Mist in a headlock before she could protest the Russian's plans. "Have a good evening then, Miss Nikishina."

She paused, giving the Rain a skeptical look.

Tyr hadn't used the more widely Italian-known surname for her, merely calling her by her first name. Nilda had to have known exactly who she was, and at least some of what she was, before this conversation to not only know that name without being told but also to not even let a flicker of surprise cross her face when she realized she was the same Russian Storm-Cloud rumor might have bandied about.

Miss Silvery-white either had some brass ones, was fully confident in her own skills for Tranquility or Misty Miss Tweet's Constructions, or had gotten ahold of someone that would've told them Sonya was strangely not as hostile as most Clouds were or were rumored to be.

She was pretty sure if there was something contrived about the conversation, the other two hadn't been in on it. Depending on how much of an actor the Mist was, she could or could not be in on it as well.

Either way, very bold of the women. The thief was slightly amused.

Renato waited until she was at least decently far from the group to side up next to her, handing her a wine glass with suspiciously clear liquid in it. "Well?"

"...the Sun was way too painful in both vision and personality to think much of. Miss Timid needs a new spine even if she is dressed in bold colors. Misty Miss Tweets has a curious lack of self-preservation paired with a boldness I'm not sure I like being on the other end of, and Miss Silvery-white… might actually wear the pants in that relationship."

The asshole that left her to muddle her way through a conversation alone snickered. "I had two grunts that barely had enough brain cells to rub together to keep their heads warm, a Mafioso with an appalling fashion sense and no taste in women and said woman who decided trying to flirt with me was a great idea. In front of her current man."

Sonya sighed, wondering what it was about parties like this that made some people a bit too bold for their own good. She knocked back whatever it was in her glass, pleasantly surprised it was actually a semi-decent vodka.

Swallowing hard to get the burning sensation of her throat getting scoured with what was comparable to industrial strength disinfectant, she huffed a sigh and wondered who the hell she had to rob blind in order to get another glass of it.

"Right, well..."

"Another go? Or are you done for the night?"

"I think my quota of socializing with unknowns has been reached and is teetering the edge already."

Admitted the thief sourly, even if she had found someone interesting. Maybe even two.

"Dinner is about to be served anyways." Renato offered idly, with an absent shrug. "We'd only have time for one last quick chat, unless you want to count it as a lightning round."
She cracked an only slightly unwilling smirk. "Can you see a Lightning? First to nail his or her personality outside their Flame type wins?"

"You're on."

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 25th of December, 1968. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Shamal waited until eleven in the morning, then grabbed the thief and dragged her to the hitman's room.

Sonya had barely enough time to snag his present as she stumbled after him, trying to remember the bratty Mist was someone she liked and that tying him up so she can get a bit more sleep wasn't a great idea.

…she really couldn't see the downside, however.

She slinked to the couch in Renato's guest suite as Shamal went to wake the man up, curling up there and bitterly wishing the brat had waited long enough for her to pull on some kind of leg covering. Near the Mediterranean the Iron Fort may be, but freshly out of bed bare skin was chilly in air-conditioned places.

Apparently, from the sounds of the swearing coming from behind her, the older Italian didn't appreciate the little brat's wake-up call either.

Shamal bounced happily to her side, followed by a heavily scowling hitman still blinking the sleep from his eyes. "Wait… Sonya?"

"We're doing it here this year. Apparently." She informed him blandly, curling up a bit tighter to try keeping as much body heat in as possible.

She was Russian, damn it. Highly humid cool air or not, she should not be this cold.

Somehow divining why she was so unhappy, the little brat sprawled out on top of said legs for her.

As far as useful lap heaters went, Shamal wasn't a bad one. He was just a bit too tiny and thin yet to be of much good for more than just her lap. Brat was getting a little boney, too.

Her toes were still freezing.

With a sigh, the thief nudged the kid off and handed him her present. Which had gotten stored on the little end table near her head while she tried to warm up. Shamal slid to the floor in order to savage the wrappings, which left her even colder.

Could she not win at all today?

Admittedly it was less than five minutes into it, but still.

Sonya's rather bitter thoughts were interrupted by Renato dumping what was likely the blanket off his bed on top of her head. The ass didn't even bother to check to see if she was appreciative of his actions or not, he strode to the door connecting the main hall to his rooms.

Likely to snag a footman to fetch his present for Shamal before he got done with her offering of pacification to irritating and wide-awake Mist brat.
Snorting, she rearranged herself and the not-so-much-offered-as-chucked-at-her-head blanket. Re- 
curling herself up under it to wait out the kid's enthusiasm of all things Christmas.

"You know," Sonya informed Renato a bit tiredly after a footman delivered the other present, not quite as cold anymore but unable to nod off as she would've preferred, "giving him ways to give us headaches probably wasn't our best idea ever."

She had given the brat a cassette player and a couple personal favorite tapes, the hitman had somehow found a 'build your own radio' kit to give. Since he had specifically asked her what she was getting the brat so they didn't end up gifting the same thing she wasn't surprised by the related nature, but in hindsight one of them should've given Shamal something quiet to do.

Like a coloring book, or art supplies.

Maybe the next time the thief gave the brat something noisy, she should 'forget' the batteries.

Normally she really liked the bands Queen, The Doors, and The Animals… but she also didn't appreciate losing her hearing or when someone messed with the tracks she was trying to listen to.

The only other adult in the room sighed, sprawling out on the other end of the couch and sourly eyeing the young Mist experimenting with the buttons on his new cassette player. "I said we should've gotten him the little toy car sets."

"I'd rather not step on those too, thank you." The thief snarked, folding her legs a bit defensively under her. "Those would give me worse than just a bruise. Besides, then we'd have to sit here and listen to him make car and crashing noises. Even worse, maybe Mist Constructs of car and crashing noises."

"If you would watch where you're going, that wouldn't be a problem." He shot back, a dirty look added for emphasis. "...and share some of the blanket, you hog."

The insufferable ass's expression didn't even change when she shot him a dirty glare of her own. Irked, she curled up tighter. "Mine now, sucks to be you."

Shamal had only been keeping a fraction of his attention on them, but he got fully distracted from his Christmas presents and peered up from the floor at Sonya's higher position on the couch. "Shouldn't you share, mamma? They keep telling me to at school."

"I, brat, am a thief. I do not share my things with just anyone." She yanked him up to her lap, then scooped the brat in under the blanket with her. "Renato should not be surprised if I steal all the fun things and leave him in the cold."

"HEY!"

Snickering, the bratty Mist popped his head out from under the fabrics just to give the hitman a smug little smirk. "It's really warm in here, Mister Renato!"

The absolutely outraged look on the man's face made Sonya have to smother her own snickers into Shamal's messy bed-hair, which didn't help because the scathing glare he pinned her with would've burned anyone else.

"Shamal?"

"Yes, mamma?"
"Hold on to me really tightly, okay?"

Bratty Mist didn't have time to question why, she bolted with both him and the blanket.

Running to the door before Renato fully realized what she was about to do even with his mind-reading trick. "STEAL!"

Shamal's surprised bark of laughter coincided with her wrenching the doors open, startling the two maids who held offering of caffeine to placate grumpy Flame users in the mornings. The thief ignored them, merely ensuring neither would tip over as the two of the them passed the ladies.

"DAMN IT, WOMAN! Get back here!"

Sonya ignored that too, using her rather long legs to eat up the ground between the hitman's suite of rooms and her own. Skidding a bit on the one, and only, turn between them she very nearly crashed into a very surprised Schnitten Brabanters.

"Excuse us, you didn't see anything!"

The Ninth Generation Rain Guardian didn't have any time to question what the hell she was talking about, with a lack of good hiding spots around the Russian opted to go up instead and make her own.

The Iron Fort did have very nice vaulted ceilings in places, and luckily for her the guest suite wing was one of them. It was almost too wide for her to reach but on her tiptoes, it worked.

Shamal had to stuff a fist into his mouth to muffle his breathless laughter into her collarbone, to a level that would only certainly get them caught.

Renato hadn't been that far behind her and was the Rain's second near hit-and-run of the day. "...Schnitten. You wouldn't happen to know where a very irritating thief got to, would you?"

Blinking at the man, who was as half-dressed as Sonya was if only wearing the opposite garment, the Rain Guardian silently pointed a finger upwards.

"Damn it. I'm going to remember this." She informed the man flatly, pushing off one wall with a foot and bracing herself with a hand instead. In order to ready herself to leap to either side depending on how the hitman moved. Then she tried for a completely innocent look. "Hi, Renato. Fancy seeing you here."

"Little lady Sonya, you suck at playing innocent." He drawled out flatly, eyeing both her and the brat sourly. "Give me back my blanket. You can keep Shamal."

"Hey!" Bratty Mist interjected, looking wounded. "You don't really mean that… right?"

Flat footed at the sudden change in tone, the Sun user blinked once. "…of course not."

"Good. GO MAMMA!"

Obediently, the Russian leapt down and hit the floor running. Abandoning the straighter route to her rooms, since that had been likely and indeed was the direction Renato had assumed she'd go in.

Instead, she bolted for the more central parts of the Iron Fort the guest suite wing opened up into.

"Hi Tyr, bye Tyr!" Sonya called out to the master assassin as they passed him, who could show surprise.
It was a tiny raise of the left brow, but it was a reaction.

Renato was a little less well mannered, he very nearly barreled into the older man. Only a truly impressive reaction time kept him from getting Tyr's sword through the throat, enabling the hitman to just dodge the knee-jerk reaction.

"Oooh, close one." Shamal offered from the thief's shoulder, where she moved him to have her hands less encumbered for wall-bracing.

If she could trust him to hold both her and the blanket of contention, she'd give him that too but didn't want to really drop the brat if she had to do something surprising.

"He's gaining, mamma!"

"Brat," the thief snorted out as she took one of the few other paths she knew led somewhere close to her rooms, "no one catches me when I don't want to be caught."

A few more twisted paths cut short by either really surprised people or the hitman somehow getting ahead of her later, as well as one Propagated jump over the man's head that had him cursing up a storm, Sonya eventually got to slam her suite's doors in Renato's face.

Very nearly causing him to run into it face first.

Shamal ended up in a breathless goo pile on top of their ill-gotten loot, not even flinching when the hitman hammered a fist on the door between them all. "Damn it, Sonya! Open this door!"

"Nope!"

"...you realize you just ran through the halls without pants, right?"

The thief braced her back to the doors, because there was no way in hell the man's strength could match her Cloud Flame derived super-strength. "You did the same without a shirt."

"I'm pretty sure Schnitten saw up your shirt."

"Well... lucky him."

She had to bite her lip against a snicker when the man hammered another heavy fist on her door, the brat was a lost cause and was currently rolling on the blanket at her feet... laughing his little head off.

"Breath kid, you choke... and I'm going to just laugh at you."

"Sonya, would you please give me back my bedding." He sounded exasperated and a bit chagrined, likely someone had come out to see what the hell the fuss was about or followed them back from their little chase.

"I apparently steal something from you every year. Guess what you lost this year."

"Nono's maids aren't going to appreciate it." Renato tried instead, not desperately but with enough chagrin in his tone to kill the mood a little.

"Mmm... fine." It was someone else's place, she probably should apologize or something.

Maybe.

Really, the only other one she remotely cared about the opinion of here was Tyr, and the man had
not looked bothered at all to see her bolt past carrying both Shamal and a blanket.

The absolutely disgusted and offended look on Renato's face had bratty Mist falling over himself in laughter again when she opened the door finally.

The thief slipped the blanket out from under the brat easily enough, tossing it into his face. "You're now forgiven for being a complete and utter jackass."

"Well... good." The hitman shot her a heated glare. "It only took me half a year and a chunk of my dignity."

"You really do suck at apologizing." Sonya agreed pleasantly, opening her door wider to see who it was that had him moderate his attempts to talk her into giving up on his own. Schnitten gave a friendly wave, not perturbed in the least to get a pointedly irritated look back. "Is there any reason why the two of you are half dressed?"

"I forgot my pants." She admitted freely enough, looking back to Renato's rather disgruntled form. "Give me fifteen to get dressed, and we'll meet you downstairs for brunch. Lunch. Whatever."

He only nodded absently. Looking from the blanket now in his possession finally, to her and Shamal, to Schnitten, then back to her. The expression that crossed his face ended up a mixed between irritated and resigned. "...this probably isn't going to help anything."

"Help with what?" Asked the Russian, really confused because she wasn't aware of what was in need of help. A rather out of the blue comment, which had nothing to it to suggest what he was talking about.

"Never mind." He dismissed after a moment with a sharp shake of his head pointing a finger in her face. "I'll get you back for this."

"Sure you will. Just like if you do, I'll wait until I know you have to deal with the brat to hop him up on an ungodly amount of sugar and monster flicks."

"Can we?" Said brat asked near-breathlessly, rolling up to clutch at Sonya's leg. "Please? It sounds really fun."

"Maybe for your birthday."

"You do that, you're dealing with the brat." Renato threw back, irritated.

Sonya scoffed, smirking wickedly. "Then I'll just take him with me to Moscow. I still win, Renato."

"Yes! Please?" Shamal upgraded to clutching at her thigh, a bit too high to be really comfortable. "I want to do that."

"You... are incredibly childish sometimes." Announced the hitman as if that had been news, irked and fully willing to show it. "Fine. I want to know where the hell he's going first."

"Then just come with us." The thief rolled her eyes, leaning up against the door jamb to keep aware of how close the Vongola Rain was to them. "This summer, I've got a bit to do back home this spring... but... you might want to get in on this next round of testing too..."

"What testing?"

"Stone testing. Over two hundred of the bloody things... and you are the only Inverted Sun I know
of. Speaking of, I had a copy of my book reserved for you. Since you did help with it and all."

To his credit, the bait didn't get more than a quirked eyebrow of interest. Sonya was a bit torn between being exasperated and being appreciative of his caution where Shamal was concerned.

"Maybe." Was all the man would say with a shrug to the offer. "Let's see how this spring goes for you first."

…that was a good point, actually.

———

(Friday the 3rd of January, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Cherep did appreciate a good book on occasion, growing up with Sonya ensured that there was an entire array of things to read. As long as you were willing to risk the budding criminal librarian in the making’s temper and her hoarding of all things papery and written on.

Book of bait, which was emblazoned with his little sister's name, did not qualify for a good book.

"Alright, spill Galina." Demanded said blonde sister shortly when they were all finally assembled in the missing Rain’s office, pinning the Lightning with an irritated look. "This is… more than a little suspicious."

The woman sighed in response.

The stuntman might not have known her very well, but for the last couple weeks he had been trying to work with her on the Cloud Flame focus stone groups until Sonya herself got back from some mafia-shindig in Italy. He knew perfectly well that prim-if-not-proper Galina would've cheerfully gutted someone for sighing over her questions.

In order to make her do it to someone else, in front of Tatiana no less, required something rather serious.

"It was Gedeon's idea, supposedly."

Cherep blinked a few times, then leaned over to Arseniy. "Who?"

"Our Pahkan’s son." The vor informed him flatly.

Tatiana gifted him with an amused look, which he pulled a face at in return.

The next guy in charge, then. He would fully admit to staying away from a lot of the Zolotov things growing up, judiciously aided by his fellow Cloud user's attempts to keep him as far under the underworld's radar as she possibly could. Even from the rest of the family.

A lack of familiarity didn't mean he couldn't grasp the basics of what was going on, however.

"From what little I know of things before Dmitriy's sudden interest in the more local business side of our clan, the idea originally came from one of the groups out in St. Petersburg. Since they didn't have the information but wanted it but didn't really want to go through the hassle of actually forging a connection to some Moscow thieves ring, they sent someone to specifically court someone high up enough to make it happen."
"Grekovs, then. Dmitriy didn't buy in, I take it?"

Galina sniffed in disgust at the Storm-Cloud's question, thinking it was inane and making sure everyone in the Inverted Rain's office knew it. "Of course not. Dmitriy flatly refused, up until Gedeon started suggesting that maybe it wasn't such a bad idea. He knows you a lot better than either the slimy snake we were sent or our Pahkan's son do, and flat out bailed when it became apparent someone was going to try to order him to do it anyways."

"That kind of left you holding the hot end of the stick, didn't it?" The stuntman interjected with a bit of confusion.

Again, the Lightning scoffed. At him that time. "No, Sonya knows better than to go after the tools. I might have had to do it, but she's not mad at me."

"I'm not entirely certain I am mad." The thief interjected flatly, drumming her fingers on the heavy built desk. "Irritated my name got slapped on this, yes. A little annoyed my permission was only sought after the fact, sure. But I did give the clan the information I no longer needed, to do with as they will. Gedeon is going to have to explain exactly how we benefit from being the collection point of all the more civilian Flame users seeking clarification when we also lose a bit of leverage with the other syndicates now that this is public, and why it is he decided to drag me into it."

"Be careful with that, girl." Arseniy suddenly spoke up, giving the youngest of his foster children a mildly reproving look. "We are Zolotovs, and I don't think old man Zolotov will be happy to lose his only son."

"I'm not going to harm anyone that belongs to our clan, Arseniy." Sonya promised, fully honestly if Cherep had to guess. "Anyone else...? Where and when I might like, in return for this utter bullshit? In FRONT of someone not being very careful with the assets he's due to inherit?"

He gave her a flat look.

"Everyone screws up, if I murdered everyone that irritated or angered me I'd probably be the world's most notorious mass murderer." She explained to him patiently. "No, I'm thinking more... indirect expressions of displeasure. Especially since now Galina and I have to somehow shoulder Dmitriy's work when not only is my career in Mafia Land picking up, but she has her own life to live."

"Dmitriy bailing as he did, and it was kind of obvious that he did, actually got old Milos interested in what was going on." Tatiana offered neutrally. More to just give details than make a comment or give an opinion on the book of bait. "He's not too happy, I think. I see him more than most here except for dad, especially now that it's been arranged that I'm his nurse when he needs something medical in nature."

Sonya gave their older sister a confused look.

"He comes to Mafia Land for it." She explained without needing the question vocalized. "He's paying for me to learn, as well as to support me while I do my residency. In return I am not only his medic, but anyone else in the clan who may need a bit of patching up."

Slouching a bit in Dmitriy's office chair, the thief folded her hands together and considered the desk in front of her for a long moment before looking back up at the people in the missing Rain's office. "Right, well... that's for later then. Cherep, are you done with your own... err, work?"

"For the most part." Shrugging, the stuntman sidestepped their older sister's playful punch to the
shoulder.

"Beast of a damn Cloud. He knocked it all out over the course of a few weeks." The nurse complained, so fake that even Sonya’s little fanboy was fully aware it wasn’t honest. "I think he might be stronger than you, if fifty took you a whole month."

"He is stronger than me." She answered with full faith in their brother, as if the concept of him not being bigger than her was a foreign thought. "Aside that, though?"

"I have two new possibilities to what you’re looking for, for us at least." Cherep admitted, weirdly touched with that faith she held in him. "Charoite and Lepidolite."

She had always seemed rather irritated when he out did her in some Cloud Flame thing, he didn’t know she valued that about him enough to boast of it in her weird little way. At least to their sister and a few other people fully interested in not dragging him into anything he didn’t want to do.

"…I have no idea what those are."

"Sometimes very purple semi-precious stones. Since amethyst never really worked well for me, I think I’m sticking with Lepidolite. It looks like a bit of purple granite, but it also comes in different colors."

"You’ll get there." Galina informed Sonya brightly. "Eventually. To start with, however…? Blind testing."

She wrinkled her nose at her. "How the hell are we doing this blind?"

"You’ll see."
Chapter 31

(Monday the 6th of January, 1969. Aleksandr's basement, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Apparently, Sonya had been only partially correct.

Not just the Grekov Gang, but also several more visible and only slightly affiliated with the St. Petersburg syndicate had been lobbying rather hard to have the basics of Dying Will Flames of the Sky become publicly sourced somehow. The Grekovs had just been more upfront about their efforts.

The demand was for the basic information on Flames, the only supply had been one mid-sized Moscow thieves' clan.

There had been a lot of pressure put to her affiliated syndicate to give over their information before someone took it by force, and probably unknowing of the combat ability of Flame users… her Pahkan had agreed in the end.

Nothing major happened in the clan without old man Zolotov's expressed permission. Even Sonya had to get it in order to range freely with Dmitriy holding down the fort on the subject of Flames behind her.

He apparently wasn't so happy with his son for being the one chink in the clan's armor someone else took advantage of in order for things to get so rushed before the thief could admit she could level a city block on her lonesome and solve the problem that way.

The Storm-Cloud didn't appreciate being used like that or getting volunteered-told after the fact to deal with the inevitable headache that would follow. She could only use Mafia Land's anonymous travel and business services when she was anonymous. If she got too famous, or infamous, she'd have to start doing it on her own time and effort.

Which she had yet to actually try for more than just crossing a border or two.

While 'Sonya Bazanova, hippy author' wasn't actually a bad persona to develop for moving around in the civilian sector, she already had 'Sonya de Mort, the stuntman Skull de Mort's little sister' for that. Both were things that she couldn't use if she intended to steal something nearby, either getting busted for theft would damage a few things she would rather not be hurt. They were both personal use only.

Mafia Land's maintained persona for her was a throw away one, one with an ever-changing name and actual paper trails however forged for legitimacy. Any investigator, law enforcement personnel, or anyone that was suspicious of her would get stonewalled trying to actually look up the company she worked for… but they would get there.

Sonya wasn't a great forger. She had actually intended to ask Tatiana if she thought she could do the same thing for her, because her older sister was a lot better than she was in it.

Crafting an actual business-related identity was her next great project… but it seemed as if she was going to have to use Nikishina as her name for that. Primakova was a possibility, but since Tatiana used it and baby Valera would probably as well the thief didn't want to inconvenience her siblings if she ever ran into legal trouble.
Spring, at least. Maybe even fall.

Half of the next three years were spoken for, given she had to somehow manage Dmitriy's teaching job with Galina as well as pull of twenty to thirty heists for Mafia Land in order to get the shared apartment Tatiana wanted. A good thing she had Bjørn, otherwise she didn't know how she'd pull it off.

Probably why although greatly annoyed, Milos wasn't actually letting his son sink or swim in this situation. He could still see how to make use of it.

It would still tie Sonya down somewhat, which since she was a free-ranging thief the old man probably didn't see a downside to. A high grossing thief near at hand if something needed stealing was probably better to him than a free-range one racking up a reputation they'd have to wonder about managing the backlash from.

Thankfully, Galina was as efficient as she was ruthless in bureaucratic realms. Dmitriy had also been training up his pack of brats, which now numbered in the low thirties, to teach each other the basics of their shared Flame types instead of requiring him to guide them through personally.

The most the Storm-Cloud would have to deal with were the older Storms, the Mists, and the Clouds if a new one ever appeared. The brunette Lightning already had the Lightnings and Suns, with Tatiana's help on the side, well in hand.

If a Sky popped up, they'd have to see about who would take on that one until he or she found Guardians of their own and could handle most anything alone.

The Rains were another matter.

The four Classical Rains of Dmitriy's actually concerned Sonya somewhat. Three males and a female, and each of who preferred working with another to the point she really did wonder if they Tranquilized each other for there to be so little friction. Other than that, she had no real opinion on what to do with them.

The fair haired and blue eyed Fadei was oldest, at nearly eighteen in age. He was already working with his Rain Flames for the clan's benefit, and likely the reason why the situation exploded as it had. Unlike with Dmitriy, who used his Flames mostly on inanimate objects or softly to calm others down in tense situations, Fadei had absolutely no problem Tranquilizing another to death.

In fact, from what notes Dmitriy had left her and Galina, he already had.

Irinei, a sixteen-year-old with brown hair and eyes who looked much like a telephone pole turned human, was less direct about his Flame use. He had taken Dmitriy's sapphire shard trick and figured out how to make it into an actual tool to be used, bending his Flames to his will to only activate when he decided they should instead of leak all over the place constantly like Rain Flame shattered sapphires did.

His age-mate Kazimir, a blue-haired and green-eyed teen who originally wandered in from the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, had decided to see how Rain Flames could be applied outside the obvious. Using Dmitriy's ability to stop machinery as a jumping off point, he was fast at work figuring out how to stop cars cold and disrupt perception of both humans and cameras.

The second giving him more problems than the first, in relation to recording devices at least.

Zarya was actually seventeen herself, a red headed young woman with freckles and equally red eyes. Apparently deciding if her cohorts were focusing on killing or enabling said kills she should focus on
the more indirect applications of Rain Flames in social interactions. The reports on her gave Sonya a headache trying to understand, but what she did know was Zarya was becoming quite the little diplomat.

They were past the point of needing instruction or guidance, and also perfectly suited to handle the other newer Rains still trickling in, but still not… quite to the point of being ‘old hands' like the rest of Sonya's Flame using cohort. Worse, the thief was the youngest of that group therefore the first one that should accept them as just fellow Flame users and not just rookies.

However, she was also the most senior Flame user of the Zolotovs'. Discounting Cherep, who was only loosely affiliated.

It left them in an awkward place with one another, so to speak. She didn't particularly want to order them around, and they weren't exactly sure what to make of her.

Gem and rock testing had transferred to Aleksandr's basement training hall, the old grizzled vor had retired from training up tetchy Mafiya brats and merely stayed as 'resident' of the house to enable the Flame users to have someplace secure and covered for their experimenting.

Aleksandr hadn't exactly been a young man when Sonya met him, and now the vor was pushing sixty. His shoulders were now hunched, and his formerly straight spine had acquired a stoop, but the vor could still give the impression that obeying him was merely the smart thing to do. He waved them through his home, apparently not interested in overseeing anything but what Tatiana had going on with him.

The underground room was nearly packed, from all Zolotov Flame users taking up spots to work their way through Galina's mass of testing material.

Currently, Sonya was eyeing a collection of seven rocks laid out on a table. They weren't even all red rocks. "These are all garnets?"

"Yes," Galina sniffed as if insulted the Storm-Cloud had to ask, "a few we got reactions from by the Suns. One seems to work with everyone."

The thief poked a supposed garnet, which was a solidly green colored jewel. "…well, I suppose this is why I left this part to you. I never would have figured there were more than just wine-red ones and focused too hard on the jewel-quality versions."

"This is to show expectations might screw up honest results. By your logic, all of them would work for you and you might have your Will overpower the natural results." The Inverted Lightning informed her tartly, picking the gems carefully to return them to their proper separate piles. "So, this is how it will work. You put your hand into one of these boxes, and one of the Shestyorka will give you one of these at a time. They will record the results, you just give the Flames for testing."

Which would neatly circumvent the issue they had last year, where they scorched and nicked their fingers to the point the recorded results had become illegible after enough tests. Sonya wasn't exactly fond of the idea of shoving her hand into a box and trusting some unknown to not mess with her hands, and she'd need both to get through Cloud and Storm testing about the same time.

Cherep, who had been hanging about still even if he was finished with helping record his half of the Cloud Flame tests, shooed the Shestyorka who would've been recording his little sister's results for her. He took up the position with a charmingly professional haughty look, mock neatening up the notebooks her future test results were to be listed within.
Galina's expression could only be called flat. "You know how it's supposed to go, right?"

"I ensured I was fully instructed by one of your little minions, yes." The stuntman returned dryly, gesturing over to where Sonya's Lackey was warily eyeing his own boxes. "Until Björn is done and can keep Sonya from punching some overly chatty or forward type out of irritation, I'll do this part."

Moderately disgruntled at his assumption over how violent she could be, even as she was appreciative she wouldn't have to deal with want-to-be vory, Sonya took the seat waiting for her and decided she was unamused.

Sniffing, the Lightning refocused on the Storm-Cloud. "A couple stones you'll be testing multiple times, in order to see if cut really does affect the results. Most of them are raw, I got them cheaper than actually cut gemstones would've been. Since it took your brother less than a month, and Tatiana is almost done with her own set, I expect you will have little problem getting it all done quickly."

"I have two types to test." Sonya reminded the woman blandly. "So does Björn."

"So it'll be time consuming, but I also think you can do more in a day than most of the others." Galina dismissed that point with a flick of one hand.

Her nails were painted green. The thief wondered…

Her smirk when she noticed where the slightly younger woman was looking seemed to confirm Sonya's suspicions that the Lightning had found a way to weaponize her nail polish.

Interesting.

Apparently, there were additional benefits to finding oneself a mineral type.

"Furthermore, there's also this to consider." Galina plucked a different rock up out of the 'to-be-tested' boxes Sonya was about to start going through, a dark green one speckled with reddish brown.

Bloodstone… possibly?

The Storm-Cloud was only an amateur geologist at best, but she was mostly sure that's what that was.

Beckoning to one of the younger teens hanging about, one that had been talking to Usov in a far corner while they took a break, Galina handed him the stone and gestured to the Storm-Cloud. "Show her."

The kid, the younger Classic Sun apparently from the Flames that bent to his will, poured the yellow fire into the rock. The piece of bloodstone spat out a slightly brighter lick of yellow fire… stronger where there were the spots of red color.

"…iron?"

"Is apparently a Sun Flame metal." Galina finished with a sharp nod. "Tatiana tried it out, since she has more fine control. Still currently in the process of trying it out, that's where she's at right now. It looks promising, anyways."

Sonya blinked at the bit of bloodstone, then at the young Sun. "Thank you, you may go back to what you were doing."
Taking back the bit of rock, the Lightning tossed it to the barrel of 'Flame tainted' rocks being amassed in the middle of the hall. "I'll get you a new one that's not tainted with Sun Flames. The point of that was we're not only looking for your sparkly jewels, but metals, minerals, and elements. It's entirely possible to grow your own crystals, so...?"

"...the Flame rings are possibly synthetic and not natural." The thief finished with a sigh. "I was afraid of that."

Galina shrugged the issue off. "Someone had to start somewhere and while you might not have been correct, but you did get us in the ballpark. Try not to dwell on how far off the mark you may have been."

With an almost breathless snort, Sonya turned to her foster brother instead of answering the older Russian.

Cherep gave her a slight smirk, already fiddling with one of the boxes apparently no one else needed just yet. "We'll go until you are either too tired or too bloody to continue."

He snickered at her rolled eyes, setting something cool in both palms stuck out for him and fussing with the start of her recorded result.

The thief kind of wished she didn't have three types to her, even if only two were usable. If she only had one, then maybe she could've brought along a book to read. Channeling her Flames into separate palms for however long Cherep needed wasn't exactly stimulating work.

Kazimir slid into the seat next to her once the Lightning had left them to it, giving the Storm-Cloud a bland looking smile. "So, rumor around the clan is that you're the boss lady of this little project."

Sonya gifted the blue-haired young man with a similarly blank look. "Did you wait until Galina was distracted for a reason?"

"She might have informed us to only bother you at our peril." Admitted the Rain easily, sticking his hand through a free box for the rather harried looking young Shestyorka who was apparently recording his results for him. "We had a question, though."

"Obviously, or you wouldn't be bothering me." The thief twitched as whatever it was in her left palm with her Storm Flames cracked on her. Cherep made a tisking sound, brushing the broken bits of whatever off her palm when she cut her Flames in order to give her a new bit of something.

Kazimir blinked at her, glanced over to where his other three fellow Rains were keenly interested in looking on, then back at the tiny blonde woman he was bothering. "Well... with Dmitriy out, what are you going to do with us?"

"Should I do anything with you?" She countered, still blank and giving the man a sideways look. "Dmitriy left us no real notes of where he wanted your four to go, so I was just going to leave you to it for now. You are decently inventive, if not as flexible as I would like."

"Not as...?" Nonplussed, the blue haired Rain spluttered for a moment.

Likely in protest.

Sonya rolled her eyes again, giving the man a bit more of her attention as her brother tapped her right wrist to get her to stop pooling Cloud Flames there. "It's been three years. You all have one or two tricks each. By the time three years had passed with me, I could not only hit as hard as I wished but also resize and copy anything I liked. Lift and jump anything as high as I wanted. I also hunted
down the beginnings of what information we have on all types, started in on this rock stuff, could melt anything I wished with my Storm Flames, and noted the physical drawbacks for two Flame types."

"…you may have a point with that." Kazimir admitted slowly, a bit more serious now than he had started out as. "But… we only have one Flame."

"That you all share between the four of you and you should be able to teach one another the tricks you invented for it. I can work with non-inventive people, non-flexible will be an issue." She gifted him with a hard look, ignoring the shattering of whatever had been in her right palm. "Think outside your box, please."

It really did seem if these four Rains were content to be fed the information they needed instead of search out new bits to play with.

Sonya supposed they might be past the age where the sky was the limit and was just thankful there were three newer Rains that were less interwoven with each other. Hopefully the reliance wouldn't get passed along, but they had no other good teachers for Rains.

Maybe it was a Rain thing?

Dmitriy had been equally content to be fed information to work off of but had actually been inventive after his starting point. Mostly because Sonya could not do more than point him in a direction, and there was nothing else known.

What other Rains did she know?

There was Schnitten Brabanters, but she didn't really want to ask a Vongola Guardian about his nature.

…Miss Silver-white?

It was possible, but the thief only knew the woman's first name. Renato could probably help her with that.

"You know, I think making her irritated is messing with the results." Cherep interjected idly, inspecting a crystal shard of something violently acidic green then giving the Rain a pointed look. "Stop it."

The Rain gave him a blank, dismissive stare. Turning back to the Storm-Cloud he blinked at suddenly being glared at.

"Also, Sonya has broken fingers of the people that try targeting or harassing me." The stuntman continued as if Kazimir hadn't tried dismissing him as unimportant. "So… you might want to watch out for that."

Flicking his eyes between the foster siblings, the blue haired young man nodded slowly. "…sure."

Sonya scoffed, trying and apparently failing to control her annoyance if the pointed look Cherep was giving her was any measure. "Is there anything else?"

"Ah… the younger three. What do you want done with them?"

"Teach them the same way Dmitriy did you four. You know how it went, what worked and what didn't, so start them off until they're at a decent jumping off point then let them loose from there."
The blue haired Rain gave a hesitant nod, eyeing her speculatively as he got up to go fill in his fellow Rains of her orders.

Sonya gave her foster brother a small frown. "It's getting harder to care."

"Stop trying to force it." Cherep informed her flatly, messing around with another rock to plop into her Cloud Flame hand and jot down the name of. "If you like someone, great. If you don't, don't try to keep on talking to them."

"But they won't shut up."

"You can't have it both ways, little sister. Either set the example to be a polite Cloud or continue the trend of a vicious one." He grinned, with some surprisingly good-natured humor, at her continued flat expression. "Yes, I cheat all over in being an Inverted Cloud and actually like socializing myself. Poor, poor little Sonya."

She sighed, wincing a little as whatever had been in her left hand shattered this time instead of cracked. "I'm beginning to wonder if it will amass me anything, or if I should just bow to the inevitable and start bitch-slapping those I dislike."

"I rather like you being willing to talk to new people, myself. Even if you don't like them right away." Admitted her fellow Cloud as he changed out what was in her left. "Then again, it's been a year since we got to spend more than a day or two together."

"I'm going to try to be here before the circus returns for the winter from now on." She hadn't really liked the lack of him in her life either, to be honest. "So, we'll at least see each other more often."

"Our foster parents would adore seeing more of you too. I know I got my years in before Tats', but that didn't mean you had to drop the rest of us in order to spend time with her as well."

Huffing, Sonya gave him a dry look. "There are only so many days in a year, and things are still settling down. Still have yet to settle down, given this new upset."

Cherep rolled his purple eyes at her this time. "Life will never settle down, it's the whole reason it's called living and not just existing. Make some time, Sonya. I really have missed you."

"Fine." She had no clue when she'd be able to manage that, but maybe this Flame teaching gig could help. "Was there a reason you wanted to handle this part yourself?"

"I kind of have to get back to the circus, but I wanted to see if you got the same results with the Cloud-possible stones as I did." Admitted the stuntman rather easily, changing out both of the rocks she was blind-testing. "I'll stick around until Tats is done with a few iron rods, then she can save one of these nervous little runners from actually having to deal with an irate Storm-Cloud."

"I am not that bad."

"You can be." Cherep insisted cheerfully, a wry edge creeping up his face as she glared at him. "I'm teasing you, by the way."

"...I knew that."

"Sure you did."
With the testing going on, even if she was one of the last people to start it and making better progress than anyone bar Cherep, Sonya's first month home followed a pattern.

Since she got herself and Björn a hotel penthouse for at least the winter-spring months, one of the hotels the Zolotovs extracted protection money from so she got a bit of a discount, she left their rooms about nine. After ensuring the Icelandic teen was awake and on his way to the old training hall since as new as he was to Flames it would inevitably take him longer.

She spent an hour at least visiting Lisa, and little baby Valera who wasn't so much a baby anymore as he was a toddler. Who had long since forgotten Sonya and was a wary little brat about the thief at first until he got used to her again. Arseniy was normally still asleep or just getting home by that point, meaning although she got to at least greet her foster father they rarely exchanged more than that.

Since she normally made breakfast for Lisa instead of having her foster mother cook, the Storm-Cloud ate there before joining Björn for a few hours of testing different rocks.

Depending on how many violently shattered on her, she either ate lunch with Tatiana or if she was injury free went to visit Cherep and Crina and the rest of her acquaintances in the circus.

The old bat was doing just fine, terrorizing yet another new apprentice.

This new one, a male by the name of Peizhi who suspiciously hailed from China, looked by turns either terrified or hesitant about his role as Crina's golfer-man. Keeping out of his sight even if she spent some time getting Crina drunker than a skunk was a decent way to spend a good hour or two here or there.

Another stint of cracking stone with Flames, then Sonya spent more than half of the night with Galina managing paperwork and brainstorming new things for the next generation of Flame users to try.

Halfway through January of 1969, one night long after Björn exhausted his tiny store of Flames and had retreated to Dmitriy's office with the Russian women, the Storm-Cloud finally got a visit.

Gedeon and one other vor, who she was pretty damn certain wasn't a Zolotov.

"Miss Sonya Bazanova." The unknown announced as if she and the rest in the office didn't know her name. "You're a hard woman to track down."

The thief blinked a few times, taking in not only her Pahkan's son's forcefully neutral expression but also the overly familiar body language of this new person. "...who the hell are you?"

Gedeon slid farther to the side, leaving the unknown standing boldly across from the missing Inverted Rain's desk. Apparently, he knew this was a bad idea but somehow went along with it anyways.

"You don't remember me? I'm hurt." He actually sounded genuinely honest about that, which made the Storm-Cloud feel guilty for all of a split-second until she recalled she didn't give a damn. "Valera, from St. Petersburg?"

Nope, didn't ring a bell for her.
Sonya leaned back in Dmitriy's office chair, vowing yet again to get rid of that ugly eyesore of a lamp one of these days. "I've only been to St. Petersburg once."

"Yes, you were with some civilian outfit."

"...I still don't care. What the fuck do you want?"

There was a tiny lift of his left brow, then the man gave a sigh. She was only partially sure that was honestly given. "There are... a few people that are interested in getting to know you."

"And this qualifies for a personal visit... how?" She asked archly, drumming the fingers of her left hand on the desk she had been working on before this little interruption. "You could have just sent a message."

"Would you have responded?" Slick-not-baby-Valera asked archly, sounding truly amused.

She didn't even need to think about it. "No."

Frankly, she had already had her fill of social interactions for the season. For the year if she could get away with it, but she was pretty sure she'd still have to socialize with people she didn't care about sometime this year too.

"And that's why they sent me." He concluded as if it was reasonable enough of an excuse, not a rather flimsy one that was irritating her. "I am charged with inviting you-"

"Get out."

Flat footed, Valera blinked once at her. "I beg-"

"Get." Sonya rose to her feet, planting her left hand over the work she had been doing with Galina before the man could inch close enough to get a good read of it. "Out."

The insufferably stubborn asshole acquired and affronted look for all of a second.

A second was as long as he had until the Storm-Cloud summoned a copy of a battle hammer to her hand and threw it at him. Nearly twenty pounds of harden steel crashed through the stone wall of the office and embedded into the hallway beyond it, shattering a good fifteen feet of old stonework and leaving an impact crater in seven feet of wall behind it.

"Get. OUT. NOW."

Valera got the hell out of dodge while he could. She had tossed that only a few degrees away from his right side.

The thief pinned Gedeon with a similarly irritated glare. "A word, please?"

Galina gave a small cough, walking with a remarkably steady clip to the office phone. "I'll just call someone to fix the walls, shall I?"

Björn, wide-eyed from the damage she had just wrought, slowly inched to the far wall well outside her range of view.

Gedeon glanced from the holes in the walls, because before her Cloud Flame hammer winked out of existence it finally fell through to the office across the hall, to the both of them and then back at her.

Sonya was pretty sure some of her desire to rend the little bastard into bloody pieces and beat him to
gooey mush with his dismembered limbs was showing on her face, because the man winced. "Somewhere a little… less damaged?"

"Here is fine with me." The thief all but purred lowly, sinking back to her temporary office chair. "Next time you bring anyone outside the clan in here, I will remove a square inch of flesh from you. If you must do so, ensure we're not working on something sensitive."

"You're not, though." He protested, almost sulkily. "I checked that before bringing him in."

"You didn't check with me or either of these two, because they would've said something. Who, exactly, did you speak with about what we may have been doing?"

"Fadei."

Sonya blinked, then blinked again when she placed the name with the eldest of the Four Rains. "You… checked with someone that doesn't work in this office."

The man, he was a vor right? She didn't actually know if he was or not, but this…?

"You wouldn't happen to know where he is at right this moment, would you?"

It would explain why Fadei sent Kazimir to talk to her instead of do it himself, he thought he was better than her. Higher up, even if technically she was in charge with Arseniy adopting a mostly 'hands off' policy with them.

Oldest male in the group, oldest senior male even if Sonya had been doing this shit for almost a decade compared to his three or four years.

Galina visibly brightened, turning to Bjorn with a sharp grin he was obviously wary of. "Come along, little Lackey. Sonya gets to beat the shit out of someone and we get to watch."

"…um?"

"Can you?" Gedeon all but blurted out, eyeing the slight frame of the blonde thief dubiously. "He's half again your size."

Snorting, the thief gestured to the door, and coincidentally the hole in the office wall. "Well, you're about to find out. Aren't you?"

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 23rd of January, 1969. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Tatiana had been mildly curious over the changes and new people that had happened while she was pouring her time and effort into Mafia Land's nurse courses with an eye on becoming a full-fledged doctor.

With that in mind, and while her presence was needed for Sonya's jewel search was going on even if she was perfectly happy with her bits of heliodor, she had been spending a lot of time in the Zolotov cantina.

Basically, a bar built into the basement of the manor slash office building her clan had claimed as a base.
Mostly for the little runners and lower ranked vory, it was still a gathering place where most if not all of the clan gossip got aired out and the occasional bar fight happened when she'd get called down anyways.

They were getting pretty used to having a Sun Flame nurse near at hand, when she left to finish her residency and start in on her internship to become a doctor they were going to be feeling it.

*Probably might be less dismissive about my skills too,* the Sun thought wryly. Just because she didn't do alcohol didn't mean she was a lightweight. Sun Flames and liquor didn't exactly mix well, and in weird ways too.

If she was to be healing, Tatiana couldn't be drinking.

As far as she could see, the Zolotov clan had a moderate pick-up in recruitment. There were more Shestyorka running about than there used to be, none of which Cherep had known from his time being Arseniy's runner. Her little brother, while he had stuck around, pointed out the ones he had known either on their way to becoming vory or slowly on their way out of active Mafiya life.

Now that the purple stuntman was back to his circus work, it left the nurse feeling a bit lonely even if she was within the heart of her clan.

Right up until Gedeon entered from the hallway leading to the staircase, walking a bit stiffly before Sonya herself.

Tatiana perked up, because her little sister looked to be the bad blank. Not the 'I don't want to be here' one, the 'I really want to murder you' one.

Entertainment, score.

Their Pahkan's son gestured to the bar, then warily backed up.

The Sun idly watched, giving her old subordinate Galina a fond wave when the Lightning notice her, as the Storm-Cloud walked right up to one of their fellow Flame users.

Then Sonya buried her fist into the man's gut hard enough he threw up all over the floor.

Before anyone else could react, the tiny thief grabbed his head with both hands and drilled her right knee into the bridge of his nose while slamming his head down to meet it. With the oldest of the Four Rains staggered, Sonya reached out with red Flames coating her hands and gripped the wrists of the two younger male Rains before they could apply their Rain Flames to her, causing them to scream before yanking with inhuman force to knock them out using the other's head.

Sonya pinned the last one, the girl, with a narrow look.

Zarya, the only one Tatiana actually knew somewhat from their childhood ballerina and gymnastic classes, held up her hands and backed away slightly.

Dismissing the girl with a huff, the Storm-Cloud bodily hauled the eldest of the Rains up by the front of his button-down shirt. "The next time you feel like challenging me, cut out the middleman and do it face to face. You ever endanger your fellows like that again, and your group will forever be known as the THREE Rains."

With that warning given, and likely uncaring if he fully heard her or not, Sonya dropped him like so much baggage and turned on her heel to stalk over to where Arseniy had been observing the confrontation with interest.
Their foster father pushed his bottle of vodka over to her, seeming highly amused at the little satisfied huff Sonya gave.

The conversation noise level rose again now that the fun was over, meaning Tatiana had to move in order to hear why that had just happened.

Her swallowing a gulp of the nearly one hundred proof alcohol gave the nurse time to work her way over and hear her first truly neutral comment. "I didn't know you came down here, Arseniy."

"Only occasionally. I'd rather be home, but I only got a bit to wait until I'm needed again." Arseniy dismissed that with a shrug, then jerked his thumb over to where Zarya was trying to peel Fadei off the floor. "What did he do?"

"Decided he had the right to make calls in my place. He might've been the one Dmitriy wanted to take over for him while he's out, but if he is he hasn't been acting like it." Sonya dismissed in return, nodding to both Tatiana and Galina before looking at her little hanger-on. "Bjørn, we're done for the night. You're free to do whatever."

"…I think I need a drink." The still relatively young teen muttered, bobbing a kind of bow at his patron then at her father. "Dama, vor Arseniy."

With an additional nod to both Galina and Tatiana, the Icelander skirted the still woozy Rains with respectable distance to give his own request to the bartender.

"…didn't I put you in charge since Dmitriy's out?" Arseniy asked idly, which was only a bit terrifying.

At least to his foster daughters, both of who knew the vor's habits and how he sounded like when they got into trouble.

Or rather, just before the Sun got in trouble with him.

"I don't think he knows that, which was why I was content to just beat him bloody and not rip his head off." Sonya admitted slowly. "If it happens again…? I'll either kick him to you or deal with it more finally."

Narrowing his eyes over at the three more conscious Rains, the vor merely hummed.

"You know, since you do walk around with an entire arsenal of weaponry? I think beating them with your bare hands was maybe a touch much." Galina offered pleasantly, looking entirely satisfied with things even so. "Aren't Rains supposed to be able to stop people in their tracks, though? Are they really that weak?"

"When it comes to other Flame users, in order to use your Flames on another you have to either have their cooperation, sneak it past their own senses, or overpower their own. Which I don't think they realized." Tatiana corrected with a bit of amusement of her own. "They, combined, still don't have enough power to trump my little sister."

"Storm, also." The young woman in question chipped in blandly. "As long as I'm aware of it, I can almost unconsciously Disintegrate anything trying to affect me. Makes it a little hard to get drunk now."

That was a new bit of news. The nurse gave her little sister a semi-concerned look when she poured another shot of the bottle their father was sharing with her. "Even drugs? What if you need medical sedation?"
"I've actually been meaning to talk to you about that." Sonya admitted wryly with a sigh right before slamming the vodka back. "I don't know, and since you're the nurse...?"

"...I'll work on it next with Doctor Kappel. We should have a few suggestions to try the next time you get a checkup." Tatiana grinned faintly at Arseniy's faintly suspicious look. "Sonya's personal physician, not part of her little collection."

"What little collection?" The thief herself questioned curiously, a little hoarse before clearing her throat.

"Don't worry about it."

The younger woman hummed, eyeing her warily, but eventually accepted her elder sister's advice. Smirking, the nurse gave the surrounding crowd more of her attention as Galina struck up a conversation with Sonya about internal applications of Flames.

Frankly, Arseniy's youngest daughter wasn't exactly a known quantity in the clan. None of the Flame users were to the rest of the Zolotovs, the best they had was Dmitriy… and Fadei, who was currently getting scraped up off the floor.

No one else had the time put in to be respectable, except for Sonya who had decided to concentrate her efforts well outside the Iron Curtain and Tatiana who decided on becoming an illegal doctor. Maybe Cherep as well, but he was also stubbornly civilian for all that he didn't mind his foster family's preoccupation with criminal and illegal acts.

Most of these younger people likely forgot the young blonde girl that would break finger bones in retaliation for her mostly civilian brother getting targeted. As a reminder, and as a second introduction to who the hell Sonya Bazanova was, the thief beating the shit out of the eldest of the Four Rains wasn't a bad one.

It wasn't a good one, either.

Sonya likely didn't care too much as long as Bjørn was trying to keep on top of it, but Tatiana did keep a personal ear out for rumor and gossip.

Mafia Land's gossip fodder was a twisted mess of rumors from around the world, an exercise in linguistic mastery if there ever was one. Tatiana was more than sure she missed a good chunk more than just half of it due to her language limitations, and then there was all the in-jokes and national happenings that separated out casual gossip from important regional variations.

The Zolotov rumor mill was almost paltry in comparison, easily kept up with because only a fraction of the people was involved in it. Bonus, they all spoke the same damn language.

Fadei wasn't exactly popular, no vory really ever was universally popular in their lives, but there were those that did respect him. His little ring of Rain Flame users was partially the reason why Dying Will Flames came to the attention to other syndicates outside the clan, but they were also the very first sign to the rest of the Zolotovs that Flame users would be good for more than party tricks.

Sonya, who had an entirely different set of expectations that came from dealing with people that were already fully aware of that, was going to be a bit of a shock to most of these people.

Tatiana healed, Galina was more of a 'sharp tongue' person than really violent. Bjørn was entirely too new to Flames to be of much use. The Zolotovs were more used to thinking of Flame users as Rains, and how difficult it was to really piss one off.
Storm-Clouds?

The nurse loved her little sister but was fully aware of how difficult it was to get her to care.

This was either going to blow up in a spectacular way or in a horrible messy one.

She wondered if she'd be here to see it.

(Friday the 24th of January, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Gedeon needs a minder." Sonya flatly informed Galina early the next day.

"He had one, but Dmitriy's in prison." The Lightning informed the only slightly younger girl, which was hard to keep in mind some days.

The thief was probably the most mature person Galina had ever worked with. Nikolai and Ziven hadn't been that focused even by the end of the gang and their crime spree, after Tatiana left and when the older two teenagers ended up arrested and extradited back to Soviet Russia. Adrik was taking a bit of a vacation in America for the time being, someplace called Santa Clara Valley in the state of California, and was so much a follower it wasn't funny.

Galina was pretty sure that even once Nikolai and Ziven got out of prison themselves and recalled their last member, Tatiana still wouldn't want to return to doing what they had been doing before the law enforcement in West Germany got involved. Which was a great pity, because it had been more interesting than what the Lightning was doing now.

Speaking of, Ziven was due for release in a few weeks. She should arrange a pickup for the man.

"...I take it you're not too keen on giving up Bjørn while we're here?" The Lightning asked idly, a couple plans working their way through her mind.

Sonya wasn't Tatiana but, in some ways, she was better and worse than her elder sister. Galina wouldn't be able to go back to working with the fire-haired safecracker turned nurse… but she also didn't want to spend more years being Dmitriy's minder. The man did half the shit he did just to piss her off, and it would serve him right to have to deal with all the damn paperwork on his own when he got back.

While something to do, working with the Inverted Rain wasn't a great occupation. Sonya had given her more to do, more interesting things to do, and it had only been a month.

Ziven had liked the girl when they were kids, he wouldn't mind following her for a couple years until Nikolai was released. Their old gang leader and her second had a few personal things to work out, once he was out of prison too, so as a temporary to possibly permanent arrangement their working for Sonya wasn't a bad idea.

The flat stare the thief was aiming at her informed Galina that the Storm-Cloud thought that was a stupid suggestion.

Smiling prettily at her, she ran a number of names and personalities through her head. "Gedeon is only screwing up with us because he doesn't understand. We need another Flame user for him to become accustomed to, not a Rain."
Not Mikhail, Sonya actively disliked her fellow Storm and likely wouldn't work well with him. The Four Rains were out, that had to resolve itself before Galina would trust any with a paperclip. Tatiana was only back temporarily, she had to return to her nurse residency and her studies to become a doctor.

Out of the 'older' generation of Flame users, that left Andrei the other Classic Sun and… "Usov?"

"…possibly. A bit young, but we don't exactly have a great number of us, do we?" Allowed the blonde after pondering the suggestion for a bit. "I don't really want to put him into that kind of situation just yet, though."

Odd… from what Galina knew, the thief wasn't exactly protective of a lot of things. Her siblings, obviously. Her freedom to come and go as she liked, which was why she was so irritable lately. Bjørn, but only because the teen had specifically made himself something of 'hers'. Any and all books she came into possession of, according to Tatiana.

How did Usov fit into that?

"Well then, there's me and you." Suggested the Lightning next, fully aware the thief was way too busy to be able to do it herself.

By the frown on Sonya's lips, she was aware of that too.

Galina sighed, thinking of the headache inserting herself into Gedeon's social circle was going to cause her. "I can do it, but…?"

"I'm sorry to ask you to, but the next time we might not be able to salvage the situation. You did perfectly with this book bullshit, nothing anyone couldn't have gotten elsewhere with a bit of effort was published in that."

Flattered by a rare compliment from the younger woman, the Lightning merely shrugged it off. "If I'm cleaning up after Dmitriy, yet again, I want something."

She didn't look remotely surprised, but she also didn't look entirely unwilling to listen. "What?"

"A favor, a personal one. After."

There was a long moment of silence, in which Galina very specifically did not hold her breath or fidget. The thief was entirely stingy about what favors she owed and given how much difficulty Bjørn had in inserting himself into the young woman's life, a favor would likely only really be the way she'd get out of her current position and into something a bit more interesting.

With Sonya's own help, even.

A very small, almost inaudible sigh was her first indication the thief was actually pondering it and not just flatly glaring for the hell of it. "What for?"

Galina also did not allow herself to smirk. "It'll be in a few years, but I want out of here."

The Storm-Cloud eyed her warily.

"If when the time comes, and I don't want to leave, we'll call it good since I'd benefit from this anyways."

"…I can probably help out with that." Allowed the thief, still wary.
The Lightning allowed herself a small smile. "Perfect."

Ziven would need to arrange his own in, but that would only be if he wanted to. Prison time might have changed him a little, and there was the whole point of getting arrested to consider as well. He might rather stay in Moscow to be a \textit{vor} instead of following a female thief outside of the Soviet Union.

Galina glanced from Sonya's slightly disgruntled face to the slowly approaching Fadei, who looked a bit battered that morning. Tatiana must have refused to heal him.

Deciding her aid would be better spent on ordering the intake of information today rather than assisting the Storm-Cloud in inter-clan politics, the Lightning seized on the first excuse she could find to leave the thief to it.

She wanted no part of two Flame users establishing who was top dog.

(ooo000ooo)

\textit{\textit{\textbf{Friday the 24th of January, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.}}}

"You're a violent little bitch, aren't you?"

Was he really Classical?

This was more something she could easily see Dmitriy pulling off.

"And?" Sonya returned sharply, crossing her arms under her chest and glaring at the Rain. "\textit{Is there a point to that comment?}"

She really had more than enough things to be getting on with, like the testing she should be doing. A more streamlined process ensured she got through a good number every day, but multiple tests of the same rocks ensured she wouldn't be beating Cherep's record to get through them all.

Fadei made an aborted move to touch the still freshly broken nose she had given him but dropped his hand and merely gave her a mulish glare of his own. "You'll never find a man like that."

"I'm heartbroken to hear it, truly."

The Rain grit his teeth but kept silent.

Sonya remained as she was, expectantly staring at him.

"\textit{If you're expecting an apology-}"

"\textit{Please.}" She cut him off flatly. "\textit{Don't waste my time. We're not going to like each other. Fine, I likely couldn't care less about that. Somehow you expected to be in charge and this little pissing contest over not getting the lead is irritating. Stop it.}"

"\textit{Pissing contest? Dmitriy trained me up to take over for him if need be.}" All but snarled out Fadei, looking like he wished for nothing less than to reach out and wring her neck. "\textit{Who the hell are you to suddenly step in like this?}"

"\textit{The one that trained Dmitriy.}" Considering it, the sequence of events that led up to the Inverted Rain being the one stuck behind, and Sonya had to amend that somewhat. "\textit{Well, to be honest, the}
one that showed him how to use Flames and gave him a way to control it. None of us were what could be called trained that far back."

"I've never heard of you before last year, or that." He informed her, as if that changed anything.

"Do I care? Arseniy is the vor in charge, he handed it off to me and Galina. If you knew what Dmitriy wanted done, why the hell am I only now hearing about this?"

Fadei kept his mouth stubbornly shut, still glaring at her.

"Because you went and had a hissy fit." Rolling her eyes at the man, the thief rubbed her temple in sheer exasperation. "Had you said something, you wouldn't have suffered through a broken nose."

"Really?"

The word practically dripped with venom, which really only made Sonya feel disgruntled and tired. "I'm not staying, dumbass. Galina only might, depending on what she wants to do once Dmitriy's back. We have our own lives to deal with, and extra set of hands to enable that would be nice. But as of right now? I don't trust you."

"...so, you're temporary?" Fadei questioned slowly, narrowly inspecting her. "Why the hell would any vor put you in charge if you're just going to leave in a few years?"

"Arseniy is my father."

"Nepotism? Quaint."

"Pretty much, but at least I am a known quantity to him." She inspected the Rain from head to toe. "So, who the hell are you?"

With a sniff, and a slightly bloody wad of spit spat on the floor, he gave her a very sharp grin. "The one looking to boot your tiny ass out."

Frankly, Sonya would adore it if he succeeded. "Are you going to behave yourself? Or do I need to go bribe one of the Mists to give you migraines and nightmares until you do?"

Fadei refrained from answering, merely making a 'tisk' sound before sharply turning on his heel to stride back to where his three fellow Rains were warily watching the conversation.

With a huff of her own, the blonde took one of the available seats and merely flatly looked at one of the runners interning as a clerk when he informed her he was going to fetch her notebooks full of results.

Shamal likely wasn't going to be able to visit this year. It had only been one month, and already she couldn't see a quick end to the shit she had to do.

Speaking of, she also needed a talk with old man Zolotov. Which she needed help with, because if there was one person in existence it would be a bad idea for her to piss off it was him.

How long did Tatiana have left to go here?

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(Sunday the 9th of February, 1969. The Pahkan's Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)
Milos Zolotov was a very busy man, even if he really was starting to look every one of his years.

The man was seated behind his desk in his rather plushy adorned office, out of respect for old and likely repeatedly broken bones, regarding the Storm-Cloud standing across the desk from him. Gedeon was lurking behind his father, the elderly man's Sovietnik behind him on the other side near the great windows. Sonya wasn't exactly sure what this was supposed to tell her, if her request for a meeting held no enforcers other than the ones outside the door and the equally senior advisor to their Pahkan. Not that she was ignoring Gedeon, but the almost thirty-year-old vor had made it a point to stay out of her way since she threw a hammer at his invited guest and broke two walls. …was she finally going to get in trouble for that?

She'd paid for it, actually shelling out the ruble to have Dmitriy's office wall patched up as well as the office wall across the hall from it.

"To be honest, Bazanova, I have no idea what to do with you." Milos started off, his steady brown eyes almost boring a hole into Sonya's own. The thief kept silent, not exactly sure where this was going.

"Or your people."

Sonya blinked, because the only people she knew she had was Björn. She was also pretty sure old man Zolotov wasn't talking about her Icelandic teenager Lackey.

"I've kept up with your little ring's findings, you know. A boy who can make one's nightmares come to life, a young woman that can turn a piece of paper into bullet-proof shielding," Milos was ancient in Mafiya terms, and his voice carried that weight almost like a physical thing without sounding wavering or weak, "another young woman that can not only light an unquenchable fire where she wills but also throw a trick hammer with the force of a speeding train."

Usov, Galina, and herself.

"There is also a young woman who can heal almost any physical injury, a group of four that will likely become untouchable when they finally work the kinks out, and various others with an array of skills developing within those examples." Cautiously offered the Storm-Cloud, still lost as to where this was going.

Her Pahkan gave a little smile at that reminder. It wasn't a nice one, nor did it instill warm and fuzzy thoughts in anyone in that office. "I don't think I understand it, Bazanova. I am also much too old of a dog to learn new tricks. This Flame business obviously isn't going away, and we ended up at the head of any developments due mostly to your initial efforts. We also just experienced a bit of unpleasantness due to your efforts, an unintended side effect I'm sure."

Sonya was pretty sure shrugging to a comment from what was her Boss was a bad idea, so instead she nodded once to show she hadn't intended for things to happen as they did.

"So, answer me a few questions if you would, dear girl." Milos' smile got a bit more shark-like, informing her she wasn't anything dear to him despite what he said. "How old does one have to be in order to learn?"

"…we have not found an upper age limit, although it looks as if the younger one is the more flexible they are with it. There are rumors and unconfirmed reports of users becoming 'active' anywhere
between the ages of four to thirty-eight that I know of so far."

"The drawbacks to using this Flame ability?"

"It's a bit like opening Pandora's Box, dependent on how you go about it and what type you end up being." She answered honestly, wondering what it was old man Zolotov was thinking about.

Surely, he wasn't going to ask her to teach someone… right?

"We are still identifying all of the issues inherent."

The silvering old Russian vor nodded once, gesturing to her to expand on that.

"I do not know enough of Sky Flame users to report on them." Started the thief, slightly encouraged when the older man only nodded again to show he understood that. "Suns, depending on Polarization, end up being highly active to the point of restlessness. Rains, again depending on how they go, end up either unable or unwilling to recognize when they are being insulted or become insulted at the slightest insult. Lightnings are either easily distracted or focused to the point of tunnel-vision. Storms become obsessed with something or how something is done. Clouds are either highly aggressive territorial creatures or passive-aggressive wanderers. A Mist… so far seems to be willing to mess with the perceptions of others or how others perceive them."

Milos rapped the fingers of his right hand on his desk, not taking his attention off the thief standing stock still in the middle of his office.

Sonya, weirdly, was reminded of Don Vongola trying this same tactic with her once before. The bookcase was behind her now, there were Russians and not Italians in the room, and it hadn't been nearly as nerve-wracking then.

"What do you think of my son, Bazanova?"

…not good things, actually. Unsure how the hell to politely phrase the fact she found Gedeon slightly wanting as their next Pahkan, the Storm-Cloud kept her mouth shut as per her older sister's advice.

Do not insult our Boss, Tatiana had informed her shortly.

"Well?"

"Gedeon and I have yet to really get to know one another." Sonya side-stepped rather desperately. "I cannot form an opinion of him with so little to go on."

Her gambit was easily seen through, if the looks she was getting from all three of them was any measure.

"And yet you felt strongly enough to throw a hammer at him." Milos commented neutrally.

"Not him, Pahkan. His guest, who was trying to sneak a peek at the paperwork that would move Flame testing out of vor Aleksandr's hall and into another building. Since our younger members would be making use of that…?"

Old man Zolotov gifted his son with a sideways look. "Why is this the first I am hearing about this part of that incident?"

"I… did not know who else to inform but you of the situation we… had." It wasn't exactly a smooth
recovery, and frankly Sonya hadn't thought to tell anyone why it was she threw a hammer at someone.

Probably something to keep in mind the next time she broke a wall or two.

Damn it all, this was why she'd rather be a freelance thief than a kept one. A silver tongue Sonya did not have. Thinking about more than three or so people in terms of what her actions affected was also rather new for her.

"Well now, let's give the two of you a reason to get to know each other. And give Gedeon a crash course in this Flame situation so he can figure it out for me. What Flame do you think he has, Bazanova?"

"...Sun, or Lightning." He might have a minor talent in Rain, he was good at ghosting around without being noted.

Not Storm, he wasn't nearly as irritable or obstinate to show those traits. He could even possibly be an Inverted Cloud, but Sonya rather doubted it.

Her latest theory was to have more than one type of Flame, one had to defy death with them more than once was still pending confirmation or a rebuttal. Cherep possibly was still defying that first death, and most Flame users tended to stick with their first and develop that to defy death with from then on.

If one didn't know, and kept on escaping lethal situations, then what happened to their Flame type?

Might be why she could barely use that minor talent in Sun Flames, it hadn't been her death she had been defying her third time around.

Old man Zolotov made a few mental connections between type of Flame and personality type, gave his sour-faced son a scrutinizing look, then turned back to the Storm-Cloud. "Teach him."

…fuck. "Of course. For my Mafia Land contracts, may I set him with another?"

"You are committed to that, aren't you?" Milos mused aloud, a calculating look to him. "When is that contract up?"

Sonya didn't narrow her eyes, clench her teeth, or grate out the answer even if she really wanted to. "I recently renegotiated my contract, it will not expire for four more years."

The first one Lisa helped her get had been a one-year type deal the thief could've let go after it expired, at twelve she got it redone for three years. At fifteen and right before she left with Cherep for the circus, she had it renewed. Her latest renegotiation was actually just an upping of the so-called 'life insurance' policy in return for adding another year to how long they had her services contracted for.

If she died due to Mafia Land's mistakes or mishandling not only would her last contract's gross payout be matched by the island to place a hit on her killer, but her assets would be sold and split between Bjørn, Cherep, and Lisa's baby Valera.

"You are going to be a busy little girl, aren't you?" Old man Zolotov commented neutrally, which just made her suspicious that he had other plans for her.

If she survived the next three years, the 'World's Greatest Thief' title might not be so ridiculously high up there as a goal.
(Sunday the 9th of February, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Renato irritably eyed his watch, then sighed. "I don't think she's coming, brat."

"But she promised." Shamal insisted sadly, moping a little at the lack of Russian thief they currently had going on.

What, exactly, would it take for Sonya to break her word to the tetchy Mist brat?

She adored him and did go out of her way to get him what he wanted if it was reasonable enough. The hitman rubbed the back of his neck as he wracked his brain, for as far as he knew the woman had intended to be present for the kid's birthday even if she had to murder everyone in her way.

"She could be in trouble," he offered uncertainly, "or in the middle of something and unable to break away. We don't live hazard free lives."

Sonya did belong to a Soviet Union syndicate. Renato had no idea how those were structured or organized, or how high or low on the totem pole the thief really was. Did she have responsibilities she had to take care of, or a quota to meet, in order to spend so much of her time in Mafia Land?

All he could do was guess until she showed back up, but if the damn woman forgot again?

He'd hunt her down every bloody year and drag her to Italy over his shoulder if he had to, even if Sonya would likely rip out his spine for doing so.

At least she thought ahead this year, giving her present for Shamal's birthday to one of the footmen to ensure it was here and ready to go even if she wasn't. It smacked of planning for last minute traveling requirements, not a 'for the worst' kind of thing. The card read as if she really had planned on being here, at least.

"Then don't you have to go rescue her?" Shamal asked way too innocently, but the hitman got distracted by the mere thought.

Sonya?

In need of rescuing?

That… he couldn't even imagine it.

Bratty Mist apparently could, because now he actually looked faintly worried as he clutched the thief's baffling gift of a massive black teddy bear almost the kid's size to his chest. "What if she's hurt? Or sick? I hate being sick. Or abducted by a really mean, nasty dragon and stuck in a tower?"

"…I think you need to stop reading fairytales before bed." Renato drawled out, trying not to let the brat actually provoke him into seeking out the missing Russian.

Sonya would show up when she did, they just had to wait to get some answers.

"Maybe some knight mistook her for his princess and is trying to marry her?" Shamal continued, ignoring the implied threat of his newfound love of fantasy stories being taken away.

The hitman's left eye twitched, but he stubbornly stayed seated next to the brat's bed. He was not going to let the kid needle him into doing what he wanted, even if the situation was a little
Sonya had been irritated enough last year at being the one to forget Shamal's birthday, she would've made specific note of it in order to not do that again.

…the fact the day passed without so much as a phone call from her?

"What if a big wolf is trying to eat her this very second?" Tetchy Mist brat wondered aloud, big brown doe eyes widening in horror at the mere thought.

She might be a slim woman, but she had more than enough strength in her little finger to snap any wolf's neck. If not, she had an entire array of jewelry weapons to use against anything happening she didn't like.

Renato was unmoved.

Then again, the thief was a lot more touch-friendly with the Russians she knew of than anyone else he had ever seen her interact with. Maybe not so much a wolf as one of her home country's vory were…?

He pushed down the brim of his fedora irritably, just so Shamal wouldn't see how well he was affecting him. Renato was not going to go looking for the woman just because she was late a few hours. A month or so, maybe.

"Please?" Bratty Mist begged shamelessly, then used the one guaranteed weapon in his arsenal. "For my birthday?"

"It is your birthday, brat."

"Exactly!" Shamal cheered, grinning brightly up at him.

Renato glowered at him, ignoring the trap the brat had tried catching him up in. "I'll ask around. That's all I'm doing."

The kid merely nodded as if the hitman had agreed to his terms fully. "Bring her back quickly, okay? And she has to stay, for a whole week again because she's late. More, even."

…he couldn't decide if the brat was being a bit presumptuous about what he was really going to be doing or if he was being specifically blind and deaf to the fact Renato only agreed to inquire around about the situation.

Either way, the hitman was mildly amused Shamal was trying some of his own tricks against him.
Chapter 32

(Thursday the 13th of February, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Warily, Gedeon took the clear if blue tinted jewel from Galina. "What is this?"

"White sapphire." Sonya informed him shortly, not happy and not caring who knew that fact.

They were in Dmitriy's still being repaired office, the thief behind the desk, Björn making tea, Galina now fussing with the already collected results from the rock testing, and the son of their Pakhan seated in the chair the Storm-Cloud would rather be in.

"…what am I supposed to do with it?" The older man questioned, letting the little gem fall through his fingers only to flick it up again.

"Björn."

"Da, Dama." Her Lackey abandoned the kettle to the Lightning in favor of approaching the two seated across the desk from one another. "I learned the same way. Hold it and think of your life, where it is going and what you want from it."

"Close your eyes, or you'll end up thinking you see something before you do." Galina instructed, lifting the boiling kettle off the little heating unit in order to pour the Storm-Cloud a cup of tea.

Sonya was entirely aware Björn was of the opinion that whenever she got irritated or upset she needed a cup of tea and had shared that with the Inverted Lightning. The fact it worked, even if it only reminded her of various and more amusing times sharing a drink with an Italian Mafioso, was secondary to the insult of needing something to 'calm her nerves'.

It was better than going for a cigarette break, and she had promised Tatiana to stop or at least cut back on her smoking. Thus, the only reason she put up with it even if a smoke would work faster to get her out of the locations she got irritable in and occupy her hands more quickly.

She wasn't sure what was grating more, the fact she was 'teaching' something as instinctive and innate as Dying Will Flames to someone that likely wasn't going to be a good user or the implied assumption that her clan was trying to hem her in.

It wasn't exactly surprising, in that not a lot of Zolotovs truly left the clan for other things for very long. Everyone eventually returned sometime, even if it was only a short break after a prison sentence or after a more ranged job ended.

Sonya had… not.

A two-year stint with Cherep in the Großes Volksfest after leaving home, then she had immediately gone to Mafia Land to set up a more permanent residency with Tatiana. The nurse wasn't even going to be away long, she was returning more and would likely continue with that up until she finally qualified to start in on becoming a doctor.

Frankly put, the Storm-Cloud was only a high grossing thief because she didn't care if the generated cash results of her jewel heists went to the general Obshchak funds, a pool of cash for the clan's interests and uses. She lived off her Mafia Land generated funds, dirty though that money might be.
Dirty money either needed 'laundering' or had to be spent with other criminals. If Sonya didn't want to invest or pay someone else to clean her money earned doing criminal activities, then she had to only spend that money with other criminals.

...she really should probably start investing in things, just in case. Most of her funds were illegally acquired, a supply of clean money could only help.

Her eye was caught by a tiny spark of something... which she was pretty damn sure had been yellow. Sonya looked to Galina, who nodded once to show she saw it too.

That was the weakest result she had ever seen, though. Did Bjørn start out that weak too?

"Alright, you're a Sun."

"A healer?"

She pinned the man with a flat look until he seemed to finally realize he insulted her elder sister with that dismissal. "A Sun Flame user's ability is called Activation. Tatiana Activates the cellular regeneration and division of a patient, which results in fast-pace 'healing'. Otherwise Tats can also Activate cell growth to the point of causing tumors, Activate the nervous system to cause extreme pain in an instant, and Activate the immune system to the point your own blood will target and destroy your body from the inside out. So on and so forth."

Gedeon had paled at 'tumors', winced at the suggestion of instant pain, and swallowed heavily at the thought of one's blood turning on themselves.

"Tatiana obviously doesn't advertise that fact," Galina chimed in cheerfully, setting a cup of Spiced Black Russian tea in front of the Storm-Cloud, "as no one would go to a healer who can also kill in the same manner just as easily."

"Understandable." The older Russian allowed slowly, although it was still likely his father was going to be told the same information the moment he had a free second. "So... a Sun is... restless?"

"If you do not have a physical exercise regime already, get one." Sonya ordered him flatly, narrowing her eyes back at him when he threw her a glare. "I am already having problems, dealing with a restless Sun on top of that? I was ordered to teach you, so I will even if you require the information beaten into you."

The fact she'd prefer a more violent method of teaching was probably blatantly obvious to everyone in that office.

"There is a second side to Sun users," the thief offered slowly when he didn't bluster or protest after a long moment, "I know an Italian Mafioso who is also a Sun. Instead of being bubbly and a healer like my sister, he is sardonic and very much a killer. His Flames are also more weaponized than hers, and merely heals when he feels like it. I think you are more his type than Tatiana's."

He obviously still wasn't sold on being a Sun at all, but Gedeon had settled down somewhat from offended irritability to grudging silence.

"With the method we are using for you, you will be able to tailor the first results as you like." Pulling the master copy of her research journal Dmitriy had in his office, Sonya cracked open the worn hand-written book to show the Sun research. "It will take you time to reach a usable level, so until you can crack that jewel merely start thinking of how you want your Flames to manifest. One's initial ability is always the strongest and the most easily used."
"I've read it." He informed her, actually not backing down when she pinned him with another glare. "I wanted to know what is was we were pressured into forking over under the threat of a turf war."

"How, exactly, did that happen anyways?" The thief inquired silkily.

Gedeon apparently didn't like being questioned, if the expression on his face was any indication. "If you'd been around more, Bazanova, you'd know we're not exactly a syndicate with a lot of men available to waste on large-scale scuffles. When it became apparent some of the other gangs were either going to take the information by force, so they didn't have to go through us to get their people trained, we had to either commit or find a way around. It wasn't that important to lose so much blood over. It was my suggestion, yes. It came from outside the clan, yes. I still don't regret it."

"Keep telling yourself that." Sonya informed him dryly. "But also consider this. It started with me, I taught Tatiana and Dmitriy. In the next five years Tats taught Galina, I helped Usov and taught Bjørn, Dmitriy taught seven more. Now, nearly a decade later? There's thirty of us. If trends continue, there will be nearly a hundred in Moscow in a few more years. Not all will be Zolotovs, and they won't even have to come through us to get good at it. Which means we lost our ability to accurately judge what kind of Flame users other syndicates have now, and our first pick of new blood."

"The information could have been gotten another way." He tried to dismiss it by next, which just irritated her more.

"Of course, but that book you had us publish is about a three-year jumping off point." The thief told him dryly, flicking a few more pages in her journal to get to the Inverted Sun section. "The rest of them are no longer so far behind us we're still the better option no matter what. And now we actually have to go scout them out in order to know what kind of trouble we can or cannot afford, which is riskier than letting them come to us."

No way in hell he was Classic with an attitude like that. He was at least showing more of the personality type a Sun should have, stubbornly blind asshole that he was.

"Even if there will be, not all of these supposed hundred Flame users will be criminals." Gedeon all but bit out, looking and sounding rather disgruntled. "You're making assumptions on what? Possibility? I do not believe it will become so damn important having every one of these fires."

Sonya paused, giving the man a highly skeptical look. "...there is an Italian famiglia, several actually, in Italy who all structured themselves based off what kind of Flame type they have and how strong they are. The biggest is the strongest mafia syndicate in Europe. I've been chased after because I am a Flame user and the Triads wanted my Flames, to the point I had to damage a bit of Shanghai in order to get away. That? All happened when I was working for Mafia Land."

"Tatiana is continually approached there by other syndicates that wish to poach her." Galina chimed in cheerfully. "Just on the off-chance she might not be perfectly happy with where she is."

"I picked Bjørn up off the streets of Finland." The thief continued evenly, gesturing to her Lightning-Storm Lackey who didn't look very happy to be pointed out. "And then I taught him this esoteric Flame thing on a whim to test that rock you're about to break."

Jerking, Gedeon almost dropped the white sapphire that was throwing out fitful spurts of yellow Flame.

Sonya eyed the still not broken rock, then looked at the Inverted Lightning standing to the side of the desk. "Apparently, pissing him off will help."
"Yes, well… this is going to be interesting."

…how did Tatiana finally spark her Flames?

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 13th of February, 1969 continued. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Baby Valera had a game where he piled his toys on Sonya's lap, getting frustrated when the thief so much as twitched something off herself.

She didn't exactly appreciate this game, because it required her to do nothing but pay attention to the toddler. If she didn't, she'd forget about whatever it was she was supposed to be holding according to Valera. Then he got frustrated and grumpy with her.

Sonya apparently could not win at all.

Accepting the little stuffed rabbit, she was vaguely sure once had been Tatiana's which was a bit chewed up and grungy at the moment, she reluctantly allowed it to sit in her lap as Valera wanted.

"Sonya, sweetie?" Lisa asked from over her shoulder, leaning over the couch to fully see her youngest foster daughter. "Are... you alright?"

"Fine." The Storm-Cloud answered a bit listlessly, readjusting the building blocks teetering on her left ankle so they wouldn't fall and require the toddler to restack each and every one of them. "Did you need something?"

"Ah... no, just checking up on you two." Giving the much younger Russian a look to inform her she knew perfectly well Sonya was anything but 'fine', her foster mother rounded the couch to stand fully in front of her. "So, try that one again."

"...I don't like people, Lisa. The last few days...? Way too many of them I'm supposed to be polite to, nice, or not offend. It'll pass, soon." Sonya got neatly distracted by Valera forcefully shoving the rattle she had been supposed to be holding back into her left hand, mustering a half-assed apologetic expression for the boy.

The toddler gave and indignant huff, something she was pretty damn sure he learned from stumbling after Cherep the past few weeks. However, he did accept her meager apology and crawled-staggered back to his toy chest to find something else to pile on her.

Snickering at the put-upon expression on her face, Lisa smoothed her hands down her thighs and took a seat on the living room couch to watch the continued decoration of the Storm-Cloud. "I'm holding you to that 'it will pass' comment. If it doesn't? We're revisiting this little talk."

"Yes Lisa."

The older Russian clicked her tongue, giving her son an encouraging smile when Valera peered up at her curiously with his father's dark brown eyes. Valera apparently decided he had kept the thief's attention long enough for the moment, scrambling over and using Lisa's left leg to pull himself up high enough to wiggle up on the couch with her.

Extracting herself carefully, because if alerted to her moving around he would pitch a fit and demand to reset everything on her again, Sonya ghosted around in order to be out of Valera's sight and still be able to talk to their mother. "Are you sure you don't need anything? Now that you're weighed down
"Well... I did have a question about your Flame thing." Lisa admitted frankly, carding her fingers through tawny brown toddler hair. "You said Arseniy is a Cloud, right? You were so worried about that a few years ago. Why?"

"Clouds... un-related Clouds, do not tend to co-exist well." The Storm-Cloud admitted slowly, softly because Valera looked ready for a nap. "According to unsubstantiated reports, anyways. Cherep and I aren't part of that, because we're not the same type of Cloud. Classical, which Arseniy and I are, are highly territorial creatures that do not like sharing anything they deem important. I do not know how he managed to raise me with so few problems, or if that has more to do with the fact he's not actively a user."

Giving her a level stare, her foster mother rubbed the toddler's back to encourage his sleepiness. "Will that be a concern with Valera?"

At the sound of his name, the kid rather unsteadily pulled himself closer to mom and started gumming the front hem of her shirt.

"...I do not believe so. If he had no problems with me, then there's no reason to assume he would have some with his own son."

"And this territorial thing?" Lisa questioned a bit more sharply, eyeing her with a measure of concern. "Have you found what it is you are territorial about, or is that still 'unconfirmed'?"

"I think Cherep may have been right... again." Sonya suggested after a pause.

It had been a realization of why the hell she was bothering with anything in the Zolotov clan, when she didn't really care too much of her standing within it or for staying a couple years at all.

Had it not been for her foster family... the thief likely would've abandoned the Soviet Union rather happily when the stuntman left.

There had to be a point of which what she paid back equaled the amount of money it took to train her up. If her first few jewelry stores hadn't done it, the string of heists she did more recently had to have surpassed the cost of training and housing her for about a decade.

Except Arseniy and Lisa were also Zolotovs, as was Tatiana. Valera was likely to end up one in the fullness of time. The clan had easy access to the Großes Volksfest and their wintering base, which also meant they had easy access to Cherep.

Sonya did not appreciate the realization she was a threat to her own siblings, when puzzling over exactly how old man Zolotov might try to nail her in place. Maybe not the nurse, but the stuntman?

The civilian sibling, who had such a lethal job?

Everyone knew she was protective of Cherep and Tatiana. She had made a very specific point of it through their childhoods and it was easy enough to provoke a hostile reaction from her if you slighted either. Likely it would spread to cover Valera as well.

Trying to think up a way to preemptively deal with it was causing her to either run in mental circles or draw a completely frustrating blank.

Sonya couldn't just leave, abandon anything to do with her home country. Not only would the Zolotovs likely send someone to kill her for it, but Arseniy and Lisa lived here. She'd never be able...
to visit or have anything to do with her own damn family if she did. Even Tatiana and the vory who tended to deal more with international things in Mafia Land would have standing orders to kill her if she showed up there.

She also couldn't refuse orders from Milos Zolotov without a damn good reason. He was Boss, their Pakhan, and the man she really worked for. Gedeon was easier to deal with for the time being. She was 'teaching' him, actually more like guide but still.

No, the Storm-Cloud was going to stick it out. She had figured it was the best option out of what she had and figuring out the reasoning for it hadn't changed anything. It was going to be as hard as pulling teeth, especially if old man Zolotov really was trying to chain her down somehow.

She would not be cornered or nailed down, and somehow through it all she'd have to find some way to repeatedly get a couple months free here and there for her sanity if not just for her Mafia Land work.

Slight problem, Sonya wasn't exactly a smooth talker.

She only had some weight behind her, mostly on the strength she bullshitted with Cloud Flames and the fact she was the one to open up the lucrative Flame thing for her clan. The former more than the latter, if only because right now was a little rocky for them.

The Zolotov Flame users were currently stuck between being useful and still too green yet. The Four Rains, Sonya herself, Tatiana, and Dmitriy did edge them more to 'useful', but the bulk of the users were all only just around a decade and a half in age. Gedeon would be the oldest once he got good at it, and she had a suspicion old man Zolotov wanted his son to take over for them if anything else ever happened to Dmitriy again.

Poor Fadei, he'd forever be third or fourth best in the ranks.

Lisa's slightly cool fingers drew the thief out of her thoughts, enough to realize the older Russian had taken hold of her face and was now keenly inspecting her eyes. "They turned purple. Does that happen often? You really do look like Cherep's little sister when it happens."

"Not often, just when things get a bit..." Sonya trailed off, wondering how to phrase it in a different way than 'when I really want to murder people'. She was trying to not be a violent Cloud. "When something infringes on our natures, or our resolve matches our will."

"And you're... Storm-Cloud. What does your little book say? Obsessive perfectionist and territorially aggressive?"

"More Cloud than Storm, so I am aggressively territorial more than I am an obsessive perfectionist." She answered with a slight measure of amusement. "A stiff-necked, incredibly prideful, OCD kind of thief."

"...yeah, I can easily see that." Lisa returned with more humor, a smirk on her lips. "You are so picky sometimes."

"Picky?"

"You either do something like it's imperative to get done, or scorn putting in the effort if it will net you nothing. You don't do anything in-between those two extremes unless you're curious or someone else asks you to." The older Russian explained, shifting the nodding Valera so he was laying on the couch instead of half on her lap. "So, you don't do anything ever half-assed. Which I like, because it also means you won't half-ass teaching Valera this Flame thing when it's his turn."
"When...?" Sonya blinked, then gave her napping baby brother a considering look.

Lisa had a point, because she knew full well there were families of Flame users. Vongola, for the most extreme example, bred the rare Sky Flames into their line. Little Valera would also grow up with visits from three active users and would either pop his own Flames in time or want to be like his big siblings and learn to do it himself if he ever caught them doing it.

Genetically speaking, Valera was just as much a possible Cloud as Arseniy was. Which... might be another reason why Sonya didn't like the toddler's game with her.

Kind of a similar issue to what Cherep had with her at first.

...she'd get over it, eventually.

"Of course, Lisa." Sonya informed their mother, completely honestly. "I'll do my best."

She patted her on her cheeks once with both hands, then slid out of her son's sleepy grip to return to what she had been doing before walking in the room. "I'll hold you to it."

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(Friday the 14th of February, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"...the usual rules apply." His patron informed him blandly, shuffling a few of the 'result' journals over to another stack as she and Galina rewrote the information into a master list. "Five to ten this time, depending on how well you do we'll adjust that for the next round either this summer or fall."

Bjørn nodded sharply, checking his own notes to be sure what he had down matched what she wanted. Even the unspoken ones he had been instructed of last year.

Gedeon made a loud scoffing sound, glancing over from the far couch he had moved into Dmitriy's office. "Why bother with so many? You only need a few, right?"

Sonya took a deep breath, staring off into the middle distance for a moment before letting the air go and returning her attention to the newfound Sun. "Because I have other goals, ones I made with my sister, that I intend to see fulfilled on time. How many contracts I take is part of that. I also have other obligations, of which are long-standing, and I do not intend to drop them if I do not need to."

It wasn't anything physical, or anything verbal that his lady did, but Bjørn was keenly aware the thief's temper was fraying at an alarming pace.

He had made it a point to get to know his patron's tics and habits, especially in light of what she could do with her Cloud Flames. It was his intent to never irk her to that level, the point of which she was fully willing to use violence to make her point or remove someone from her path.

Normally it was easy enough. Sonya had a firm grip on her temper and aggression, so while you could tell that she wanted to smack you she wouldn't.

Lately?

Bjørn's nerves were practically shot from the events of the last month and a half. He had made enough tea to drown a fully grown human several times over, and although his lady humored his habit of making her tea it wasn't helping as much as he would've liked.
"For the time being, you need to focus on that rock." Sonya continued in a painfully forced patient tone, flicking one hand to the Inverted Lightning steadily working across from her on the desk between them. "Galina is the one that will handle Suns and can take over for me until I get back."

Gedeon didn't seem to appreciate the tone, but also was at least fully aware he was a bit out of bounds with his questions of his 'teacher'.

Bjørn might actually be wrong in that, but he wasn't raised in this Mafiya syndicate nor did he appreciate they were irritating his lady so much recently.

What had been so wrong with what they'd done for the last year?

His slim blonde patron had paid their dues in advance not only last and this but also the next two years, one would think that kind of dedication would've earned her some leeway when it came to other things.

Possibly not here, criminals could be backwards sometimes. Did they want more from her, or something?

By the time another month or two of this situation was over, he was pretty sure she'd agree to most anything just to get away from it again.

"Bjørn, go." Sonya interrupted his thoughts with a sideways look. "Once done, give me a call for the details and meet me in the first target location with the rest."

"Da, Dama." The best he could do to help her, and himself in a more cynical way, out of this was to handle her orders with the best of his ability. Hopefully not screwing up again while doing so.

Galina flicked her green eyes from her work, glancing first at him then at their currently shared 'boss' and finally to her unwilling 'student'.

The Lightning-Storm Lackey was fully aware of her plans. The Inverted Lightning had taken him aside and filled him in on a few of her fluid ideas for her future as well as getting across the fact she didn't want his job but a different one. That also meant he was fully aware another vor was on his way, one that might possibly be able to better distract Gedeon from bothering his patron so much.

At this point, any little bit of help was appreciated. Even if he had to get used to the idea Galina was intending to wiggle her way into Sonya's frosty guard and might possibly bring another or two with her.

(Sunday the 16th of February, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya actually hadn't known Ziven had been in prison, so when he showed up bright and early one morning sporting prison tats she really was surprised to see him chatting avidly with Galina.

Well… flirting?

Maybe?

Hesitating just outside Dmitriy's office, the thief really did wonder what they were doing. Heads together, whispering, and about shoulder to shoulder. Either plotting or trying to keep a conversation between them regardless of who might walk in.
…or possibly flirting. Sonya didn't know and was reluctant to interrupt in case it was.

"Bazanova."

Instantly slightly irritated, she turned away from the office door to look at Fadei walking down the hall towards her.

He hadn't exactly avoided her recently, but his other three Rains sure did. It made the Storm-Cloud not impressed with the Four Rains at all, mostly due to them being afraid of her and because the eldest still had yet to actually pitch in with any of the work needing to be done.

It had been almost a month since she all but smashed his face in.

She didn't like this group at all. "What."

"…our Pakhan wants to see you." Fadei informed her sourly, apparently not happy with either being the messenger or being required to talk to her.

Perfect. Now what?

Instead of asking that, because she wasn't stupid thank you very much, Sonya nodded once sharply and passed the man.

She would've gotten more than three feet beyond him, had Zarya not flinched away from her.

A flat stare aimed in her direction had her edging behind Irinei, which just irritated the Storm-Cloud even more.

"The hell is your problem?"

"My-?" The female Rain spluttered, looking half bewildered and half offended. "You beat up Fadei, for no reason."

"…how stupid can you be?" Sonya asked, actually interested in the answer.

"What?"

"I 'beat up' Fadei because he put our fellow Flame users, most of whom are younger than us, at risk with his bullshit. Did he not explain that, or did he lie?"

"We only have your word for that." The tall and beanpole like Irinei informed her blandly.

The Storm-Cloud stared at him flatly for a second, then turn to see if Galina had been attracted by the noise or not. Seeing the Inverted Lightning had come to see what the situation was, Sonya addressed her. "Galina, make note that Rains seem to have a small problem with being easily led. We'll have to think up some way to stop that."

"Of course." She replied cheerfully, whipping a pen and a pad of paper out of somewhere to jot it down. "Anything else you want looked into yet?"

"…not as of yet. Let me go see what our Pakhan wanted first."

Galina stuck her pen behind her ear, smirking wickedly. "I'll see you in a bit, then?"

"Excuse me, but what the fuck is your damage?" Kazimir all but barked, stepping up to be shoulder-to-shoulder with his fellow if taller Rain and to hide Zarya better behind them.
"...you are not only rather pathetically helpless against another Flame user, you also show absolutely no initiative to fix that since I took all three of your combat-able members out nearly at the same time." Sonya informed him flatly, glaring. "You seem to accept the word of someone you trust as is, not even bothering to check it against easily accessed sources. That's pathetic, and if trends continue all four of you will likely be dead in as little as three years from other Flame users. Therefore, not worth my time and effort to fix you. We'll do it right with the younger Rains instead."

"I knew all that, and I only just got in." Ziven snickered as he leaned his frame up against the door jamb of Dmitriy's office. "Well... you've not changed at all, Sonya. Nice to see you again."

"Are their fingers broken?"

"Well... no, but they also haven't tried harassing your siblings either." The probably just freshly titled vor admitted easily enough with a shrug. "Lina, you want to fill these morons in with what details their missing? I'll escort little Sonya to our Pahkan's office, I wanted to talk to her anyways."

Fadei made an abortive move forward.

For what Sonya wasn't interested in knowing, she aborted his movement forcibly by pinning the asshole against the wall with one of her golden battle axes. Collaring his throat through the space between the two arched blades and using her strength to shove the weapon into an inch of stonework to do said pinning.

He would not have the air to talk, much less bitch or try to spin whatever was said in a better light for him.

She was mildly interested to see what internal conflict would do to this little group.

Galina's smirk grew as she admired the thief's handiwork, Ziven even gave a delighted if rusty laugh out of surprise at what she could do now.

Sonya dismissed the rest of the Rains, turning on her heel to continue her way.

One fresh from prison hand-to-hand combat specialist easily caught up to her. "So... Lina had a suggestion."

"Oh?"

"Instead of her, I should maybe attach myself to Gedeon. Likely to be less tricky, and she could instead redirect some of his attention on you to herself." Ziven admitted lowly, shoving his tattooed hands into his ill-fitting slack's pockets as they walked down the hall. "If you wouldn't mind sharing the favor she asked for with me too."

Confused, Sonya gave him a sideways glance. "You want...? Ziven, you're a vor now. Right? Shouldn't you have an easier time finding different things to do?"

"Your dad came out to fetch me, and he did title me a vor once I was free." With another shrug, her fellow blond gave her a small smirk. "Which is nice and all... but it's another two years until Nikolai is free. More, if he keeps on making trouble as he's been. If I want to be free at the same time he is to get the gang back together or even see what he wants us to do after that, I need something... less likely to get me arrested again."

The Storm-Cloud was well aware there had to be something more. No shiny new vor would want to spend two or so years playing enforcer for her, even if or especially because she didn't need anyone to handle her dirty work.
However, Ziven was a childhood friend and was one of her elder sister's subordinates once upon a
time. She might not know what he was really after, but she would allow him the benefit of doubt up
until she knew what that was.

She'd be looking specifically for what it was he was after, but until then…?

"Fine. If you want."

"Sonya, you won't regret this."

"Touch me, and you will." The thief informed him flatly, sidestepping his attempt to hug her.

Ziven's sheepish grin was wiped off when they reached their Pakhan's office doors, and her fellow
blond graciously opened them for her.

Sonya and her new temporary enforcer, as well as old man Zolotov and his son, weren't the only
ones now in the third-floor room that doubled as both their Pakhan's office and the clan's treasury.
There was a few more random vory this time around as well as Pyotr, their Boss' Sovintnik.

Standing in the middle of the office was also Valera, the slick-not-baby one, and an older man the
Storm-Cloud assumed was either his next higher leader or possibly his Pakhan.

She rather doubted the last one, so just someone more senior than he was.

"Forgive us for being tardy." Ziven started off, almost politely as if the assembled group hadn't taken
him off guard as well. "Your messengers attempted to start something after giving the message,
Pakhan."

Old man Zolotov didn't look amused, but he also wasn't grumpy or glaring. Sonya supposed that was
enough to count it as being forgiven.

Gedeon looked a bit irritated, but that was a default expression the new Sun had around her so she
couldn't tell if it was irritation at just her presence or if he had something to do with who exactly took
a message to her.

"Bazanova." Pyotr called her attention to himself, gesturing to the two non-Zolotovs in the office.
"This vor is from the Novgorod Brotherhood and has asked for you to clarify something for him."

Absolutely no mention of what was traded or discussed about actually letting the man have a word
with her was made, nor why the hell she should care. However, since Sonya actually did most of her
clan-related business with the Sovintnik she knew the next few steps in this exchange.

"And?" The thief replied, obediently to expectations.

Pyotr gave her a sharp looking grin. "And they have agreed to not only leave you alone if you do so,
but a few other… forfeits for the information."

Great. She was a bargaining chip. Getting rid of slick-not-baby-Valera was good enough for her
though, so she sighed but did give the vor her attention. "…well?"

The man had some extensive artwork covering both hands, and from under his collar she could see
he had a few more on his chest and neck. More than her foster father, so either he was completely
shameless in what he advertised on his tattoos or tended to get jail time frequently.

"We found a Cloud. He's dead."
…Novgorod Brotherhood. Either Velikiy or Nizhny Novgorod. They might operate in one city at a
time or even have brother factions in both. If she got information on where exactly this syndicate
hails from in the last couple months, or any sharp changes in so basing, she'd finally have a range for
a Cloud's 'territory' reach and how far to look for the next one.

Unless a closer Cloud user of Dying Will Flames was found.

While Sonya was sorry to hear about the demise of her fellow Cloud, she also didn't know what she
was supposed to do with that information. "...and?"

The vor gave her a very yellow baring to teeth. "Why is he dead, bitch?"

"Because you killed him, more than likely." Replied the thief flatly.

Ziven snorted with little humor, reminding her that he was there. "Mind your fucking manners, if you
could."

The Novgorod vor twitched slightly, then gave the younger man a leer of a smirk. "Oh? And why
should I? This little slut's refusing to answer my damn question."

"I've answered the only question you've posed to me so far." Sonya interjected blandly, rolling her
left wrist and pulling one of her mauls out of a flair of Cloud Flames. "If you are too stupid to
actually pose an intelligent question, that's not my fault."

The maul was one Renato bought for her, one of the less ornate ones. While she had been amused to
get a pure silver great maul that looked like some fantasy warhammer a dwarf might have held, the
one in her hand now was the plain version that wouldn't have been out of place driving spikes into
railroad tracks.

The fact she had no physical mass to hide the damn thing, as well as pulling it out of lavender tinted
fire, re-centered attention back on her.

"I do not have to move from this spot to throw this hard enough to remove your fucking head."

Smiling prettily at the vor eyeing her now, she gave a glance at the even paler Valera. "Your little
friend over there knows that full well. You probably should've asked him about that before this."

The Petersburg vor looked highly unwilling to be brought into the conversation, but he did nod once
sharply at the Novgorod one when the older man glanced at him.

The vor tisked, turning back to eye her lithe form. "A toss from a stick of a girl like you? Wouldn't
hurt a fly."

Sonya glanced over to her Pakhan, because this was his office and his guest. Old man Zolotov made
a dismissive shrug.

Handing off the maul to Ziven, the thief pulled out one of her battle hammers instead. "Next time,
Valera, bring someone not stupid."

Not giving anyone the time to so much as twitch, she threw her hammer… straight at the Petersburg
vor.

It had only been an instinctive flinch that kept him from losing an ear or half his head, and her
hammer yet again impacted the far wall. This time blowing the bullet-proof glass, all six panes of it
thick, out of the window with an ear-splitting crash.
A regular bullet would've only cratered a pane in it, and apparently that fact wasn't missed by anyone watching.

The ringing silence was punctuated only by the few shards still falling to the ground below, and Sonya re-Propagating a new battle hammer to her right hand. "Now... try that again. Although, I'm aiming for your head next time."

Valera yanked himself upright again, the only one that moved for a very long moment.

"Feisty little thing, aren't you?" The vor all but barked out with a laugh, grinning wickedly.

"I have axes, too."

"Alright, wildcat." The man huffed, still grinning. "Sheath those claws. This kid, fourteen, decided that trying to take on three vor was a wise idea."

"He suicided." Sonya summarized shortly. "Whatever you were trying with him, he decided he'd rather be dead then bend. It appears to be a common problem with feral Clouds, from the scarcity of how many actually reach adulthood and are revealed as found. You either weren't strong enough, or not what he respected."

A huff was her first answer, so they probably had known that was the issue before ever arranging this little meeting. "How long until we can catch another?"

…she didn't really like the idea of answering that one, but from her Pakhan's expectant expression she had better keep on being helpful. "With the more dominant Cloud in your region now dead, either the less strong Clouds will start acting out and might get into it with each other to find the next dominant one or a new one will eventually be born into that vacuum. Either is possible."

Of course, there was also the possibility a new Cloud could move in or one had just moved like she had way back when. Sonya didn't feel like offering that up though.

She really didn't like this vor, or his plans to 'catch' another.

How many Clouds died young before their time because some group in the mafia wanted one of those 'rare' types to terrify others with?

Something about what she said seemed to give the Novgorod vor an idea, because he gave old man Zolotov a sharp nod and turned on his heel to stride out of the office. Valera scrambled after him, throwing one last look to the broken window and at her before Ziven crossed the office to shut the door behind them.

Milos gave her a considering look, then glanced around at the vor of his own who were considering the broken window and discussing how to best fix it. "Gedeon, Bazanova. Come."

"Go make sure Galina isn't eviscerating the Four Rains for me, Ziven." Sonya asked before following her Pakhan and his son to the far door she hadn't ever gone through.

"Will do. Ah... do you want this...?" He blinked when the weight of the maul disappeared from his hands. "...never mind then. I'll just go catch up more with Lina."

One of the rooms connected with old man Zolotov's office was apparently a mid-sized bedroom.

Sonya highly doubted the elder Zolotov actually slept here, so probably more for his Sovinntik than him.
Poor Pyotr, no wonder he was always in the office when she came to pay off her and, more recently, for Björn's dues.

"What is that young puppy doing with you, Bazanova?" Her Pakhan asked, seating himself a tiny bit shakily on the couch set up against the far wall.

"Waiting two years for his ring leader to also get out of jail." Sonya answered old man Zolotov honestly, or as honestly as she could without straight out asking for the real reason from the new vor. "He's fully aware I have next to nothing for him to do, so I suppose he's going to be handling what I had intended Fadei to do if he ever pulled his head from his ass."

Gedeon twitched, but subsided whatever that reaction had been for under his father's grim stare.

"...my son tells me you have him as a healer." Milos told her, once he was satisfied the younger Zolotov vor wasn't about to interrupt.

Which... wasn't really anything but a statement. Sonya had to take a stab in the dark to figure out the issue. "He's a Sun, Inverted. While Suns are better known to be the best healers... it's called Dying Will Flames for a reason. Instead of healing, he can also summon a palm-full of fire to burn someone's face off."

Old man Zolotov blinked once, then smiled in his shark-way. "I like that much better."

"Pakhan, forgive me but... I cannot teach someone who is unwilling." Sonya started hesitantly, fully aware this was maybe over the line. "If he's not willing... and this ability depends on willpower...?"

Milos inspected his now stone-faced son, then looked back to her. "I'll handle that part. You have some business in Mafia Land, don't you? By the time you return, he'll be a most attentive student."

...and that was likely not to help her at all. Especially not if Gedeon blamed her for getting him in trouble with his own father. "Actually... I was about to ask if I could take him with me. Not this time, the next round."

Old man Zolotov's features went stone-still, even as Gedeon glanced at her out of confusion. "And why should I do that, Bazanova?"

"I think the real issue is one of viewpoint, Pakhan. We have different ones on the rise of Flame users and what they will impact in time. He merely sees the Soviet Union. I can show him two international examples of Flame users being more than just very talented members of any syndicate from Mafia Land, the Vongola Famiglia from Italy and the Luen Group Triad from China. I have contacts in each."

Renato and Fong, both of who she would owe something rather dire to for the aid. As this wasn't personal, her friendship with the Italian Mafioso wasn't going to cover it. The Chinese man was going to be insufferable about it, but if it got her free from the undertones that were starting to disturb her any faster?

She'd put up with it.

...she should check to ensure Fong was from the Luen Group. He hung around that Triad's Mafia Land territory a lot, but that didn't necessarily mean a whole lot.

"Hmm... possibly." Milos answered neutrally, stroking one hand across a neatly shaven jawline. "I'll think about it."
Sonya had to go ask if the men would be willing at all, or if she had to figure out a different bit of culture shock to give the new Inverted Sun, so the delay was fine with her. "...did you need anything else from me, Pakhan?"

Old man Zolotov gave her a carefully blank look. "...Clouds and suicide, Bazanova?"

"It happens, more often when we're younger from all reports."

"Are you past that point?"

Honestly speaking, no. The thief was fully aware if it got bad enough she might be driven into doing the same thing, even if only through the act of being a little destructive towards this old man or his son and getting herself killed that way. "...I do not have that information."

Again, her social skills were not up to the task of fooling either vor.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 16th of February, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Ziven watched the goings on rather interestedly. It was a hell of a lot more interesting than anything he had gotten to see in prison, so he supposed he might be currently easily amused right now.

He hadn't really thought much of Tatiana's younger sister when they left Moscow, not even the first time, and seeing her again was fascinating.

The Dying Will Flame trick had evolved from resizing a physical Bec de Corbin into creating her own copies of them, one of which he had held and seen used but were as unsubstantial as the weather formation their type was named after.

It had also spread from a trick Sonya had taught Tatiana and another of her few friends into something that required clan staff to keep on top of.

That was the slim blonde woman's excuse to duck both Ziven and Galina from accompanying her on her next series of heists. Sonya claimed she needed the 'Lightning' where she was, which seemed to be true enough, but also that Ziven would be required to help her while the thief was globetrotting.

In the place for a boy by the name of 'Bjørn' he was pretty sure his old gang member had called her Lackey a few times.

Which the new vor figured was well enough. He was still trying to catch up, aided by a research journal that not only his old gang leader had contributed to but some other Zolotovs he knew of.

Listening to Sonya give Galina marching orders for however many months she'd be gone was instructional too.

"-and what parts of Omertà that covers Flame use. We vowed to keep our world hidden, our methods to ourselves, and to keep our mouths shut if ever caught. If the Vindice also oversee Dying Will Flame use, there would have to be mention of it somewhere."

"...I'll start looking, but I can't make a promise on that one." Galina answered honestly enough, still making extensive notes anyways.

Ziven was pretty sure she was ecstatic to have something to chew on in-between other projects.
He was a little bemused on the amount of information the thief seemed to want, but supposed the girls were hardwired a little differently from him and needed all sorts of details that might not be remotely applicable ever.

"Bjørn will know where I'm going and how to reach me if anything serious happens." Sonya continued, hands on her hips and gnawing thoughtfully on her lower lip. "Gedeon shouldn't be up to testing efforts for another month or two at earliest. If Fadei and his lot get up to their inane shite again-"

"That's what Ziven's here for." Galina finished for the slim thief, clicking her pen rather sinisterly. He had seen what she could do with that pen, Ziven wasn't fooled by the innocent looking writing utensil.

"I have my own ways to puncture over inflated egos... but you do realize they're rather young yet, right?"

The blonde thief was only a bare few inches shorter than Galina was, and the brunette was a respectable five feet and eight inches. Being five and a half feet tall meant Sonya was still looking up at most everyone, and she was on the slender side of skinny. More than enough meat on her bones to tell someone she was healthy, but not slightly built enough to pass as the classical idea of a ballerina.

Slightly prominent nose, high cheekbones, big grey eyes, pointed chin, and full lips framed with shoulder-length blonde hair. Nearly classic Russian beauty.

Too bad she seemed to be completely asexual.

The leers, jeers, and catcalls that she got from the vory that walked the same halls were all flatly ignored. Others checking her out were similarly overlooked, and the one idiot that tried a pickup line on her that he saw had been stared at blankly until he slunk away.

There was no indication she was aware of what they had wanted, or how she appeared to others. It wasn't even in that classy 'ignoring anything too crude' kind of way, it was nearly complete incomprehension to anything like flirting that Sonya had. Well, from what he had seen so far at least.

Ziven dimly recalled her doing a similar thing way back when they had been kids, the gossip and rumors that circled about her had also been bluntly dismissed by the then tiny blonde thief. Apparently it was a bad habit she never unlearned, and he could understand why she would bother allowing anyone to attach themselves to her.

Unless something got shoved under her nose, it was ignored if not violently lethal. Someone keeping a more practiced ear out for the things she missed probably was worth their weight in gold or would be once they caught something she couldn't probably learn through another manner.

"What does being young have to do with anything?"

"They're still riding the high of being useful." The apparent 'Lightning' informed the 'Storm-Cloud', smirking a bit wryly at the uncomprehending expression aimed her way. "They only recently did their end of training traditional job, and cleanly swept a whole business complex in broad daylight."

"While... grand and a bit over the top," Ziven allowed, paging a bit through the well-thumbed handwritten journal that had most everything their clan knew about Flames and their types, "that's not nearly impressive as a branch of an international jewelry store. At twelve. Botched but with a clean getaway."
Sonya flexed her right hand at that reminder, the hand she broke getting them free and clear just moments before law enforcement could corner the gang.

"They're a little behind, but that was mostly due to the Flame business." Galina rotated her own wrist, gesturing to the office they were within. "So, they're both feeling their way into being truly Zolotov clan members and catching up with the rest of us."

"…didn't Sonya start all this Flame business herself and her career rather early?" Ziven asked, mostly just to see Galina glare in her huffy way at him again. "These guys are still not impressive."

It had been nearly three years since he had last seen her do that, excuse him for provoking reactions out of her that reminded him of their gang's old times.

"The point is that they are green and prone to making mistakes anyone with a bit more experience wouldn't." Spoke the brunette rather forcefully, glaring at him exactly as he remembered her doing. "A few more months of actual work without the training wheels, and they might be less idiotic seeming to us."

"…are you sure about that?" Sonya asked skeptically, seemingly highly dubious over that possibility. "I mean I can sort of understand your point, but they should have something redeemable about them already if they would ever get anything we'd want to see in Rains."

"Just give it a bit of time." The Lightning promised, grimacing at the younger thief's point. "If when you get back and they have yet to really wise up at all, then we might have to write them off as a loss."

She seemed to consider it seriously for a long moment, then she sighed through her nose. "Alright. See if you can't get me a visit to Dmitriy when I get back as well. I'm aware it will be overseen and all but knowing what the ever-loving hell he had wanted them to do can only help at this point."

"The clan's lawyers said sometime this summer would be when his final sentencing comes about." Galina informed her but made another note of it. "So possibly a few months after you do."

"Galina… I have anywhere from five to ten heists to do. It might take me until summer to get it all done."

"It better not. I don't mind pitching in to cover a bit of time, so you don't have Torpedo coming after you, but there's no way I can keep on top of everything myself."

Contract killers?

What the hell did Sonya get herself into that she was risking hitmen coming after her if she abstained too long?

"…get Gedeon's help."

"What? Sonya?"

"He's going to need the experience, I think." The thief affirmed slowly, obviously still thinking this idea through. "Get him familiar with the information we already went over, and the extent of how much data we already accumulated and where it fits. Ziven can learn it at the same time. They both can pitch in with condensing the raw testing data into a comprehensive list of results."

Damn, and here he had been hoping for a cushy job while he adjusted to being out of jail.
Well… he had been tasked with keeping an eye on what kind of trouble the son of the Pakhan might get up to. He found the whole premise a little ridiculous but supposed the guy might be having transition issues the girls kept running into or something along those lines.

Best to keep his opinions to himself until he had a better grasp on what was really going on, because he was pretty damn sure Sonya wasn't trying to hide or conceal anything.

The thief herself checked the office wall clock, making a face at the time. "Galina, I have to run to make my flight. Is there anything else you might need?"

"Not that I can think of, if anything does come up I'll call Björn to get some clarification." The slightly older Russian woman made a shooing gesture. "Get on out of here, we'll hold down the fort until you get back."

Sonya hesitated, but gave her a nod and one more to Ziven before finally walking out of the office.

Galina huffed, waited a few beats until she was sure the blonde woman was truly on her way out, and then gave him a sideways look. "Well?"

"This is some weird ass shit you all have been up to." Ziven informed her honestly.

Tatiana could heal just about anything now, using a bright yellow Flame. He'd seen her do it before, but it had been mostly bruises and the occasional broken bone not a nearly severed artery he watched her repair when he went to see her. Sonya developed her trick weapons into something that allowed her to be a walking arsenal of medieval weaponry and toss them around with an effect like a grenade went off.

He was almost hesitant to learn what Galina had done with that jagged green fire of hers the past few years.

"I meant about Sonya, and this office."

"Aren't they the same thing?" He questioned, a bit confused.

Sonya started it, hadn't she?

"She put… ah, do you remember Dmitriy? The mechanic friend of Sonya's way back when? He's an Inverted Rain, he normally sits behind that desk. He's in prison, so she was recalled to shore up things until either someone else can take over or he gets back." Galina tapped her wickedly bright green painted nails on the desk in question. "She's not exactly happy with this all but is trying to tackle it all admirably. It's just…"

"Her temper isn't letting her?" Ziven finished for her, darkly amused by the very thought.

No one with sense would have Sonya do anything diplomatic or social intensive… or at least no one that knew her. She was a blunt, sometimes rude, very straightforward type of girl that grew into a similarly tempered woman.

The likelihood she'd piss someone off was higher than the possibility her normal behavior would win her a lot of friends.

"You realize this is Sonya, right? The little girl that once broke your fingers because you tried beating up her brother? The one who grew up to be a woman that can toss ten to fifteen pounds of steel hard enough to break through six sheets of bulletproof glass? If that one guy hadn't ducked, I'm pretty sure he would've been without a head."
Sniffing in offense, Galina crossed her arms under her chest and gave him a deadpan stare. "Do you have a point, Ziven?"

"...nope, just checking to see if you understood all that."

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 16th of February, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Hey." Cherep blinked, then looked over his shoulder at his little sister. "Have a moment?"

"Sure?" It wasn't like he was doing much, so he tossed the tools in his hands into his toolbox and gave Sonya his attention. "Is something wrong?"

"Well… no. I wanted to know if you would like to meet Shamal for his birthday. Tats already met him, in passing but she has."

"…the brat you're letting call you mamma?" The stuntman questioned, a smirk crawling it's way up his face. "Sure, I'd love to meet my cute little nephew."

His fellow Cloud sighed, running a hand through her shoulder-length hair and setting the luggage in her other hand down by her heels. "It will be in mafia territory, Cherep. Italian mafia territory. The brat lives there for the time being."

"Why?" Cherep was pretty sure if she was bringing it up it had to be somewhat different than their childhood of living in Zolotov territory.

Not that mafia business would keep him from meeting whatever little Mist brat Sonya had gotten attached to. The kid had to be something for his notoriously picky sister to go out of her way for.

"Because that's where his godfather has him living. It's safer for Shamal there." The thief informed him hesitantly.

"Then I don't mind going in there to meet him."

Sonya nodded a bit absently, still looking a little torn.

"You're going to tell me to not use my Flames while there, aren't you?"

"It is not that I do not trust you, or Renato. Or Shamal. It is that I am not sure what Vongola's people will do if they realize you are an Inverted Cloud. Some of them are already jumpy around me, so to be safe…"

Safe, huh?

Cherep smirked a little more, actually laughing as something else occurred to him. "I take it you also want me, and not Skull, to meet this kid?"

"I am well aware there is little difference… but I prefer you." Sonya answered him tartly.

That was still freaking awesome to hear. "Can I bring my bike?"

"…must you?"

"I love my bike. And, you know, stuntman." He replied overly cheerfully. "The kid might even want
to go for a spin with me. It could be my present to this shiny new nephew you've got us."

Sonya stared at him flatly for a long moment. "Only if you get the brat a helmet. I am not kidding, Cherep. Helmet, or no. And you have to get that past Renato first."

"Alright, alright. When?"

"Last week of the month." She answered, a bit more easily than the rest of the conversation. "Meet me in Reggio Calabria, which is part of the southernmost tip of Italy's main landmass. I will come fetch you, if you call in when you get there to Bjørn and find something as a landmark for me to find you at."

"I can swing that. A whole week?"

"Possibly. I will get you a hotel room if I cannot get you a place with where Shamal's staying for the next few years." His little sister puzzled something over in her head. "I do not expect to have too much difficulty with that, at least."

"Awesome. I'll see you there, sis. In… a week and a half." Cherep grinned at her, still more than a little amused at the brat's ingenuity in how he got her to allow him to call her 'momma'.

"Thanks, Cherep." She looked entirely pleased with his agreement to meet her brat, even giving him a quick hug in thanks before snatching up her bags and running off for more of her likely criminal activities.

The stuntman was somewhat sure Sonya's increasing tolerance for being touched was due to this little Shamal brat. Which now made him his favorite nephew, even if he was still the only one he had.

…damn it. He forgot to ask her what she wanted to do about that Chinese man who was playing old Crina's new apprentice.

Well… he'd ask her later then.

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(Monday the 17th of February, 1969. Mafia Land.)

"Where is she?"

Sonya's little Lackey boy gave him a scrutinizing look, even if Renato was holding the young man up off his feet and against a wall by his shirt collar. "Dama is not here."

"Obviously." The hitman drawled out, dropping the kid to his feet now that he had his attention. "But neither is her sister, both haven't been here since the end of last year. What the hell is going on?"

At worst, he had expected to be able to ask Tatiana about the whereabouts of her little sister.

However, the nurse was also missing. Listed as being off on 'syndicate related business'.

"Clan things." Bjørn stated flatly, checking the pile of paperwork he had in his hands to ensure they were not ruffled. "Dama has a two week break in another week, you will likely find her then. If you miss it, she will not be free again for another few months."

Like that wasn't concerning. Renato hadn't heard her breath a word about her syndicate for years,
and now they apparently needed her and the Sun using nurse close at hand?

It explained somewhat of why she missed Shamal's birthday earlier in the month, if not why the woman hadn't called or sent word.

He wondered if this happened last year too, or if it was a new development.

With a sharp huff, the hitman almost dismissed the thief's little aid… but a sharp flick of green Flames caught his eyes.

Bjørn had Lightning Flames and had used them to keep the paperwork he was clutching from being damaged when Renato grabbed him.

Well… no wonder Sonya thought Ganauche was defective. Her Lackey was a Lightning, she knew another woman with Soft Lightning Flames, and they seemed a lot more competent than Nono's Lightning Guardian from what little she had seen of him.

How and where did the thief pick this boy up?

He thought in a language mix Renato couldn't pick apart, a Germanic variant language with peppers of French and Russian sprinkled in. European, obviously, but not one he dealt with often.

Interesting.

"Excuse me, is there a reason you are assaulting him?"

"Why do you care?" Renato snapped at the new arrival, a Chinese man dressed in eye catching red speaking Russian.

"Well…"

"Dama is not here." Bjørn interjected rather exasperatedly, tucking his files under one arm and glaring at the both of them. "She will be at the end of the month at best. I can take a message, but that is it."

The Chinese man knew Sonya too?

Well, concerned bystanders were as rare as hen's teeth in Mafia Land. It was reasonable he knew the boy the Mafioso was sort of assaulting.

Did this man know what happened to the thief in Shanghai to the point her brother was wary of such a situation happening again?

Renato turned to get a good look at the newcomer, inspecting him suspiciously. Part of a Triad, more than likely. The other man was eyeing him back just as suspiciously.

"My name is Fong." The Chinese man started pleasantly, with a tiny incline which was apparently to pass as a bow of greeting.

"…Renato Sinclair." Returned the hitman slowly. He could pick up Fong's thoughts a lot easier… but he didn't know Mandarin Chinese.

New goal, once he found and dragged a missing thief back to Shamal he was learning Chinese.

Bjørn sighed exasperatedly at them both. "May I go?"
Chapter 33

(Wednesday the 19th of February, 1969. Tripoli, Kingdom of Libya.)

"Qaddafi, the thief is a woman!" One man snapped at another in Arabic, making Sonya rather happy she had bothered the fire juggler Faris to learn his native language while she was with the circus. "A woman will not be able to aid us!"

"You requested a thief, not a male thief." The Russian flatly interjected in the same language, making the naysayer startle and the other whisper-conversations come to a screeching halt. "Either get to the point or stop wasting my time."

Finding a random ass tent in the middle of freaking nowhere outside Tripoli, capital of the Kingdom of Libya, had not put her in a good mood. Finding her contact point was a rebel faction aiming to overthrow their monarchy was equally irritating.

The fact half or more of them seemed to be apparently sexist Muslims?

Sonya had known this world's various governments had all sorts of shadowy ties, yokes, and puppet masters in the mafia. She hadn't known she'd be in line to have a whole lot of blackmail if this coup ever succeeded, or even if some of these men survived their attempt.

This was the Middle East, the kingdom of Libya a very far western part of it in upper Africa, but still one country she knew would have some or a lot of instability come the turn of the next century.

Bjørn really needed to do a tiny bit more fact checking for the work he lined up for her. Religious Police might not be such a thing here, but she still wasn't happy with this job.

"Prove to us that you are a thief of any skill." Blowhard number one demanded nastily, sneering at her. "Before we trust you with anything that would risk us all."

"No. That is not how this works." Sonya informed him sharply, an equal amount of distaste in her tone. "How this works is thus. You put in a request. A thief picks up the contract. The job is done and certain people who shall not be named are paid. End of story."

She was fully aware of the two guard-types that were at the tent's flaps, so grabbing their wrists before they could so much as touch her shoulders was straightforward enough given the lamps were affixed to the tent posts and had cast some easily tracked shadows. Flipping them near-effortlessly to smash the 'war planning table' mockup was just an expression of how unamused she had become.

Twisting said wrists she had hold of to dislocate shoulder sockets with inhuman ease was just her being petty.

The other guards and men around the little broken card table rose to their feet in protests but paused as they tried to figure out if they even had a chance against something like her.

"Now either get to the point or I will return to my agency to inform them of your unreasonable refusal to pay for services due to trivial reasons." The smile that inched across her lips was a humorless one. "And they will bring their grievances to you to deal with."

No one got away with bullshitting Mafia Land's various branches, refusing to pay, or backing out of an already accepted contract. Aside all the killers they contracted in a day and could put to other uses, hitmen and assassins alike, there were also all those blackmailers and corrupt politicians that
also worked with or around the island.

Besides being just deadly, it could also be intensely uncomfortable as well as life ruining.

Either someone knew that before sending off a person to arrange the hiring of a thief and told the man across from her that seemed to be in charge what would happen, or they could divine exactly how bad an idea it was from her expression alone.

'Qaddafi' gave a short, almost angry nod. Almost, because he appeared to be more calculating than emasculated by her very presence. "Acquire a copy of any and all information you can find that might even help us convince others to overthrow the monarchy."

She had been hired to steal information?

Well, that was a new one.

Rather loose of a target goal, but she could work with that. Bjørn had at least ensured it had an expiration date. Now she just had to ghost past all sorts of soldiers, politicians, and government lackeys that might or might not be perfectly aware of Mafia Land agents exist.

It was only going to be a couple days. They hadn't had the funds to secure her or any other thief's services for longer than that. Which was odd, because she was pretty sure there were oil fields that had just been tapped and the country should've been richer than that.

Maybe that was part of the reason why these people were plotting treason?

Sonya wasn't really interested in learning why or how, she'd probably figure it out sometime in the next week.

"Fine." She informed the apparent spokesperson shortly, turning on her heel to escape the musty and cramp tent.

(Sunday the 23rd of February, 1969. Tripoli, Kingdom of Libya.)

Slight issue with this job, no one stood around convenient corners discussing how they were in fact screwing over their population and leading her straight to what she had to nab in order to call the job good.

Sonya actually had to hunt around a little, and by a 'little' she really meant to get anything at all. Around guards, government aids, and all sorts of other random people who all knew each other by sight if not well and what their surroundings should look like.

She got very, very familiar with awkward hiding spots and how to check to see if a room is occupied in a fast hurry.

Aside her unfortunate and frequent association with the cramped and dusty side of an African palace, she had a few other issues with this job.

King Idris I of Libya wasn't a bad ruler, all told. He wasn't Sonya's king, or ruler, so her passing judgement on him made her hesitate. However, she was currently aiding a faction of his own government in their plot to overthrow him so ignoring the situation wasn't something she could realistically do.
While she greatly preferred jobs and contracts where what she stole would only make history in the 'where did it go?' kind of way, jobs like 'help us to change history' were also things she would inevitably get involved with if she kept working for Mafia Land.

More to the current point, King Idris the First was… conservative. It might be Rachel's lifetime of hearing about the war that went on in the Middle East coloring Sonya's perspective, but he really was rather temperate in how he ruled.

There was no mass, large-scale atrocities. No suppressed, unhappy populace. There weren't uncountable orphans slipping through the streets or widows bawling about missing husbands due to some conflict or another.

It was just the King's policies were not popular, and a large portion of his population wanted someone more forward and progressive. More Arab nationalist rather than what they had.

…and a more efficient government with less taxes, but all people everywhere had wanted that since the dawn of the Roman empire.

The Mafia Land agent spent three days and two nights carefully pawing her way through countless offices, following oil-field money to where the ever-loving hell it was going. Money made the world turn around and was one of the better incentives she could likely gain more from for her 'target'.

She eventually traced the bulk of it back into the agriculture development plans currently being implemented.

Almost three-quarters of what the government was earning through selling crude and refined petroleum products was being poured back into the country, but the results were things that would take years to be noticeable. Water reservoirs for irrigation, farmland development, things like that.

Not exactly a mark of a bad ruler.

The third night, she broke into a prison.

Of course King Idris I imprisoned political dissidents, who didn't in this world?

Mahmud Sulayman al-Maghribi, who had been pretty damn surprised to see a woman breaking into a prison just to ask around about the Libyan King, gave her a bit of a lead in return for a couple newspapers. Since she had no idea when he had been first imprisoned or how long it would be until he got out again, she complied for a brief lecture on liberal Libyan views and the unrest he had gotten imprisoned for fanning.

By the time she could escape that, she was firmly of the opinion the older Muslim had greatly missed hearing himself talk and was a little full of himself.

….or he was a condescending asshole that viewed her as an abnormality in the 'weaker sex'.

Probably not, but she was detecting a general theme to most interactions she had with Muslims lately.

Day four, she returned to the royal palace in Tripoli to search out the kingdom's foreign policy plans. King Idris the First's greatest failing, in a liberal Libyan's view, was his over-reliance and conformity to Western influences. Which did have some basis in real life facts, Libya currently got financial aid in exchange for allowing both the United Kingdom and the United States to maintain a military presence in their country.

Running out of time, and with the flimsiest of things to go on, Sonya compiled what she had learned
over the last few days into a shorthand kind of report. Palace rumor, about Queen Fatima's conversation with the royal couple's adopted daughter Suleima about exactly how many children the King had fathered and which didn't survive their infancy, what she had dug up, and the short version of what she had gotten out of Maghribi.

Then she stole into Gaddafi's tiny office in the Libyan Army's Signal Corps and dropped what she had on his desk.

After getting over his shock at her surprise appearance, of which she probably didn't help any by taking up possession of one of his office chairs and blandly staring back until he got with the program, the army officer carefully poured over her information while also trying to keep an ear out for anyone that might discover her presence.

Which was slightly insulting, but Sonya bit her tongue and just sat there. Repeating 'two more days' over and over in her head.

"There is little here of use, thief."

"King Idris the First is an unpopular king, not a bad one." The Russian informed him flatly, irritated with both him and her own lack of solid findings. "Besides the corruption in government offices, which is so evident you probably already knew it, and the foreign affairs policies which may prove equally unpopular? There is little else to find."

"Foreign…?" Gaddafi apparently hadn't gotten that far in his perusal of her findings, he skipped a few pages of labor-intensive hand-written notes to see what she was talking about.

"The British are using your country as a logistical pin for covert intelligence operations in the Nigerian Civil War. They will not be pulling out of your country for another full year." Even if they should've been gone five years ago, when they were first asked to leave.

Cue under-the-table negotiations and payoffs, which King Idris I might or might not have been aware of. Regardless, it was his government and therefore his responsibility as the head of it for their actions.

It was, apparently, more than enough from the expression of pure distaste on Gaddafi's face as he read her notes on it.

When the Muslim man looked back up at her, the Russian gave him a level look. "You have paid for my services for another two days."

"Are you able to get a message to Maghribi?" He asked, tapping a finger on the name in question in her report.

"Obviously." She had gotten in to talk to the man in the first place, the question was a bit superfluous.

Gaddafi scribbled a short note in Arabic, which she hadn't learned to read so was unaware of what exactly it was even if his attempts to conceal the contents failed miserably. "Take this to him and bring back his reply."

"Do you want a written one or a verbal one?" Sonya didn't care to know what it was that this man wanted to say to the other, and she wasn't interested in the least in what the reply was.

The entire situation was bothering her, but she couldn't solidly decide on what was plucking on her nerves. If it was the country, the current on-going treason being plotted, or the people involved.
Two days of playing messenger girl might be it, too.

"Written." The Signal Corps officer snapped, eyeing her suspiciously before handing over the note.

The thief didn't bother informing him she couldn't read the language even if she could speak it. He wouldn't believe her anyways and letting him have a way to possibly lead her into a trap was just stupid.

(Tuesday the 25th of February, 1969. Mafia Land.)

Sonya got into Mafia Land in the early hours, which meant she had a few hours to kill before she risked the island's streets.

Not that she expected to have any problems, but the dark and copious amounts of alcohol tended to make lesser criminals bold enough to risk their luck against more dangerous ones. The Russian thief didn't just avoid Mafia Land's streets for her own well-being, but also for her sanity.

She hadn't had to kill very many people to date, but she also knew that bit of luck wasn't going to last her long.

Instead of court the possibility of increasing her kill count, or risk someone getting lucky against her because that really only took once to be lethal, she instead browsed a bit of the shopping complex attached to the air/sea port complex and the Arrival Hall.

It was mostly just tacky tourist shop crap the closest to the actual airport and dockyard. There was also a random flower shop, a laundromat and a more expensive dry cleaners, three pawn shops of various sizes, and a convenience store. Which didn't include the various kiosks, the Mafia Land bank branch, and the large number of newspaper hawkers.

Sonya didn't buy anything in this part of the island but didn't mind browsing around a little.

Since it was last minute shops, most of it was way overpriced even considering the fact most of the money used on the island was either dirty or blood money. Money that couldn't be used in any large amount in any civilian outfit or for any great legal reason, and which generally either got banked to be laundered or only spent on the island.

Black hole of Calcutta, the thief mused to herself. Wondering only a slight bit idly exactly how much of any government's finances were tied up in the island, and where the hell she picked that saying up from.

Later she wouldn't clearly recall what tripped her off, but whatever it was had her whipping around and pooling some of her Cloud Flames into her right palm.

Renato was stalking over to her, face blank and all but glaring. "Little lady Sonya… where the hell have you been?"

"…Libya?" The Russian Storm-Cloud replied blankly, wondering what she had done. Didn't do, apparently by what little context she had so far. "Why?"

"You missed Shamal's birthday."

"No, I did not." She refuted instantly, then paused and considered the implications. The hitman
would know better than anyone if she had. "…right? It is not until the end of the month."

"Sonya, it was the ninth." He drawled out darkly, at least now looking fairly irritated rather than just blank.

Sonya blinked a few times. "I thought that was Ottavia's."

With an exasperated sigh, the Italian plucked his fedora off and ran a hand through his short and spiky hair. "January ninth was Daniella Vongola's fifty-fifth birthday. February ninth was Shamal's sixth."

"…oh. Oh fuck."

"I'm starting to think you need a keeper." Renato snarked at her disgustedly. "Your Lackey isn't a very good one."

"Leave Bjorn out of this." Sonya snapped back, mostly reflexively and without much heat.

Mostly because her brain was blank. The only thought she had in her head was the fact she promised Shamal she'd be there this year, and a sinking-type of guilty feeling settling in her gut was distracting her from anything else.

"I… fuck, give me a day."

"You have three hours. Then I'm throwing you on some kind of transport, even if it's just a damn rowboat."

"Fine." The thief was a breath away from snarling something nasty back, but the simple fact she was in the wrong on the subject kept her mouth shut.

Instead of say anything else, Sonya turned on her heel and stalked to the great double doors of bulletproof glass. It was still before dawn, but she suddenly didn't mind the thought too much anymore.

She'd try her luck with the drunks and risk-takers. Maybe someone would be stupid, and she'd get to smash someone's hands while pretending they were Renato's.

…even if this was totally her fault.

"Well… at least you can admit that." The hitman himself chipped in his two bits on her mental train of thought.

Sonya very slowly blew out a measured breath, giving him a similarly level look over one shoulder as she tried to tamp down her irritation. "I thought you were attempting to control that?"

"I haven't been given much help in trying." Renato continued almost pleasantly, which made her suspicious. "But, given the brat is demanding the same forfeit as last year, we should have more than enough to make a decent start."

Pondering it, if only because it was something other than the guilty feeling she was struggling under, the thief had to admit that while it sounded like something she was willing to do… it probably wasn't going to be possible.

"Why not?"

"…because a few things back home have gotten a little…" "tight, was how she wanted to finish
that.

Constraining was another good word.

"…Sonya?"

"This is the earliest I would have gotten free anyways." She admitted slowly, not as an excuse but a fact nonetheless. "…and this year, probably also the next, I will be very busy just trying to survive."

Sonya was also technically playing hooky on her own clan by not immediately going to her second Mafia Land contract and returning to Moscow take some of the pressure off Galina. A week in-between would've been doable, two was stretching it, but any longer than that and it would be more than just obvious the Storm-Cloud was reluctant to go back.

"Ho?" It wasn't really a question, even if it was pitched that way.

To her, it sounded more like a demand.

Which Sonya wasn't going to bother with answering. It wasn't his business.

"Sonya, I'm not asking again."

"Perfect." She tossed over a shoulder, skirting a rowdy group of somehow connected individuals.

There was a thief in that group, she recognized him after several years of passing through the Thieves' Hall. What he had going on with two of Renato's fellow hitmen, who recognized the man at her back and shifted near-absently in response to keep him in sight, was something to ponder.

The Italian didn't so much as twitch in return for their actions, but he did smoothly insert himself between Sonya and the group as they passed one another down a well-lit but pre-dawn Mafia Land street.

Ignoring the hitman stalking her steps, the thief mainly just concentrated on making her way to her clan's condo and keeping an eye out for anything too suspicious going on.

Which… pretty much described the streets of Mafia Land regularly.

In the dark however, there was an increase of shady types and a dearth of family groups. Most of which she ignored, as they were about other business than eyeing the others walking the semi-lit roads. The real threats were the loitering mafia men and women, eyeing those out and about speculatively. Hunting for either easy targets or keeping watch for or on their fellows.

That was why Sonya hated walking the main streets when it was fully dark. Aside the higher likelihood for violent confrontations and the risk of walking into one already in progress, getting eyeballed by some idiot that didn't realize she could literally take their heads off with a swing grated on her nerves.

They weren't the biggest baddies walking around, and she refused to act like they were. The biggest bad in her mind was her foster father, and she wasn't about to change that just for some prick who felt himself and whatever weapon of choice up then decided they were cool.

She was more distracted by keeping a wary eye out as they walked than on what her current strolling partner was up to, which enabled the Sun using Mafioso to herd her somewhat into a corner between two shops. When the thief pulled up short to avoid running into a brick wall, she had a living one to her immediate left that was equally unwilling to budge.
Relatively speaking, that was. She could make either move, but the damages…

"You… are pretty much the only female influence the brat has." Renato started off silkily as he slid forward a little to really put her in his shadow cast by the street lamps, a rather cold looking smirk twisting his features. "Which you agreed to, when he asked to call you 'mamma' and you allowed it."

Sonya blinked up at him blankly, because she yet again couldn't find the obvious return statement for that.

She supposed it was true enough, as it was stated. Shamal either had her or whatever woman the hitman was skirt chasing at the moment, and frankly she'd rather handle any feminine questions the brat had to pose than whatever flavor of the week or month.

"…we'll pick that one up later." He muttered sourly before continuing in a stronger tone. "My point is, as the brat's primary guardian I should be kept informed of anything that might impact his care."

"Sure?" Rather stupidly redundant statement, but she could agree with the line of thought.

"Since you are part of his life, I then merit being kept informed of what might affect you. Yes?"

…she had to think about that one. Shamal was one thing, the brat was too young yet to really use any information she gave against her nor did it look like he ever would.

Renato?

He was a different kettle of fish entirely.

The hitman was a whole lot more willing to use what he knew of her against her and had little to no impediment to lying to her. She had asked Nono Vongola much later than she probably should've, but the Don of Vongola informed her he was entirely willing to allow her to refrain from attending a Christmas Ball as long as she had some reason for being in the Iron Fort other than visiting Shamal.

A bribe was required, in other words.

Renato had claimed Nono would have an issue with her being there but abstaining, to her face.

The man in question had apparently been following her line of thought, he rolled his eyes. "That? Of course I was lying. Who wouldn't?"

The Russian huffed sourly, slightly nettled with that confirmation of what he would or wouldn't do to her. She made as if to push past him and continue on her way, but a quick movement and an arm barring later she found herself pulled up short again.

Cornered by two actual walls and the hitman.

There was an entirely blank moment when Sonya regarded Renato and the considered position he had maneuvered them both into. She had two corner forming walls to her back, one brick and the other wooden fencing, and an individual that likely outweighed her by more than half again her own weight. He was also crowding her backwards, which forced her to either crane her neck or press up against the bricks and wood behind her.

…she didn't like this but was unable to figure out a socially acceptable way to tell the man who was also her friend to back off.
Renato took advantage of her inability to decide what to do, fully planting his right hand on the fence slats behind her and leaning in closer. "I'm not asking for a complete accounting, Sonya. Just… major events. That *might* impact the time you have for the brat."

The thief was officially uncomfortable with this.

It *sounded* reasonable, and she could reason why and for what purpose he wanted to know.

However, the crowding and her lack of options was also making her slightly fidgety. This wasn't the time or place to get distracted from their surroundings and she was pretty sure he was intentionally causing it, so he'd get what he wanted with little fuss.

By the expression on the man's face, he hadn't been expecting for her to plant her own hand dead center on his chest and push backwards until he physically *slid* away from her. "…let me think about it."

"If I let you think about it, you'll find some way to weasel out of it since you just *love* dropping off the grid entirely now and again." The hitman sourly drawled out, a hand reaching up to adjust his fedora a bit lower, so the brim shaded his dark eyes. "A line now and again would work fine. Write the brat letters for all I care. *Something.*"

Letter writing wasn't all that bad of an idea. Sonya had little to no idea what to put into a letter, but as a Cyrillic reading exercise she likely couldn't find a better one unless she had months of free time to teach Shamal herself. "Maybe."

"Is that all I'm getting?"

"For now, yes." She confirmed, edging to the side in order to free up her range of movement back to an acceptable level.

Later, she'd seriously ponder the suggestion/demand. When certain hitmen weren't trying to… intimidate?

Trying to intimidate her into anything she might not like given enough time.

Renato had been trying to intimidate her. What was so wrong with just asking?

Was that needed?

"…Sonya, I wasn't trying to intimidate you." He stated flatly, eying her speculatively.

The thief snorted, finally slithering out from the corner he had backed her into and looked in his direction to snap something about intentions versus results.

A dull glint of something small and long caught the very corner of her eye, so instead of the words she had intended to bite out she instead grabbed hold of Renato's lapel to yank the man into her personal space again. Probably by sheer virtue of being able to read her mind, the hitman didn't protest her actions but grabbed a handgun from the small of his back and fired off three shots in the approximate direction she spotted metal.

The lone shot they got in return whistled through the area he had been in only moments before.

Whoever it was, they were a terrible shot. That wouldn't have done anything but slightly inconvenienced the Italian Sun, at least until he healed it up. Mid-chest, and with the angle the hitman had been standing at probably only lung or shoulder would've been hit.
Renato snorted himself that time, if for her train of thought or if he agreed with it or for another reason was debatable. Cocking the gun in hand again, he stalked over to the shooter.

Probably to see if he or she was still alive, and if he could get a 'why' from whoever it was.

Slightly curious over the reasons herself, Sonya lingered instead of taking the distraction to continue on her way. She wanted to know if this was just an attack of opportunity or if there was yet another person Renato pissed off after him again.

Also, to keep an eye out for anyone else while the hitman poked their attacker.

Which let her spot asshole number two and three, sneaking out from an alleyway on the opposite side of the street than the first one.

A rather shoddy pincer maneuver, since attacker number one either started it early or didn't know he or she would be getting backup.

Two and three froze when they realized Sonya was watching them, exchanging a look then looking back at the highly unamused Russian Storm-Cloud. Three jabbed Two in the ribs, then again when that didn't seem to elicit the response the man wanted. Finally, asshole number Two straightened up a little nervously and quirked a rather sickly-looking grin at the thief then bolted as fast as he could away from the area.

Sonya blinked. Asshole number Three looked torn between being pissed off and envious.

When the man looked back at her, he paled and tried his own escape.

Renato hadn't really need all that much time to go kick a corpse, the man had come up on Sonya's right side while she was watching the other guy run for it. He also wasn't remotely amused himself, he shot the guy through the back of his left knee before he could even leave the street they were on.

"…continuing." The hitman drawled flatly, un-cocking his gun and strolling down the street to collect his likely unwilling new informant. "That wasn't intimidation. If I had been trying to intimidate you, little lady Sonya, you'd know it right off."

"Then whatever you had been doing, I do not appreciate." Shot back the thief, rather aimlessly wandering in his direction so they wouldn't have to raise their voices and attract even more attention.

Gunshots weren't exactly foreign sounds late at night in Mafia Land, but arguments were more attention getting.

With a much put-upon sigh, the hitman planted a shiny black leather shoe firmly on the spine of the whimpering attacker clutching at his knee. "How blind… never mind. Just go deal with the brat, I'll meet you there."

"It will be a day or so," Sonya informed him, continuing before the glare he gave her darkened even more, "I have to pick my brother up."

"…ho?" Renato's expression changed way too quickly for her peace of mind, a rather unsettling smirk curling up one side of his mouth. "Your brother. The purple one?"

"…yes?"

"Lovely." By the man on the ground's expression, the hitman was applying even more force to pin him down and didn't think so. "A day. If you're not there…?"
"You will be hunting me down?" Finished the Russian tightly. "I got that already."

"So long as you know." The *Mafioso* informed her, turning to regard the man he was nearly standing on. "If you would excuse us?"

"NO! Lady, *please.*"

"Have fun." She tossed over her shoulder, leaving the hitman to it.

"Sonya." When she looked back, the Sun user gave her a measuredly even look. "The Mataraci Group has no major operations within Czechoslovakia. They do have connections to a syndicate called the Kolín Collation, a baffling minor player in that shark's pool I have yet to dig anything up on. They have numerous but clandestine connections to them, all of which I was unable to get more information on."

"...thanks."

Not something she could give her Lackey, but maybe Ziven wouldn't mind doing some poking for her.

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**(Wednesday the 26th of February, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)**

**Cherep** knew Mists.

It wasn't like Viper was the only Mist he knew of, just the one he knew best.

Esper, whatever. The miser Mist had been pretty canny about introducing him around in his, at the time, social circles, but… mind readers, psychics, and Espers weren't the type of people that allowed secrets to be kept for long.

Seriously, why were all the other Flame types more interesting than his own?

Defying death wasn't really all that cool, merely painful. Aggravating was another good word.

Cherep rather absently sidestepped a Construction of boar-like creature so Sonya could pop it, considering the other words or terms he could apply to his Flame ability.

His little sister's bratty Mist was not happy, to say the least. Which had flummoxed his normally contained and aloof sister, she was looking distinctly harassed the longer the kid's temper tantrum went on.

It was also why the stuntman was politely ignoring the situation until Sonya finally hit upon a way to apologize.

She had a very nasty habit of never really apologizing, for anything. As far as he was aware, she had only apologized maybe once or twice in her life. Once was to him.

Mists were also very dramatic creatures, hence the display of very rowdy fantasy creatures keeping the Russian Storm-Cloud at bay until she somehow made up missing the brat's birthday. Again.

Cherep might be secretly rooting for the kid. Italian or not, and a ward of that Sun guy with the curly sideburns he never remembered the name of, Shamal was probably going to somehow wring an actual apology out of his little sister. Then, being a Mist, would probably twist and pull said apology
until he got what he wanted but that was par for the course when dealing with that Flame type.

He ducked a flying anchor, which… *what*, before it clipped his head.

Sonya reached out and yanked hard on the surprisingly detailed looking barnacle encrusted chain connected to it, arresting the thing's forward momentum before it could crash through a rather expansive window. A flick of red Flames ran down the Construction, making the illusion pop under the Storm Flame's Disintegration feature.

A red-faced, teary eyed brat was mulishly glaring from under his wavy brown fringe at his still flustered sister. Bits and twists of indigo Flame sparked to life here and there around him, sometimes spewing out some creature or string to either lash out with or try containing a thief.

Sonya *looked* normal, but her purple edged grey eyes were a little too wide to be calm and she seemed to be torn between taking another step forward or backing up.

Slipping out of the little room the Storm-Cloud tracked the Mist brat down to wasn't hard, his fellow Cloud had long since stopped obsessively tracking his movements not long after he moved in with her when they were kids and the kid didn't yet care who he was or where he went.

There were a few maids hovering at the end of the hall, enough cleaning supplies between them to suggest they were waiting for an all-clear in order to fix whatever was broken after a Flame user's tantrum. They weren't going to have much to do, Sonya was a very quick Storm-Cloud thief and had prevented Shamal from doing more than scuffing up the furniture.

As Cherep was a guest, and a little unnerved still about Italian criminals and how they contrasted to *Soviet Russian* criminals, he didn't do more than glance over at them.

Seriously, they had a *mansion*. A very old, seemingly respectable and expensive manor house.

That had history. Lots of history given the things and portraits on display.

With a full complement of servants. Who seemed to know what to do when users of freaky soul fire got out of hand?

The stuntman was not at all sure about what that fully implied, nor what it meant when his sister was so embroiled up in it.

Mist brat of respectable temper, who she did more than just humor, was proof enough of that.

Instead of deal with his sister's inadvertent side-trip of being an adult figure in a kid's life and how to apologize like a human being *or* try chatting with maids who seemed a bit too interested in him for his peace of mind, Cherep looked squarely at the other two.

A very dark-skinned man with red and blond hair, and a very imposing lighter skinned Italian with completely blank features.

He was pretty sure one of the two was the 'Tyr' person Tatiana had chatted on about. The assassin.

Which, again… *what*.

There was seriously enough of a demand for killers aside hitmen *or* *torpedo* that yet another term was needed for paring down the job description?

This might not be Cherep's world, but it was Sonya's. He might have snubbed it in favor of a
civilian's lot in life but given his foster family's ties meant that being ignorant of it would only harm them.

Viper was also very… not less stingy, but willing to be amiable about volunteering information when well-fed and bribed with bits of other information… and money. The stuntman had to be careful about that, because the Esper would and could drain his meager savings to nothing and call the whole thing a 'needed life lesson'.

However, he was probably the most well-informed civilian with only flimsy ties to the Mafia world at best. Well informed and prone to worry over his stubborn, taciturn, sometimes vicious little sister who was up to her neck in things she probably didn't spare a moment's thought about.

"So…" Cherep started in what was probably heavily accented Italian, looking between the two.

*Everyone* he had seen yet in this sprawling building that really was too large to just be a family home was in uniform. Either in what seemed to be the servants' version or a very understated suits worn like uniforms. Like that wasn't suspicious at all.

"Hello?" He got a slow blink out of one, and the darker one just flatly stared at him.

Fantastic. Not only did they all look like suspicious security guards, they had the personality of them.

Perfect. Well… Sonya kept saying he had no sense of self-preservation. "Okay… what are you doing lurking outside the room my sister and her brat are in?"

There was a faintly raised eyebrow from the guy who could actually blink, and the other guy remained as impassive as carved granite.

"Being creepy. Duly noted. Can you do it elsewhere?"

Nothing. Not even a twitch.

The Cloud stuntman clamped down on the temptation to run his mouth until he gained *some* kind of reaction from them, which was more of a Skull thing than a Cherep thing. Sonya wanted *Cherep* and not *Skull*, so he was trying to not be annoying.

The *temptation* though. He had probably been in show business too long, if a blank façade any *vor* would admire made him itch to break it just for a reaction.

…or he had been hanging out with Viper too long, but eh.

"This isn't because of Sonya, or you would've met us at the door." Cherep reasoned aloud instead of try jabbing at hot buttons he was only semi-sure would elect the response he'd probably not want. "Not about me, either. For one you didn't know I was coming and while some strange man in your territory is a cause for some concern, I'm here at her behest so by Mafia rules you can hold her accountable for me."

Again, nothing.

If the hallway wasn't so elaborately detailed, meaning statuary and pictures and a very nice green with gold accent rug with matching if only occasional lounge furniture, he'd get rapidly bored and try something probably ill-advised.

Glancing between the two statue-esque men and the pretty décor probably told them he wasn't used to being in places like this… but again, eh. "I think you're here because of Shamal. Or because the
brat's busy throwing a tantrum at Sonya around a guy you have no idea about."

The stuntman did not get performance anxiety. He hadn't since the very first time he defied the laws of gravity and mortality in front of spectators and lost the gamble then woke up to a freaking out Sonya.

Getting stared at by two blank-faced men while he rambled wasn't new, it happened nearly any time Viper decided to be female and he ended up taking her out to dinner. No one really knew what to make of the miser Esper at first, especially if she was feeling unsociable.

He would, however, admit he might be rambling a bit too much. Nerves were still an issue for him.

"Miss Sonya has yet to actually deal with one of young Shamal's fits." The one he was semi-sort of sure was Tyr offered after another pause, looking… not interested, but also not as blank anymore.

"What? The kid's normally an angel for her and is a nasty terror otherwise?" Shamal was a Mist, it was possible.

Possibly-Tyr gave a tiny lift of his left shoulder.

"That's… awesome."

His baby sister had to be more than a bit out of her depth right now, if this wasn't usual behavior for her. She'd drop the stubbornly judgmental part of her in favor for the adaptive curiosity once it was less alarming, and weasel everything about what had tripped this tantrum out of the kid.

Uncle, huh?

Uncle Skull sounded a lot cooler, but Sonya would probably actually try to murder him for it.

Skull wasn't really a good influence for any kid, even criminally raised ones.

Cherep didn't think he'd mind 'Uncle Cherep' so much, as long as that hitman dude wasn't included in the package.

"Ah… Cherep, a word if you please?"

Speak of the devil. The stuntman gave the very subject of his thoughts a wary look as the man practically sauntered down the hallway. Not as if he owned the place, because he gave a tight nod to the two men still all statue-like that was more deferral than he had expected to come from someone like that, but more 'predator' than he was comfortable with.

That grin could mean nothing good. Then again, the man probably wouldn't want to risk pissing off his little sister again. From what Tatiana had to say, he had to do some rather fancy footwork and making up in order to get out of the dog house once already.

"…sure?"

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 26th of February, 1969 continued. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Lisa sighed, using her free hand to pinch the bridge of her nose as she forcibly calmed her racing heart now that she knew her lover was going to be okay.
Tatiana didn't look any happier than her foster mother, stitching up a nasty gash on Arseniy's back.

"They're claiming foul-play?"

"Of course they are." The vor snapped shorty, pausing to take a deep breath even if it did make the redhead stab him harder than need be with her needle. "Their man went missing, Lisa. Between here and there. Ever so conveniently, it was only after we got paid and the information 'allegedly' changed hands the vor disappeared."

"I failed to hear anything about free-passage bartered into that mess." Muttered the nurse, tugging a bit sharply at the thread now seaming his back.

"That's not exactly helping us, Tats." The older of the two women informed the younger dryly, shifting the upset fourteen-month-old baby as he fussied into her short brown hair. "Don't you start too, this is already touchy enough with Sonya going off on her own around the same time."

"Oh please. We all know Sonya probably forgot the vor and what he looked like the moment he wasn't in front of her anymore." A sharp snip of a small pair of scissors and Tatiana was finished stitching up her foster father's back for him. "She probably passed him twice on her way out and never gave him another thought."

Biting her lip as the nurse repacked up her small first aid kit, Lisa shifted backwards to allow Arseniy to get up from the kitchen chair he had straddled backwards to allow the young woman the space to work in. "Can't you…?"

"I'm wiped, Lisa." She responded wearily. "Between that little scuffle and all the more inane shit I've been called up to heal, I've got nothing but dregs of my Flames left. Had someone actually said they were injured… I'll close it all up tomorrow, but I can't right now."

The vor grunted, not even dignifying that with a real response.

As her mother, Lisa was less than happy to hear it. Multi-colored fires of spontaneity and convenient abilities or not, that was her eldest daughter. Tatiana had better things to be doing than exhausting herself erasing every scratch and bruise the Zolotovs were testing out her healing ability on before they had to rely on her or any of the other Sun users.

As in conserving her Flames standing by for emergencies, like a full out firefight between her lover and his coworkers and the messengers of another syndicate.

Just like how Sonya had better things to be doing than trying to corral and guide a mess of kids into decent criminals.

To think, the little con artist girl who was expected to be the best of her generation ended up as an almost-legal nurse aiming to be a doctor when the tiny waif no one had expected became the best thief of her generation so far with no intent to stop anytime soon.

Why was the daredevil Cherep the good one with less issues to give her grey hairs?

Lisa handed over the finicky Valera over to his big sister, smiling wanly as Tatiana slowly coaxed the baby to give her a smile even if he was suffering teething pains. Arseniy had tucked the medical supplies that once laid on their kitchen table into the redhead's purse, gingerly flexing his injured back and considering the bloodstained and torn shirt he had been wearing before this.

She got started on dinner, even as she mulled the situation over with all the experience her two decades as a thief then a vor's lover gave her.
If the Zolotov Clan wasn't careful, they would end up embroiled in a large-scale turf-war they had been trying to avoid.

The Novgorod Brotherhood wasn't an insignificant syndicate. They had two cities fully encased in their territory and were more protection-racket orientated than thievery inclined. They might need that territory to generate enough cash for them, but that greater territory also gave them more people that considered themselves theirs.

Due to the vory present at the meeting and what all had been at stake, they could probably call up the Grekov Gang's allegiance if things really did get nasty.

One of the Novgorod Brotherhood's vor going missing between wherever he was going and Moscow, after a very tense meeting held in the Zolotov Clan's headquarters, did not shine a very good light on the thieves' clan. Aside the subject matter, it had been mediated by an outsider.

Mostly an insult, but partially a safeguard to ensure things went smoothly.

With these Flame things on the line, Lisa didn't exactly know how to measure the situation anymore. It really did seem as if Sonya was the one making it up as she went along even if it was supposedly some old arcane mafia skill making a comeback.

Which would be more confident inspiring if her youngest daughter hadn't been such a tragic little girl.

Tiny and icy seeming little Sonya, who really had no blessed clue in hell what to do when faced with a family at first. At five years of age.

Lisa took a little while to catch on, but the tiny blonde had really only been going through the motions at first. Tentatively following Tatiana's lead as if testing the waters, then once she found a reliable routine that took her mostly out of sight she locked herself down and tried not to stand out.

She had no idea what to do with that kind of reaction, needy orphans and tough-guy street rats were the usual fare for that recruitment drive. Not tiny ice cube girls that never needed help.

The only option she could think of was keeping to that schedule until Sonya relaxed a little.

Which worked. Eventually. Mostly due to Cherep.

Arseniy had noticed first, and drew Lisa's attention to it, but they both got to see exactly how Sonya became possessive over the few of 'her' things. Even when she had no clue how to deal with them.

Like Tatiana. Who was the tiny blonde's sister, who couldn't see the girl's tentative and mostly hidden overtures as what they were instead of more anti-social behavior she had long grown used to.

Lisa had set herself up to be an older female figure they could lean on, but not mom-like, by that point. Tatiana had been in the throes of pre-teen puberty, and like most young children a little bit cruel and blind if it wasn't in her face. Sonya had a very nasty habit of assuming if she wasn't included then she wasn't wanted and tended to disappear to visit a very purple friend of hers or find new marks more often.

That messy circle drove her, and by extension her lover, up a wall. The ridiculously young thief had been pulling away without ever really connecting to the little slap-dash family unit, only barred from really leaving because she had still been an age below double-digits. The older girl had been jealous, and a little bit hurt at the seeming rejection of her as a sister, deciding if the little girl didn't need her she didn't need her either.
It only ended when Cherep face-planted into their little home with all the childhood grace of an ugly duckling.

The one thing Sonya hadn't had the resources or knowledge to deal with completely on her own, but also hadn't fought them on helping her with it when Tatiana alerted them to something being wrong with the situation.

Lisa really did try hard not to have favorites. Arseniy had Sonya, because for all the stress and worry she caused them she made up for it with pure loyalty, finding a miracle cure so they could have their own baby, and a rather cute case of puppy love. Unfortunately, Cherep had always be her favorite no matter how hard she tried to keep her children on the same level.

Little purple Czechoslovakian runaway that he was, who tripped the tiny thief up enough she finally accepted her foster parents helping her and becoming more than 'just there' to her.

He had his own horror story baggage, which she never could decide if it was worse or better than what Sonya ended up dealing with. More of a cleanly cut beginning but also a shiftier ending. His own tricks and quirks, and completely civilian by choice.

Best of all, Cherep spoke Sonya-ese.

Rather, he could translate the stilted and barely-there responses as something more understandable to the rest of them so no more guessing was needed. Just in time too, their then youngest little trainee plus hormones equaled a very awkward girl that greatly preferred keeping her mouth shut.

Who had turned out to be a bit of a bemusing pyromaniac in the strangest ways.

Most women would be appalled that the girl in their charge was lighting herself on fire. Lisa had just wondered if that explained how Sonya had gone from self-contained and precocious as a child and turned into… a violent bibliophile with a stubborn streak as a young adult.

Cherep bridged the gap between the girls, kept Sonya in some nights instead of wandering the city with him, and was ever so innocent and optimistic enough to accept the mothering she did to him when she learned of his horrible experiences before their then-youngest found him.

It hadn't been all smooth sailing with the little boy included, Sonya had been getting progressively more territorially aggressive and snappish and hiding in her books with the onset of her bout of puberty and Tatiana finally started putting serious thought into how to live her life as a con artist and what she needed to do it. The boy also had not been… happy to learn of what kind of family they were, but some gentle coaxing paired with the lonely and lost looks the littlest thief shot him when he pulled away from her eventually settled him into his own niche.

Lisa was never going to be able to get the smell of motor oil out of the second-story third bedroom. She would probably never care to either, as it held the guest beds the middle children preferred to crash out on rather than the blonde thief's old room which was still packed with books. The eldest took that one when she spent the night, snubbing the motor oil smelling one as she claimed it gave her a headache.

However, given it was only shortly after Cherep joined them that Tatiana and Sonya put their heads together to do a heist Lisa was sure she'd botch if she tried to do, she had no complaints.

No major ones, anyways.

Although Sonya really should've trusted them with Cherep's Flame given undying skills instead of trying to hide it from everyone, Tatiana should've said something about any desire to formally learn
to heal others instead of just use the Flames her little sister taught her, and as for the stuntman…

Lisa was aware Cherep couldn't die, had been killed but refused to give up his ghost. That his circus work was probably a lot safer even without his Cloud Flame trick than Arseniy's life was as a vor. That didn't mean she was confident in his life choices.

Sonya followed after him with the same look in her eyes that she did when she went after the few stubborn kids who failed to learn from their fellows' broken fingers. She was a very observant woman, she knew that meant the thief hadn't been sure it was safe and was following her best friend/brother to ensure it would be.

The blonde might have made out with a few more friends, and Cherep found one he would risk exposing to his not-very-nice criminal family, but Lisa still worried for the both of them. The stuntman more than Sonya, because the thief could and had proven she would defend herself with lethal force if need be.

Setting out a pot of stew she was only vaguely aware she had made up while wandering back down memory lane, Lisa clicked the gas burners down to simmer the soup without really seeing her stove.

Tatiana was allowing way too many of their fellow Zolotovs to abuse her abilities in return for building up their confidence in her skills and any other Sun users that became healers. Her way of lending Sonya some aid, because Lord forbid any of her foster children do anything straightforward nowadays.

She appreciated seeing more of her eldest, especially after two and a half years of cramming for her nurse licenses however borderline-illegal Mafia Land's hospital was. The being taken advantage of part she could do without happily.

Cherep was working hard and happy, if a bit lonely. Obviously, the reason why he had been hanging around the house more often this winter was because he missed his best friend/sister. The fact he had a trip planned with her in Italian mafia territory and he agreed almost thoughtlessly when it was proposed meant he was going to take whatever he could get.

He had asked her to brush up on his Italian and wondered if she had suggestions of what to get his 'honorary nephew'. Other than that, barely a twitch over more criminal connections.

Sonya was torn between a promise to her sister, her duties as a daughter, her loyalties to their clan, her career on a criminal-run island, and her few contacts/associates/friends. In over her head, and probably barely realized it.

Lisa sighed, palming her face in exasperation.

Yes, she had put Dmitriy in place as a sort of 'catch-all' when it came to their clan and what they wanted done about the Dying Will Flame business. However, it seemed as if Sonya had either expected him to have a backup plan in reserve or something to cover his position in case of interruptions like jail time.

The fact she really disliked his pick aside, there hadn't been a way to refuse Arseniy pulling her back to slap some kind of patch together over the tiny and still developing 'Flame' department.

Sonya adored her foster father, of course she'd do an exacting job of it since it was him who asked and end up miring herself in place until her handpicked replacement was available again. Which caught her the attention of old man Milos, who was no slouch or dullard.

Lisa would admit he was a bit ornery and stuck in his ways, but Gedeon was doing more than
looking pretty and thuggish standing in a corner of his father's office. He was a slightly younger contemporary of Arseniy's actually, a friend as much as vor could be to each other with only a decade of difference between them. Being taught Sun Flames by his youngest foster daughter was a bit galling, but he was keeping an admirable open mind about it all.

He was as stubborn as his father was, however, and with her stubborn and intractable youngest daughter added to the mix?

She was a little impressed it was only a window that caught the edge of Sonya's ire so far in front of their Pahkan.

The girl made so few mistakes in her life so far, aside a little difficulty on a roof and social ones all over the place, it made Lisa terrified of what would result of any major misstep. She had only been a pillar, never a guiding light, for the girls growing up that she couldn't see a way to warn the young woman to be careful.

It made her wonder if she had been wrong, all those years ago, in how she handled the dual problem of being given a social butterfly and a tiny robot made of ice to raise.

If she had been more of a guiding hand instead of a permissive authority figure, would Sonya have pulled away even earlier than she had and abandoned them before she found Cherep?

Would Tatiana have resented the more talented and younger girl even worse than she had?

'What ifs' were very nasty things Lisa decided, aimlessly stirring her stew as it shimmered from the heat that wasn't quite boiling. It wasn't going to help, so she should probably put more effort into wondering how to help her youngest foster child when she inevitably messed up.

Sonya, however intelligent and self-possessed she might be, was only human. A very pyrotechnic human with an abundance of strength and little care to most others, but still human. Mistakes were only natural and given how rarely she ever had to deal with the results of any blunder as a child hers would probably be spectacularly messy and painful instead of merely embarrassing and personal.

Well… she'd probably have a few of those too. That girl did have to stalk her best friend for weeks if not months to decide they were friends.

Lisa was pretty sure Sonya failed to ask Cherep to be her friend properly, too.

"Mama? Someone's hungry."

Pulling out of her probably overly pessimistic thoughts, the older Russian looked sideways at the younger holding her biological son. "You know where everything is, Tats."

The nurse pouted prettily at her, shifting backwards when Valera became interested in what his mother was cooking and tried to grab the shimmery soup. "Whoops. Yeah Lisa… but I really have to be getting back. Lina's trying to keep order without Sonya's… you know, scariness to back her up, and although Zi's there Fadei is being a complete… butt."

Lisa raised an eyebrow at the substitution, getting a sheepish half-shrug in response.

"I'm trying not to swear around the substitution."

"How well do you think that's going to work?" She asked with audible and visible amusement, watching as Tatiana almost propped Valera on the table before remembering it had yet to be wiped down after being used as a medical tray to stitch up Arseniy's back. "In this household?"
"Approximately until Cherep does something mechanical in the drive and ends up swearing when he jams a joint, or when Sonya loses her spot in a book, or when Arseniy is feeling particularly vicious about the brats he's teaching." Waving that off, the redhead did some rather impressive baby wrangling to both hold onto her little brother and wipe the table off with a clean towel Lisa handed her. "Point being, it's not going to be me."

"Well... alright then." She dismissed it, probably some comment from either adult sibling sparked the idea in her head for whatever reason. "You're staying for dinner."

"Lisa-"

"And at least five or so hours of sleep."

"But-"

"I will include breakfast in that if you try to keep arguing."

Wisely, her eldest shut up.

Lisa was still mom, and her kids were still wary of her methods. She had to be doing something right still.
Chapter 34

(Wednesday the 26th of February, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Sonya was pretty damn sure if one was pissed off enough to throw what amounted to everything in one’s imagination at another, then that one person was very much not happy with said target.

It didn't explain why, after testing his Mist Flames against her Storm and failing to do more than ruffle most everything, Shamal had a messy sobbing fit into her thigh.

If he was mad at her, wouldn't he stay away?

After what amounted to ten years of self-inflicted anti-socialism, she had lost a great deal of Rachel's social skills to disuse. The first five years of which, ignoring anything for the sake of her sanity, had not helped much. What little she could recall about how to deal with other people from a lifetime before this was… fuzzy at best.

Now Sonya found she didn't quite understand people anymore, which… frankly she didn't care about. Cherep was good enough to help straighten out some of her issues, Tatiana ended up fanning the flames of her piss-poor interactions but that was par for the course for fucking them up in the first place in front of her sister.

She could deal, in other words.

On a general basis people were stupid and shallow. That didn't mean she couldn't be as stupid and shallow just as much as any other person, but if she had to deal with her own problems then she didn't really have the time or inclination to overlook or care about others that would have no great impact on her.

Cherep was better than her all over the place, Sonya had long since grown used to the fact. He was nice, she and Tats weren't.

Of course, that meant in situations like these she was completely stumped.

The thief liked Shamal. The kid could be very witty in a childish way, didn't seem to mind her apparently awkward way of viewing the world, practically inhaled what she could teach him, and wasn't as stupid as most grown Mists were reported to be. He also adored her for some reason, which she was fully willing to admit was a great draw.

…and she fucked up on one of the things he had asked of her. Again, she wasn't a nice person but she never really thought of herself as a bad one before this.

Shamal gave a hiccupping shudder-cough into her shirt, Sonya blinked and awkwardly patted his back a few more times. In response the brat rubbed his probably snotty nose all over her stomach and hip.

She couldn't really find it in her to be annoyed by that.

"You suck." Bratty Mist informed her gravely, muffled from both her leg and his stuffed-up nose.

"Yeah… I do." The thief absently agreed, wondering if she could maybe tip the couch laying on its back upright again so they would have a less physically uncomfortable time of him yelling at her.
What had knocked it over?

It wasn't any of the fishing-related Constructs, so maybe one of the fantasy creatures?

That had been one weird-ass looking unicorn that almost clocked her upside the head.

"So... the day before your birthday I ended up throwing a hammer through two walls. My current temporary office and the one on the opposite side of the hall." Sonya started, nudging the kid to shift a little so she could pull on the capsized couch. "The day of, I had to go meet with my Boss and a few very annoying vory. I ended up throwing another hammer through six panes of bullet-proof glass. After pinning another annoying person to a wall with one of my axes, but I don't really count him as much."

Her reward for telling him she basically had a tantrum herself was a very snotty sounding sniff.

He was probably smart enough to catch on to the fact she hadn't said it was because she was dealing with something else on his birthday.

She righted the heavy piece of furniture without more being declared sucky or anything else along those lines, so she didn't really mind his non-comment. "It's really up to you if you forgive me or not, Shamal. But I am sorry. I can't even promise it won't happen again, because I've found there is a constraint on my freedom I'm not entirely alright with."

The thief had made her future plans assuming the Zolotovs would mainly leave her alone. She paid her and her Lackey's dues, pretty much didn't mind they had next to no use for her, and that it was likely without any major change she would continue to do that for the rest of her life.

Up until Dmitriy allowed himself to get arrested.

Right now, it didn't look like her assumptions were going to bear out as she had thought.

The Four Rains probably got along a lot better with their fellow one. Although Galina said she would prefer something else to do, Sonya was pretty much taking her at her word instead of investigating if that was true or not. Gedeon would probably greatly prefer it if Dmitriy was the one he had to deal with than a woman even more years his junior. Ziven was... Ziven, he'd probably find something else to do for the next two years if she hadn't been there.

The Storm-Cloud was not a good fit, even for a short-term stint as the one in charge of the Zolotov Flame users. However, she was the only one left that didn't have prison time or medical lessons to get through or was so green and uninvolved it was painful.

It was up to her, even if anyone else probably could do it better.

"...you don't like it here."

Well... "...I don't."

It wasn't so much how she was treated, because after the whole 'is she or isn't she a Cloud' situation the staff of the Iron Fort got their act together. Mostly. Aside a few easily scared or startled few, the service personnel here were very bland and non-offensive.

It was the fact she was an obvious Russian in Italy. She stuck out as sorely as any Italian would in Soviet Russia.

Sonya was an outsider, she didn't know the people or their local customs and that translated to the
locals as 'someone unsafe, must be watched'. Shamal was getting an in, he'd grow up in Vongola
territory and would eventually be able to move in it without raising major red flags.

She was pretty sure that was half the reason Renato arranged this protection for him, a safe territory
he could lose any tail within when he was grown and not shell out an arm and a leg for to the Don in
charge.

Aside from the fact he needed the backup, and this was one of the major players in the Italian
underworld.

Even the hitman encountered some opposition to his presence when touchy subjects were being
discussed, and he was an Italian Mafioso. The issue was that he wasn't a Vongola Mafioso, his
insistence on being left freelance made it that way. No matter the amount of hits he did for Nono
while Shamal was growing up in the Iron Fort.

Said Mist brat grudgingly fell on top of her when she sat on the couch, wrapping boney arms around
her waist and basically being as much of an obstruction as he could get away with.

"Mister Renato's not around when you're not." He informed her stomach mulishly.

"He was here for your birthday, right?" Because if he was giving her shit for something he did as well...

"Yeah..."

Okay, so she didn't have a leg to stand on in that.

It was somewhat understandable that the hitman ended up with as little time for the kid as she did, in
a weird way.

There was a difference between putting aside time to deal with Shamal and putting time aside to deal
with the issues that came with protecting, housing, and everything else the brat needed. All of which
Renato had to do as well as keep up appearances in Mafia Land and Vongola territory to keep
people from going after the kid, whatever else Don Vongola asked in return for this arrangement,
and whatever interests he had on the side.

She was almost unsurprised the man had been acting a little strange lately.

"I can try to be early next year, even if I have to knock out the entire month of February to do it."

Shamal didn't comment, but she was unsurprised by that.

Sonya did break her word to him. All she was really hoping for was the patience to not fuck up even
worse before the brat worked through the hurt she caused him.

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 26th of February, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"I'm only going to say one thing to that. Sonya was about ten when she realized she could snap a
person in half by hugging them." The lack of thumps and clatters were probably a good thing.
Cherep wasn't entirely sure. Viper had never blown up at him before, so he had nothing to compare
Mist brat's tantrum to. "Guess what she stopped doing from that moment on."

"That's it?"
"I'm not even sure why you think I would tell you more or answer in the first place." The stuntman informed his little sister's hitman friend, slightly irked and striving not to show it. "Think it's safe yet?"

Renato Sinclair eyed the closed door he had been considering, then shrugged and threw it open.

Cherep was torn between grudgingly impressed with the flourish he could put into the action and being annoyed at the man on general principle. He still did follow him into the Mist brat's little zone of destruction, if only to get away from the two very silent and imposing men still standing against the hallway wall.

His crooked best friend had corralled her kid, currently she was sitting rather stiffly upright on a heavy piece of furniture and listening intently to what seemed to be a litany of Shamal's grievances with life in general.

"…and Federico is stupid. He always wants to play cops and mobsters and thinks he can order me around."

"Who is Federico?"

"Nono's eldest." Renato volunteered after scoping out the extent of the damage done to the room. "A kid more than half a year younger than him."

The statement meant nothing to Cherep but seemed to mean more to his little sister by the sudden twitch in her cheek. Sonya gave a very controlled sigh, glancing down at her brat then up to her brother. "Some days… not worth it."

Snickering at her truly disgruntled complaint, the stuntman crouched down in front of her and poked her kid in the back of the head. The Mist whipped his head around, a rather cute expression on affront on his face as he tightened his grip on the thief's waist.

"Who are you?"

"Sonya's older brother." Cherep informed the grouchy kid cheerfully. "The maids probably want to clean up here, so while it's nice to meet you and all we should probably relocate."

"I need to see Don Vongola anyways." Sonya allowed, blinking down at Shamal when all he did in response was squeeze her more. "…brat? I'll be right back."

That didn't earn her much of a response.

Renato looked entirely unbothered and not remotely concerned when the siblings looked at him. "Little lady Sonya can deal with him this time, it's really only fair."

His incredibly touchy fellow Cloud let him call her by a pet-name? When the hell did that happen?

Cherep set his teeth, glanced between the two of them and then at the little Mist. "Whelp, plan B it is. Hope you have a good grip, kid."

"What is…? Oh, no. No." She even tried backing away as much as she could, planting her booted feet squarely in order to push the couch she and the kid were sitting on backwards.

Shamal blinked and looked at him weirdly, which changed to a wide-eyed gape when the stuntman plucked his baby sister up into his arms and rose to his full height. The hitman standing off to the side flinched, backing up a step and looking just as dumbfounded.
Trying really hard not to laugh, because then Sonya might actually attempt to murder him for this, Cherep hefted the two of them to a better position and ignored the blistering glare getting drilled into the underside of his jaw. "So... where are we going next?"

"I swear to hell, Cherep, if you do not PUT ME DOWN-"

"...woah." Shamal ended up rather awkwardly sprawled on the Storm-Cloud, a probably unwilling smirk inching across his face. He pushed on Sonya's ribcage and cut off the rest of what she had been about to say, righting himself to stare up at the only other Cloud in the room. "How...?"

"I know exactly how far I can press my luck with my own little sister." Cherep informed the Mist cheerfully with a grin. "If she's not stiff or wiggling, then I'm safe. And you know you love me, Sonya."

"It's genetics." Said thief snarled out irritably. "I'm forced to by nature."

"We're adopted, that doesn't count."

When she didn't immediately snap something else, Shamal sat on her stomach and peered up at the stuntman with a tiny bit of hero worship. "Could I do this?"

"You need to be taller-"

"NO."

"-but given she lets you hang off her without so much as a twitch, probably." He continued, still cheerful. "Now, where are we going?"

"Nowhere." Sonya snapped again. "Or I'll murder Betsy."

Considering it, and her expression, Cherep sighed. "Ah well, would've been funny."

He ignored the fact four people had peered into the room after he scooped the two up and would likely carry tales to others. He was probably hanging around with Viper too long if he found that amusing.

The look she shot him informed him she thought otherwise, but her kid was smirking still as he slid off her and onto the floor before the stuntman set his little sister down. Sonya shot him another blistering look, reaching into a pocket and withdrawing a little drawstring bag to pitch at the hitman's head.

"For my bribe of safe passage, and Cherep's too."

"Why give it to me?" Renato questioned slowly, eyeing the little pouch.

"Right now, I'd rather not see Nono." Sonya informed him flatly, then placed a hand on Shamal's messy hair. "And I don't think I'm going to get the space to sometime today."

Said kid had wrapped her left thigh up in his arms, and Cherep privately betted he would refuse to let go of her no matter what was going on at least for the rest of the day.

(Thursday the 27th of February, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)
"This place is a little… strange." Cherep informed the Russian thief over the breakfast table the very next morning.

"Kind of like a really fancy hotel rather than a Famigila’s criminal headquarters?" Sonya asked wryly, buttering up Shamal's toast for him.

The little Mist brat had decided that since she couldn't be held to any schedule, he should make the very most of any time she was present. Which meant he slept in her bed last night, would probably do so for every night for the rest of her stay, and was occupying her lap instead of sit in his own chair.

Renato was pretty damn sure the brat would also demand to be excused from schooling for the next week but intended to veto that before it could even start. The thief wasn't yet twitchy over the sheer amount of personal contact Shamal was insisting on, but there were better ways to test her tolerance for contact than using his ward's clinginess.

Like maybe the brother's inability to keep his hands to himself.

"Pretty much, yeah." The man agreed pleasantly, chewing on a bite of bacon as the brat in her lap accepted the bread and freed her up to eat something herself. "Not exactly what I was expecting, I thought it would be more like the Zolotov's place."

"That's more of an actual place of business than a repurposed family manor." Dismissed his little sister, flicking a wrist in his direction to motion to her words. "I… think? It's also used as a family manor too. But the feel of this place is very impersonal, yeah."

"Do you also belong to the Zolotovs of Moscow then?" Renato chipped in, slightly curious for the answer but more interested at the scuffle happening closer to the dining hall's main entrance.

"…I used to." The very purple man conceded after a long moment of suspicious peering.

"When we were younger. Message running, he was very good at it."

Cherep rolled his eyes at his little sister. "You didn't know I did it until I told you."

"Therefore, you were very good at keeping quiet, unnoticed and your work confidential." Sonya pointed out with a strange little smirk. "Considering I did keep an ear out for anyone talking about you, and still missed that news until you stopped in favor for something else?"

He took the high road in that little exchange, which was actually stuffing his mouth with the rest of his bacon and pointedly not looking at her.

The hitman observing them over his morning coffee pondered what Sonya's brother did now. Smuggling, maybe?

He could be maintaining a fallback point, or some link in an informant's chain of communication.

She was very pointedly keeping herself between her brother and her friend, a strong hint that she didn't want Renato picking up anything in Cherep's head. Considering she had blown up at him for stupidly treading on her siblings' privacy using her, he wasn't in any tearing rush to try even if he was curious.

Nono probably would not appreciate the landscaping costs of an irate Storm-Cloud's rampage.

He was trying to keep his mind to himself, and there was no time like the present to try. Not exactly a
safe location for it, but at least a safe target to work with.

Shamal tugged on Sonya's dark red shirt with buttery fingers, ignoring her narrowed eyes on the grease mark he left behind. "Can we go to the park today, mamma?"

"After school, sure."

"...do I have to?" Bratty Mist inquired sulkily.

"Yes."

"But."

"Yes," Renato sternly interrupted the kid before he could continue, "if you want to go with Sonya this summer you have to. I'm expecting top grades, Shamal. No excuses."

"With everything you've been taught by now, it shouldn't be that hard." Sonya continued, not looking at the kicked-puppy look now aimed up at her. "And if you prove to your teachers that what lessons they're giving you are too easy, they'll give you harder ones that aren't."

"Do it consistently enough they'll bump you up a grade, too." Cherep added in, giving the kid an easygoing grin. "Then it'll all be over that much quicker."

Shamal gave the man the stink-eye, still undecided about his so-called 'zio'. To him, although his mamma's brother managed to pick them up and escaped with only threats aimed at him for the act, he was still pretty much an unknown the brat wasn't sure about.

Given the number of dead role-models in his childhood so far, he was also very leery of getting attached to more people. He was more liable to chase people off via Mist Constructs than allow them close.

"Excuse me, young ones." Ottavia Vongola interjected pleasantly, a toothy grin stretching her lips and her dark eyes locked onto skeptical grey. "Might I have a word?"

Renato inclined his head to the elderly Vongola lady as her Storm Guardian found her a chair, keenly interesting in this little confrontation. Timoteo had told him his mother was interested in meeting the Russian but, with Sonya's errant adherence to scheduled visits and the elderly lady's abhorrence to standing around politicking now she wasn't Donna Vongola, this was the first time the two had met.

The thief herself looked not at all pleased by the interruption, although her brother seemed warier than anything. "If you must. Shamal, are you done?"

Not sure if he should wince over the semi-obvious dismissal of Daniella's presence or laugh at Sonya's blunt mannerisms, the hitman instead eyed the kid in her lap as he sat back to observe this.

Mulishly, the brat of a Mist pulled the Russian's plate over to himself and started in on her cooling breakfast.

Obviously, a no.

"You know," Sonya started in a completely bland tone of voice, letting the kid chomp on her food without care, "we found that certain metals react to certain Flames very well. Copper is a very obvious Lightning metal but can work for Rains too, iron and steel work very well for Suns, but silver... well, it works for Storms. If you do not get your Cloud Guardian out from behind me, they
will get their eyes gouged out by a silver spoon."

The retired Eighth head of Vongola smoothed her expression out to a politely inquiring one, flicking a glance over the Russian's shoulder. Cherep had turned to eye the rather grizzled and grey Cloud Guardian suspiciously, but the man heeded his Sky's unspoken order to move himself.

"Forgive Solothurn, Miss Nikishina." Daniella told the thief pleasantly, as her Guardian circled their little table back to her side. "He's a little protective."

"He's a Guardian." Sonya pointed out repressively.

"Hmm... he is." Agreed the older woman, lacing her fingers together and settling them in her lap. "I have been wondering about you, ever since dear Tyr brought you up in a conversation last year. Now that I have finally met you... I think I see why. It's been quite a few years since I've seen a pair like you two."

Blinking once, slowly, let Renato know the thief had no more an idea of what the Sky was talking about than he did even without his mind-reading trick.

Daniella gave that toothy grin again, the one her son hadn't quite managed to inherit in full, flicking her eyes from one Russian sibling to the other. "Dual Guardian prospects, I mean. Rather rare for a non-twin pair of Flame users."

Sonya froze for a moment, Cherep cocked his head at the older woman, and the hitman suddenly wanted another espresso.

No wonder Timoteo barely caused her to bat an eyelash, the effect of any Sky was probably halved for her unless her sibling was nearby.

Shamal just kept nibbling on his mamma's half-finished breakfast, keeping an eye on the new people.

"Which Flame do you two share, I wonder?"

"Well, that is a question isn't it?" Claimed the thief's brother, looking for all the world unlike any Flame user under a curious Sky's eye. "Little rude of you, but I suppose I can understand why you would want to know."

Renato eyed the self-claimed siblings, and their reactions, thoughtfully.

The Sky switched her gaze to the man, not missing the flick of violet in the Storm-Cloud's eyes when she did or the stiffening of her own two Guardians in response. "Not going to answer?"

"There's no real reason to. You don't need us. Your son doesn't need us." Cherep returned the grin, still easygoing and without any edge of his own. "This Tyr character might... but I've met and don't like him."

"And there's the rub." She admitted dryly, her rather blood-thirsty looking grin fading somewhat. "It's you your lovely little sister is conforming to. She won't accept any Sky you won't, will she?"

Renato realized that was probably why Tyr liked cutting in for a dance the last two years, and why he tended to at least acknowledge the thief's presence when she was around.

The Head of the Varia wanted her for a Guardian, for which Flame was debatable.
She had three, and one of them was one her foster brother held as well.

Tyr annoying him was probably just a bonus.

"Any way we could change your mind?" Daniella inquired, almost politely.

"Nope."

"Down, Carcano." She reassured her Storm, who looked half a tick away from snapping something probably insulting to the two siblings. "That's very… final. And stubborn. Most Flame users would kill for a chance for Harmony."

"And I intend to remain so. This will probably be my only visit." Cherep pointed out, settling back in his chair and giving the Sky a measured look. "So, I won't have any time to become accustomed to any Sky looking at my little sister for a Guardian and will not unless she asks me back here. Pity that."

"Yes, quite the pity." Ottavia Vongola answered thoughtfully, unlacing her hands to rub thoughtfully at the red flower tattoo under her left eye. She turned her attention back to the younger woman, who had been watching her Cloud Guardian more than her conversation with her brother, and the curious little Mist in her lap. "I was wondering, my dear, if you wouldn't mind meeting me and a few other women for coffee this afternoon."

"I'm here to visit Shamal." Sonya stated flatly, getting into a new staring contest with the Sky. "I have no other reason to do anything else while I'm here."

Daniella pursed her lips, crossing her arms under her chest after straightening the cuffs of her red suit jacket she still favored for daily wear since her own Donna days. "Nilda and Rosabella were expecting you earlier this month."

"…Miss Tweets and Miss Silvery-white?" The thief clarified to herself slowly, after a long moment trying to mentally place the names with the various Italians she didn't know well. "That's nice. And?"

"They would be most put out if you ignore them."

"I've met them once. It wasn't an entirely great meeting."

"That is likely the point, Miss Nikishina. They would like the opportunity to make a better impression."

"Which they can do at Christmas." Dismissed the Storm-Cloud swiftly. "I have no reason to go out of my way to see them."

Queerly, the elder Vongola looked amused at the stubbornness she was getting stonewalled by. Her Guardians weren't, but then Renato was pretty sure they were insulted on their Sky's behalf.

Carcano was Daniella's second Storm, and thus younger and more of a fussy hen over the retired Donna. Solothurn was the lady's original Cloud Guardian and held more faith in the Boss he followed through World War Two with.

"Nothing to add, Sinclair?"

"Since you had yet to direct your lovely attention to me, madam Vongola, I wasn't going to interrupt." The hitman professed smoothly, smirking at the level gaze the retired mob Boss pinned him with and the bristling her Storm did in response. "But… Shamal has school, and I don't think
Sonya made many plans for the time he's otherwise occupied."

He ignored the less than amused look the thief tossed his way. She had asked for more people to talk to before, he was just helping her get what she wanted.

"A wonderful idea. Lunch instead then, Miss Nikishina?"

Sonya flicked her gaze from Renato to the Sky and then to her brother. "I should beg off, I have Cherep to entertain for the week."

"After this week?"

"I should get back to work." Bratty Mist in her lap puffed up in outrage, and the thief rolled her eyes at his slightly betrayed but mostly demanding look.

"Should is a very interesting term." Not remotely nonplussed just yet, Daniella glanced at said brother. "Can you spare her a day or two any sooner?"

"I could, but I don't see why I should risk her getting annoyed with me."

"Because I've asked nicely?"

"Will you ask rudely if I continue to say no?" Cherep countered with genuine amusement and a lopsided grin.

The Sky barked a laugh, which startled her Storm but caused her Cloud to roll his eyes. "You two are amusing, and quite the tag-team pair. It really is such a pity you both are so stubborn, I am very interested in how you would behave as Guardians to a Sky."

"We'll take that as a compliment."

"It was meant to be so." The retired Ottavia admitted to the brother with another but more amused toothy smirk. "But I really must insist on at least one meeting, or I will be forced to continually bother the both of you for as long as needed. I have only so few things to entertain me these days."

Sonya raised one sardonic eyebrow, nonverbally calling the Sky a liar by her look alone. At the entirely unapologetic expression she got back, the thief huffed sourly. "Once. The day after he leaves."

"That wasn't so hard, now was it?" Asked Daniella pleasantly, a slight smirk of triumph on her lips. "I look forward to it."

The woman at his side fully intended to bail if the Sky insisted on more than just one meeting, which was why she put off her agreed one until her brother had left.

Renato, very carefully, didn't snort. It would only let the thief know he had dipped into her thoughts again, and he was trying rather hard not to.

He was pretty damn sure Lady Vongola wasn't going to view that as anything more than a temporary obstacle to overcome in a long-term campaign, just as she seemed to view the siblings' stubbornness as a challenge more than a deterrent.

It would be interesting to see who was more obstinate, the Sky or the Storm-Cloud.

Renato drank the rest of his cold coffee as Daniella made her excuses to leave, dropping the cup
when the three members of the Eight Generation of Vongola were well on their way out of the dining hall. "Shamal, I do believe you're late for getting to school on time."

"I'm late." The total brat confirmed smugly, then returned to nibbling on the last piece of toast Sonya hadn't gotten around to eating.

"I'm pretty sure Cherep wouldn't mind taking you to school, and claiming he got lost." The thief ruthlessly shot down the kid's hope for getting excused for the day.

"Aww…"

"Kid, I have a motorcycle."

Shamal suddenly didn't look so depressed about the prospects of going to school anymore.

Sonya sighed heavily as the brat abandoned her hurriedly to gather his school things. "Boys. Shoo then, and make sure he's got a helmet. Pretty sure there should be at least one in the garage if you ask nicely."

The hitman waited until after Cherep rolled his eyes at his sister and walked off to find what she asked for, then looked at the thief. "Suns and iron, huh?"

"How often do you melt your guns rather than just the grips?" She asked in return, inspecting her now empty plate but deciding not to bother with getting more to eat. "They're not nearly as stable as crystal formations, but metals can work in a pinch."

Renato actually didn't know the answer to that, just that he had to replace the grips on his favorite pistols more than a few times before then guns melted.

Something to watch for. "Huh."

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 27th of February, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Eyeing her foster brother's current favorite contraption, Sonya shifted so Cherep could pull whatever tool he wanted out of the borrowed tool chest she was leaning against. "Are you going to do this every day?"

"What else is there for us to do in Italy?"

"We could go into the town and explore a little, instead of whenever Shamal wants to." The thief answered blandly. "There's a few good library rooms in the Iron Fort. Pretty sure they have practice ranges for firearms and possibly a sparring ring or gym in there if we're really that desperate."

"We could, books are more your thing, and… no." The stuntman tossed back, checking over what his little sister was pretty sure was the intake valve or something.

Even after watching him pull engines apart and put them back together, she really only had a passing familiarity with mechanical things. Either way, she did like watching him mess with metal machines. It was slightly hypnotizing and a decent time waster.

Sonya had really little to do in Vongola territory, but like he had said books were more her thing. She was perfectly happy reading all day if she could get away with it.

Getting away with it this week seemed to be a challenge. Daniella of Vongola had all six Guardians
still, even if she had comparatively very young Storm and Lightning ones, and each of them had no compulsions against asking the Storm-Cloud if she had the time yet to cater to their Sky's interests.

They were all very polite about it, but they were also all very insistent.

"You know, it's called self-defense for a reason. I don't care if you never use it, frankly I'd be happy to hear it, but knowing how to get out of a tight spot can't be that objectionable."

Cherep shot her an amused look over one shoulder. "I don't have a problem defending myself, I have a problem learning to hurt people."

Sonya shot him a glare in return. "People aren't always going to be as considerate as you are for their well-being."

"Well then, they suck at being decent human beings." The insufferable ass returned cheerfully. "It's fine, Sonya. I plan on running for it instead of stand my ground and letting myself get beat up."

…yeah, that was going to go over as well as a ton of bricks when it came time for the Arcobalenos to make a comeback. She sighed heavily, sinking a hand into her hair and raking it back away from her face. "There's this one art that… isn't so much as fighting back as it is redirecting an attack away from you. You can hurt others by doing it, but the basics was just avoiding everything."

Pausing before replacing the gasket on his engine, her fellow Cloud gave her a sideways look. "Do you remember what it's called? It sounds… interesting."

"Starts with the letter a, but I can't remember exactly what it was named. I'll find it again." Sonya promised him, trying to dredge what the ever-loving hell it had been out of her faulty memories of Rachel. "You could also go with blunt weapons? I could teach you what I know of the staff."

"I'll pass, thank you."

The thief rolled her eyes at the rather predictable answer, tentatively hoping this one martial art would at least pan out. She didn't worry about him all that much anymore, but she was also keenly aware that there was a clock ticking.

Which also reminded her, she had 'la tourmente's' rotten lockbox to investigate. When she got back to Mafia Land, it was going to be sent on to Moscow to Lisa to hold until she had the time again.

The Storm-Cloud watched her brother mess with his bike for a good fifteen minutes before anything else happened, and that else happened to be the Ninth's Lightning Guardian.

"Err… shit." Ganauche stated flatly when it became apparent the only two in the garage he had entered were the thief and stuntman. "Hey, either of you know where old Augusto is?"

"Yes, he's gone to the hospital to see his daughter give birth to his first grandkid." Cherep informed him slowly, straightening up slightly to look at the man curiously. "And before you ask, Costanzo volunteered to take him there. The old man's hands were shaking rather badly."

The head of Vongola's motor pool and his best mechanic, Sonya mentally pegged the two names. There were more mechanically inclined people, but not within the Iron Fort's main garage itself.

Stately manor home or not, there was only a small fleet of cars to worry about.

Every other car that belonged to the housekeeping staff seemed to never stay longer than an hour before being driven elsewhere to be parked.
"And they just left you two in here?" The Lightning demanded irritably.

"Well, one of the footmen pokes in every half hour." Amended the stuntman with a shrug. "Used to be every few minutes, but I suppose he has better things to do."

Ganauche still didn't look happy. "Well... shit. You any good as a mechanic?"

Blinking at that non sequitur, Cherep shot Sonya a glance then the Guardian one of his own. "Yes? I kind of do it for a living, with a bit of stunt driving on the side."

"Perfect. Look, something is going funny in the car I took out. Take a look of your own, only a look, and let me know if it was something I did or if it's just the damn car."

She didn't think she liked this, they were guests not hired help. Ganauche quailed only slightly under her glare.

"Nono's going to kill me if I ruin another car outside a mission. And I didn't even go far!"

Tossing the tool he had been fiddling with at his little sister, the stuntman gave the Lighting a small smirk. "Well... there's some motivation. What seems wrong with it, anyways?"

"It's making some weird ass clicking noises. Still, and I shut the engine off." The man claimed, shoulders slumping as he tried to put what he knew into words. "And I think the hood's half unlatched or something, it's jiggling."

"Probably the alternator, or maybe the timing belt is going. Those are more wear and tear than preventable damage." Mused Cherep aloud. "Something could've gotten loose, small enough and they might click instead of thump. Depending on the rate and strength of the clicking noise anyways. The hood's latch... where did you leave it?"

"In the-"

Ganauche was cut off by an only partially muffled explosion that rattled the garage, flinching from the noise just barely enough to save his life temporarily when what looked like two shattered car doors embedded themselves into the thin sheet metal that made up the garage doors and cut into his face.

Sonya, gritting her teeth against the rather painful ringing in her ears, pulled herself off the ground where she had fallen and mentally finished the Lightning's comment as 'in the drive'.

Cherep had tripped backwards over his bike when he flinched at the noise, which had neatly saved him from the other car door, and curiously abandoned it tipped over in favor for scrambling to the Guardian's side to ensure the man didn't bleed out.

She staggered a little drunkenly to the connecting doors between the garage and the Iron Fort's main kitchen area, beaten to opening the door by a very white-faced little maid.

Which wasn't fair, the maid was probably as tall as Sonya was when she stood straight.

The thief made a few awkward pantomimes, trying to convey the fact she couldn't hear anything and another needed something to staunch a head wound. She wasn't exactly sure how well she did, but it was enough for the girl to figure out she wasn't going to be much help in any conversation.

Tiny maid peeked around her form, said something the Storm-Cloud couldn't hear, then ducked back into the Vongola Headquarters.
At least someone knew they were alive and where they were, Sonya gave up on the maid and twisted in a wobbly path back to help her brother.

Ganauche might have kept from getting his head ripped off by large chunks of shrapnel but didn't avoid all the sharp metal edges. He probably had a concussion too, he was entirely unresponsive to whatever Cherep was trying to shout.

Rather frustrated looking, he glanced up at her. Shrugging, Sonya jerked her thumb to the still open door behind her. The look he gave her was a very familiar echo of his childhood when he regularly looked like a sopping wet kitten as he pointed to the unconscious Lightning.

Irritable, and not exactly in the mood to play charades to try getting any kind of communication across, she instead reached for Ganauche's left arm and bodily hauled the man up.

At least the sheepish smile she got soothed a bit of her ire.

Sonya just would really like her hearing back.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 27th of February, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Odd."

"What is?" Cherep asked curiously, keeping half an eye on the guy called Brow Nie as he held yellow Flames to both sides of his little sister's head.

"You are perfectly alright." Revelli, apparently old lady Vongola's Sun Guardian and head of the Vongola's little personal medical wing, commented neutrally. "Aside a bit of bleeding from the ears of your own, nothing is so much as a rip in your ear drum."

"Mmm... yeah. I'm... sturdy." The stuntman explained awkwardly, rubbing the back of his head when it seemed the medic didn't really believe him fully. "So... that other guy, is he going to be okay?"

Half the reason he had insisted the older man in charge of the medical wing to focus on his fellow Italian was to give his own Flames time to finish fixing himself.

"Ganauche will be fine. A few scars, the metal was burning as it gouged his face, but nothing I can't smooth out with enough time. His eye on the other hand... nothing left alive to regrow, even if something so delicate wouldn't just end up a mass of scar tissue if I tried."

Cherep very nearly blurted out his Cloud Flame trick for instant-heal to the medic looking reprovingly at him, as if he knew the stuntman wasn't being fully honest with him. He held it in, knowing full well Sonya would not appreciate him doing any such thing no matter what was at stake.

Besides, the Lightning would probably get a Mist Construct or... maybe not another Cloud regrowing an eye for him, but there would likely be yet another fix he didn't know of.

Tatiana was the medic of their little foster family, she'd probably be better suited to suggesting alternatives to a lost eye.

Sonya suddenly hissed out a very nasty sounding chain of syllables, causing the Sun Activating her own cell growth and division to repair the broken parts of her ears to chuckle. "I'll be sure to let the
men hunting for our bomber know exactly what you think of their mothers, and who could possibly be their fathers, Miss Nikishina."

Given the glare the thief shot him, Cherep figured she could hear again. He did wonder what language she was swearing in.

"He was very lucky the two of you waylaid him for a few minutes." Revelli of the Eighth Generation commented quietly. "I know the knucklehead pretty well. Had you two not been there and got to talking, Ganauche would've gone back to see if he could fix the problem on his own before owning up to Nono Vongola about the situation."

The salt-n-pepper Italian Sun threaded his fingers through his neat beard while Cherep absorbed the fact and pondered the other possible outcomes that might have happened.

He didn't get far beyond the poor guy maybe getting a face full of exploding car before someone threw open the medical wing's doors with a bang that made his little sister cringe.

Don Vongola was glanced at once, then everyone in the room pointed him in the direction of his injured Lightning Guardian.

Cherep, while interested in how the near-mythical Harmonized Sky-Guardian thing actually worked out in real life, didn't watch the man he had yet to meet. His friend... subordinate-person was injured, it would be rude.

The older Sun Guardian hummed to himself, redirecting the stuntman's attention. "You're fine, but I think your little sister will be asked to remain for the night at the very least."

Sonya had shattered three of the six tiny bones in her ears, as well as popped both ear drums.

Ganauche had it worse, but then the native Italian had been closer to the explosion than she had been. That was why his crooked best friend couldn't quite walk in a straight line afterwards and needed him to keep them all going in one direction.

Giving a man a nod to show he both heard and understood, Cherep slid off the medical cot he had been situated on upon arrival and slid over to his sister's spot across from him.

Her brat was going to pitch a fit.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 27th of February, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"What's his Flame?"

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"That bad?"

"...depends. He's very good at keeping himself contained. A very skilled Mist has probably been teaching him how to do it. But he's nowhere near good enough to hide it from me."

"So...?"
"I've never seen a pair of Clouds before. Rather interesting, don't you think?"

"Wait, both of them?"

"Yes."

(Friday the 28th of February, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Sonya wondered if she was going to really be absolutely petty about this or not.

Yeah, yeah she was.

"Do try not to crash, Cherep. I'll see you... this fall?"

"Might make time this summer, possibly." The stuntman cheerfully informed her, taking his cue from her and responding in Russian, patting Shamal on the head as he accepted his helmet from her.

"For... reasons."

The thief knew perfectly well he didn't quite understand. Her brother would play along anyways, because he didn't much like the underworld of crooks and killers. Vongola was as mafia as you could get and was pretty shameless about it.

That was fine, she didn't mind.

Cherep wasn't an inherently nasty person.

Unfortunately, or not depending, she was.

"Do you have to go?" Shamal hadn't quite gotten the hang of her native language, he only had a handful of phrases and a few numbers memorized so far.

His question was in Italian, and the brat was curiously accepting of the fact their conversation was going over his head.

While Sonya was held in the medical wing overnight, Cherep finally figured out how to bond with his little sort-of nephew once they were kicked out. She didn't know yet what they bonded over, other than her brother's dratted motorcycle, but could probably figure it out eventually.

The bratty Mist was nearly chomping at the bit to get up to something. She held the suspicion it was something Viper told Cherep who passed it to Shamal. Sonya didn't really mind at all, so long as she wasn't caught up in whatever it was.

She would be asking her brother if he knew anything to pass to the Zolotov Mists, because the moment someone other than the Four Rains were considered assets she might have less issues all over.

Could only be a good thing at this point.

"I don't have to," Her brother informed the kid easily in the only language he understood fully.

"Sonya would rather I did. And frankly she knows more about this place than I do, so it's only natural to follow her lead."

The fact the thief didn't know more about the latest incident of car-bombing in Vongola territory than
he did was politely ignored.

"Nono's going to be pissed." Renato didn't exactly sound too upset, queerly.

He was at least going along with the siblings in speaking only Russian, for now.

"Nono can kiss my ass." Sonya informed him flatly. "I didn't bring my brother here to get caught up in any famigila's pissing match with him, and he has no control over me or Cherep's leaving."

Which, since she didn't know too much else about the circumstances of Ganauche's recent car troubles, was a fairly decent stab in the dark for the why. She was only intending to stay long enough to keep her word to the retired Vongola Sky, then she would be leaving as well.

The fact this was going to make Shamal very, very upset was only icing on the cake. He had only now gotten attached to his 'zio', the man leaving was probably going to be another thing he'd stew over for a while.

Unhappy Mists were… not fun things to deal with.

Timoteo probably was more occupied with the hemming in the idiots that dared to strike at his Lightning Guardian before they could repeat the attempt to realize there was a separate issue entirely linked to the situation.

The Russian was a Cloud, she didn't like it when her prerogatives were usurped.

Cherep had been pained by the incident, which meant Sonya was upset. No one was telling her which moron-flavored syndicate was responsible, for then she could work her ire off on the proper targets, so she was going to internalize it and take a leaf out of the stuntman's book.

Passive-aggressive behavior, at least until she felt better.

The first step was extracting her brother out of the mess, which was easy enough. His visit was only really getting cut by a day, hers on the other hand…

Shamal was either going to throw a titanic fit again or be an absolute snot of a brat, more than he was being lately anyways.

…but she could spend a whole week being as much a bitch as possible.

That dearly appealed to her, but there was the twin issues of the Mist brat's living situation and Renato's reputation.

She wasn't quite irritated enough with the hitman, even if he was acting weird, to damage his standing by being a rude guest again. Shamal lived here, at least until she could find something the older Italian wouldn't mind as an alternative.

If she hadn't been so disgusted at the 'but all _ Flame users act that way' bullshit, she'd find it amusing that the brat's Misty tantrums were merely regarded as a measure of how strong he was. As it was, she was wary of Timoteo trying to get his oldest to bond with the kid.

That would happen only over her cold, dead corpse.

Shamal was way too strong for a younger Sky to hold, and a possible Guardian's repeated Rejections of the same Sky was a phenomenon she had no information about. She'd rather not learn there were consequences from that after the point of no return, especially not from her brat.
It was possible she just disliked the pairing, or this Federico's reported behavior. However, she had disliked the news when she figured it out so throwing down any objections she could was something she was going to do.

Sonya did not like Timoteo of Vongola much. She hadn't really held much of an opinion on the man before this, but she was leaning to dislike after the events of the past two days.

Cherep ruffled Shamal's messy hair in farewell, shot a rather indescribable look to the hitman lounging against the Iron Fort's perimeter wall, and tipped the thief a nod before sliding his helmet over his features and starting up his rather noisy bike.

She only turned to the older Italian when her brother was well on his way out of Vongola territory. "Why have you been acting strange lately?"

"You didn't want me and my talents around your darling brother, little lady Sonya." Renato reminded her in a slightly insulted but mostly sardonic tone. "I was merely respecting that."

"Huh." The man could be charmingly well-mannered if he had a reason. He rarely did, unfortunately. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Ever, went the unspoken tail end of his comment.

She looked down at the mopey Mist brat. "I don't feel particularly inclined to wait around for someone to notice I've snuck my brother out of the manor. Shall we hit up a gelato store?"

"Will Mister Renato come with?"

Sonya shot the hitman a similarly curious look.

Shrugging, he pushed off the wall and walked over to them. "Why not?"

(ooo000oooo)

(Friday the 28th of February, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"You're being silly." Shamal informed the man heatedly. "Mamma fights all the time, you just don't realize it."

"Oh?" The really weird old guy asked in amusement, shaping a tiny tower with tiny people walking in and out of it for him to try copying. "Funny. I hadn't noticed half the manor falling down around our ears yet."

Blowing out an exasperated breath, the younger Mist carefully Constructed a tree-fort tower of his own design. A big oak tree, with a chapel and a hospital 'branch' and… well, lots of rooms in the leafy part.

His tiny people ended up looking like tin soldier figurines more than people, and he tried to correct that before continuing. "She fights with her words, Mister Croquant."

Red hair and dark skin made for a very funny looking person, but Shamal ignored that. The raised eyebrow was rather annoying, as his mamma's Cloudy habits were understandable once you looked past the obvious lack of outward violence.

He had all sorts of suspicions of why the Mist Guardian had invited himself into the Mist Flame classroom and the weekend lessons he had to take since he was a young Mist, and specifically why
the man was asking about Miss Sonya.

Giving up on tiny people, they never turned out right and Mister Renato was going to have him copy everyone exactly the moment he knew until his skill in that was better, he switched to a fort full of animals and flying fish.

He was pretty proud of the whale.

Croquant Bouche merely gave a tiny shrug, setting his tiny people up to wage war on Shamal's tiny animal-fish army.

The younger Mist liked this game better than chess, but Mister Renato wasn't a Mist so he couldn't play. Neither was mamma or her brother, but they had him make the armies for them instead and they had fun that way.

His guardian probably figured he'd cheat if he was in control of everything, and he did.

He was a Mist, of course he cheated.

"How, exactly, does your mamma fight then?"

"I already said, with words."

His mamma fought most with Mister Renato, mainly. Over everything and anything and until one or the other huffed but went along with whatever it was. She also fought with her brother, in a lighter way because they knew full well where they stood with one another and didn't need a full out fight to know it.

Both men fought back just as much which made her a happy Cloud, so she could feed her Storminess with books. It was why she had been undecided over Don Vongola until recently because he didn't fight with her at all, so she couldn't get his measure.

Then zio ended up injured with her, in Vongola territory, and she didn't like him at all. To a Cloud, one's home territory told her a lot about the kind of person in charge. It probably wasn't fair, but no one ever said Clouds were fair creatures.

Master Tyr was fighting a different fight with his mamma, a slower one of snips and digs with smirks in an 'I-know-something-you-don't' way when informing the other of whatever. Shamal didn't like it, but anything that got her attention here was a bonus.

Maybe she'd visit more if other slow people caught on and gave her more challenges. She always seemed bored when he couldn't find something for her to do with him and Mister Renato was off elsewhere.

"A fairly interesting opinion."

Shamal's whale swallowed a whole flank of the older Mist's infantrymen, an expression of the younger's irritation. He lost the flying tank-creature, the wing of army people had been a feint to allow the older Mist's archers within range of it enough to pop his Construction.

He knew his mamma perfectly well, thanks. It wasn't his fault if other people were slow and scaredy-cats.

If they didn't want to believe him, then he wasn't going to try to change their minds. They could figure out what he was trying to tell them on their own, and he'd get to say 'I told you so' afterwards.
Mister Renato always seemed to have fun saying that to other people.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 28th of February, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Sonya Nikishina irritably eyed the woman that asked if she was ill. "I am Russian, black tea was what my foster mother gave us to grow up with."

Nilda Guerra quickly inserted herself into the conversation before the other woman made another condescending assurance that they wouldn't judge her for whatever she was suffering from. "We Italians really only drink tea when feeling a little under the weather, Nikishina."

She gained a very flat grey stare for her troubles. "I'll have tea, thank you."

Something had ruffled the Cloud's feathers rather badly. The Soft Flame Rain was pretty sure she was being stubborn just because and not for any other reason. It was possible she was wrong in that, there was a tizzy of rumors floating around lately she had yet to gain full understanding of.

Lady Vongola had anticipated the woman's request, beckoning for one of the maids to come forward with a very specific teapot. "You know dear... may I call you Sonya? That rascal Sinclair specifically ordered this for you before your first attendance as his date."

"That's nice. And no, I'd rather you didn't."

Nilda inhaled sharply at that breathtaking amount of rudeness, but Daniella's lips only twitched in amusement.

"Miss Nikishina then. You are determined to be stubborn?"

The very bland eyebrow that was raised in response spoke volumes of unimpressed. "Since you were determined to cut into the time I have available for a certain brat and my friend, I feel no need to be polite. You wanted me here, Ottavia, I didn't want to be."

"Friend, hmmm? Is that all?"

The smile Sonya gave Daniella made more than a few of the mob ladies shudder. Which, Nilda mused, was impressive because they were not fainting socialites sheltered from their bloody reality.

A few unpracticed mob wives maybe, but there were also a few hitwomen and assassins in this crowd in the retired Vongola Donna's parlor.

"Friend." The Cloud affirmed strongly. "It is rather bewildering how many people seem to think we are more than just that."

The Rain turned her attention to the elderly Sky like the rest of the ladies in the room, to see what her rebuttal would be.

It was rather fascinating, in the same way one couldn't look away from a heated duel. No matter the weapon of choice was, everyone wanted to see who would come out on top.

Although, the Cloud's comment was rather lacking as a denouncement of anything more than friendly bonds between her and the hitman in question. Probably not her intent... but tasty as a rumor to spread.

Ottavia's expression was still as smooth as polished marble, but her eyes were locked with the
Russian's own defiant ones. "I suppose… we'll just have to take your word for it."

"I can't decide if that means you are easily led via rumors or if you don't form an opinion of your own."

Nilda hid her gasp into her coffee, unlike a few others who spluttered.

Was Sonya trying to get herself killed?

Beretta and Glisenti were situated in the room, Rain and Mist Guardians respectively. Both females would not hesitate to try removing the woman's head for disrespect if even allowed one inch of leeway.

No, the woman decided after an intense moment of staring on both sides, the Russian was trying to get herself kicked out.

"I would've been a very poor Donna if I allowed myself to be easily led or never made up my own mind." Daniella informed the other woman pleasantly, a slight wrinkle forming at the corners of her eyes creasing through a tattooed petal. Nothing negative yet, merely a slight disapproval for how direct the other was being. "Although, I do wonder what your mother would think of your behavior."

"I'd rather not know. She was a nasty piece of work." The Cloud, thief by trade if the rumors were right, dismissed after a sip of her dark tea. "My foster mother, on the other hand, would tell me I shouldn't pull my punches anymore."

Neatly cornered, the Rain judged. Ottavia had few choices from that and they all were as murky as possible. Either ask about the original mother, the foster mother, or try a different attack but concede the initial parries in the Russian's favor.

"'Pull your punches'? Is this polite for you then?" She asked, a fourth path than what Nilda had figured she would take. "I would hate to see you angry."

"...you could ask Renato about that." A warning she had definable limits, or merely a comment? "Although you could also go to Mafia Land and see the mile-long swath I carved out of the headwind forest instead. The damage is still rather obvious, and that happened only last year."

She was pretty damn certain she wasn't the only one making plans to see if that was actually true or not the next time she went there.

"Isn't that odd for you?"

"You know me that well, do you?"

Daniella pursed her lips, to hide a smile if Nilda was a decent judge. She wasn't, which meant it was equally as possible it had been a frown. "There are so few strong female Mafiosi, the news of any… even Russian ones, is interesting. Do you blame me for following what little I can hear?"

That obstinate edge of challenge in the Cloud's eyes suddenly hid itself, and she sat back in the upholstered chair she had been guided to upon entering the parlor.

It was very different from the rapid-fire counters and parries it attracted attention and held it fast for a long moment.

"Actually? Yes, I do."
Lady Vongola's brows raised up sharply in surprise.

"If you were serious about that, it wouldn't have taken you two years to talk to me." Sonya blithely continued on, as if she was unaware of the sudden ringing silence. "Frankly, I'm not appreciative."

Daniella threw her head back and laughed.

"It's been ever so long since I had someone as forthright as you to argue with. You really must visit more often, Nikishina."

The Russian blinked, then blinked again. "Well… fuck."
Chapter 35

(Friday the 28th of February, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Where the hell are you people coming from, anyways?" Sonya snapped at the woman hastening along in her wake down one of the Iron Fort's halls.

"Problem?" Nilda Guerra asked wickedly and just a bit breathless, finally succeeding in coming up to walk next to the Russian Storm-Cloud.

"I've never been... sought out before." She admitted tartly, still trying to put even more space between herself and the retired Vongola Sky's parlor. "Most people avoid me. Rather sensible of them, I'm coming to find."

"Are you truly annoyed we appreciate a strong female Flame user?" The Rain asked in amusement, smirking at the deadpan expression aimed at her before they turned another corner. "You'll find more Italian women with enough steel in their spines to appreciate you fully than most other countries can boast of."

With a heavy sigh, the thief came to a sudden stop and glared full out at her tagalong. "That sounds rather elitist of you."

"You didn't answer my question."

"I have no reason to answer." She dismissed sharply, suspicious of all the unwanted attention suddenly aimed her way.

Sonya didn't appreciate the change, mostly due to the fact she didn't know what caused it. As it was entirely possible said change was actually rather sinister than benign, she had chosen to try and make herself enough of a pain to be avoided until she could find out more. Daniella... did not react as expected.

There was something entirely unfair about the fact she could barely make friends normally but ended up possibly doubling the number she had before when she decided to truly be a bitch for once.

Cherep was going to bust a rib.

"Since I did volunteer information for you, it's really only polite to give a little back." Nilda instructed amusedly.

The Russian shot the woman a disgusted look for treating her like some green newbie to mafia life. "I have no intention of getting pulled into a verbal trade-off. You have no real information I want or need, merely the obvious answers to a few wonders."

"Do I not?" The grin twisting her lips suggested she thought otherwise. "I have had a few general meetings with Daniella Vongola before, and could probably gain more if I wanted to get that deep. Is there really no reason to avoid courting my aid?"

"So, you're basing your use off of being an informant? Trite and not needed." It was entirely possible that wouldn't be the only way that exchange of information could go. "I can as easily get it by allowing Ottavia to pull me into whatever it was she wanted. Since I did not conform, does that not suggest I can do without such?"
"And how long do you expect that to last?" Nilda countered quickly, darting along in the Storm-Cloud's wake when she suddenly started moving again. "Daniella is a Sky-"

"And I am not one of those raised to believe a Sky can do no wrong or is always right."

"-that is exactly why she likes you and why her Guardians, all of them, will put an insane amount of effort to draw you back to her." Insisted the silver-haired Rain, scowling as a rather surprised servant cut her off.

Skirting past the man with his arms full of cleaning supplies, she actually flat out sprinted to catch up with the mildly annoyed Russian.

"You have basically two choices, either fight or play along with her whims. If you fight it, she'll get exactly what she wants. If you don't, just a few meetings not sniping at her will probably ensure she'll lose interest."

"There's a third option." Sonya informed her unwanted tag along sardonically as they descended the foyer stairs probably quicker than was recommended, nodding to the footman who yanked the front door open for her and the other woman. "Not being here and ignoring her."

"Little lady Sonya… did you specifically leave out your lingerie just for me or did you forget about it?" Renato Sinclair snapped irritably at the sound of her voice, blinking once at the extra she really rather wished had left her alone. "Miss… Guerra?"

He had fetched her luggage for her, especially since she promised him the next week to mainly help with his little mind-reading issue rather than fence with words against the Vongola Skies. There would be other things done during that time, but she really did need to get on with knocking out what she had left pending in favor for less interesting but more hazardous tasks.

"The maids probably left it there, since I did start packing my things this morning and removed the stuff I left in the drawers. Besides, it's not like you haven't seen that before."

The man scowled at her for that, flicking a glance to the Rain still gawking near the front steps of the manor. "I find this a very unscrupulous use of our friendship, just so you know."

"Thank you for collecting my things for me, Renato." The thief informed him brightly, ignoring his complaint. "Did you-

The card he flicked to her from a breast pocket was easily snatched out of the air.

"And thanks again."

"Wait, you're leaving?"

Sonya slotted the other woman a dry look. "I do believe that is what I meant."

Nilda's expression was… interesting.

"Sonya."

"I'll make it up to you." The thief informed her hitman friend swiftly, smirking slightly at the very irritated air about the man as her taxi made its ponderous way up the drive. "Rather soon, too."

Renato gave a very disgusted sounding scoff, twisting on his heels to stalk back inside the Iron Fort like a greatly offended panther.
"Miss Silver-White, it wasn't... entirely painful to see you again."

"That... probably was because Velia didn't faint this time."

"Was she there?" The only person the woman would assuredly know had fainted upon meeting the Storm-Cloud was that one weak Sun user from the last Christmas Ball. Sonya would admit she didn't really recall much, other than she was very pathetic and fainted again at Tyr's feet.

"Well... yes, but she was hyperventilating as you took your leave." She admitted slowly, with only a touch of something tart and wry lacing under her words.

(Saturday the 29th of February, 1969. A hotel, Reggio Calabria, Italian Republic.)

"They're going to know."

"Renato, stop trying to distract me and go back to learning how to shut off that annoying little trick of yours."

The hitman lasted all of another five minutes of silence before he rather irritably ripped the history text out of her hands and violently pitched it at the far wall. "That is disgustingly white-washed make-believe that has only a passing acquaintance with what really happened."

Sonya didn't immediately kick him in the shin for mistreating her book, because for one he had bought her it and two she was also pretty sure that text was a mass-produced sort which had little real value in a historic sense. Renato probably did know a lot better than any civilian published book did about Italy's involvement with the Mafia Wars during World War Two, and frankly she had been meaning to ask him about it.

However, she also wasn't going to let him get away with being an asshole to her since she was putting in the effort to help him. Crossing her arms, the thief gave the man seated across from her at her little hotel room table a flat look.

The older Italian native in the room looked pretty unrepentant for a long moment, then very slowly and reluctantly grimaced. "I have a migraine."

"That is the point."

They already knew her reading when he was close enough to mentally pick it up gave him such, it was the whole reason she was reading while the Mafioso was right next to her. There was no teacher quite like pain, and Sonya was perfectly okay with causing him it.

"You dented the wall." Shamal piped up from the thief's hotel bed, where he had sprawled out to do his homework for the start of his next week of schooling.

Sighing, she pinched the bridge of her nose as the hitman glowered at the brat irritably just for something to glare at that wouldn't take offense. "We may as well stop for the day, not that you managed to do much. Shamal? Are you done?"

"Yes!" The little Mist scrambled off her bed, bringing with him several sheets of lined paper for her perusal. "All finished!"

Renato probably did check over his homework when he had the time, the man was an irritating
perfectionist. She'd seen him glower at his contract work at Mafia Land enough to know. The thief plucked the papers out of the brat's hand and glanced at it before the hitman with a headache could, but her attention got rooted to the fact it was written in perfect Cyrillic.

"Shamal? Remove the Mist Flames, kid."

There was no way in hell he was this fluent in written Russian.

Not with biyearly instructions and only occasional help with it. It had to be a Constructed illusion, one that makes whoever look at it think the work had been done... but since she had no idea what his homework was about it looked like the written explanation for lock picking she did around his age.

"Um..."

"You didn't do the work, you just have Mist Flames imbued in it making others think you did."

"...but mamma, it works!"

As long as Shamal could get away with it, Sonya really didn't care that much. Against a person, a teacher, that assigned a classroom full of kids the same work it would work as intended and had little risk to it other than a civilian's psychotic breakdown.

However, he probably still should at least attempt to do the work to prove he knew it. Even if what he did and what he turned in were different things.

"Works or not, try doing the work first before you turn in something so...

"Uninspired." Renato chipped in for her, leaving the chair next to her in favor for taking up her bed. "You had better not have given me something like that and passed it off as your homework, brat."

"I only figured it out recently." Shamal admitted, disgruntled and shooting his guardian a dirty look.

The hitman probably would appreciate the sneakiness more if he didn't have a headache the size of his home country, so she ignored him. Then again, if it had been used against him...

"What did you really do for the last hour and a half?"

"Wrote the questions out."

She arched an eyebrow at the homework when the brat lifted his Mist Flames from it, and all the doodles edging the neat list of problems assigned from his textbook. "How long does that last?"

"Until I get it back."

Which... anywhere from a few days to a week of time?

She had no clue how long a teacher would take to grade a full classes' worth of homework, and if Shamal was doing this for all of his assignments?

"Right... well..." Eyeing the hitman currently sprawled out on her bed, and all over the brat's books, the thief instead tossed the paper to the tabletop and looked back at the young Mist. "I think we should go find something for dinner. You can make a crack at answering the questions after."

Renato had snuck the brat out of the Iron Fort and would be ferrying the kid to and from his school for the next week. In exchange, Sonya would remain otherwise free this week to expressly help him
with the mind-reading issue in the safety of her hotel room instead of somewhere else that might not be as easily secured.

Like Mafia Land, or one of the Iron Fort's various little parlors.

Right now, they were figuring out the limitations and the trick. How far he had to be for what kind of thoughts, helping the hitman figure out how to either turn it off or intentionally ignore another, and they would either sort out the basics so the Sun wouldn't tip anyone off figuring it out on his own or until he got a good grip on the skill.

She did not believe for a moment that Renato would ignore his trick, it was way too useful in a lifestyle where most lied to others as a matter of fact. Her helping him also helped her, in figuring out if there was anything she could do to stop it if she didn't want him reading her mind aside giving the ass a migraine or two if she caught him at it.

"There's a small restaurant down the street, if you take a left after going out the hotel's lobby."

Started the hitman, moving his fedora to shade his eyes and shifting a bit more. "Three doors from the next intersection, right-hand side, called Sotto Sotto. Get me the dinner special."

…worked for her.

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(Sunday the 1st of March, 1969. A hotel, Reggio Calabria, Italian Republic.)

"They know."

Sonya snorted at him, trying to figure out what to pacify Shamal with so they could get on with the reason she was stalling yet another week in Italy instead of getting things done so she could return to Moscow. "I'm not doing this in some kind of protest of Vongola, Renato. I'm doing this so I'll be bothered less, and because it's cheaper than bribing Nono for a week's worth of safe passage."

Being ignored was something she could deal with. The thief wasn't a very influential person here, she really had little to no reason to interact with the Vongola Skies, and therefore being left alone to amuse herself was a pretty decent deal for all involved.

Little effort on her side, little effort on Don Timoteo's side, and still things got done at a respectable rate. Maybe he even got a laugh or something to think about as a bonus.

She didn't appreciate that status quo tipping.

Tyr was different, someone she wanted to forge a connection to because she wanted to, but Daniella's interest in her for much the same reason wasn't appreciated. The only reason she brought Cherep was because she was pretty much left alone, not because she wanted more attention.

Yet she was getting more attention, and even if her passage could be bought with the elder Sky's interests… it would also mean more effort on her end to keep that relationship up.

Cheaper did not always mean easier.

She also had little reason to get involved with the Eighth or Ninth Generations of Vongola. They were Italian, she was Russian, and their respective interests didn't mesh very much. Yes, they were all Flame users and criminals.
Beyond that…?

Thankfully today was Sunday, the little brat had school tomorrow. The Sun user could dump Shamal at school for most the day, they could put in more effort in his mind-reading trick, then the hitman could go recollect his ward and dump him off on her for the rest of the night while he did…

She was pretty sure the man was trying the riskier mental probing on people he had to kill anyways.

"I am, actually." Renato admitted willingly enough as if that didn't imply that he wanted to spare her the worst effects of his tricks, didn't think she could take it, or that he didn't want her irritated at him again. "Frankly, you're in enough of a contrary mood that anything I do will have negative motives behind it for you that I don't see the point in trying to avoid them."

Was she?

Sonya brought her thoughts up short, wondering if she was doing exactly what he was accusing her of.

"I'm not accusing anything. You are, and you're also probably entitled to it."

The man had the audacity to laugh at her for the probably skeptical look she gave him.

"Sonya, Nono isn't perfect. No one is." Renato informed her of airily as he moved to check what Shamal was really doing with his books and if he was done so they could get on with the plan for the day. "A reminder that non-Vongola assets need different handling than the rest of the Famiglia is probably an overdue prompt he needed for a while now. You're such a good guest, self-contained and not interested in prying for rumors or gossip. I'm willing to bet a lot of people forgot you are a Cloud and are perfectly capable of acting like it."

Which didn't excuse the fact her brother had gotten injured on Vongola grounds. Even if they didn't know that because Cherep's ability healed or bullshitted a fix, it was hard to tell sometimes, himself before medical aid could be given. It also didn't excuse the fact that she was not informed of anything regarding the people that managed the injuring.

Sonya would've accepted being informed that whoever did it were all dead, or just mostly dead, or the famiglia responsible were slotted to die the moment Tyr had a moment free. Hell, she would've settled for being informed of the name of whoever it was. She'd kill them then, or more likely hire Renato or the Sword Emperor to do it for her.

The hitman would get preference, but if he didn't want to be known for taking out whole famiglia she'd offer it next to the master assassin before taking the commission to Mafia Land or even to Ziven if he still was looking for something to do.

…probably not. The thief still had enough morals to know mass murder wasn't an answer. One or two hits then, for the idiots that carried out the attempted car-bombing of the Vongola Lightning Guardian and probably wouldn't see her brother as anything but collateral damage.

Sighing, the Russian rubbed the bridge of her nose and gave up worrying about it. Tyr probably would likely inform her of what she wanted to know if she asked politely, as long as it was termed in a query for 'who hurt my brother' than 'who hurt Vongola', so the issue would be dealt with then. For the current issue she really should be thinking of…

"Shamal… aside my presence for the rest of the week? What else would you like for your birthday?"

The brat then proved he had been spending way too much time with Renato by looking her in the
eye and asking, "Besides you showing up on time next year?"

"...besides that, yes."

The young Mist left his work in his guardian's hands, ducking the man's arm to come around her temporary bed in order to face her fully. "I don't know, what can I get?"

"Again, brat, I am a thief. What can't I get?" Sonya held up a hand to stop him before the spark of something mischievous in his brown eyes translated into words. "Aside a baby sibling again, because I am way too young to actually get myself pregnant for no real reason other than that and you have yet to actually meet mine."

"Aww..." Shamal even let himself bat suspiciously overblown teary eyes at her but dropped the illusion of wounded innocence when she gave him an unimpressed stare back. "...can I get a dog?"

"No." Renato answered for her flatly, glancing over to pin the brat with a no-nonsense look before catching what was probably a questioning look on her face. "Vongola's child wing has a no large pet policy. A few of the other brats have allergies, as do the housekeeping staff. If it can't be caged and contained to one room, it's not allowed."

"So smaller pets like birds, rodents, and amphibians? A dog is a lot of work, Shamal. If you can take care of a smaller pet until your time in the Iron Fort is done, I'll consider getting a house in this country for the rest of your preteen and maybe teenage years, as long as Renato agrees you can handle yourself and your Flames, where you can have a dog."

Mist brat's excited 'really?' was echoed a bit more dubiously from the hitman.

Sonya shrugged. "Obviously I'm not living in Vongola territory, so it'll be a lot more north than here. Maybe near the border of France. But I am eventually going to need a house, Cherep even agreed to hold onto the deed for me as long as he gets to crash there now and again. I have little concerns for where said house will be, so long as it is secure."

Renato kept eyeing her strangely, but that was practically a given. Shamal was his ward, and she was still a mostly missing presence the brat knew of and could get along with.

She might want to do more than visit every now and again, but he had little to no idea of that or why she'd want to. The Vongola Guardians had probably spent more time with the brat than she could.

Nothing said she couldn't sell the house and move the very moment the Mist brat didn't need the location anymore.

(Wednesday the 5th of March, 1969. A pet shop, Reggio Calabria, Italian Republic.)

A near full week of work, with a subject that was perfectly willing to be helpful, Renato had a fairly good grasp on his mind reading trick. How far he could pull on that before others could become aware of it, a method that might pan out to help him ignore the more useless aspects, and a working range.

Sonya was, mostly internally, torn between thinking it was a Sun Activation skill and wondering how much she would have to bribe someone named Viper for information about Espers and seeing if the trick matched up to that skill set. It was still mostly a thought she was playing with and not something she had brought up to him, so he wasn't sure if she would really do that for him or not.
She didn't seem to like the person very much.

As for the hitman himself, he was just happy the woman had finally put aside more time to help him.

Not so happy that the damn Storm-Cloud had actually gone through with the idea of getting his brat a pet, and they were both watching the kid flirt around a pet store looking at all of his possible animals he could get.

"I swear, if I end up with whatever it is..."

"That's more than likely, actually." Came the entirely unrepentant reply. Sonya looked, for her, highly amused as the tiny Mist got distracted pestering the poor clerk about the snake tanks. "Three, four at most, years then I can probably get him a dog. Which means you should probably put some effort into steering him to an animal you don't mind, or you'll end up stuck with something small, fuzzy, and cute."

Renato glared at her, the thief batted her lashes once then waltzed off to tempt Shamal with a hamster.

Oh hell no. Trailing them both down a line of fish aquariums, the hitman ignored everything fuzzy in hopes the brat would get the hint.

He didn't really have anything against rodents, so long as they weren't sharing his living space. It baffled him why some people considered them pets, his less than sanitary upbringing half on and half off the streets made him less than appreciative of the small furry menaces.

If Sonya really wanted the brat to live with her, and deal with inevitably caring for whatever mutt, that was on her. Ten might be a few years too early for Mafia School, but Shamal being eleven or twelve could be overlooked as long as he was good enough.

Since the only other option was bargaining with Nono for another few years more of sanctuary for Shamal until he was old enough or becoming a bit more stationary than recommended for someone like him, the thief stepping in instead would work fantastically for him. As Sonya's involvement was Shamal's effort of changing his living situation, the young Mist would probably greatly appreciate the change.

He wasn't blind to his ward's dissatisfaction with living in the Iron Fort without him, but Vongola territory was a lot more stable than just about anywhere else in Italy. The Russian Storm-Cloud seemed aware enough of that and being a Cloud would enable her to secure a small area for Shamal to finish growing up in a lot better than he could do until he got a slight more... murderous in reputation.

A week of days also let him know the woman was near utterly disinterested in being flirted with.

He held the suspicion for a while, which ended in Mafia Land when his attempts to figure it out ended with him being bodily removed from her personal space. Twice.

A week of merely observing her interact with a few petty Mafiosi and the housekeeping staff clued him into the rest.

If you were direct enough, Sonya could recognize it as actual attempts but regularly shot down anyone trying something with her. Anything else, flattery to suggestive quips, earned another of various responses from flat glares to bemused little snorts. Not even the brat could get away with it without skepticism.
Renato himself got an annoying little lift of her eyebrow when he tried flattery, before the damn woman overlooked his flirting for what they were really talking about. Anything further, mainly getting into her personal space, ended up with him being kicked out or her stalking off after she did a bit of forceful rearrangement.

In the end, the results were pretty much mostly the same thing.

Sonya was not interested in any kind of relationship beyond friendship. Either she was too much a Cloud to pay much attention just yet or, like her brother said, she had lingering issues with personal contact. She’d probably have to start anything, or someone would have to spend an obscene amount of effort to get her to pay attention to them.

Continuing to test her limits would only turn her wary, violent, or violently wary, so the hitman was going to stop pressing his luck.

Some other idiot could end up a bloody splat on the ground first from a highly embarrassed or frustrated Storm-Cloud.

That conclusion didn't quite mesh with the offer Tatiana gave on the sisters’ behalf, but it was entirely possible the bubbly Sun with a wicked streak had been playing with the more straightforward little sister in some way and he just happened to get caught up in it. The humor of that possibility did appeal to him, but since that little incident started his wondering over the younger Russian's outlook on sex he didn't fully appreciate it either.

Tapping a finger on a tank earned him the beady stare of some lizard, Renato glanced at the handwritten placard that declared the species as a *Graceful Chameleon*.

"That's pretty neat." Shamal gave his opinion, ducking under the Sun user's slightly bent form to gawp at the same lizard. "Don't chameleons also change colors?"

He glanced at the animal Sonya was carefully returning to its tank with aid of a young teen clerk, which was a tiny corn snake from the banding colors. "...yes. Much more interesting than any old snake, right?"

Being the kid was a Mist, he was entirely unsurprised by his next comment. "I thought girls didn't like snakes, frogs, and creepy crawlies? Mamma didn't even blink when I showed her a snake. She even helped me feed it a few crickets."

"Well... Sonya's not a normal lady." Frankly, he didn’t know if any Cloud would allow themselves to be frightened by things which would creep out anyone else. Not without a large amount of collateral damage at least. "What about one of these?"

Giving a considering look to the tank's occupants, the kid trailed down the aisle of tanks farther to see what kinds of four legged lizards were available.

"What, no snakes?" The thief asked with a smirk, finally divested of the small one she had helped Shamal see better.

"At least they're not fuzzy."

Bratty Mist suddenly trotted back to them, hands cupped around a rather small lizard. "What about this one?"

It was still a chameleon, but one rather reduced in size than the nearly arm-length versions Renato had been eyeing. The lizard was actually fit for the brat's hands than something that would take the
hitman to move for him.

"Cute. Where did you find him?" Sonya asked before he could, following the kid back down the lane.

Following along, if only out of sheer curiosity, Renato eyed the sign taking up the lower left-hand corner of the tank.

*Cape Dwarf Chameleons* read the plaque.

"Well… at least he will stay small."

"I think it's a her, mamma."

The thief eyed the lizard in the Mist's hands, then the others stalking around their glass enclosure. "How can you tell?"

Shamal shrugged, petting the probably scared docile chameleon in his palms. "She's not as spiky."

"She's really small compared to a few of the others, though. Might get her spikes in a bit when she grows a little." She eyed him, the tank of little lizards, and the prospective pet in the kid's grasp. Finally, the thief smirked up at the hitman. "I think we found your pet."

"…is it a he or a she?" Asked the young Mist, looking up at his self-claimed *mamma* then at his guardian. When both shrugged at him, he peered around the hitman's form at the clerk who had been helping him investigate the animals.

"Um… male? There's no real easy way to tell until they're fully grown."

Renato was going to end up stuck with the dwarf chameleon of indeterminate gender. Fantastic.

Sonya did pay for the glass tank and bedding, as well as a few plastic fake-tree branches and the food to feed the brat's new pet for at least a month. Shamal looked entirely less enthusiastic when he learned the lizard ate mostly bugs, and that hand-feeding was one of the better ways to get a chameleon accustomed to being handled. Renato bought the warming light and water dish, and since he was going to be stuck paying for some poor maid or footman to keep buying bugs for the little lizard's natural lifespan only bought a bit of other creepy crawlies that were used as treats for the breed.

He took possession of the tank and the bulkier packages, leaving her with the bugs. The Mist brat ended up with a cardboard box holding his new pet.

Sonya still looked highly amused at the whole situation.

At least the damn thing was only going to live three to five years.

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday 5th of March, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Sonya was only mildly surprised Tyr melted out of nowhere while she waited for Renato and Shamal to finish installing the brat's new pet in his room.

The children's wing of the Vongola's Iron Fort was apparently located somewhere on the second floor. She didn't know exactly where. The hitman had gestured to the second landing's little seating area for her to wait in and she took the suggestion even if she was curious.
It made some sense. The ground floor would then be as 'public' as any criminal syndicate could get, and that was a bad location for any half-trained or too young brat to live on.

It was only half a possibility the young Vongolas didn't live on the floor too. The thief was pretty sure they didn't… but she had been surprisingly wrong a few times before about where things were located here and was disinclined to make a solid assumption about it.

Either way, she was going to remain exactly where she was in hopes of preventing any more Vongola interest in her direction.

"Did you really need to leave?"

"It was less bothersome. And I could keep my own weaponry on me."

She didn't bother trying to keep a wary eye on Tyr, the master assassin was a threat she was pretty sure she'd fail in trying to counter if he wanted to kill her. Depressing but true, the Russian had actually very little pure combat experience to date.

She cheated greatly through it anyways.

Most often, people were just afraid of her temper and tended to freeze up when she got irate. Not so much in Moscow, but she was pretty sure that was only a matter of time and when her temper did slip her control.

A particularly annoying Chinese Storm had been the only one that didn't flounder in any conflict with her, which helped counter the times when he was being irritating.

"Lady Vongola was most put out."

Giving the Head of the Varia a dirty look probably wasn't a great idea, but Sonya did it anyways. "Really? Why do I care?"

"She does have a large amount of influence still." Tyr's expression was bland as always, but if she didn't know better she would swear the Italian was teasing her for running from a retired old woman.

Sonya wrinkled her nose up in disgust. Even if the impression was wrong, that didn't mean the idea she found behind it was. "The current situation mostly worked for me. Complicating it, even in aims for a better one in the future, is not something I am prepared to deal with."

"If you were? You now do know Daniella is interested in you."

"Tyr, what ever happened to the idiots that tried blowing up Ganauche and almost got my brother?"

Yes, it was a painfully obvious subject change. No, she did not care it was so transparent.

A few lines around the assassin's mouth deepened, but he accepted the switch with grace. "I, and a few of my… subordinates, removed them from the gene pool."

Well, she probably would've loved to help out if anyone had told her which moron flavor of the month was a valid target. Even if anyone had just suggested the situation was going to be taken care of, she might not have left the Fort.

Might. Ottavia was still damn annoying.

The master assassin waited a beat, then prompted her with a very flat, "Well?"
"I will reconsider the situation, when I am less annoyed in general." Sonya promised him, as that seemed to be the exchange he wanted. "My brother is not trained for combat, and I had thought this place secure enough to not worry about it. The fact he came to harm anyways is not appreciated, nor was the fact I was told nothing about the situation being handled."

Tyr gave her a long stare, which seemed more contemplative than simply to unnerve. "Most seemed to think you had gone out to hunt for the individuals that did it."

"This isn't my territory, I am not Italian. I would have caused more harm than good for both Vongola and I." Not to say she hadn't been tempted, but Renato and Shamal still trumped hunting for idiots that only had a short while to live anyways. "I left it up to Visconti and you."

Of course, had they not finally given her a bit of news on this end... she might have just asked Renato about it then missed her flight for an hour or three in favor of something quick and violent. She could be patient, but not that much.

"...I see."

Sonya doubted it. She didn't understand her own Cloud instincts very much, where her own personality ended and where Flame induced impulses began. "Cherep is not combative."

That earned her a near-violently suppressed twitch, which just might be Tyr's reaction when surprised.

The Russian wondered why he was surprised at all, as it was the second time she had made that point. "He's a pacifist, which I support. Even if I do think he's being needlessly complicated about it. Since my brother will not be proactive in his own defense, I will be even if it is passive-aggressive."

The older man gave a short, tight nod to show he heard her.

"She did explain what we were?"

"I was sorry to hear it."

"Cherep would never be interested, even if I wanted to try and be stubborn about it." Mostly out of sheer curiosity.

Skies and their Harmony was something she still didn't understand, and it seemed as if that knowledge could only be gained through experience. A thief and an assassin might work together well, but not a stuntman.

Tyr gave a rolling motion of a shoulder that might have been a shrug. "I do not mind talking with you."

The Storm-Cloud wondered if that was a warning or a clarification.

(Thursday the 6th of March, 1969. Mafia Land.)

Given how wildly popular she had somehow become, the Russian was almost unsurprised when Fong managed to track her down after she had been on Mafia Land for a few short hours.

"I do not have the time right now. If it is that important, take it to Moscow and wait for me there at
the end of the month."

Eerily like how events had played out in Shanghai, the martial artist dodged and weaved around the island's foot traffic easily enough to keep up with her. At least they weren't running flat out, nor was he dripping wet this time.

"Even for a possible personal commission?"

"Even then." The thief tossed his way, ignoring the possibility for a fat payoff and aiming for the general location of the arrival hall in order to not give Galina a coronary by how late she was becoming. Another month was going to be unavoidable as it was. "I do not have the extra time to go out of my way, and my current goals require short and sweet right now. As many as I can safely manage."

"That sounds… slightly alarming."

Spinning around to open the free-swinging doors with her back and face the Triad member at the same time, she gave him a wry smile. "It is more for a personal goal than anything, one I made with my sister. Besides, I do not wish to return to China."

"What if we were to go through the client services here? Would you consent to visit then?" Fong asked as he continued to dog her heels into the massive sea/airport complex. "It is highly unlikely you could avoid everything connected to China for the rest of your life, why not allow us to fix this misstep?"

"At the moment, it is not that I am unwilling." Corrected Sonya, only a touch exasperated with the man's stubbornness over sparing him more than a few words for the moment. "Although I will admit there is some of that. I do not have the time. I am, frankly, overdue as it is."

"Ah…?"

"Syndicate related."

Fong's braid tipped to the side with the motion of his head, then the man shrugged. "Moscow, then?"

"End of the month. I actually had something I wanted to ask of you as well, but again…"

The entirely too stubborn Storm actually started to consider her repeated protests finally, and Sonya was going to take that as a win. If her next contract didn't have such a damn tight deadline, she would've spared the time to fully hear the man out if only for the prospect of another spar.

Right now, she really should've been on a flight to Sierra Leone. It was another region she also really should've barred Björn from taking contracts from, but she hadn't thought of it until the teen brought her next contract to her.

Conflict diamonds. Much of the continent was embroiled in civil wars or armed conflicts, and while her Lightning Storm Lackey was doing very well keeping on top of some subjects he didn't have her understanding of mostly broad world events to come.

It was her fault for not thinking about it, not his, so she would suck it up and deal.

A very worrying start to a string of heists she greatly cared about not being identified doing, these were… a lot more dangerous. Given the situations she was heading into, at least knowingly, murder might not be something she could avoid again.
However, as she had told Fong, it was short and sweet. Fly in, maybe a day spent checking the information Mafia Land had on hand, steal something, get the hell out of the country. Her Lackey would meet her at the underworld friendly airport with both her next contract and to take charge of the old, which was how she intended to spend the rest of the month.

Three weeks, most of the travel handled by plane. It might not be possible to cram the next nineteen heists she needed to do in order to realize Tatiana's goal in so short of a time, but Sonya would damn well try.

"I will see you in Russia, then."

She heaved a sigh, finally coming to a stop in line for the ticket booth. Fong considerately ensured it was obvious he wasn't in the same line and was merely talking to her. "I am not certain if I should be worried or what."

"I would not be worried…but then again, I am not you." With that little pearl of wisdom, the Chinese man gave her a respectful incline of his head and a little wry smile. "I can at least ensure you will not be too upset by what I am to request."

"Aside the visiting China aspect."

"…aside that, yes."

(Saturday the 8th of March, 1969. Freetown, Republic of Sierra Leone)

The tricky thing about mafia life was that it existed as a confusing mass of layers.

There was the very most top, containing all the petty criminals that never truly realized they were being used as disposable pawns or easy distractions. The part law enforcement the world over knew and handled as a matter of fact, crimes of passion and those who allowed their greed to overcome their senses. The easiest part to get into, the less controlled and mostly ignored level.

Those petty crooks were handled, guided, nudged, maneuvered, and pushed around as need be by the next most visible layer. The old hands, the retired, the cowards that didn't dare go deeper or had no way to enable it, pawn shop brokers, money launderers, drug runners, smugglers, informants, petty thugs that worked small territories. They held the gateway through Omerità, only sometimes just this side of respectable and yet completely shameless criminals enabling the trade of violence.

It was possible they might be arrested if anything too bad happened, so they only held bits and pieces and generally preferred not to know.

Under that, was where things got… sticky and messy.

Free agents, the grunts of any syndicate, assassins working without direct oversight, loose thieves. It entirely depended on where in the world you were and what kind of situation you were looking at to tell what set of murderers and crooks were dominant, who was on top as 'less respectable' and therefore 'disposable' and who was at the bottom and 'priceless' to the local syndicate in charge.

The pillars shafted through that mired muck and held up the structure of everything were the mob families, the more ruthless gangs, and tight knit clans of criminals. Again, depending on where and who, they might be only shallow enough to barely dip into the heavier trades or deeply rooted enough to go so far down they were up. Vongola and the Zolotovs were part of that, her clan was
still mostly shallow but starting to sink and the Italian *Famiglia* was in so deep it was almost legal.

Laced between them were the conglomerations, networked syndicates that banded together for whatever reason. The American Mob Families, Vongola's Allied *Famiglias*, Mafia Land, China's Triads. They gave the underworld even more structure to rely upon, but also turned large stretches of territory into even worse patchworks of which criminal type was favored.

At the very bottom was a slurry of near diamond hard mud, the Dons and *Pahkan* and the mafia legends. Chess masters and puppeteers, who you might or might not hear anything about, mixed with a sprinkle of crooks so damn good their exploits were still told to the green newbies. A tiny handful of people that kept pulling strings and orchestrating events to enable their existence.

Like the Vindice, who were fearsome enough no one broke *Omertà* unless they had a death wish. The First Generation of Vongola, pioneers of criminal Flame users still gossiped about to this very day. A man she only knew as Semion Mogilevich, the boss of bosses in Russia that she had heard tiny bits about, but it seemed to be all true.

Sonya's main issue with Africa was that in some places, there was next to no upper crust to the underworld. She wasn't sure what that said about her, if the thin veneer of civilized crime settled her when it was less transparent to armed thugs walking about any old civilian town like they had no reason not to.

However, it was probably the best look at what the hell happened to a country after their underworld boiled to the surface she'd find. It didn't mean the situation was pretty, or remotely civilized.

The thief seriously wondered if she was spoiled or something.

Two hours into her first ever visit to the Freetown of Sierra Leone, she already wanted out. The streets were cramped, pedestrians were either suicidal or blind and were fully willing to walk mere inches from fast moving traffic, and motorcycles could and did go off the roads and onto the pathetic excuse for a sidewalk. Most if not all the men wandering the streets were armed with rifles, giving the city a very nervous air even as it prepared for their very first elections as a free republic.

Thankfully, Freetown was merely the biggest port city and she got the hell out of there quickly.

Since she didn't speak a local dialect, she opted out of questioning anyone. English was a common language, but not a widespread one in the middle class or lower-class working districts. She did take the time to buy a very wide straw hat, to protect her pale skin from the sun this close to the equator.

There was little she could do about the insects, other than wait until she had the freedom to utilize her Storm Flames internally. It wasn't a half bad trick, for all that it made it impossible for her to get drunk anymore it also kept her clear of unwanted drugs or viruses. Beating that back the next time she needed vaccinations was going to be a pain.

Damn Fong for giving her the idea.

Sonya took the pain of buying several expensive bottles of water, having known coming into the country that their water sanitation wasn't the best. Then, with her traveling pack stocked with said water and a floppy hat on her head, found herself a way out of the city.

A very slow, careful way out of the city. She was being followed.

Not surprising really, Russians weren't wildly popular down here.

In fact, anyone with white skin were treated with a healthy amount of suspicion. The thief didn't
really mind, Freetown was built by ex-slaves and some of that disgruntlement had to have carried over through the generations. It didn't exactly help her, but she could deal.

Mainly by heavily abusing Cloud Flame speed the moment she was visibly alone. It took an hour of walking down the busier streets to lose the less stubborn tails, another hour to round the small peninsula the capital city was built on, and a handful more minutes to find a mostly abandoned area free of civilians.

The reason she refrained from hitching a ride was because she was down here to steal diamonds. She wanted no links to this job to linger on her, and to do that she was actually going to use her Flames on this one.

For her, running wasn't a bad method to exercise by. There just wasn't any long enough stretch she could run down, not with her Cloud Flames lending her legs more strength than her muscles could. Even with her Flame trick they were still moving, which was a semi-decent alternative to a spar or three.

Rachel had hated it, strangely.

Sierra Leone's geography was at least south enough to not be pure desert, but from the grit and sand seeping into cleared sections they also weren't far enough to escape all of it. Equally it was north enough to not be rainforest but still enough, so it was more than a bit dangerous. Mostly scrubland with fringes of forested jungle creeping up here and there, and still hot enough that if she wasn't wary the thief would end up with several bad sunburns.

It was also a wet heat, which helped nothing.

At least her speed, when not reduced going through the little villages or in sight of the various farm fields, generated a bit of wind that kept her moderately comfortable. Stopping would be a bitch.

Sonya wasn't nearly as fast as an automobile, but in a less developed country that was good enough.

She wasn't really going very far, which let her risk getting lost in favor of keeping her presence mostly overlooked. Out of the peninsula Freetown was situated on, down the coast on the southernmost end of Yawri Bay. The forested areas were the worst parts, even crossing the few rivers weren't nearly as bad as the tangled mass of vegetation proved to be.

As interesting as the near-tropical assortment of wildlife was, she strove to avoid most of it. They returned the favor, aside a few monkeys eyeing her suspiciously and a lone roving hippo, the most she had to personally deal with were the thick swarms of insects.

They did not like her Storm Flames. Sonya felt the exchange was fair enough, she didn't like being bitten by a possible malaria carrier.

Taking great pains to avoid the little coastal town of Kata, by skirting the entire section of forest almost south enough to hit the outskirts of Shenge, cost her another hour. The Russian could also not go as fast as she could in emptier stretches of beach, and by the time she reached the jutting tip of the southern bay she felt disgustingly sticky and overheated.

Almost wishing for another river to cross, lukewarm though they might be it was still a mostly clean wet, she lingered at the edges of the southern forest line treating her blisters.

As she hadn't wanted to ruin her boots for this, she had bought herself a cheap pair of running shoes. The mass-produced things hadn't liked her feet, and from the looks of it would need to be discarded the moment she got back to Freetown.
Her position did include a stretch of beach, which made a pretty picture to stare at aimlessly as she waited for full dark. Stare at and not explore because it was pretty visible to the houses on this unnamed jut of land and she was trying for discrete.

Finding somewhere to sit or relax on that wasn't bug infested or serving for a bird perch was another.

Sonya had a, rather unpleasant, four hours to wait. By the time dark had truly fallen, evading three chances of discovery by the local children and two by old fishermen, she was disgustedly bored and rather irritated overall.

The flash of headlights as a convoy of jeeps passed her little copse of trees signaled that she hadn't missed the date or overshot where she had to be.

Slipping her feet back into the still wet and unraveling running shoes, the thief snuck off into the beach to swim for the next bit.

They were smuggling their diamonds off the one lone pier at the edge of the seaside village, the small motor boat that she would be stealing from would linger for half an hour after the jeeps left under local guard. She was sorry the locals would probably suffer for this, but they did enable the trade of blood diamonds by allowing the handoff to happen a stone's throw from them.

However, this was the point her contract demanded the stones go missing from. As sorry as she was, she also didn't feel like getting hunted down and murdered for refusing to do the job after accepting it by proxy.

Sonya slipped into the waves silently enough, the crash of the sea covered most of the sloshing about she had to do to keep moving in the right direction.

At least she won't have to smuggle the damn rocks herself. It was going to be a drop off in-country, her paperwork would get signed at the same time, so all Bjørn would have to do is turn it in.

Swimming in the ocean was different than a river or a pool, and the irritation she experienced over the day made corroding a few key wires with her Storm Flames easy enough. Hiding herself under the pier for said tampering at least helped her keep the flair of red light from being noticed, and once that was done she slipped underwater again to get on the other side of the boat.

It was a really, really good thing one's Flames of willpower were waterproof.

It took another two hours of treading water, mainly helped along by holding onto the side of the small boat, for her to finish silently Disintegrating a hole into the bottom of it. She was going completely off reported information, and it seemed true enough when she broke through the thin fiberglass to only come up against a wooden crate. A bit more Storm Flames, and she had broken through that as well.

From there, it was a simple matter of feeling out then taking the velvet pouch of high-quality diamonds and putting them into her pack. Everything else she also tried to take, the possibility the obvious quality pouch being a decoy was high.

The thief did managed most of it, before shouts started up as the slowly rising water level was noted. Before anyone took attention off trying to find and plug the leak, Sonya slunk backwards under the pier again. The dark and murky mud would conceal her from sight, so long as she didn't flail about and cause plumes of the silt to float around.

A check to ensure everything she had was secured, a moment to be sure no one was looking in her direction, and then she pushed off underwater. Swimming as fast as she could.
Getting out of the area before they noticed the hole in the bottom of the crate was a necessity, checking to ensure she had her target before leaving entirely was just as much.

Luck was with her, when she reached the tip of the jutting land she had the space to double check. The velvet pouch had been a decoy full of simple limestone rocks, as were two of the four other packets of lumps she also took. Of the other two, one held a jumble of rough-cut stones clear enough she guessed they were uncut diamonds and the other had color tinted ones just as rough.

Sonya did not need more diamonds, especially not these ones, so all of it was going for the drop off. The real point of the contract was something had to be stolen, the amount or how left up to the thief contracted.

Repacking away her find, she slipped back into the ocean to make it across Yawri Bay without risking being seen by the Kata villagers. She had to get up to Tumbu on the north side of the bay before dawn, but at least she had no smuggling to do on this contract.

There was no way in hell she'd make it by purely swimming, so skirting shore until the first major river it was going to be.

She had to leave her straw hat behind, since this part of her heist was aquatic, but she could buy a new one if she really wanted. Swimming in salt-water had her blisters burning, and the walk back to the airport was going to be excruciating.

With just a bit more luck, she'd be out of Sierra Leone by dawn's break and able to put her feet up for a few days.

(Sunday the 9th of March, 1969. Freetown, Republic of Sierra Leone)

"Wait, what?"

"You are under arrest."

Oh... goodie.

"I just wanted a hat." Sonya even helpfully pointed at the rack of them she had been perusing while she waited for her Lackey to find her. It was still before dawn's break, so she supposed it was kind of suspicious she was wandering the flea market browsing.

The uniformed man looked unimpressed with her defense, gesturing again with the rifle. "Hands up, white girl."

Dutifully doing so slowly, the Storm-Cloud really did wonder why she was getting arrested while also being thankful she had no conflict rocks stored in her possessions.

Frankly, she didn't have time to be arrested. Not in some third-world country. It was appealing in a lazy way if one took out the location she was being arrested in, frankly no one in Moscow would really blame her. Be annoyed, yes.

Sonya, personally, also couldn't afford it. Shamal would throw a goddamned bitch fit if she missed yet another visit for any reason, and Galina did not deserve to be stuck with all that work on her lonesome.
Near instant jailbreak it was.

Her personal effects were confiscated, annoyingly. The tungsten Bec de Corbin keeping her hair up in a knot, the Thor's Hammer pendant and red tourmaline skeleton key chains around her neck, and her chain of mini-weapons irked her more than her fake passport and paperwork she came into the country for.

She actually didn't need anything but the paperwork, which had the signature of the man stationed to accept the stolen diamonds, but her weapons were something she wasn't going to leave without.

The thief was forced to change clothing, which wasn't too much of a loss. Having known she'd be in the water for a bit she had worn things she wouldn't mind losing, and given the blisters she had on her feet sandals weren't a bad idea. The rags, on the other hand, she intended to ditch as soon as possible.

Since it was so early, Sonya got stuffed in a holding cell for processing later when someone more important came around.

She didn't intend to be here for that.

It took her a second to realize that yes, she did just get thrown into a communal cell with a mixed group of what appeared to be thugs and civilians.

Entirely unimpressed was probably her expression.

Ignoring the chatter that started up behind her, Sonya took two steps back to the cell door in order to wrench it open. To her surprise, someone else was already fiddling with it. "Move."

Scruffy blond and near skeletal shot her a wide eye look, then scrambled out of her way before she could grab him. Reaching through the bars and around to the locking mechanism, the thief pressed a finger to the keyhole mostly to cover up her Storm Flames eating through it.

"How?" Scruffy spluttered, wide eyed and dumbfounded as she wrenched the cell door open with little resistance.

The Mafia Land agent ignored him even if he did speak English, already turning to examine the gate separating the holding cells from the rest of the provincial jail. It was rusty enough she wouldn't have to risk a second Disintegration, her Propagation was a lot less showy anyways.

Digging around the bolts holding the door in place was the work of a few moments and prying them out of the concrete walls was simple. She pocketed the bolts, so no one would notice they were more screws than just large nails.

Removing the entire door and doorway proved harder, as she didn't know how many guards would be left behind to ensure no one escaped nor where they might be. She worked the entire frame back and forth slowly, to prevent any screeching groans from giving her away.

By the time she had finished that, Scruffy had stupidly managed to open the rest of the holding cell doors.

After thinking about it, the Russian figured they could work as a distraction well enough and didn't say anything as several of the bigger prisoners bolted past her like bats out of hell.

Waiting a few more moments, when that was all that decided to risk encountering armed police, the thief checked the rest of her fellow prisoners and became curious. Scruffy was doing something at
the far back wall, and from the flickers of light… it was something Sun Flame related.

…even civilians now?

The man had a ragged air about him, a long-term prisoner if she had to guess. Entirely possible that was more than enough to ignite his Dying Will, and Suns were one of the hardier types that would let him live through what others wouldn't.

Scruffy also seemed to know what he was doing, quite possibly not his first jailbreak.

If Sonya didn't need her stuff, she would've gone through the back too.

What was the proper procedure for this kind of situation?

A civilian Sun Flame user, using his Flames in front of even more civilians?

She really hoped Dying Will Flame use wasn't covered by Omertà, or at least civilian Flame use wasn't.

From the fitful sputters of his Flames he was trying to channel through a clear but rough rock, she had some time before he successfully cut through the concrete. Stalking their less patient cellmates and ignoring the dead guard who seemed to have had his head bashed in before he could react, she followed the semi-obvious path to where her things had been tossed.

It was all still there, midway through being inspected. There was a very nervous girl still picking through her things, who blanched a pasty ash color under her dark skin at the sight of the highly unamused thief.

Obviously, no one else had brought anything too important in with them but her.

The girl scrambled to her feet and lunged for a pistol on the counter, which just put her head in range for Sonya to smash her forehead into the wooden counter she had been working on.

Picking up her stuff was fairly simple from there, except the girl was wearing her hammer pendant. Said girl also got stripped to her underwear, to replace the rags the Russian was wearing.

Donning the colorful skirt and sleeveless blouse then repacking her stuff sans the water bottles she had left over, Sonya retraced her steps. Every now and again dropping a handful of Storm Flames to set the place on fire.

The girl would maybe live, if she woke up quick enough. Dead guard number one, and any others she failed to check for, would just end up fuel for her Flames.

Scruffy had barely managed to make a decent dent into the wall, and while Sonya's Storm Flames would prevent anyone coming down the hallway to try re-securing the prisoners he was a bit too slow for her taste.

Nothing really could be done without exposing her own use of it. Her Storm would eventually turn into pure fire, and she intended to drop a bit on the wooden flooring here to aid muddying the trails.

"Shit…"

"What?"

Scruffy twitched violently, whirling around then flattening himself to the wall when he realized how many people were crowded around him. His wide eyes flicked from person to person until he
reached her, then while nervously fingering the stone in his hand gave her a grim twitch of his face.

It might have been a try for a smile, but it failed horribly.

"There's... uh, rebar. In the way, I mean." Still fiddling, the man cast around desperately until it reached the smoke curling in lazily from the other hall. Flinching, his eyes skipped to the cells then whipped around to the one she had opened. "Can! Um... can you do...?"

...someone save her from stupid civilians. "Does that not work on metal?"

"Not... not well, no."

Risk Vindice attention and finish breaking them all out, or leave them all to die even if she wanted to know what Scruffy Sun was doing with that stone?

Sonya twitched, swore viciously under her breath, and stalked forward as the remainder of the prisoners scattered out of her way. As irritable and impatient as she was, her Storm gouged deep into the concrete and made a sticky mess of the steel rods reinforcing the walls. With an ear splitting crack, she managed to wrench the hole the Sun had painstakingly carved out in near enough one piece.

With how she angled things, their fellows managed to dart on through before Scruffy could since she had to put down the slab of torn wall somewhere and passed it in front of him first.

Which really only meant the two of them weren't the ones the guards outside opened fire on.

Sonya had expected it, given the amount of time that had passed, Scruffy hadn't. His horrified forward lunge ended up short when the Russian gripped his greasy beard and yanked him around gently. "Enough of them will escape to make it worth it. Ignore it."

"But! But they weren't-! They didn't do anything!"

"In a country like this, they existed. Sometimes, that is all it takes." Pushing the stick of a man forward, away from the hole they had made, she bodily blocked him from following after the rest. "Now shut up. I need to concentrate."

Another toss of Storm Flames blocked the hole to both prevent Scruffy from trying to get by her again as well as anyone from trying to enter to ensure everything was cleared out. Then Sonya turned her speculation to the flooring.

Sierra Leone had an underground rail system and if she had any luck at all, that would be what she'd break into. If bad luck was all she had, the sewers. If she had none at all, she'd be stuck carving a hole through dirt all the way to the coast.

Depending on which direction she went in, at least.

Her Storm might be controlled, after years upon years of trying, but she really never did figure out how much of it she could use before exhausting herself. Burning through the ground for any amount of distance would be hard, especially as smoke continued to creep into the cell block they were in. When she broke through to whatever she might hit, it would even make the fire behind them worse.

"Right... stay behind me and for fuck's sake, do not be stupid."

Scruffy didn't have time to question her, or even do more than blink as she regained his attention. Sonya planted a hand on the floor and willed.
With the volume of dirt in the way, this was going to take a while. She lost her sandals, and a large chunk of fabric from her skirt, but eventually ended up with a six-foot-deep hole.

Hoisting herself out, she probably rudely pushed Scruffy into it and snagged hold of the plug of concrete and rebar she ripped out of the wall.

Slipping back into the hole she made was a tight fit with another body however scrawny he was, and in the sudden dark he seemed to have a panic attack. When she lit up her hands with Storm Flames, the Sun snagged a desperate hold on her.

Sonya did not appreciate that. "Let go."

The close quarters were just something she had to deal with, but she heartily disliked people touching her.

"You… you could've done this before." All she was really concerned with was him releasing her, which he did with suitable speed.

"I could have." There was no sound to Disintegration, not here.

When she cut into the bottom of a boat the water would hiss the longer she was at it, but dirt gave away without even a whisper.

The heat, on the other hand, made her wish she hadn't discarded her last two bottles of water. Uncomfortably warm seemed to be the theme of her entire visit here.

Scruffy shuffled slightly behind her, now that she was working on opening up more room for them. "Why didn't you?"

Sonya pressed further after checking to ensure she wasn't angled downward, even if that was hard to check in the red light her Flames gave off. "Because there are things that scare even me, and had I done so I would be in a massive violation of certain things and bring me to the attention of those I would rather be ignored by."

She might still be in violation. The Vindice might just be waiting for more room to arrest her, meaning the moment they got out of the underground she would end up arrested again. This time without the possibility of breaking herself out.

Pleasant thoughts.

How far did she have to go?

The holding cells had been part of a corner affair jail/police station, and while the part they had been held within had be at the back of the ugly building it was still close to a street.

Gritting her teeth against the strain calling up so much Storm was giving her, she paused for a break after a musty chunk of time she was assuming amounted to fifteen minutes and punched the dirt a few times. A faint and muffled tinkle of pottery and brick informed her it was likely there was a sewer closer than she thought.

Fantastic.

Sonya hauled back and punched the wall of dirt in front of her again, busting out a masonry wall of brickwork into the nasty sewage system. Scruffy choked on the loose dirt that flew backwards, then gagged as the smell hit him.
She didn't really see why he was so offended, he smelt worse.

A pause was in order, because she had popped blisters on her feet and she really wanted nothing to do with this next part. There was at least lighter than the murky dark lit by Storm Flames, from the grates dotted here and there.

It seemed to also serve as a storm drain.

"So now what?" Asked Scruffy nasally, pinching his nose against the reek of sewer water. "Are you going to kill me?"

"For?" It would be way too much work for her, dragging him along. If she had wanted him dead she would've let him run off like an idiot into a firing line. "I am going to get you to a doctor, then you are on your own."

Ripping off strips of her ruined skirt and removing the remains of the sandals, Sonya wrapped them around the worst of her blisters in hopes of keeping them clean. It was a faint hope, especially since they had to go a ways in order to not be obviously escapees.

"Why?"

"I would like to know what kind of stone that is." Doctor Kappel had also wanted more Flame users to study, so she was pretty sure the man wouldn't mind fixing the Sun's health in the process.

Sonya ended up in a mini-skirt. She needed new clothes, some halfway decent shoes, and a bath. Hopefully the next contract her Lackey was to give her had a bit of time free between to enable that, or she was going to irritate the hell out of an entire plane's worth of people.

"It's a diamond."

She froze, then swore viciously. "No, no I do not believe that. We never got a diamond to work for any Flame user."

"…Flame what?"

Dmitriy had burned himself on one, though. Was it just effort needed, or was there something wrong with the stones they had tried?

The thief swiped the rock in question from his fist easily enough, examining it closely even as the Sun swore himself and tried grabbing it back. It was a raw gem, vaguely pyramid in shape. The long tip was broken, leaving a jagged edge she was pretty sure the man had used in his attempts to cut into a concrete wall.

Did rough work better than cut stones?

Galina would know now, after another month of work there should be enough data to make or discard more theories. Sonya absently gave the rock back, scowling as she considered the implications.

Were they wrong yet again?

"Well… I suppose it's safe to say you were arrested for stealing." Scruffy snapped at her irritably.

No, she wasn't. "I was arrested for buying a hat."

There was a long pause. "Really?"
"As far as I am aware, yes."

"...you do know someone murdered the usurped Prime Minister before he could retake office, right?" At her blank blink, the man scuffed his own rag wrapped feet against the dirt they were loitering within. "That's why they're rounding up the people out early enough to be possible suspects."

Well... that made more sense. She wondered who did it, it couldn't be someone else from Mafia Land because they did ensure these kinds of crossovers didn't happen. "How do you know that?"

"I speak Krio."

The local language, Sonya assumed. He probably got the details from the few of their more informed cellmates before they got themselves killed. "Good for you. We should... probably go."
Scruffy cleaned up pretty nicely, for someone that looked like a skeleton with paper thin skin stretched over his bones.

"-which is odd, when you think about it. They're an independent state, have been since sixty-five. But this is the second time the elections have been ever held, and the last time around the Prime Minister was only in office for minutes before he got… uh, ousted. Then the military ran the country, up until they tried giving the man a chance again. And now he's dead… huh. Wonder why they deposed him only to try giving it back before killing him? They'll probably go back to being a military state, for now."

Sonya pretty much ignored the man and his ramblings, pouring an expensive as hell bottle of rubbing alcohol into a tin pie pan. Shoving her blistered and only newly cleaned feet into said tin burned, but at least informed the Russian that this was probably direly needed.

She had Propagated herself a copy of Scruffy's shoes before she could bring herself to take one step into the Freetown sewers, and much to her relief her Cloud Flame copies were immune to her Storm Flames.

Some wandering down rancid tunnels, a bit of stashing her new Dying Will Flame foundling in a trash strewn side street, did a bit of pickpocketing practice to net her some more petty cash, and finished off her morning with a mugging of a cop to reacquire the rest of her luggage. She then had herself sorted out enough to find and rent them a hotel room and direct her foundling to it through a backdoor in order to keep him mostly inconspicuous.

Björn had found her by that point, trading off their contracts and appointing himself her gopher for cleaning supplies and food after suspiciously glaring at Scruffy Sun man.

The place wasn't anything too impressive, it was at least somewhat clean and neat. Bare walls painted a rather garish pale blue-green, brown comforters on the beds, and a similarly colored carpet she was almost as suspicious of as the sewers under Freetown.

The selling point was the bathroom, which held an actual tub and not just the sink and toilet combo.

The man she had rescued was probably in some kind of shock as he went about like a robot in her wake to clean himself, but he did trail off his verbal diarrhea after a while.

"You… could have done this for anyone."

"Possibly." Since that was actually directed to her rather than at the thief admitted to it blandly, watching the streams of little bubbles rising from the liquid she had her feet in. "I probably would not have bothered, personally."

Not that she didn't appreciate the info dump on what had gone on in-country, but it was about to be a moot point. This was a country she didn't want to do semi-regular heists within, but she had quite a list of those at this point.

Scruffy had shaved off his scraggily beard and clean shaven suited him better than the chin hair had. It didn't magically make him less gaunt or soften the sharp jut of bone under his skin, but he did now look less like any decent crazy person would appear.
Small wonder, really.

His current preoccupation was trying to cut his own hair, long and thin fingers plucking a clump of knotted dirty blond strands as he hacked off the greater lengths into something more manageable. Pausing in what likely was the first grooming session of however many years, Scruffy peered over at her suspiciously. "Why not?"

"Why should I?"

"It's the right thing to do!"

"For who?" Sonya snapped back, lifting one foot to inspect how bad the popped blisters were now. A few had cracked through her skin, meaning they were technically blood blisters. Thank the gods for Storm Flames, they had probably prevented her from getting some kind of blood borne pathogens seeping into her bloodstream. "Nothing ever gets done in countries without a large amount of people dying. For whatever cause or not."

Paranoid was going to be her watchword for the next month. She wondered what kind of tests Tatiana could do for her, and if it would help anything at all to try being tested.

"What? But… those people, they would be alive."

Slipping her right foot back into the pan of alcohol, the Russian gave him a flat stare. He had given up on cutting his hair, but half of the top layer was sticking up from how he cut it and that left him with a kind of cross between an afro and a mullet. It was… rather stupid looking.

"…those are people that took the opening we made and ran for it without so much as looking backwards." She started off slowly, wondering if the man was mentally deficient or what.

Scruffy ran a hand through the ragged hair her still had, only for his fingers to get tangled up in the unholy mass of curled knots he had yet to get to. "You can't blame them for that. They were only doing what was best for them."

"And their best was apparently running out into a firing line."

"You could have stopped them! You stopped me!"

"I could have." Sonya admitted again flatly. "Did not, though."

The man's thin chest heaved as he took in a silent breath. He seemed to count to some arbitrary number, then blew out the held breath. "Why."

"Why did I not stop them, or why did I stop you?"

"Both… please."

The Russian pulled her left foot out of the disinfecting bath, examining the rate of bubbling the remaining liquid was doing even as she reached for her medical supplies and the towel destined to be turned into rags to dry the limb off. "Various reasons. They were only concerned with their own survival, so I left them to it. If they failed or not matters little to me, besides the fact their death might motivate the locals into doing something about this situation. You, on the other hand, had something I was interested in."

"…my diamond?"
"No, but I will admit that is interesting." She also kind of wondered how he managed to keep the
damn thing on him, her strip search had been irritatingly through. That, probably, was an answer she
could go her whole life without knowing. "The yellow stuff. Your Flame."

Scruffy flat out glowered at her for a long moment. "That's the second time you've said that. Flame, what flame?"

"You are a user of Dying Will Flames of the Sun. Defy death a few times, and it tends to pop out." She informed him blandly, wrapping her heel up in sterile medical bandages before pulling on a sock to ensure nothing would slip on her. "If you are anything else besides Sun, it's too soon for me to
tell."

A hand was held up between them the moment she was done with that, lighting up with a flair of violet and red as her willpower burned. Both at the same time had been something she had spent long hours combining, if only in hopes of reacquiring her tri-colored flame start.

"I am a user of Dying Will Flames of Cloud and Storm." Locking eyes with the gaunt man over a palm full of her own Flames, the thief's lips twisted as she took in his wide eyes.

Alas, she still had no Sun.

"You're… I thought… it can be red and purple?"

"As well as blue, green, orange, and violet." Sonya clarified with a shrug, carefully pulling on her left boot from her luggage she nearly lost to Freetown's police. Leaving her things in beachside lockers didn't help when she got arrested and an officer was sent to pick up the rest of her few traveling possessions. "Rain, Lightning, Sky, and Mist."

"…you can make copies of things with that light and burn other things until they're gone." Scruffy stated slowly as he tried to understand what she was telling him. "I… can… make a laser with an uncut diamond?"

"I have done that with Storm Flames before. The ability of Cloud is Propagation, Storm is Disintegration. Suns are Activation." Pulling her right foot out of her makeshift disinfection tub, she started cleaning and bandaging that as well so she could finally get a move on. "If you are really that interested, Björn can direct you to a book and another Sun user."

The man blinked, examining her closely. "You're not going to…?"

"To what? This is a parting of the ways. You are going somewhere for medical aid, as well as an educational brief you likely would die without getting regarding those pretty yellow Flames of yours. I have other things to do."

Sonya pulled her other sock on just as carefully as she had done to her other foot, then stamped her boot on.

She was never ever going around in anything other than these boots ever again. Even if that would mean she'd have to have a new pair every damn year. At least not without actually breaking in a pair of whatever other shoes she wanted to wear.

"My Lackey will ensure you reach a hospital and set you up for anything you would need to return home."

"What? No--! Lady, you saved me. Take responsibility." Scruffy didn't even flinch when her eyes narrowed, he just glared back. "I have no home. You just pulled me out of… well, no. Actually, I
got my own ass mostly out of the worst… but you \textit{did} save me in the end."

"I saved you out of pure curiosity. It is sated now, you are useless to me."

Skeletal Sun user man scrambled around his discarded prison rags on the floor of the bathroom hurriedly as she started packing her own stuff back up in order to enable her leaving.

"THIS!" Scruffy whirled around before she got to dealing with her pan of rubbing alcohol, shoving the rough bit of jewel in her face. "You said I did something that 'we' never managed. Which means there are more of you. Like you and me. I can… I can study that, help you figure it out. I have a degree in engineering."

…how the hell had he ended up in Sierra Leone's Freetown then?

Looking like some kind of prisoner of war?

Sonya stared at the man. "Geology would be more useful."

"I can learn that too. I actually-" He glanced down at 'his diamond', looking entirely disgusted and a bit insane as he glowered hatefully at the lump of compressed carbon. "I… actually spent about five years, learning a bit of the diamond trade. Before."

There was a twitchy gesture, aimed at the dinky little window of the rather dumpy hotel she had wrangled a room with a bathroom from a very suspicious proprietor.

"I have no use for diamonds, but \textit{IF} I take you on," the thief started slowly, suspiciously, "you will be expected to catch up. Quickly. And find yourself something to do, because I do not tolerate lazy people leeching off me."

She had no time to learn herself, Tatiana had too much on her plate as it was, and Galina was more a secretary than a scholar. Gedeon might have the smarts but would probably not have the drive for years. Ziven probably wasn't sticking around for long, Dmitriy was in prison and not useful. Bjørn could, if she asked him too, but she was planning on dumping finance and investment training on him first.

Scruffy gave her a hard look, dropping the hand gripping his bit of uncut diamond to his side. "Lady, I think you're possibly psychotic and a little too cold to be human. Frankly, given what I think you are, not surprised. But you know what's going on, with this 'flame' business. And seem to know what to do, even when arrested and stripped of just about anything useful. I'd rather be on your side."

"I have been called worse than just 'cold' before." Sonya informed him flatly, stooping to snatch her pie tins to dump the liquid down the drain. "And to be completely honest, the only reason you are still standing is because you currently have \textit{inhuman} stamina."

"…what?"

She gave him a look over her shoulder, the gaping expression made her feel better about the whole damn thing. "Your Sun Flames are the only thing keeping you upright, anyone else would have collapsed long ago. How else do you explain why you look like a skeleton with skin and yet still be able to stay awake for more than five hours without eating?"

By the time she had dealt with her medical disinfectant and the tin, Bjørn had returned with the variety of fruit juices and the easy breakfast food she had asked of him.

Her Lightning Storm Lackey was also instructing Scruffy not to scarf down the liquid like a dying
man. "If you keep guzzling it all down, your belly will pop."

The Icelandic teen helpfully mimed his own stomach exploding to help the Sun figure out that he should slow down before he killed himself.

"Lackey, take him to Doctor Kappel. Tell him he's a baby Sun, and if he gets him to a healthy state I'll pay the medical fees. Set him up with one of the copies of my book while he's there until I can get to him." Snagging a few of the Cassava bread loaves from his shopping, the Russian also grabbed her complete luggage set and her next heist contract. "Tell Galina I am sorry but got slightly arrested."

Björn looked slightly wide-eyed at he stared at her. "Dama, how does one become 'slightly arrested'?

"By not staying arrested. My parents are going to be so disappointed in me for not hanging around a little." She took one last look as Skeletal and Scruffy and Sunny, then gave the teen a hard look. "He so much as twitches wrong towards you, have him killed."

(Thursday the 13th of March, 1969. São Paulo, Federative Republic of Brazil.)

Côte d'Ivoire, the Ivory Coast, wasn't much better than Sierra Leone.

Just a tiny bit more south.

It was at least a hell of a lot less headache inducing of a country, the local government had been in power for a long while now and wasn't at risk of instant destabilization if another enterprising assassin managed to kill another political leader on her.

This particular contract was more civilian-oriented, she was stealing a thesis from one of the professors of the University of Abidjan-Cocody. One of the boring contracts, mostly.

Sonya barely stopped for a full day, merely waited around the large campus until the professor of whatever got tired and turned in for the night before stealing her mark, calling Björn in the early hours of morning for the details of her next contract, and taking the next flight out.

Brazil was newer of a situation for her.

The government, which was another military one but one she expected, was splintering up under what she was pretty sure was sabotage. Outside or inside was the question, but the Russian merely made note of it and decided this was another country she wasn't sticking around in for long.

She didn't speak Portuguese anyways.

Interestingly enough, she would be contributing to the on-going sabotage according to the paperwork her Lightning Storm Lackey brought to her as she ate breakfast. The beachside café was cute in a picturesque way, but the creeps and coffee weren't exactly filling.

Sonya liked the palm trees though, they were suitably different enough from the African versions to be worth a stare or two.

"Dama? The Sunny man? He is not... exactly healthy. The doctor isn't happy with you."

"He didn't die between now and then, did he?"
"...no?"

She glanced up at the teen over the paperwork she was reading. "Then what's the issue?"

"He is... too skinny." Insisted the Icelandic Lightning Storm, playing with his food instead of eating it. At her dirty look he shoveled a bite into his mouth and tried looking innocent. "Doctor said he would need weeks of careful watching before he can be... let go."

"Released." The thief corrected his French absently, turning her attention back to figuring out where she had to go. "Doctor has until the end of the month to get him to a state my sister can take over from."

Sonya really had only one doctor she would conform for. 'Doctor' was a decently vague way to reference Kappel when not in Mafia Land. She didn't know what if anything the German was avoiding or would rather hide from, and frankly she didn't care.

"You can stay in my hotel room for a bit or go back to the island but bring me back another contract tomorrow. I don't want you wandering around this country just yet. Too hot."

Björn accepted that with a shrug.

Since she was vaguely sure this country was also heavily into torture, even if she couldn't recall against what or for why but could guess pretty damn well, and she didn't want to do another jailbreak the thief would rather her more vulnerable asset got out as quick as he could. His movements were his own though, so warning him would do for now.

...she was going to need a camera for this next bit. Taking pictures of the documents in question would be less risky than trying to take the papers themselves or make copies on-site.

Especially from within a military base that had close ties to both the US and Britain.

"I will be very annoyed if Scruffy Sun has to become my next Lackey, especially if it's due to some civilian reason. He would probably be terrible at it, and I'm used to you."

It earned her a smirk from the teen. "I will be careful, Dama."

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(Friday the 21st of March, 1969. Mexico City, United Mexican States.)

After Brazil, two contracts one of which was industrial sabotage picture taking and the other a robbery of a politician's home for some suitably shiny trinket, her next target was Bogotá in Columbia.

Aside feeling rather thankful she was no longer in sub-Saharan regions, the temperature was still as bad for a girl from the frozen north. She made a mental note to inform her Lackey that contracts in near equator countries during the swing into summer were not ones she liked very much.

She found it a bit bemusing it was just as vegetated as the Ivory Coast, if only a lot higher in elevation. Which did nothing for the humidity, not quite as miserable and salty but still sticky and pervasive.

Other side of the Amazon in terms of an actual mountain plateau and not borderline scrublands, and the first time Sonya dipped back into the local underworld since leaving Italy.

There was a bit of relief in the fact she only had to deal with the urban jungle and not the actual
jungle again. Less shelter from the sun, but less insects and less wildlife she had to maneuver around as well.

This government didn't seemed any more stable than the rest of Africa or South America, but because the mafia hangouts were pretty much the only place to get halfway decent information it was still not somewhere she wanted to linger about. She had to go through two pawn shops before finding a rather rickety underground bar affair that seemed less like a criminal watering hole and more of an army one before the initial hostility to her mere presence tapered off.

Asking around there carried less risk than chancing asking an unknown member of whatever anti-political guerrilla faction about some detail and getting violently or quietly removed for the mere act. Within the underworld, at least whichever faction would admit to it before you asked possibly life-threatening questions.

Sonya found it all rather tedious if possibly murderous, a terrible combination. She made liberal and heavy use of her inability to become drunk anymore to drink several heavily armed members of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo under the badly made makeshift table for her needed information.

The FARC–EP at least didn't give her dirty looks for having the bone structure of a Russian.

This was another semi-boring but at least interesting because it was bizarre kind of contract, she was stealing a soccer trophy. Football in this corner of the world… but she kept thinking of it as soccer anyways.

The trophy she was after was the División Mayor del Fútbol Profesional Colombiano original, and ambivalent to sports as a whole or not she didn't even breath a word of that to the guerrilla soldiers she pumped for 'where not to step unless you wanted to be pumped full of hot lead' information.

Sport fans were nuts, in the worst ways.

To take up the empty hours before she could go to work, she shopped around a small bit in the tourist traps to replace some of her more ragged clothing and a few odds and ends. More medical supplies mainly, because if she didn't have that fully stocked Tatiana would bitch at her until she was blue in the face.

There was an interesting little crafts section, within which she picked Shamal up a little retro and tribal looking bobble headed lizard/turtle thing made out of wood and string.

The weird bulbous trophy she was actually after had actually semi-decent security on it, which took her two tries to break into without tripping. She hid the thing into a massive shipment of Colombian coffee beans, wondering if Renato liked soccer/football at all.

Skipping several countries Bjorn couldn't line up quick and dirty contract for left Sonya in Guadalajara, Mexico. Siemens Mesoamerica held an industrial complex on the outer reaches of the city, not nearly as big as the one in Mexico City by all reports but a decently large one nonetheless.

This contract was on behalf of the Mafia Land hospital, which made her take due care in what she was acquiring if only to not hear about it from her sister for years. Buying medical equipment from the very place she intended to rob a backup generator from probably wasn't a very smart plan, as a matter of fact it was a very bad one according to all the lectures Arseniy and Lisa had given her over the years.

However, the place was large enough to require internal maps for their own workers. A lone thief
with little to no familiarity of how the inside layout worked meant Sonya had little to no idea and little time to acquire it.

As Bogotá was a very high city compared to seaside port towns and Guadalajara wasn't much better in that respect, the Storm-Cloud had to take an entirely unexpected full day just to counter altitude sickness. At least, she dearly hoped it was altitude sickness and not something else.

Another three days were needed to arrange the purchase of medical lab equipment and paraphernalia, and two for customs to look it over her legal shipment before giving her their stamp of approval.

During that time, she learned that 'generator' was a very broad term. They came in sizes from tabletop affairs useful only for a handful of lights to two-story monsters that could create enough electricity to run New York's Times Square. Her paperwork called for nothing but 'a backup generator for the hospital for use during times of conflict'.

Meaning either the docs wanted the hospital's power to be on its own grid when idiots invaded the island, or the internal affairs people wanted to ensure if they ever had to treat someone really important the power couldn't be cut and take someone on life support off it on demand.

Sonya, since she used that hospital, fully agreed with the idea. The issue was she didn't know how much space the hospital had for a backup generator.

As she was trying to get through as many contracts as she could in a month, she also didn't have the time to ask and get the answer back through whatever agency was in charge of Mafia Land's hospital or just the island's acquisitions department or related sections in general.

She was going to steal three. A two-story affair, a room sized one, and one that fell in-between the two. Then she was going to write a nasty note to whoever would take possession of them about being specific and saving her time and effort.

Given the sizes of the objects in question, disassembled or not, she placed a bogus order for pickup in order to have it pre-assembled for shipping for her. A few pesos to a beggar prevented her voice from being recognized, and a few more got him drunk enough he likely wouldn't recall what she had asked of him in return for the liquor.

Then she had to skip back to Mexico City because Siemens Mesoamerica had the order available there and not in Guadalajara. If she had wanted it assembled where she was, it would take another week.

Sonya then did the nasty thing, as in the night before the beggar man was supposed to pick up his shipment she went in and stole not only the damn parts but a few extras and a bloody truck to get it all back to Guadalajara. Mexico City wasn't quite as foreign underworld friendly, and she had started the arrangements for a completely illegal airlift for the shipment already before learning about the location issues.

Systematically taking out the guards on an industrial complex's loading bay was easier than it should be, spaced too far apart and with too few check-in points, but since they were civilians she wasn't really going to complain that much. Altering documents that would get her pulled over by the Mexican highway patrol took her longer, as well as fudging the paperwork on her acquired shipment to muddy the trail. Hopefully enough she could get out of the country before the discrepancy was noticed.

On her way out of the security office she only belatedly realized they had a close circuit security recording going on and did a bit of on-the-spot arson in the recording room.
The thief also found out, very quickly, that driving a full diesel big rig with an attached trailer was a lot different than a van or any commercial car. She also wasn't very good at it, unless the streets were more or less straight. The only bright spot was that it was an automatic transmission, and she had started out on mostly deserted roads.

Resigned to the fact she was probably going to end up pulled over, as she didn't know anything about driving the damn thing, she aimed the lumbering beast of a truck in the direction of Guadalajara and hoped she could at least get an hour or two of the possibly three-hour trip done before anything nasty happened.

Before she got out of the capital city of Mexico, she spotted the train yards and tried very hard not to Disintegrate the steering wheel she was clutching. If she couldn't get the truck out of the city without massive amounts of luck, she could probably have it shipped for her instead.

With a dubious amount of legality, but it was less risky all around.

She had dealt with ports more than train lines and airlines, but the basics were the same. She was going to have to rely on bribery more than prior shady connections, and if she was really unlucky a murder or two.

Maybe she could trade the big rig?

It was hot, and a little damaged from a sideswipe or two plus a dent in the grill from where she ran over a sign, but still a very large truck.

(Saturday the 22nd of March, 1969. Agua Caliente Touristic Complex, Tijuana, Free and Sovereign State of Baja California, United Mexican States.)

Her last heist for the month, having lost a good week in Mexico already and unwilling to overshoot that badly, was in Tijuana.

It was also where something she only fuzzily recalled from Rachel's time horribly clashing with her reality now.

The Agua Caliente Touristic Complex was something she knew had been shut down long before the 1960s, and yet it was still in operation in front of Sonya now. In a past-life-future-dream it had been notorious for a lot of things, more notably Hollywood movie stars and just as much for American mob involvement if for worse reasons. There had been a crackdown on gambling due to some government official, and the high profiled guests dried up in response until the place shut down.

Yet… it was the end of April in 1969 and the complex was still open. It was a lot of things; hotel, spa, dog-track, racetrack, private airport, golf course, and gambling casino. Apparently popular as a retreat and a vacation still, crawling with people she could peg as both security guards and mobsters mixing freely with the high-society slumming it.

The Russian checked her paperwork again, even if she had the moment she landed here, and pressed her lips into a flat line. She was required to go in there for her last contract.

Turning on her heel, she left the area to prepare.

To start with, she picked herself out a long-sleeved cocktail dress in red from the local shopping mall with all the accessories she would need. Since she had expected a working-class month and not a high society one, she didn't have anything like that on her at the moment.
A room at a hotel across the city was another must, rather pricey for the better security but she could change there and fall back to it later if things turned sour.

The thief wasn't sure if she expected things to go sour, but as it was a possibility she was preparing for it anyways.

Her blisters from Freetown had healed up well enough, but she still put on stockings against current fashions to prevent the newer skin from tearing open or getting more blisters and covered it mostly up with her usual boots. Taking out the bulk of her weaponry she secreted more than enough to actually be a 'walking arsenal of jewelry weapons' without the obvious chains of them wrapped around her bicep.

Last time she did one of these 'present yourself to acquire the details' contracts the Chinese Triads had tried to acquire her later. She didn't really hold high hopes of avoiding that again.

A magnetic bracelet she had found in the city allowed her at least one of each type of weapon for one wrist, the charm bracelet of axes she had repaired by a local jeweler went on another. Her blond hair was put up into a bun with a Bec de Corbin, a few more were set in a purse with a couple hair ties and the bare minimum of makeup she could get away with wearing.

Leaving behind her luggage, she had paid for a week but better not really need that, the Russian retraced her steps back to the Agua Caliente.

Since she didn't know the place, nor did she particularly wish to be shot either now or at the end of this contract, she went right up to the white stucco bell tower that seemed to work as a gatehouse and handed her Mafia Land paperwork and ID to the nearest guard. The skeptical look she got was ignored, as was the hushed conversation via radio, and she only stepped forward when the same guard waved a car going down the drive to stop and gestured her forward.

A short stint in the backseat, and the driver took her right up to the racetrack clubhouse. After he opened her door, she followed him into the building.

He had taken her paperwork from the guard, and she didn't intend to lose sight of her ID or the contract.

Three stories up lead to the roof of the clubhouse, and what she supposed was a fantastic view of the track. The gentleman her loosely termed 'guide' was bringing her to barely so much as twitched as the sheaf of paper and the laminated card were placed on his café table.

"Do you like the races, señorita?" Asked the likely Spanish descendant with the typical tanned skin, black hair, and equally dark eyes.

"Not particularly."

The man, somewhere in his thirties and dressed to the nines in a light tan suit, glanced over at her distractedly. "No? Pity. Do you mind if I keep this? For… validation, I assure you."

"I do mind." Sonya informed him flatly, since he was fingering her Mafia Land ID. "We are… heavily encouraged to keep track of such things. Personally."

Looking neither surprised nor irritated, he drew a pen out of his breast pocket and noted down her ID number on the ticket stubs she was somewhat sure he received when placing bets of his own. "I am Emmanuel Rodrigo Vásquez, señorita. May I have your name?"

"…Salina Buhari." Her fake passport was still set for a French woman to visit Africa, she had yet to
switch it out for a new fake. The ID Mafia Land issued held no names, merely a number and a picture, so the skeptical look he shot the thing netted him no conflicting information.

"Vásquez!" Someone behind Sonya called out as she snatched her ID out of the air as the man lazily flicked it in her direction. "You rogue, keeping all the pretty ladies to yourself."

The new man was easily over fifty and rather portly with a similar ancestry of something Latino, yet again in a well-tailored suit but he had his greying hair slicked back and had a very puffy mustache that was only salt and pepper in coloring. He and her possibly temporary boss looked nothing alike, except for the shape of their eyes.

Cousins, the thief hesitantly assumed. Possibly a great uncle.

"My dear," she had to suppress the desire to rip her arm out of the new man's hands when he grabbed her elbow, "if you're looking for some entertainment I would be glad to help you out. If racing isn't what you fancy, there is a simply delightful spa on the other side-"

"Hermano, ella es agente de la Agencia."

"Si, si. I am-"

Old and pushy was suddenly yanked to a halt by his grip on her arm when Sonya planted her feet and refused to move under his direction. She gave him a flat glare in return for his handling of her person. "Let. Go."

"Señorita, it would be churlish-" He cut himself off that time, as she allowed her eyes to flash red. Better to appear to be only a Storm than a Cloud, given the reactions she had experienced to date for each.

It did get the man to let her go with all due haste, if seemingly alarmed his possible relation still seated.

"A change in venue, I think." Vásquez abruptly declared, pocketing one of the tickets he had in his hands and tossing the rest to the table he was seated at.

Standing he wasn't much taller than old and grabby, and she privately admitted he cut a poor figure against someone like Renato.

Also, she could smell his cologne from where she stood not three feet away. Combined with his possible family relation's own eye-watering amount, it made her eyes itch and her nose sting.

At least the hitman's cologne never made her want to sneeze, even if that was still too strong for her when in his personal space.

Having rounded the little café table and placed himself between the thief and his… whatever, her possibly likely temporary boss flicked a wary look down her form. "…just… follow me, por favor."

Sonya gave a short nod, that bit of Spanish she did know.

After this, she was going to restrict her movements to countries where she spoke a local language. The two of them could have an entire conversation she wouldn't be able to understand over her head, and that did concern her a little.
Long winded story short, the owner and manager of Agua Caliente wanted an auction house added to the Tijuana resort. Vásquez had been in talks with one from San Diego, but the owner of that establishment got tempted away over to Mexicali.

It was mostly farms and food production over there, but also located below the border between Phoenix and San Diego. Said owner apparently decided that the revenue could be improved by weekly antique auctions for those more local and monthly weekend ones for their high-end clientele.

As to why a Mafia Land thief was brought in, Sonya was to steal one of the once a month auction items before it was actually auctioned off but after it had been displayed and verified as genuine. Vásquez promised a bonus if she got something bigger than a pocket-sized item, but also wouldn't pay anything if she got caught.

The objective of her contract was to scare the target into seeking protection from a well-established complex, not prove that their security was more than enough.

The thief was also encouraged to make use of the resort while she was there, with heavy emphasis on the gambling hall and the two racetracks. She wasn't much of a gambler, so all she did do was make use of the spa's salon to have her hair cut back to a mid-neck length.

Vásquez did not know what display procedures the auction house she was targeting had, did know what was up for auction, didn't know what kind of security they would have in place, but did have some knowledge of where and when.

She was... less than impressed with him.

Of course, the last time she did something like this it had been for the Triads so that might have been why she had more resources to work with then.

Leigh’s Auction House wasn't an overly classy affair during the week, but the invite her temporary boss had gotten for the ritzier night did have a dress code to attend. Sonya had to buy another dress, this time with matching heels, just to get in the door the night of the auction.

A few mostly superficial checks for their seemingly standard operating procedures during the less hyped week, and then the Russian used Vásquez's invitation to gain her entrance in order to scope out what was up to be sold.

"Señor Vásquez did not wish to leave you with an empty seat at your first auction of this caliber, as that would have been greatly rude of him." The petite blond assured the man who had fussed over the invitation she had handed over. "However, he is also unfortunately committed to a business meeting he could not get out of. As my company handles acquisitions for various entities all across the world, he gave the invitation over to me to see if we would be interested in frequenting your establishment when the more... tricky to acquire items are found."

"That is greatly generous of Señor Vásquez." The man who had yet to introduce himself commented quietly as he showed her to a seat. "Considering we did not accept his invitation to set up in his resort."

"There is time, you may want to expand in future years and so he intends for your relations with him to stay good." Sonya gave him a small smile, the most she could manage without it coming off as fake or plastic. "I will not be staying the whole night, merely long enough to understand what kind of
history and value the lots tend to be. If something is interesting enough, or I know of someone who would like an item or two, I might bid myself."

She actually had more than enough money to buy something legally, cash given by her temporary boss even. Depressingly, it looked to be jewelry at most out of the first few lots. At least if she bought it she wouldn't have to steal it later.

The usher, she guessed, raised an eyebrow at her probably dirty look to the items on display for the beginning of the auction. "…our more valuable items will not be displayed until much later in the night, señorita."

Vásquez did have some useful information for her, and in particular was a crash course on how auctions worked and were normally laid out. Sonya gave the man a very purposely fake smile. "The gap between what you and I consider less valuable will tell me much about what difference there is between what we think is more. I will stay at least until midnight, but not much longer if I do not need to."

She would be stealing something from the very last lots, after all. Best to leave hours before anything happens.

It wasn't perfect, even if her temp boss promised her an alibi for the hours after the agreed leaving time, but she had little information to work with in the planning and this was the first auction house she would be robbing.

Digging out a rather battered notepad out of her very shiny purse, and letting the man hovering at her elbow catch sight of the various denominations of money she kept on her, the Russian flipped through the mess of shorthand notes she kept track of her legal shipping details and attached receipts in.

The fact that most of those 'legal' shipments held a few illegal bits in them wasn't the point.

Establishing that she seemed to be what she claimed to the man was the point. A lot of money, foreign receipts for large numbers, the fact the pocket-sized booklet was almost full of rambling letters and numbers, all of it was just props to establish her 'credibility'.

Similar to the way she could go from a pair of trousers and a blouse to a snug dress and heels and imply she wasn't a working-class girl but a high society one slumming a bit. She had the 'air' of one trained into her over her second go at being a child, and Lisa's directions for implying or suggesting without the crass action of drawing attention to such details was still something she remembered.

Sonya had little idea what separated 'classy' from 'trashy', it all seemed to be behavior oriented and she wasn't naturally inclined to that sort of thing anyways. She also didn't have to know, as long as someone else did and could instruct her.

Her foster mother had declared she could do 'icy snob' very well, anyways. It seemed to work the best for her.

Noting down the maxed out line of business credit she had with Mafia Land's bank as her max limit for the evening and the island's 'wish list' items she had only updated almost a month ago on a clean sheet of notepaper took her only a few more moments. Enough time for the man that ushered her to her seat to make up his mind if he believed her or not.

If the glass of champagne he pressed on her was any measure, he bought the whole line.

Ironically, it was true if you looked at it from a less than legal perspective.
He was civilian, he could be excused for thinking her a small wildcat and not a full-fledged tiger.

Sonya settled in to be bored out of her skull for the most part.

At the end of the night, when she came back to ensure they panicked over their security arrangements, the thief no longer felt bored. She felt rather cheap, especially since she ended up stealing a Ming dynasty vase out of everything she could have grabbed.

It was the more 'obviously' expensive piece, and decently sized enough to make her bonus.

What she was going to do with said vessel of near-ancient clay was a good question. She couldn't leave it behind, nor did she really want to hawk something so damn pricey on her own.

…maybe Lisa could do with a new flower vase.

(Monday the 24th of March, 1969. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)

"I cannot believe you some days." Tatiana informed her little sister exasperatedly.

"It's a piece of pottery. What else would I do with it?" Sonya even helpfully gestured to the 'it' in question, sitting oh so innocently on the table between the sisters.

A genuine Ming Dynasty vase. A tall white one with blue patterns of birds, bamboo leaves, and two Chinese dragons circling the base. She had seen some of those bulbous vases for sale before, so she knew what it was and how much they were generally priced as.

Something the redhead Sun using nurse believed to be almost priceless, and yet the other woman was planning on gifting it to their foster mother for her birthday. To display cut flowers in.

It fit right into their current setting, the condo was a rather bland affair with really pricey junk left all over it.

Tatiana couldn't wait until they got their own apartment and could not only decorate as they wanted but paint the walls.

"Not just that, Nya." She ignored the weird look for hacking the blond thief's name up in a not-obviously Russian way, plastering a hand over her face to try and hide the smirk. "I mean this entire month. The sheer insanity of what you get up to…"

"…what?"

"There's the gaunt skeletal Sun in the hospital Doctor Kappel is having a blast poking and prodding that you sent him, the three generators you sent the hospital when they really only commissioned you for one? I know you did that, that note was in your handwriting and it's your sense of ill-humor all over the situation. Now… I love you, I really do. But little sister, you are a few sheets shy of a full stack if the only thing of note you think happened is a few hours of being arrested and a new flower vase."

The look that said little sister sent her way informed the elder Russian that she believed herself still rather sane. "Tats, I love you too and all, but you're weird."

She wasn't the one intending to use a vase easily worth more than half a million rubles as a flower vase.
Tatiana could not get over that.

"The hospital would like the thief that did the contract to know they only wanted the room-sized generator. The other two were a bit over the top."

"The hospital should then be more specific." Sonya groused irritably, arms crossed defensively before her unlike how she would hold herself if anyone else said something about it to her. "Since the only thing they gave me was 'an emergency generator', they should be happy I guessed right and sell the other two."

"I'll pass it on." The elder Russian promised the younger, flouncing over to sit on the couch with her. "Now, my turn. A couple things happened back home you should be aware of before walking into it."

"Oh?"

"Mmm... something a bit important happened, and it will affect you." If at all possible, Tatiana didn't want to be the one to tell Sonya what was going on back home.

Yes, her baby sis was a very well controlled Cloud. That really only meant that her breaking point had yet to be found, and from her fits of temper before escaping the situation for two full months...

"Arseniy got attacked."

There was a very long moment of silence, as something violent and purple flashed in the younger thief's normally grey eyes. "...what."

"You remember the visit from the Novgorod Brotherhood?" Only when the blonde nodded sharply did the redhead continue. "The vor they sent to talk to you didn't return to his territory after he talked to you. It was kind of bad that first month you were out, until some wise ass finally decided to double check the prisons between our headquarters and theirs. That wretch got his ass arrested but hadn't been able to get word to his fellows."

"Tats, that's nice and all... but Arseniy deals with training. He's normally in secured territory or running little would-be-hopefuls through a milk run or two. He rarely gets more than that."

"I healed him." It earned her absolutely nothing. "It was pretty damn minor, all things considered."

"All what things?"

Nope, not going there. "Point being, Nya, things are a little... tense. Lisa's not happy someone almost got her man and baby's daddy, Arseniy's not happy something failed and got through to where he was running the baby vor through their paces, heck even Lina's not happy."

"...so, not that I don't appreciate a heads up, why tell me this now?"

Tatiana probably shouldn't have finished that statement in her head with 'and not when I can throw a hammer at the assholes'. Frankly, the nurse would be entirely too happy to hear Sonya had murdered the entirety of the Novgorod Brotherhood with a hammer. "Gedeon managed a... cease-fire."

"Will wonders never cease."

"Oh hush. He's not incompetent." The truly skeptical look that earned her made the Sun smile, but it really shouldn't have. Their Pakhan's son wasn't stupid, just less practiced and maybe a bit too rigid still. "What I wanted to warn you of, is that you are kind of a large part of that."
The completely blank look on the Storm-Cloud's face was probably not a good sign. "I was what now? How?"

"There are fifty Dying Will Flame users that we know of now in the Soviet Union. Technically forty-eight, but not the point. One of them was a Cloud."

"…was."

"Was." Tatiana confirmed slowly. "He... went out with a bang, to say the least. The kid, Dorokhov was his name, took out the Khimki Ring by his lonesome. Do you remember them?"

Sonya blinked at her a few times as she tried to place the syndicate in question. They shared a border territory with the Zolotovs, so there was more than enough interaction for the younger thief to at least recall who they were.

"The smugglers? The ones north of us?"

"Yeah, the entire building they used as a warehouse slash base ended up collapsed on top of all of them. Killing everyone there including the Cloud kid. Then a pair of twins ended up burning themselves alive using what's reported to be Storm Flames out in Yekaterinburg. Did you know that was possible?"

"I heard rumors but didn't really know if it was or not."

"Well," the nurse continued in a markedly less depressing tone, "the point is that they know fully understand what it means to have a Cloud and some of what it means to be a Storm. That kid was untrained, what you called feral, and completely new to his Flames. And took out a syndicate trying to box him in to recruit. Then there's you, fully trained with that burn alive ability and ghosting about the Zolotov clan."

"...so, they know what I am now?" Sonya tried to clarify.

"They did before, in an entirely abstract kind of way. You carved up a bit of the forest here, Nya, and bitch smacked that one clerk. Rumors got back to the other vory, but they probably discounted a lot of it since it's outside information and kind of inhuman even for Flame users. Rumors and folktales. Then they got a report of that one kid from their own people who can go see it easily enough and recalled what rumor reported you did in a fit of temper. Both here and back home."

She still didn't really understand either, Tatiana could just tell. As far as her little sister was concerned, she hadn't changed a bit so the reactions to her shouldn't either.

One of those kinds of situations where her social incompetence was more frustrating than amusing.

"Gedeon used that uncertainty and fear to arrest any more violence to our clan. Which is a good temporary fix, but the 'threat' of you isn't going to stay static. If you don't somehow prove to all and sundry that you are a murderously violent bitch, we're going to lose a lot of face and probably a lot of clout against the other vory."

Sonya's features went an icy blank. "But I'm not."

"I know you're not. So do our foster parents, Cherep, Lina, Ziven, and everyone else important. However, they might ask you to."

The Sun had a very bad feeling about the ice she could still see in her little sister's expression.
"I got eight heists done out of the twenty plus I need." The abrupt change in topic jarred the nurse a little, and the younger thief kept going before she could redirect the conversation back to where it had been. "One or two more two-month stints, and we can get that apartment for us all. If my Lackey and I can keep up the same rate. I got a bit tripped up twice and he had issues lining them up, but another goes or so and we'll have worked out the kinks."

Well... way make your older sister feel like a bitch, Sonya.

Tatiana rubbed her forehead tiredly, yanking one of the couches' pillows out from behind her to clutch and kneed in worry. "As soon as I get my probably illegal medical practitioner license you can scale back Nya, but that's not for a few more years yet."

"I don't mind the work, Tats."

Of course she wouldn't, because she could be nauseatingly sweet sometimes.

"...why are you calling me Nya?"

"I had a little Japanese girl for a patient a week ago. Who shared with me her manga about a cat."

Sonya gave her a blank look, one thankfully without the ice. "And?"

"You kind of act like a ditzy cat. I'm calling it like I see it."

"...thanks ever so much for that."

"Welcome!" Tatiana chirruped back to her gleefully. "Now, what do you want done about Peter?"

"Who?"

"The Sun man your Lackey brought into the hospital for Doctor Kappel? The guy's mostly set, he could leave at any time. He just needs his supplements as we try to counteract his brittle bones and some of the other health risks he flirted with when he got skinny enough to do substitution duty for a skeleton model."

The younger thief huffed softly. "He's calling himself Peter?"

"It's not his name, terrible liar. But it's something."

"I call him Scruffy."

Snorting, because she could totally see her little sister doing that for the rest of the man's natural life, the nurse gave her couch mate a smile. "Scruffy then. He's good to go, but Doctor Kappel will want quarterly checkups as he progresses as a Sun. More if possible."

"Keep him for another week or two, then send him to me with Bjørn." Sonya instructed slightly absently as she nibbled on her lower lip. "Actually Tats... wait until the worst blows over, I'll call you when it does, then send him on with my Lackey. I'll send you a white sapphire for Scruffy to start on with, so Kappel can have the first control exercises to inspect. If the good Doctor wants more visits, then he needs to make more appointments. I'll still pay."

"The Doctor will be ever so delighted to hear it." Announced the Sun user.

"Speaking of," the younger sibling announced as she got to her feet, "I need you to test my blood for any tropical diseases. I know I was inoculated against a lot of them, but given the places I went through..."
"You want me to check to be sure?"

"Please."

(Wednesday the 26th of March, 1969. Moscow School #3054, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"...you'd think I would learn about leaving you in charge."

"Then maybe you should stop leaving me behind." Galina announced wickedly, shuffling some of the paperwork on her clipboard.

"Galina?"

"Yes, Sonya?"

"It's a school."

"Yes, yes it is."

The Lightning had purchased the entire property using the leftover funds she had after selling the higher quality gems in order to buy the lesser semi-precious ones. Getting it refurbished required the aid of a few other Flame users pooling their powers together to generate the cash… and a few other things she was still genuinely surprised about.

The yet to be opened Moscow School #3054 was a nice four-story brickwork affair on the outskirts of the Zolotov's territory, close enough to encompass the neighborhood they grew up in and yet still far enough away that they could provide their own security without drawing attention to the kids' homes. At least, that had been her intent until the nastiness of the Khimki situation blew up in everyone's face.

A lot of things changed priority after that, some of which had yet to be fully dealt with.

She slotted a glance to another of those Cloud Flame users and wondered the sheer amount of destruction the tiny blonde could cause if given enough reason to.

"Did you have a childhood dream of becoming a school matron or something?" The thief in question wondered aloud as she finally let them into the building.

Ziven tried really hard not to snort at the question, but the smirk on his face had been there ever since he had been sent to pick up the Storm-Cloud and betrayed his feelings on the situation. The vor leaned his frame up against the school's gates, content to wait until the two of them were done at the building.

Galina sniffed in mock offense even as she followed her fellow Flame user, her heels making a rather nice clicking noise on the polished tile flooring. "No. Lisa has agreed to teach a home EC class and history, I will be doing mathematics, Irinei agreed to teach grammar and literature. I was hoping you would consent to do art and the girl's side of physical education, Ziven the boys. Tatiana will be the school nurse when she has the time. And Gedeon will overlook it all with Arseniy and do criminal lectures jointly until Dmitriy is back. A few more here and there, and we will shift things around when one or more of us leave to do other things, but for now...?"

"I might have a science teacher for you. Not too sure about him just yet." Sonya admitted slowly, peering into a classroom on alternating sides of the hallway they were going down. "Why though,
"Why keep it all apart? Our Flame users can then rub elbows with their contemporaries instead of being segregated, make the connections and earn favors while the non-Flame users learn what not to do around them or how useful one or two might be for their own aims." Taking the lead, the Lightning lead her superior down a different hallway to where the basement of the building was. "Also, it takes the place of the homeschooling efforts that is becoming harder for your parents to handle without civilian scrutiny. Aleksandr also donated the weaponry he no longer teaches others to use for our own training hall, which is now mixed with the Flame practice hall."

The Storm-Cloud easily followed her down a flight of stairs, wandering into the mostly barren but well-lit sub-basement level arranged to be a few different things all at once. One wall was covered in mirrors and held a barre for ballet classes, the mid-east wall had the mats and equipment for gymnastics. Opposite of that held a row of the donated training weapons set under the bank of windows, and the far end held seven different stations for Flame lessons spaced equally apart from one another.

Wandering to the middle of the cavernous room, Sonya glanced at each wall in turn. "So... what am I not seeing yet?"

"There's a hidden room behind the Flame stations," Galina admitted readily enough, "in there we'll test Flame users and possible stones. But everything really expensive is back there with the sharp weapons and the lock is very... tricky."

The thief probably would've found it in time if they had the opportunity to let her loose to poke around on her own. They would do that later, because as much as they stripped the place to the bare bones and built it back up to what they needed there was nothing like a professional picking everything over to get to any possible hiding place.

"Galina, would you please just tell me why."

"It has to do with the Flame related deaths news that made the rounds and I'm sure Tatiana told you about."

She didn't look remotely surprised, merely expectant.

"I actually started it from your plans to provide a place for Flame users and also ease the work your foster parents do." The Lightning was pretty sure the Storm-Cloud hadn't intended for her to find the idly made plans for a legal criminal school she doodled up out of boredom one day in between stacks of paperwork. Purely a mental exercise of hers to try figuring out if it was possible or not. "Then things happened, and we got a lot of ill-trained Flame users tossed our way. Just shy of twenty from that, nearly ten on our own end, plus the thirty we already had. You said it would get worse, and so I wanted to be on top of that before it became so."

The expectant look didn't falter, but the younger woman looked more contemplative. "No one is going to trust us with their Flame users for any decent amount of time. We could train them to be hostile to their 'sponsoring' syndicate or other such similar things."

"Exactly." Galina admitted shortly. "Which means, in the long run, the teachers we end up with will be cut loose from their syndicates. A few of those 'other' teachers and the staff we need are coming in from the outside of our clan, until we have a nice even mix of various syndicates represented. If you are one of those teachers...?"

"...can I be the librarian instead?" Sonya asked a little tiredly, rubbing the back of her neck."I'll
teach Flame use and applications, which I suppose is an elective kind of thing."

Noting that down, and highly aware what she just said could constitute as betrayal of their syndicate, the Lightning moved on with her end of this affair. "I do not wish to see you go like the Khimki kid. I don't think anyone really does. When it happened, this was the best way I could ensure you wouldn't."

"They will not let me go, Galina."

Possibly not, especially since the Soviet Union was waking up to what Flame users were capable of. Especially her type.

"This will keep you out of the Zolotov headquarters most days."

With a sigh, the thief retraced her steps back to the other Russian. "Good enough, I suppose. I'll still have to check in twice a week or so."

Galina intended to ensure this would work no matter the pessimistic outlook of her ticket out of here. This Cloud self-destructing like those others would be a sight she wanted to be spared from and would do their clan some serious harm.

"…what kind of books do we have now, anyways?"

She was also pretty sure having said Storm-Cloud as the school's librarian might be its own anchor. The thief was obsessed with her books. "I'll draw up an inventory list of what we have so far."

"Did Fong ever swing by? I was kind of expecting him to show up enough for you to say something by now."

Almost missing a step of the stairs, the Lightning shot her boss' back a strange look. "Who?"

"Chinese Triad member, expert martial artist. Storm, one stronger than me. The man's irritatingly stubborn, but I did tell him to come here if what he wanted to talk to me about was that damn important."

"Not that I am aware of." Galina admitted slowly. "Is he the one Tatiana refers to as 'Tasty Muscles'?"

"Yes. I suppose he might have been waiting for me to leave Mafia Land first. So, he might show up in the next week or so."
Galina peered over her shoulder as she dumped the box holding a dead Arcobaleno's things out on Dmitriy's desk.

"What is that?"

"Something I've been meaning to get to for a while now." Sonya replied absently, shifting the Cellophane wrapping off various parts of a likely three-hundred-year-old keepsake box and its contents.

Lisa must have gotten suspicious of the possible mold or mildew contamination to wrap it all in the plastic film.

"Do you have nothing else to do but hover at my elbow?"

"No, not really." Was the utterly unapologetic answer from the brunette lurking at her back. "The stone testing is in the final phases. The bulk of the information has been sorted. Awaiting the very last entries then a comprehensive look over. Gedeon is off doing his father's bidding, your Lackey is elsewhere, Ziven's at the school overseeing the finishing touches, and Dmitriy's prison has a visiting hour almost ready for you."

The thief's classical or middle French was nowhere near as good as her spoken modern, because even with a language as refined or widely used as French there were linguistic shifts to account for. Furthermore… she was trying to read a run-on sentence. Probably.

…maybe the long-dead Storm just had atrocious handwriting.

The tinier ink spots might have faded too much for her to read with the naked eye. It was possible the written French rules had changed in a century or two and it would've been correct in another time.

She also needed to brush up on her French, given she couldn't really figure that one out.

Discarding the heavily rusted plate with the engraved 'la tourmente' back into the box it spilled out of and sweeping of the moldering flakes of various pages after checking to see if she could read any of it, the petite Russian eyed what was left.

A few pages with water damage, a few more without but that held very faded ink, a picture she might or might not be able to have recovered depending on what kind of paper it was on, and…

…a carving of a naked lady in some kind of hard green tinged yellow-white material that wasn't cool, dense, or heavy enough to be soapstone or marble. Curious.

There was a hastily muffled snicker, and Galina pulled away slightly. Biting her upper lip so her smirk wasn't as obvious.

She failed massively.

"Sonya, I respect you. I do. But… why is there a statuette of a half-naked woman on the desk?"
"Because it was in the box I just emptied out on said desk." The Lightning had even watched her do so, the inane question was less than appreciated. "Galina, I'm going to need a few sheets of blank paper, two pieces of transparent glass big enough to hold a single sheet between, and a clean journal. Please."

Possibly even a French to Russian dictionary, but Sonya would fetch one later if need be.

Getting a clean copy of the mess would be more important first. Finding a Middle French to modern Cyrillic dictionary would be the trick.

"Right... I'll just leave you alone with the... little lady, then." The brunette flashed the only other woman in the room a wicked smirk, stalking off to acquire the items asked for.

Placing the so called 'little lady' back into the box she fell out of, the thief poked the remaining pages with the capped end of a fountain pen. Judging them to be impressively sturdy for paper nearly three hundred years old, she then considered her hands.

She knew in a vague fuzzy way that the oil from her fingertips would ruin the pages if she just ran them all over the sheets at will. How she knew that was probably a Rachel thing, but the question was what to do about it.

Lisa had probably used gloves or pinched the very edges to wrap it all up, the papers had been all together in their little plastic pocket.

Discarding the capped pen, she wouldn't need it until the Lightning got back with the glass and tracing paper she needed to make a clean copy to try translating, Sonya dug around Dimity's desk a little to see what else there was to poke while she waited.

Not necessarily for her self-appointed assistant, a few members of their clan might suddenly recall they were also criminals of various skills too. One or two of them might even have the balls to try talking to her sometime today.

Sonya wasn't going to hold her breath for that.

Having been warned made it slightly less jarring. Slightly. Since it had been the exact shit she had been trying to avoid by being the world's least violent prone Classic Cloud user, it was all still depressing.

Before they could care less about her or what she may or may not be, and now...

It was very easy to see who all believed her to be similar to the dead Cloud and Storm kids and who were still skeptical yet, there was an increase of those that would stare at her and those that would back away at her passing.

Sonya herself had a passing curiosity about the mechanics of the rumors, did the young Cloud employ a bullshtited inhuman strength like her or did he Propagate whatever he could reach and end up expanding the warehouses' supports only to suddenly cut it off and cause it to collapse?

If she couldn't get more than two words out to her fellow clansmen for any reason, she'd never really know unless she sent Galina out for it.

That was a nasty habit she was trying not to rely on. Bjorn and his fellow Lightning made it all too easy to fall into the rut of leaning on them to do her busy work. She was getting rather partial to Lightnings, sans the weird defective one Nono Vongola had as a Guardian. Lady Vongola's she didn't think she met yet, and Tyr hadn't seemed to have any Guardians, so Sonya didn't know if she
was partial to just Inverted or mixed Lightnings or what.

"So… you are back."

"Do not sound so excited, Gedeon. Someone might think improper thoughts about the enthusiasm you show me." Coming up with nothing interesting in the desk's drawers, she opted to inspect the newly arrived Sun instead. "Did you need something? Or did you just want to tell me why you used me like a threat to other syndicates?"

Her Pahkan's son regarded her for a long moment, then either with extreme arrogance or just from knowing she wasn't going to suddenly flip her shit and murder him messily the man took a seat across from her. "I didn't sell out any of your Flame shit."

"No, instead you just sold out a Flame user." Honestly, she really couldn't decide if that was better or worse. "So, before I hear about it from anyone else… how the hell did my father get injured two months ago?"

"There's no guarantee they knew who he was, or what he was to you." Gedeon countered easily, still inspecting her closely. "That being said… he is pretty well known around our slice of Moscow. Might have just been because he was Zolotov, and not for anything else."

Sonya gave the Sun a supremely unconvinced look across the desk separating them.

Apparently well aware how flimsy that disavowal of intent was, the still mostly newish Flame user but still experienced vor changed the topic but not the subject. "It was just to the Novgorod Brotherhood, who we could say you have legitimate issues with."

"They are the ones that got close to Arseniy?"

Instead of snap something else off just as quick, which he had opened his mouth to do, he gave her another of those considering stares and obviously amended what he was going to say. "…I don't think I'm going to answer that just yet."

"…you grew a spine at the worst possible moment." Sonya ignored the faintly insulted look on the man, contemplating her options for finding out what she wanted to know.

Lisa might tell her or might not. Her foster father may or may not take her interest in the subject the wrong way, or the really right way. She didn't know what they would risk telling her, nor what she might just end up doing with that information.

The thief didn't know, and perversely it made her want to know if only to have a good idea of what she was fully willing to do to such a group.

Tapping an entirely random pattern out on the desktop, she glanced back up at the Sun. "How far have you gotten with your Flames so far?"

"Not very," Gedeon extended a hand, which flickered momentarily with yellow fire, "best I can do."

"Compared to what?" Sonya went the long way around her Flames, focusing on the combat ability to the exclusion of all else, and it took her near a year to get a concentrated Flame going. "You're doing surprisingly well, although we do finally know the better methods for others. Or rather we went the wrong way and you got a shortcut."

Tatiana method, maybe?
She didn't really know what he got up to outside her realm of 'expertise'. He probably still did his father's bidding more often than not, so she also had no idea how much time the vor could put into learning.

"Do you have a stone?"

At her question he placed a pitch-black gem on the desk, and at first the Storm-Cloud thought it was a piece of jet. Obsidian maybe.

Until she picked it up and it sparked under her own Flames in a very familiar way.

"Spinel?"

"Not as fancy as the ones you use. But yes." Replied the Sun, flicking a glance to one of the heavily edited notebooks she had yet to actually crack open. "We found that spinel works pretty well for most anyone. The colorless types are synthetic, so until we can produce or grow them ourselves... topaz has the next highest 'all' compatibility. A certain kind of jade, one of the garnet types, feldspar works like shit but is workable even if it's not 'pretty'. The best for a clear picture of what kind of Flames one has is still white sapphire."

Sonya found that one out on a whim, thinking more of her tri-colored start and the subsequent inability to pull it out again at the time rather than a foolproof way to find the exact Flame type of new users. "Topaz, huh?"

She wasn't really that surprised to know one of her old 'Cloud' stones wasn't really a Cloud-only stone but a very easy to use one. It was possible she'd never notice it could work for another until they started cracking more than working as intended and she discarded them for a more stable type. Subsequent testing for others would have highlighted the same thing eventually.

"Depends on the coloring, but yes." Gedeon confirmed slowly, still apparently more focused on whatever in his head than her. "There are a few more, again rubies and sapphires work for most everyone but are way too temperamental to just fork over. A few others have very odd reactions to one or two types of Flames but will work for others with minimal issues."

"And we still have no idea why?"

The vor gave her question a dismissive shrug. "Empirical testing has its benefits, but also drawbacks."

Giving the same pile of paperwork waiting for her a dirty look, the thief curled her legs up under her in Dmitriy's office chair. She wondered if the Rain would notice if she stole it from him if she replaced it with something else.

Probably not, it was another year at most before the man got himself sprung from jail even with good behavior. Since it was a Soviet Union prison, and a Mafiya member in question, it was likely the sentence wasn't even half done yet.

"I'll look it over with my geology books later. Did anyone get a diamond to work for them?"

"...no? We didn't even test diamonds, the work the three of you did two years ago said they were non-responsive."

Sonya pursed her lips, giving the Sun across from her a long look of her own. "I found a Sun in Sierra Leone's Freetown. He used a diamond as a makeshift laser focus."
Blinking at her, the Sun scowled. "Galina sold the bulk of the diamonds you sent in. They didn't even fetch very much."

"Of course they didn't. Diamonds aren't actually all that rare, it's just a cartel of diamond mine owners restrict how many they sell to artificially inflate prices." With a shrug, the thief left the desk to see where in the Rain's office bookcase were her gemology and geology books. "There are a few left, right?"

"Yes?"

"Good, I want that Sun to see what he makes of it." She tossed him the piece of black gemstone she had almost forgotten about, reading the titles of the books on display. If more than half of them were actual books and not fake blanks with fancy titles, she'd eat her own Flame research journal.

"...you are less of a bitch right now."

Snorting, the thief pulled down the books Tatiana had stolen and then gifted to her after their second joint jewelry store heist. "I am less stressed out and have been promised more books. The break... was also rather appreciated. I don't actually do very well lingering in the same place for very long or talking to people. I get restless."

Gedeon merely watched her as she dumped the heavy tomes on top of the processed results for the Zolotov Flame testing experiment. "Less stressed?"

"I am not a social person. When I have to be, and be on my best behavior? Teach someone that doesn't wish to learn? As well as guard the brats we're still teaching from outside attention they might or might not be able to deal with? Forced to help some idiotic asshole who had no idea what he was playing with attempt to 'catch' another like me?"

His expression was flat, she almost found that impressive.

"Then of course I was used as a figurehead to publish a book behind, which held at least three or four years' worth of research into the Dying Will Flame phenomena and how it might be utilized. Without my say so, and only an afterthought given for what I would think of it."

"Not quite done bitching about that, then."

Sonya gave the vor an entirely unimpressed stare. "No, I'm not."

"I still don't believe it's all that important. Three 'users' just got themselves killed on their own Flames. If that won't cull your supposed 'hundred' down to a manageable size-"

"Four, but you're entitled to your own opinion." She interrupted him shortly. "I'm still entitled to think you're a moron. Speaking of, we're going to have some international visitors soon. All of them, and I do mean all my guests, are Flame users."

"Wait, WHAT?"

"Sit down." Sonya only continued when he did so, not remotely in the mood to be yelled at even if he technically was a superior to her. "Fong, a Chinese Triad Storm. Who is better than me, and that idiotic Storm male here isn't strong enough to hold a candle to me either so he will not aid you if you insult him. Renato's a freelance hitman from Italy, a Sun stronger than all of the Sun users here put together. Both of them are associates of mine, and while I would normally do this in Mafia Land... I cannot do so if I am here."
"This is because father brushed you off about taking me there, isn't it?" Gedeon questioned rather roughly, appearing highly suspicious for a moment.

Right on up until she snorted. "The world does not revolve around you. They are coming here for other reasons than for you to embarrass yourself to. Fong has an offer he was rather insistent I listen to, but I did not have time to then so he's coming here to get heard. Renato's coming for a different reason."

"And the third?" The older Sun had his mouth still open to continue with whatever it was he was going to say, but very abruptly cut himself off and eyed her suspiciously.

"The third one you do not need to concern yourself with. I will have that handled separately."

"…right." Shifting backwards in the chair he claimed for himself, her Pahkan's son all but fidgeted in place.

Sonya took the opportunity to ignore him, examining by look alone the sheets of cracked and water damaged papers she wanted to read.

If she couldn't translate them by herself, she wasn't sure how to go about getting herself a professionally translated copy. It potentially held some information on the mafia, on the Arcobalenos, or possibly just international criminal activities of the early 1700s.

Which, unless she wanted to murder the people she might hire for such a thing, ruled any civilian institution out.

She might possibly be able to find a student or professor somewhere that studied Middle French to help her translate the trickier bits, but that would be only rarely relied upon if needed. No reason to give them more than enough to understand what the papers were about if it was that sensitive.

Galina swept back into the office as efficiently as she had left it, two panes of glass in her arms and a sheaf of blank paper resting on top of it. "Oh good, you're here. Sonya, the things you asked for. Is there anything else?"

She was kind of certain the Lightning was getting her kicks by needling Gedeon somehow but wasn't exactly sure why or how.

As long as she stayed busy and useful, Sonya also didn't really give a damn.

"I would like to visit the Khimki location." The thief made an absent gesture to the north facing wall, behind the Sun. "Where yet another of my fellow Clouds bit the dust."

"Why?" From the confused expression on Galina's face, she couldn't see a reason for her to want to visit a collapsed warehouse.

"I have... a few questions about the incident."

Cherep defied death itself and ended up with an inhuman recovery time for any and all injuries. Even lethal ones.

Sonya… likely defied the possibility of being unable to fight back and allow their continued survival, so she ended up with an inhuman strength far beyond her frame suggested. Then bent it to continue being armed even when most were not.

What the hell did this other kid defy, that enabled him to bring down a structure on top of himself
and his attackers?

(Friday the 28th of March, 1969. Khimki, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Ziven didn't actually mind being Galina's busy-man, since he opted out of orders being dictated to like any other undirected Zolotov vor in favor of keeping the remains of their gang mostly in one place until their leader got out of jail.

Seeing Tatiana again was always a bonus, and her little sister was unused to having others enough to not take advantage of it.

He also wasn't entirely certain of the 'Lightning' jumping ship so quick, but again she hadn't been arrested for a few years and things did and could change during that kind of time.

Sonya's entirely bemused expression when he arrived to either drive her around Moscow or handle the trickier bits she asked for was pretty amusing as well.

"I tend to forget about you, mostly." The lone thief commented in a completely bland tone of voice when he said so to her face. "You're just... there. Sometimes I'll try to think of something for you to do and end up doing it myself."

Snickering at the irked expression on Galina's face for that blunt comment, the hand-to-hand combat specialist shut the door he had opened for her once Sonya had cleared the car. "I'll just hang about here, alright?"

It was probably prudent to keep someone with the vehicle, this wasn't a good part of town.

Docksides of any major port weren't without significant effort by security or law enforcement, and although the city of Khimki wasn't quite on the same part of the Moskva river system the Zolotov territory within Moscow was... it was similar enough to make someone that stayed in their territory or left it frequently forget that.

The clan's only Cloud was in and out of the country so much he was pretty sure she'd be just as cautious in their home territory as out of it, which made the absent nod to show she heard him entirely expected.

Galina waffled a bit, torn between following their fellow thief as she wandered closer to the destroyed warehouse or hanging back with him. She eventually settled on remaining where she was, when some of the rubble beneath Sonya's sturdy boots slid out from under her.

The brunette could keep her balance well enough, just like the other woman out there with them who easily compensated for the shift, but he also understood why she stayed where she was.

The Lightning wore heels most days.

Ziven turned his attention to their temporary underboss, wondering what she expected this to answer for her.

It wasn't quite snowing just yet, but it was still as cold as fuck and everything had a generous layer of fresh powder snow from the night before. What little that remained of the smuggler's warehouse had been first cleaned up by their few surviving members, then picked over by the local petty criminals,
and then the KGB took what was left.

Sonya suddenly kicked over an entire massive slab of concrete with as much effort as he would use to bat away a pesky insect. Ziven ended up staring at the several hundred pounds of artificial stone as he tried to mesh that act and the lithe blonde woman who didn't remotely look like a physically powerful individual.

He still didn't understand the Cloud-thing, and not from a lack of trying. The entirety of the Dying Will Flames thing confused him still, and he had more experience than most seemed to have with the users of it.

The Lightning had even tried to help him learn, but as of yet he had no sparks of his own. Not even using the sapphires the entire group seemed highly wary of.

Sonya herself would probably have to take a look at him and try to help.

However, Ziven had the suspicion he just wasn't able to use the skill.

There wasn't really much left to see at the warehouse, Sonya eventually wandered back after shifting a few more pieces of building around. Looking slightly contemplative, the thief looked at her taller brunette. "Galina, who has the kid?"

She blinked at the woman. "You mean his body?"

"The KGB might have it." Was his offer.

By Sonya's expression, they might not have understood her comment as well as they thought.

She hummed slightly, turning back to look at the collapsed building for a moment before looking at Ziven. "I would hope not, otherwise someone's going to have to break into their offices and see about springing that and whatever notes they might have on the…"

He didn't even have to ask, he heard the same thing she did that made her trail off.

Someone rattled some chain.

Queerly, the thief's expression had blanched with more alarm than the vor thought the possibility of being overheard warranted, which made him suspicious that this was another Flame thing he didn't quite understand. One Galina also shared his incomprehension with by her expression of bewilderment.

Whipping around, Sonya scanned their surroundings intently. One hand slid behind her back, and in full view of her fellow Zolotovs a full sized Bec de Corbin shimmered into existence in licks of lavender Flame.

That weapon she brought out in front of her in a movement Ziven almost couldn't keep up with, and the shaft of the polearm was brought up between the Storm-Cloud's person and a length of sharpened rebar that nearly impaled her.

"Stay. There." She barked at him before he could fully raise the small pistol he never went anywhere without.

Galina laid a hand on the car itself, making it spark and shimmer with her own green Flames even as she shifted around it to put the origin point of the makeshift lance between the car and her. Ziven belatedly recalled Lightning equated 'Harden' and rounded the bonnet to join her.
Sonya didn’t wait to see if they followed her directions or not, the most she lingered for was another attack. She smacked it out of the air, yet another repurposed length of steel sharpened at one end, then practically launched herself to where whoever was throwing them was likely at.

Ziven glanced at the two makeshift projectiles, which had embedded themselves into the asphalt of the road, then to the woman he was taking shelter with. "Did you know she could do that?"

Galina only glanced to the place Sonya had been before, which was suspiciously devoid of any snow unlike the rest of the paved area, before going back to watching where their leader headed to with due speed. "I don't think Sonya even knows everything she's capable of, it's part of why she's so annoyed with the Four Rains."

"Did you tell her-"

"I don't think she'll be interested until it resolves itself either way."

She would know better than he would, and if not the crazily over-powered thief would be annoyed at her secretary more than him. Ziven was surprisingly okay with that thought.

They had only a few more moments of being unable to see or tell what was going on, one kid scrambled out of the far warehouse Sonya had made for being pursued by said thief.

Teenager, Ziven corrected himself as he mostly left the dubious shelter of the half a ton hunk of metal in order to see better. The teen was decent, from what the vor could see, but not remotely a match for the thief.

Much to his benefit, Sonya wasn't looking to take his head off for attacking her anymore. As a matter of fact, she looked pretty satisfied even as she used that unreal polearm she favored so since childhood to pin the brat to the street.

"So… I take it you are the Khimki Cloud." She wrenched the club swung at her head out of the boy's hand, still inspecting her find.

"I thought he was dead?" Galina wondered aloud, still keeping the car between herself and the two 'Clouds'.

"That's the problem with relying on second or third hand information." Sonya absently tossed the makeshift weapon she had confiscated behind her, pressing down on her Bec de Corbin in order to prevent the scuffed up and bruised teen from being able to pry himself loose. Not without removing a leg, at least. "I'm not really surprised he survived whatever it was he did."

There was a beat of silence, where the vor figured that the Zolotov Storm-Cloud would probably know a lot better than they did what a Cloud could survive or not.

"It's a pity we can't take him back with us." The thief continued, attracting the rapt attention of the others.

Ziven blinked, looked between the confused women. "Why can't we?"

Galina looked as stumped as he did, which told him waiting to ask wouldn't help him any.

"He and I would end up trying to kill each other. Holding back so I didn't grievously injure him was hard enough." She flicked a glance to him, mostly to see if that answered his question or not and if she could go back to studying the teenager. "Kid, I am the Cloud whose territory borders yours on the southern end. As far as the greater Mafiya knows, you're dead."
The scrappy bit of a teen hesitated, still glaring and near spitting mad but at least he had the brains to listen even as irate as he was.

"You can keep it that way as long as you like. I certainly won't tell anyone otherwise." Sonya continued in the same matter-of-fact tone of voice. "I'll send Galina back here tomorrow, the brunette, with a book you might need to understand why it is you heartily loathe me even if we don't know each other."

Until their fellow thief pointed it out, it seemed the teen hadn't cottoned on to why he had attacked her and only her. Especially since there was three of them, and frankly Ziven looked more of a threat at first glance than the shortest woman there.

That confusion replaced the hostility, mostly at least.

Yanking her weapon out of the ground, and the teen's ratty clothing, the elder Cloud pointedly let her weapon go and kept her empty hands in full view. Seeing it clatter to the ground then immolate itself in techno colored fire seemed to buy Sonya more goodwill than telling the kid that those who had hunted after him thought he was dead.

The vor didn't buy that suggestion of unarmed peacefulness she was trying to project. She hadn't been obviously armed before when she got into the car, he was pretty sure she could still summon a sledgehammer out of nothing again.

"However, Galina is mine. You harm her, and I will come back and kill you." That also bought her more attention, although why that threat would work when the woman practically knocked him out of his cover and pinned him to the ground didn't Ziven wasn't sure of.

"Fine." The teen with lurid bruises spat at the blonde, warily picking himself up out of the snow. "What else."

"Only a few things. There will be another syndicate that will come here, to take advantage of the 'empty' territory or to make use of the waterway. Either get on top of that, and make it your syndicate, or avoid it entirely. I will expect you to find the other Clouds bordering your territory and sort them out as I am doing for you." Sonya considered the spiky haired brat in tattered rags for a long moment. "Lastly, avoid the KGB. I do not want to try stealing or destroying information they might have, and if you make me I will either kill you or ensure that anything you ever touched is erased."

Said teen, a bluish-green haired brat with black eyes and a thin frame which suggested he wasn't from a middle-class or higher family situation, sneered again. "Get out."

"You are a decade too late to try ordering me about." She snapped back, then visibly arrested her forward movement to smack the ungrateful little snot. "They know your name. I am going to forget this ever happened, and if we meet again I will be the last thing you ever see."

With a huff, the teen barely gave her a nod and stalked off. Sonya similarly ignored him, striding back over to where Ziven had parked with a forcibly blank expression. "Let's go."

Still confused, mostly over why the thief was letting another of her Dying Will Flame users go without dragging him back to be fully educated, the vor opened the door for the girls. "Why-?"

"Not now."

Galina only waited for as long as it took for Ziven to get them back on the highway to return to their headquarters. "Now?"
Sighing heavily, Sonya glanced at her rather than the warehouses they were passing. "Clouds do not coexist very well. Arseniy, Cherep, Valera and I are different. We're heavily socialized with each other and two of us aren't active users. That kid was as feral a Cloud as you can get and mostly high off his activation still. Had we been forced to closer quarters, I would have murdered him. I'd rather not, really."

"Really?"

Ziven's startled question netted him a glance from the thief through the rearview mirror.

"...it's one of the few things those stories got right actually. I wanted to kill the kid, for making me think of the Vindice then attacking me and putting Galina at risk. At first, I was even going to murder him first and figure out what the hell second until I realized what was going on." She did not sound very happy about it. "I had thought... no, I'm just odd, Cherep's the opposite of a Classical Cloud as can be, and the Guardian Clouds I've met had mitigating influences. Damn."

Screw sound like, Sonya was both visibly and obviously unhappy over the thoughts in her head.

He didn't know the woman could pout at anything.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 28th of March, 1969 continued. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya was entirely unsurprised Fong was waiting for her the very moment she got back.

Feeling slightly frustrated and sickened as she finally got a good grasp on instincts that nearly made her kill some scrawny brat of a Cloud sight-unseen, she merely offered the Chinese Storm a nod of recognition. "Is it really all that important?"

"Not for a few more months yet, no. I had a thought that you might like a warning, before I put in for the actual contract." His red eyes flicked over the bemused vor eyeing him and her in turn. "Should we not speak in Russian?"

Grimacing as she realized she didn't know if Ziven or Galina spoke English, she risked a look at the two following her into the Zolotov headquarters. "Probably, but it is kind of a habit. Ziven, Galina, this is Fong of the Wo Hop To Triad."

Good thing she double-checked which Triad he belonged to before being needed to introduce him and get corrected.

Ziven, who had been tailing her around probably out of a lack for anything else to do, merely blinked. Galina, who had actually known the man was going to be visiting, gave a tight smile in return for the bow of greeting the Storm gave as he was introduced. "I think I'll get us some tea."

Sonya sighed at that, she wasn't upset. More disappointed and disgruntled than anything. If there ever was another Cloud, so long as said Cloud was Classic she wouldn't be able to personally do anything with them.

As well as mildly horrified she nearly killed some brat of a kid, but that was pretty much it. The space between herself and that kid's territory helped massively to try putting the incident behind her.

There hadn't been any real indication she had walked into another Cloud's claimed territory, she had just gotten antsy and a little suspicious the moment she left their borrowed car. No instant recognition
of another active Cloud user, nothing but a prickling up her spine that informed her she was being watched.

That was so generic it was going to be damn near impossible to separate out what was a 'Flame' sense and what was just her own damn nerves.

For fuck's sake, neither of them had given a moment's thought to watchers. Ziven even made a mention of the KGB to her, and yet Sonya still smacked the brat around in full view without bothering to double check to ensure they were in the clear. Hopefully the little scrappy Cloud teen can and would be able to ensure their scuffle remained between them.

She wasn't going to count on it, though.

"I wasn't aware you knew that." Fong commented quietly as she led them to her borrowed office. "Which Triad I hailed from, I mean."

"I'm not blind, Fong. I hadn't intended to do anything with said information, but then you and yours decided to chase me down in Shanghai."

"And then you dunked me and Liqin into the harbor, yes." Oddly, he seemed more amused over the entire affair than irked.

Which was her summarization of the whole farce, the entire situation could have been avoided rather easily had they tried not getting around Mafia Land's rules. Fong even had the gall to smile pleasantly at her in return for the dirty look she shot him for the dismissal of the event.

"And you tried shaming me about the man's hand that I shattered." She shot back, checking to ensure the worst of what was left out was her geology books and a few pages of near illegible notes from a three-hundred-year-old Arcobaleno. "What was his name again?"

"Gen. He's doing surprisingly well with a hook instead of a hand."

There came a sound of a choked off swear word behind her, which made the thief blink then scowl. She had locked the office when they left, not that a lock held much more than a pause in a syndicate of thieves. It should have ensured that the others understood she wanted things left where they were, and that she was out for the moment.

Gedeon and Irinei were in the office, both looking a bit spooked. Sonya wasn't sure why, obviously she would return to the office eventually if only to collect the paperwork she had to go through and finish with what she had been doing.

She stared back at them for a moment, until she decided a prodding was needed to get past the silence. "Whatever is wrong won't blow up in the next few hours, right?"

Their Pahkan's son looked to the lone member of the Four Rains, and the pole-like Rain fidgeted with his fingers. "...no?"

"Good." Then she didn't care what they were doing. Whatever it was could be dealt with tomorrow. "What do you want, Fong?"

"A great many things, but I suppose you mean 'what do I want right now'." Returned the Chinese man, un-phased by her shortness with him.

It was generally how she was when he was around, so she supposed he had considered it her default personality. He might even have a point in assuming such, if he did.
Ziven slunk into the office after him, taking up a position next to the bookcase and keeping an eye on the foreigner. Irinei gave up his seat for the visiting Storm, a bit more hastily than strictly polite, and Gedeon looked pretty unwilling to remain in his own as her guest seated himself.

Sonya flatly ignored all the twitching and shuffling after cataloguing who ended up where, she snatched Dmitriy's ugly ass office lamp off the desk and placed it on the floor before her.

Switching it on after she had it and its shade adjusted to make a makeshift backlight then pulling a sheet of glass resting the top part on the desk's edge and the bottom on her thighs gave her the base of what she wanted. Placing the top sheet of nearly illegible French writing carefully pulled straight on top of that, then sandwiched between another sheet of glass, and she had herself a functioning backlit tracing table.

She had forgotten to ask for one thing, though. "Ziven, tape."

Something to secure the paper she would be using to make a clean copy she didn't need to risk eye strain to read over the slanted glass.

Fong eyed her poor-man's tracing table curiously but kept his distance out of either prudence or politeness.

Irinei was the one to move, when the newer of the two just gave her a silent look that questioned what sanity she had. "I will fetch it."

"What do you know of the ongoing situation in China, Sonya?"

"I've kind of stopped looking into it, honestly." She admitted blandly, studying the new faint lines she could only now read in Pierre-Antoine's handwriting. "I kind of had to, otherwise I would've gotten a little more than irritable at your countrymen for the desecration of your country's heritage. I've... got a soft spot for books and things and did not appreciate the news a lot of old books ended up torched not too long ago."

Frankly, she didn't really like reading a whole lot of world news on a general basis anyways. Obviously, some researching was needed for the places her heists took place in but there was a lot of nasty shit that went on in the world even within a day-to-day basis. Keeping up with situations in places she didn't want to work in for those very reasons was... less important than ensuring she was abreast of things going wrong in the Soviet Union or just Italy.

She had a bigger investment in those two locations, and frankly she had little empathy for the rest of the world. Besides, more often than not hearing about vaguely familiar situations tended to give her an aching headache.

"Ah... yes. It's... now highly discouraged to practice traditional martial arts in China."

Jerking her head up, she gave the Chinese martial artist a long look. While that did explain what the hell he had been up to in Mafia Land aside learning more styles, that didn't exactly answer her question of what the hell any of it had to do with her.

Although she wondered if Fong had volunteered to be relocated elsewhere for a few years while that got sorted out or if his Triad group wanted him to learn as many styles as he had to teach later when the worst was over with.

"Fong, what does any of that have to do with me?"

"We are not going to let this go quietly." He continued, a nod to show he was getting to that. "Since
that is so, an underground martial arts tournament is being worked on. To take place this fall in Hong Kong, actually."

"And?"

He laced his fingers together for a quiet moment. Sonya already knew she wasn't going to like this.

"We are being… encouraged to bring along a… guest."

"I am not an escort." She shot back, a terrible suspicion already niggling at the back of her mind.

"I am aware of that, but as I am fairly well known and the only other option I have is… not someone I want to risk in such a situation." Her expression didn't change, and the Storm sighed exasperatedly. "I cannot just pick someone at random, as that possibility has been ruled out and will be enforced. There aren't any others of our kind I am aware of and interact with enough to count."

"Why need a plus one at all?" Sonya snapped, seriously contemplating throwing the man out before he could possibly convince her to go along with such a weird ass situation.

"Hostages against anyone informing certain, likely highly interested, parties. Had that not been the reason, I would have taken my other option along. Since it is and said option is not quite able to defend herself as well as you can, and you both are the only ones I qualify to take along, I would rather a greater threat to take with until things are more settled. You will be able to extract yourself if anything goes wrong."

She was slightly distracted by Galina returning with the lone Rain, the Lighting with a tea tray and Irinei with the tape she had requested. Snatching said tape when it was lobbed at her, the thief tore off a strip and affixed the top of her clean paper to the glass sandwich on her thighs.

"…when?"

"I only know sometime this fall."

Placing the roll of tape on the desk and picking up her pen, Sonya glanced up at the Storm in her office. "Then I can't give you an answer. I have things to do, Fong, and they aren't wait around in convenient places."

"I am going to request you by number." He warned her, accepting the teacup Galina offered to pour for him silently.

"Which is all well and good, but since it's not a contracted heist I do have the option of declining."

"You can do that?" Gedeon interjected, which forced her to introduce the man to the Storm.

She hadn't intended to, that was the whole point she had left off introducing the Sun and Rain even if it was polite to do so. As their 'Pahkan's son Gedeon was a bit more important than she was, and his security was probably supposed to be more than two other vory and a thief when meeting agents of other syndicates.

"Fong, this is Gedeon. He's a Sun." The fact she didn't make any mention of his surname should be a big enough hint that she wanted him to keep his mouth shut. "Gedeon, Fong is a Storm from the Wo Hop To Triad."

The two of them, seated in the only other chairs of the room, gave each other a considering look but exchanged a nod of greeting as Galina started pouring the thief a cup of tea.
"I can, so long as it's personal contracts and not for the agency I am contracted to." Sonya replied to the actual question posed, ignoring the steaming teacup sitting on the corner of the desk. "The clan can also pull me off the island without me forfeiting more than just money or time in return, even if I am in the middle of something. It just doesn't happen often, and you do it too much and they'll consider it abandonment anyways and still have me hunted down."

Fong decided to muse on his own thoughts for a little while after tasting his tea, which enabled her to get through an entire line of tracing once Gedeon's curiosity had been sated, before he spoke again.

"I would consider it a personal favor."

She blinked up at him blankly for a full second, wondering where in hell she would ever use a favor from a Triad member. Then again, it was also an opportunity to ask for a full spar on her own terms. …not a bad bribe, all things considered. He had also asked with plenty of time to consider.

"Maybe. If you give me exactly when and what I might or might not have to do." She supposed there wasn't any reason not to at least consider the request, other than the fact she had more than enough to do this year as it was.

As long as it was possible, didn't take up more than a week of time, and was a contract that would count to her total for the year?

China was a very big country she might not be able to avoid entirely for the rest of her life. She could try, but frankly from memories as Rachel the Triads would end up entrenched even in America given enough time. Additionally, from how networked the underworld was in her life?

A group might even eventually end up in control of part of Mafia Land like Vongola had.

Unless the Yakuza in Japan pulled off some kind of upset, but they had a lesser area to gain influence within and frankly she wasn't going to hold her breath.

"You will know when I do." Fong promised, then glanced at the three vory and two women in the borrowed office in turn. "Ah… one last thing…?"

Sonya paused, right before starting in on the second line of nearly-incomprehensible French. "Now what?"

He gave her a pleasant little smile, tinged only slightly with a wry edge, as he regarded her over his teacup. "I had figured it would take more to convince you to even listen to me, much less actually consider the suggestion."

"…you have nothing to do until your ride out, don't you?"

If possible, the Storm's smile gained even more of an edge. "Not a bit. Any recommendations?"

Sighing heavily, the thief glanced at her Lightning to see if the woman had any suggestions. It had been nearly a decade since she had the time to simply wander about, and without her brother taking a walk with her it had lost a lot of its charm as a distraction.

"Everyone should see the Russian Ballet at least once," Galina suggested slowly, looking more than a bit sidetracked, "otherwise there's the circus on Tsvetnoy Boulevard, or the Red Square and the Saint Basil's Cathedral. It's almost May, which has more festivals than April."

Fong gave an absent nod. "Sounds interesting."
Sonya rubbed the bridge of her nose tiredly. "You're going to want a tour guide, right?"

"If it is possible. Although I speak your native language, I have yet to learn to read it's written form."

She gave him a long flat stare, then turned to the only non-Flame active in the room. "Ziven, will you do me a quick favor?"

The vor gave her a similarly judging look as the first one he gave her earlier. "I'm not going with him, we've got way too much to do as it is Sonya."

"Obviously not. But he's my guest and I did tell him to come here." Sonya gave the, highly suspicious, blond a sweet smile. "Go fetch my father, please."

Arseniy had seemed interested in the men she knew. Two birds, meet one stone.

The momentary alarm that flashed across Fong's face was totally worth whatever price her foster father would ask in return for dogging the Chinese Storm around the city.

Especially since she, Galina, and Ziven had some serious work to do before their school could open in the fall.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 28th of March, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Fong was mostly certain Sonya's father wasn't hers in the biological sense.

Bazanov Arseniy was a massive man put next to his petite daughter, who wasn't really all that short unless… well, set next to those that rather towered over most with average height. Dark coloring where the thief was light, his tattoos reached up both arms to encircle his neck while hers remained contained under her clothing.

It didn't really seem to affect their relationship a whole lot, by the hug the woman gave him as he followed the younger vor into the office.

…and the older man was entirely unamused with what Sonya wanted from him.

He had the suspicion it was more to do with him than what she was getting up to here.

Well, Fong had asked for this. Even had the suspicion that she couldn't spare more time than she had, and so getting stuck with her father as a guide was something he could deal with.

Folding his hands into the sleeves of his changshan, he gave the older vor a more respectful bow than the other men Sonya had mostly absently or not introduced him to.

"-and this is Fong, Arseniy. He's the one Tats calls Tasty Muscles."

He immediately hid the wince, as far as introductions went that probably wasn't the best he could have gotten. Sonya either ignored the highly amused, the other woman she had named Galina to him, or highly dubious looks that earned him, which came from the rest of the men in the office with them.

"How long are you staying, Fong?"

If she was leaving him to the mercy of her father, not nearly as long as possible. "Only another two
"days."

The thief's lips were twisted up in a smirk, but she also seemed genuinely amused more than irritated now. "I have a couple martial arts questions, and if you can answer them I might see about getting you to test a few stones we know are Storm compatible."

"I can try." It was entirely possible he would know what she wanted, and as for a return favor that wasn't something to dismiss out of hand.

He had only been after it or something like that for an entire year.

Which would be more impressive if he had actually seen the woman more than a handful of times.

"There's a form of martial arts that is more evasive than either defensive or offensive. I can't remember much about it, but it did have an emphasis on redirecting attacks away from oneself. Do you know what it's called?"

Surprisingly enough, he did. "Aikido. Sonya… it's becoming rather popular as a style."

"Do you know it?" She asked, even as she returned to her desk to jot down the name on a corner of a folder.

"I've seen it used, and know some of its moves, but I have not studied it." Fong studied the thoughtful expression on the Storm-Cloud's face. "Should I?"

"Not necessarily. Any of your fellow martial artist that do know it enough to teach?" Carefully shifting the sheets of glass on the desk off her sheets of paperwork, Sonya shifted yet another piece of blank paper before her.

"Possibly. I could ask around for you."

"If you find someone that wouldn't mind teaching it to a few others, anywhere from one to five or so more, I will arrange for a safe place for that one to wait out your country's current… intolerance."

Somethings Sonya seriously wanted then, either for herself or another. The Storm doubted it was for herself, she did more than well enough against him even if her attacks were more rough than polished, and if she was looking for something to augment her own skills then she would be after bō lessons.

He hadn't learned aikido himself yet, it was technically a Japanese martial art and he was more focused on retaining what Chinese styles he could unearth before the users of them were… lethally inconvenienced.

However, Fong did know others that knew the style. "Would it matter if the individual is civilian or not?"

"…not, but if civilian then I would assume it would be for a longer-term arrangement."

That was a safe bet. As a matter of fact, he knew one of his old masters knew the style and wasn't doing too well under China's internal crackdown on traditional arts. The strict elderly man would not move himself out of the country regardless of any concern over his wellbeing, but the temptation of more students to teach would. "I may have someone in mind."

Sonya was a Cloud, and in giving one of the few people he still respected to her to guard?
It was a safe bet that Master Yaozu would be well protected for the rest of his natural lifetime.

This was an unexpected benefit from visiting the woman.

"Would I need to go visit this individual myself?"

Fong very carefully did not cringe as he thought what the two headstrong individuals might do when they met. "It would be better to send a letter inviting him to set up a school here first."

Master Yaozu wasn't exactly for gender-equality in battle. He was pretty certain he could arrange things in order for his old master an up-close view of a Storm-Cloud's lethality, well before the old man insulted the thief to her face and got a different demonstration. A personal one.

After the elder had been tempted and committed to moving his school to Russia would be a better moment to introduce him to his patron. As a matter of fact, if Sonya did consent to helping him keep his little sister out of the greater Triads' view that would be the perfect time to introduce the two of them.

Possibly to get in the spars he was pretty sure he was going to owe the thief for this. There were less visible dojos he could appropriate for such a meeting, and a few that might need to be destroyed in the end anyways.

"I'll give you the letter before you leave then." Sonya glanced to the woman still positioned behind her desk. "Galina, can you assemble a kit of Storm Flame rocks for me? I'll see about clearing it with old man Zolotov."

The brunette slipped a well-worn notebook from the thief's desk drawers and nodded, paging through neat rows of their language's script. "I should have it done by tomorrow. One of each?"

"Might as well use it as a test to see how well targeted sorting works out. As far as I am aware, Fong's pure Storm."

"I am." He confirmed for her when the woman he came to see glanced back up at him questioningly. "Should I be prepared to pay for what I break?"

"Probably. Not to spring it on you, but some of these are damnably expensive." Sonya tapped her left fingers on the desk's top for a moment, slitting a glance at the two older vory in the room and the younger apparently less respectable male listening to her explain all this to him. "And, if you can pay, I can sell this as an actual service instead of a favor in exchange for another. Might end up that way anyways, in order to give a good thorough test of what we have or compile more information for it."

Fong had to smile wryly at her suggestion. "I know of quite a few people who would gladly pay you a small fortune to match them to natural gemstones, even if the price tag is greater than the Flame rings sold in Mafia Land."

"Especially those you work with?"

"They would be the first ones I would inform of this, if you can." He had to admit to it, as denying would only make him a bad liar and do nothing for his reputation in Sonya's syndicate. "...although, if you can, I can say with some certainty that my Triad would be highly interested in an arrangement of mutual benefit."

Gedeon, one introduced to him as a Sun, jerked sharply upright and stared at the Chinese native. The martial artist raised an eyebrow back at him for the unusual reaction, giving the thief a confused look next.
Sonya merely smirked tiredly and waved a hand. "Don't worry about it, old argument. So, leave tomorrow morning free. I'll get back to you with what I can or can't do, or if my Pahkan wants anything other than money in return for using clan assets like this."

"I will see you tomorrow, then." Fong agreed, then blinked as he realized that left him to the direction of her father.

Vor Arseniy crooked a finger for him to follow and lead the Chinese man out of the Zolotov Thieves' Clan headquarters. More specifically, he immediately removed the Triad member from his daughter's office with an overabundance of haste and a minimum of politeness.

Which was a rather nice set up the Cloud woman had, an entire office for herself in a sprawling complex owned outright by her syndicate. The building seemed to be half an apartment and half a business office, even if he hadn't seen more than a fraction of the inside.

It did make him wonder what she was doing taking the odd contract for someplace like Mafia Land if she had the experience and pull her to rate such a part-time accommodation.

At least the older man did ensure there were no eavesdroppers to be worried about when he suddenly turned and demanded, "What the fuck do you want with my daughter?"

"A sparring partner." Fong answered as honestly as he could, out of respect to how highly Sonya seemed to hold her father in her esteem. "Which we are occasionally, but I would like to be friends as well. Your daughter has an impressive control over her Flames, which she has been helping me with this past year."

In truth she really only gave him a direction to go in, but the results spoke for themselves.

He no longer obliterated everything in his way when he called up his own Storm Flames, but just Disintegrated whatever was in the way he directed them. He had even had a limited amount of success in trying to stop the Flames from eating through what he hadn't intended to burn, or at least moderating the extent of the damages.

A small step up from anything even brushed with Storm Flames spontaneously igniting and anything touched with the smallest amount eventually being eaten away entirely under red Flames, but it was a difference.

He could avoid accidentally Disintegrating entire dojos now, and eventually might stop putting holes in a few walls eventually.

Not quite in time for Fong to return to learning from civilian institutions instead of criminally inclined ones that would hold their silence about his Flames, but he only had himself to blame for not finding his own way. That wasn't the thief's fault.

Vor Arseniy didn't seem to buy his explanation, but the man had two full grown daughters. Tatiana alone was probably the one to put a lot of the grey starting to pepper the man's hair there, and Fong didn't have a good grasp on whatever flaws Sonya had that might have contributed.

…on the other hand, if the sisters were anything as children like they were last summer…

Coughing, and hastily casting around for a subject that wouldn't get him into a messy confrontation with a fellow Storm's father, the Triad member dug his nails into his left wrist for something else to think about. "Would you mind recommending a hotel I may stay at?"
"Not that I'm complaining or anything," Cherep started off after he swallowed, "but you've been visiting more."

"You better not be complaining." Viper glared over at the Inverted Cloud stuntman, then wrinkled his nose at the contents of his plate. "And I can't believe you can eat that."

"You know, Sonya never really liked my habit of sampling the local dishes either." Actually, to be completely honest, he didn't exactly know what he was eating.

It was a very strong flavor, very sour. Since he had been recommended to order either beer or milk with this dish, he had opted for the milk just in case. It seemed like a good idea, and it did cut the sourness a bit.

"Cherep, mou… surströmmingsklämma is a sandwich made of fermented herring and potatoes. Possibly onions if you're lucky."

Checking between the two thin pieces of crisp bread, he had to give him that point. The meat in it did look like fish.

The Mist gave him a flat glare from under the ever-present hood for trying another bite.

"It's not bad." Not exactly good either, probably an acquired taste. Cherep had eaten worse in his life, and there was potato in it too. "Besides, it's bad manners to waste food."

Not entirely surprised when his visitor didn't immediately respond, given how often Viper weaseled a meal out of him was a good indication this was another person that knew what it was like to starve, the Cloud continued to eat his fishy sandwich.

"It's been very quiet recently." The Mist offered after a moment of dubious staring at his meal. "Lulls like this aren't good for my business, since I rely on those that want to know what others are doing in their own little sections of the world without risking their own necks for it."

"Crina would dearly appreciate it if you would come back and rescue her from her newest apprentice." The stuntman gamely contributed around his next mouthful.

In fact, the old bat had near begged Cherep to contact her sister for subbing in for a month or the rest of the year. Whichever might be possible.

Peizhi was wishy-washy, which irked the old gypsy woman something fierce.

She couldn't decide if she should run him off or keep putting up with him. It didn't help that her ex-apprentice had actively avoided the man pointedly. If one of her old apprentices needed a place to fall back to, she could then give the Chinese man the boot guilt free.

The Cloud wasn't going to drag his little sister back. Sonya had put up with circus life pretty well, but she also had left for a reason. Viper was more feasible, especially if the Esper was having money troubles.

"If… I… pay… will you stop eating that?"

Cherep could not stop his eyebrow from raising up, but he did pause before his next bite.
"Mou, Cherep, it reeks."

Well yes, he supposed that had been why he was directed to wait for his food outside of the restaurant. They had some very nice sheltered tables, not quite picnic-like ones but also not as spindly as the café tables his little sister had favored.

However, the entirely rare and unexpected suggestion for Viper to pay for a meal had the stuntman seriously considering the offer. "…no fish?"

"No fish." The Mist confirmed with a sharp nod, already rising from his seat nearly a full table away. "They have some decent British restaurants down the street."
Chapter 38

(Saturday the 29th of March, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya got a curious lack of resistance in getting approved to sort Fong out with a Flame compatible stone. Gedeon sold it to his old man, emphasizing the money that would be paid in return instead of mentioning the whole exchange of favors that prompted it. A nice twist that prevented him from giving her any further credit when it came to knowing what she was doing…

While not needing to argue or try negotiating with her ultimate Boss was nice and all, she was pretty damn sure that still meant both her Pakhan and his son had little to no faith in it being a sellable service. They also probably thought that the rather young-looking Chinese Storm didn’t have a decent reach in his Triad, so it would end up something minor in the long run.

If she didn’t know full well that the two of them almost never had anything to do with syndicates outside of the Soviet Union, the thief would actually begin to suspect they were being obstinate just because. That was entirely within Gedeon’s personality to do, and it was highly likely he got it from his father.

Knowing it was out of ignorance for what was out there wasn’t much better, but the only thing she could do with that was arrange more non-Soviet business and hope it got corrected in a fast hurry.

The clan had loose thieves like her just this very thing, to handle or warn of outside influences that might impact them before it did. The Storm-Cloud might currently be the youngest and one of the farthest ranging, and a young woman aside that, but the lack of weight her suggestions carried within their syndicate was starting to irk her.

Yes, she was young, female, and not a well-established figure within their syndicate. That didn’t mean she had little to no idea of what she was doing, or what those outside the Soviet Union thought about some specific mafia issues.

On her lone walk back to her office she had to remind herself she wasn’t yet twenty, seemed entirely too green and young to a vor of either Gedeon’s or Milo’s age, and working with a subject that old man Zolotov had admitted he didn’t understand. It would take time, effort, and probably a fuck-up or two before her advice got more than just passing interest.

Pyotr, the Sovintnik, did at least seem to be aware that if Sonya was setting this up to be a service they could charge rather disproportionate prices for then she also knew where the market for it would be. At least he had faith in her ability to earn money for the clan.

Mostly due to the fact the grey haired older vor was the one to check up on the end of year finances the clan had, and exactly how much Sonya usually brought in when the stones the Flame users were messing around with needed ‘restocking’.

The Sovintnik was also a better financier than she was, where the Storm-Cloud was just going to charge Fong for everything he destroyed and leave it at that Pyotr instead worked out a by-the-hour fee and what cost any half-cracked stone should be worth compared to a shattered one.

Sonya did appreciate the Triad member knowing a master Cherep might be willing to learn aikido from, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t charge him through the nose. She was going to go with the elderly vor’s pricing suggestion, simply adjusted slightly.
Fong was going to do her a favor, and if she wanted a relatively painless education for her clan about the true reach of Flame users they would need repeat business.

With that sorted out, she turned her attention to her fellow if feral Cloud.

The Khimki Cloud wasn't exactly doing well. It had been a week or so since the incident that made the collective Mafiya assume he had killed himself, and the teenager still had livid bruises and scabbed over cuts from it. Probably living on the streets out of concern for others hunting him down again.

As the young man was a Cloud, Sonya had little to nothing to offer him that he would accept.

It was already a struggle to keep her thoughts about him neutral as it was. The thief continually had to remind herself the teen was young and likely entirely civilian before his Flames came to the fore with a vengeance, because she still resented the scrappy bit of kid for picking a fight where and how he had.

Said teenager would have little to no reason to think fondly of her either, if their shared nature made them highly predisposed to hate each other's guts for little reason. He also had less reason to try ignoring his Cloud-instincts, because in a way it was correct.

Sonya had nearly killed him, for attacking her at an angle that would've harmed or outright killed the two others out there with her. As far as said baby Cloud was concerned, that was validation that his instincts were correct in picking her out as the most lethal even when placed against a full vor like Ziven.

She couldn't get to grips with the little snot to convince him otherwise either. Going herself would likely just aggravate the issue already inherent and make them even more hostile to one another.

What little she could do had to be done through others, or at least until the Khimki Cloud came to her.

Until then…

"Galina, about that kid." The Lightning had been picking through the master list of gemstone/metal/rock results to pick the Storm positive ones, and when Sonya called to her from the doorway she looked up. "Take Ziven with you. You just drop off the book then leave."

"What am I doing then?"

"Making sure he won't freeze to death." It was nearly April, but in Moscow Russia?

It wasn't entirely uncommon for it to keep on snowing until more than halfway through the month.

"Since I keep overlooking you, I am hoping the Khimki Cloud will do the same. If he does great, if not just get him fed and patched up then leave. I'll recompense you for whatever you spend on him, just don't tell him that."

Ziven looked rather thoughtful as Galina pulled certain pamphlets out of the bottom left desk drawer. "Speaking of said kid... should we tell...?"

"We do, he dies. If news gets out, someone else will eventually try again to 'catch' him. I will not tell anyone as I gave the jerk my word I would not, but what you and Galina do are up to you." Sonya didn't really want the kid to die, he could be useful if they found a work around for the hostile-Cloud nature thing.
"He was still pretty young. Even discounting the fact we're not much older, he couldn't be more than fourteen or so. Fifteen at most." The Lightning mused aloud, double checking the list she had made up to assemble a kit of gems, jewels, and crystals for Fong to try out. "A year or two of grace, I think."

The vor raised an eyebrow but shrugged that issue off.

"Sonya? Which set am I to give a book from…?"

"...the civilian one. But make sure to mention you hid the information within the hippy-love bull."

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 29th of March, 1969 continued. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Valera learned to talk while she had been gone. Short comments only, and his vocabulary was rather restricted, but actually understandable instead of the toddler babble he had been limited to the last time she saw him.

Sonya might be overreacting a little to the scare with the Khimki Cloud, but there wasn't any reason to avoid visiting Lisa and Valera. Getting the baby Cloud familiarized to her presence and getting him to understand she was their father's second and not a threat to him was just... something to do.

Her youngest brother quizzically stared at her for a while. It had been nearly two months. "Ma?"

"Your sister, Valera." Lisa didn't even need to turn around, and the thief still had no idea how she did it. "Sonya. You remember her? The one that let you play 'stack on me'?"

...wait, she did. The kettle that was almost always on the back range was an expensive-looking silver affair none of the children ever got the story behind out of either of their foster parents, with a high mirror-bright polish.

Damn.

Tatiana was going to bitch over her catching onto their foster mother's tricks before she did. Maybe she could just not tell the redheaded Sun…?

Lisa's lips twitched, and that looked odd in the bent reflection, but the older Russian turned the heat down on her porridge and gave the youngest of her foster children a warm smile. "Good morning, Sonya. Business or pleasure today?"

"Half and half." Admitted the younger thief willingly enough, obligingly moving into the hug she gestured for. "Not that it's entirely terrible to see you two again."

"Why thank you Sonya, you always know just what to say." Pulling back slightly, her mother also seemed to forget to let her go. "Now, what's this about a Chinese Triad member visiting you? One all your other siblings seem to know but you never thought to introduce to me?"

...Arseniy likely told her.

"Fong's... Fong. He's a pervert." Shrugging that off, Sonya fidgeted but didn't remove herself from Lisa's hold. "He wants a favor, so we're... exchanging a set of them. Two actually. I get one of his old martial arts friends to guard and teach a few of my to-be students and possibly Cherep until the unpleasantness in his home country is over, he gets a run through of the Storm Flame stones we
know of. He needs someone semi-capable for some tournament token hostage, and I get a few spars out of it."

If anything else came of the arrangement, it was just a bonus.

It wasn't guaranteed Cherep would go along with learning aikido, or that the tournament the Storm wanted her to attend with him would even be held given the pressure the event was likely under.

The thief was taking more of a risk on Fong's martial arts fellow, but she was pretty sure if whoever it was associated with a Triad member then he wouldn't mind teaching to-be thieves or vory.

"Hmmm… you don't say."

Did she say anything wrong?

"A pervert?" Inquired the older woman, letting the Storm-Cloud she raised go in favor of checking up on what she was making for breakfast. "That doesn't sound like something you would label another as."

Sonya slunk to a chair, knowing full well she wasn't going to be able to leave until her mother fed her something. "It's Tats' fault."

"That sounds like a very interesting story." Arseniy gave his own opinion as he lumbered sleepily into the kitchen, seemingly half-blind and the scowl only lifting from his face when Lisa put a mug of coffee in front of him.

"You know Tats, she might have been just messing with Sonya's and this Fong's head." His lover reminded him, pausing only for a moment to smooth the sticky crumbs off Valera's chubby cheeks.

The toddler made a few grasping motions in her direction, which made her rolled her eyes and pull out a few more of her homemade crackers to give him.

Sonya remembered those, it was more like toasted bread slices with dried fruit bits baked inside. They were very good, especially since the older Russian woman tended to not make sweeter things very often.

"She was, but I didn't really catch on until a while later. But it's stuck in my head, and now I keep thinking of him as a pervert."

The vor grunted as he set his now only half-full mug down. "Good."

She blinked, but her foster father paid her confusion no mind. He was eyeing his son's progress in learning to eat solid/crispy things. Valera seemed to not like the crunchy texture, instead he was sucking on the cracker and using his few baby teeth to scrape off the soggy outside.

"Lisa, do we have any milk left?"

"Of course we do. Cherep's not here to drink it all as soon as we buy it."

Sonya snickered, only slightly guiltily. Her brother wasn't the only one that tended to drink a lot of milk as a child, and from the look her foster mother was giving her through her kettle Lisa knew that full well too.

Given that even Arseniy flicked her a glance, she had not been as sneaky as she thought she had been about that either. Whoops.
At least it was some mischief that neither seemed to really mind, after the fact. It was entirely likely
the two of them had let her ‘get away’ with stealing extra cups of milk since it had been a rather
innocent thing in the end.

Pouring half a mug full of milk, one of the heavier and clunky ones that stood up well to possible
toddler abuse, the older woman placed that and a small plate of her crackers on the table between her
lover and their children.

Sonya got a mug of coffee, the ban on the stuff had lifted for her after she and Cherep had finally
moved out. Likely Valera would be forbidden to drink it until he was old enough to make his own
decisions, but that wasn't the thief's problem.

The toddler watched suspiciously as his father snatched a cracker and dunked it half into the mug of
milk, then just as narrowly watched his foster sister do the same with her coffee and a cracker. He
considered his half-masticated one, his father, sister, and the innocent mug of white cow's milk in
turn.

Clumsily lunging forward, the kid managed to hook a few soggy bread crumb covered fingers into
the thick mug and drag the milk over to his highchair. Surprisingly without spilling it all over himself
or the table.

Abstaining from making her cracker soggier than it already was now that the toddler had the idea, as
she didn't really like the texture of soggy things if she liked how they were normally, Sonya caught
Arseniy's eye. "Where is Fong, anyways?"

"Same hotel you tend to live out of. He's to meet me there at ten, then I'll take him wherever you
want him to go."

She had an hour to find someplace to test Fong with Flame crystals.

While wondering how old Aleksandr was doing, and how badly his underground hall was damaged
after the clan's testing, she finished off the cracker just in time for Lisa to set a full breakfast before all
of them.

"You are eating, Sonya."

…right, half an hour to find someplace Fong could pepper with crystal shards without consequence.

(ooo0000oo)

(Saturday the 29th of March, 1969 continued. Aleksander's basement, Moscow, Russian
Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"What, exactly, do you want from a Flame focus?" Sonya asked of him idly as she paged through a
few sheets of paper covered in Cyrillic script.

"...I do not need more power, but a limiter that can stand up to the strength of my Storm would be
nice." Like with how she found her own control, the so called 'bad match' in the red tourmaline.

Fong was really rather curious over the box of small packaged stones at her feet, but the thief was
still perusing the information she held in her hands. As she knew what to do and he did not, he was
rather content to allow her to set the pace for this.

She was even missing her people. The Sun, Lightning, and the other vor he didn't know the Flame
type of were elsewhere. Even her father left them alone, and the Storm was actually rather surprised
by that.

He wasn't sure if that meant they had their own duties to attend to or if there was another reason for it.

Given the pockmarks in the ceiling of the generously spacious underground room, he had the suspicion this might be a bit more than volatile until they did find him a match.

There were the marks that a lot of testing had gone on here, char marks spider webbing out of certain spots on the walls and the debris of various desks and chairs likely sacrificed to the pursuit of knowledge still lay strewn about where they had been abandoned.

The whole hall seemed to have an energy about it that starkly contrasted the dearth of those within. Fong could almost say it was like the rare times he and a few other Flame users of China had the time to gather and show off what they had learned to the rare few elders who retained their Flames from years ago.

Just… lacking the people.

Possibly those shards of crystal embedded into the ceiling retained a tiny amount of Flames still, which is how the room seemed to be fuller than it was even near empty.

"Anything beyond that? Or are we just looking for indicator stones for various levels of control?"

Considering the question as he turned back to the woman that lead him down here, the Storm had to admit he didn't know. "What can I do with a Flame focus gem?"

The question distracted the Storm-Cloud from her reading, and she gave him a measuring look. "…we'll find you a few matches, then. You can figure it out on your own time, but I expect at least some mention of what you end up doing."

"Very well."

Sonya put aside the sheets of paper, glancing at the topmost entry and pulling a small plastic bag holding a lone stone. "Might as well start from the top. Diamond."

Catching the package as it was tossed at him, the martial artist pulled the tiny diamond free and held a lick of his Storm Flames to it curiously.

For a moment nothing happened, but the jewel did suddenly heat up under his fingers. It went from cool to burning hot quickly enough he had to drop the diamond or risk burns on the pads of his fingers. It rolled on the flooring, making the wood smoke where it came to a stop.

Luckily, nothing burst into flame… or Flames. Curious that it had burned him… with his own Flames supplying the heat.

"…yeah. I've only seen one Sun that can make use of a diamond. That's not really an uncommon reaction." Marking down a few Cyrillic letters in the space left after the first entry on her lists, the thief checked the next entry for what gemstone to try next. "…ruby. I'd advise you to be more careful with these. Explosions aren't an uncommon reaction either."

Fong supposed that would be why the ceiling of this underground hall had pockmarks in it.

Catching the new package, he slid the red jewel out of the plastic and tried to generate the smallest Flame possible.
Fascinatingly, he could see the gem actually wick a tiny amount of his Storm into it before it shattered. A few of the nicks his fingers suffered burned momentarily.

"**Sapphire. Expect a similar result but with a minor variation.**"

As Sonya claimed, the blue gem went the same as the red one. Fong suffered a deeper nick to his left thumb, though. Slightly more forceful, then. *"Are all the reactions going to be that violent?"*

"*No, those are just the more volatile ones.*" Pausing in marking down the result he got with sapphires, she then looked up at him curiously. "*Do you want a red variation of whatever stones, or one that doesn't have to be red?*"

"That's possible?"

"...Fong, you just used a sapphire. Admittedly it blew up on you, but that should at least suggest that color has little to do with these stones."

The Triad member blinked at her, then blinked again. With his eye coloring and Flame type, he had been given mostly red things for most of his life. It had been an unspoken tradition he had not honestly expected to be broken at all.

He liked his Flame's color, but that didn't mean he always wanted to dress in the same shades. *"I do not know?"*

Sonya shrugged. *"We'll see what we end up with. Next...? Moonstone."

This stone was a rough one, meaning it didn't have the edges or polish of the other three. Still wary over explosive gems, Fong only introduced his Flames to this jewel slowly.

Again, there was a moment when the Storm Flames seemed to almost wick into the chalky white crystal but when he cautiously increased the amount of Flames he was using it crumbled into his hands as a fine white powder. It wasn't an unusual reaction for something held to Storm Flames, dissolving into powdered nothing, but...

"...apparently not."

Fong grimaced, the crystal powder had gotten into the nicks left in his fingers from the explosive jewels.

*"Here, one of my positive reaction stones. Ajoite."

A polished pebble of blue-green was tossed to him next. *"How many of these do you think I need to test?"

He went even slower with this one, which proved to be a good idea. Although it didn't explode as violently as either the ruby or sapphire, it also didn't behave nearly as sedately as the moonstone. Resisting the temptation to sneeze once it shattered into tiny particles, he waved the powdered teal stone grit floating in the air away.

"...at last count, there are a hundred and sixteen stones we know will work with Storm Flames."

Sonya absently answered him, scribbling down a notation and rummaging around for the next packet with another stone. *"Unless we find one which has a reaction you greatly like, all of them. You're stronger than I am and seeing what kind of upper limit some of these rocks have might help me the next time I need a new Storm stone.""
The next was a blackened brown chunk of what he was pretty certain was a mineral. "...Sonya?"

"Allanite." She ran a finger down the line of Cyrillic script. "From what little we know, another likely to end up powdered when an overly strong Storm puts their Flame to it. At least, it happened to me too."

Fong eyed the already fragile looking bit of mineral in his hands but did light up his left with Storm Flames and brought it close to his right hand holding the next crystal to test.

This was going to be a long morning.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 29th of March, 1969 continued. Aleksander's basement, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Fong's best match ended up a tie between a bewilderingly fragile crystal called amblygonite and red imperial topaz. That wasn't to say those were his only matches, but as for what could stand up to his Flames they ended up as the best.

Which was odd, given she had tried red imperial topazes years ago and found them less than responsive. That held true even today, even with the news Gedeon gave her about topazes working for most any Flame.

She gingerly guessed it had to do with Fong being a more powerful Storm than she was, or because he was purely a Storm and not a mix. She made note to get Coyote Nougat to try that one out over Christmas to see what he thought it would be good for.

The amblygonite, a tiny radiant cut gem in pale green which was barely three carats if Sonya had to guess, actually could stand up to the Chinese Storm's absent playing with it. She was pretty damn certain it would shatter before long, no Flame focus gem she ever used tended to be long-lived either.

She let the Triad member slip those two into his pocket, as he was going to be paying for all the rocks they wouldn't be able to reuse anyways. His attempts to steal from a thief was noted, but generally ineffectual and so ignored.

Next best for him were cavansite and celestite, a violently blue chunk of mineral and a cloudy light blue mineral shaped into a worry stone. The Storm seemed more bewildered they could stand up to his Flames more than fascinated with them, but again wasn't what he was looking for. They could stand up to his Flames in small doses, but eventually had the same powdering issue moonstones did.

Eudialyte, a marbled red, white, and black kind of semi-precious gemstone, proved to be more in line of what Fong had been looking for. It crumbled easily, but only when the Storm specifically tried to overwhelm it.

As in tried to expend more Storm Flames than generally needed to melt or Disintegrate anything.

As eudialyte was common in Russia, Galina had purchased nearly a hundred tiny examples of the sphere-shaped stones. Given how many ended up cracked or crumbled between her, Mikhail the younger Storm user, and the five newest the clan picked up over the last year, she figured Fong could very well get away with taking a few extra.

A few Suns had been able to use the stone as well, but a few notes Galina included with the Storm gem list told the Storm-Cloud they had agreed on the thought it was like pouring Flames into a bucket. A lot of effort for little visible results.
Sonya scribbled down the last results they had gotten, watermelon tourmaline which ended up scorching then flaking away under the full Storm's Flames and zoisite which imploded, then slung the paperwork back into the folder she had received from her Lightning. "Right, thankfully we're finished."

"Have we gotten through them all already?"

"I can't exactly time it, as you went through only a little under half of the stones we have, but I think you would've tied with my brother for how fast you managed to get through it all." If they doubled the four hours and took out the time Cherep had to spend on other things than something his foster family's syndicate wanted his help with, then it was comparable. "That doesn't mean this list of rocks isn't subject to change, but if I find more Storm stones I will inform you if you promise to tell me how they responded to you."

"Agreeable. My thanks."

Sonya was still the strongest Zolotov Storm, at least until the younger ones finally became settled with their Flames and could be judged, but Fong had her beat easily. Of course, she probably could do more than he could even with her limited strength with their shared Flame type since her minor Sun talent lent itself to 'efficiency' from all signs.

A very annoying talent, especially since it inhibited her from draining her Cloud Flames in order to actually exercise. What took Cherep a decent amount of Flames to accomplish took her half of his effort, and from watching the Triad member all morning playing with stones she could safely say she did have a tighter control over her Flames than he did.

"Have you eaten?"

"I… no. Not as of yet." Fong finally allowed himself to be distracted from one-handed juggling of two spheres of eudialyte, catching them in sequence absently. "I was going to just wander about for a little while and see what the vendors around here have."

"If you do, I recommend the pelmeni." Grabbing the Storm focus notes and tossing them into the box of rejected or shattered jewels, the thief swept it up and headed for the staircase. "But since I owe Aleksandr breakfast for loaning us the hall, you could stay here and eat."

Also, the elderly vor who still lived here had a first aid kit. The Chinese man should probably get his fingers wrapped up before he left bloody handprints everywhere.

Sonya glanced pointedly at the hands in question, which had him following the path of her eyes and inspecting his own nicked and slightly burned hands as well. "…is there something I may use as a bandage here?"

"Upstairs, and yes. Actual bandages."

At least it was going to be a brunch type of breakfast. She wouldn't end up possibly killing either the Aleksandr or her guest via poorly made food.

A cross between a pancake and a crepe, and maybe some sweet rye bread with sausage. Maybe with some black spiced tea.

Rachel had been a college student, who only just managed to gain her degree in foreign affairs before her death. She had eaten as little as she could get away with to help save money to pay off her student loans. Sonya traveled for work, meaning she rarely had the time or energy to practice cooking much less an actual kitchen to try in. When she did, she looked for what was easy and quick
rather than what she would have to spend effort to make.

Was it any surprise she could barely manage the simple parts of a typical Russian breakfast?

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 29th of March, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Half a page into tracing the first page of a three-hundred-year-old Arcobaleno's handwritten note, Sonya belatedly realized that Pierre-Antoine Carpentier had written on both sides of the sheet.

What little she had done so far was a mixed jumble of forward and backwards letters, not something that would be translatable.

Taking a deep breath, the thief placed the fountain pen she had been using down before she threw it in a fit of temper and possibly punctured a few walls. "Galina, I'm going to go check up on my Lackey and visit my sister for the weekend. Call me when Ziven drags himself back."

"...um, alright?"

Since Ziven wasn't back yet, he was either dead or also slipping under the other Cloud's instincts. She highly doubted the scrappy almost-civilian could kill the vor. More likely he was at least arranging for a better living situation for the snot nosed little brat and would be getting back sometime today or tomorrow.

At the very least her first attempts at tracing a legible copy of an ancient Storm's letter hadn't been a complete bust, Sonya had another name. Yang XiaoJing.

Of course, finding the owner of that name about three hundred years ago without a country or town of origin was going to be rather hard. Especially since China was busy destroying its history. That country alone represented a large chunk of the Far East, meaning if Yang XiaoJing was Chinese it was possible that any records of her mere existence had been long since burned.

Given how… dicey she had found the region, that could certainly wait for confirmation and a better handle on what kind of criminals operated in that mess.

When she got back, she would pay more attention to what she was tracing and try again. For right now, Sonya needed out of that office.

"Sonya," Galina called out before the Storm-Cloud could exit the imprisoned Rain's office, "Tuesday you have a meeting with the two-eighty-one School District Intendent."

Pausing, she gave the other woman a confused look. "Why me?"

"Because for all that you look like a tiny Russian doll, you're scarier than I am and don't have the criminal record of our vory." Admitted the brunette bluntly, slipping the book she had been reading before she gave up on her self-imposed quest for the time being shut and placing it on her lap. "It's just to get the bulk of the paperwork done with, mostly just signing things and agreeing to terms."

Well, Sonya wasn't going to be looking forward to that. If it helped Lisa, however… "Fine. Are we going to be a boarding school or a day one?"

"Bit of both." Galina shrugged that off. "We're going to be a private school anyways, even if those are kind of rare these days. For... get this, 'the advancement of Soviet technology and sciences'."
"...I thought the private schools were shut down?"

"A few years ago, yes. A few of them are coming back, and this way some of the prospective kids won't have to spend most of their lives on trains or planes. Our kids will be the day students, the outsiders will be the ones living on the fourth and third floor dorms."

The thief puzzled over it a bit, but eventually decided the Lightning likely had checked all the options available for the school and likely picked the best one. "Fine. I'll be back Monday evening at the latest."

"Say hello to Tatiana for me."

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 29th of March, 1969 continued. Mafia Land.)

"So, what? Are you going to visit every few weeks or something?"

"Every weekend, maybe." Sonya informed Tatiana absently, following the redhead to the dojo she had mentioned gave classes in Fut Gar and had a variation in staff-styles. "At least until Bjørn has another series of heists set up for me."

It was a mark of either how busy or how lazy she had gotten, exactly how long it had taken her to follow through with her sister's idea of learning a specific martial art together.

The Storm-Cloud hadn't had a reason to travel down these roads in Mafia Land yet, although she was aware Fong nearly lived within them. The farthest she had gotten was the rent-a-barre room establishments closer to the island's center, again with Tatiana nearly two years ago.

Dance studios, an actual gym kind of thing for 'real' men, and maybe a couple smatterings of international martial arts from around the world littered this section of the island. Most of what was out here was the rent-a-room kind of things, dojos and studios that allowed someone that needed the space or setups for their training regime or exercise routine.

Sonya highly suspected that when kung-fu movies actually became popular this sector would become as wildly popular and wondered if she should purchase a bit of real estate here or not.

It would be prohibitively expensive but would be a way to generate 'clean' cash for herself, at least.

She should really get on having her Lackey pick up some skills or contacts within the finance section of the island, if only to have him make investments on her behalf or make some 'clean' money she could spend off the island or away from criminal establishments. Bjørn was still young enough he should pick up the skills rather easily, but she wasn't sure if she wanted to kick her little Icelandic teen fishy to swim in a tank of sharks or not.

There was a civilian way around that, right?

"Hello? Earth to Sonya. You in there, baby sis?"

Narrowing her eyes at the hand waved in her face, the thief turned to the nurse irritably. "What?"

"We're here, Nya." Tatiana gave an expansive hand wave to the establishment in question.

It wasn't anything fancy, not for a school teaching a martial art style the management of Mafia Land actually encouraged its day workers to learn or at least attend a few classes of a month. A two-story
building, which was actually the norm for non-main street buildings here, of which the ground floor held an open training hall and the upper floor likely housed the main teacher and possibly his family. If not, then a few other students/assistant teachers.

However, the location didn't instill nearly as much trepidation in her as the students and teachers were. Three older men, an elderly lady, and a smattering of young to old students mirroring them mid-pose who all seemed entirely too surprised at what should be a fellow student and a guest.

"Tats... you didn't tell them I was coming, did you?"

"Um... nope." With a shrug the nurse strutted into the establishment as bold as brass, the Storm-Cloud very reluctantly trailing behind her. "People get weird when they know I know you. Like at the hospital, during the mid-month meetings? I told them what you told me about the heist you did for them. Pretty sure one of the docs crapped himself."

Tatiana tapped her lips with one nail, setting her purse down in a cubby hole provided for the students to use if they came a bit overdressed.

"Also, pretty sure he was the one in charge of arranging for that contract, so... yeah. Doctor Kappel laughed afterwards, though."

Sonya honestly couldn't see the dour German doctor laughing at anything, he didn't really seem to have a sense of humor around her. However, her sister did see him more than she did. It was possible said 'laugh' was more of a quiet chuckle or a snooty snort-laugh. That seemed to fit the man more than just laughed.

"While that's nice and all Tats, they're... staring."

She was a thief, however much playing Crina the gypsy fortune teller's draw girl had given her a bit of tolerance to it she still didn't like being the center of attention.

It didn't bother her so much normally, but these were people her sister likely knew of well enough to care about. She couldn't pretend they meant nothing to her, because they did as long as they mattered to Tatiana.

Her elder sister scanned the small dojo, locking eyes with a few of her fellow student and even two of the assistant teachers. "I kinda find it fascinating how many people like poking at your temper, then acting as if it's your fault when you avoid them instead of smack them through a wall or two."

Sonya sighed silently through her nose.

"I will not lose my student by pitting them against you, Cloud." The elderly woman interjected before Tatiana could say or accuse them all of anything else.

"If I wanted a fight, I would find Fong. I believe he is back on the island already. He's survived me being pissed off before, and thus I already have a sparring partner."

The grey-haired old bat, only an inch shorter than the younger Russian sister, considered her words very carefully. "Why are you here?"

She might want to take offense but really, she could see why the old bitch might be wary of her.

Sonya's mere presence would likely cost her some business, from those ill-informed idiots that tended to treat the Storm-Cloud like some kind of monster. To be frank, she could act like one when her temper got away from her. "To learn. Is that not why students come here? I was only informally
instructed in wielding a staff and was looking to get formal instruction."

Tatiana stamped a foot, looking rather pissed off now. Not that she wasn't when her little sister pointed out people were staring at them, but now she was showing it more. "This is getting beyond stupid. Nya's been here for a damn near decade, and no one ended up meeting a messy end via her unless they were invading idiots. Now all of a sudden you want to treat her like a leper? There's an entire generation of us back home that will tell you the worst you will end up suffering from her in a spar are bruises and maybe broken fingers if you pissed her off."

The old bitch had as big of brass ones as the redhead, and merely raised a cool brow. "The last Cloud that came through Mafia Land did the damage to the old sector that made it become abandoned in the end, since it was decided it had to be completely leveled instead of repaired due to the cost."

Having not heard that before, the Russian sisters exchanged a look.

As far as Sonya knew, the old sector of the island had been abandoned long before she started working here but happened after Lisa stopped. Apparently even Tatiana hadn't known what had caused the island's infrastructure to shift by the look on her face.

Sighing, the thief rubbed her neck. "Well, that does explain a little of the reception I got when the news broke."

"It's still stupid." Denied the nurse in the next second. "What was he? An invader or did he pull the Cloud-suicide trick?"

"Neither, as far as I am aware. The Cloud was supposedly just visiting, and then went rampant."

"…possibly got the news of a death in or of his territory. Or he got into a fight that got out of hand and he didn't stop until someone killed him." She hazarded after a moment of thought. "So… is that why I'm avoided? Because no one ever managed to figure out what triggered that rampage, they're even more scared I might snap in the same way?"

"It's a possibility." Having settled at least the bulk of the hostility going her way for being probably just prudent, the older woman eyed the Storm-Cloud again. "As long as you can find your own sparring partners, I will teach you."

The thief shrugged that off. "Fong owes me a favor. Tats can sub, if you feel waiting for him will take too long."

Although the news the old bitch had given them made a disturbing amount of sense. There had been a lot of fear from the more permanent residents of the island to her outing of being a Cloud. Way too much not to merely be unfounded hysteria from old stories or rumors that might or might not have been true.

The people who visited always showed less personal wariness to her, until one of those residents managed to have a word with them. If the last Cloud that claimed anything about Mafia Land as territory blew a gasket and actually destabilized part of the island, of course none of the people that lived here full-time would want yet another Cloud to lose her temper.

However, Sonya had lost it once. She even had to pony up the money and her services to pay off what she broke. Pavement and a stretch of forest.

The news of which, she supposed, might actually have coincided with the tapering off of the 'personal bubble' thing she used to have.
She hadn't even realized her treatment was due to the actions of a predecessor. While it made it less personal... it was even worse news in a way than just unreasonable fear.

The thief might not be personally responsible, but it was a validated fear regardless. It had happened once and could happen again. Continuing as she had been, ignoring those that were afraid of her for little reason, would not help her at all in the end.

Very few were interested in interacting with her in spite of the rumors and fear surrounding her, and those that were content to wallow in their ignorance would never bother to learn they had actually little to fear from her.

"Very well." The old bat, who was going to be the first one Sonya made to see her behavior had been not only stupid but wrong, finally gave a short bow of greeting. "Although Primakova knows this already, I am Han-yue. I will be teaching you."

(Sunday the 30th of March, 1969. Bjørn's Apartment, Mafia Land.)

Mafia Land's television channels were mainly news feeds from around the world, two or three national stations in the bigger countries each, and one internal news network. Well-padded of a selection, but ultimately not very useful since they were civilian channels that only really delivered civilian news.

She supposed that might help a little if you had the time to watch the news of wherever an agent might be going or wanted to keep up with the current events back home.

However, there were Mafia Land news anchors. Sonya almost wouldn't have believed it had she not caught sight of the feed on Bjørn's TV. The one mafia news network was bewildering, since it detailed mostly the rising police attentions on certain aspects of criminal life and warnings about the various ongoing wars and how they might affect travel in the areas more than the obvious.

At least the teen had decorated Tatiana's issued Mafia Land apartment more than the last time she had seen it, and from what she knew of his spending of her dirty money he had been rather frugal in buying mostly second-hand and putting in the elbow grease to fix what he needed up instead of buy new. Not quite how Renato had furnished his, but the younger man had a more limited freedom with the funds available to him.

It was more patch-worked than the hitman's, and kind of seemed more lived in.

"Dama?" Her Lackey inquired, placing the pot of tea he was probably going to insist she take a cup or two of during her visit, down on a scratched-up coffee table sitting between the couch she was on and his own personal purchase of a television. "Was there something you needed from me?"

"Mostly to catch up with you about..." She informed him, still rather distracted by the on-going news report. It was from a CBS station from the States, detailing the life of the former President Dwight D. Eisenhower and coving a bit of how he died at the end of last month.

She had completely forgotten about which American President was in office. Richard Nixon was the current one, he had just taken office, and that just reminded her of the Watergate scandal to yet happen.

How would that work out in this world of crooks and criminals?
John Kennedy had still been assassinated, a professional assassination from everything she had seen of the situation. Not a hitman's mark, the murdered President was a civilian and therefore the greater bulk of Renato's associated mafia coworkers would've snubbed the contract.

One or two might have actually agreed, for enough money.

"…err, Dama? That's not much of an answer." The Icelandic teen commented slowly.

Sonya tore her attention away from the damnable glowing box rather sharply, by the jump the poor teen made at her head snapping around. "...about how hard you might have found arranging heists for me earlier this year. And if there was anything you needed done, or if it could wait."

"Aside missing my mother's jewelry, Dama, I am rather content with my life." Björn gave a slight wave of a hand, a grimace painting itself across his face. "I went back to Finland myself earlier this week, to try tracking it down. I know where most of it is, just... a few pieces had been sold."

"How shady of a pawn shop?" The thief questioned idly, thinking of all the risks that came with robbing a mafia hotspot like that. If it was heavily into the local syndicate, it might just be a better option all around to try bribing the information out of the owner instead of steal from him or her.

The smile that sparked across her Lightning-Storm Lackey's face made her smirk in return.

"They were not good people, Dama. They ripped me off, and we all knew it. But I had needed the money, rather desperately." He shrugged his shoulders, which she was pleased to note weren't as boney as they had once been. Björn had put on enough weight to have actual muscles now, and his build was still filling out. "But because they were not good people willing to swindle others, they are actually rather unpopular of a shop for the local mafia to frequent. They all prefer another, which denied me service only because I wasn't a native."

Good, not the local fence who can call up an entire syndicate to hunt her down. That let her get him some retroactive revenge in robbing them blind. Any extra money could make up for the suffering her poor Lackey suffered when they shorted him on the pawning of his dead mother's jewelry.

"Get me an address, Björn, and the next round of contracts had better start there." Sonya smirked wickedly at him. "As long as I have a bit of extra time, say a week or so, collecting the last few pieces will be no true hardship."

"Ah... speaking of," the teenager, and she was pretty sure he wasn't actually that much younger than her, idly scratched a cheek, "will we continue to go as slow as we did this last time? I think I could slot you a new contract every three days, as long as you can get me word when you need to slow down."

"We probably could, but I'd rather not overcommit myself." Agreed the thief thoughtfully. "Other than a starting spot in...?"

"Rovaniemi, Dama."

"And make it a trip into the Iron Curtain this next time. If I don't trip up for a week or two again, we'll see about the three-day thing." She blinked, then frowned as something told her they weren't alone anymore.

She knew this feeling, since the last time she had needed it had been…

A Mist was around, or more specifically looking in on them. Sonya might know more Mists than Storms or Clouds but given the experience she had with Shamal and the scare from the Khimki
Cloud, she had become very in-tuned with that hackle-rising sense of hers.

The only Mist she knew of and would possibly seek her out here was Cherep's friend. "Viper... that had best be you."

"If it wasn't?" Asked the gender-fluid Mist in rather accent less Russian as they pretty much ignored the Icelandic teenager's front door and walked through it as if it wasn't a solid object.

"I'd be guilty of killing my first Flame user." Admitted the thief bluntly. "Bjorno, Viper the Mist. Cherep's friend. Viper, this is my Lightning-Storm Lackey."

Viper merely tilted his head at the greeting. "I have a question, Sonya."

"I really have little to ask of you." She responded, still only somewhat sure the pronoun for the day was male and not female.

He wasn't wearing a skirt this time, at least. Heavy cloak still, and a tunic length long shirt under that made it hard to tell for sure.

The Storm-Cloud was sure he'd correct her if he didn't want to be male this time around.

Bjorno flicked his blue eyes up and down the Mist's form, then glanced at her skeptically for a long moment. "I will... get Viper a cup, then. And make more tea. Excuse me, Dama."

"I need some non-Mist information. Something isn't... right." The entirely uninvited visitor continued when the teenager left them for his kitchen.

"What do you mean non-Mist information?"

"...I think one of us is concealing something from any other Mist that might get suspicious. If I'm wrong, I can deal with that. But as it occurred to me when talking to your brother... ever been to Switzerland?"

"Once, with the Großes Volksfest. Do you want me to check in on that?" Sonya was a little confused on why the current man would want to know, but entirely willing to humor her brother's friend.

She couldn't visit Cherep on the road herself, not with the situation back home being as tense as it was. His doing it was rather appreciated, and as such made her more amiable to helping with whatever was going on. The Russian knew he was doing it, since she got sporadic postcards from her brother that occasionally mentioned the Mist.

Once in a while, she even sent the stuntman one back from the countries she was stealing things from. Hearing him spaz out about it when they met up again was usually funny.

Viper stalked over to the armchair that looked rather beaten up and slightly mismatched with the rest of her Lackey's furniture. It was at least green, which kept it from being entirely out of place from the floral-patterned couch. "I will pay ten euros for every topic you can give me, and fifty for anything I did not know myself."

"...thin on syndicates, mostly unaffiliated claim the country as territory. They all pretty much know one another, outsiders tended to stick out like I did." Started the thief slowly, as she tried to dredge her memory for the not entirely interesting country. "Pretty neutral, almost like a parody of the civilian views of the country. Mostly money laundering, the crime of choice seemed to be petty or tax evasion. No human trafficking, some drug trade, a few fences have properties there that occasionally substitute as storehouses. There was... a rumor, though..."
What had it been about?

She had thought it had been important, but almost promptly forgot about it. Not something she was going to make use of, but she had intended to remember it and the inability was starting to irritate her.

Something about the kind of bullshtitted mysticism that some Mists were known to spout off in their evasive ways, and something else…

Sonya clicked her tongue, now getting frustrated. She had made a point to remember, and she couldn't recall why.

"Bjorn!"

Her Lackey had made it through the country on his own, because that was still part of the time he had been trying to prove himself through sheer bullheaded stubbornness about how far he was willing to follow her.

A heavy if muffled clank, likely a kettle of water being hastily put down, and the blond teen darted back through to where they were seated. "Dama?"

"Switzerland. There was a rumor about something that heavily suggested Mist involvement. I can't remember what it was about."

He blinked at her clipped tone, blinked again, and then for a third time as his brow furrowed. "I... do know what you are talking about, Dama... but..."

"You don't remember either." As it was, it wasn't that suspicious.

Sonya hadn't been to the country in a few years, and neither had he.

Except for the fact she had wanted to remember whatever it was... and didn't. That might be just human memory failing but given Viper's highly suspicious expression, she wasn't putting money on that. Even if it was his money and not hers.

"Viper... I have a trade I'd like you to consider." It earned her a sideways look from the Mist counting out a stack of euros since they had contributed to whatever it was he was hunting for. "I want my Lackey to get a bit of experience in finances a criminal needs, but don't want him to go and get his nose bitten off. Play with my money but teach him how to manage it."

It was also a very convenient excuse to linger and make contacts or gather rumor in the business sector of Mafia Land. Which would have ties to Switzerland, especially since Swiss Bank accounts were just as popular as Sonya had figured they might be. She even had one, which was just simply sitting there getting stuffed with the extra money she had little use for if Bjorn didn't need it to live on.

Before she bought a house, she needed her mostly dirty money cleaned. It would be nice not to have to deal with Mafia Land's inflated prices or run a few thousand of whatever denomination through the laundering services here before going on a spree.

Viper likely caught on to some of the undertone she had, given the short nod the thief received and a hand-over of a hundred and sixty euros. Possibly the opportunity to not spend his own money to gain the information he wanted was as much of a temptation as she had figured on from Crina's griping about his miser-ness.
The Storm-Cloud handed it back over her head to her Lackey. "Also... I don't mind if you make him a contact point for whatever, as long as I get first dibs on his time. He's mine."

That earned her a bit of hesitation from the Mist. Until she finished her thought.

"I don't mind helping you out as muscle, as long as I get at least a heads up a week of time beforehand. This year is a little rocky, but next I will have even more leeway and possibly the year after very little restrictions."

He was Cherep's friend, and she was pretty sure her brother would mope something fierce if he up and died on the stuntman.

"Mou... that's rather generous of you." Viper commented rather neutrally, which she assumed was his overly cautious version of being highly suspicious but non-committal at the same time.

"Cherep's planning on asking you to come home with us for Christmas, if he hasn't asked you already." Sonya countered blandly. "Which means you're rather important to him, to drag you into a den of Clouds."

"... a den?"

"Four. Me, Cherep, our foster father who isn't active and his biological son who is too young to be active." She quirked a smirk for his jerk at the news, rather amused at his sedate reaction compared to what she was used to getting here about the so scary topic of Cloud Flame users. "You'll be safe with us, and it's really only for a night. We, or I am at least, are going to rent a hotel suite for the week."

"... I'll think about it." Viper's attention, or at least his hooded visage, turned to Björn. "Ensure you are prepared, tomorrow I'll start... instructing you. Mou, you better not cost me anything or prove to be foolish either."

"Ah... thank you?" Her Lackey called out in bewilderment as the Mist left the same way he came in. "... Dama? What was that?"

"I'm going to buy a house soon. But I need money that civilians or police can't trace back to any dirty dealings. Either you or Cherep are going to hold the title." Sonya got up from her spot on the couch, still ignoring the teapot of Russian Black Spiced Tea he nearly compulsively gave her whenever he had to interact with her. "Viper is very good with money and is going to teach you for a mostly innocent cover for any poking around he does here. Don't ask, merely learn. Speaking of... he's only sometimes male."

Apparently very little of whatever happened in his living room had made sense to the teenager, because the look he gave her was likely classified as 'scared to know'. "How is someone only sometimes male?"

"By appearing as female half the time. Although, I will admit that he seems to be male around me more than female." Shrugging that off, the thief curiously considered her Lackey as he absorbed that information. "Depending on how that Mist presents him or herself is how you know what pronoun or gender article to use. If in doubt, ask."

The Lightning-Storm didn't seem too squicked out at the thought of a gender-fluid Mist. It had probably yet to sink in, and if he screwed up and insulted Viper she would probably hear about it eventually.

"I think the next set of months we can spare is around August and September. Might be before that, even, depending on a few things. We're aiming for twelve on that go through, and I'll make up what
we can't hit in November and the beginning of December."

"Sure… ah, Dama? Your tea?"

"I'll pass this time." Sonya glanced at his television, still blaring the life and times of one former President Eisenhower, which she had actually forgotten had been on.

Maybe, possibly, the teenager would stop trying to drown her in the stuff if she left him to handle the entire pot by himself. He hadn't liked her tea very much, and she knew he only stocked it for her rare visits.

At least the other pot he had going wasn't likely to be brewed. She wasn't that mean.

(ooo000000)

(Sunday the 30th of March, 1969. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

"Peter, huh?"

The self-proclaimed Peter flinched slightly, jerking around to face the doorway where Sonya stood.

Doctor Kappel pushed the half-moon spectacles up his beak of a nose with a long forefinger, then shrugged. "Nurse Primakova has scheduled his flights in and out for his checkups, and as long as he takes the supplements I've prescribed young Peter over there is free to go."

Since the thief had stopped at the greeting desk to get the paperwork finished for the Sun she found in Sierra Leone's Freetown, she had already known that. She even had the series of vitamins the doctor had dictated in her backpack already.

Which, frankly, added in with the cost of housing the man for a near month in a private hospital room with personal attendance by a Mafia Land doctor… had been damn expensive. "I am aware, and Tats has the schedule he needs to follow. Anything else?"

"He'll be easily tired for the short term, slightly more irritable and prone to depressive behavior." The German doctor gave a limp-wrist wave to dismiss the subject. "Long term effects are mostly just brittle bones, possible diet complications, and a susceptibility to diseases a bit more than any healthy individual."

"You know, it's rude to talk in front of others in a language one can't understand."

"Well, you are going to learn very quickly. We are leaving, Peter. For Moscow, Russia."

Scruffy opened his mouth, hesitated, then shut it with a tight nod. "Alright."

Sonya inspected her new Flame foundling closely. "Is that it? I expected more of a reaction."

"I did ask for this." Peter McScruffy, dubbed so by Tatiana, admitted wryly. "Of course, I wasn't expecting anything quite like this."

'This', by his expansive arm gesture, was the either the hospital or the entirety of Mafia Land.

Which she supposed she understood somewhat. She hadn't believed her ears either when Lisa first informed her of the island's existence.

Kappel sniffed, gave the thief that paid him to poke at the Sun for a few weeks a short nod, and wandered off. She ignored him after returning the nod, gesturing for the no longer skeletal looking
man to follow her out of his previous temporary residence.

"The worst you will be expected to do is mess with a few more rocks and such like your diamond, and possibly end up teaching science to a bunch of secondary school students." Sonya admitted to the man, not entirely unsympathetic to the once civilian's situation. "I am a criminal, a thief, but so long as you remain useful I will ensure you are adequately protected and somewhat employed. Legally if you would rather, but I can work more with non-legal routes."

Scruffy gave her a sideways look as they made for the hospital's elevator. He really shouldn't be moving around so much, which is why she was scorning the stairs this time.

"Frankly," the man admitted blandly as they got into the empty elevator car, "I had thought you were a spy or something. Not a…"

"Member of the mafia?" Sonya finished for him. "Mafiya, where we are going, but the distinction is minor. You could think of me in such a way, it is true in a fashion. I am hired to do a lot of things, stealing is just one of them."

"There is an argument about morality and legal vs illegal acts in there I am not touching." Scruffy gripped mostly to himself, then he took a deep breath and actually looked at her fully. "I refuse to kill anyone."

"Fine."

His surprised expression should probably be funny, the thief wasn't in any kind of mood to appreciate it.

"Again, you can spend the rest of your life teaching a bunch of snot-nosed brats science if you would rather. As long as you keep your mouth shut and obey the vory and others I point out to you, I will consider it more than good enough after some years."

"In… and I take it doing more dubious things will get me a lighter sentence?"

"Helping me with categorizing Flame reactions to certain stones or crystals will help." Admitted the Storm-Cloud as the elevator doors opened up to the semi-harried looking lobby of Mafia Land's hospital. "Figuring out what else you can do with them is another. Teach a Sun or another Flame user how to do what you do with diamonds will work. Working as a labor and paying me back the three thousand in euros I just paid for you to get a clean bill of health is the very least of what you can do for me in return for dragging you along. On your insistence, might I add."

Scruffy might have frozen up the very moment they left the hospital's front doors had Sonya not gripped him by the elbow and kept him moving through sheer force.

"Do not freeze. Act as if you belong and you know what you are doing. We are leaving, you might never have to return here."

Of course, even with her propelling the man along his neck still craned about to gape at the criminals walking about boldly armed to the teeth. Next to family units who didn't so much as bat an eyelash at the same scene, from every walk of life, Mafia Land's streets were very… eye catching.

The thief didn't really want to learn why someone decided walking around with a grenade launcher was a good idea, and at least kept them moving fast enough that few would take umbrage to being stared at.

"I can walk, woman."
"Then stop making it so obvious you do not belong." Sonya snapped back, finally letting him go before she gave him a bruise. "And my name is Sonya Bazanova."

"I'm Peter, obviously." The so-claimed man muttered a little rebelliously, deciding that focusing on her was better than rubbernecking about.

"You are a terrible liar." Corrected the thief with a scoff. "My sister has named you Peter McScruffy. I'm calling you just Scruffy."

(Monday the 31st of March, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Renato Sinclair?"

The hitman shifted his head far enough back he could clearly see the lady that had come up to him from under the brim of his hat, even if he was trying to scare off anyone interested enough to try chatting his ear off.

While boring, hanging around Vongola's Iron Fort while Timoteo Vongola had meetings with various other Dons at least kept the other Guardian Flame users focused on him instead of picking petty fights with each other.

Of course, Vongola's Guardian Elements knew full well he wasn't a threat to their Sky and the allied Dons. The few other Guardian groups or bodyguards wouldn't want the hosting Don's security or Guardians to show them up by being hostile to a hitman lingering about.

There were still a lot of shiftly looks being thrown his way still.

Which was why it was boring, nothing more lethal would go his way beyond dirty glares. Anyone that tried would not only be shot but would likely be ripped apart by the Guardians in the expansive room.

Said lady that ignored the intimidating aura he was projecting to help keep the peace was a near typical Italian beauty, with curiously straight black hair, blue eyes, and a tattoo of... a seldom seen famiglia emblem under her left eye.

"Luce of the Giglio Nero, I presume?" This was odd, shouldn't she be in with the other Dons?

Renato knew full well women could be just as powerful or as nasty as men, he had lived on the streets for a time himself and seen Sonya grow into herself after all. A few interactions with Tatiana would've cured him of any illusions otherwise long before this if he had not.

He didn't really care she was both the Boss of a mafia Famiglia and female, unlike what he was pretty sure a lot of other Mafiosi seemed to think.

"We've taken a recess for the moment, while the heads of the Cavallone and Calcassa Famiglia come to an... understanding." Luce smiled serenely, lacing her fingers together and nodding to the few other Dons walking into the waiting lounge on her heels. "I've been meaning to talk to you, actually."

"Ho? Really."

"I was hoping for a better situation, or at least an introduction. But... well, needs must and all."
Ignoring his less than enthusiastic response, the woman gave him a few bats of her blue eyes. "I need a bit of security help, you see, and Timoteo suggested you might be interested. You are freelance, and without ties that would make hiring you a little tricky to smooth past my own Famiglia."

Renato cocked a skeptical eyebrow.

He had assumed, at first, she was approaching him because he was probably the strongest unattached Sun in the room. It wouldn't have been the first time a Sky had tried to hide a forceful Harmonizing attempt by chatting him up, a first for a female Sky but not an unknown situation.

Speaking of, the hitman glanced around the room using his fedora to shade his interest. No one was paying overt attention to him or her, except for the brunette bodyguard on the opposite side of the room. He was also looking rather disgruntled what was likely his charge chatting to a freelance hitman.

…she only had the one?

Most of the Dons invited to the Vongola Alliance meeting had shown up with as few as three or as many as six. Admittedly the Giglio Nero weren't a large famiglia, but they were an old and respected one.

Now a bit confused and probably more curious than it was warranted, he returned his attention to the pretty female Sky that had asked for his help. "What, exactly, seems to be the issue?"

She couldn't be that much older than him, why did she have no Guardians with her?

Luce's smile dimmed slightly. "One of my own tried to kill me. I need an unbiased set of eyes to help ensure the situation has been dealt with."

…and ah. That answered quite a few of the questions Renato had about the whole situation. The one guard was probably the one she knew without a doubt she could trust, and approaching a freelance hitman was likely her attempt to ensure her response had been enough without overlooking something due to her attachments to her Mafiosi.

Except for the no Guardian thing. If she had any, they weren't here. Having any would also mean she had pretty bad Guardians, for what Elements let their Sky wander about in territory not their own without so much as a Sun or a Cloud guard for the worst that might happen?

He probably wouldn't have given it another thought but… even Sonya was looking for Skies.

Mostly hidden as that interest was in finding one to help her with her already impressive research efforts, but she was. The Russian thief would likely never bond with a Sky, as her brother seemed to be her complete opposite and Dual Guardian Prospects both needed to accept the same Sky before they could bond. Hard Clouds were never the understanding or accepting sort, and Soft Clouds were rare enough very few had even heard of a live one to know what they were or were not in person.

Renato might not be looking for a Sky of his own, but he seemed rather odd in that respect. He only seemed to like Skies that already had Sun Guardians, because Skies without a Sun Guardian bond just irritated him.

Tyr was a bastard that could go jump off a bridge, otherwise the hitman would've been rather glad to say he liked Vongola Skies just fine and just disliked everyone else.

"I take it you'd like this dealt with as soon as possible?" He had a month and a couple weeks until Shamal got out of school, and he had to arrange a visit to Moscow Russia for the both of them.
"If possible." Luce confirmed, having waited patiently as he thought about her request. "The details… well, are you free this evening?"

"I'm not." If the damn bratty Mist heard he'd been in range but didn't stick around to visit him he'd whine to Sonya, and being the more responsible adult in their little bastardized situation was surprisingly rather fun.

Especially listening to the kid teasing the thief about her inability to be on time for personal things.

It wasn't like it had been unexpected, she had tended to disappear often from Mafia Land without word as a young teenager. Renato might know now she was dealing with her syndicate most of that time, but then he had no clue.

Besides, if the hitman didn't call in every week to remind the brat to feed his chameleon the Storm-Cloud would probably not follow through with buying Shamal a dog in a few years. He could just do it in person this week.

"Ah… here…?" Glancing around, most of the Dons had retreated to their personal grunts for the break and even Renato had to admit it was a terribly exposed venue to have a sensitive situation aired out for him. "Well…"

"You're a guest of Don Vongola, right? There's no reason you can't linger a bit after most the others leave or get interested in other subjects." The Sun offered idly, absently examining the relief that appeared on the Sky's face at his suggestion. "I'll see if I can't bother some of the staff to secure a meeting room for you."
(Tuesday the 1st of April, 1969. Mafia Land.)

If his lady knew of and wanted Viper the Mist to teach him how to manage the money she earned for her, Bjőrn was pretty sure that meant Sonya probably knew of and accepted the varied risks of giving the details on her accounts and earnings over to Mist Flame user.

At least, he was sort of sure of that as he handed the information the man had asked for. More like demanded from him after pounding on his front door at an obscene hour of dawn before informing him shortly of where to go once he had it gathered together.

Her Lackey just… wasn’t sure about the mechanics of what his patron wanted the other to be allowed. He had a surprising amount of free range with her personal affairs, but he had been very cautious exercising those rights since the Storm-Cloud could very well take offense if he did something wrong.

Nor was he really all that confident in being instructed in anything by Viper, but since Sonya had arranged it for him that was the lesser concern.

Handing over the details of his patron's accounts seemed a little… unwise to him. He did so anyways, bringing it with him to the meeting point set at a little corner bistro, because the Mist had a point in demanding to know just how much was available to teach him from.

Viper seemed rather… focused on those details once he had them in hand. More than the accounts of someone else's really required.

Admittedly, Bjőrn might be a little predisposed to take umbrage with the other. Mornings weren't his best hours. Demanding some of the personal information about his patron pretty much killed whatever little goodwill the Lackey had for the whole situation.

Sonya rose before the sun just as much as Viper seemed to, but at least she was well aware that most others didn't like being up at the same hours as her. She would let him sleep in if he wasn't needed.

"Stop pouting." The Mist shot at him irritably, making notations with a Mist-pen all over the account statements Bjőrn received more than his employer did. "You are a nearly full-grown man, pouting shouldn't be something you still do."

"I am not pouting." He denied practically on reflex, before he really thought about it and realized he might have a point with that. "I'm glowering."

He didn't have to admit it.

There was an impression of the other rolling his eyes, and how that was possible when half of his face was shaded by a cowl the Lightning-Storm was chalking up to Mist Flames. Viper seemed highly disinclined to remove the fabric, from what little he had seen so far. "I have a quick question, then we'll get on with it. This one… the safety deposit box. Anything I should know about that?"

No, the Icelander thought rather stubbornly. It contained the gold bars his patron hoarded and mainly used to pay off their Zolotov clan dues, and if he touched that she would likely come back and slap him into a wall or three.

Sonya really preferred to have that kind of thing almost at hand instead of try scrambling to secure it
As far as Bjørn was aware, his 'instruction' was only limited to cash finances, not tradable goods. Obviously, something of import was held in the Mafia Land bank's safety deposit boxes but then again that's why the island had a bank in the first place. Not necessarily something valuable, but important to his patron.

Claiming there wasn't anything the Esper needed to know in there was just good sense.

Viper seemed disinclined to believe him, but shrug that off. "Fine… mou. First thing first, you need new clothes."

"I… what?"

"You look like someone picked you up off the street." Clarified the Mist shortly, gathering the information Bjørn had brought with up into a neat pile. "No one, and I do mean no one, where we are going will take you seriously if you dress like a punk and try to engage their services. This is white collar crime, idiot. Mou… you won't be able to afford it, so…"

Shuffling, he picked one sheet out of the stack and laid it out before the Lackey.

"…your Dama will just have to pay the bill."

Bjørn tried really hard not to blanch. The euro account held most of Sonya's ready cash and was where the money she earned on her contracts eventually ended up, merely because it was a wide-ranging currency that had decent rates when switched over to others once he knew what was needed.

While he knew he could spend it, and his patron would probably understand the reason why, justifying his expenditures to her was still rather a nerve-wracking ordeal.

He had only recently taken her up on the permission to go where he willed, and even doing that small offer she gave him a while ago made him nervous. If he was gone when she needed something…

Viper clicked his tongue after a moment. "You also need acting lessons… so transparent for a thief's assistant. Well, mou… I can ensure I am well compensated for this…"

That was the only warning the Lackey got before something heavy, cold, and conversely burning hot at the same time bypassed his skull and slammed into his brain.

His only thought was that brain freeze had nothing on the sensation.

Blinking rapidly as the impression of frostbite in his mind faded, Bjørn suddenly realized he knew things he knew he hadn't known. Said things also had a very pointed emphasis on keeping a straight face.

"Shut your mouth." The Mist that had just assaulted him ordered shortly, rising from his chair fluidly as if overwhelming the Lightning-Storm's Flames with his own Mist ones had been no challenge to him. "It's unseemly."

Taking a moment to shake off the frosty feeling on his brain, he scrambled after his 'teacher'. "What… what the hell was that?"

"Mist Flames. Obviously." Viper shot over one shoulder, making decent progress against the foot traffic of Mafia Land. Bjørn had less luck against the same tide of human movement but then again,
"You'll eventually learn the muscle memory yourself, but I did give you a compulsion to obey the impulses and I suppose that must feel weird." Clarified the Mist rather thoughtfully, until he kept on going. "Your Flame will eventually burn it out, so it'll need to be done a few more times until you actually learn the skill. Something else that might just cost your patron a bit more, mou. Unless, of course, you prove to be a most attentive pupil."

Bjørn did not swallow hard. He wanted to.

"Now then, go buy yourself two suites. Tailored, allow the clerk to coordinate the color until you learn how to do it yourself."

When he merely stared at the other instead of entering the store waved at, the Esper aimed a very evil looking grin at him.

"Mou… I suppose I could make a Construct of you to do it… if you're that scared. Another thing—"

The Lightning-Storm didn't need to hear how that would end. He also didn't want to know how much Viper's tastes would cost his patron. All but running, he darted into the store before the Mist decided more of his services were needed.

Which left him in the lobby of a tailor's shop, being narrowly glared at by the impeccably dressed proprietor for the doors banging against some of the displays near the storefront.

The only reason he didn't flinch was due to Mist Flame compelled self-control.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 1st of April, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Ziven isn't back yet."

Sonya paused momentarily at Galina's greeting, almost causing Peter McScruffy to run into her back.

While she wasn't exactly surprised the vor wasn't back just yet, it was also becoming a little alarming. The Lightning would've said if he had called or contacted her in any way, and the thief had thought their fellow criminal would've at least sent word he was still among the living somehow by now.

She'd have to venture into the other Cloud's territory for a bit, if only to ensure Ziven was perfectly fine. Risky, because she fully intended to hold herself to that 'see me again and it will be the last thing you see' threat.

Lying to another Cloud, even if by accident or omission, would do her no favors nor would it allow the baby-Cloud to respect her or take heed of her advice. Especially not when they had issues even seeing each other.

She only gave a distracted dismissive glance to the Sun nervously hovering behind her before continuing on her way.
"Sonya?"

"I'll go fetch him." Glancing again at the man over her shoulder, then back to the other woman, the thief resigned herself to not taking a rest day before going back to work. "Put him somewhere contained, in fact get him a room at the hotel I stay at and charge it to my account. He's got to learn Russian before we can make more use of him other than as another pair of hands."

Galina blinked, pulling herself upright enough it almost looked as if she was taken aback momentarily. "...now? You just got back."

Shrugging, the Storm-Cloud motioned for her newfound Sun to follow. "I didn't give him a time to return by, checking up on him is merely due."

Actually making to leave Domodedovo International Airport made Scruffy become even more nervous than he had been already. Apparently flying by foreign airlines was not quite as intimidating as walking into a city you didn't speak a language of.

Sonya might actually be wrong in that or could be entirely off in her assumption, but frankly she also didn't really care much. He had asked for this, so he could damn well put up with the feelings it caused him.

Galina led the two of them out the street access doors, unlike the Storm-Cloud's normal habits which was to take the train to the other side of south Moscow. Given Ziven was not available, the Lightning snagging another vor to drive her about was expected.

The identity of the two she had acquired to do said driving, on the other hand…

Half of the Four Rains were waiting by a car she could dimly recognize from being driven around. Irinei and Kazimir, the sea colored vor looked rather compacted next to his fellow beanpole looking Rain.

Glancing to the woman who was looking back at her to gauge her reaction, the thief sighed even as they continued to move away from the crush of people either entering or leaving the airport. "Now I want to know."

"I'll tell you in the car." Came the firm, but entirely toneless, promise.

Shooting both men a look of her own, the Lightning rounded the vehicle and Kazimir quickly jumped to open the car door for her.

Sonya paused only long enough for Scruffy to get the idea that he would be sitting in the middle of the backseat's bench, slinging the greater bulk of her luggage at Irinei once the Sun finally started moving forward again.

"So... the Four Rains have decided to be somewhat useful. Finally." Galina started off absently in an entirely sarcastic tone, inspecting the painfully thin man sitting between the two women curiously and ignoring his fidgeting. "Fadei sent us Irinei first, obviously. Kazimir only the third to pass over to us actually, Zarya is doing secretary things for Gedeon and has been for... almost two days now."

"...what?" Demanded the thief irritably, wondering what kind of bullshit the lone female Rain could be up to.

They had enough trouble with the painfully new Sun, both of them, they didn't need anymore.

With how easily led the Rains had proven to be, Sonya was not happy to hear one of them had
gotten attached to someone perfectly capable of protecting them from any damage they might end up doing. Especially not someone that was genuinely higher placed than she was.

"Rya's not making trouble... Bazanova." Kazimir started lowly, not particularly pleasant sounding but not hostile yet either. "She just wanted something to do but refused to consider you."

Given the Storm-Cloud had probably badly intimidated the woman, as well as stripping whatever illusion of protection she might have had with her fellow Rains, she wasn't surprised to hear it. If that was it, she could sort of respect the younger woman for trying to attach herself to Gedeon.

She'd still look hard at that situation. Regardless of any excuse, it was still an alarming event.

Even if Zarya wanted to avoid Sonya, she wouldn't be able to. She wouldn't allow that kind of bullshit maneuvering under her nose.

"No. I will not allow anyone to screw up that particular situation." She snarled out, ticked off and rapidly approaching angry. "Galina, I want to see her. Even if it takes a damn week, I want to hear from her what the hell she thinks she's doing."

"Miss Bazanova-"

Sonya cut their driver off. "You are adults. ACT like it. This pissing match has gone a touch too far, and frankly killing you all is looking like the more attractive option to deal with."

Irinei was tall enough she could fully see his shoulders over the driver's seat, and how they tensed up at her tone. She had no pity for him.

"She's trying to go over my head, but what she and your insipid leader doesn't know is that for the time being Gedeon is one of mine right now. Tough shit."

Kazimir, who didn't need to pay attention to the road or fellow drivers, glanced from his fellow Rain to Galina and then back to the thief. "I don't think you understand what it's like, Bazanova, to work with others of your Flame type. What-"

She hadn't actually intended to cut him off, but the bitter sounding laugh did it for her anyways when she couldn't keep it in.

Sonya knew perfectly well what it was like, and then had to let her fellow Cloud go or risk entrapping him in the same chains she was burdened by. Cherep was happier as a stuntman, which made it almost worth it.

"She knows better than you think." Galina offered lowly, occupying herself by sorting through the messenger bag that passed as her purse.

"So... the tense part is over with, yes?"

The thief gave her new... minion a sideways glace. "That had nothing at all to do with you."

"Lovely." Scruffy's thin shoulders drooped, and with a sigh glanced at the Russians surrounding him. "Not knowing the language is going to be harder than I thought, isn't it?"

"You will learn, eventually. Immersion is a very hard way to learn another language, but it is effective." Sonya crossed her arms under her chest, looking out her window for the lack of anything else neutral to stare at.
This was going to be a very awkward car ride, especially since she likely pissed off the driver and his friend then possibly reminded Galina of her memories of working with another Flame user.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 1st of April, 1969 continued. Khimki, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"So, now what's your plan?" Ziven asked the young brat cheerfully when one of his little runners brought the news a painfully familiar sounding tiny blond woman was standing smack dab in the middle of his territory.

Dorokhov Timur, otherwise known as the Khimki Cloud, glanced at him skeptically.

"She's not going to just go away. One thing you can call Sonya is stubborn." The vor continued pleasantly, going through the motions of sharpening a knife that was already sharp.

He apparently hadn't quite understood what 'Cloud' meant, before this anyways.

He got a crash course in how possessive and argumentative they could be, that the only other Cloud he had met had long since learned to swallow in favor of being a follower rather than a leader.

Sonya leading actually held its own bumps, but nowhere near how much trouble this brat of a kid caused him after offering a bit of help. She had expected him to slide under any territorial-ness her fellow Cloud held, but that hadn't happened.

Ziven offering the kid some help cemented that to him, rather than his lack of Flames preventing such a thing.

He must not have had whatever Sonya looked for in her few followers. It really was the only thing he could think of on why one Cloud didn't regard him that much and why another would.

Frankly, Ziven hadn't really minded. He knew himself well enough to understand he was a follower and not a leader, whose lead mattered only a little in ensuring he wasn't betrayed easily. Tatiana had been a fine leader, Nikolai had been a stricter but just as good as the safe-cracker turned Sun nurse.

Sonya might be a different breed of beast than her sister, but Galina had made up for her disinterest in him.

Little depressing, in how much damage a Cloud Flame user could shrug off or deal out depending on their temper, but frankly he had gotten the time to seriously consider that before this.

The Khimki Cloud was pretty young, newly installed as the leader of a hastily made street gang. He was still learning the ropes, working out how to keep his gang members going in the same direction instead of being all over the place.

During his time here, he had figured out the young Cloud's ability was more of an explosive expansion within a small area. He didn't need the Zolotov Storm-Cloud's inhuman strength to break things, his Flames just caused things to 'boil over' on demand where he touched. Timur could also expand air, in pressurized waves, if desperate enough.

It packed one hell of a punch to be hit by, the vor could say with unfortunate experience. More than enough force behind it to take out a wall or two, or load bearing walls if the Cloud was desperate enough.
Timur did not want his 'windfall' to go. Someone who could identify non-Moscow vor and instruct his little gang members in how to defend themselves without needing to rely on purple Flames he could not teach them. The kid was short of word and expressive in strength, meaning Ziven had to do some fancy footwork to keep his head attached at first.

However, the vor had prior commitments to handle.

"She did threaten to kill you if you saw her again." Ziven tacked on thoughtfully. "You could either lose your entire operation here, face her and get killed, or give in for the time being until I can come back."

His wave to their 'base', the underground of an abandoned warehouse recently repurchased and fitted more as a tiny safe house, and the few gutter brats that were taking advantage of the free warmth.

Hopefully Sonya would make good on her promise to pay him back, otherwise Ziven was out a pretty kopeck for offering the money to buy it outright. Just having someplace secure had done a minor wonder on the teenage Cloud, making him less edgy and jumpy but also making him reluctant to wander too far.

He had gotten a very pointed demonstration that several people would and could go after him, for both obvious and not reasons.

"You know perfectly well your boys will not stand up to her for long."

Timur scowled at that reminder, all but sulking as he nursed his grudge against the Zolotov Storm-Cloud.

The vor tried not to smirk, because the kid really was pouting more than scowling. "You have my word I will come back, but I do have things I have to handle back home. If you force Sonya to come out to fetch me every time…?"

"Fine." Bit out the Khimki Cloud, giving him a seething glare. "Hurry up."

Ziven uncoiled himself hurriedly, sheathing the knife back in a boot and giving the tetchy boss-in-training a backwards wave. "I wouldn't expect it to be more than a day at most."

Picking his way out of the cozy little nook took less time than winding his way in, the various brats lingering around knew full well only their leader could prevent the vor from going where he would. Two doors, a staircase between, then a bit of hallway and passing one more lookout got the man out of the 'den' the young Cloud had made himself.

Sonya was waiting not too far away, looking supremely bored as she stared up at the lightly falling snow. Probably the last they'd see until fall came around again. "Galina was not pleased to lack even a phone call."

"She set you up to come out here?"

"No, I came myself." Corrected the Storm-Cloud absently, still not entirely willing to move just yet. "Is there a reason it took so long?"

"Not done yet." It earned him a sideways look from her.

Sonya wasn't Ziven's ideal leader, but she was her own type of one that seemed decent enough. She was standing there, at least.
"Interesting." She decided on after a moment. "Try to check in at least once a week, if you could."

"I'll try." Actually, that sounded like blanket permission to skip out on anything else they had going on. "What about my part of the school? Or even Gedeon?"

"...pretty sure we can find someone else to cover it." She dismissed absently, finally moving to leave her fellow Cloud's territory now that he had shown up. "Physical education for the boys is easy enough, it was just something you could do. As for Gedeon... I'll think of something."

Ouch. Well... at least she had been honest enough over not having much for him to do for her.

"You can get back to it today, even, as long as you spend some time reassuring Galina you're not about to drop dead."

Ziven smirked a little lopsidedly as he followed her down the streets. "I'll just do that, then."

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(Wednesday the 2nd of April, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya just wanted to sigh, really.

Usov looked entirely unrepentant as he stood before her and her borrowed desk, rocking back and forth a little on his heels as he spoke. "They've gone after the younger ones, trying to make it out to seem as if you are some kind of cruel monster using those rumors we hear about what you've gotten up to. We Mists saw through them pretty easily, but they did get Mikhail of the Storms solidly in their corner. The younger Rains are confused but will go with the older ones if it comes down to it."

"What do I care?" She questioned tiredly, trying again to transfer the writing of a three-hundred-year-old letter to another piece of paper so she could try translating it.

The only other one left in the borrowed office aside the two of them was Scruffy, seated on the couch pushed up against a wall and pretending his fascinated interest in a Russian to English dictionary she once chucked at her brother's head. Everyone else who had been in there, Galina and Gedeon with a suspiciously lurking Kazimir, had suddenly either recalled something they had to do right away or something important they had to check up on right now.

The sharp exodus had made the thief suspicious, so when the normally well-prepared Lightning had run off in her impractical heels Sonya had quietly armed herself. It hadn't been needed, frankly.

The tetchy young Mist Usov wasn't anywhere near annoying or as dangerous as Cherep's friend Viper and was surprisingly loyal to her for a kid she rarely interacted with the last couple years. He had grown up little, possessing the thin edge of recent rapid maturity to his features that hadn't had the time to fill out yet most children approaching their teenage years had. Still shorter than her, but from the looks of it not for long.

Almost twelve years in age, and in a position even more awkward than Sonya's. The oldest of the Zolotov Mists, but the youngest of the Flame users she had specifically taught something to. Second 'generation' so to say, after her, Tatiana, and Dmitriy.

If the Storm-Cloud's rank as the most senior clan Flame user when she was only seventeen seemed strange to someone like Fadei or Gedeon, Usov's was entirely mind-boggling. He taught the Mists that came to the clan to learn about controlling their Dying Will and how a Mist's Construction might
work for them, despite not being much younger than she had been when she finally managed to summon her own Flames on purpose.

He shrugged rather more expansively than humanly possible to her question. "Very little, I can guess. Perhaps you should though, if they succeed…"

"They would have to kill me." Sonya countered shortly, eyeing fragile paper in hopes of being able to magically pull the lost words from it somehow. "And that is something I am highly skeptical they can pull off."

"They might not be able to, but they can interrupt and damage some of the work you're putting into the clan." Promised Usov airily, waving one Mist-coated hand in the air. "Possibly setting a few things back by years if you don’t do something."

Likely he was trying to keep their conversation from another witness or trying to influence her somehow. Since she didn't find within her a sudden urge to rally the various Flame trainees, and her Storm Flames were pulling internal 'immunity' duty but there was no flare up, she guessed the former option.

Scruffy didn't fully understand, from the cautious looks he was shooting them. The Sun's presence was being somewhat ignored, which he seemed perfectly fine with. Had been that way for the last few days, but she really should work on him with learning the language sometime soon.

Finally giving in to the impulse to sigh, Sonya replaced her work on her desk and regarded her latest visitor fully. "I still don't really care too much, but you are right in that point."

"So! What are my marching orders then?"

"…I believe I told Fadei that if he didn't behave I would bribe the Mists to give him nightmares and migraines." Drumming the fingers of one hand on her desk, she thoughtfully stared at her ceiling for several moments before glancing down again. "Usov… could you do me a little favor?"

The preteen smirked at her wryly. "Of course, Sonya! I would be delighted to."

"Then my bribe goes to you."

The faint smirk took on a strong wicked edge to it. "Wonderful."

"I need Galina back." Sonya continued after nodding to show she accepted that. "Did Gedeon get involved with this?"

"He's trying to play neutral." Usov explained with a disgusted sniff. "Badly, may I add. You really didn’t win yourself very many friends lately… or that might just be because you were gone for a few days and he had no access to you."

With a sigh, she waved one hand lazily. "Kid, I have trouble dealing with a lot of people without trying to either murder or maim them. I have few friends, and I actually like it that way."

That admission made him huff wryly. "I remember how you stiffened up whenever I gave you a hug years ago, Sonya. I understand, even if I will poke fun at you for it. I take it that was why you absconded for Mafia Land as fast as you could the moment you could?"

"That was why Dmitriy was in charge, yes." She corrected tartly, slightly miffed.

He planted his feet on the floorboards before her borrowed desk, even as the office door banged
open to allow a highly suspicious Galina back into the office, and he peered over the desk to see what she was so distracted by. "Who are you going to start with?"

"Me? No one yet. I'm just going to be here. Galina is going to go sound out the baby Lightnings under the excuse of running a few errands for me, and I need you to get out of here without being seen and talk to Andrei and his Suns about meeting me in a little while. I am going to sit here, being watched by a few Rains that shall be unnamed. Eventually I might have to go myself to talk to the Storms in secret, but that can wait a little bit."

Grinning, the still rather young Flame user bounced on the balls of his feet with more glee than he started this whole conversation with. "You're going to usurp the bulk of their attempt to overthrow you, without lifting a finger? How... wicked."

The Storm-Cloud gave him a bland smirk of her own. "I have no idea what you mean."

"I'm sure." Scoffed Usov, his sarcastic tone not doing a damn thing to his smirk. "Last item, how much will I have to do to change that bribe into a favor? I have my own graduation heist coming up, and a safety net would be most appreciated."

"It's done alone for a reason, kid. Unless... you want to go for a very big target."

"How big would you consider the KGB?" The Mist asked lightly, rocking back on his heels.

"I'd consider that suicidal, not big." Sonya admitted frankly. "What the hell, Usov? You're not even in your teens yet."

"One, that's a little hypocritical coming from you. And two, I want to meet a member of the Vindice. Without, you know, being arrested for it." He announced cheerfully. As if that wasn't alarming. "A little birdy also told me you made mention of checking to ensure the KGB had no information on our little parlor tricks."

"Who are the Vindlece?" Galina demanded shortly, looking slightly harried and a little more than disgruntled with the Mist in Sonya's presence as she recovered her mental balance from whatever he had done to her to chase her out with the rest of her temporary guest.

"Haven't you wondered who policed Omertà?" Asked the Storm-Cloud instead of allowing Usov to explain what he knew of the Mafia Enforcers, looking at her with a measure of curiosity.

"We do... don't we?"

"The small things, yes. The bigger incidents? No. The Vindice do that." She glanced from the very first Mist she ever aided to her Lightning assistant. "No one wants the attention of Vindice to fall on them, Galina. Except, apparently, very mental Mists."

"I resemble that remark." Said Mist sniffed in mock hurt. "Besides, didn't you have questions for them? I was rather sure of that."

"...Usov, have you been spying on me?"

"You're more interesting than untangling new Mists from their own Constructions." Claimed the likely no longer mentally stable preteen Flame user, his hands making an expansive wave in the air as he pulled a comparison out of it. "Like a radio drama, or one of those televised cartoons. It's interesting."

"You're repeating yourself." Sonya pointed out blandly, settling back in her borrowed office chair. "I
will agree to aid you, on the condition you start small and work your way to something that... risky."

"If we do, they might catch on and try to arm themselves against me."

"Usov, you're not going to be waltzing into the offices of the KGB tomorrow. Spread it out, learn how to make your changes overlooked, how to hide the information, and trace agents back to their various bolt-holes. But take the time to do it right, on the first and likely only opportunity you're going to have."

"That's... depressingly sensible, I suppose." Usov frowned as he puzzled that over, glancing from the Storm-Cloud to the Lightning and then to the still very bewildered Sun. "Fine. I will take baby steps."

The Mist glanced at all three of them again, then stepped forward and tapped the glass she had been working on once before taking one step back and allowing himself to be immolated by his own Flames.

The thief scowled slightly, irked by his gall in cheating an answer for her on what she had been trying to do herself. Now as Mist Flame imbued glass, it was showing her a glimmering dark blue tracing where the words were once written on an ancient piece of paper.

The door Galina had shut behind her banged open again, spilling Kazimir into the office.

Sonya sniffed, decided to take the offered assistance Usov had left her with, and pulled a new clean sheet of paper. She had screwed up the latest attempt from what the Mist Flames were telling her. "Was there something you needed, Kazimir?"

The man glared at her, shooting glances at the irked Lightning he had almost ran smack into and the uncomprehending Sun shooting a strange look of his own at him, and straightened up hastily. "No."

"Is there a reason, then, for you wasting time in this office?"

Obviously there was, frankly she had been getting suspicious ever since Irinei got cozy with Gedeon last week.

Rains were supposed to be patient, right?

They weren't toeing that line, even remotely. Not quite purely Classic in nature then.

"Fadei needs me somewhere accessible just in case. Why? Am I not welcome here?"

"Not really. Do something useful for a change instead of waste time." The thief admitted frankly, glancing at Galina. "How long until I can arrange a meeting with Dmitriy?"

"You're on the waiting list already, Sonya." Promised the Lightning pleasantly, giving the paperwork which she had somehow decided was more important than awaiting an opportunity to talk to her without eavesdroppers an odd look. "Although, speaking of appointments, did you remember the one with the superintendent of the school district yesterday?"

"Yes, and I think I might have scared him. He was very relieved to learn I was only the librarian."

She offered the papers to her, and it was mostly out of sheer curiosity that the Storm-Cloud took them to see what had become so important to her under the influence of Mist Flames.

Galina had made up a list of the sixty plus Flame users currently looking to the Zolotov Clan for
guidance, with various little tick marks next to their names in several colors.

She could understand what the blue and purple were for, obviously Fadei's reach compared to her own. Their names were even helpfully written in those colors. There were a few green and yellow marks, a tiny handful of reds, and a fair number of dark blues.

The older woman was trying to warn her without being too obvious about it or being overheard. Three days of having one of the Four Rains somewhere within hearing range was obviously starting to irk her.

Making a mental correction and giving herself at least half the Mists due to Usov’s influences alone, the Storm-Cloud still wasn't too worried about the Rains' planned 'mutiny'.

The Suns were more loyal to Tatiana than Gedeon, if only by sheer effort she had spent helping them out over the years during her rare visits. The nurse was still more popular than the son of their Pahkan, and if the vor didn't expressly order them to follow the Rains' lead they would at worst abstain from any internal conflicts. Since he was trying to pull off 'neutral', that wasn't likely to happen.

As for the loose Storms… Sonya wasn't the only one that didn't like Mikhail.

The rather arrogant Storm user had burnt a lot of bridges behind him, mostly the ones he found unimportant in his fixated quest to become vor. If he went along with Fadei's plans, half the rest of the Storms would flock to Sonya's 'side' out of sheer spite and drag the undecided to her from numbers alone.

Since Galina was the only one that seemed to bother with the Lightnings, they would follow the brunette unless one of the Four Rains was trying hard to recruit them from under her. It didn't seem like it, since her aide had checked off all the Lightnings with purple tick marks.

Which just left the Rains. Depressing if they lost a large number of them but… not exactly a formidable array of Flame users against a Storm-Cloud.

She needed to talk to the young Storms and Rains, before Fadei tried something suicidal.

…who was watching the possible Sky and his family, with Dmitriy in prison?

That, and the Khimki Cloud, were two issues she would have to wait on checking up for. Not with things so… unstable right now.

Hopefully Ziven could keep a lid on things on his own for a while, but the moment someone realized there was still a mostly grown Cloud in that territory… some very nasty shit might very well hit a massive fan.

If she moved fast enough, she might be able to settle all of the mess just before summer. Maybe Shamal could visit this year…

"If I can ask…?"

"How much did you understand?"

"Only a little." Scruffy admitted sourly, giving an ugly look to the book settled in his lap. "What is going on?"

"Internal conflict, I suppose. Not much of a conflict when the odds are so skewed, but it could be
seen as an admirable effort... maybe." Sonya shrugged it off, placing the paperwork on her discarded pile of failed attempts at translating a long dead Frenchman's last words. "I am going to place you with our younger Suns until you can reliably speak Russian, hope you do not mind."

"Err… alright?" His tone was somewhat alarmed, given he probably didn't understand how bloodthirsty criminal infighting could become.

Possibly he did. She had yet to get the man's full story. It was entirely possible he had seen more than most civilians did about how criminal syndicates could pit against itself than she figured.

"Galina, we're also going to need a list of names from Lisa about how many students they've got right now." Continued the thief in their ‘native’ language, finally tracing a clean copy of the Middle French written long ago to translate later. She was a little skeptical that Mist Flames would make a faithful tracing of the dead Arcobaleno of the Storm's letter, but that could be checked against this later on. "And some kind of estimation of where everyone is in their education compared to the civilian institutions."

She vaguely noted Kazimir trying to inch to her desk to do… something. Which she was in no mood to tolerate.

A look pinned him in place, and she decided to be prudent about the information she was handling. Taking back the list Galina had offered to her, she wrote her foster mother a short note on another clean sheet and handed both it and the list back to the Lightning.

"Ask Lisa to finish filling out our roster of students, if she could."

"Of course." She shot Kazimir an ugly look as she folded the papers under her arm, then turned on her heel to stalk back out of the office.

Thwarted, the Rain decided to silently harass Sonya's latest foundling. The Sun, who had probably dealt with more threatening things in the last year than a want-to-be-vor with illusions of grandeur, ignored him in favor of looking up more vocabulary for his language studies.

Rubbing at her faintly tense temple, she vaguely wondered what Dmitriy would say if she ended up killing his protégé or his little irritating minions.

Since leaving things as they were wasn't an option, and since she really didn't want to hand the Flame user section of the clan back to the Inverted Rain when it was starting to break down, she had to put even more effort into fixing things up.

She did not appreciate it and intended for the ones being difficult to become painfully aware of that fact.

Apparently, she needed to start with correcting how others saw her here first before tackling how those in Mafia Land saw her. Maybe if she considered it a dry practice run, she would be less irritated at having to do something like this at all?

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(Thursday the 3rd of April, 1969. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

As there were no Skies or additional Clouds in the Zolotov Clan, not yet as Valera was too young to be added and finding another Inverted Cloud would be near-impossible from the look of things, the only Storm-Cloud started with the Suns.
Usov the Mist more than likely had gone straight from her office to them, so she didn't particularly feel as if she was rushing anything.

Andrei the Sun was the next most senior Flame user of the group, discounting Tatiana and Gedeon. Since Sonya's sister was still a mostly full-time resident of Mafia Land in the process of getting her nurse's residency out of the way before tackling trying to get her doctor's license, the son of their Pahkan was actually 'in charge' of the Sun Flame users when it came to day-to-day things.

However, because Gedeon was so painfully new to his Dying Will Flames and has his own responsibilities as a vor and son of a syndicate boss to handle on top of everything else, it was the barely fifteen-year-old Sun conducting and overseeing their day-to-day training.

Giving her Scruffy over to Andrei was relatively painless. "I need you to teach him to speak in Russian, and possibly learn how to use a diamond as he can."

Gedeon was lurking in the back of the warehouse-turned-practice building the bare two score of Suns had taken over, as they needed the space to bleed off any excess energy without irritating other Flame users, either trying to keep an eye on her or give a more solid impression of neutrality in the rather laughable 'struggle' between the Four Rains and Sonya. If he was ticked off or even miffed she was handing the foreign Sun to Andrei instead of him, she didn't care much.

Peter McScruffy went sort-of willingly enough. They were all painfully young looking to be unassuming at first glance, and if you overlooked most of them were raised or trained by criminals they didn't seem all that intimidating. He seemed slightly awkward under the sudden scrutiny, but that could be attributed to a lot of other things like being the center of attention by people he probably wouldn't understand any if they tried talking to him.

The brunette teenager, the one with a slightly baffling ability to Activate machinery from a distance and was the first ‘found’ and not taught Flame user of the clan, gave a short nod. "Anything else?"

"Since I'm here, yes. Any questions, concerns, or just warnings you would like noted down for future Suns?" Sonya dug a new blank journal Galina had sourced for her out of her bag of a purse, snagging a couple pencils as well. "I've also got the notes Galina had on you all from last year. I'd like it if you could compare them to how you all are now for general Flame growth patterns."

Andrei chewed on his lower lip for a moment as he studied her but shrugged and accepted the paperwork she handed him to peruse for a moment. The thief's Lightning assistant was doing the same thing with her fellows, and once he heard of any such rumors Usov would likely do his own section in short order.

She had two hopes for this 'annual check-up'.

First, while she didn't greatly care about her own reputation she was well aware it wasn't a nice one. Supposedly, she was a scary beast of a Cloud and ruthless bitch with a temper that went off at a drop of a pin. Which was actually and honestly true, mainly a reputation based from a lingering legacy from her childhood hunting those that inconvenienced her siblings now labeling her rather short-tempered and completely unreasonable.

Galina would laugh if any of her Lightnings asked if it was true, and maybe would fan the flames a little but would correct the gross exaggerations. Usov's Mists would verify the information themselves at least, or that was the impression she had gotten from talking to their 'leader'.

Which left the Suns, Rains, and Storms hanging when sorting out truth from old and new rumors about her.
Tatiana was another that might poke the situation for laughs before correcting it, but since she wasn't here Sonya had to do it herself. The blonde was technically the most senior Storm, and as for the Rains…

…she was going to handle that last.

Her second hope was possibly getting the young Flame users to talk and exchange tips with each other. She didn't know if they did on their own or not, Tatiana was again missing too often to tell her and Gedeon missed about as many Sun gatherings as she did for various other reasons.

The only other person that could tell her was Andrei, and he probably didn't know her well enough to walk up to her borrowed office and offer that kind of information on his own.

"Klava figured out how to do that 'Activate nerves' thing." The third eldest Sun user of the Zolotov clan started surprisingly steadily as he made a few marks on the paperwork with a borrowed pencil. "Klavdia I mean. Without needing to ask your sister for tips."

He waved behind himself to the girl in question, who seemed pretty stoic for a Sun user. A rose haired girl with green eyes, standing slight apart from her fellow Suns. Those she knew for a fact were Classic, but if the girl wasn't 'with' them then…

**Solidly Inverted** Sonya decided, after considering the preteen in question for a moment and getting a surprisingly level stare back for her trouble. Not quite Renato levels of arrogance or anything like snobbishness to someone not a Sun, but a healthy amount of challenge in her gaze to the 'outsider'.

Thankfully not nearly enough to trip off any 'Cloudy-ness' impulses she had to her leadership.

Girl was playing with fire, there.

She did wonder if that meant they would have a torture specializing Sun in a few years. Would she need medic lessons, and if so would she get them from Tatiana?

"Aside that, it's mostly more of the same of what we've already figured out. In… interesting applications, sometimes." Andrei continued leadingly, which made their audience of Suns stir a little and exchange a few pointed looks as he put the year-old records aside likely to fill out the rest later. "We are having a little trouble bleeding off the excess energy, honesty. Any advice for that?"

"…exercise, more in the lines of a full out spar. Possibly a marathon? Tatiana somewhat recently found martial arts helped her out greatly, might be the same for you all." Decided the thief after a moment. She was not going to mention her elder sister's other preferred method of blowing off her extra energy. Way too young of an audience for that. "Frankly, it sounds a little like a Cloud's inability to get a workout might be somewhat similar to your own exuberance. I can't help you yet, it's entirely possible I might go overboard since I have yet to decide if my self-control will outlast a full fight."

The only one she knew of that might outlast her in a full fight was Fong, and they had yet to really test that. Renato was another possibility but pitting a ranged fighter against a close-quarters one was an iffy thing.

"All I can say is… try running. It's a common enough activity that will gain you less attention than seeking out fights to pitch in with and will allow you to avoid cooping yourselves up in here too much."

Andrei considered that, looking around the rather empty building he and his fellow Suns had likely cleared out by hand trying to drain their Sun Flames with.
One of the younger Suns, a kid she didn't recognize at all, hesitatingly piped up. "I... figured out how to Activate animals."

"You mean animal corpses." Snarked the brat right next to him, making the slightly younger looking kid cringe.

"...that's actually awesome." Sonya spoke absently before anyone else chipped in their two kopecks. They had a freaking necromancer. How was that not awesome?

Kind of creepy, sure, but still.

"What can you do with that?"

The Necromantic Sun blinked at her a few times, shot an uncertain look at Andrei's back, but did volunteer a little bit more. "Not a lot. They're... well, dead. I can make them move around a little, and they'll follow their normal patterns for a bit. A cat just curls up, but I got a few mice to run around once."

...why had she put this off?

If the other types had anything as interesting, she would try to do this sort of thing more often. "I wonder... if we get you a Mist partner, if you could turn them into a kind of spy? Even if you can't, it's a ready-made distraction if you need it."

Sonya rather happily made a note for Usov, to see if they could get that Sun and a Mist to work together on it. Partially because she really did think it was just that cool, and mainly because if that developed into being able to Activate dead humans... a Mist could cover tracks better than a lone Sun might.

"Anything else?"

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 3rd of April, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

It took Sonya three hours before the entire gaggle of Suns ran out of things to chat about. It started rather slow, even after the necromancy admission, and she probably hadn't helped much by keeping to short responses once the young Flame users started talking.

Once the awkwardness of having two people they really didn't know that well in their midst wore off, and the thief started hearing more personal details of how or why they did this or that, Andrei turned his attention to filling out the paperwork instead of just stand there between the Storm-Cloud and his Sun while looking confident.

When she stopped hearing about the early day fiascos, the last that spoke of it being the baby Sun Feliks Ilyich and exactly how he figured out Activation could be used to overload a transistor if he threw enough Sun Flames at it, she slowly eased herself out of the building.

The chatting of incidents and accidents was in the middle of turning into 'I can do more of this than you can'.

She had no interest in getting caught up in a marathon of Sun users trying to outdo each other.
With her Flame mix, it was entirely possible she could keep up… but there was no telling if that would be a good thing or a bad one.

Gedeon, with a rather interesting expression on his face, and Andrei followed her out with varying levels of stealth or sheer confidence. The younger Sun trying to finish scribbling out the last of the information on the newer users his group had picked up, and the elder one seemingly intent on talking to her.

"Why are you encouraging Edik and his creepy corpse experiments? That will not end well."

To her, not with her. Sonya sighed, accepting the sheets of paper Andrei handed her with a wry smile as they both ignored him.

She did make note of the kid's name, so she could give it to the Mist group and they could hopefully find one of them to work with the budding necromancer. Since Mists were so strange, it was possible one would be highly interested enough to at least cover the Sun's tracks if not actually pitch in to help with figuring what else can be done with that.

There were a few more tidbits in what the teenage Sun had given her that she heard in the warehouse, but the Storm-Cloud wasn't quite surprised by that. A little sorry they hadn't spoken up, but if they had not wanted to speak to her she wouldn't force them. She had more than enough Suns that had talked to her to counter any rumor mongering that she was always a vicious and violent bitch without reason.

Nothing quite as interesting as Edik and his Activation ability, however.

"Are you even listening to me?"

Well, Sonya thought a little wryly, "I am now. Keep it down, we're in public."

She folded the papers into her newly written in journal, giving the younger brunette a small smile in thanks.

Andrei was kind of in the same position as Fadei, if she thought about it.

He should've been the next one in charge of his Flame type group once Tatiana left to do her medical studies… but got transplanted by Gedeon out of the blue. The differences being the elder Sun hadn't be established before Tatiana left them, and Andrei was a lot more easygoing than the Rain was being.

Probably because he was still on the young side and hadn't quite had his training wheels taken off yet to do his first heist/job for the clan. He was well used to being second to a vor, and Gedeon was at least that.

"You know, there have been some odd rumors about you floating about." Andrei spoke up before the older Sun’s blood pressure could settle. "Very odd, given Tatiana likes to spread stories of you two growing up together… and your continued misadventures."

Sonya sniffed, half because she knew what he was driving at and didn't really see it as much of a threat to her and half because it was still rather cold out. "Interesting, given I've rarely interacted with other Suns."

"Interesting isn't quite the word I would chose."

"Just rumors? Or... complaints?"
"Few of those, too." Confirmed the younger teenager brightly. "Strange, isn't it?"

"I've never been able to use my minor Sun Flames intentionally, so I've left it up to you Suns to handle yourselves." She admitted blandly as she tucked her papers into her purse. "Should I not have?"

"Which is why I say it's odd, and strange. We're doing just fine, really. But you already knew of this, didn't you?"

Sonya didn't bother trying to look innocent, even if Gedeon was likely collaborating with the Four Rains. She wouldn't be able to pull it off, anyways. "What's strange is a Rain's ability to ignore how far a Mist can reach, actually. Or how foreboding a Storm-Cloud can get."

Andrei smirked lopsidedly, glancing sideways at the older man before giving his goodbye in a twist of his wrist. "It's a wonder how the world works, isn't it?"

She considered the younger Sun's back as he retreated into the warehouse the Zolotov Clan owned and the Suns repurposed to fit them. Glancing at the thoughtful vor once, the thief turned on her heel to continue on her way.

The warehouse wasn't too far from the middle of the clan's territory but placed decently far enough it would be a long and cold walk back to their headquarters.

"So... you do know. I didn't think Fadei would be able to keep it from you."

"Again, Fadei forgets I was here before him and have my own sources." Although, honestly enough, she was a little surprised Usov had informed her of the situation before Galina could.

It wasn't really a surprise in the end, Fadei was full of himself enough to overlook what her father would do if he managed to kill her. Much less her sister and mother, for that matter.

Mikhail of the Storms was an interesting mix to add to his Four Rains, but she was frankly a little skeptical of his intelligence if he thought that would actually stop her.

Fight fire with fire might be a valid combat tactic, but with Flames... there was no way that would work. Pitting two pure Storms against each other might, but she was not a pure Storm.

If, in the last two years, Mikhail had managed to outstrip her in power as one Sonya would be surprised. There was little to no way he could outstrip her in control, however.

With her Cloud Flames added to the mix?

The thief was pretty sure that would be a non-contest.

"I'd rather not kill fellow clan members." She informed the Sun pacing alongside her blandly. "It's starting to look like I may have to."

"It's a squabble." Gedeon protested, both surprised and a little wary.

Sonya's smile was probably ice cold. "Think, if you would, of what Mikhail can do. Then put that with me and the headquarters' walls if we miss, since it's likely that's where they might pick a fight. Think of what Fadei can accomplish, and then wonder how far he might go to get his ability to affect me when we already know the 'usual' amounts for one person do nothing."

A decent Storm could likely burn the entire building they worked out of down in as little as an hour.
Four Rains working together could possibly put the whole building asleep, in comas, or Tranquilize them all to death if they weren't careful about it. Combined, and with her ability of Propagating her own strength, they'd all make short work of a merely physical location much less pure humans that might be caught in the crossfire.

Sonya had already broken a few walls and windows, and she hadn't even been really pissed off then.

"Did you even seriously consider this before you allowed it to go on?"

"I didn't 'allow' anything. I can't get between the two of you-"

"Bullshit. You are the old man's son, if you say so Fadei would have dropped it." She snapped at him, brushing off his excuse with a wave of her hand. "As it stands, they need to be removed one way or another. I can't have them poisoning the younger ones, against me or the other groups, or things will start to rip apart and will never be mended in this lifetime. Even if they managed to remove me, did you even consider what my father would do? What my sister might end up doing?"

It was horribly short-sighted if you looked at it from that end. Arseniy was not a vor to cross, and Tatiana…?

The nurse could probably do some scary things now that she had formal medical training.

The expression that painted itself across Gedeon's face said he knew full well what she was getting at. However, it was also queerly stubborn. "I cannot get between you two, Bazanova."

…their Pahkan wanted this to go on?

Milos was the only one that could tell this vor what he could or could not do. That held nasty implications for both her and the situation.

Her last hope to stop the terribly one-sided conflict was now Dmitriy, who had been out of touch for nearly a full year and some months now.

What was the point behind enabling the Rains' behavior?

Either they managed to kill Sonya, which would alienate Arseniy and the rest of her family with the possibility of losing her connections outside the clan, or she kills them…?

What, exactly, was the punishment for murdering one's clan members?

Even if it was out of self-defense?

Sonya didn't actually know, since it was never something she had seriously considered she might have to do.

…and that estimation of the situation depended on if old man Zolotov was fully aware of what kind of damage any decently motivated Flame user could do to each other. He might not be aware of that and was banking on Fadei somehow gaining control of her.

Somehow.

It was even possible he was angling for the Cloud habit of self-destructing to take herself out, or for her to bend even more in aims of avoiding that fate. The opposite of that would be he wanted her taking out the Rains, which might be for whatever reason a Boss might have to encourage conflict between his people.
speculating was giving her a headache. "This clan… seems to be rather bad for my health all of a sudden."

Gedeon sputtered, but the Storm-Cloud was distracted by yet another possibility.

Old man Zolotov might be using this 'squabble' to measure his heir in some way. Seeing if his son could pull the situation together somehow, or how he would manage two opposing factions that were not working together even if they belonged to the same syndicate.

Which would he sacrifice, and which would he salvage?

Too many possibilities, and some were out of her pay grade. Sonya fixated on what she could do instead.

"I might be able to do this bloodlessly." She cut off whatever he was about to say, seriously pondering the few options left to her. "Might. If you can stall it."

What were the Four Rains doing for the past year?

Additionally, why were they still hanging about the training cadre?

They weren't needed, really.

As the group of Suns she just finished checking up on proved, Flame users really needed minimal oversight and mainly a direction or two pointed out to develop. Applying that outside of their safe little niche in the Zolotov Clan territories might be tricky, but doable.

Sonya had four, possibly five with a six almost ready to join that group, of full-grown Flame users just stagnating. One was rather intently after her job… but the rest seemed to be perfectly content to do nothing. Irritating to consider, honestly.

"Gedeon… you can't get between us… but can you go around us?"

(Friday the 4th of April, 1969. Gang Jiao, Longgang District, Kwangtung, People's Republic of China.)

Fong was not remotely surprised the martial arts master he had come to see had not left his dojo.

It was closed, obviously bending to the recent sway of popular support away from traditional martial art forms. That did not mean Master Yaozu was alone, or that his students had all fled.

A few eyed him severely from their spots, two manning the rickshaws just down the street and a third in plain view hauling a bale of something down the dirt path. One was just too graceful of movement to be untrained, the other two had shifted into open ready stances he recognized full well.

Bowing slightly to the expansive and once full hall, mostly due to habit and mainly due to the respect he still held for the teachings he had received here, the Storm left his shoes in the entranceway and sought out the elderly master of the dojo.

The action would tell his seen and unseen watchers he was not here to cause trouble, but Fong also knew better than to assume that would allay any fears of his possible mischief causing. He gave it less than ten minutes until one of the neighbors barged in to ensure their Master was still among the
living.

Even if various branches of martial arts had been heavily 'discouraged' by many, the dojo was still clean and well maintained. Empty, and half in shadow, but the floors still without a speck of dust and the mirrored wall polished to a high gleam.

Gloom or no, he was fully aware this level was abandoned for the time being and made his way to the staircase left in the open on the east wall.

The elderly man, who had once been a towering and well-respected figure for a remote Chinese village, did not allow a stooped back or his advancing age to corrupt his posture by much if anything. Master Yaozu had been old before Fong had ever stepped into his halls, his hair still silver and thick just as it had been more than a decade ago.

The Triad member hadn't expected otherwise, honestly. When he came upon the man, Master Yaozu was meditating on the landing before the door of his home. Having little other to do here but talk to his old master, Fong folded himself down to wait out the elder's mental pondering of the skyline he could see out of a large window.

It did not take very long. If the master hadn't been fully aware of him entering the dojo, the Storm would honestly be surprised.

"So... the wheel turns anew, and you finally return." The weight of years might be lending a stoop to the martial arts master's back, but it had not cut the sharpness of his pitch-black eyes. One cracked open to study the man that replaced the child's image. "Are you here as Fēng my once student, or as Fong the criminal?"

"Both actually, Sifu." Retrieving Sonya's letter, he held it out to Master Yaozu with a bow. "It is from my... less than morally correct contacts but is for one of my previous masters that know the way of Aikido."

"What would thieves and murders need with a pacifist's art?" The elderly man still took the letter, but merely held it up between them instead of crack the seal to read what it said.

Fong had fully expected that, there was little to no reason why he would take anything a Triad member said at face value. He had his reasons for choosing this life, as did his master for heavily disapproving. "I only know it is not for the writer's self. One to five students await, with the possibility of more in time."

Bait it might be, but Master Yaozu had picked his path with the intent of teaching students for the rest of his life. The lack of which in their homeland did affect the elderly martial arts master, and even transparent bait had him inspecting the letter.

"I would have to leave to answer this request."

There was no real answer to that statement, so the Storm held his silence.

Obviously, the arrangement would not happen in China. Sonya's offer of shelter from the political situation would only happen in Soviet Russia or another location she chose herself in another land. Either Master Yaozu would need to sell his home and dojo, to a student or someone else in hopes of it continuing after the restrictions on marital arts relaxed or even retrieving it once the situation calmed, or put it in legal limbo for the same reasons.

Any way also carried the risk the government might snap the property up for reasons of their own.
Regardless of which option the elder chose, the chance he would not live to see it opened again was very much a real possibility.

Equally unlikely was the prospect Master Yaozu could weather the current political situation alone, or even with his students' amassed aid. He had devoted his life to teaching, not teaching for the years this situation may take to wane could drain his savings and his previous students' goodwill until he starved to death or lost the dojo anyways.

It might be rather low for him to capitalize on the situation to safeguard one of the few highly respected teachers he still had, but Fong had found he was fully willing to bend several tenets he once swore by if the results were worth it.

If he achieved moving the stubborn old man, settling him under the eye of a very vicious Storm-Cloud he had drawn even with the one time they fought was well worth the hassle. Death was still a possibility, but if not natural then the thief would hunt down the perpetrators without even asking if she should.

"And what do you gain from this?"

"Your survival."

Both of Master Yaozu's eyes were open now, and he glanced out the window before him at the roofs and sky outside.

It took another moment, and by this point Fong could hear the almost silent steps of the elder's former students come to check on their master ghosting through the empty dojo below, before the old man cracked the letter open.
Chapter 40

(Saturday the 5th of April, 1969. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Arseniy eyed his youngest foster daughter warily.

Sonya tried for a smile, as she was angling for him to do her a favor. "I don't really care to know... but it's getting stupid. They've been hanging around, getting in my way, for an entire year now. I have my dues prepaid, but from what I got out of Pyotr that first time was that's not usual for most of our thieves. So, aren't they due to pay up sometime soon? What have they been doing?"

Lisa was busying herself with breakfast/brunch/lunch. It would be lunch to the rest of the family but the vor's breakfast, and then brunch if hungry enough. The younger Russian woman was fully aware her foster mother was still listening in and would probably have a chat about the situation of her own a bit later on, but since she had been meaning to talk to her anyways that wasn't too daunting.

"Are you stalling?"

"A little, yes. I need a few more days, at the very least, to arrange things so I can kick them out with minimal fuss." Not remotely surprised at how easily Arseniy saw through her, the Storm-Cloud crossed her arms on the kitchen table and set her chin on top of them. "Gedeon already bought in, after I gave him a wake-up call for what issues the collateral damage a 'squabble' between Flame users could cause the clan. If you think about it, Fadei taking over for me is actually just going back to the status-quo under Dmitriy. Actually, more of a step back. No matter how he tries it."

For all he was a known killer and criminal, the eldest of the Four Rains wasn't yet a vor. Again, prison time was needed to cement that kind of respect. Since Fadei wasn't a vor, having him in charge as a kind of internal clan specialist without the rank to be really heeded to would boil down to them just going in circles.

Worse than it had been even in her pseudo-childhood, when she had to report on the existence of Flames to several higher-ranking vor at the ever so towering age of ten.

Sonya was never going to be a vor, male-only title after all. She also wasn't the best fit for collaborating various Flame type users to work together and getting them trained up, had known that long before there ever was a need for someone to be officially in charge. She was proving it true now, she just didn’t have the energy to keep up with all the baby Flame users pouring in.

However, she was more than sure she was the least bad fit while Dmitriy was catching up on being that 'respectable' to be listened to.

Whatever the older Rains' issues with her, fact of the matter was they would do worse in her position. Aside pride or vanity or whatever, superiority maybe but she really needed to take a hard look at that later, even four more Rains trying to fill the empty boots of an older one would not work for very long.

Fadei did not embody the ideal character of a 'Classic Rain'. Probably stuck somewhere between Inverted and Classic, with an emphasis on Classical if he was identified as such by someone Inverted. He wasn't easy to get along with, or very interested in keeping conflict to a minimum. Managing three other Rains to work together with him, which was probably the basic of basic Flame team builds, wasn't all that impressive.
As it was, the thief actually thought he was Inverted. Maybe he had been more Classical before puberty?

Did or could that property of one's Flame flux a little to a lot while still in the middle of growing up?

If she wanted to be petty and shallow, she could use that book Galina published under her name as an example of how bad she was sure Fadei would be in her place. Nearly half of it came from the work the Storm-Cloud poured into it clarifying and clearing up fact from fiction, so she at least had a direction to go in without any provided by others, and all Four Rains barely had contributed to a damn paragraph in their 'Blue Soulfire' section.

It was entirely possible that was wrong at this moment. A year was a lot of time to do nothing with, but Sonya also was sure they hadn't studied either the bait-book or her actual research journals.

She had beaten Fadei to a pulp, as well as almost-effortlessly knocked out Kazimir and Irinei.

Their response in adding a Storm to their ranks was a pitiful attempt to address that imbalance when it came time to actually physically oppose her. All five on one might be tricky from the mere number side, but she did believe in skill over quantity.

Valera stumbled into the kitchen during her mental wanderings, rubbing at sleep swollen eyes from his recently finished mid-morning nap. Upon seeing his sister in the room, he made a staggered turn and pulled incessantly on her pants leg to be picked up.

Sonya merely straightened up and gave in, as the brat had issues with being stuffed in his highchair if there wasn't food to be had yet. If she did, Valera would start throwing things. Mostly at her, since she'd be the closest.

Lisa snickered, not bothering to hide her amusement. Which clued the Storm-Cloud into her expression not being as neutral as she'd like. Probably disgruntled, if it amused their mother so much.

Wrapping her arms around her little brother instead, she looked back at her father. "I have random school-related things to be doing today, and I'd rather not have them get even more underfoot than they already are."

"You're meeting with some of the other syndicates." Arseniy stated rather than asked for clarification, seeing as it might be something he'd have to deal with if Sonya was not available due to emergency reasons later on. "The ones we have a smattering of your combustible brats from."

"That'll be… fun."

Snorting, the vor accepted a plate of food from the mother of his son. "Might be interesting how you're going to establish yourself in that."

"I'm bringing my hammers." His daughter admitted to blandly, Valera's forehead impacting her collarbone softly as he dozed lightly in her arms. "And possibly an ax or two."

The smirk that curled Arseniy's mouth wasn't a friendly one, his lover's snicker turned into an actual laugh.

"And then I have to deal with the Storms. I already touched base with the Suns, but that one is going to be a bit… harder."
Lisa finished cutting up Valera's lunch, so she put her grumpy little brother in his highchair and confiscated his fork until mom was ready to hand the food over.

"They took over an abandoned industrial park."

"They'd have to, a Storm is pretty much sheer destruction by another term." No physical building would stand up to massed baby Storms trying to learn how to Disintegrate things on command.

Someplace with a lot of things to destroy no one would miss was practically required, bonus if it had walls or fences to conceal what was going on and could be more or less guarded while other Storms figured out how much was too much Flame for what they wanted.

She should probably check to ensure no one else had Fong's problem, of having too much Flame and being unable to regulate it. Pure destruction was all well and good, but she had never required more than a sliver of her own Storm Flames on any job. Any more would've been overkill, and she knew firsthand how hard it was to think up of non-Omertà violating uses for the ruby-red Flames.

Maybe she should just hand over her method of learning control as a matter of fact, Storms going overboard every time they pulled on their Flames would mean they'd be restricted to sheer brute force instead of delicate operations.

They were a clan of thieves, not enforcers. While there might be a number of said enforcers in the clan, not all of them would be Storms or willing to work with one or two.

"I'll distract them. Only for today."

Likely because today was a day she had to be elsewhere for clan business.

Sonya was perfectly content with that, to be honest. Arseniy didn't have to help her, and since he did do so much training it had been entirely possible he'd see the situation as a learning experience for her.

Vor were very much 'sink or swim' method teachers. They could do lectures, and indeed she had listened to those her father gave through most of her second attempt at a childhood, but Arseniy swore by the maxim 'practice makes perfect'.

Speaking of teachers, she wondered if Scruffy had found himself in over his head yet. A gaggle of Suns intent on teaching him to speak fluently in Russian would be a headache to anyone.

Said gaggle without much restraint one usually found only after being fully grown?

Sucked to be him.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 5th of April, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Waiting only long enough to hear the first stirrings of rumor over Arseniy detaining the Four Rains, Sonya gathered Galina and some additional paperwork to her then left the Zolotov headquarters.

Their driver this day was one of the more unfortunate Shestyorka in range when the thief realized she didn't want to drive Moscow's streets and the Lightning was similarly disinclined.

On the way to the meeting spot pre-arranged for this little… occasion, she had time to review a few
bits of data she had not really concerned herself over from Dmitriy's time in his office.

From her records, which the slightly older brunette had almost compulsively kept updated as much as she could after the Rain got himself arrested, there were a bare handful of Flame users from outside their clan. They rarely showed up to their Flame sections, normally with escorts of their own, and spent as little as a few hours with others of their type before being hustled back to their home territories to 'put the lessons into practice in more comfortable environments’.

Out of all the syndicates operating in or around Moscow, six were currently outsourcing the training of their Flame users. More than likely in hopes those few would be able to at least pick out and teach the basics to any others they came across.

Mainly Mists, but one Rain and two Storms were included in that count.

Which would be more worrying if that could ever become an issue at all.

All the groups of Flames taught by the Zolotovs were a little scattered away from one another, partly by necessity and partly out of sheer practicality. A large group of Suns together would irritate even the mildest of Storms, and while there was a good number of Rains so far there was no telling what kind of 'humors' a similarly large number of Mists might bring to bear on anyone unlucky enough to irk them. Lightnings, depending, might either become unwitting pawns in that mess or egg it all on.

Without Skies to buffer anything harshly jarring, or Clouds to terrify them into passiveness, Sonya didn't even want to know how bad unsupervised interactions might get if allowed to go on long enough.

The Suns needed the repurposed warehouse to contain their blindly bright yellow Flames, and to shelter the 'miraculous' healing from civilian eyes. All the Storms needed the privacy and convenient targets of a long-abandoned construction zone, one that was never finished and left to rot until something else was planned for the lot. Hopefully both locations would do for the short-term, while she could outright buy both if needed she'd rather not dip that far into her personal funds just yet.

Sonya only had reports to go by for the others, but it seemed as if Fadei had been somewhat intelligent when he commandeered the basement of a local sympathetic bar for the Rains. It might have been Dmitriy, but given the numbers only really exploded after he got himself arrested she doubted it had been his idea. Anyone falling asleep unexpectedly at a bar would be thought of as drunk, which nicely contained any rumors errantly leaking Tranquility might cause.

Galina's Lightnings were easier in a way, they met up in one of two locations. Either in Aleksandr's mostly abandoned hall if they were practicing Hardening other things or in the clan's old dancehall's extra rooms when trying it to Harden themselves to ensure they could see what they were doing.

As for the Mists, Usov had neither requested somewhere the clan held influence in nor made explicit where he met up with his fellows.

She was taking that to mean the kid either shifted the location around as needed or Mists required less operational security than the other Flame types. Since 'Construction' somehow equated to 'bend reality', Sonya was just going to nod and accept it as long as it remained under wraps.

On second thought… teaching all the different Flame types in the same building would be interesting. Not the good kind of interesting either.

Sonya and Galina were not the last ones to arrive to the meeting place, from the look of things.

Criminal groups really did prefer to remain with their fellows, so even a mixed meeting of several
syndicates still had invisible boundary lines between factions.

A meeting room in the ground level of the Leningradskaya hotel had been set aside for them. Which, she wryly mused, was the reason her Lightning assistant all but demanded she dress up for this. Ornate, but stopping just short of ostentatious, this wasn't the kind of place her usual pants and blouse combination would work with.

Instead, she had to dip into the clothing and dresses she had bought over the years to attend the Vongola Christmas Ball or very recent high society heists. Which wasn't cheating, she hadn't worn any of her dresses in Moscow yet.

Besides, she bought them with the intent of reusing them if need be. Might as well get as much mileage out of them as she could.

Galina, being taller and bustier than she was, had arranged her own outfit from some of the other women in the clan. While not penniless, the Lightning really did have better things to spend her money on than a dress that would see minimal use for however many years. She did, however, ensure she was a bit more professionally dressed than Sonya.

Meaning the brunette got away with a dark charcoal suit jacket and matching pencil skirt with a green undershirt while the blonde had to suffer high heels and her purple jersey dress from last Christmas.

Sonya found that entirely unfair. Especially since, not two seconds after walking into the meeting room rented for the occasion, one of the vor made a possibly raunchy to him remark that caused Galina's spine to stiffen in outrage.

She didn't know what was said, she had better things to think on and didn't really care for some asshole she didn't know at all to bother listening to what came out of his mouth.

However, since whatever it had been upset her assistant, the thief took offense anyways. "Do you think the hotel staff will charge us for cleaning up any messy bloodstains we might happen to leave behind?"

Galina only blinked at her, unwilling to say anything that might be misconstrued in this setting.

The vor in question, likely from the Zapadny Administrative Okrug from his grouping which meant the syndicate due south of the Zolotov's territory, gave her a smirk that was all teeth. "Feisty, I like that in women."

"Everyone keeps calling me that, and I have no idea why." Sonya informed him in an even tone, an ax made of her Cloud Flames appearing in her hand with a flash of lavender only for the head to be buried into the chair the man was near-lounging in.

In the gap available between his legs.

It didn't quite make the vor physically uncomfortable until she pressed down on the handle and it bit more into the wood as she leaned forward over him. In consequence, it also closed the very minor gap between her bladed edge and the man's… slightly cheap looking pants. Since she swung it only hard enough to lodge in the fabric, the force she added caused him a very uncomfortable little problem.

"Most people call me cold." The thief added as she let go of her weapon, but not her Flames.

Galina sniffed haughtily for effect, eyeing the now very pale vor gapping at the plated gold ax head
pressed against something he probably valued a lot higher than his reputation, then stalked after Sonya's more sedate meander to a free section of the meeting table. "I think we're only missing the Khovrino Association, Sonya."

"They are farther from here than everyone else." She reasoned dismissively as she seated herself.

She knew, from office records alone, the Khovrinos had two of the Mists in Usov's care. The Association was actually white-collar crime focused than most of the syndicates that surrounded her clan, dealing more with political and business-related work than the thieves' clan.

They were lucky they had two Mists instead of the Storms or lone Rain, although a Rain might just be a boon of their own when it came to negotiations. She wondered what Usov was instructing them in, or what he wasn't.

Aside from the obvious two Flame users from the Zolotov clan the two lone women in the room represented, she also recognized the Filat syndicate's representatives. From the Khoroshevo-Mnevniki District, located due south of the Zolotov held territory. One of the Storms came from this one, but as they were involved with information brokering she didn't quite know what they wanted their lone Flame user trained up for.

Hopefully Mikhail did. Sonya wouldn't hold her breath, though.

The other four weren't well known to her but were to Galina from how she noted them in order without so much as blinking. One was a rival syndicate of thieves, another a brotherhood of enforcers just rising to some prominence in their own little corner of the city, and the last two the thief didn't bother to even guess.

Either so newly fresh they were only just getting into the shark tank or handling a larger syndicate's interests for them and trying to pull off being 'new'. Either way, not Sonya's problem.

One of the representatives from those unknown syndicates yanked his eyes away from the vor with the very large ax problem to visibly measure the Zolotov women. "That was a very… interesting introduction. Might we have a name and reason for a… for your inclusion here?"

"I am Sonya Bazanova, from the Zolotov Clan. And the one in charge of the service you all have opted to take advantage of." Giving him a bland and utterly insincere smile, with more teeth than probably ladylike, she laced her fingers together and set them on her right knee which was hooked over her left. "This will probably be only one of two occasions I will bother to attend, so make the most of it."

A tiny sigh from her left informed her that Galina thought very little of her introduction.

"You are that Bazanova?"

"I wasn't aware there was another. Unless you are referring to my father, but while he shares my… main archetype, he is not actively one."

The man she was speaking to, seated two groups down from where she picked to sit, glanced back to the vor trying to pry her battle ax out of his lap. It was taking a lot of elbow grease from one of his fellows to even make it budge, seeing as moving the ax in one direction would cause… complications.

"A little hint, please? Were they not color-coded as well?"

"I am the purple one, with a side of red." Offered the thief, willing to answer as long as things stayed
civilized.

There wasn’t much they could do with the confirmed knowledge that she was a Cloud or a Storm, other than be aware of what she might be able to do.

Giving a slow nod, which since none of his features didn't tighten in distress or narrowed in comprehension meant he was still testing her to see what might be true or not, he flicked his gaze to her assistant.

Possibly he had a really good poker-face?

Galina answered for herself. "Green."

"The men, mostly blues with a red and one yellow, are all unfortunately otherwise occupied. You would have gotten my father or the yellow if possible, but again they had more pressing things to handle which could not be passed off."

Gedeon might actually show up if he finished his errand for his father soon, and her own father probably wouldn't as he really couldn't answer any semi-complicated Flame-related questions, but the inexperienced Sun was more likely to meet with her in the hotel's lobby instead of crashing the meeting.

"I thought we’d get young Gedeon Zolotov, not… lovely young ladies like yourselves." Another of the men, not quite as shoddily dressed as the boldest that struck up a conversation with her but also not too far removed from him, interjected.

The pause was either a quick correction of what word-choice he wanted to use, or a sign of insincere flattery.

"Galina, ensure we're not being spied upon." Sonya ordered instead of reply to that non-question. "If I have to talk in riddles the entire time, I'll be charged for the destruction of more than just one seat."

Setting the paperwork she had taken charge of in front of the Storm-Cloud, she gave a nod and turned around from the position she had taken standing a little behind the more experienced Flame user. A sparkling crackle of emerald green Flames spat from the Lightning's similarly green nails, which she rapped against the nearest wall.

The crème colored paint on the walls cracked themselves as the Lightning Flames shot through the long-dried paint, either from the heat or the stress of conducting the Flames closest to being electrical in nature, and six small pops came from various points of the walls.

Unfortunately, the overhead lights also burned out when the electrical Flames overloaded the fine filaments.

"Hmm… again, a touch too much." Observed the responsible Lightning clinically, eyeing the cracks she had done to the walls rather than the blown-out lights. The lightbulbs were always going to be broken if she was speed-clearing a room, that had been entirely expected.

Was that lead paint?

She hoped not. They had expected the expense of repainting an entire room so had the money to cover it and then some in her purse.

"One would think that since you conduct the Lightnings in their training, you would have a finer control over that." Sonya commented rather blandly as their fellows for this meeting either recovered
their composure at the blatant display of Flames or at least mustered the nerve to stop looking a breath away from grabbing their closest weapon.

"No one has your fine control, Sonya. You are a terrible example to strive for. Cheater."

The thief checked the watch secured to her left wrist in lieu of her chain of weaponry around her arm, and then pulled the files she had brought with closer. "Gentlemen, since it is five past the hour, we are starting now."

A vor from the Filat syndicate she vaguely recalled from somewhere cleared his throat to gain attention. "Dear… Bazanova, we are still missing a few people and we have not agreed to allow a little girl to lead this discussion."

Her first impulse was to tell him to leave then. Since it was, she figured it was probably undiplomatic. Biting her tongue against the desire to go with it anyways, she temporized with her second impulse. "You don't have a choice."

"E-excuse me?"

"There is no one else." Sonya waved a hand at the ornate double-doors that led into the meeting room, which conveniently also was the direction the Zolotov claimed territory was in. "Unfortunately, there are not a lot of Flame users of age to be at least semi-respectable and male. The only Zolotov vor user of Dying Will Flames is both ill-trained and still beholden to other commitments. The only other vor who knows the information but isn't a user is tied up in his own duties. Therefore you all are left with me, a Classically natured Cloud with Inverted Storm tendencies who could otherwise care less about any of you."

"A very… bold statement, given some of us have amicable relations with your own syndicate." The older man with a semi-respectable spine, or appalling ignorance, who had prodded her for basic information spoke up.

He didn't look nearly as outraged as some of the older members or as stony-faced as some of the more in-the-know vory.

"It's awkward, unusual, and odd. We, the Zolotovs, know that. Galina, behind me, does have some seniority if not the oversight position and is as female as I am. My sister, Sun user and currently a nurse learning in Mafia Land, has similar issues to her inclusion. Dmitriy, the Rain I am covering for, is in prison for refusing to give up clan details to the police. Gedeon is in the middle of being trained to be a Sun user and will likely take over once he is. If not me, there is a twelve-year-old male Mist who has next greatest seniority. A fifteen-year-old male Sun after him. Deal with it."

"You should have started with that." The only one in the room she remotely liked aside her own Lightning commented neutrally. "I wasn't aware the situation was so dire."

"It's not dire, just still young." Sonya rolled her eyes, sorting out the paperwork in sections of which outside Flame user getting trained were in which group represented here. "I started it a little under a decade ago. I was the first Zolotov Dying Will Flame user. My hand-picked successor to conform to your oh-so-delicate male sensibilities is in prison, so I came back to 'hold down the fort' for him. Thus, for the next two years, you will have to deal with me."

"And if we still don't want to? What are you going to do, little girl?"

She was fully aware she was a little shorter than the average male, but it being repeatedly pointed out to her was starting to irritate her. "The door is there."
Galina sighed heavily, looking more than a little exasperated.

In response, the Storm-Cloud could only shrug a shoulder as she glanced at her. "It's not worth the effort to care about. I do not involve myself in much Moscow business, and when the time is up I'll go back to the international stage and remain there. What do I care if they dislike me?"

"Other than the fact they are our clients?" The Lightning questioned a touch more than dryly.

"Where else could they go? I suppose they could hope one of their little morons might discover a fraction of what I put together on my own at age nine," Sonya glanced down at her paperwork to see if the names of the other two groups were mentioned or if she'd have to be rude enough to ask, "or let them go feral and hope. Frankly, I'd rather they did that given how much of a headache this is becoming. But since the clan has other ideas..."

Sighing again, her assistant rolled her eyes and returned to her original position before the group in the meeting room had an up-close and personal demonstration of a Lightning's capabilities.

"So... since the Khovrino Association seems not polite enough to even send a representative, we'll skip reporting to them."

They were located... north-west?

She was somewhat sure they were located within the Severny Administrative Okrug. Entirely possible, what with the two Mists they had reporting back, that they had known Sonya herself would be sent to this little meeting.

She didn't rightfully care if it was a snub, if they really had opted to not show up, it just meant she had less work to do.

"If any of you know what you want your Flame users specifically trained for, tell me later. Or send a note along with them the next time you send them in. I'd actually rather if you did that."

The few reports they had, already sorted and paired or not if need be, were taken by Galina to be passed out. Since she did know whose report went to whom, the Lightning merely slipped all but two reports on two Mists from the thief's hands in order for them to be passed out to the right people.

Her secretary/personal assistant had paper in her hands, it was the only reason Sonya didn't end up with a bullet hole somewhere uncomfortable or ill-advised. The brunette merely held them out, straight into the path one of the friends of the vor she pinned to his seat shot in.

It dented the papers and ripped them out of her hands, but her Lightning Flames made them hard enough it worked as well as any bullet-proof shield.

Her first instinct was to Propagate a hammer in her hand and throw it at the man.

Sonya's action turned out to be the wrong one. She had no warning besides a split-second of hackle raising sense of complete wrongness.

There was a very long moment of sheer collective surprise, that didn't result from the report of a gunshot in an enclosed room.

That silence turned into a kind of mutual shared horror as everyone present got a very good look at what stopped a hammer thrown with the force of a speeding train, and what knocked a small caliber pistol out of another's hands.
Said gun clattered to the ground in the eerily still room.

"Ah... I was unaware this meeting would be overseen by the Vindice. Forgive my reaction, the Soft Lightning is one of mine and I am a Hard Flame Cloud."

There wasn't any sudden rattling of chains, her ears were ringing too much to tell if there had been, but the dully gleaming links of metal were merely just there one moment before the unheard fluttering paperwork had the chance to settle on the floor. Black as pitch, spider webbing out from a point behind both the thief and her suddenly nervous assistant, holding her hammer suspended in mid-air even with the force she had thrown it with.

They were also wrapped around the possible vor that tried to shoot her for whatever reason he had, pinning the arms against his chest in a painful looking contortion as well as effortlessly supporting the man a good half a foot off the floor.

Her Propagated hammer was imploded by the black Flames as they overpowered her own Cloud ones, that same force that shattered her weapon dragging the now weakly struggling shooter back to the far wall behind her.

"Officer," Sonya stiffly turned in her seat to fully see the figure even if she really didn't want to, "we are missing the Vindice laws for Flame users. I do not know where to go in order to obtain a copy to pass on to those being instructed."

She was trying really hard to ignore the pulse hammering in her ear, but that wasn't going away or calming any.

Every possible inch of flesh that might be otherwise exposed were wrapped in white bandages, the bulk of the body covered with a ratty seeming but still serviceable long black trench coat under a more... insubstantial seeming cloak. Fur collar, piercingly white cravat, top hat, white gloves, and an air of something horrible and unholy lingered around the Vindice Officer now suspending the unfortunate shooter in midair.

There was a feeling of being dispassionately inspected, like she was a common bug under a microscope of a bored collector of rare insects, before she got a response. "Ignorance is no excuse."

"No, it's not." Agreed the thief as levelly as she could, trying to ignore how her skin crawled with something half-sensed and half-imagined just from hearing the... thing's dead and raspy tone.

Not nails on a chalkboard bad, but rough and dry with a crackle of something she really didn't want to think about. That was a dead Arcobaleno.

"I would merely like a copy to either read or disseminate to the other Flame users and their syndicates, in order to prevent the lesser infractions before they happen from it."

A dead Arcobaleno, possibly either Pierre-Antoine Carpentier or one of his fellows in his generation. Possibly one that had taken over for his generation or succeeded them.

Why did the mere thought make her feel guilty she had a letter from one of them locked in Dmitriy's office desk?

Oh... because it might possibly be addressed to this Officer. Which... she dearly hoped not.

Worse than merely hoped, she'd give up her Cloud Flames in order to keep that not true.

Its appearance was... a very pointed reminder Sonya didn't need about the possible fate of her own
damn brother… or her friend, with the strongest Flames of their generation. The others were still unknowns to her, but Cherep and Renato alone were more than enough to make her afraid of all the things that could go wrong.

She wasn't really sure why, but the wrapped up empty face turned in her direction was more than just a little terrifying. It was bandages, covering an unseen face. How could that be scarier than anything else she couldn't think of at the moment?

Her breathing was trying to speed up without her permission, which distracted a lot of her attention she would have normally kept on the rest of the room.

"A copy will be made available for you, Sonya Bazanova of the Zolotov Thieves Clan." The figure settled on after a horribly long moment of consideration. It's attention seemingly turned to the man it had wrapped in black chains, or at least it's blank face did. The shade of its top hat made the blank visage even more sinister, and a slow tilt to the featureless head creeped her the fuck out. "You are under arrest for attempting to instigate a war between syndicates. If, in the course of our investigation, it is found you were ordered to do so… your syndicate will be penalized."

…it had been lurking around for a while, then. If it knew her name and syndicate.

She dearly hoped not, but the other explanation would be that she was a known quantity to the Vindice and that seemed to be an even worse option to 'any gathering that had to do with Flames being monitored by the mafia police equivalent'.

Without so much as glancing or turning its face to the possible vor's fellows gaping at it, the Vindice Officer slunk backwards into the wall with his prisoner. A large part of said wall was as black as the chains the horror wielded, mostly oval in shape with weird almost mind-bending flickers of dark black wavering here and there that made it look like whatever energy that was made of was eating the wall, and said chains finally gave off a sound Sonya was sure would haunt her for a long while.

They seemed to only rattle once the culprit was in hand. Two longer chains wrapped around both the gun which had fallen to the floor when the shooter was wrapped up in his own and the spent bullet Galina saved her from suffering from, sucking them into the disk of pure flat darkness the Vindice Officer and his victim disappeared into without a ripple.

It was very quiet for a long moment after the thing had left. Since her Lightning looked frozen stiff, and possibly terrified out of her mind, Sonya bent to gather the scattered papers off the floor.

"Bazanova, kindly explain what just happened."

The first man that talked to her in an understandable and reasonable fashion had gone a sickly pale color, but his voice was evenly measured and controlled.

She really respected the hell out of him for that self-control, and mentally pinned him as not a tiny syndicate member but one moon-lightning as one for whatever reason.

"You all should remember that the Vindice police Omertà. Infractions that might expose the mafia world to the civilians are dealt with by them. I… have suspicions they deal more with infractions by Dying Will Flame users than other criminals." She gave a limp wave to the blank wall behind her. "That was an Officer of the Vindice. I only have suspicions for what reasoning… he had to take the gentleman from the…"

Frowning, the thief eyed the remainders of that particular group.
Galina seemed to have settled at least somewhat by then, because the Lightning took the paperwork back with a shaky hand and took the opportunity to whisper, "Kozlov Brotherhood."

"...Kozlov Brotherhood." Really?

Were they?

Sonya kind of wondered what they did.

"...I think I need a drink." Came a mutter from the far corner she hadn't been looking in.

The Storm-Cloud readily agreed with that voice, whoever the hell it was. She almost couldn't believe she had managed to ask the thing a question, much less had gotten an answer.

A positive one.

...she really hoped the answer was a book or something written. Having to actually ask another member of the Vindice would be... nerve wracking.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 5th of April, 1969 continued. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"...are we expected to do anything?"

"Can't." Sonya really mourned her inability to get drunk right now.

She never had before gotten to the point of being blackout drunk, and the loss of the option was strangely irking at the moment when she had never cared to try when her Storm was still unpracticed enough to remain mostly benign in side-effects.

"The Vindice took the man, they'd deal out the retribution needed if at all. Crossing them... Arseniy, there's a reason they're that terrifying. We try to force the issue, and it's possible they'll wipe us out. I'd be... less than useless against them. Until I know more..."

"I thought they were just part of some old fairytale." Gedeon marveled aloud, which irritated her.

Swallowing that down with a generous gulp of vodka, the Storm-Cloud shuddered as her mind drifted back to how fast everything had happened. The circles of tight panic her thoughts ran down hadn't helped jack shit.

"We've... for the last fifty plus years we've been more occupied with avoiding the KGB and just surviving the crackdowns under Stalin, Flames and their usage became almost extinct out here for nearly twice the amount of time. I think that might have reduced the number of incidents any Vindice Officer might be spotted in dealing with. So, they were regulated to rumor and hearsay. Until now."

"Anything they would have involved themselves with would have been those breaking Omertà, and by rumor alone I'd assume witnesses from that would be... thin on the ground." Tacked on her foster father with a tone as dry as the bottle she polished off first after that disaster of a criminal gathering she had to attend. "Makes sense for why we haven't seen them in a long time."

Directly after the meeting broke up Sonya had dismissed Galina for the day, so the Lightning could recover instead of trip after her in a half-blind half-panicked daze. The brunette had been more than just rattled by the visit, heaped on top of as assault on the thief's person and she would not be good
for much else.

Paying off the damage done to the meeting room in a five-star hotel had been annoying, but after what had happened the thief had been desperately pleased they had done the Lightning Flame sweep for bugs. The Vindice probably had their own methods for avoiding surveillance measures, but she didn't think they were ever shared with mere criminals the mafia enforcers dealt with.

Visiting her father was just… reporting an unusual incident to a superior in the clan. Not a badly hidden attempt to get some kind of comfort after a very unwanted look at the possible fate in store for one of the next group of Arcobalenos.

Which might be the intended fate of Cherep or Renato, as Skull de Mort the Immortal Stuntman and Reborn the World's Greatest Hitman.

The to-be Cloud and Sun Arcobalenos of this Era.

Sonya… had not appreciated the reminder smacked in her face of the stakes involved around her brother's and, likely as close as one she'd ever get aside her foster brother, best friend's futures.

Arseniy's idea of comfort was a bottle of alcohol, of which she was on her third-soon-to-be-fourth.

Frankly put, that Vindice Officer probably saved her from doing something extremely stupid. She knew she could throw a hammer harder than humanly possible and whipped one out of sheer anger someone had shot at her around Galina. Forcing her Lightning to possibly save her life at the risk of personal injury.

She had Hardened both her hand and the papers, which saved Galina from a broken wrist when she interposed paper turned bullet-proof shield between a gun and Sonya. Her muscles were wrenched around pretty bad, as she had favored the right wrist after blocking that shot until being dismissed for the day.

Said hammer had a very good chance to not only remove the top half of the shooter, but likely removing a couple walls between that meeting room rented to criminals and a large number of civilians.

Possibly the police too.

Sonya seemed to have terrible self-control when attacked out of the blue, possibly when surprised, or when someone she was familiar with were in danger. She had no idea how to work on that.

That scared her, more than just a little.

Making a bit of mental rearranging, the thief decided she needed a Rain. Somewhat desperately.

As fast as possible.

Hopefully one that could keep her from repeating that stupid mistake when the Vindice weren't conveniently around to catch her weapons.

Not one of the Four Rains, she didn't think she'd be able to stand having one nearby or allowing herself to be influenced by their Flames. Hopefully one of the younger Rains they had would be suitable, because she didn't think another Bjørn or Scruffy would just end up in her lap.

Speaking of, she needed to check up on Scruffy. She hadn't heard anything from him since she dumped him on the Suns and Andrei. Which, given the Classical Suns and their entirely too helpful
natures contrasted with very demanding Inverted Suns and their expectations, might not be a good thing.

A semi-decent distraction in the form of work yet to be done, Sonya eyed the fourth bottle of vodka she had absently cracked open during her mental review.

"How many of those is this going to take?" Asked the older vor as his eyes flicked down to the empty bottles half the Zolotovs lingering in their basement cantina were considering with an air of almost comical disbelief.

The thief guiltily lowered the opened bottle to the table. "I can't get drunk."

Arseniy blinked at her slowly, Gedeon's jaw dropped open, and the few she could see out of the corner of her eyes seemed to be disbelieving… until they really considered the three large empty bottles she had drained over the course of an hour.

"Storms, when they use their Flames internally, end up with stupidly powerful resistance to poisons and viruses. I haven't been sick, unless you count altitude sickness, for almost five years now... and getting tipsy became impossible for me for nearly three."

A last glance to the empty bottles, and the older vor snagged the last full one before addressing Gedeon. "You're paying for two of them."

"Why me? You... urg." With a grunt, the Sun glared at her and her probably highly bemused expression. "I blame you."

"Fair enough, I did drink three bottles myself." Two and a half, really. Arseniy had been halfway through the first one before she showed up. "What were you two doing, anyways?"

"I'll tell you in your office."

"It's Dmitriy's office. I'm merely borrowing it."

"Whatever." The remaining vor dismissed disgustedly, either over getting into a petty verbal fight with her or for forgetting that fact. "Are you coming, or do you want yet another?"

Thinking about it seriously, the Storm-Cloud decided he should at least get something for spending an hour with his eyebrows glued to his hairline as she downed more liquor in one sitting than most civilians could handle in a week. She dug out the ruble for a fifth bottle and slapped it gently on the chest of the Shestyorka on bar cleanup duty.

The kid had been nervously hovering around, not sure if he should grab the empty bottles she had gotten through or if she had wanted to keep them.

Gedeon blinked bemusedly at the bottle handed to him the moment she got it. "...thanks?"

"Hmm..." Sonya's steady as a rock stride earned her more incredulous looks on her way out of the half-full cantina.

Apparently not a lot of her once-watchers had believed her about the inability to get drunk issue she had. Which would have been better to keep under wraps until the next drinking competition she came across, actually.

Damn it, she hated hindsight.
...so... the Vindice are real.

"You'd hear more about them outside the Soviet Union." The thief admitted quietly, glancing over each of the individuals they were passing down the halls once before moving on. "I knew they did exist, but that was the first time I've ever been in the same room as one."

The relatively newish Sun user but older vor eyed the vodka she had given him. "Are you saying we're cut off from news like that?"

"Like it or not, we are out here. The Iron Curtain did more than give the civilians a boundary line, it caused a backlash in criminal organizations that worked more closely with their governments to adopt the superiority or hate they had for the other side."

Not quite as bad as it would have been otherwise, with a more hostile Cold War, but... bad enough as it was.

Honestly speaking, other than the actually physical barrier bisecting Berlin and Germany, Sonya now had her doubts about if the Soviet Union would fall. It was both more stable and more flexible from what she had seen so far than what little she recalled hearing about it once upon a dream-life.

She disliked how hard it made getting information here, unless it came from the civilian gathered news about occurrences around the world the Storm-Cloud was pretty much blind to what was happening in other countries when dealing with her clan.

It was very isolationist out here, which the criminal ranks had adopted by sheer virtue of some of their ranks coming from the civilians that supported and spread the behavior. There were the borderline syndicates, but obviously they would have reasons of their own to control the flow of information through them.

"Idle question," Sonya spoke before Gedeon could fully process that fact, "where is Dmitriy right now?"

"...for some reason, I don't believe it's an idle question for a moment." Muttered the Sun plodding along in her wake. "He was moved from Kresty Prison to Matrosskaya Tishina earlier this year."

Humming thoughtfully, the thief turned her attention to the short preteen eyeing her borrowed office's door speculatively.

Usov gave the vor a friendly wave, not bothered in the least by the suspicious look he got in return. Mostly due to the fact he flat out ignored it in favor of giving her a more worried seeming look. "Sonya... there's something on your desk."

"Dmitriy's desk."

"Yes, that desk." The Mist confirmed with a lazy throwing away gesture to show how little he thought about that correction. "I was... loitering, because I have something I wish to sound out to you... but something... happened."

"A sense of something just wrong? A feeling like someone dug up your grave and did the tango with your corpse?"

"...disgustingly detailed image, and yes actually. I could not stay with that feeling, but it went away the moment I shut the door behind me."

Gedeon sighed through his slightly crooked nose. "And now an explanation for those of us left out of
"The Vindice knows where the Flame office of the Zolotovs are. And that I am working out of there for now." Sonya grimly informed him, eyeing her door as skeptically as the preteen had been before her. "Not sure if I should be delighted or disturbed by that."

Both Sun and Mist joined her in dubiously regarding her office door.

"I'm going with disturbed." Gedeon decided after a long moment.

Usov brightened a little under her elbow. "Then I shall go with delighted. They do exist!"

With a sigh, and pinching the bridge of her nose with her left hand, the thief shoved the offensive slab of wood open so she could see what her possibly impertinent questioning of the Vindice Officer netted her.

There was nothing obviously wrong with the office. It was still mostly blue with bits of green; blue rug on the floor, heavy dark blue curtains pinned neatly on either side of the one window, a suede blue couch with green and blue throw pillows, a single green armchair and a blue on in a matching style if not color sat before the desk, and an ugly green lamp she had yet to break sat on it with part of her paperwork.

Most of what was left out were deceptive. What was even remotely sensitive was secured in the locking bottom left drawer, carefully coded by Galina to seem as mere budget calculations for keeping tabs on the Flame user trainees and code names with various fake descriptions for their budget.

The bookcase that matched the heavy dark wood of the desk had mostly blank but ornate covered books shelved within it.

The only new item of note was the dusty scroll left on the desk.

Sonya didn't hesitate, even torn as she was over what she felt about the Vindice's knowledge base and what that might mean. That held the answers of what her brother could get away with, and she needed to know in order to protect him.

She crossed the office in three not-quite-human strides, snatched up the oddly stiff paper, tore off the glittering black seal, and ran her eyes over what the undead enforcers of the mafia ruled must happen when it came to users of Dying Will Flames.

…Cherep was still in the clear from the looks of it.

Apparently, by Vindice law, no Flame user was to hold a government office if they knew of and utilized their Flames. She could agree with that, letting it happen was either a recipe for an Inverted Sky to run roughshod over everything or for some Mist to puppet half the world for kicks.

Flame users were also expected to keep any rumors or knowledge of what they could do contained from civilian or governmental scrutiny if unable to abstain from using their abilities, which was common sense in the way of 'clean up after oneself' and 'don't draw attention'. Her brother might be skating that one, but as he would never outright admit to why he was undying it wasn't that alarming.

She would have to tell him that Master Liam was not to be told of anything else a Cloud could do. Even if the circus master was very considerate with the whole 'keeping it under his hat' thing.

If a new or not-in-the-know Flame user was found within government office or employed by such,
the discovering Flame user was obligated to contain the errant individual or report it to someone who could.

…slightly more than just alarming, because wasn't one of the next Arcobalenos a soldier?

Not just a soldier… a sniper, right?

Either or, Cherep didn't have a lot to do with the governments of the places he passed through with the Großes Volksfest. That one was… she'd think about it later.

The only other thing a user of Dying Will Flames was obligated to do was pass on what was and wasn't allowed to any foundling user.

Sonya made mental note to get Gedeon to pass it all to the Suns. Usov could inform his Mists, Galina her Lightnings, and she could do the Storms and Rains when checking up on them.

Problem solved.

Aside those few, the rest of the laws were more in lines of 'what to do if such and such Flame user did stupid things' and procedures for containing problem Flame users. Slightly interesting in an abstract way, she supposed it was more in line of a warning section for those that would abuse their Flames.

What equated as 'neutral territory' or what should be expected to be overseen by a Vindice Officer, which included 'meetings or gatherings with the intent to trade Flame-related information to non-aligned syndicates'.

…that Vindice Officer's comment about ignorance might have also have been aimed at her as well.

The thief stiffened her spine when it wanted to shiver as that occurred to her, and she dropped her gaze to the last item in hopes it would ease the hard knot of ice sitting in her stomach.

The last item on her Vindice supplied list was a regulation of Flame user to non-users for any small- or large-scale turf wars.

Which was eyebrow raising, until she really considered it.

If one's opponent had no Flame users, the other syndicate was allowed three in any altercation. If they had anywhere from one to ten, you could only exceed it by a factor of two. Ten to twenty, a factor of three. So on and so forth.

At first glance, it was pretty strange of a stipulation. Her second glance made her wonder how many syndicates would hunt down any Flame users young enough to be ineffectual if another syndicate was training them as an enforcer army.

Then she wondered how many times some scuffle exceeded that recommendation with bad result had happened before this if that was a law. Additionally, what exactly happened to result in a century long decline of Flame users around the world?

Russian Flame users had apparently become all but extinct somehow. Italy, France, and Greece got embroiled in the Mafia Wars during that time.

Something to look into when she had the time.

Sonya handed the scroll of Vindice related laws and guidelines to Gedeon, looking over one
shoulder at Usov.

"Is whatever you wanted safe to ignore for a day or two?"

A slow rise of an eyebrow was her first answer. "Dare I ask why?"

"...I have an idea, and you can think of it as a dry-run."

Blinking once quickly, the Mist made a show of mulling her words over. "Curious."

The Storm-Cloud huffed slightly. That wasn't an answer, but she also knew what he was angling for... surprisingly. She had been hanging out with Mists way too much. "I am going to break someone out of prison, you can use it to see how to confuse or slide us by normal guards."

Gedeon almost dropped the stiffly curled paper as he spluttered in a protest. "I wear it in? Dmitriy has to serve out his term!"

"Of course he does. I never said I wouldn't return him."

Usov grinned widely at that tidbit. "I'm game if you are, then. Let's give the poor man a taste of freedom, shall we?"

(Sunday the 6th of April, 1969. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Dmitriy had been rather enjoying his vacation.

Two meals a day, time to work out or air himself out in a cramped courtyard, a thin but not bad bed to sleep in... and at least two semi-serious fights a week, made the Inverted Rain fully appreciate why some vor opted to not resist arrest with all they had. The lack of stress for one was a damn good draw to taking a prison break from duties.

The prison guards in this fine establishment were a little more on the ball than the last prison he had the privilege to be contained by, but Dmitriy didn't see that as a bad thing. It was less crowded here, for one.

It meant he hadn't had to sleep with one eye open like he had to in a cell with around fourteen other men shoved within it.

Had been, up until Sonya arranged for him to be sprung for a few hours.

That little tetchy brat Usov took on his form and appearance, unceremoniously booting him from his little cell cot, and the Storm-Cloud made off with him bodily as if the Rain couldn't handle his own damn self.

Admittedly, Dmitriy had been expecting this. Sort of.

Not quite in the manner of a temporary jail bust, but the opportunity to find a bar and get shitfaced was easing the disappointment.

In himself, not in Sonya. He wasn't remotely surprised by what was going on.

"...I highly suspect Fadei is Discordant."
The thief sitting across from him blinked once, then glared over the grungy booth table between them. "…what."

"He's obsessed with that possible Sky family, the inactive older one I identified and his two sons. He wants your position to reassign himself to the watch roster, which I pulled him from when he tried forcing that Guardian bond thing with one of the kids. None of whom showed even the so called 'charisma' of a Sky up to that point. Freaked them out good until one of his non-Flame fellow watchers tackled him to drag back."

"…fuck. I should've brought Gedeon."

Dmitriy huffed lowly, pulling a large gulp from the bottle of beer which was her silent apology for needing to pull him into this at all to help settle his utter disappointment in his first 'student'. "He's not going to stop, or see reason, or anything. His goal is your job, and he's unhinged enough to risk everything for it."

The bar she had dragged him to wasn't that far from his prison, actually. Not in the same neighborhood, as the off-duty guards then might spot him and wonder, but at least an hour away. Ussov was still rather young for a stint in prison, even a few hours' worth, so the Rain had been assured he would be going back the moment this conversation was over.

A muscle ticked in Sonya's cheek.

"You might just have to kill him by this point. It's been almost two years, if it's not getting better it probably won't."

He had been hoping that time away from the Sky Watch would settle the Rain, and his old childhood friend was enough of an unmoving wall when she wanted to be that Fadei would at least dimly realize his obsession would not happen.

Dmitriy had been damn proud of the results from his first attempt to teach another his Flame tricks. Proud enough to be more than a little permissive in what his first student got up to.

However, when the Rain scared the shit out of a six-year-old… probably shutting down whatever possible Sky behavior that drew him in the first place?

There was no way Fadei was the only one who could tell if the brat was actively a Sky or not. Dmitriy had gone to check himself after that incident, felt and saw nothing of the sort the other claimed. The father did give a kind of hypnotizing air for Flame users, more than the ones that had no Flames, but his kids were just brats.

He had reshuffled a fair bit of people around, stripping the Sky Watch of every possible Flame user out of concern what happened to the Rain happened to another.

They had strict orders not to tell anyone they were part of it, to stymy Fadei's attempts to weasel into it again. Sonya seemed to have respected that if she still didn't know, even Galina hadn't known who Dmitriy had stuck with that job.

Which meant at least that part of his scrambled attempt to fix the shit that went wrong had at least gone as planned.

"Dmitriy… if I kill Fadei right this moment, none of the Rains will ever listen to me." Hissed out the Storm-Cloud across from him as quietly as she could. There was an interesting pattern of spider web cracks spreading in the varnish from her one-handed grip on the table, the only other sign she was upset. "Why the fuck did you not mention this to anyone?"
"…yeah, by the way, I unknowingly fucked over my own protégé." Snarled back the Rain, a bitter self-hating twist to his tone. Darkly pleased by the minuet flinch in her gaze, he belatedly reminded himself she was stuck cleaning that mess up and dropped his face into one hand. "The hell was I supposed to do about it? Rumors, half-assed information, and a grand total of zero confirmed information about the phenomena were all I had to work with. I had hoped… doesn't matter anymore. There's a report I made up, stuck in the pages of the world atlas blank book on the bookcase. Give that to the old man."

Sonya remained quiet for a long moment as they nursed their respective poisons. "How many other reports are stuck in those books, and are any of them paperwork Galina is going to cheerfully maim you for hiding from her?"

The snort that question drew from him was more of a disgusted one than an amused sound.

"Dmitriy… do you want me to buy you a bottle of something before we go?"

"…please."

(Monday the 7th of April, 1969. COMSUBIN Headquarters, Italian Republic.)

"-all COMSUBIN trainees, report to loading bay three. This is not a drill. I repeat, all-

Lalia Murgia tuned out the blaring announcement as she passed scrambling soldiers, even as a corner of her mind noted that her idiotic student would likely be mustering out with the rest of the noodle-armed rookies.

She normally thrived in handling her military duties, but lately… it was starting to chafe.

What else was there?

Lalia had gleefully trounced every macho male that took one glance at her figure and sneered, everyone who said she couldn't do it. Broke a staggering number of records on the firing range and off, made her childhood dream come true, now stood at the top of a military organization as a widely respected if not just feared commander of soldiers.

'Then hit a damn ceiling', she sourly concluded, leaning out of the way of some stupid scut with a duffle bag perched on a shoulder running down the halls. Probably trying to answer the alert after being startled repacking his kit, kid would be lucky to have more supplies on hand than his unfortunate fellows when the war games kicked off.

It had taken her five goddamn years to kick and claw her way up the ranks, and now she had what she worked her ass off for… she was surprisingly dissatisfied with it.

Lalia had loved the challenge, it seemed. Pitting herself against older and tougher opponents either in her way or trying to make her stumble, getting out and ensuring things were getting done at a decent pace, the competition of proving herself better than another male officer.

Being on the top was not quite as she had counted on.

Few field duties that didn't involve some spineless newbie scrambling to try upholding a military bearing, no more solo missions since she was 'too high-ranking to lose'. There were a few trainees she could probably whip into a semblance of shape for a new unit, a handful of others that might be
worth the time put into them to pound a spine through their backbones… but nothing really inspiring.

She was bored, and irritated that she was.

"LAL~!"

The overly sappy voice caused an itch in her trigger finger. Could only be the idiot student who hit on his instructor the first day of instruction.

Tilting her head so her short blue hair swung out of her line of sight, the so nicknamed 'Lal' glared at the blond rookie scrambling to reach her. "IDIOT! What the hell are you thinking?"

"We're… evacuating?"

"We are not evacuating, you grunts have a mission. Why do you think they ONLY CALLED FOR THE TRAINEES?"

Said member of the trainees, whom she really did have to remember a damn name other than 'idiot student' for him, yelped. Then he tried to cover the childish reaction to her yelling at him with a painfully faked cough and attempted a smile he probably thought was suave.

It wasn't.

"Lovely Lal, would you do me the honor of-

Lalia didn't bother to let him finish his words, she knew how it would go. Her idiotic student had been trying to get a date with her near daily ever since he hit on her his first day of training.

Un-holstering her side-arm, she tried her damnedest to put a bullet hole or two in the jerk's hide.

The only reason she had yet to chase off this particularly annoying rookie and his normally insulting invites to violate a few regulations against dating among the lower ranks was his very respectable skills in saving his hide.

He ducked the first shot by a hair, scrambling momentarily to mesh with the higher than usual foot traffic down this hall of the COMSUBIN Headquarters.

"Maybe another time! See you later, Lal!"

Trying her hardest to suppress the twitch in her left eye, she lowered her service piece and breathed out hard.

Now that the daily sideshow was over with, she should probably get on with attending the meeting she had been called for.

"Lieutenant Commander Murgia," an equally unwelcome voice belted out from further down the hall, "would you please refrain from firing a weapon casually in HQ."

Lalia suppressed her irritation, holstering her gun and turning on a heel to look the Commander of COMSUBIN in the eye. "Of course, sir."

The Commander was one of the really set in his way old school soldiers, who didn't like having a female officer but ignored it with a professionalism she could respect. He didn't add to the harassment she ripped through during her time as a trainee, nor did he favor her because she was one of the so-called 'weaker-sex'.
Indeed, Lalia was sure that was why she rather liked the old war horse. Getting caught doing something a bit 'not allowed' by him aside.

"Your next assignment. Try not to bring them back with more bullet holes than wise." Holding out the neatly contained folder, the old soldier merely returned her salute before walking on.

She glanced down at it, then a smirk drew up her lips.

'Rules and Regulations for the International War Games, Defiant Seed' read the neatly typed folder's tab, under it was scrawled '1969, Italia COMSUBIN forces against Croatia HOS forces'.

Might be interesting. She wondered how long she would be responsible for this.
As the Ottavia of a longstanding Italian Famiglia, Luce of the Giglio Nero was not a stupid woman. When you added in the entirely frustrating ability to foresee some of the future inherited from her ancestors, she couldn't afford to be.

Yet even with her prophetic abilities, she could still be surprised.

Working to avoid future pitfalls she knew would matter in a few short years made her look too far in the future, sometimes overlooking what was in the present. Sometimes her actions seemed incomprehensible to her own Famiglia, such as her not taking Guardians or passing certain people over when it came time to replace an individual who was retiring or dead, which was where her current difficulty had risen from. Even then, sometimes the motivations and reasons behind some actions others had for their to-be actions escaped her.

She was not all-knowing, but she knew enough.

Luce knew what was going to happen. There wasn't any way she knew of to avoid it and still give her future descendants enough time in this world to actually live. The Tri-Ni-Sette had to be continued, Checker Face couldn't continue holding onto the Arcobalenos' third as well as his Mare Ring for much longer.

Once upon a time, that inevitability had made her incredibly bitter. She had not been a happy child when her linage's Sky gift came to the fore and she realized she would barely live to see her own daughter reach her teenage years.

If she warned her future co-workers and fellow Cursed Arcobalenos of what was to come, Checker Face would run out of time. He had put off finding the next set of I Prescelti Sette for too long already, if she did not help things along he wouldn't be able to find the next strongest set.

Given what the individuals he would select this time around were like, they would actively hamper his work knowing the full situation or not. It was in their natures, such a 'betrayal' of their contracts or honor code would turn them against the near-ancient being and what he worked for as a matter of course.

That would also mean her daughter would only see the age of seven before the world started cracking apart and everything started 'mysteriously' dying off.

Luce could abstain from being the next Arcobaleno Boss, their Sky to buffer the worst edges of themselves before they found their own ways to do it, but the individual Checker Face would be forced to turn to in order to both hold the Sky Pacifier and keep the to-be Arcobalenos together would fail miserably. Not in holding a supernatural piece of rock syphoning off his life force, but in keeping the very different personalities in his Arcobaleno Elements from… explosively clashing.

The quiet green one would be the first to leave, well before the Curse was set. A bit of scrambling would patch that loss over, but the damage would have been done. They'd lose the purple stuntman and the blue soldier candidates in short order. Without the strongest Lightning, Rain, and Cloud in the world to help support the Tri-Ni-Sette, it would cut the life expectancy of the others just too short of her end-goal and make that path of the future defunct. That would mean her daughter would get to
have her own child, but then her granddaughter would have mere months to be alive before things turned… unacceptable.

Aria would be the next Sky Arcobaleno after him, but be an unknown instead of the daughter of their previous if unscrupulous Sky. However, things did not have good endings down that path. Nothing would change, they wouldn't survive long enough to accomplish anything or spark any changes, and I Prescelti Sette would continue on far into the future.

Eventually, if Luce did exactly as she knew she had to, while her daughter would have a painfully short life… her daughter's daughter would have the chance to live and see the end of the Arcobaleno Curse as well as actually grow up and live her own life.

She was doomed and so was her daughter, in more ways than one. A quietly tragic pair of mother and daughter, which she just as quietly loathed. She wanted her daughter to be given the time to grow up, to live her own life and take over the Giglio Nero as Nona in time instead of in a mad scramble to secure things before it all fell apart.

Two out of three was as close as Luce could get from the options she had. Even then, a shorter lifespan than her own was what she was cursing Aria's fate with. She would only have enough time to keep things on track and conceive then birth Luce's granddaughter before her own end as the Arcobaleno Sky would come, after Yuni turned five. If there was eight, it would be shortly thereafter. If nine, Aria might be able to hold off until her daughter was six or seven.

Well before, when she didn't quite know the full situation, she secretly hated the individuals she would eventually come to know and omit the details from. They would come to hate her, so she figured fair was fair. She even spent a small period of time hating Checker Face, who she also knew as Kawahira from her ancestor's journals.

Renato Sinclair was the only one she had the range to actually see before she came to accept her fate in full. She only managed it once, and that was actually not too long ago.

The Giglio Nero Famiglia kept to themselves a lot, more so than most mafia families. Her line, and especially her ancestors, had no desire to pit themselves against other famiglie when they knew the outcome and which of their subordinates would end up dead from it. They were mostly intelligence brokers, useful to hide future knowledge behind with enough muscle to back up those spies when needed. That didn't require face-to-face meetings very much, and Vongola was enough of an old alliance they were exempt from the newer one as long as they kept supplying information.

Luce was not particularly willing to admit the fact the to-be Sun Arcobaleno was as handsome as she had 'seen' or the strength of his Sun Flames in person put a dent into her long-held bitterness to her fellow pre-Cursed Arcobalenos. What had caught her attention and made her somewhat ashamed of her unprovoked bitter feelings against the hitman and the others, was the tiny Mist child he had been herding into Vongola's territory with as much haste and security as he could muster up on demand.

That day she had been forced to accept that she wasn't the only one who would be losing important things in the quest to preserve the world they lived on. Reborn's godson, Lal Mirch's future fiancée or Colonello her in one way or another, Fon's last remaining blood relative, Skull's foster parents with the side possibility of his sisters if Sonya proved more than just stubborn, Viper's fellow Espers, Verde's… well, maybe not him. However, most of them had people they would be forced to give up for 'the sake of the world'.

Some of them would not regain those important connections if everything worked out for the so-called 'best', and Luce would still be stealing years from all of them to give to her granddaughter in the future. In hopes of ending the Arcobalenos' involvement in the Tri-Ni-Sette for good. In order to
prevent anyone from being stuck in the same position as she was, choosing between family and duty and the end of all things.

The Ottavia of the Giglio Nero did not come to hold the position she had at a young age without the ruthlessness to toss someone else under the bus if it came down to it. To lie and cheat her way in and out of dealing with other criminals just so her Famiglia had the upper hand. One could not see the future without seeing all the futures, good or bad.

She had picked this path for herself. The damages and hurt she would deal with full knowledge weighed on her heavily. She was a Sky, it would hurt even more before the end when she not only knew them but had come to like them for themselves.

However, it was also the best of horrible and worst options.

Even if they would end up hating her for it, Luce would still do everything she foresaw twice over if only just for one extra year for her daughter or two for her granddaughter. She might regret her actions, hate herself as much as the Arcobaleno would, but she had few alternatives to pick from.

Her network eventually spat out the name of the Mist boy, Shamal, in the process of ensuring what rumors were escaping Vongola's Iron Fort. In her visions he would become the doctor-assassin Trident Shamal, Reborn's best contact, in the hopes of keeping an eye on his godfather and when he'd break the mental blocks if the hitman went that way. The Mosquito Hitman if his godfather could come to terms with himself as a 'man out of time'.

It had been merely confirmation that she needed to start on her own end to build a better future. Aria's father was something she could and would pick for herself, at least. Pity about the hitman, but that way lay a can of worms even worse than what she was dabbling in now.

However, it was Shamal's surname that eventually found its way to her which was actually jarring enough it had jolted her out of her pessimistic loathing of her situation.

Nikishin. If her visions of the future that involved that name any were right, a variation of the Cloud stuntman's little sister's original name.

That had narrowed down which of the futures possible she was going to be dealing with. Free-will was very much a headache for those of her line but kept things from being too predictable and opening a path to be arrogant with their abilities.

Skull de Mort didn't always have his family in her visions. When he didn't, things were a bit rough for him in the beginnings and never did smooth out all the way. When he did, which settled his personality nicely to somewhat helpful if still pacifistic than just brash and sometimes hysterical passive-aggressive protest, things were both harder and easier on her.

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How would Colonello get by her, anyways? That part of the future wasn't hers to see, but she could've sworn he went to the thief in order to gain the same brief on Dying Will Flames Lal Mirch would. Something had happened, she knew that much from future mentions of the incident.

There were other things she couldn't quite confirm yet, there were three other inclusions in that knot
of previous connections possible. Fon was almost a given, but there was another… She'd know for sure the closer it came time for Kawahira to gather them up and saw their reactions to each other if mentioned before that.

Right now, what she needed to do in order to secure her daughter's survival as long as possible was getting to know the man who would become Reborn, the World's Greatest Hitman.

He scared her a little. She knew full well what she was doing would make the man hate her eventually. However, if she did it right, he would be attached to her daughter as a kind of uncle figure. Renato valued family connections above even his duty, and while he wasn't yet to the point he'd discard his pride for someone that saw him as part of theirs it also wasn't too far off that point.

Reborn wouldn't quite so much, but he'd respect prior ties to any famiglia of note even if he couldn't quite recall how people were attached to him.

Either way the hitman was skilled enough to ensure Aria would survive her rocky early years when she became too frail to aid her daughter. Even if he couldn't deal with Luce's future betrayal or the reduction of his person and what it meant for him both personally and professionally.

She took in a shaky breath as she sat her brush down on her armoire. Today was the day.

Luce would either be flattened by a boulder the last rebellious faction of her Famiglia would set in order to remove her as Giglio Nero's Ottavia and install someone else 'more sensible' of their own pick… or Renato would shatter the boulder and cement his tentative allegiance to her as a Sky. Then probably brutally murder a faction of her own Famiglia.

Some days, she abhorred getting out of bed.

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(Tuesday the 8th of April, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

The bookcase in Dimitry's office held only three actual books. There had been more, but the gemology and geology ones Tatiana gifted to Sonya over the years of their childhood had been taken down and moved to wherever Galina had put them.

Which left a copy of the bait-book, a dictionary, and the master research journal Dimitry had been left in command of. The rest were fancy blanks interposed with a few knickknacks from here and there.

The blank world atlas was on the same shelf as the various fake travel books, second shelf from the top. Sonya kept glancing at it even if she really should be more concerned with yelling at Fadei.

If she hadn't already had a good idea of how crazy or irrational a Sky's Rejection of a Flame user could turn them, this would certainly take the cake.

The so-called leader of the Four Rains had done exactly nothing for the past year. Plotting to take over her position maybe, but in terms of extending the reputation of Zolotov Flame users or even just making himself useful as a possible vor absolutely nothing. He had shown not even an inclination of realizing he had to get on with paying his own dues, when his fellow Rains had already secured their own.

She was privately bewildered that some six-year-old brat had twisted the Rain's head enough he was
this thickheaded. They likely wouldn't even be able to get a Sky out of it either, because Fadei had scared the brat off whatever it was he had done.

"if you would get off your ass and do something, I'd be able to LEAVE by now!" Sonya bit out at the man, irked and pissed off she might just have to kill him if nothing would jolt him out of his mental rut. "But because of your inactions, I wouldn't leave you in charge of a damn DOG much less this office IF I DIED TOMORROW!"

She was pretty sure the literary reference of 'a glimmer of madness' wasn't actually a thing. There was nothing obviously wrong with Fadei, other than his behavior. According to Gedeon, he was still an intelligent individual with a perchance for dark gallows humor when Sonya or Dimitry weren't brought up in conversation. Of course, since he flat out detested her as the personification of everything in his way, she had very little other than pure loathing aimed her way since she had met him.

Galina caught a little of that, since she was aiding and abetting her instead of helping Fadei along to 'his' Sky. She didn't seem greatly bothered by it at least.

In fact, her aid was as distracted by the bookcase as Sonya was. Between the Storm-Cloud and Sun, they had a bet for how long it would be until the Lightning would rip it apart for anything else the Rain had hidden there.

She looked to be losing that bet, alas.

"Fadei, since you seem to require a boot to the ass, GET OUT AND SOLVE THIS NOW." Hissed out the thief instead of addressing her assistant’s latest preoccupation. "Prove you have a brain for once, so we can at least get on with things."

The look in his eye that she did recognize was just sheer hatred. She could live with that, he was enough of a pain in the ass she hated him too. He didn't bother giving her anything more than a barely there nod, twisting on his heels and leaving the borrowed office as quick as humanly possible.

She sighed heavily as the office door slammed shut. "Galina, leave it. We have a different meeting to go to."

Slotting the book she had almost pulled out back into its place by the broken geode, the Lightning huffed. "Now what? I thought that was it for things we had to do. And don't you have to go see the Storms today?"

"Yes, but… something came up last night that you might want to hear about from me."

Curious, the brunette followed her out of the Rain's office. She got a lot less curious and more hesitant when she realized where the thief was going. "The Pahkan's office? Sonya?"

"They are expecting us." She had been getting called in way too much, if the guard outside of it knew her by sight and didn't need a prompting to pull the office doors open for her.

Gedeon had tackled informing his old man, as well as Arseniy, Pyotr, and the three remaining of the Four Rains what Dimitry had hid in his office before his arrest. That was what Sonya and Galina walked into.

The report itself, in the Inverted Rain's cramped messy scrawl, was being owlishly peered at by Milos through gold-rimmed reading glasses. Her foster father looked as blank as Pyotr was, which meant it was probably up to the younger generation to handle the problem. Gedeon's expression was a bit harried, but that was more likely to do with the badgering Zarya was subjecting him to on what
'Discordant' and 'Sky Rejection' really meant.

As if the Sun had been lying for whatever reason. She did not have the pull over their *Pahkan’s* son to get that kind of a favor on something that would become a semi-known problem in enough time.

"At the surface, it means he's no longer Classical but Inverted." Sonya bit out, saving Gedeon from the nth repetition of however many times what little they knew of the Flame-born issue. "Deeper than that, it means something in his personality has changed, most likely for the worst. Was he ever one to put things off? Pick a fight where there wasn’t one? Ignore his responsibilities? Yet that is exactly what he's doing, and for what? Do you even really know what he's after?"

The redhead and red eyed Rain whirled on her with a semi-impressive sneer. "So what, is this your bid to remove our leader? Slandering his name, his character, however you may?"

"It is not his fault." Mainly, the thief tacked on in her head. She wasn't generous to absolve him of everything. Fadei was still rational on occasion, he had the opportunity and option to realize there might be something wrong and seek help. That he didn't was his own fault, the pieces were *there* to be found. "It is a phenomenon we still do not fully understand, which Dimitry had hopes he would overcome in time."

"Which he hasn't." Gedeon offered a bit more gently than she bothered, re-drawing the Rains' attention to him. "Even you all cannot reason away this last incident. Aside Sonya's supposed… vendetta against him, what would you name as his reasoning to forgo even meeting the minimal requirements for his dues? Ignoring that he had to pay them at all?"

…Sonya had a vendetta?

News to her, frankly.

"Explain why Fadei was passed over, when Dimitry was arrested!" Kazimir near-shouted a touch desperately. "Tell me that makes no sense. Where did she even come from?"

"Me." Arseniy spoke up and startled the hell out of the three Rains. "Sonya is my daughter, who taught your boy Dimitry how to even use his Rain Flames. I put her in charge, since I knew she knew how to run things."

"I told Fadei that almost a year ago." She tacked on quietly. "As well as why I would greatly prefer it if he could boot my, and I quote, 'tiny ass out'. I am a thief, not a politician, and would have agreed to hand over my duties if he showed he could handle them."

Milos let the papers he was squinting at fall to his desk, which worked better than any loud noise to get everyone to shut up and pay attention. The old man glanced from his son to his *Sovintnik*, to Arseniy and then her. "Is he dead weight?"

"…not as of yet." Sonya hedged a little, if only to get the remaining Three Rains from staring at her fearfully. "He has to be prompted but is still functioning as a thief."

"Will he become so?"

"I do not have that information."

"You do not have a lot of information, Bazanova." Old man Zolotov observed evenly.

"It's because I do not. *Pahkan*, there is little in any information on Skies and what their Flames can do outside of their tight knit circles. Part of the reason we were watching the tiny family of one was
to gain that knowledge. Now we know Discord is a fate anyone that suffers Sky Rejection might face. I could ask foreign Skies about it, but the cost…"

"No, I think you will not do that." Milos threaded his knobby fingers together and set them before him on his desk. "Is it fixable?"

"According to what little I know… there is nothing to fix, Pahkan."

"Could you be wrong?"

"Yes, which is why I am more inclined to say I do not know than answer."

"Intelligent of you." Dismissing the Storm-Cloud for a moment, the old man eyed each of the Rains left then his son. "Gedeon, how would you fix this?"

"Easiest way to do so would be removing Fadei entirely." He reluctantly concluded, ignoring the various betrayed looks shot at him. "The damage that would do will eventually heal in time. Next best solution would be to task Sonya with figuring out if there is anything to do using her connections, but that would free Fadei to continue sowing trouble in the meantime regardless of the answer she arrives at."

Oh look, they were admitting she did have connections. Fong's Triad had probably requested a few people be tested for Flame focuses pretty quickly.

"Which I have already ruled out."

Gedeon bowed his head to show he accepted that mandate from his father. "Lastly, we could put Fadei in charge temporarily to see if gaining his obsession would settle him. Unfortunately, that would mean it is highly likely he would go after the young possible-Sky that rejected him and started this mess."

"No… we're not doing that either." Decided Milos, then he turned his attention back to the most senior member of the office handling his clan’s interests in Dying Will Flame users. "Bazanova, are you responsible for him?"

Sonya really had nothing else to answer that with. "Since I did take Dimitry on, and he is not in the position to do it himself, yes."

Galina was watching the Rains' reactions, so she didn't have to do it.

"Good. Kill him. We cannot afford internal strife, not even now you have found us a loophole to stave off any more attempts to spark a war."

"I request a stay of execution."

That had everyone in the office looking at her strangely.

"Oh?" Milos did not particularly look amused. "Why? I would have thought you would delight in removing a thorn in your side."

Sonya didn't actually know what she felt about this specific order. Disgusted, maybe? "I have a visiting slot with Dimitry coming up next week, I would like for the Rains to gain a bit of closure before I remove the option entirely."

Zarya looked desperately at Kazimir, who merely pressed his mouth into a thin line. It was Irinei
who sighed and answered the obvious question. "We... would appreciate it, Pahkan."

Obviously, none of the three were very happy about how this had gone. It would be more accurate to say they were as angry as possible even if they were Rains. The Storm-Cloud wasn't even sure why she was doing this, other than the fact they had a bond of a type that she had with Cherep.

"I would expect you all to keep your mouths shut." Observed old man Zolotov in a very reasonable tone that made her hate him a little. "Otherwise... by the end of the month, Bazanova."

"Of course, Pahkan." Sonya agreed blankly, giving the man a nod and walking out of the office with Galina close on her heels. They waited for the other Flame users of the Zolotov clan, even if she really did want to wander off with her father after the man gave her a quick squeeze to one shoulder when he passed the two of them on his way out.

Zarya looked a fit to be tied when she spotted the Storm-Cloud waiting for them. "Are you happy now?"

"I am rarely if ever happy." She still didn't quite know what she felt about her orders. Instead of getting into a cat fight with the female Rain Sonya addressed the other two. "You can safely hate me, you already do."

Kazimir seemed to entirely agree with that estimation of the situation. "Easy enough, come on Zarya."

Irinei loitered until they were a decent amount of space away. "But we can't hate Gedeon, is that it?"

The vor sighed and answered for himself. "Likely father would've ordered Sonya to do it anyways. No, I think her point is that you shouldn't hate Dimitry."

"He did give Fadei every opportunity to salvage himself." Agreed the thief blandly as she could. "I was merely the last option in that attempt."

"Come on, Irinei!"

Absently shrugging a bit more than listlessly, the Rain moved past them to follow his two fellows.

"I thought you said you could do this without blood."

"I was operating under the assumption my opponent was sane." Sonya defended herself probably a touch harshly. "Not possibly crazy or practically insane."

Gedeon looked at her skeptically. "So now what?"

"...Fadei is about to have an unfortunate accident on his way back." A week or so was a decent amount of time for a heist, of which he might come back early if he was that obsessed. Usov was keeping track of the man for her and would warn her when he was about to return. If he fucked up... she'd think of something.

"If you use your weapons, or your Flames, everyone will know."

"And why would that be such a bad thing?"

Her initial answer was a huff, a very sarcastic one. "With what the Rains have been spreading about you?"

"Oh, that's right. I forgot they were hypocritical enough to accuse me of what they had been doing
"all along."

"To be fair," Gedeon pointed out blandly, moving off to leave the floor, "Fadei might have really believed what he said."

Sonya was pretty sure her expression could be called 'highly unimpressed' as the vor left them.

"...Sonya?"

"I'm not going to ask you to do it." She reassured her Lightning tiredly. "Just because I don't use them doesn't mean I can't use a gun."

Tatiana had taught her to shoot, actually.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 8th of April, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

She had forgotten about Mikhail.

Too bad she couldn't go back to forgetting about him.

Sixteen and arrogant enough it made her want to punch him just as a matter of fact, Mikhail was the one in charge of the Storms and how they developed. He had 'taken over' the abandoned construction site by force, kicking the small gang of kids that had been using it a a play fort of a type. Which, while it was decently protected and expendable enough for Storms to practice their Flames within, made her not quite impressed with him as what Fadei managed when he was still sane enough.

The moment she was spotted, a cry quickly went up and was silenced from the fenced off area.

She did not need Galina's under-her-breath sarcastic commentary to figure out what was going on.

Mikhail had met her near the entrance to his 'domain', had attempted to bar her way at first but when she bodily moved him out of her path settled for lecturing what she was and was not allowed to do. She could ask how they were progressing, but couldn't ask how they liked it, his methods, or what they wanted to learn.

Sonya lasted until they were in sight of the gaggle of Storm then her temper snapped, and she punched him. A quick haymaker to the jaw laid out the second eldest Storm in the dirt and out of her hair.

He would live… but probably not live it down.

She left it at that, while the Four Rains and their thorniness in her side would be solved in a bit of time making a solid enemy out of Mikhail before it was over was just stupid. What Galina did or did not do to show her own displeasure was ignored.

The thief might claim the Lightning, but she was a grown woman and was responsible for her own actions.

The kids, while torn on if they were impressed with her knocking out their nominal leader or not, were obviously apprehensive about the Storm-Cloud's presence. It didn't take a genius to realize the slander the elder Rains had been spreading had reached and taken root here as well.
Opting to ignore it, there was little she could do but provide the evidence she wasn't some power-hungry bitch and let them make their own assumptions, Sonya Disintegrated herself a seat in a half-removed concrete wall. There weren't really any other options for seating, the kids had made a decent dent in Disintegrating the abandoned concrete and steel pylons left out to rot.

Settling herself, and her paperwork, on the chalky fake-rock took a few minutes. Which mostly let her pull the roster of Storms to the top so she could mark it.

The next eldest Storm's name was Yegor, but she didn't know the Storms well enough to pick out the kid. "Are we missing anyone?"

There were a few quick shakes of various heads, which told her they didn't know who was supposed to be in charge if Mikhail was out for whatever reason and she was still intimidating.

"Mmm... alright then. Anything you know now you wish you were told when you started?"

Sonya listed down the few timid suggestions that encouraged the bolder ones to volunteer information of their own as Galina delicately picked her way across gravel impregnated soil over to where she was sitting. It was thankfully warm enough out she didn't have to repeatedly warm her fingers up between items, but the air was still a little brisk.

Why 'do not wear something valuable when using Storm Flames' wasn't a common-sense thing she had no idea. It would explain why some of the brats were a little raggedly dressed, if they were wearing things they would not mind losing if something went wrong.

"I did that too," she admitted when things stalled on that point, "I lost a coat, in the middle of winter."

"Will they be replaced?" One of the girls, a fellow blonde, asked curiously. "I rather liked my skirt, but the hole I put through it..."

"Did Mikhail not keep records?"

"Only for the boys." She replied disgustedly, flicking her long hair behind her in one smooth gesture. "Dunya... err, Avdotya? She kept records when he refused to."

Sonya figured she should've expected that, regardless of what Dimitry told the pure Storm. "Give them to Galina, we'll replace them."

"Aren't you a Storm?" A kid she tentatively identified as Rasim asked from the 'male' side of the gathering. Slightly of the older few Storms, with pitch black hair and green eyes. "Why aren't you training us?"

"Storm-Cloud, actually. Unfortunately, I don't have the time. I have been pulled to handle the office work while here." Deciding that telling the kid that she likely wouldn't have visited otherwise wasn't a good idea, or at least she thought so. "Speaking of, if... Mikhail's methods are objectionable, or another issue comes up where he refuses to do something for the girls that he's doing for the boys, you may send someone in to talk to me. I'll... talk to him."

Almost under the sudden spate of mutters there was a scoff and a slightly louder utterance of 'why bother' from one of the brats in the far back. He apparently didn't mean to be overheard, by the red flush that went up his neck under Sonya's eyes.

"Because we do not have the numbers to support sexism. There will be just as many girls as boys until things finally get settled and even then you may find a girl is simply better at something than..."
you or your friends until things are." She blinked, which finally let the little brat tear his gaze away from her, and looked over the knot of Storms. "Any other non-topic related questions?"

A hand was raised, which earned the poor kid a few snickers and a couple catcalls of being a teacher's pet. Said kid, giving his fellows a dirty look for their behavior, pressed a set of rather scuffed glasses higher up his nose. "If you are two Flame types, aren't you weaker than Mikhail?"

Galina snorted, looking back at the still insensible Storm in question.

The thief gave her a quelling look when that caused the kid to flinch. "It's a fair question, how else would he learn but by asking? To answer your question, yes and no. Frankly, I am three types and it seems my will is split between them if I use two. Two I can use, one I can't. But that last one, my Sun Flames, gives me more efficiency than most. So I am more efficient and have tighter control, because I needed less Storm than Mikhail ever had at once. Now, knowing that, who's stronger?"

"Wouldn't he be, then?" Glasses asked aloud, only to be punched in the shoulder by one of the girls she didn't know enough about to guess a name for.

"You add destruction to destruction and you still only get destruction, Senya." Sniffed the punch-happy girl. "He's the one laid out while she's not."

"That means she's just smarter, or sneakier."

"Evidence still proves my point!"

"Enough." Sonya cut off the next brat before a brawl could take place. "Back to the point, please. Anything else you all wish you were told before starting?"

Storms were argumentative little sots, herself included. If she didn't watch it, there would be a full out war between the male and female Storm users right in the middle of this dusty and abandoned construction lot.

Maybe she should cut Mikhail a bit of slack. Then again they didn't really get along very well themselves, so he should've known that going in. She might just dislike him because he was a sexist little asshole, and he might dislike her because she was higher ranking and a girl, but they might just be excuses to loathe each other.

She got a varying amount of 'no's, some confident and some not. Recognizing the pattern for what it was, the Suns did that too, the Storm-Cloud moved to the next point. "In the process of sorting out what else can be done with Storm Flames, I've found that if you utilize them internally you eventually become immune to most everything."

"What does that even mean?" One of the brasher girls, who had looked perfectly willing to throw a punch for her little friend insisting Sonya was stronger than their male instructor, asked in a bewildered tone.

"I use my Storm Flames to prevent getting sick when working in other countries. It also now means I'm immune to medical anesthesia, alcohol, and probably poisons."

"I'll take that in exchange for never getting sick again." She insisted brightly once she had a moment to process that. "Who wants that yucky beer anyways?"

"I'm not sure if I can never get sick, just that I don't if I have my Storm Flames." Sonya amended a bit quickly. She hated not being able to get drunk anymore. "If you want to learn, you need to justify why to me before I teach anyone."
…if she drained her Storm Flames, *could* she get drunk like she once had to do to her Cloud in order to get a work out? Did using either drain both her Flames?

The thief made a note to investigate that. Even if the Rains ended up being a headache and a half, she was already more than pleased with the things she had learned with this.

"*Moving on, anything in particular you all would like to say about Mikhail's methods? Since,*" she glanced back at the individual in question who was only just coming around from her punch, "*he specifically tried to tell me I couldn't ask?*"

(ooo000ooo)

**(Tuesday the 8th of April, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.**)

"*I'll do the Rains when I get back.*"

Especially since this weekend was the slot she had gotten to visit Dimitry within, and the three salvageable Rains would be using that to independently confirm the necessity of her actions.

Sonya had to buy a gun, too.

"*…alright.*" Was Galina's distracted reply from her borrowed spot behind the desk, still paging through the few pieces of long misfiled paperwork that would probably see her attempting to brutalize the Rain when he got back. "*Usov and I have finished passing on what the Vindice have on Flame users.*"

In other news, Sonya did win that bet. She put money on her getting her hands on any paperwork left in random books within twenty-four hours. Entirely depressing and disgusting meetings with their ultimate boss aside, she *had* ripped into the bookcase the very moment she could last night.

Of course, that meant she only now was able to read what paperwork she had found.

Gedeon winced slightly. "*Erm, I've passed it on to the Suns too.*"

Eyeing him strangely, the thief waited for either an explanation for the flinch or if he would tell her to ignore it. That he flushed slightly and fidgeted when her stare attracted even a highly distracted Lightning's attention.

"*I didn't know…*"

"*Know what?*"

"*…had we let the situation with the Grekov Gang and the Novgorod Brotherhood go on, the Vindice would've-*"

"*None of us knew that.*" Sonya cut him off a bit exasperatedly. "*Furthermore, all our Flame users would've been mostly trainees. There was me, Tats, Galina, and maybe Dimitry would've still counted but that's not really something I can say with certainty. Maybe the Four Rains. My sister and I weren't here, so we might not have counted. You want to play a 'what if' game? What if the kids hadn't counted either?*"

Gedeon didn't quite subside at that. "*What if they had? I thought-*"

"*You did what you had to do.*" She cut him off again before he could articulate his second guessing
aloud. "You had limited information and a very real threat. I was not very appreciative, I am still not to be honest. But my job is to find valuable things and horde it to be sold to the highest bidder, and you gave that away. Your job is... what? Learn of anything new or interesting that might help your father? Be a sounding board?"

"Something like that."

The thief decided to try a different track. "Why, exactly, is this coming up now?"

The expression that passed over the vor's face was an interesting mix of chagrin and disgust.

"The Wo Hop To Triad paid us a visit yesterday." Galina chipped in for him, sorting her pile of papers one last time then pulling the letter in Middle French to try translating for her. "Three guesses for what they either directly or indirectly confirmed, Sonya."

...Fong had visited two weeks ago. Not a bad turnaround, if the negotiations were already started. "And?"

"From what I heard? They gushed over a syndicate that held a Cloud's loyalty. Especially since their attempts to gain your attention took so long for one of their best to accomplish."

Sonya couldn't help the face she pulled at her assistant's words. Perfect.

She hated it when she ran into the dregs or remains of some other Cloud's actions.

"What's the damage?"

Galina laughed, wickedly smirking at the disgruntled Sun. "Oh... it's nothing bad, just... a little awkward for poor Gedeon. There was a lot of 'and she hasn't killed you all yet?' being tossed around."

Even better, she was left with the reputation a very touchy Cloud had left behind.

"It wasn't that bad." Gedeon interjected a bit more than huffily. "Just... eye opening."

Giving the sulking Sun a patronizing smile, the Lightning turned to the still mostly wary thief with the air of someone conveying a tasty bit of gossip. "They mostly wanted to know whose brilliant idea it was to conceal you behind a thief's façade, since everyone knows Clouds are more soldier-types than support. Apparently, the way you pulled off being a small fish in a pond when you were really a shark is very... awe inspiring."

Nodding at Sonya's skeptical look, she bent over the papers she had to start in on translating it as she continued.

"The fact you are a good thief practically blew the poor man's mind. There were a few too many to be subtle inquiries if you were single, and how content you were here. Additionally, your foster father was very angry at the end of the meeting."

"And?" Repeated the thief with even more exasperation. While kind of creepy to know, and a little weird someone would ask that without so much as seeing her in person first, that still answered exactly zero of her questions.

With a huff, of what sounded like laughter, the Lightning paused in her work and pulled herself upright a bit. "How often would you say Gedeon and his father irritate you?"
"A lot." Sonya answered impatiently. "Why?"

"They just had someone, who didn't even bother keeping his aims to himself, trying to sound them out for how easily it might be to get you to jump ship." Galina pointed out bluntly, ignoring the face Gedeon was pulling at her. "Who then reminded them you are one of those Clouds that can go off the deep end messily, and they haven't been particularly nice about managing you here."

"So… what? Are they worried I'd defect or something?" Sonya's head hurt. Why the hell couldn't anyone just say what was going on?

Details were nice and all, but right now it was just confusing her.

"Summed up, yes."

"Not… well, yes but…" Gedeon's expression said he shared at least a little of her pain at the moment. "Just, maybe we haven't been considering some of what you've said as hard as we should have."

"…are you saying I was lying?"

"No, just that you might not have had the experience or range to understand how what happens outside the Soviet Union would translate to within."

Under her entirely unimpressed eye, the vor made a throwing away gesture and slumped back into the couch he had mostly taken over when he visited.

"Not like that… I mean…"

"Gedeon… I've been working for Mafia Land for almost a decade. What does my age have to do with anything, especially when paired against my long-standing experience?"

He kept his mouth shut.

Sonya glanced at Galina, who gave an unhelpful shrug.

"Right… I'm going to go visit my parents then my sister. You… figure out how to phrase whatever that was in a coherent manner."

Hopefully, when she got back, things would make more sense.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 8th of April, 1969 continued. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Lisa eyed her strangely. "You were intimidated?"

"No, it was the best I could come up with at the moment. I was… weirded out? It was strange." Sonya probably should've had this conversation with her mother months ago, but she kept forgetting. "But what other reason is there to get into someone else's personal space like that?"

"Like what, sweetie? You need to be a bit more descriptive."

Huffing, she abandoned her teacup and gestured to the older woman. "Stand up, I'll show you."

It took a bit of shuffling, and an awkward use of one of the living room's corners, for her to pose them both in a mockup of how Renato had used two walls and himself to corner her.
"This?"

"Yes. He said it wasn't intimidation, but what else could it be?" Sonya was pretty damn sure the situation was still greatly off, she wasn't taller than Lisa nor could she pull off Renato's almost effortless airs. It was the closest she could get, however.

Her foster mother had a strangely amused look on her face. "What did you do in return?"

"Planted a hand on his chest and pushed." When she pressed gently against Sonya's sternum, the younger woman obligingly backed up. "Lisa?"

"Mmhmm… he wasn't trying to intimidate you." She shook her head before the Storm-Cloud could then ask what it was. "I think you have to figure that out yourself, sweetie. Although I am pleased to hear you got yourself out of that situation when it disturbed you and he respected that rejection."

With a sigh, she accepted that and slunk back over to their cooling tea set out on the coffee table. Wondering if Tatiana would give a different opinion or if she had to really muddle through it all on her own.

"Now… although I am aware this is more than a little late, Sonya? What do you want out of life?"

She paused, cup halfway to her lips as she shot her mother a sideways look. "What brought this up? And now?"

"I didn't like where I was when I was your age." Lisa admitted candidly as she refreshed the tea in their cups. "It occurred to me a little while ago that you might be having similar issues with where you are."

"...I don't hate it, but I also don't really like it." Sonya admitted slowly, opting to stare at the steaming dark liquid in her hands than the other woman. "Which is fine, it's temporary. I do kind of like taking contracts for Mafia Land… did I ever thank you for taking us there?"

She smiled softly at her. "You don't have to, but you are welcome. Even if Cherep didn't like it much."

"Cherep's a dork." Dismissed the thief absently. "And at least he tried it, so the next few visits didn't paint him as painfully green or out of place."

"Well… yes. But we're not talking about your brother right now, sweetie."

With a sigh, she turned her attention to the question posed to her. "To be blunt, I don't know."

She was alive, wasn't that enough? Sonya could live and see things. Travel, learn interesting facts or skills, and meet people even if she didn't really like very many. When she had memories of being murdered, and yet woke up?

As for what she would like… she'd like it if Cherep didn't have to worry about someone going after him for his undying skills. If Tatiana didn't have to deal with sexist assholes when trying to develop her nurse and doctor skills. Maybe to spend a little time with Shamal without having to wonder if the reverse of Sky Rejection might be possible and could drive the poor brat a bit around the bend too.

He was a Mist, from the look of Usov he wouldn't need the help.

The Storm-Cloud looked at the woman that raised her. "Would 'I want people to be less stupid' be a good option?"
"No, nice answer though." Lisa cheerfully shot her down with a broader and fond smile. "Think hard, Sonya. I really would like to know if I can help you or not. Your siblings, well... all of them that are grown anyways, are well on their way to achieving their own goals. Yet here you are, sulking about at the whims of others to afford them that leeway."

"...I want a challenge." Sonya settled on after a few moments of deliberation. "I mean... I did a heist for Mafia Land that was outside of my usual. It was last second, hard, unwieldy, and totally off the wall. But I did it. Flawlessly. I want a challenge like that again."

A nod was her first answer, then her foster mother leaned back in her armchair to ponder her request for the time it took them to empty the pot. "...Sonya, why don't you steal things when you're here?"

"Do we need anything?"

"Sweetie, I mean steal things from highly guarded or very secure locations just to see if you can." Lisa elaborated with a laugh. "You don't need a contract to steal things. You can do your own heists even if you're stuck behind a desk some days of the week."

...right, she could do that.

"You could even change it up a little and steal information instead of jewelry. Books for your own reading habits, anything really."

"Wouldn't that clutter up whatever storage options we have?"

"Not entirely. You could just practice breaking in and out of different locations as well. Scout it out, find something to steal that will either be not or greatly missed, and steal it one night. As long as we have some idea of what is going to be taken, we can always absorb more things to sell."

The thief pondered on why she hadn't thought of that herself. Too used to being told what to do, probably.

"It's a decent short-term goal, I suppose." Her foster mother decided, straightening up the tea service they were using. "I would like to hear a long-term one out of you sometime soon. Figure out if you really like teaching, or if you want to become the best thief in the world or have the largest library in the Soviet Union. Something."

"...can I take the last option anyways? Even if it's not a life goal?"

Laughing wryly, Lisa flicked one fine-boned hand to convey her permission. "Oh... excuse me. What I'm worried about, sweetie, is that our training you to be a thief made you think that was all you could be."

"But... I'm a good thief."

"Of course you are." She agreed immediately with a nod. "But that's not all you are."

"...I am also a Storm-Cloud?"

A sigh informed her she was a little off from whatever her mother was searching for. "You are that Shamal child's mamma, are you not? You are Tatiana's, Cherep's, and Valera's sister. You are my daughter. See what I mean? Outside of being a thief, outside of being family to a few people, what are you?"

How did Renato put it?
A 'Dying Will Flames expert'. An author, even if that was more on a technicality than by design. Björn's patron and Crina's ex-apprentice. Those were more obligations than things she liked to do, so probably not what her foster mother was driving at.

What did Sonya like to do most days?

She read or stole things. Books were more of an addiction than something she defined herself by, and stealing was out as a life-goal apparently. Took tea/coffee with Renato, but that was a rare thing nowadays. She had one spar with Fong but was looking forward to another.

Recently, she had been… "...I want to be a mafia historian."

Lisa blinked at her. To be fair, the younger woman was just as surprised as she was by what came out of her own mouth.

While interesting to poke at the places where the mafia world and civilian worlds crossed, getting the history of such interactions out of either highly suspicious or wary individuals who may or may not even be alive anymore might be a headache. She had enough as it was, why would she add to that?

Talk about near-impossible goals. Why did she do this to herself?

"That's... a tall order. Not... entirely impossible, but very tricky." The older woman offered delicately, a faint crease showing up between her brows. "Is that all?"

"The World's Greatest Thief?"

"...your childhood goal? Okay, why not?" Lisa stood up, picking up the tray with the pot and cups stacked on it with a distracted air. "I forgot I was talking to the difficult one."

"Hey..." That wasn't very nice, Sonya almost felt insulted.

She wasn't difficult, that was Cherep. At least she could defend herself in a pinch.

Just because she had a lot of things she had to do and a few things she wanted to do didn't make her difficult. Boring, maybe. Duty-bound?

She got distracted by that point, absently noting Arseniy was back with Valera from wherever they had gone.

What did she want in this second shot at life?

Covering for Dimitry wasn't it, so it likely wasn't the job she arranged the Inverted Rain to have. Heists were interesting rarely, and she wasn't at the point Mafia Land would toss more her way just yet. Reading was more of a time waster now, even if she was highly protective of her books. While history was kind of interesting, a mafia historian would be... tricky.

Then again, she had wanted a challenge. Like keeping Skull de Mort safe from the mafia wouldn't be challenging enough in the coming years.

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(Wednesday the 9th of April, 1969. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

"Are you sure about this? "
"Nope!" Tatiana brought around the tray of various liquids, parking it next to the medical bed Sonya had obligingly laid herself out on. "The problem with you being oh-so-Stormy is that we have next to no way to tell if anything will work without clinical trials. So just sit back and relax as we poke you full of holes and try to find something that can knock you out."

Her little sister eyed the line of needles already full with different solutions. "...I think you're enjoying this way too much."

"Miss Bazanova, Nurse Primakova? English please, if you've forgotten." Doctor Kappel informed them both without even bothering to turn around from his desk. "We are recording this."

The younger thief sighed, which made her older sister smother a smirk.

In all actuality, Tatiana was a little worried. Sonya's possible immunity to poisons like alcohol and maybe even viruses was all well and good, but that was probably only when she had the Storm Flames to spare for it. If they couldn't find some way around the unexpected development of internal applications of Storm Flames, she was screwed if she ever got sick after a nasty fight.

Especially if they couldn't give her booster shots or vaccinations anymore.

The Sun nurse was ignoring the odds of the Storm-Cloud ever getting in over her head and draining herself dry in risky situations. Her little sister might be a careful sort most of the time, but she did still have a temper that could and would explode when tweaked just right.

It could happen, best have a few options prepared before that.

"Sorry doctor, testing general anesthesia first." Plucking the mask off the tank to Sonya's left, Tatiana grinned brightly at her sister's deadpan expression as she fitted it on her. "Entonox. Dosage should be in effect in thirty seconds after my mark. Mark."

As she cracked open the tank, the utter brat that was her sister cracked open a book.

Counting down the thirty seconds, she was almost unsurprised when her hand didn't even waver under the slight weight by even a tiny bit.

Once she hit zero, Tatiana sealed the tank of Entonox and pulled the breathing mask off Sonya's face. "Patient is still conscious."

"Unfortunately." Said patient agreed for herself absently as she marked her place.

Well... they had known she would have some kind of immunity going in. Confirmation was just... depressing, decided the Sun. A good thing Sonya questioned everything and wondered about the effects, because learning that mid-life saving surgery would've been bad.

Kappel paused in listing down the procedure and written transcript they had decided upon making for this test, turning around on his swivel chair to run the willing Storm-Cloud through another reflex test. After being poked and prodded, and a light shone in her eyes, he sighed himself. "No visible decrease in response times. Nurse, start the next test in five minutes if nothing changes."

"A whole day of trying to drug my little sister to the gills. I love my life." Tatiana marveled as she seated herself on Sonya's bedside.

"Hooray for you." A flick of a finger had a page turning without her needing to bother raising her other hand. "Speaking of, while home I had an idea. Couldn't I just drain my Storm Flames before getting shots?"
"Can you?" She countered curiously. "I mean, I know you have difficulties getting your Cloud Flames low enough you can get some exercise. Wouldn't it be just as hard to drain off your Storm?"

"I'm not as… practiced? With my Storm as my Cloud." Answered her baby sister thoughtfully. "It might be easier. It is entirely possible I could drain or shift my Flames to be purely Cloud in time, so my Storm would not be affecting everything I take."

"A decent second or third trial possibility." Interjected Kappel, having returned to scribbling away on his desk. "If no results are found this time around, that may be an avenue of investigation."

"…how many more of these are there?"

Tatiana hummed as she checked on the next general anesthesia they were going to be testing her immunity with. "Well… there are several options, and several combinations of those options, and a few additives to certain options. You didn't have anything else planned for today, did you?"

Sonya eyed the IV she was preparing worriedly. "…um… Tats?"

Uncapping the needle, the nurse gave her little sister a smirk. "Yes?"

"…have I told you I love you lately? You love me, right? You would not take advantage of my current… uh, difficulties, would you?"

"Nya, sweetie, shut up and take it like a woman."

Kappel coughed delicately. "Ladies, the recording?"

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 9th of April, 1969 continued. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Romanov Pyotr did not put his face in his hands, sigh, or roll his eyes. Even if he was the Sovintnik to Zolotov Milos' Pahkan, the fact that restraint felt like some kind of accomplishment probably meant he was getting too old for his position.

Way, way back in the day he should have told Milos to stuff it. A clan of thieves stealing and hoarding their goods in one place?

More like a den of drama queens. They weren't particularly any more violent than other vory, which was a blessing in a way. However, the gossip that got around…

"Primakova…" the vor sighed at the woman giving him a sweet smile, standing as bold as brass in the middle of his office, "Elisaveta, you know as well as I do-

"That my youngest daughter is an asset where she is." Interrupted the mother of the girl in question, crossing her arms under her chest. "And that I would know her better than most about her. Couldn't you at least consider it?"

Pyotr gave her a slight frown. He had known her and her lover since they were children, with scuffed knees, elbows, and the barest amounts of the skill or grace either had grown up to possess. He still remembered how devastated Lisa had been to learn of her inability to have children, her 'running away' to Mafia Land and what Arseniy had to do to drag her back.

The fact she even had a child at all?
Using her foster children's investigations into Dying Will Flames, no less. Practically a miracle, and still wasn't just happy with that. Here she was demanding one from him now.

With a harrumph, the elderly man leaned back in his office chair.

Pyotr wasn't as financially minded as Milos was, ironically. Keeping the books for even a criminal enterprise was no light duty and being cooped up in an office all day did take a physical toll on him all these years later. He didn't get out of his office much, but he also didn't particularly care to much anymore.

That also meant he had a better idea than most of the state of funds within the clan.

Lisa's younger foster daughter had practically financed half of the living situations of the newest crop of orphans and foundlings unknowingly. The gross excess from her jewel finding had still spilled over even with young Galina's attempts to reroute some of it to finance their own projects. A lot of gems and precious metals still sold no matter where they were acquired.

The damn girl had even dumped eight bars of high purity gold and silver on him at the same time. Not just the little troy ounce bars, the full-sized bullion bars. How in the nine hells the girl got a hold on something like that still befuddled him. She overpaid, but never bothered to check to see if she was good or not on her dues and take back the remainder.

With young Sonya stuck behind a desk as much as he was, she wasn't contributing anything to the clan's coffers. Oh... they had her dues, for both herself and that foreigner boy she took on, but that was really little more than a fraction of what she could pull in.

"What exactly are you suggesting?" Pyotr settled on as he straightened up to run his eyes over the figures he was supposed to be checking, deciding hearing her out wouldn't harm anything.

"Sonya's used to being contracted, or even at least told, what is needed. She also wants a challenge." She smiled even more sweetly, as if she had already won. "So considerate, isn't she? But she won't steal anything if she's not sure we can absorb whatever. Tell her what the clan may need."

Lisa probably had won, the elderly vor mused sourly.

Even if her youngest daughter decided to drown him in excess as she had young Dimitry when something was asked of her, Pyotr could still use just about anything.

They were getting more attention, which was both good and bad. More business, in that dratted Flame thing her foster daughters were caught up in, and more scrutiny.

He might be putting more and more away into the Obshchak funds just in case, but they also needed more and more ruble to handle the influx of those joining the clan and outfitting them appropriately. Land wasn't cheap, nor was proper housing for their members. Clothing, food, and weapons made their own dents in the funds. More was needed to afford the lawyers for those that got arrested to ensure things were done properly, even more to appropriately decorate their headquarters so any visitors would not assume they were worse off than they were.

"My daughter is bored, restless, and aimless." Lisa informed him as if that had not been apparent to almost everyone. "Since she is stuck here for the time being give her something to do, before she finds something you would not like."

"And why does she not find her own work?"

"I just told you, she's too considerate. The clan and her father told her she was needed, she'll remain..."
close until that is no longer true. You tell her you need something, she'd take it with both hands if only for a small break."

Milos would not be happy if he learned of this when he needed something from the girl… but wasn't she also training that young boy of his to do it?

Young Gedeon was probably a bit spoiled, but he had a decent head on his shoulders more often than not.

Pyotr sighed heavily again, slumping back into his chair and giving up on his figures for the moment. "Elisaveta, you are a pain."

She had the gall to keep on smiling at him. "You know you love me, father."

"Not your father, girl."

"You raised me." Lisa shrugged that off. "Speaking of, grandpa, the children might be interested to at least meet you outside of this office."

"I'll think about it."

"You've said that at least fifty times now. I didn't mind when it was just the girls and Cherep, they're in the same situation as we were and it might have been a bit more than awkward when they were still settling in, but Valera?"

"How, exactly, did his foster daughter end up such a manipulative little beast of a woman? "…I'll think about it."

"This Christmas, or I'll have Arseniy abduct you out of this office."

Snorting, Pyotr bent to his daily tasks again. "Still using him to do your dirty work?"

"Of course, we've been trading off things like that for years." Lisa's smile twisted into a smirk. "Of course, the dirty work I do for him tends to be a lot more interesting."

"Girl, I do not want to know."
"So... what are you going to do about it?" Her sister asked the moment she finished prying the last of what she knew of the clan's state of affairs out of her.

Sonya nibbled on the lunch Tatiana had made them while she did said prying. "...mmm, not really sure. Obviously, I have to..."

"But?"

"...I do not really want to." She wasn't a murderer... well, she had killed a couple goons in France.

That was self-defense, as they pretty much were more than likely going to kill her if they spotted her first. The little family that had gotten tangled up in that made it all the murkier of a moral definition.

The point was she had never intentionally gone after anyone with the intent to kill them.

...except that one invasion goon she ended up breaking the spine of. That hadn't been intentional. Accidental, up until the nurse informed her it would be probably kinder just to kill him.

Alright, the thief wasn't quite as non-lethal as she had thought.

Stabbing more of the whatever-spicy-chicken and ignoring how both the meat and pasta were starting to fall apart off her fork, she gave serious consideration to if she could kill Fadei or not.

Not in a 'was ordered' way but in a 'do I want to' one.

She didn't really.

Killing Fadei might solve a few problems, but it had its own attached that made her regard her expressed order to kill him dispassionately. Aside her personal reservations over him, the Rain could have and might possibly still be the best example of a user of Dying Will Flames for the Zolotov Clan.

Just... not around her, anywhere near some Sky-possible brat, or Dmitriy. By anywhere near, of course she really meant 'not in the same postal code'.

What he arranged for the Rains was proof enough of that, hiding their gatherings under the umbrella of bar patrons and possible drug users to conceal leaking Tranquility. He had hammered three other Rains of various outlooks or personalities together to the point they could be referenced collectively instead of individually.

No, she might not particularly like him very much but her own feelings on the matter were near enough inconsequential to what he had been.

Digging deep to figure out if she did have serious problems with what was going on or not, Sonya actually felt a little frustrated. Not just with Fadei's latest behavior, although a lot of it was that, but with the situation in general.

Out of all the Flame users the Zolotovs had ready to be tapped, the Four Rains were pretty much the only ones able to move freely and establish something of themselves without limits.
The sisters were mainly Mafia Land employees, they were international examples of the Soviet Union's underworld presented as a measuring stick to the rest of the world's criminal ranks.

Maybe not intentionally in the beginning, but with Tatiana in the hospital and Sonya's latest notoriety making the rounds it made even the more casual of visitors to the island associate Soviet Flame users as strong or strong-willed creatures if that was what the women were like. Even possibly terrifying or deadly, if she was pressed to be honest, given one of them was half a Cloud.

Dimity was in prison for at least another year yet, but even before that he was practically chained to a desk much like she was now. He had other duties, but his main one was training up the next set and shoving them out the door as quick as possible. Galina wasn't much of an independent operation, she seemed to be more about finesse than brute force, and it was likely if the Storm-Cloud hadn't come along the Lightning would've eventually attached herself to a knot of the younger users to manage once they became something.

Mikhail got caught up in that a little, he was about the age where their clan members left to branch off in whatever direction they went in until arrested. Instead of preparing or planning that out, he was instead stuck instructing a gaggle of Storms how not to atomize everything in range with their pretty red Flames.

Much as she loathed to credit the sexist asshole with anything, it still showed a decent amount of clan loyalty to stick it out instead of reach for excuses to hurry his acquisition of the 'vor' title.

Might be his Storm obsession showing in being the best vor to be, but at the very least it was convenient enough she'd overlook any benefits he might get out of the action to just grudgingly appreciate his taking on that headache.

After them it was Andrei and Usov. Which… one was a Sun without a serious dedication to murder or theft and the other a fucking twelve-year-old Mist.

Andrei actually seemed keenly curious to contribute to the on-going orphan/foundling training rather than get starry-eyed over the vory interacting with them, so it was likely he'd remain where he was running various Suns through their paces for decades.

Usov was just… a whole lot of no right now. The Mist might have the skills and willingness, but he was still a preteen and young enough Sonya just didn't want him to do anything really serious yet.

Information networking, sure. Teaching his fellow mind-breakers what they knew of Mists, why not?

Even stealing, which she had done before his age… kind of.

However, the men in the Russian Mafiya were expected to be more than just thieves. Which made her baulk when thinking of the Mist going off on his own finally.

Fadei, Kazimir, Irinei, and Zarya were supposed to have been the Flame users' exposition in being useful and valuable criminals. Flame users that weren't chained to a desk or out of the country for upwards of half a year or more, who could spend the dedicated amount of time needed to pull off what a non-Flame user would've said was impossible.

More Rains, but then again Dmitriy had probably wanted to start with something familiar to him before branching out.

Their initial job was prime example of that. An entire five-story business complex picked clean at their leisure without a kopeck spent on bribes. Sonya might view that as rather plain, as there was
four Rains pooling their Flames to accomplish it so she saw it as a bit of overkill and cheap, but to a non-Flame user?

With her orders to murder Fadei taken into consideration, it left the three remaining Rains in a bit of a tight spot. Kazimir might rise to the occasion, and indeed he seemed rather on top of things if his herding of his fellows away from a known threat like her was any indication.

However, that still left them on the back step as the secondary or beta tried to fill in the alpha’s shoes for him.

Maybe they would acquire someone new?

They could take Mikhail with her blessing, even if then they would be three Rains and a Storm.

"Sonya? Are you going to eat that or just keep murdering it?"

"...I am finding the murdering option is very therapeutic." Sonya absently replied, sticking a forkful of her shredded lunch in her mouth instead of actually acknowledge Tatiana's smirk verbally or otherwise.

Hopefully, hopefully either Kazimir or Irinei would take command of their little clique with minimal fuss. The best option would be if either decided to put a lot of distance between themselves and her and go on to do that establishing of a Rain's reputation in the Soviet Union. The worst would be if they decided to continue the little grudge their soon to be dead leader held to her.

Could she somehow nudge that along?

Maybe even get rid of Mikhail at the same time?

The thief was no great shake at talking or persuading people, but she'd bet good money that Gedeon was. Galina was probably even better than she was. Besides, it wasn't like any of the remaining Rains would take her word for anything even if she told them the sky was blue.

…which, actually, given their Flame thing… Skies were orange, not blue.

Huh.

Sonya puzzled that over for only a moment longer, giving up and accepting there was both no right answer to that riddle and her feelings from the past week. She'd live with it decently enough, that would have to be it. "Tats, I need a gun."

"I thought we were talking in English to ensure the next time we didn't slip back to Russian in the middle of Doctor Kappel's recording?" Asked the nurse thoughtfully around the tines of her own fork. She then waved it in the blonde's direction in return for a disgruntled look. "Oh... sure I'll help, but... why?"

"Because I do not need or normally use a gun and I was told to kill someone, and another suggested keeping reasonable doubt about me doing it intact was probably a good option."

"I don't want you going off on your own just yet." Tatiana severely eyed her little sister for a long moment. "Some of the things we tested yesterday should've knocked you out until halfway through next week, and I would like to be on hand if they finally kick in."

Sonya blinked once. "I feel fine."
"No lightheadedness? Numbness? Headache, nausea, tiredness? A cottony feeling in the mouth or brain? Anything at all?" With each negative shake of the head she got more disgruntled. "...I really hate this newest upset you've got going on. Wasn't the 'not using your own muscles' one bad enough?"

"Did you ever find the end of your own abilities when it came to Sun Flames?" Asked the younger sister in hopes of shifting her elder's attention.

It sort of worked, but the redhead Sun still looked rather irritable. "Besides the fact I have more energy in a day than is entirely humane? If I wasn't a nurse by this point... I probably would've gotten into something either ill-advised or dangerous to try bleeding off the excess instead of fast-healing a couple cases a day."

Sonya quickly took a bite of lunch instead of pondering where her sister had been the year before and what 'ill-advised or dangerous' might have meant.

"So... you need a gun. Would one of mine work?"

"...I fully intend to destroy whichever weapon I use for this after one or two shots, so unless you have one you don't mind losing..."

Pursing her lips thoughtfully, Tatiana stared hard at the younger thief. "I don't have so many that I'm willing to lose one just like that... but do you have any other criteria other than 'a gun'? A Soviet manufactured one? Small caliber or large? Anything?"

"Soviet, and maybe something accurate?"

It had been more than a few years since Arseniy had taken them to a small firing range at Tatiana's request and she had taught her to shoot, admittedly. Sonya actually wasn't that sure if her aim was any good since she scorned handguns for her various bladed or spiked staffs. She might need practice too... or get close enough that the risk of missing would be minimal.

Which... wouldn't do much for her aims of at least keeping plausible deniability intact about her involvement in the whole issue.

The thief finally decided she had an issue with her orders. Killing Fadei without so much as an attempt made to see if he was salvageable or not was kind of... wasteful, and the short notice made anything she could do rather sloppy.

However, on the issue of actually murdering someone in cold blood because someone else said so...

Sonya liked stealing things a lot better.

"Tats... since the anesthesia testing proved I'm probably immune to all of it... can I go back to smoking?"

"What? Why?" Head snapping up in order to give the blonde a pithy glare, Tatiana abandoned her empty plate and utensils in order to plant both hands on her hips. "It's a nasty habit, Nya. Why in the world would you want to pick it up again? It'll probably do absolutely nothing for you."

"As an alternative to Bjørn or Galina drowning me in tea?" Posed the Storm-Cloud wryly, stacking her own half shredded meal on top of her sister's plate. "It's just something to occupy my hands with. Something else, anyways."

Aside actually punching people. Maybe laying Mikhail out hadn't been her best idea. Doing it once
means she'd probably do it again, and soon as well.

"But, it's… urg. Fine. Just nowhere around me, alright?"

"Alright. I am going gun shopping, are you coming with or not?"

The nurse thought about it. "Are you paying?"

"…sure, why not?"

(ooo0000oo)

(Thursday the 10th of April, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"I think it's a love letter."

"Seriously?" Sonya eyed the translation in progress set out before Galina skeptically. "I found it in a box. Why wasn't it posted if it was?"

"Which is why I only think it might be, it might also be a transcript of this guy's last words or some kind of bastardized memoir." The Lightning continued thoughtfully, placing a finger in a French-Russian dictionary she might have gotten from the school books they were slowly amassing and glancing up to her. "Some of it is disjointed, kind of like it was written over years of time. Other parts of it are referencing a… Yang XiaoJing. Or XiaoJing Yang, I haven't quite pieced that together yet. A Lady of oriental features, olive skin, dark hair, and apparently a very Rainy countenance."

Confirmation on the name, plus. That the Arcobaleno of the Rain some three hundred years ago might have hailed from the Far East?

The thief frowned thoughtfully. That wasn't exactly good news.

China, Korea, Vietnam, and a fair bit of their surrounding countries, were a little… implosive right now. The odds were against her digging up anything about an Asian Rain that far back, and that was only if the partially translate letter from Pierre-Antoine Carpentier held a possible address for Miss Yang. She could hope some eventual digging might turn something up… but…

"Anything else?"

"I think some parts of this is in German, which I don't know." Continued the brunette regretfully. "It's accented differently, which is the first clue. If there's any more I wouldn't know, since my own linguistic skills only reach as far as French and Chinese."

"I can muddle through the German myself, and hopefully anything else that comes up. Thank you for starting it at least." Sonya finished tossing her coat over the backs of one of the chairs set up before Dmitriy's desk, leaning over the surface to get a good look at where her assistant was unable to translate. "Do you want to learn more languages? I have a fair few more, and I'm pretty sure Scruffy would be thrilled to have a less Sunny teacher for whatever Russian he still needs after a week of immersion."

"I'm fine with what I have so far, but I might not be opposed to learning English." The Lightning's lips twitched as she rose from her borrowed seat and set the book she had been referencing on the desk besides the partial translation. "That Sun you brought back? That you tossed into that mess head first? I'm sure he would be very willing to deal with me instead of more young and eager Suns. Rather mean of you, Sonya, to sentence the poor man to deal with that."
"Do me a favor, go fetch him so I can see where he's at."

(ooo000000)

(Thursday the 10th of April, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

'Peter McScruffy' and yes, he was fully aware by now he was never getting rid of that moniker because Sonya called him that without fail every time she saw him, tried to severely eye his once-rescuer. "I don't care what it is you're after, or what it'll cost me, just do not send me back there."

'Tried', because the little icy little blonde woman didn't even bat an eyelash over his begging. "I need you to learn Russian quickly. Immersion is one of the fast and dirty methods I rather like."

Running a hand through his neatly shorn curly hair, and casting about the blue-green office desperately in hopes something brilliant would occur to him, the man tried a different tact than just pleading. "I learned five words. Алло, Прощай, да, нет, and Что."

A greeting, goodbye, yes, no, and what. In that order. 'Что' had gotten the most use so far, sadly.

He had more luck with learning his 'Dying Will Flames' than learning the local language, depressingly. He could more easily mimic the kids' actions than repeat and understand their words, although some of what those same kids were getting up to with their bright yellow Flames was kind of... beyond strange.

The best he had gotten, now he had examples to pull from aside his rough diamond's laser trick, was summoning up a double palm-full of 'Flames'.

Now he just had to figure out what was next that they were trying to gesture across a language barrier, which also had to do with that dead cat one of the younger ones had brought in a few days ago. Teaching them to use his diamond had gone exactly nowhere so far.

"Pretty good for only a week of experience in it." Sonya didn't even sound amused or scornful or anything, not even glancing up from the paperwork on her desk at all. He figured she might really think that honestly, from what little he did know of her. "You will learn more as time goes on."

The woman named to him as 'Galina' was at least human enough to snicker even as she pretended to busy herself with another section of paperwork that seemed to be waiting to be dealt with, but if it was his expression or the tone of the conversation 'Peter' didn't quite know.

Even if he had fully known what the impassive 'Storm-Cloud' had really been involved with and what it would mean for him back in Freetown?

The depressing thing was that he'd probably would've gone with her anyways.

…or rather beg/demanded for her to care a scrap over what would happen to him after she saved his hide but had coldly let the others run into a firing line.

Surprisingly unexpected health benefits aside, 'Peter' hadn't figured her to be a criminal at first. Even if they had met in jail.

His first thought, when she picked the lock of their jail cell near-instantaneously between reaching it and dismissing him from doing it, had been that the terrifyingly competent but tiny blonde was some kind of government agent.
Neither being surprised nor very concerned over being arrested after the assassination of a government official hadn't screamed 'less than legal employment' to him. More likely that she had some kind of hand in it, or knew it would happen, which suggested she had likely been part of the KGB somehow.

It was possible, even if Sierra Leone had been pretty far from the Soviet Union. Peter hadn't had the opportunity to pick up world news between escaping his forced 'employment' and reaching Freetown before his own arrest, so it had seemed like it could be.

Boy was he wrong.

A criminal who worked by contract was very, very far removed from any government agency. If that wasn't the complete and utter opposite, Peter didn't want to know what was. Sure she might claim to be a thief, either because she identified or took contracts for it more, but that didn't mean she couldn't be deadly.

Also, he existed in a permanent state of not even touching on the mere existence of a 'Mafia Land'. He wasn't that suicidal, for all that he had very little left to his… borrowed name.

Questions were only a good thing when you were in school or working with people that encouraged them, when you weren't such things could become lethal when asked at the wrong time or of the wrong people.

He didn't know for sure, he wasn't indispensable, and discretion right now might be more than prudent. Compared to his last 'internship' with criminals, this was greatly preferable than being the unpaid and underappreciated gem cutter for a diamond cartel.

Whatever this was, that is. Besides getting actual food to eat and a place to sleep, and some new things to learn, it was still head and shoulders above what he had before.

Without even the risk of a beating or starvation if he performed poorly.

Sonya had plans, probably, and had seemed perfectly willing to abide by the few limitations he had set before common sense reasserted itself to him.

"Is there any other way for me to learn? Can't you teach me?"

"I could, but I am occupied with little office tasks for the next year and some." There was finally an inflection in her voice, a tinge of disgusted resignation. "You could try teaching Galina English as she teaches you Russian, but that might not be a very good option until you both have more vocabulary. Or you could find some way to structure what the Suns are ever so enthusiastically trying to cram into your brain instead of drown under it."

Another of her… 'co-workers' entered the office as she was listing things out for him. The man she had nicknamed 'Scruffy' side-eyed the even older criminal warily.

Peter was almost thirty, or thereabouts from what he had managed to extrapolate from the dates he could puzzle out from the not-quite-old newspapers around here. That man was either a bit older or not that much younger than him yet seemed a lot more dangerous than the very bland woman he was dealing with.

No, he didn't quite know everything about his new situation, he wasn't going to be asking much for a while either. Sonya had shoved some tools on him and then had left him to sink or swim on his own merit, but that didn't mean he was terminally unobservant.
This man was as much of a 'Sun' as he was, more powerful even, and more highly placed than even his more or less unwilling 'patron'.

At least, she didn't quite have as much control or automatic adherence over him as the other younger Suns.

Since the blonde woman had an office in the middle of a criminal headquarters, that had to mean 'Gedeon' was either in line for an even better office or somehow connected to the even higher upper echelon of this… organization.

Either way, not someone Peter wished to get in the way of.

Even if he did know English and could talk to him.

The spill of Russian he produced was too quick for him to get more than the blonde woman's name from. He didn't understand a lick of the rest.

Sonya sighed, glanced to her brunette aid and spoke off her own orders in the same language.

It was rather isolating to be the only one who didn't understand. Rather musical language to listen to, but still completely foreign to him. Probably the motivation the thief was relying on to spur him into understanding the language in a few short months.

"Scruffy, Galina will take you back to your hotel room for the day." The youngest in the room informed him with the air of one that expected to be obeyed quickly as she set her work aside. "I seem to have… other appointments to tend to."

He'd take the break happily, and hopefully match some of the sounds he had been hearing to a few written words in the dictionary she tossed at his head. Maybe he could add a sixth word before the end of the week.

Galina clicked her green painted nails in his direction, clicking off in her heels the moment Peter looked at her. Scrambling after, because Russians did not seem to be the patient type of people or at least these ones weren't, he glanced back in time to see a split-second snarl of frustration pass across Sonya's normally bland or blank face as Gedeon kept talking to her.

Nope, he didn't want to know what had put that expression on the impassive woman's face.

Considering the 'Lightning's' back, Peter wondered how he would enlist her aid in freeing him from over excited, over-enthusiastic preteens with little understanding of how to teach someone else a language.

(Friday the 11th of April, 1969. The Rain Bar, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"-when she gets here tomorrow. And do not-"

"Kazimir, shut up." Sonya snapped as she descended alone into the den of Rains, uncaring she had probably interrupted a lecture on how to handle her visit.

As far as a basement of a bar went, this was pretty typical. Barrels of beer and stout occupied the far wall, crates of liquor bottles were stacked everywhere and a few looked to be missing a couple of
their contents, a lot of dust and rust streaked the walls, and a hollow had been made for both probably illegal gambling and criminal gatherings. The seating arrangements and pillows set aside in one corner were a bit odd, but understandable additions with the primary property of Dying Will Flame users of Rain being Tranquility.

Unexpected naptime was probably a hazard of these Flame users being around in any concentration.

There were more young Rains than there were Suns or Storms, and from her paperwork Sonya knew only the Mists outstripped them in numbers so far. Oddly, Rains had the oldest age bracket for newer users.

An interesting trend, and one she hoped meant they had at least a working brain between them from.

As the Storm-Cloud reached the bottom of the rickety staircase the remaining three Rains had maneuvered themselves between their knot of brats and the interloper.

"We weren't scheduled until tomorrow." Kazimir all but snarled in her face. "What's wrong, Bazanova? Don't trust us?"

She gave him the disgusted look that accusation deserved. Of course she didn't, but she also wasn't being that petty. "The Wo Hop To Triad have demanded that I be the one to handle their damn request for matched gemstones. Which, if you failed to pay attention to anything but yourself, will happen tomorrow and continue until finished with. Which might last the entire month or more. So, guess what I no longer have the time to do then and need done now so I can plan for this fall before it gets here?"

Easily shoving the obstinate Rain out of her way, the thief picked her way further into the basement's rearranged area. Having opted to leave her Lightning out of this, she had to resort and shuffle around her paperwork in order to get to the parts she needed and handed Irinei off the roster for more markings.

"Do you really hate Rains?"

"No, I've trained a Rain before. I hate a Storm of my same Polarization, and stupid Mists." Finally pulling free her 'suggestion' sheets, Sonya dug into her trousers' pockets for her pen. "Other than that, it seems to be more hit or miss for what... oh wait, I intensely dislike a Cloud of my same Polarization. That's it."

The boy, about the same age as Usov or maybe a bit older, hummed a bit. "Stupid Mists?"

"...Kirill, Kirill Yevtukh."

She didn't have the roster in front of her, which meant she had little beyond his appearance and accent to judge by, but she was pretty sure he wasn't actually Russian. "Yevtukh, how did you get here?"

A gapped-tooth smirk was her first answer. "I walked. And before that? Well, see... there was this book with ever so interesting descriptions of 'soulfire' in it-"

"Never mind." The bait-book had hooked a Rain?

Well... hooray. It probably had caught a few Mists as well, she should check with Usov if she really wanted to feel that cheap and used. Sonya uncapped her pen, and actually took a look around at the
faces staring back at her.

"So… anything you wish you were told in the beginning that you only now know?"

Much to her mingled disgust and exasperation, the only answer was a lot of wary looks being tossed around.

"Anything at all?"

Since even Yevtukh was silent, maybe the path she picked for Dmitriy had been the best one?

A stab in the dark, and this was assuming that was what he had passed on to Fadei and his Rains, that she was honestly surprised might have been on the mark.

"Huh… interesting."

"What is?" Asked the only Rain so far with a spine.

"I taught Dmitriy how to use his Flames, he taught Fadei. Fadei probably taught you the same way he was taught, which meant the method I shoved on Dmitriy actually worked decently enough." Sonya wasn't even a Rain herself, and yet a half-guessed method only possibly modified by an actual Rain proved true enough in this volume?

"I thought Dmitriy was the one to start all of this?"

Pursing her lips, because she did catch onto the slightly cautious edge in the brat's tone, the thief merely shrugged after a moment of mentally arranging her thoughts. "I only started Dmitriy and my sister Tatiana on their own Flames personally. What you all are taking advantage of is what Dmitriy developed when I left. Which is why I'm here doing this at all, your opinion on how well or how badly it did will let us convert the process to a more… sociable setting for larger groups."

Yevtukh blinked flat black eyes at her innocently. "Why?"

"Because there will be more, and it's best to have the tools to handle that before the flood hits."

There were in fact five more that had to be added to the rosters, two new unaffiliated Mists and three ragged Suns, since last Friday. Even as Sonya was here handling sounding out the Rains for any immediate issues that needed addressing, Galina was off collecting two new Lightings and a Storm from other syndicates that had arranged training.

"We, obviously from how packed in this place is, are running out of room already."

About twenty bodies, even if most were preteens, crammed into the basement cellar of a bar made for some claustrophobic elbow-room. Part of the reason why Sonya had merely gone in far enough to make use of a barrel as a table and opted to stand.

"Can I ask a question?" One of the teenaged girls in the back asked a bit impertinently, ignoring her barrel-mate's hissed 'Raisa!' "Why haven't you keeled over yet? The bartender does every damn time he comes down for something, then we have to stop for an entire hour while we try and wake him while Irinei goes and holds down the fort upstairs."

"…I'm partially a Storm. Internalized Storm Flames means your Flames have to at least amount to or overpower my own before you can even make me yawn." Glancing between the semi-guilty looks being traded around and the highly wary elder Rains in the room, the Storm-Cloud gave the girl a very toothy smirk. "Still not there, girl. Massed Flame use is more of an overlap than a mingled
"Well... that's unfair." The girl, with violently purple-blue hair paired with bright green eyes, announced as if Sonya had done her some kind of insult.

Shrugging, the thief checked over her as of yet unmarked notes and waved to their 'elders'. "These morons should've passed on that tidbit when they tried and failed to Tranquilize me before, you may blame them for the oversight. Continuing."

"Wait just one damn moment. You may n-"

"May?" Sonya echoed Zarya icily, turning only far enough to pin the twit with a glare that might or might not be red herself. "I may do whatever the hell I want to. If I bad-mouth the lot of you for finding one trick each then crawling into a hole with your developed Flame usage, then I will. You are all unimaginative, conceited examples of a Rain. Yes, what you do works against civilians and possibly uninformed vory. You already had ample proof it would not work against another Flame user when I beat the shit out of your boys. Which, may I point out, I just had to tell the brats you three are in charge of how to get around. A. Year. Later."

Bless whoever the fuck was the patron saint of Dying Will, because that tidbit of news had the collective young Rains actually looking semi-thoughtful.

Irinei sighed heavily as his shorter fellow male Rain spluttered in outrage over how she addressed the now pale red headed Rain, marking off a last few items before handing the paperwork back to the Storm-Cloud. "May we please keep previous disagreements between just us?"

"If you would do your damn job, it wouldn't have been brought up. Either teach them properly, or hand it off to the next experienced Rain and go. Either or, I don't care." Sonya blinked as something occurred to her. "No wait, just hand it off already. I'll deal with a teenager teaching, I already have Usov and he's twelve."

Said twelve-year-old was even doing a much better job than these three, and she didn't even have to go check on the Mists herself. Admittedly, the sky very nearly seemed to be the limit for Mist Flame Constructs so a lack of imagination wasn't really a problem for them.

Again, the thief was just going to nod and go along with it as long as the Mists had no great issues needing to be heard.

"So..." The same outspoken Rain girl interjected into the very tense silence she was somewhat sure was named 'Raisa' from both her barrel-mate and the newly returned Rain roster. "How would we overpower your Flames of Storm?"

"...I know a Sun nurse that will be highly interested in any answer for that." Sonya started off thoughtfully, forcibly putting the behavior of the elder Rains out of her mind if only for the moment. "It might be something you need to know eventually, so... I'll schedule some time for a few of you to try Tranquilizing the Storms. Both when they know you're there and when they don't. I'm still one of the strongest in the clan, but that might change in as little as a month. You may find out for yourself and inform your fellows once you know."

Raisa beamed at that answer. "Stella and I will totally volunteer for that."

'Stella' seemed to be her ebony haired barrel-mate, and she gave a more hesitant nod to confirm her friend's words.

Noting that down, as well as jotting a reminder to pose that possible option to Tatiana so Rain
Flames of sufficient strength could be found for her anesthesia testing, the Storm-Cloud glanced to the slightly more than a baker's dozen of Rains she had yet to hear a word out of.

"Anything else? Thoughts, suggestions, disgruntled bitching?" Queerly, her semi-sarcastic question actually earned her a few snickers. Unwilling to snub a gift horse even if she didn't understand how she got it, she tentatively suggested something else. "Anything one of you think you might need in the near or distant future?"

Yevtukh took the bait, jabbing an elbow in a green-haired fellow's ribs at the same time. "Are only Storms sort of or possibly entirely immune to Rains?"

Sonya eyed him as she thought about that. "...pick a Flame but not Rain, Cloud, or Sky."

"...Lightning?"

"You, and greenie over there, have just been volunteered for testing Lightning reactions to a Rain's Tranquility." That would leave Mists and Suns, since she was the only Cloud she would accept being a test subject but her Storm would interfere and they still had no Skies. "...I need four more Rains."

Were there any possible difficulties a Mist might have trying to work their own Flames against other users?

Tatiana had already mentioned healing using her Sun Flames was harder on Dying Will Flame users, but Storms and Clouds were more physically destructive with their own.

While she was at it, she made additional notes for Galina to test her Lightnings against the other types they had access to.

"When you're done with that, make sure you inform these three exactly what you find. Maybe they'll get a clue or something."

"We do not need to be taught by children." Kazimir sneered bitterly at her back.

Sonya paused in writing down the next timid volunteer's name, slitting a sideways glance at the man. No, wait… he was still a teenager. Right?

Still younger than her, so she was mentally labeling the asshole a brat.

"So that's the problem."

Irinei glanced from his blue haired and green eyed fellow to her and back again warily but kept his mouth shut. Zarya had similar restraint, so Kazimir had to be the one to ask, "What?"

"...I don't think I actually have words." Marveled the thief as she finished her note, more tiredly amused than actually pissed off. "Get out, you and Zarya. Find something else to do."

"...wait, WHAT?"

"Why?" Was the question the eldest female Rain cried out nearly at the same time as the teenager's splutter. "What gives you-

"I... have... had... it, with both your insubordination and slander. Now I just learned the reason there have been absolutely no developments from the Rains is because you're molding them into copies of yourselves? We do not need more Fadeis, Kazimirs, Zaryas, or Irineis. We don't even need..."
another Dmitriy, although that would be nice to dig up out of nowhere. We need Rains who will find their own damn way."

Sonya gestured expansively behind her, to both her own paperwork and the few Rain brats that had the spine to actually talk to her so far.

"We need them to find out what else they can do with those pretty blue Flames, so we can keep on top of training more Rains to do other things. Nurse Rains, possibly weather Rains, mass crowd control Rains, Rains that can cut or affect radio transmissions, different Rains. Why, the fuck, wasn't this question of which Flames were Tranquilize-able and which weren't raised last year? When you knew there was an imbalance you didn't know much about? Did you think you had the best and only way? If so, I don't need you. I have some of these kids actually asking questions, and I need more of them and those questions more than I need you."

"You-"

"Leave." Lighting up one hand with her Storm Flames, the thief held it up between her and Kazimir. In the not-quite-dim lighting, the palm-full of will fire threw off a whole lot more bloody light than she was used to. "Before I Disintegrate you and rid myself and these kids of your bad influence that way."

Even if it had been some time since he last felt the touch of her Storm, the blue haired Rain scrambled to put room between himself and her red Flames. With him moving, it didn't take more than a narrow look to get Zarya to head out after him.

A glance at Irinei netted her a highly wary look. "Am I next?"

"Who is the next experienced after you?"

"...not the eldest?" The last of the Four Rains asked, inching away from her slightly since the Storm Flames were still in her cupped palm.

"Irinei, I have a twelve-year-old Mist in charge of his Flame section. Usov didn't get that by being the oldest, he got it by being the most experienced and multi-faceted Mist we have. There is actually a twenty-seven-year-old Mist that he's teaching, and one as young as seven teaching him new things."

Irinei silently pointed out one of the teens, and Sonya blinked at the brunette with darker grey eyes than her own.

"Chernyshyova Tereza Yanovna," the girl grimaced even as she introduced herself. "I don't want it, Bazanova. I don't think I will deal with you very well."

"The worst you have to do is report in every week and gather up the new Rains that reach us." Snapped the thief, wanting the whole issue dealt with now rather than later. It had, apparently, gone on long enough for one of their oldest Flame type groups. "You'll maybe see me once a damn month, and I can get Galina, who heads up the Lightnings most days, to handle anything you need reported instead."

Yanovna considered her skeptically, then glanced at the older Rain still lingering around even if she did have a hand full of Storm Flames. "...I'm keeping Irinei. We need him for the bartender's unexpected naps."

"Fine. Undo the damage he and his idiotic fellows did to you all, actually progress in your own ways, and you may keep him."
Finally shrugging after a long moment of contemplation, the teenager nodded a sharp acceptance.

Sonya let her Storm Flames go and made another note to find out if there was a limit to Usov's ability to stalk her, and if he or another Mist could apply that to these Rains without issue. Like hell she would let Irinei remain without someone looking over his shoulder to be sure he didn't continue suppressing the other Rains.

"Now... may we finally continue? I still need another Rain to help test Sun reactions to Tranquility."

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 11th of April, 1969 continued. Mafia Land.)

Severely eyeing the borrowed Lackey, Viper sighed heavily and tugged the hem of her cowl. "Wrong."

Björn cringed slightly, still slightly uncomfortable in his suit and tie as well as looking uncertain enough the Esper wasn't willing to incur his patron's wrath by leaving him on his own here.

"Go get us something to eat." Aside a trade of favors going on that would end up with her paid anyways, Viper rather liked being able to use the Lightning-Storm as a minion while she had him. "We'll try again after lunch... and you had better get it right next time."

Aside the situation allowing her to conserve her own Flames for her independent investigation, as well as the opportunity to be this heavily into the business sector of Mafia Land with a convenient obvious excuse, being able to take slight advantage of Sonya's reputation was proving just as much of a help to the Mist's aims.

She was only gingerly taking advantage of that. If uninformed idiots volunteered information on their own without needing her to threaten or pay them, all the better.

With a gesture, Constructed wind gathered up the economic reports the Mist had been instructing Björn how to read together in a neat pile in front of the Mist.

Viper abhorred owing someone anything, money or favors. Curiously, the arrangement she and Sonya had over her Lackey had a lot of leeway. Depending on how much of the thief's capital the Esper used, and what she found out under the cover of instructing Björn, would dictate how well informed and trained her Lackey would end up.

She couldn't decide if that was unintentional on the Storm-Cloud's end, or if it was a side-benefit she earned by associating with her brother as a friend.

If it was unintentional, she could safely ignore that and just take the advantage without Sonya becoming irked with her. If it wasn't, then keeping her end of the semi-unspoken arrangement was probably the wisest idea.

Getting up and leaving a Constructed façade of herself behind in her chair, to both retain use of the room and to await Björn's return for her, the Mist ventured out herself to maybe acquire a few more pieces to her puzzle.

Actaeon Tantalo didn't even glance up when Viper took a shortcut through his office's wall. "I take it you want an answer now?"

Coming to a stop in front of the information broker's desk, she merely waited silently.
"No, not even if you sic that Cloud you flaunt your connection to on me." Tantalo's lips curled in a passable facile of a sneer.

"Mou... it surprises me how many are afraid of her mere shadow... and ignore the other more present threats." Mist made Constructs of chains suddenly snaked up the man's body, smashing him none to gently face down on his desk before snapping to convenient protrusions on the walls to pull him violently upright again. If that was way too tight to be safely comfortable, Viper didn't rightly care. "I don't need you willing to tell me, you know."

Queerly, the man's bloody sneer hadn't been knocked off. Even after getting a way too personal introduction to his own workstation. Even more irritatingly, he had some instruction on how to block out a Mist that she might end up shattering him in order to get around. "But you don't know if I have what you want, or if it's still with someone else. Threaten me all you want, Mist, but you're still not getting anything out of me."

Eyeing the man, and his utterly confident expression even as more blood leaked from his smashed nose, Viper wondered what to do now.

Obviously, she couldn't straight out kill him. The island’s masters held a dim view of such a thing happening even if their agents were being less than cooperative. Tantalo was also partially correct that she didn't know if he had want she wanted or not, no matter how much it irritated her to admit, but she still needed him to serve a warning to his little friends somehow.

Maybe one of the others would crack if she could.

Viper let a trickle of Mist Flames to run over the fingers of her right hand as an idea occurred to her.

She didn't know for sure if he had what she was after, but he was the type to think his immunities translated to the rules as well. She wouldn't quite lay money on the possibility, but she would bet his life.

"Let's see what kind of a naughty little boy you've been, then." The slip of his irritating smirk made the Esper grin, her Mist Flames spreading out from her fingers to envelope the tiny office room. "I'm pretty sure I can find something of which to use in your petty little mind, mou. Doesn't even need to be what I'm after as long as it will still get you killed."

Actually stating it to his face when he was of an uncertain enough mind not to be obsessively blank let her Flames latch onto his thoughts, to create a sympathetic mirage for her own viewing pleasure, and that chink would let her unravel the rest of his mind.

This would break him, just a little no matter how careful she was. Viper again didn't really care much so long as she got both something to incriminate him by and a new thread to pull on.

Information was almost as good as money, and if she got enough she might be in a good enough mood to able to take Bjørn through predicting the flow and ebbs of international stock trading yet again.

Hopefully, the third time would be the charm.

"...mou? Well... I do believe that is technically drug trafficking, Tantalo. Selling to your own coworkers, even." Vindicated in her gamble, the Mist grinned broadly at her now terrified prisoner and peered at him from under her hood. "Perfect. Care to change your tune? Or should I just rip it out of you?"
Sonya was not going to be the only one personally helping a few Triad members find a compatible stone-mineral to use as a Flame focus.

No matter how much they wanted her to be.

For one, she had her own things to handle and couldn't set aside or dedicate all her time to this no matter how much they were shelling out for it. For another, she really didn't want to leave the kiddy Flame users alone after a closer look showed so many promising avenues of investigation.

Drudging up a few Shestyorka, that already knew the drill from being terrorized by Galina when they were processing all the Zolotov Flame users together, to help her get through five or so people a day was smoothed past one of Fong's co-workers with an impatient purple-eyed stare.

Especially since the man knew for a fact her eye coloring was actually grey and was forced to think he was irritating her to near-unreasonable levels.

In truth, being able to control the colors of her eyes was kind of cheating to the highest degree. The thief was utterly unconcerned with that but made note to rarely fuck with her eye color before someone caught on.

The Shestyorka weren't immediately available, but they would be for tomorrow which was good enough. A demonstration for how and why things will go should be done first.

Gedeon was lurking in the background, having been rendered quite useless since the thief knew enough Mandarin Chinese to handle her own translator needs and the still irritating automatic fear a Cloud user generated prevented any kind of diplomatic exchanges from happening right away. Instead the Sun lingered at her back like an entirely unneeded bodyguard.

Arseniy was here somewhere, as well as several other Zolotov vory, but they weren't the ones she had to concern herself with.

The very first Triad member she would match herself, if only to keep things more or less smooth. It was both a demonstration and instruction of how to behave while things were being tested, and an opportunity to give his fellows some idea of what they needed to think on.

Like… for what did they want a focus stone for?

Control, the ease of using their Flames through it, or as a measuring tool?

Fong had at least passed on that just simply picking out a Flame focus that could be used as an alternative to the Flame Rings there were other possibilities, but why she had to be the one to explain it to them was something she'd like to quibble about.

The first Chinese man, who was introduced to her as just Xiasheng the Storm, ended up with a pretty green jewel named diopside. It would end up as sharp grains of stone under Sonya's fingers, but for Xiasheng it worked perfectly as something to measure a limit by.

She wasn't naming all of them for him, especially not now they were charging for testing. Merely letting him try one or two and jotting down notes on what worked and what didn't, as well as how. A lot of the Storm-possible stones were very confusing jumbles of jewel-quality gemstones and semi-precious rocks.
Opting out of describing the likely reaction after the first few she knew wouldn't work for him also meant it was less likely his Will was merely matching the expectations she pressed on him.

"Is that it?"

"For something to learn control on, sure." Answered the thief being questioned absently, noting down that match for future attempts to make sense of what they had in hopes of not going through a few thousand ruble of rocks a person per match. "Do you want a focus as well?"

There was an aborted twitch to glance at one of his fellows that she didn't rightly care for wondering about. Interestingly, the three thin and vertical scars slashed into his left cheek twitched instead as he leveled hawkish yellowish-brown eyes on her. "Yes."

Sighing softly through her nose, she then resigned herself to spending another hour or so helping him find something that he could use for it.

Eventually, at the grand total of nearly three hours for one person, she decided the strange lighter green andradite garnets were the best from what reactions he had.

Xiasheng's first comment when he had both his matches in hand made her itch to punch him. "They are not red."

"...diopsides can also be blue, brown, or clear. That variation of garnet can come in brownish reds, if you must have one be so." Occupying her hands with digging out a cigarette, now that Tatiana had let up on her personal crusade to keep her from them, merely meant the man went without an impressive shiner of his own for a little while longer. "Anything else?"

Even a few hours of being stared at by several unknowns had her tense and uncomfortable, especially seeing as she and Xiasheng were the only things to stare at for the last four hours.

She didn't think one of the visiting Triad members were another Cloud, but it was entirely possible there was another Inverted Storm or a few Mists in the room.

The mere thought made her itch, but whether or not to find them and ensure she was just imagining her antsy paranoia or confirm there was something to that old wives' tale of which Flame user hated another's on general principle was debatable.

Sonya had opted to take advantage of the Suns' normal repurposed warehouse, kicking the kids out to go mingle with the other Flame types for the day. Galina had split them up in little sections, sending them off earlier that same day and by the time she got to the warehouse they had ideas for the next round. This was the only day she'd get away with that, but by tomorrow Usov and his Mists would have checked over and reinforced old Aleksandr's basement to handle even more Flame users exploding random gemstones.

These all were well trained individuals, which could very well mean the reactions would be even more explosive than a bunch of trainees.

After this, the Mists would come here and ensure nothing was tampered with.

It was the best temporary job she could manage at last minute, especially since old man Zolotov hadn't paid enough attention to the reports she and Galina made up for Gedeon to take him that said how much damage something like this could cause any room they tested others within.

The Storm-Cloud hated scrambling as much as she did being forced to be sloppy.
That new twenty-seven-year-old Mist of Usov's was actually a Misty Lightning, which suggested very interesting things for his Constructions or what he could end up Hardening. Once the man figured out how to mesh his Mist and Lightning Flames together.

Sonya still couldn't do that, the best she could was to make her Storm work around her Cloud's Propagation but not through.

Alas, Storm Flame imploding Cloud copies of her weapons were still a bit out of her reach.

Taking a drag from her newly lit cigarette and ignoring the very real possibility it did nothing for her, the thief removed the filter from her lips and looked Xiasheng in his very interesting eye color. "You have the rest of the day and night to ensure those two will work for what you want, just be aware that since they are common stones they are more fragile. But replacing them is so much easier. Tomorrow we will start testing your fellows, so at least be sure they know what they are looking for."

She hadn't seen very many with yellow for an eye coloring. It seemed rarer than Cherep's purple coloring. Made for a striking kind of stare, especially with the scars he had acquired sometime in his life.

"This is your last chance to back out." Continued the Storm-Cloud disinterestedly. "If you all chose to turn up tomorrow, we'll see this through the end even if you decide it's not what you're looking for."

"Given you have no competition, or no reasonable one, I find that highly unlikely." Xiasheng rolled his two jewels around his fingers, glancing from them to her and then to his fellow Chinese Flame users visiting a Russian thieves' syndicate. "You will see us on the morrow, Bazanova… and, I wonder if I might be able to speak with you then?"

The sudden rustling of a large number of people suddenly all moving at once preventing anyone from overhearing his question made her narrow her eyes suspiciously. "About what?"

"This and that." The Chinese Storm merely shrugged absently, not moving with his various fellows to leave the warehouse. "Mere curiosity on my own end. Fong had some things to say about you that I will admit aroused my interest."

Sonya scowled, but the man had moved off before she could snap that she would very much rather he didn't try to talk to her about whatever Fong had said about her.

What the hell did the Chinese martial artist tell his fellows?

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 12th of April, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Sinclair," Nilda Guerra observed the hitman being greeted by one of the other mob wives she was tailing with some amusement as he wandered back into Vongola's Iron Fort's front lawn and the other woman's sights, "you've been missing a while."

"And since when was I special enough to receive particular note from such a lovely lady as yourself?"

Oh, this might actually be interesting.

Nilda played idly with her coffee cup and hid a smirk as Renato practically sauntered towards one
Marisa Venturino. For a man that flirted as easily as breathing as that one, any pretty woman giving him attention would at least merit her some tidbits of information.

At least, that was what Marisa seemed to believe.

"You always have been, ever since you made such a… splash into this little corner of Italia."

"If you even knew who I was before I took over the De Campo famiglia, I'll eat my hat." Was his suddenly and jarringly flat answer.

Tilting his head and said fedora in order to stare at her one eyed from under the brim, their so far unseen watcher was treated to a surprisingly level stare from someone that had as much of a reputation of a ladies man as him before he switched targets to the lady talking to him.

"Now… what exactly does one of Ottavia's agents want with me?"

Apparently, she wasn't as unobserved as she thought. She might need to ask her Donna's Rain Beretta for a bit of a brush up on her skills if some freelance hitman could pick her out when stalking another.

It wasn't widely known young Mrs. Venturino was part of the retired Donna's information network, as there were scores of women allowed to the Sky's parlor to cover exactly who reported to her. The fact he even knew that made her mark him as more intelligent than his reputation suggested.

Taking over a territory and waltzing away afterwards free and clear proved that much, at least to those paying attention.

"Rumor had it you've been dabbling in something over with the Giglio Nero Famiglia, with their Ottavia's own permission."

Renato readjusted his hat to set the brim lower, which mostly concealed his sudden suspicious frown from Marisa. "Why the sudden interest?"

Nilda discarded her coffee cup in a nearby hedge, and her spot on a rather comfortable bench she had perched on just around the corner of the Iron Fort's west wing's walls, in order to catch the red headed woman's words more clearly.

This was an interesting development.

"Because Lady Daniella has been trying to reach her fellow female Sky for a long while now, but the Giglio Nero Ottavia has not been replying. She would like to know if it is because her letters had not reached Lady Luce or because she is being snubbed."

"And why would I tell you anything if I knew?" The Soft Flame Sun user drawled out sardonically, going very still.

Someone was now more than suspicious, which might mean Nilda had a possibility of some unexpected aid.

"Surely you don't think you will walk away empty handed from this exchange?"

"…so what, a bribe of some boost to my reputation? Is the former Donna going to meddle with her son's reputation to ease my remaining a freelance hitman? Interfere with Shamal's situation and take him under her Mist's wing?"
Nilda didn't take a step back or swear out loud, but it was a near thing. Ottavia would do no such thing, as her lady boss didn't believe in such permissive free-reign for any one person.

Especially not someone without firm ties to Vongola as a whole and who might just wander off as easily as he had come in.

Obviously Sinclair was well aware of that, or at least didn't believe in such an ill-balanced trade was anywhere near legit.

With near-silent huff to herself, part exasperation and part chagrin, the silver haired Rain switched mental tracks. From merely ensuring Marisa wasn't under suspicion from her work for Daniella to contemplating how to figure out what the wife of the Venturino Don was after and if it was a betrayal or not.

She'd probably have to enlist Rosabella's aid, if this actually went all the way back to the woman's famiglia and not just through her.

"Is there anything that would tempt you?"

"No." The entirely impassive Sun informed her shortly. "I didn't survive as long as I have by being unreliable and have no reason to start now. Find another pasty to use."

"Very well. The Donna will be most disappointed in this refusal."

"I'm sure." Was Renato's very dry drawl as the young woman minced away in delicately insulted dignity. He merely kept standing on the walk leading up to the Iron Fort's main doors, sliding a glance her way once the other woman was behind the heavy reinforced slabs of wood. "Do I want to know?"

"Probably not. If she's doing what I think she's doing, Marisa won't be a problem for you for long." Nilda observed lightly as she ducked the low branches of the oak that hid her from view. Traversing the lawn in heels was a little tricky, but it did amuse her how many never checked to see if she was out of sight if the lawn was under her feet. "Daniella will also be more than appreciative you didn't buy any supposed 'favors' for information she could get on her own."

"Going to curse me out for not dragging more information from her?"

"Sinclair, you're not the only professional here." The silver-haired woman observed with genuine amusement. "I don't need you to find that out."

"Lovely and competent, much better than the last woman that laid in wait for me." The hitman mused wickedly with a smirk. "Miss Guerra, what do I owe the privilege of your presence to?"

"Careful there, I'd rather rumor not get back to your lovely lady Storm-Cloud and invoke her wrath on my head."

Renato rolled his eyes exasperatedly as a footman opened the main doors for the both of them. "Sonya and I are not dating, lovers, or secretly married and Shamal is our real child and not just a godson. No, I don't know how or who started those rumors. You may rest easy on that aspect."

"No? …how interesting." The tiny bit of disgruntlement edging his features said he rather wished it was otherwise. "Because Solothurn had some interesting things to say on the mindset of female Clouds I had thought to share with you because of those rumors. But if you'd rather not hear it…"

The Soft Flame Sun user quirked an eyebrow at her. "Well now, don't be so hasty. I never said that."
"A spar?"

"Fong expressed an interest in the possibility that your skills with something a bit more... balanced, would be even better than the one fight he managed to have with you." Xiasheng offered up easily enough as his reasoning for suggesting one, examining the typically dark teas Russian tastes leaned to instead of risk a sip of the bitterly spicy brew. "He suggested taking the opportunity, if only for the possibility of claiming I've lived through a fight with a Cloud."

They weren't exactly within her clan's territory but taking a lunch break in a bistro on the outskirts. That no-man's land of street-gangs and kiddy cliques that buffered all structured syndicates from one another and that they all heavily recruited from when their own territories didn't offer enough bodies for them.

As a guest, but more importantly a mess of a dignitary and an ambassador from another syndicate, the Zolotovs had no control over Xiasheng's or his fellows' movements. They could suggest that digging where they were told not to would be a bad idea, and had as far as Sonya knew, but they couldn't bar the visiting Triad members from anything.

Well... they could. It wouldn't be very diplomatic.

The Storm-Cloud had little sympathies for anyone who got stuck on that edge, she had been stabbed with that more times lately than she really cared to experience ever.

While taking an escort was kind of a thing even for simple day-to-day errands, especially since vory were never really against picking fights just simply for the hell of it or out of boredom, the Chinese Storm had opted only for her as a translator and guide for shopping around Moscow.

Moscow wasn't a safe city to wander within, not in the parts of it the Zolotovs occupied. There was also the risk someone outside the clan noticed the international flavoring to the movements of the primarily thieves' clan and wanted to stop anything from developing, or just wanted to sabotage a rival syndicate, ect... The thief actually hadn't minded too much being diverted into being an overly glorified bodyguard that worked better as a tourist's guide.

The gem testing was over for the day, three more Triad Dying Will Flame users had their matches and another four had partials. Usov had yet to inform her to hunt down Fadei before he could return to the clan, so she had little other duties to do herself.

Additionally, he bought her tea while he tried a bit of local flavors. It earned him enough of her goodwill to not mind dallying about instead of him handling whatever the hell it was he needed and returning in good time.

The Russian Zolotov Thieves Clan were now in a committed alliance/trade with the Chinese Wo hop To Triad, as of that same very morning she helped this Storm find his matches. Her thieves' clan would supply the gemstones and matching services, in return his Triad would be giving a number of things from repeat business to trade connections in China and maybe a bit of muscle if needed in
As well as money, a lot of it. They were *thieves*, greed was a vice that was understandable the moment you started dealing with them.

More specifically for Sonya’s office and efforts, they would be getting a decently of-age Rainy muscle first and possibly a Mist in a few more weeks.

One of Xiasheng's fellows, who introduced himself as Kau Yanlin that morning, would remain behind even after the mass stone testing for the Chinese contingent was over with. Yanlin the Rain would be folded into the cadre for the slightly criminal school effort, to handle both teaching his native language to students as well as take over the role Aleksandr had once held to her for the newer students. Basic dirty combat training.

A detail that was depressing or hilarious depending on how it was brought up, Soviet schools actually taught how to handle and fire small arms to their students, as well as basic hand-to-hand defense.

As the temporary vice-principal, Sonya was *legally* required to ensure any students they got could clean, load, and fire a handgun accurately. Which made the freshly built gun range a *government subsidized expense*, according to Galina’s notes for tax reasons.

More importantly, this allowed Fong’s Triad to have an out of the way place to send Flame users to be trained up for them outside the greater eye of the Triads entirely. Someplace exotic that most of China’s underworld probably had little to no connections to, *and* with the only one stupid enough to get herself saddled with the dubious honor of being a ‘Flame Expert’ heaped on her head.

Since Sonya couldn't actually assign her way-too-young Flame users to positions of authority in the yet to be opened school, on paper at least, that tetchy Rain in charge now she kicked out the last of the bad influences wouldn't have to hold onto her position for long.

As long as Yanlin ended up somewhat decent for a Triad member. An introduction and some hours spent matching him and his blue Flames to a set of Rain-possible focuses aside, she really knew little about the man.

At this point, the thief would settle for him being a decently-inventive Rain even if he made her want to punch him on principle by his personality alone.

She still needed an of-age and competently skilled Sun, Storm, and Mist for the rest. While *technically* she counted as a Storm, she also really didn't want to be pinned in place all school year for the next few years on top of what she was doing now.

A year more would be doable but beyond that and she would start seriously considering ways to dismantle her clan from the inside, so she wouldn't be pinned in place anymore.

The Storm-Cloud was playing at ‘officially’ assigning Andrei as a teacher’s aide rather than make him part of the yet-to-be-finalized student body. Probably as Yanlin’s translator/aide, to be shared with Scruffy if things worked out for the better.

There was that Filat syndicate Storm that was almost fully trained as much as possible who was also not-a-preteen, she was playing with asking him to remain for the teaching effort in order to free Mikhail before problems on that end arose. It would also possibly cut down the number of accusations that the Zolotovs were not relenting control over Flame Training at all, although she was still aware accusations would happen anyways.
Not that they had to or anything but keeping this somewhat neutral would at least broaden the pool of users she could then study or get reports about. Without the expected Mafiya scuffled over who controlled all it and got the bulk of the rewards for doing so.

"Would you mind an exhibition bout?" Sonya asked delicately, halfway through nursing her cup of tea and still thinking of her entirely too annoying Flame brats and possibly educating them as to why she was the top dog.

Especially while the borrowed brats were still in attendance.

That Storm, one of Usov's Mists, and a Rain were due to leave the Zolotovs to return to their own syndicates as fully trained so no longer dangers to themselves or others unless they wanted to be. An example why a Cloud was so feared and whispered about would likely put a few more things in perspective for the greater Soviet underworld.

It would also draw more scrutiny to any possible Cloud Flame user as well, but Sonya didn't think there was much she could do there just yet.

Getting the Khimki Cloud to spread a policy of 'find a Cloud on his border, train up/warn, pass on to their bordering Cloud fellows, leave alone' was probably the little she could do. Especially with how she reacted to him, and his own reaction to her.

If it was any less hostile instantly on any meeting, or if she could actually put faith in a random Cloud's restraint, she'd really try harder with the brat.

As it was, she could only hope once things settled for him they would have fewer instant hostilities between them.

Xiasheng's expression tinged in a decidedly green kind of way across the booth table from her. "I was hoping my humiliation would be private."

"I haven't fought with mere poles and staffs for a few years." Sonya confided willingly enough, if the prospect of another actual fight was on the horizon she'd probably even promise no overt use of Flames too. Not without prompting, but if he'd ask specifically for that she'd seriously think about it. "All my training was also informal, I've only recently taken steps to get formal instruction."

Which Tatiana hadn't let her do this past weekend, especially with the chemicals and compounds they tested her Storm immunity with possibly in her veins.

"That does not make me feel better. Fong can beat me easily, and you two fought to a standstill from his report of it. Ill-trained or not."

"I was also extremely pissed off."

The Chinese man's expression didn't lighten any, in fact he now looked more convinced he would lose badly. "Which means this time you will be in full control of your faculties, and more of a threat."

Pursing her lips, the Storm-Cloud pinned her tea-mate with a narrow look. "Please tell me you're not backing out of this, after dangling bait in front of me."

"Against my better judgement, I am not." Xiasheng admitted wryly, hawkish yellow eyes flicking back to the dark tea in hand. "If an exhibition match is my only option, I will take that."

"Only the once." She reassured the man absently, making plans for someplace she could destroy and not feel bad about it to be found. "If you want anything beyond that, I will accept less watchers after
"...I have just volunteered to be an example, haven't I?"

Sonya merely smiled thinly at her 'guest' in confirmation.

If he wanted to build a rapport with her that badly, and she had the suspicion he had been ordered to, she would get some use out of him first.

No, she didn't really care what Fong's Triad was trying with her. There were suspicions, but someone like her would be damn near impossible to actually threaten or coerce in any way if she really wanted out.

The thief didn't have very good options if anything was tried, but there were still options.

Actions versus intentions. She rather valued the actions more than the intents behind it, however dubious.

That didn't mean she wasn't going to be as suspicious as hell over any hooks the Wo Hop To Triad tried sinking into any bait they left for her, but until they actually pissed her off she'd play nicely.

At least she'd get a semi-decent estimation of how well her fighting skills stacked up against someone actually trained to fight, and not have to subside with assumptions made on spats with ill-trained or scared-stiff grunts.

Fong and his damn point hoarding.

Sonya did kind of wonder if he was stabbing her or his fellow in the back with this 'suggestion'.

She might get a fight, an actual bout with someone that wouldn't be petrified to even look her in the eye she hadn't had since she left her childhood home, but it would require her to be nice and polite to the Chinese Triad members she normally wouldn't have really bothered with.

Especially if she wanted more than just one, or if she might want rematches. Playing nice with Fong's Triad was kind of an iffy thing, given they had already tried to acquire her once before.

Xiasheng was either being set up to have the tar beaten out of him, or to cement her interests if he could at least match her without her inhuman strength. He might have the experience to outwit her too, which... just made the thief even keener on at least one spar to see if he was or not.

"When?" Sonya asked lightly, and probably a touch too eagerly from his expression.

"This weekend?"

Damn, she didn't really want to give up her family time. It soothed the part of her that wanted to hunt Cherep down and ensure he was still in one piece after doing stupid and suicidal things for a paycheck. "I generally go visit my sister then... early next week?"

"...I have changed from being an example to being a test subject, haven't I?"

The thief offered a sharp little smile and a shrug. "Very few people seem to have the balls to fight me, knowing full well what I am."

Xiasheng acquired a very wry and slightly self-deprecating smirk. "Am I stress relief, as well?"

"You are proving to be very talented at being possibly useful, I'll admit."
(Saturday the 12th of April, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Usov, looking entirely too damn serious for her tastes, appeared in her borrowed office late at night when she was finishing up orders for replacement stones with Galina.

Sonya wouldn't have to go steal them, a few would be kicked over to some of their fellow thieves to manage as it was less urgent, and she was only half-thankful for it. Which made her admittedly grumpy because while she didn't have to steal it herself it didn't mean she was alright with passing on the responsibilities.

It was for her work, her office however temporary, and not doing it seemed like shirking duties somehow. However, she didn't have the time to go flitch things if she was also matching others.

The Triad members weren't nice exactly, but they did behave themselves better when it was her in the room and not just some random vory. Said vory also weren't exactly accommodating when questions over her location were asked by keenly curious Triad members.

For interests of keeping everything moving in the right direction, and not having to stop for whatever little tiff to be resolved, it was better if she was there.

Her Lightning had bought her an ashtray when she brought up the fact they would likely need to replace a few of the focus-possible stones before their allied Triad's Flame users were all matched. It wasn't as aggravating as being drowned in her own weight of tea, but since it was half full already after only three hours the thief felt it was close enough.

"Usov, are you really here or is this just a Constructed image of you?" She knew what he was here for, she didn't need to hear it.

This question had been bothering her since the last time he had visited her office, as she might as well ask since they had the opportunity.

The Mist gained a half-smirk, drifting over to the desk where Galina was hurriedly checking to see if everything was done. "Just an image, our little mirror lady stumbled onto this astral-projection trick and taught the rest of us."

Sonya cast her mind back to the roster lists of Mists, all of whom she had really never met but got reports about from Usov. Anna, she was pretty sure the girl's name was, the next Mist that arrived at the Zolotov clan after him.

Mirror Lady Anna, who somehow came to them from the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, was what she got nicknamed among her Flame type. For an entirely nightmare inducing ability to utilize mirrors as a kind of portal-focus to the point she carried a hand mirror with her.

Some of the nasty Constructs she could conjure through those also spoke of a girl that liked horror and grotesque things, which starkly contrasted with her well-bred mannerisms the Zolotovs had no hand in giving her.

Another reason why she greatly preferred staying out of the Mist users' way. She had enough headaches from dealing with the others, Usov was at least somewhat immune to his fellow's developing strangeness.

…or had more than enough of his own developed to counter any outside influences.
"Where are you?" Entirely disconcerting to be asking someone that face-to-sort-of-face or not, if Usov wasn't actually here…

"The edges of the Voykovsky District, Fadei is making his slow way up the Leningradskoye highway. South of us and the harbor. Walking, not… much of anything else."

The frown was mostly reflexive simply on principle, Sonya would admit. No matter how idiotic she found the Rain, she also knew it hadn't always been the case.

Why the hell was he walking, when she knew for a fact he signed out a car from the clan's motor pool?

Especially likely carrying with him the funds he'd need to pay his dues for a year at least?

Maybe he broke it, doing whatever it was he did, or ditched it because he got chased. If that was the case, he had better be carrying more than enough to either purchase a new car or to pay off one of the carjackers in the clan to do their thing.

Whatever, she didn't really care all that much. "…come back."

"Sonya."

"I don't want you there when I get there." The thief continued over him, pulling the Nagant M1895 revolver Tatiana had suggested to her from her purse to check to see if she had loaded it or not. There were only seven bullets in the chambers, and if she missed more than once at close range she'd resort to breaking his neck or something. "In fact, I don't want you physically anywhere near him at all."

She was pretty certain the Discordant Flame syndrome shit they fell into with Fadei wasn't infectious, unless you were dealing with a Sky suffering from it. She also didn't really care to risk Usov like that, even on remote chances, nor did she want the preteen there when she killed someone in cold blood.

Replacing the young Mist would be a nightmare aside any help he needed to deal with difficulties or trauma he developed on his own, and not just from dealing with his fellows and their personalities.

"I'm not anywhere near him." Usov pointed out, still weirdly serious sounding compared to the slightly manically happy edge she had grown used to hearing from him over the last year. "I would much rather keep ensuring others don't pay attention to him, and you when you get there, than leave both to chance."

Sonya glared at the young brat… but he did have a point.

Mists were damn near invaluable because of their attention directing abilities, which greatly offset their seemingly strange-ness or insanity when dealing with one. Her work would be so much smoother if she allowed it, and it would mean she'd have more time to be not-sloppy following their Pahkan's orders.

"I know," Usov cut her off before she could say anything to that effect, "what you were ordered. I also know you're not happy with that. Because you're not happy, and my assistance would allow you that much more room for error in it, is why I want to. Let me pay you back for screwing my head on straight as a child, if only this little bit."

Sighing heavily and digging out yet another of the probably-not-doing anything cigarettes from her greatly diminished pack of them, she only put off agreeing long enough to lite it and take a drag.
"Fine. Two blocks of space, and not directly behind the ass. You so much as step inside that..."

"Thank you." The preteen Mist's strange seriousness faded as if it was never there, which left the kid giving her a bright grin as if she just promised him something highly expensive and tricky to acquire... or promised him to be a willing test subject for whatever mind-fuckery his Mists had dreamed up lately. "Now then, should I... ah, misdirect and manage our oh-so fractured Rain around a little to keep him just on the edge of the clan's territory?"

"...just keep him still."

(Sunday the 13th of April, 1969. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Do you really see nothing wrong with your behavior?"

Fadei jerked and twitched just far enough to give the little bitch that snuck up on him from the front a blistering glare. She really didn't seem to care for his expression, merely gave him an unimpressed flat stare back for his troubles.

"If I promise you whatever it is you are so rabid for, would you at least talk to me?"

Pity she chose to do this in the middle of a sidewalk, for all that they were strangely not attracting much attention. Might be because it was the middle of the night, or because she arranged it that way.

The Rain really wanted to bloody that bland face of hers, especially since Sonya never saw him as much of a threat to her.

"Lying, Bazanova? To my face?" Impossibly well-connected or not, there was no way the little girl had the reach to convince the random pedestrians passing them to pay them no mind. There was something else going on... "Full of yourself, aren't you?"

"I rather respect who you seemed to once be, because that Fadei at least had a head filled with more than just Sky obsession." Continued the mere thief as if she hadn't heard him at all, blandly as if she wasn't baiting him with the Sky he was being kept from and standing in his way yet again. "It's a pity how far you've fallen."

"Fallen?" Fadei echoed incredulously.

Why was she confronting him here, of all places?

There was no one around for her to show off to, was giving him time to prepare for whatever she could do instead of letting her taken him by surprise. The fact she kept on looking at him as if he wasn't going to amount to anything made him itch to-

"Your standards are a little skewed, aren't they bitch?"

"Skewed? I suppose, in a way, my expectations for you were more than a little unfair."

...what?

What was she trying now?

"Expecting you to behave in a manner other than an addict looking for a fix seems to have been... unwise."
He would never admit to anyone, much less himself, that the rim of red outside her normally grey eyes acquired when violence was possible freaked him out a little. It was different from Zarya's, much different. There was a tiny gleam of yellow somewhere in that ashy-blood color which…

That bloody look was back in her gaze, just as it had been when she got a drop on his group and dismantled them with insulting ease.

"You are about to serve as an object lesson, so pay attention." After saying that, she ignored him in order to dig out a pack of Marlboro cigarettes out of her pocket. "Not that it will do you much good after tonight."

Belatedly realizing he was just giving her time to play with his head, as well as the lack of witnesses meant she could do anything she wanted and it would only be her word against his for what happened, he reached for the calming blue fire Dmitriy – traitor! – had taught him to grasp.

Sonya's eyes flicked to his hands, absently examining the Flames of Rain he held. "I am so lucky Usov convinced me to allow him to come."

That Mist fan-boy of hers was here?

Well, Fadei thought nastily while glaring at the icy bitch, that explained who she was posturing for. Not that he was going to let-

A barked report of a handgun was almost insulting more than shocking. The pain was startling enough he lost grip on his will, his blue Flames flickered out without his say so.

The pedestrians had all fallen asleep around them, under the influence of wildly leaking Tranquility. Probably the only reason why there were no car crashes even in the split second he had full control over his Flames was due to that little annoying brat of hers.

End of spring or not, it was still slightly chilly out enough to require thick coats. Fadei grasped the new tear in his, which almost scalded his own fingers with the blood pouring out a sudden hole in his left lung.

Sonya re-cocked the revolver she had just shot him with. "Forgive my bad aim, it's been a few years."

"…you… shot-?"

"Dying Will Flame users or not, we're all still human enough to die by very simple means." She leveled the still smoking barrel straight at his head, and even the people now coming up on them and the sleeping pedestrians seemed to find nothing wrong with the situation.

Which didn't quite mesh with him, somehow.

They were all civilians, why didn't they start screaming or something?

She had shot him.

Why wasn't he doing something?

She had no Rain Flames to do this with.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Fadei coughed, splattering both his mouth and the sidewalk with his own blood. Internal bleeding
dimly occurred to him between that hazy non-reaction and a sense of unreality.

A gun?

She had once pinned him in place for hours with a gold ax.

Why a gun?

Fadei had expected her to try a fight again, but he had little intention of letting her get the first lick in. She wasn’t the smoothest fighter, jerky and more reactive than anyone that brawled regularly were. The fact she opted to scorn even admitting she got lucky that first time to just shoot him seemed… bewildering.

He also couldn’t quite figure out when he fell to his knees, or how he could feel so cold when something fucking hot was spilling down his front.

"Kazimir seems to be taking up control of your little morons rather well, and I’m content to allow that to continue. Hopefully they’ll at least develop more, and somehow evade this end themselves." Sonya continued evenly, as if she hadn’t just perforated his lung with a revolver or was still holding him at gunpoint. "Either way, I’ll have little to do with them anymore. So they’ll likely be out of my reach after this."

No, wait… that cold feeling was his Flames. Rain Flames, Tranquilizing his body to slow the bleeding. Fadei could literally feel his heart slow, the bleeding escaping his fingers fall to a trickle.

He was going to survive this, then he'd find that little Sky of his and somehow murder this bitch.

Maybe Dmitriy too, since he was the one to start this from jealousy. Since the baby Sky found him unworthy but let Fadei get a sense for his Flames.

His… fellows, who all lost their nerve after she destroyed them in fight she got the drop on them, could go to hell for all he cared.

"Sonya, the militsiya have been called about the gunshot." Even if there was no body, Fadei dimly recognized the voice of the Mist boy that all but fawned over the Storm-Cloud thief. "Outside of my reach, sorry. They are on their way already, two have passed by only to be redirected. Or the same one doubled back. Either way, we need to leave."

Usov simply appeared as if he always stood there and didn't have the balls to actually look at him, at what his precious leader did to him. His eyes, glowing with more than a bit of his darker blue Flames, were locked on the profile of Sonya's face.

She narrowed her bloody-ash eyes slightly in response, but the revolver didn’t twitch. "End of the line, Fadei. You have our Pahkan to thank for it."

Wimp out, he tried to will her. If she would only show the base craven nature he knew she had, he'd survive. Sonya was a thief, a girl-child playing at being a leader. Like hell she had the guts-

Fadei didn't hear the second bark of the revolver, his brain matter that would have processed the sound ended up sprayed out over the sidewalk behind his dead body.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 13th of April, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)
"Can I have it?"

Sonya paused, the trickle of Storm Flames she was going to pour over the gun in her hand clung to her other as she considered his request. "Why?"

"Because." Usov grinned brightly at her as they walked back to the car she had taken out there, which earned him a dubious look in return. "I want it."

No one would believe she shot someone with it, she was known for throwing medieval weapons around when irritated. Why would she use a revolver when she had an endless supply of axes to use?

The fact Fadei had been killed by a gunshot to the head would just prevent most from realizing she had done it.

"You're a little disturbing, Usov." The thief that had been so patient with him, even if she didn't like how he clung to her in revenge for being so bluntly spoken way back when, remarked idly.

However, she did pass the weapon over instead of Disintegrate it, and then ignored the fact he had a loaded gun in hand.

Taking the strangely heavy pistol, grip first which meant she did have some small arms training like most of them did, Usov broke open the barrel curiously.

Two still warm to the touch casings steamed a little in the cool spring evening, but there were five rounds still chambered.

He wasn't sure what he should feel in respects to the fact Sonya just murdered someone. They both knew him too, and he knew she killed him. Had watched her kill him, dragging it out because she really hadn't wanted to but would do it anyways since Fadei was a possible risk to the rest of them. Mostly to the young Rains.

Being perfectly happy with just the fact she let him tag along and help her probably wasn't what someone should feel in the aftermath of watching a murder take place. Fadei wasn't his first body, nor the first one he'd ever seen killed in front of him. That dubious distinction belonged to one of the vor her father had on hand when some kind of talk had gone south, when he was following them out of pure boredom one day.

Snapping the barrel of his new gun closed, Usov let it nestle in a Constructed holster he pinned to the inside of his leather jacket his mom gave him on his eleventh birthday. "Can we stop for ice cream?"

"It's almost midnight." Sonya informed him bemusedly with a touch of tiredness, digging the keys she had silently borrowed from the clan out of her pocket to unlock the doors of their equally borrowed ride. "You shouldn't be eating sugar this late. Eating before bed causes weird dreams anyways."

"I'm a Mist, I dream lucidly. I'm still not convinced if that's a Usov thing or a Mist one." Which was fun, actually. Making such dreams make sense in the light of day was kind of a past time for him and a few other Mists that did share the trait. "Please?"

Regarding him levelly, the thief gestured to the open car door for him to get in as she pulled one last time on her cigarette and crushed the remains under the tip of her boot. "Maybe. If I spot somewhere still open. Get in, brat, so we can go home."

They were far enough away Usov's Mist Flames were starting to fade from his grip, which means
those sirens blaring in the background were actually finally getting close to Fadei's body. However, the two of them were streets away from the scene and more than enough kilometers from headquarters to nearly guarantee she'd stop for his request.

"Are we going to get his dues somehow? You didn't take it before shooting him."

"He didn't have it on him. I suspect it's either with the car he's signed out with or stashed somewhere safe." Sonya gave a shrug as she slipped into the driver's seat and turned the engine over. "Someone's going to have to hunt it down or retrace his steps to find it. Once the clan is informed."

The Mist blinked innocently at her pointed look, but when she merely stared at him flatly did finally pull the clunky seat belt over his lap with a pout and click it in place. "So... ice cream?"

"Aren't your parents waiting up for you?"

"Nope. I sometimes stay overnight, they're used to me 'sleeping over' with a few of the other Mists." His parents were merely happy Usov had 'friends' who were alright with his abilities after worrying he'd have trouble fitting in, and as long as no one told them he actually had minions he was pretty happy with the arrangement.

Besides, it wasn't a lie when a few of the older Mists did live in the Zolotov headquarters.

The thief found something about his words shifty, from the side-eye he got as she pulled the car rather smoothly into the sparse traffic on the streets for someone that rarely drove herself around.

However, she didn't comment on it and instead the Storm-Cloud changed the subject. "In about two months, another Mist I know will be here."

"Oh?" Usov couldn't quite keep the frown out of his tone, or off his face. Another Mist he had to share her with?

He had kept the others away from her handily so far, rumors of Cloud-Mist interactions had helped a lot but some of it was her own rather touchy reputation working for him. He didn't really want to share her attention whenever he got it.

"He's half your age."

Ah... baby Mist. She was probably helping said baby Mist like she had him, which... fair enough.

He couldn't quite be disgruntled about that, as it was her nature to help if only for the information she could extract out of said helping. Said information would also go to helping others understand or develop their own Flame skills further, which he also couldn't really begrudge whoever this was since he'd likely benefit from it.

"What do you want me to do?"

"...I'm halfway positive the people he's been with have filled his head with fluff and stupid things. Shamal is also slightly impressionable, for all his is a Mist since around the age of three and orphaned. Ensure he's not thinking stupid things, and just help him develop a bit more in ways he's suited for."

Mentoring another out-of-town Mist, then. He could do that. "Alright. Ice cream?"

Sonya sighed heavily, twitching her left hand away from the pocket that held her smokes. "Yes, fine.
Valera did not like being cuddled unless it was his idea.

It was such an Arseniy thing for his son to do it made Sonya smirk every damn time. Even if he did kick the underside of her jaw getting free of her loose grip.

His father didn’t really like being piled upon unless he somehow made it clear it was allowed, which usually was whenever Lisa decided she needed pampering and nudged or pushed him to the living room’s couch.

She had a very vague, likely hormone-induced daydream of once curling up to him way back when. The Storm-Cloud didn't believe it really happened, it was probably a fragment of a dream she was trying to suppress for likely good reason.

She was normally fine with that non-touching thing. Sonya wasn't a touchy-feely person often, and the number of people she felt comfortable with getting that close to could be counted on one hand.

She just felt bad enough to want it now, but Tatiana was somewhere in the middle of an ocean out of day-trip reach unless she went by air and Cherep was who-knows-where. Shamal was… in the middle of Vongola territory and a short visit would irritate her even more than she already was.

There were tickets for her to catch a plane later that night, so inevitably she’d get time to spend time with the nurse anyways but that was for then.

The thief hadn't been sleeping well, not since she and Usov went to get ice cream and sort out Mist-problems… as far as the rest of their clan knew. She had expected that, given her sleeping issues back after France that first time out with Cherep, but that still didn’t mean she appreciated the restlessness.

Cold-blooded murder was very much different than rescuing a civilian family from the consequences of Renato's misstep, or a self-control accident which ended in death. That meant she had no idea how or when these nightmares of bloody rains or smoking guns would end.

However, Sonya didn't seem to care much that she added another life stolen to her tally of them. Not caring much also made her slightly concerned, because she could still understand murder wasn't really the best option even if she apparently wasn’t morally opposed to it.

That could be anything from the consequences of hanging around a vory for long periods of time, or even dealing her own contacts who used murder as a job description, or her very vexing Cloud nature rearing its ugly head again.

Possibly even knowing full well that a lot of the people she interacted with could and possibly had done something to another like what happened to Rachel. Accidents happened, except with their lifestyle civilian accidents tended to be lethal for them.

The least she could do was firmly remind herself Fadei would've ended up a threat to some possible-Sky brat, and there were Vindice laws against allowing their fellow Flame users act out and catch obvious attention like that. It wasn't the best option, was a rather wasteful one, but apparently correct as far as the underworld was concerned.
It also sounded like excuses, which was where the main amount of her disgruntlement was stemming from.

Being tired and admittedly grumpy over the whole semi-disturbing mess made her want to snuggle with her baby brother on the couch instead of anything else, she would even compromise and read him one of his picture-with-caption books instead of one of her own… but the brat had other ideas of what to do with his sister's undivided attention.

That disinclination for touch she was running into was also a very Cloudy thing for a toddler to do. Especially since she was mostly sure he wasn't actively a Flame user himself still.

Her idle wonderings on that and if the remaining three Rains had put her visitor's slot with Dmitriy to any use was interrupted by a stuffed dog almost impacting her face. Snatching it out of the air, a bit belatedly due to her fatigue, left her holding one of Tatiana's old stuffed animals by an ear.

Then Sonya and Valera got into a staring contest.

These were becoming more frequent. The thief really did wonder if it was due to the nature they likely shared, even if his wasn't active, or if it was something else like inherited nature vs nurture.

If she won, and she usually did, they'd do whatever she wanted to do. If she lost, which meant if their mother or father somehow interrupted and gained her attention instead, they did what he wanted to do.

The Storm-Cloud didn't want to spend a morning being the guardian of whatever plushies her baby brother shoved on her, so she didn't intend to lose today. She straightened up and dropped the dog to her lap, causing the kid to have to crane his neck up in order to keep eye contact with her.

"Sonya, do you know where the dried peach slices got to?"

A spark of triumph entered Valera's stare as Lisa's voice reached them, which made Sonya narrow her eyes at him. She was not going to lose.

The toddler cocked his head to the side, then blinked deliberately.

…the little brat threw their contest?

Feeling weirdly insulted, the thief sniffed then belatedly realized Lisa had been speaking to her. "Sorry, what was that?"

"Never mind, I know where they went." Lisa remarked with a smirk, glancing down to her son's chubby fist. Which was knotted in a ripped open bag of the dried fruits she had apparently been looking for. "Something wrong?"

"No." She would admit to sulking, but to nothing else.

Sonya was tired, she was entitled to be upset her toddler-aged baby brother was patronizing her.

The ending of this week had turned out rather bad, which she was going to blame her bad mood on. The thief ignored Valera pulling on her skirts, he wasn't quite coordinated enough to clamber up onto the couch without aid just yet.

"Well?" Lisa asked aloud, apparently to her son and not the foster daughter. "You did it, fix it."

There was a rustle of something she was decidedly not paying attention to.
"And not with the fruit you stole out of the kitchen on me, scamp."

If he could steal something from Lisa's domain while she was in there, he was rather entitled to his little snack. More likely, if he got Arseniy to fetch it for him somehow she'd be impressed.

The vor wasn't a mushy kind of person that was easily manipulated.

Their mother apparently didn't agree with her, she rescued the remains of her dried peaches rather handily. Valera was more than suitably distracted, trying to regain Sonya's attention.

Which she wasn't giving him, if he was going to try suckering her like that. She'd rather win on her own merits.

"Up."

Not even blinking, because she knew full well he could talk he just didn't often, Sonya sniffed in offense again. "No."

"Your sister is a very proud kind of person, she hates to be patronized." Lisa offered on her way back to the kitchen, leaving them alone in the living room.

Obviously a few of those words were outside a year-and-a-half old child's grasp, but the general gist seemed to have carried over decently well. Not that it seemed Valera knew what to do with that kind of information when paired with what he did.

Seating himself before the couch, still in reach of the hem of her skirt, the brat scowled at the fabric as if it had done him some kind of wrong.

Sonya realized that being offended on behalf of her clothing was ridiculous and figured she might be being petty or something.

With a sigh, she leaned forward until Valera looked up again. "Don't do that again."

She received a very serious nod in return for her effort. Then a gesture demanding she pick him up, after a stubborn moment on both their ends.

Giving in, because cutting off her nose to spite her face was something she found stupid and silly, the thief pulled him up on the couch with her.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 13th of April, 1969 continued. South Beach, Mafia Land.)

"What a brat."

"Mmph."

"Not him, you." Tatiana clarified happily, ignoring the elbow her little sister planted in her ribs. "You really threw a little snit because Valera decided to let you win once?"

"...I realized it? Sort of." Sonya offered in an absent way, staring out over the sea as they sat on a bench on Mafia Land's beach. She sipped the melting ice cream dripping on her fingers before continuing. "It wasn't very nice of him, though."

Most people would take it as a favor or something done out of concern, but not her socially awkward little sister. A belated realization that their youngest brother was probably going to end up as
awkward as her made the nurse huff a laugh around her own ice cream cone.

With Sonya as the only sibling that had long stretches of time to visit him within?

Tatiana dearly hoped Lisa had realized it herself and was taking steps to ensure Valerian wasn't going to grow up with a copy of the thief's social competence.

"Why do you only order vanilla?" A change of subject, or her little sister would sulk more at her if the nurse's line of thought was brought up. "They have very good combinations you could try."

"I like vanilla." She cast a skeptical look at her own cone. "...and I think what you have counts as at least half frozen fruit rather than ice cream."

What she had was a double berry swirl. "It's healthier."

In response to her claim she snorted. "With the amount of additional sugar they poured into that as well? I doubt it."

"It's ice cream, Nya."

"...point."

Sonya's grey eyes drifted back out across the artificial surf created from the island's wake as it moved through the ocean, giving Tatiana an opportunity.

She was pretty sure the thief hadn't noticed or was purposely ignoring it.

Same difference, really.

Some stealthy application of her Sun Flames to the bottom of her little sister's ice cream cone ensured a very sticky problem recurred. However, Sonya didn't react the same was as last time. Neither did Tasty Muscles.

She eyed the sticky white and cold mess splattered over her bare thighs. "This only happens when the two of you are near me. One of you is doing it."

"Not me." Fong, the traitor, answered swiftly.

He, probably catching onto her movements and not wanting an exact repeat of last time, had decided the sky was a lot more interesting than the second take of this situation. Red eyes were very firmly locked on the distant horizon as the man evaded looking at the results of her efforts again.

Tatiana blinked innocently in the face of Sonya's less-than-amused expression. "You're going to believe some guy you only recently met over you beloved older sister?"

Those grey eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"I'm... going to go now. Be sure to be at the hospital around nine island time, little sis. Have fun!"

No, she wasn't running. It was a tactical retreat. Nya would get her revenge eventually, so it was best to limit what she had to get revenge upon.

(ooo0000oo)

(Sunday the 13th of April, 1969 continued. South Beach, Mafia Land.)
Since her sister decided to bolt, likely to the condo to monopolize the shower first to scrub the salt from their swim off her skin, Sonya considered what limited options she had to clean herself off without giving the pervert next to her a free show.

"Do you have a moment?"

A glance showed her that the martial artist was focused on the water and holding out a few serviettes for her.

…napkins, holding napkins for her.

She plucked them out of his grasp, using the first to wrap the remains of her cone in while she dealt with her little issue. "Sure. What?"

"Well… I am mainly interested in how things are going."

The thief pushed the bulk of the white mess off her skin easily enough, but that left her with a thin film of rapidly warming sugary stickiness to deal with. "What is Xiasheng's agenda, anyways?"

Fong hummed a moment, folding his hand back into his sleeves. "I have no idea what you mean."

"Of course you do not." Licking the fragile paper helped a little, but she was still uncomfortably sticky. Under the island's heat, since they were pretty close to the equator right now, it was making her wonder how to hijack the shower from her sister instead of continuing to talk to Fong. "I meant what do you think he wants?"

"Good relations?"

"If I am to be the one overseeing all the efforts going on, I do not also have the time to establish good relations."

Fong risked a quick glance at her, which she only caught by the swinging flick of the tail of his braid out of the corner of her eye. "While that may be true, surely a friendly spar isn't too much to ask?"

Sonya now had sticky and kind of papery fingers. Giving up on doing it a normal way, her right hand ended up bathed in her Storm Flames for a moment to remove the sugar giving her problems before applying the ultimate cleaner to her thighs. "So, you do have something to do with him."

"Of course I do. I assume he said as much himself."

"He did, but independent confirmation is always nice." Now sugar-less, if not entirely salt-less, the thief tossed her abandoned cone and the rest of the paper napkins and re-crossed her legs. "There is no way you could have known what the outcome of the talks would be, although I will give you it was entirely more than possible they would go well since it was mutually beneficial."

"I… did suggest it as a way to acquire your attention and gain us a bit more advantage if things didn't go smoothly." Admitted the martial artist calmly, another whipping motion of his braid informed her he was checking to ensure she was done cleaning herself up. "However, that is the extent of what I did."

"And the fact Xiasheng compared his skills to yours and then to the things you told him about our own little tussle means…?"

Now fully facing her, Fong quirked a serene little smile at her. Then seemed to realize exactly what she was wearing and found issue with it, by how quickly his gaze wandered south then was firmly
yanked back up to fix just over her head. "That they were very impressed when I held my own against you, and Clouds are not completely common where I am from."

Yeah, she likely wouldn't be getting anything from this angle. Leaning back against the sun-warmed bench, Sonya crossed her arms and huffed. "Aside from checking to ensure your machinations are going well? What else did you want?"

"Machinations is a very strong word, Sonya. I was only curious. However, Yaozu-sifu has agreed to travel to the Soviet Union in order to teach. Although… he is being a bit more stubborn than I anticipated."

The first impulse should not be to copy Renato's favored way of prompting more information out of another. Sonya frowned, but had to admit she had been spending a lot of time with the hitman this year and would likely do more in a few months. "Oh?"

"Sifu has… reservations about teaching criminals." Admitted the Chinese Storm pleasantly, taking Tatiana's abandoned seat instead of risk another eyeful of her attire. As if what he said and what he was held no conflict at all. "Severe ones."

"…only one of the students that might be interested that I have in mind could be called a criminal, the other two only have connections. There is a great pool of baby-criminal want-to-be brats, as well as the civilians that might have their own wherever he sets up, but the degree of criminal accusation will vary. How severe are we talking?"

Fong, even perched on a bench with peeling paint in the middle of Mafia Land's boardwalk, gave off the impression of complete innocence and serenity. "Ah well… I mean he will likely refuse your one possible criminal student."

Sonya blinked over at him, because that really didn't tell her much.

He took her silence as an invitation to continue. "He's a very stubborn old man but will hold up his end of the bargain… as long as his limitations are heeded. I will introduce the two of you when you come to China this fall."

"Very sure of that, are we?"

"I am fairly confident you will find it more engaging than a ball could possibly be."

"…where did you hear about that?" Given gossip was a widely shared human vice, the thief wasn't exactly surprised he'd heard she attended a few of Vongola's Christmas Balls.

Regardless of how much she might not like their Skies the Italian Famiglia was very newsworthy, even on a drifting island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Those that attended such events did seem to be as equally newsworthy, much to her ire.

"Here and there." Fong temporalized, unfolding his left arm only to flick the wrist in a dismissing gesture. "…I've met Sinclair."

Exactly when did an Italian Mafioso and a member of the Chinese Triads meet?

Well… it was Mafia Land, she supposed that explained the how if not the why. Fong usually stuck to the eastern side of the island, and Renato pretty much lived in the western side when he had the time to come back.
"I have known him for years." Sonya settled on responding, fully aware the hitman was one of those people normally labeled as 'a bad influence'.

At least, when the man wasn't hunting hits down, since she didn't know what Renato was like when he was working.

It wasn't like she had cared way back when, and from all appearances neither had he.

The expression that crossed Fong's face, which she really only got half of because he was squarely keeping his eyes on the far horizon rather than face her again, seemed to be a bit wry. "An old friend, then?"

"...something like that."

"Ah." He apparently decided not to go down that path. "Sonya... do you have anything else to wear?"

Looking down in response, the thief wondered what was wrong with the purple and red bikini Tatiana bought for her. It wasn't quite the same Rachel had been used to, but close enough. "Not here. Why?"

He breathed out what was almost an aggravated sigh if it had be a small measure more forceful. "Just humor me. Not even a towel?"

"...Tats and I do not bring them, since we tend to dry... well, here." Casting a glance outward, to where the bolder mafia vacationers were exploring the carefully maintained swimming bay sandwiched between the rocky jutted end of the boardwalk and the harbor, Sonya mentally compared what she was wearing to what the other mafia women were.

There wasn't anything like string bikinis around, but frankly there were others showing a lot more skin than she was. A few had gone sans-tops, which Sonya hadn't before realized was allowed here.

Admittedly, it was a mafia owned and maintained beach. Depending on their confidence in themselves or their partners, they'd do whatever it was they were comfortable with and screw other people's' sensibilities.

Maybe a newer development?

What was wrong with what she was wearing, anyways?

"...one last thing?" Asked the Storm, moving to get up himself with a tone that implied he was well aware of her fraying temper but really wanted whatever it was.

"What?"

Fong winced at her half-bitten off question, folding his arms into his sleeves in what likely was habit from how often he did it. "Why did your sister want you to visit the hospital tomorrow? You're not injured, are you?"

"No... Storms can become immune to immunization shots and medical anesthesia." Sonya reluctantly informed him, since he was a Storm and likely either knew of or was aware of the problem and possibly shared it. "I found I cannot get drunk anymore, which made me wonder if anesthesia was possible. Or if I should bother getting immunization shots anymore. From what Tats found, I really should not since it does nothing for me."
A pensive frown formed on his tanned face. "...I do not recall the last time I have gotten sick."

"You might want to swing by as well, if only for a solid answer if you have the same issue." Sonya shrugged, fetching the shoes her sister had abandoned when running from her and her own smaller pair. "You could even offer Tats some assistance, since I only have the weekends to pitch in."

"Is that a greatly serious concern? Although I realize several will be most upset at an inability to become intoxicated, an immunity to anesthesia would also mean toxins and poisons... correct?"

"What happens if we ever run out of the Storm Flames that gives us the immunity?" She posed dryly, slipping her heels into the flimsy sandals Tatiana had insisted they wear. "Viruses eventually replicate themselves with our own cells, which would mean they would become part of us. And with that 'do no self-harm' thing of Flame use..."

"...I see."

Sonya waited a beat, but he didn't seem too inclined to keep asking questions. "Anything else?"

"Would you like to get some tea later?" Fong posed, risking one last eyeful of her apparel.

"Not today." Moscow's time zone and Mafia Land's current one was about five hours apart, which meant she really did feel like going to bed even if it was only about suppertime here.

"Another time then? I would like to hear how well Xiasheng performs against you."

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(Monday the 14th of April, 1969. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Why is he here?"

Galina only blinked as she picked her way delicately through the underbrush, but Gedeon's tone failed to make her hesitate. "Sonya wanted all of us here. He's part of us, therefore she wanted him here."

'He' in question seemed rather resigned to the fact he likely understood almost nothing of yet another conversation. 'Peter McScruffy' eyed the forest with more interest than he held for either the bigger Sun or the Lightning guiding him through the forest.

Dying Will Flame user of Sun or not, the vor was more than a little skeptical of his emaciated fellow. He didn't know much more than the basics of Scruffy's situation, Sonya would only say she picked him up in Sierra Leone's Freetown on her way out because of his diamond laser trick.

Maybe with a mutter about jail-time not served if you caught her in a good mood.

Catching her in a good mood was near-impossible, at least for him.

Gedeon would consider that he might have been a little heavy handed with her in the beginning, mostly due to several misunderstandings and what seemed to be her complete apathy to the prospect of networking even with her fellow thieves.

Since all he had known of Sonya before actually meeting her was that she stepped aside in Dmitriy's favor years ago when the Dying Will thing was still new, and that she had been fostered under Arseniy and Lisa for her childhood, assuming that he was being attached to 'her' office as someone to
mitigate whatever damage she'd do to the 'Rain's' work wasn't really that inconvincible.

Sonya didn't have the temperament for the position she was forced to hold. The thief had apparently known that years ago well before she could possibly be asked to do something she wasn't fit for.

A bad habit of stomping those getting unruly under her thumb, a disinclination to actually communicate what her aims were to others, and a heavy preference for the more bookwork side of the office than the interpersonal part made her a less than ideal secondary if the Inverted Rain was still unavailable.

Most senior Dying Will Flame user they had or not.

However, she had the skills to do it even if it went against her grain. There wasn't much really required, and she did fail the managing personnel side of the work, but in developing more useful applications for the skill the Storm-Cloud was proving to be better than Dmitriy.

Gedeon had expected her to be more of a purist in regard to the information in her precious books, but Sonya was actually more of a radical in how it could be used and ignored the bulk of her sources. Dmitriy looked like a conservative Flame user next to her, more of a plodding old man than the student to her he apparently had been.

Dmitriy was steady in his approach to the Flames of Rain he held, Sonya was actually flightier and poked more into everything. In a 'twist your head to the side and squint' kind of way.

Said flightiness when it came to information meant Scruffy was pretty much here to stay, for as long as she was forced to be. He held a skill she wasn't aware was possible, and a trick with a stone they all had thought was more unresponsive than anything. Until she was satisfied with how and why it wasn't likely the Storm-Cloud would seriously consider sticking him somewhere else.

"Tell him to stay out of the way, then." They were going to watch Sonya attempt to oppose one of the Chinese Flame users, and Gedeon was more than a bit interested in how that would go down. "I mean this in a most respectful way but tell him yourself." Galina sniffed as she drew even with him, pulling her coat more firmly around herself as a fresh breeze whipped through the trees.

The best part of having territory bisected by a waterway was the numerous warehouses dotting the banks and large expanses of parks available for clandestine reasons. The Zolotovs covered a great stretch of both sides of the Moscow Canal, reaching a bit farther west than they did east. An outlying piece of Moscow proper, but the smuggling routes and the still fairly dense urban areas made up for the lack of entrenched businesses around them.

The forest park in the Pokrovskoye-Streshnevo District wasn't actually part of their territory, but it at least had the cover for anything too destructive now that the leaves were coming in on the trees. Sonya had actually wanted something more urban, but Gedeon had seen her toss a hammer one-handed through six panes of reinforced bullet proof glass before.

How well she could fight was immaterial, with that kind of damage dealt out in the blink of an eye. He'd pay for damages to the woodland if need be, as he really didn't want to get caught within a collapsing building if she got a bit too carried away.

"He doesn't speak Russian."

"Ah… I feel I must interject something here." Scruffy spoke up for himself in Russian, an expression torn between pained and aggravated on his too-thin features. "Young Usov managed to reverse engineer a Mist trick from something Sonya heard from her Lackey this last weekend, to give me a
general understanding of your language. Depending on how well it sticks, or when it fades away, translation duties will likely fall to any Mist instead of requiring foreign language studies."

Gedeon had to blink in the face of that calm if resigned spiel, then glanced at the Lightning still shivering in her coat. "...that's fucking lazy."

"Obviously we're not going to hammer languages into everyone's head that way." Galina scoffed, sniffing again but this time more for her reddening nose than to show off her momentary snit. "But as emergency translation? Scruffy's merely the test subject to see how well it works and how long it lasts."

"I would not suggest trying it yourself if there's another way." The thin Sun continued, now looking more than pained. "While I am used to unpleasant sensations, this was oddly sideways enough I still have a headache. Talking or listening to conversations in this language isn't helping."

The Lightning gave a shrug, likely not really caring too much for his discomfort. "If enough sticks, I'll work with you on expanding your vocabulary if you help me learn English."

"I would greatly appreciate that."

Probably an understatement. Gedeon had seen the gaggle of young Classic Suns trying to broaden Scruffy's grasp on their language, and the three Inverted that took a crack of their own at it.

Great entertainment to watch, but probably not very helpful to someone that barely understood the basics of spoken Slavic languages.

"How is that even possible? Mist Flames do Construction, illusions, not..." He couldn't really come up with a word for how he wanted to phrase 'mental hijacking'.

Given where they were and what was going on, he'd put money on at least two Mists specifically listening in on them while they waited for things to get started.

"Usov believed it would work, giving Scruffy a Constructed understanding of our native tongue. Sonya accepted his argument easily enough, and the proof is before us." Shrugging again, she gestured to the more than likely Classical Sun user who still had a fairly pinched expression. "So, apparently they can."

"Belief seems to be their only limitation, which would also suggest belief is the limitation they work with when it comes to affecting others." Peter continued for her absently, a hand rubbing the back of his head as his attention wandered. "Also, I had to undergo the experiment twice when I disbelieved it would work the first time. Of course it failed, but enough of Usov's Mist Flames lingered that I was able to catch a few more words I had not known before and found I really could believe that was a viable way to learn a language in a short amount of time."

Gedeon arched an eyebrow as the man rambled on.

"Possibly, it might not be that Storms and other Mists are the best defense to a hostile Mist. It could entirely be just a frame of mind which Storms are certain they can do because Sonya proved able to Disintegrate Constructions at will and other Mists have a more personal understanding of the mechanics involved. It would be interesting to see if someone without Flames can be trained to resist Mist Flame 'suggestions', or what would be needed to train another Flame user not Storm or Mist to resist as well as Sonya could."

"...so that's why she wants you."
"He does have a more analytical and trained mind, which could be bent for very specific skills if we direct him. A mature Sun user as well, Classical, which would mean he should be more teacher-material than any number of the young ones."

"I… am…" Scruffy paused, then continued in a more deliberate tone as he refocused on the both of them. "Collage was almost ten years ago for me. Surely there's someone else better suited."

"We have what equates to homeschooled, and very specifically targeted, educations." Dismissed Galina with a sharp little smirk. "You are still the most educated person in this clearing. I don't think any of us will even bother with attempting higher education, and if we do they would be similarly targeted in scope."

"They're getting ready to start." Gedeon huffed at the two of them, jerking a head at the far clearing they were well away from but still able to see. "I want to see how this goes."

The other Sun's expression turned wry even as he turned in that direction. "I've seen her melt her way through concrete and stone, then punch her way through four feet of packed dirt and brick. I don't think he's going to last."

"That's utility, not a battle use." Insisted the Lightning, checking to see if her position would be good enough to see herself. "I've seen her fight three of the Four Rains, punch out a Storm, and yet years ago she utterly failed fighting a hand-to-hand specialist even with her strength. Oh… and all but trounce a little brat that shares her Cloud Flame type, but that was more recent."

"When was this?" He was pretty sure he would've heard about it if Sonya had finally run across another of her ridiculously tricky Flame type.

"…few weeks ago? Last month, for sure." Galina continued thoughtfully, as both her boss lady and the Triad member finalized the last-minute details of what they were allowing each other but seemingly yet another issue was brought up that needed addressing. "That's right, you still don't know. The Khimki Cloud is alive. We're just not drawing attention to him, so he might survive being one."

Gedeon stared at her hard. "Why is this the first time I'm hearing about it?"

"You weren't there, and Sonya is trying to enable his continued survival by keeping her mouth shut about it." The woman shrugged that off, waving one hand to dismiss the topic he brought up. "Since we were trying to keep things contained, it wasn't like we could walk up to you and inform you of what had happened in headquarters. It's where Ziven got to, he's slowly prepping both the baby Cloud and his 'gang's' territory to become at least provincially added to the clan."

"Provincially?" Repeated the gaunt Sun as the other frowned and tried to find a fault with that reasoning for keeping him in the dark.

"Sonya said they'd murder the other if forced in close quarters. Since she's already proven he's not a match for her? Watching her go after him for attempting to murder her first was… an experience. Enough of one I don't actually think she'll get off injury free from this herself, but not enough to lose." Galina glanced down the incline to where said Storm-Cloud was discussing something with her erstwhile opponent. "I think it might actually be that they're not used to another, or that she was 'trespassing' in his territory. There isn't really a lot done on Cloud natures, not compared to the others, which means she's as blind to the long-term as everyone else."

Being highly skeptical of Sonya actually pulling a win out against a man actually trained and with honed skills for combat, Gedeon frowned. Scruffy still looked as if he expected the Storm-Cloud to
trump her competition from his skeptical glances, and since Galina was in the middle of their expectations the vor suggested something that might actually mend some of the fences he had torched with the Lightning.

"How about a bet?"
Sonya figured out Xiasheng was one of those very overly modest Asians pretty damn quick.

Politely spoken, as reserved as most that lived in the Far East, and utterly willing to take advantage of that since he had been the one to charge her once the match was started in an attempt to take her off guard.

He was the type that would downplay their own abilities and accomplishment as just a matter of fact, rather than display even a drop of arrogance or overblown pride in his skills. Would in fact dismiss his abilities as not remarkable at all in the hopes of avoiding anything smacking of arrogance.

No, he might not be at Fong's level. Wasn't quick enough, mostly, from what she could see.

Not if she could hook his ankle with a wickedly fast sweep of her staff at all while also getting herself out of his way.

However, she had the sneaking suspicion she had only done so much damage to the other Chinese martial artist herself because she hadn't exactly been clearly thinking at the time and Fong had stuck to mostly dodging at first.

Ducking to avoid a punch that would probably at least rattle her teeth, those gloves he showed up with were strangely stiff around the wrists which made her suspect Xiasheng was using a pair of cestus, meant she also had to bring her borrowed staff up instead of continue her sweep to prevent getting kicked in the head.

The bō staff was his, or at least something he produced for her. Somehow gaining an understanding that she would have to resort to less specifically designed lengths of materials to use as her weapons without being specially told so by her.

Someone had been talking, apparently.

Dissatisfied with being pushed on the defensive, especially since she was trying not to use her absurd strength to cut this short, Sonya used the planted end of her staff to vault over the Storm's head. He went the obvious route of punching the weapon from out underneath her, but that just meant she came down on his shoulders hard and just had to backflip to finish getting herself some space.

The push not only staggered but forced him forward, and she used the time to correct her grip and dig one end of her pole into the soft, mostly-decayed forest litter underfoot. Flinging it backwards and into his face when he spun, trying to get her within his field of view again.

Bare fingers, if gloved palms, meant when he used his own Storm Flames to eat through the dirt and half-moldered leaves he also didn't lose the protection of what was either ridged leather or metal plates. It still didn't prevent her from spinning back around and lightly jamming the length of her staff into the back of one knee, taking Xiasheng to the ground in a half-kneeling position before he could clear his vision fully.

While anyone else might have seriously inconvenienced by being forced down, fully trained fighters seemed less so. Xiasheng snagged the end of the staff lodged in the back of his right knee with both
hands, attempting to yank the weapon out of hers.

Sonya dug her boot heels into the ground and tugged back, willing to cut back on her strength when she hit for someone she might be able to fight again but also equally unwilling to let herself be disarmed. She was just barely keeping ahead of his attempts to land a serious hit, heavily abusing rusty if serviceable circus-level acrobatics and Cloud Propagated speed to do so.

He had either until he managed to land one solid hit, or five minutes, before she'd really try to retaliate instead of play-fight. It was really only polite, and he did request it just before they got started.

Xiasheng shifted so both hands were on her staff, levering down on his end just enough for the thief to lose contact with the ground. Surprised, she didn't let go of the borrowed weapon before the man had tipped her far enough up for any landing to be awkward.

Dangling from the end of her own weapon was a new sensation for Sonya. One she didn't much like, to be honest.

Her opponent capitalized on her bewilderment and slammed a soft-soled shoe into her stomach and kicked her off the staff hard enough she landed awkwardly on the soft, half-rotted leaves underfoot.

Entirely disgusted by her hesitation, and irritated from being more than a little winded, the thief snatched up a rather brittle looking twig and Propagated it large enough to take a solid whack from her borrowed weapon now in the Chinese man's hands. Her makeshift pole snapped easily, but not until she managed to hammer Xiasheng's stiff grip hard enough he ended up dropping the firmer length of wood.

A side benefit of her makeshift if entirely unsuited weapon, it rained a light cloud of gritty dry soil down on the man when it broke, making him flinch back as it got into his eyes and nose.

Hooking the temporarily borrowed staff up with a foot, Sonya reequipped herself and managed a two-handed swing mid-chest level. Her mid-chest, which ended up being a bit lower on him.

Instead of dodge, which she expected him to, Xiasheng actually caught the blow. Which made her try to draw back the power she had behind her swing, but even her hastily checked force wasn't enough to prevent her sparring partner from sliding back himself a few good feet.

Curiously, the furrows his shoes left had some leaves that were smoldering. His shoes were slightly charred, now that she noticed what he had done.

That was enough of an odd occurrence the Storm-Cloud was instantly riveted, so her counter to Xiasheng's kick was more of a hold than a dodge using her bullshitted strength to match forces in order to keep hold. Curious grey eyes flicked from the burning forest loam to her opponent, then she abused her strength for science before his slightly awkwardly thrown punch could connect.

In all actuality, she would admit to a bit of petty revenge in bodily slamming the Chinese man into the ground by her grip on his leg. However, the strange fire-starting thing happened again so she considered it perfectly acceptable action for the results she had intended.

Xiasheng's very long over-shirt thing was also a bit scorched in a similar broken ring pattern as the ground when he picked himself up delicately, or perhaps gingerly given there was a faint impression of his back in the ground. He also looked highly wary, since any sudden change in behavior for any Cloud was probably something to be wary about.

"…your first application for Storm Flames?" Sonya asked, half hoping to get a more-or-less straight
answer out of the Chinese Storm about his ability before she had to cut back on her strength again.

He might have gotten a solid kick on her, but she was pretty sure both the bō staff swing and her slamming him into the ground counted on her end. Entirely possible he'd ask for another 'five minutes or until I hit you' grace period if she kept talking long enough, but this might be worth the risk.

His expression was a bit… wry. "Yes. I can… blend outside forces into my Flames if I need to."

The thief considered him and his expression. His tone had also been a bit chagrined, which she didn't really know how to respond to. "Hard to hold onto that kind of force?"

It was… sort of similar to Fong's blend heat until it was his trick, in a sideways kind of way.

Possibly why he was still wearing those short-soft soled shoes in a Russian early summer late spring, which left his ankles rather bare. His shirt didn't have the same benefits, it was looking distinctly charred now.

"No, it is just… forceful. I merely have to do something with it immediately. To prevent any… unfortunate reactions." Xiasheng rolled his still smoking shoulders uncomfortably, settling himself into a wider stance.

Sonya's lips twitched, she really couldn't help it with how gingerly he was holding himself as he said it. She might have done him a bit of damage slamming him into the ground as she had, that she hadn't intended to deal out.

"Alright then." She had probably sprained a rib again… or broken it, from where he kicked her.

Her breathing was kind of hitching funny.

A more defensive fighting style wasn't something she knew very well, but she knew the basics enough to try. It might be more interesting to figure out how to get him to break himself if she didn't want to do it for him.

Either way, it would probably draw this out a little bit longer. She hadn't had so much fun since the last time Tatiana let her go to their Fut Gar classes.

Also, her not trying to hit someone more trained than her might actually let her do better. Pure evading might actually be interesting as well. She could dust off all those ill-used skills from the circus, more so than trying to hit the better trained Chinese man had yet so far.

Sonya spun her borrowed weapon a few times, absently catching sight of the damages it already had suffered in a short few minutes as he set himself up again.

Xiasheng's expression when she opted to merely avoid him entirely on his next attack might have been funny, had she had the time to appreciate it. Sonya dropped into a split to avoid his next punch and rolled under his kick only to arch a leg backwards to impact his ankle with her heel before he got his leg out of range again.

Since the force had been supplied by him, she figured he couldn't… or wouldn't, complain that she hadn't stopped using her bizarre strength after the agreed upon time.

Getting back up to her feet via aid from the staff was easy enough, interposing it between them at just the right angle for him to drive it a few solid inches into the ground took a few tries.
Especially since he was now refraining from putting his full weight on one leg, and a lot more cautious about how he struck out at her the longer their spar went on.

It took a bit of creative dodging, which Sonya seemed better suited for than pitting her meager skills against a fully trained opponent, to... encourage her opponent to drive the staff home.

Sonya actually figured Xiasheng did the final blow in order to deprive her of a weapon entirely after she pulled his second attempt out of the ground, which had cost him a possible cracked metacarpal, only to interpose it between herself and yet another punch by those oddly stiff gloves.

His attempt aided him very little when she ended up back flipping and pulling herself up to balance on the lone free end on her hand. A high-kick could probably reach her, but that would also open him up further than he seemed willing to go now.

Xiasheng's expression was entirely flat as he experimentally kicked at her support, which he had driven into the ground himself with a fairly powerful double-handed overhead strike.

It didn't make Sonya do much more than wobble, and she had the skills necessary to keep her precarious balance intact through his exploratory strikes. Even mostly through his harder palm thrust attempt to knock her off, and she only needed her other hand to firm up her hold on the staff.

He wasn't expecting her to flip her lower body backwards enough to lightly kick at his temple when he cautiously approached far enough, but his care when trying to figure out what to do paid off and he dodged the tap.

Another moment, while he confirmed she wasn't giving up her high ground for just anything, and the Chinese Storm's expression firmed up as he took a step backwards.

Sonya utterly cheated by abusing trapeze moves when he kicked out at her, with what Jiayi would've been called a 'gazelle' on a trapeze bar, by hooking his knee with her own and forcibly tugging until he lost his balance and had his forehead introduced to her staff violently.

She wobbled precariously but managed to keep hold of her perch even if the end of the staff ended up in splinters due to her grip.

Xiasheng made a pained grunt when she dropped him, no longer able to support his weight hanging off her leg once he had impacted. "...are you done with the posturing?"

Letting herself fall off the elevated end of the bō staff, the thief considered both him and their mostly silent audience then her palm to check for splinters. "I suppose so. If you would like another fight, it wouldn't have to be a public bout."

Next time she was going to use her own damn weapons, just so he couldn't use them against her.

"I begin to see what Fong meant when he called you an entirely unconventional opponent."
Xiasheng offered as he sat up, gingerly touching what would probably be a spectacular black eye in a few moments.

"I will thank you to not discourage him from trying again, I had fun trying to bash his head in."
Sonya returned a little tartly, with a shrug for his strange look.

He did at least accept her hand to haul him back to his feet. "I don't think anything I would say would discourage Fong. Thank you for the spar, Miss Bazanova."
(Tuesday the 15th of April, 1969. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Tatiana practically barreled into the house and slammed into her still slightly sore little sister in a rather sudden surprise hug. "I have had the most awesome idea ever. Nya-

"Tatiana, let your little sister breathe." Lisa interrupted her from the kitchen's doorway, quirking a small and wry smile for the eldest foster daughter as she ventured out to see who had barged into the house so suddenly. "And it's lovely to actually see you off the island for once. But shouldn't you be working now?"

"I took a few days off. Lisa. They were ever so excited to give me them when I mentioned what for. Hello to you too! And you, little Lera." Pretending the still recovering blonde in her arms was suddenly more important that acknowledging the elder woman's unamused look for the 'feminine' nickname she kept applying to their toddler-aged little brother, the energetic Sun lightly squeezed the bewildered and slightly achy Storm-Cloud. "So... Nya, you eat."

"Well... yes?" Sonya answered slowly, mostly out of respect for her twinging ribs, confused as to why that basic fact of human existence mattered.

Valera looked highly unamused that his sisters were mostly ignoring him, rather unsteadily tottering his way to his mother since his playmate's attention had been forcibly redirected by someone he really didn't know that well.

"No, you eat." Insisted the nurse forcefully, as if repetition would convey whatever idea she had come up with. "You eat things, which didn't originate from yourself. That's not automatically burned up by your Storm Flames. Since you're not starving yourself... you're not, right?"

Sonya blinked a few times as she finally found what point her sister had. "...as far as I am aware, I have no issues eating or maintaining my weight where it should be."

"So, you take in something that didn't originate from you. There's a loophole in your Storms-are-immune-to-all theory, I'm guessing it's because you expected your Storm Flames to act up somehow from how you were using them that made you able to apply them internally as you have." A thoughtful frown crossed the Sun's face, and Tatiana squeezed Sonya once more before finally releasing her. "Which would mean you're only immune to the things added you're aware of, not to anything foreign in what you eat. Because what you eat is foreign, so if you expect something to work on you it would then mean...?"

"That I can be affected." The thief concluded on her own, a more irritated expression on her own face. "And that this immunity thing would only work if I was aware or suspicious in the first place. Damn."

"What? Why damn? I mean, besides a bit of a setback in an otherwise rather useful ability for Storms this is good news." There was a pause as the elder sister shifted gears from nurse to shady-character and dubious uses that information could be put to. "...well, okay. Good news as in if you can somehow accept anything I give you, or Doctor Kappel might give you, will affect you in the way we would normally require medical anesthesia or shots of various usages to."

Sonya huffed at her absently, still turning over the issues and complications she now realized in her mind. The bad news was as in she didn't have an immunity that was undefeatable.
Although… she *might* be able to go back to getting drunk, once things on her Storm end settled down a bit.

Possibly they could work out a way for her to get, or re-apply, the vaccines and booster shots she missed the past year. Which was, along with the point Tatiana had made, the only good sides to the loophole the redhead had spotted.

That was one hell of a pitfall an unknowing Storm could fall into. The Storm-Cloud herself had brushed that edge unknowingly, had she truly *believed* that she couldn't eat or take in *anything*…?

Dehydration and starvation had only been side-effects mostly ignored and not thought of because Sonya had almost twenty years of life in this… world, ten of which with active Storm Flames. If she hadn't starved herself by then, or deprived herself of water before then, she hadn't thought or expected even her own Dying Will Flames would affect it.

Was it *possible* to Disintegrate water?

If so, could she boil water in her own mouth before swallowing it if need be?

Possible and interesting applications aside…

Might tie in with how some Flame users could *burn themselves alive using their own Flames*, if they didn't believe they were immune to their own multi-colored inner fire. She had only refrained from killing herself through a skewed belief in her own Flames due to absent-more-than-intentional ignorance.

"…well fuck. I nearly died." Sonya marveled out loud, feeling more than a bit shaken as she realized how close she had come to unintentional suicide.

Only because it *hadn't* occurred to her at the time had she avoided killing herself. Alcohol was a poison, she hadn't *wanted* to be drunk when scoping out bars in-between Sierra Leone and Colombia when she realized she couldn't get tipsy anymore, just like how she *hadn't wanted to become sick with some tropical disease in a Freetown sewer*.

Tatiana hadn't exactly gone very far after releasing the slighter Russian, and the younger thief found her nose mashed into her elder sister's collarsbone as she seized her into another crushing hug. "No. You're not allowed. That would be a stupid ass way to die, anyways."

"Do you want to explain that comment, Sonya?" Lisa inquired evenly from the hallway, a suspiciously alert but still mostly just confused Valera in her arms.

By inflection alone in the words, the woman implied that her query was actually more of a demand and that answers had better be given up soon.

"…I nearly starved to death? Or died from dehydration. Although I'm not yet sure if I can Disintegrate water, so that one is possibly less likely until I can test it." The still slightly muffled comment, made as it was through the nurse's shoulder, didn't seem to buy the Storm-Cloud any leeway with her mother. "We just found another way Storm Flame users could possible commit suicide via their Flames?"

Tatiana scowled into Sonya's hair, which was more felt than seen by the younger sister. "One step forward, another three fucking steps back. Damn it all to hell, Nya. I thought I had a possible way to help you, not yet another pitfall."

"We already knew it was possible to injure or outright kill ourselves with these abilities, Tats." She
replied with a few awkward pats to the back. It didn't seem to be helping much, but it wasn't like she knew what to do with her upset sister. "It's just... now we know there's a possible faction of Storm Flame users out there that might have starved or otherwise deprived themselves to death instead of just immolated themselves."

"A slow death versus a fast one? Not helping, Nya."

Lisa didn't look to be any happier with the subject matter as her eldest foster child, but frankly even Valera didn't look very pleased with the tone and weight the conversation had carried with it and it was suspect if he followed along with everything. "That's not going to happen. Right, Sonya?"

"...no? I avoided it at the time, and if I keep on even like this it's possible I won't. But... I need to think more before I continue playing about with the possible side-effects of my own Flame usage." Finally prying herself free, the thief patted down the blouse she was wearing to ensure Tatiana hadn't twisted it up. "I should... probably also list down every possible way we've figured out how a Flame user can kill themselves and post it somewhere with rebuttals for why that shouldn't be possible. Might head off a bit more of the possibly lethal happenings somewhat."

"We'll plan for it, Lisa." Tatiana confirmed stridently, apparently still not at all happy with Sonya's realization. "Or she will, and I'll see about spreading that kind of information out."

"What's wrong with my network?"

"It's mostly Russian. I can get it out to the few Flame users that do use the Mafia Land hospital."

"...oh."

(ooo0000oo)

(Tuesday the 15th of April, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"You sure you're okay?" Tatiana asked more seriously, eyeing some of the piles of paper on her little sister's borrowed desktop. "Lina got me word, through Ziven, about what's been happening here lately."

"Did she also tell you about the other?"

The other what?

Puzzled, the nurse inspected Sonya's form. Slightly battered, but it was possible she found someone in a non-hostile-to-Clouds Moscow to whack about rather than wait until Tatiana cleared her for attending their martial arts lessons.

Other than the fading bruises, which the younger woman hadn't asked to be healed so it was possible she had entirely forgotten about them, she merely looked... like she normally did.

"What Ziven is on for me."

Oh... that other. "In the most roundabout way possible, yes. It took me a few good minutes guessing with vague word choice for him to lead me to the probably right conclusion. I'm a nurse, damn it all, not a cryptologist."

Sonya blinked a few times, then snorted. "A Trek fan, are we?"
"You ever see it? It's pretty good, for an American produced television show that ended production a few years ago." Tatiana suddenly frowned, because the only reason she ever saw the first rerun herself was because some of the patients in the hospital watched it when she was checking up on them. "Wait… when the hell did you ever have time to catch an episode or two of Star Trek? I'm pretty damn sure it's not showing on the channels here."

"BJørn." The thief claimed absently after a moment of silence, waving a hand as she paged through some of her papery mess. "The very first thing he bought with his own money was a television set."

Like Sonya ever really visited her Lackey at his apartment long enough to watch an entire episode to catch Doctor McCoy's catchphrase. Dismissing that, because it was possible her little sister was talking about an incident a year or two ago and the subject was pretty off-topic for why she was back in Soviet Russia anyways, the nurse monopolized one of the free chairs.

"So… you may have little nurse Rains for me, right? The hospital is pretty keen on somehow appropriating them from you."

The thief scowled as she looked up sharply, probably because all she had sounded the Sun out for was what it would cost to have them understudy her a little. Not the entire Mafia Land hospital staff, just the lone Russian Sun nurse.

"Yeah, I know." She waved a hand, half to keep Sonya from biting out something cutting and half to greet Galina as the Lightning let herself into the office with more paperwork in hand. "But apparently the phone lines in the hospital are tapped. A little after you explained to me what you thought any other Flame using nurse aside a Sun might be good for, I got called into the… um, it's kind of like a board of directors, but it's really just the longest serving doctors of the hospital calling the shots. So, I got called into a meeting with them and they would like to suggest they'd train both your prospective Rains up as long as they can keep one until they train a replacement. More would be nice, too."

That whole meeting had been completely out of the blue, and without Doctor Kappel involved.

Tatiana would never admit to being so nervous about the whole thing she had gone in armed, which she didn't tend to do while in the hospital. Her own Sun Flames did the little threatening she needed to keep her patients more or less in line, and the fact she was still one of a few Dying Will Flame using nurses in the hospital meant her co-workers were less likely to brush off any harassment her way.

That didn't mean they were devoid of jealousy or envy, but that Tatiana and her few fellow Dying Will Flame users there were considered a set apart. In a mafia ran hospital that meant it was worth more than most of the other's jobs to ignore such goings on.

The Russian Sun using nurse would admit the idea of an anesthesia specialist Rain nurse was a damn good idea. Hopefully a semi-competent one, so Storms with silly ideas like Sonya's latest one could be worked around for the short term until the long could be addressed fully.

A Mist nurse was more likely easily obtained without going through her little sister, but even that might just aid her and Kappel's research into a Flame user's baseline all the more. A Lightning surgeon was even more tantalizing but was probably going to be as rare as hell given the popular assumption about any Lightning user's behavior or use.

More likely was a Storm surgeon, but she'd take that if she had to.

She would probably cheerfully murder for a Sky nurse. All those grabby assholes, those difficult
patients… they wouldn't do that shit in the face of a Sky, even if they already had an entire array of Guardian Elements.

Alas, that seemed as if it would never happen with how rare that Flame type was.

Much like how it was probably going to be damn near impossible to source a Cloud nurse, one that could probably Propagate blood if need be until any patient was stabilized. Not that any Cloud was very welcome on Mafia Land, given her own sister's reception when that came out to public criminal knowledge.

However, if she found the whole promise interesting, her bosses were damn near committed to murdering themselves for different Flame using medical personnel.

"…so, call you when you're at the condo. Noted." Sonya muttered sourly as she picked the newer three sheets out of her little mess of them to look over.

The rest of her comment pretty much devolved to snide comments of the nasty kind about assholes that eavesdropped on a conversation between sisters, so Tatiana beamed at the woman she once ran with in her gang. "Hello, Lina. Lovely to see you again."

"You could see me more often if you'd just visit." The snarky brunette shot back pleasantly, arranging herself neatly in the other chair situated before Sonya's borrowed desk. "How much longer are you going to be? The Pahkan's not getting any younger."

"Actually, he's doing marvelously for his age range." However, the point was well made. Milos Zolotov was pretty much at the end of his life expectancy. She was slightly surprised he had yet to retire in favor of his successor yet. "…it's not likely that I'll finish before the old man is done in by old age, actually. I've got the residency requirements yet, which is another few years of proving I know my shit after it and more has been crammed into my head. And if I'm coming back for a short while to be the nurse on call for this school thing, it means it's going to be pushed back at least another year or two."

A blonde head had snapped up, a skeptical frown on her little sister's face.

Tatiana smiled wryly at both of her fellow females. "Look, take it from me. It's impressive he's lasted as long as he has, where he has, but… Milos isn't immortal."

Her baby sister's eyes narrowed as she considered that.

Galina sighed as she ruined her posture a little to lean back fully against her chair's backrest. "I can understand that, at least in my mind, boss. The problem is actually believing it. He's always been there."

"He started all this, and that was before Arseniy or Lisa's time." The younger thief tacked on thoughtfully. "Why hasn't he retired if he's really that far along, then?"

The nurse raised one eyebrow at the blonde. "Probably because what you started, Nya. It's entirely possible old man Milos didn't want to hand things over when an entire new upset was just coming to be. This Dying Will Flame stuff still isn't well known, and this is the only time he can spare his son from his office just long enough to figure it out himself."

Thus, why she was only slightly surprised the old vor had yet to retire. Tatiana could see it, had seen it when she drifted back after her gang broke up do to legal jail time issues. Sonya getting stuck helping Gedeon learn the ropes had probably been entirely unexpected when Milos had decided what was needed, and from the look of things…
"Nya, you did know that was why Gedeon ended up sorted out with us, right?"

From Sonya's expression alone, she hadn't.

No offence to the guy intended, but Gedeon was a little… too rigid for what they were getting up to. He didn't have the needed mindset, even if he had the Flames, which wasn't his fault but the fault of how long it had taken for him to start using his own Dying Will Flames.

He had acquired, not a front-row seat, but a very good spot to see what the up-and-coming sections of his clan were struggling against through his father's actions… but how to convey that he needed more experience in a short amount of time to the ill-fit that was Sonya?

Her little sister was entirely the type to have enjoyed the ivory tower thing, a place where she was mostly left alone except for a few responsibilities that she could set up and knock out at a steady rate. In an imperfect world, she was left with a few ill-fitting jobs and one she was good at but wasn't a passion to her.

One of those ill-fits was this same office that she had escaped once before but hadn't been able to dodge again.

How could a vor like Gedeon inform a blunt woman like Sonya about what he needed from this office without losing face?

It wasn't like there was the urgency to make up for his late start available, no Dying Will needed to spark his Flames.

Giving him his Flames was a decent start, but a reason to reach for them?

Slightly unexpected that Sonya hadn't seen it herself, but the thief hadn't yet had to deal with people dying from old age on her.

Death was a very real part of their world, but death that wasn't ordered or mandated for whatever reason?

Tatiana heaved a heavy sigh when the vor in question walked into the office, only to get pinned in place with a highly unamused Storm-Cloud's glare. "I'll do the negotiations on the kids' end, little sis, and sound out a few others that might be interested. I think you might have a few things to discuss that are pending that you don't need me for. I'll… uh, check out this school thing you want me to be the nurse of. Coming, Lina?"

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 15th of April, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya had not appreciated the reality check.

She probably would in a few weeks or even a month or two, but not right now.

"Gedeon… what do you think of Dying Will Flames? Now that," she continued dubiously, "you're considered one of us."

The vor, who might be a little on the young side for taking over a criminal syndicate, inspected her strangely. "Only considered? You don't think so?"
"You're not much of a Flame user." Sonya offered honestly enough. Might be best not to mention she held him on a level with Fadei's old group, just over the ex-Sky crazed idiot himself. "It's not seconded nature to you to reach for that ability, nor have you really interacted with very many that we haven't practically indoctrinated to be somewhat loyal to us."

The two newer Suns that didn't originate internally weren't trained with the other Suns, they were trained by them in other locations. Gedeon might have a measure of Zolotov Flame users, but not of anyone else's.

The man himself looked fairly dissatisfied with her comments. "You were supposed--"

"I? Can only do so much. I can teach you to use it, but to think like a Flame user first and a vor second?" He was also rather irritatingly stubborn in the whole 'neutral' aspect. Which, in hindsight, should've at least suggested to her there was a reason for him sitting on the sidelines instead of getting into the thick of things. Other than just pure irrelevance, that was. "Forgive me for letting you have your own way, I had thought you wouldn't appreciate being ordered around much by a girl a decade younger than you."

Now what was she supposed to do?

Tatiana was right, old man Zolotov wasn't getting any younger. In this day and age, which was different than Rachel's in that whole 'medical advancements' thing extending life expectancies alone, seventy was a respectable age to reach.

Milos was just over that and was edging into the middle of his seventh decade of life.

If Gedeon had been kicked over to her, or more to the point this office in spite of her presence, to learn what he needed to about the Dying Will Flame phenomena then he had wasted a fair amount of time.

Sonya refused to be held accountable for this, the man was fully grown for fuck's sake. Gedeon should've been able to figure out what he needed to do without her leading him around by the hand. She might apply a few more kicks to the ass, but only because he probably should be well informed before he took over for his father.

The vor in question studied her for a long moment. "What do you suggest then?"

"I need to know what you think you know." It would at least suggest the level of immersion she had to put him through before she, and the rest of the Flame users of the Zolotovs, could be shot of him. "And where you foresee this going."

'This' was elaborated by the Storm-Cloud's vague hand wave around the borrowed office.

"...frankly? I think it's still a party-trick." Gedeon started irritably. "Parts of it might become worth any headaches, the Sun healers alone probably would be by themselves. A Cloud that isn't female and entirely disinterested in Moscow would be nice, or one that isn't fixated on the wrong part. I can see use for a few more, but it seems like you're conforming for the ill-trained young too much."

Sonya blinked, but kept silent. She did wonder how blind the vor had made himself in his little special niche above all day-to-day headaches caused by instructing a large number of young Flame users.

"Storms only seem useful when everything can be destroyed, otherwise they're about as useful as anyone else trained to the same level." He continued, either ignoring her carefully blanked face or not caring much. "Lightnings seem to be only useful in support capacities. Mists are probably the
"...prove it, then." The thief offered idly when it seemed he wouldn't be continuing. "Take one or two of each type, either separately or all together, and make them better than the brats I'm... conforming too much for. If you can, and I'm signing off on who so you're not starting from a half-trained one, I'll say whatever it is you want me to say to your father."

It wasn't going to happen.

Sonya might have managed to train herself up, but Lisa was very damn permissive about how she had gone about it. Arseniy had be just as considerate for what he hadn't known of, leaving it mostly up to her to muddle through. Her picking the best possible course for Dmitriy had been sheer luck, not skill or prior knowledge.

To be honest, it was only recently that Sonya realized she was actually rather ill-trained. A decent Storm, and her Cloud nature made everything rather hard to judge, but as an individual outside of being a Flame user?

A good thief, but only a passable fighter when pitted against actually trained opponents.

She had nearly killed herself recently.

The brats Gedeon 'trained' would probably end up rather useless as Flame users, but they should make semi-decent clan members in the end. If they didn't end up imploded or something similar. Probably Gedeon's personal guard when he finally took over, at least.

However, he couldn't continue as he was if that was what he had pulled from it. Sonya also didn't really want to create yet another enemy for herself, so actually whacking his thick head against a wall or two wasn't an option she could go with.

If, even though she highly doubted it, he managed to pull something together... then she really would just be shot of him.

Additionally, if he did, then she'd finally have a team of Flame users to establish how useful any group of them could be to a criminal syndicate and she'd still be shot of him.

Being a vor, and one that had seen a bit more life experience in this life than her, Gedeon seemed just suspicious of her offer. It didn't mean he abstained from taking it, if his reach for her much amended roster list of students said anything. "What do I have to do with them?"

"Something like what Dmitriy made up, just hopefully not as moronic." Sonya instructed absently, running her mind over the same list that she had poured over way too often. Excluding the non-clan trainees, and the ones Tatiana probably wanted to make off with, there was still just under a hundred young Flame users Gedeon could pick from. "I will also ask that they not be more than two of the same Flame type, but other than that you have almost free reign with them."

"That's it?"

"They're going to end up looking to you, instead of me." She tacked on after a long moment. "Be sure they're at least competent in what duties you'd need a team of bodyguards to handle."

The Sun eyed her suspiciously again, but then stole one of her pens to start marking out who he wanted.
"This is actually pretty awesome." Tatiana informed her cheerfully, pitching in with moving in another delivery of furniture with a large number of her fellow Suns as Sonya stocked books on the library’s shelves. "I don’t think I’ve ever heard of something like this before."

Picking up another stack to sort through, and shelf by the Dewey Decimal system, the younger Russian shrugged. "There is actually an Italian school like this, and I’m assuming at least one or two more somewhere else in the world. So, it’s not entirely my own idea."

"Meh, what’s plagiarism to a bunch of criminals?" Asked the nurse brightly, shoving her hip to nudge a chair more firmly under the table it would go with. "I still think this is a really cool idea."

"You have Galina to thank, then."

"Oh?"

Sonya shrugged with one shoulder this time, so she wouldn’t lose her grip on the books in her arms. "I wasn’t actually going to put this into operation, but she found my plans for how it would work out and implemented them."

Tatiana glanced around to the half-finished library, then back at the book-obsessed Storm-Cloud. "So… you need more teachers, right? To formally open up, I mean."

"Teachers, more students, just mostly personnel right now. I’ve about got everything else covered."

As a matter of fact, someone had to do the actual interviews. Sonya was pretty sure she was the wrong woman to do them and had been leaning to leaving it up to the Lightning whose fault the entire mess was.

She paused in mechanically shelving books to look out to the hallway through the opened double doors that lead out, as a team of four Suns muscled a series of filing cabinets destined for the main office down the tiled hallway without scraping said tiles.

Even if she had inspected the entire building before, twice even in between fitting various Chinese Triad members for their personal stone matches, it still looked significantly different with furniture.

Almost like an actual school instead of just a building. It was pretty weird to wander the hallways now.

"Any idea how you’re going to handle hiring outsiders for something like this?" Tatiana actually sounded slightly skeptical, seating herself on the desktop she had just straightened out.

"…for the first year or two, until our own picks have finished their legal teaching requirements, we’re going to have to hire an entire pack of teachers. Replacing them as our own teachers become certified will be… irritating."

"Not a lot of people appreciate being fired just to make way for others."

Sonya pressed her lips together in sheer annoyance but had to give her sister the point.

Lisa did have the certification to teach, having got it so she could do the whole 'homeschooling' thing
legally enough, and would probably be the one to interact the most with the other teachers they would have to bring on in the beginning. She was practically the only one as Scruffy didn't even have legal paperwork just yet, Andrei and Usov were too young to apply, the Triad member Yanlin wasn't even Russian but was applying for a visa to teach, Irinei was in the middle of applying for his own certifications, and that wasn't even counting the non-Zolotov originating or allied teachers.

The Filat syndicate was offering up one of their own vor, which Sonya was probably going to use to cover the male physical education with Yanlin for the time being. More than likely that vor was just offered to keep an eye on what the Zolotovs were up to, but the Storm-Cloud would take what she could get.

As for herself and Galina, they had already finished their own certifications for teaching and the exam needed to qualify. Sonya for literature and the Lightning for geography and social studies. Arseniy also had his, apparently earned around the same time as his lover, but her foster father wasn't going to be doing more than security on the odd day.

They still needed math, science, history, and technology teachers to finish padding out their curriculum and finally open up to take in students. Science and math would be the first ones to be replaced, with Scruffy and Irinei respectively when they finally qualified. Andrei might take on history, if she could nudge him into it.

Usov with technology?

Sonya hastily amended her thought, Usov could take history and Andrei would get technology. Yanlin… would probably pick something for himself and handle his own responsibilities.

"…speaking of students." Tatiana spoke up after the gaggle of Suns pulled the bulky metal cabinets pass the opened doors. "I would like to steal three Rains, one of the Suns, and a Storm from you."

"Who's going to pay for that?" Asked the thief, returning her attention to her sister and her sheepish expression.

"The hospital. They're really keen on acquiring more Flame users for themselves." With a shrug, the nurse hopped off the oaken table and made her way down the aisle of bookshelves to where the thief was sorting things. "One of the three Rains they want to keep, and either the Sun or Storm, for themselves. In return for letting them poach from you, they're suggesting that any Zolotovs that need medical attention from them gets a discount as long as one of us is still with the hospital."

Sonya frowned, but really didn't see much of a problem with that for now. Lucky brats, for getting an out if they want it, but… "Am I talking to the Pahkan, or are you?"

"Can you? I've got to return soon." The redhead's expression was entirely unapologetic as she beamed at her little sister. "Fantastic, thanks so much Nya. Knew there was a reason you are my favorite sibling."

"I didn't agree." She pointed out, only to be ignored.

"Let me know when you want to open, or if you can't this year." Tatiana continued pleasantly, slowly backing up to the doorway. "I'll put in for a temporary leave of absence at the hospital once things are somewhat settled there. Especially if there's going to be an influx of Russian speaking Flame users."

"Tatiana…"

"Love you, sis! Have fun with this!" Before she even finished her words, the nurse darted out of the
half-furbished library.

Almost bowling over the next group of Suns muscling more desks in for the various classrooms.

The thief scowled in the direction her sister had run off in. "...well fuck. Again."

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 16th of April, 1969 continued. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Did Tatiana leave you alone already?"

"She ran off on me." Sonya informed her foster mother rather irritably, picking through the results they had from matching near about thirty Triad members with their own focuses. "She might be at the house, with Arseniy and Valera right now."

It was technically still on-going, but the thief finally managed to gain some time for herself to handle her other responsibilities. There were really only four or five left that needed matches yet, and Sonya expected to be informed it was finished by the end of the night at the very least.

A few more days before the visiting Triad members would finally leave the Zolotov clan, and hopefully she wouldn't have to personally do it herself ever again unless she wanted to. A few of those Shestryorka had become rather professional in matching up Flame users to their stones, which means there wouldn't be a need for Sonya specifically to do it unless something really dire happened.

...or if someone specifically asked for her to do it again and she got forced.

"Sonya?"

"I'm sorry, Lisa, did you need something?" Asked the thief, pressing a finger to her temple in hopes of warding off a headache.

"I have a little something for you, to get you out of this office for a moment or two." She waved a piece of paper with several pictures clipped to it in the air, distracting her youngest daughter from her own thoughts. "See, we were in the middle of a negotiation with another syndicate about stealing something... but they suddenly broke it off without giving a solid reason. Can you steal it for us anyways?"

"Do you think someone's trying to undercut us?"

"It's possible." Lisa claimed, handing over the paper and taking a seat in the blue armchair before Sonya's borrowed desk. "But even if it's just the item isn't what they want anymore, I think you might have fun getting it."

She blinked at the itemized list in her hands, complete with actual photos of the items in question. Religious artefacts were a new one for her, and one she was only slightly skeptical of.

An, of course, bejeweled bible topped the list.

"...the hell?" A solid gold cross, a set of rosary beads made of jade and silver, and a bronze goblet were also listed. As well as an address she was pretty sure was for one of the city's museums.

"Lisa?"

"We're not selling them, even if the syndicate that broke negotiations with us don't want them"
Now that she thought about it, Sonya fairly itched to get on something. Nothing was close to being done, except the Wo Hop To Triad matching job, that something short and sweet was rather tempting.

"...I'll do it." She could even visit today, get a feel for the security tonight, and steal it either later on in the night or the next day if possible. It would be nice to get out of the office and stretch her legs, so to speak. "I won't be in tonight. Say hello to Arseniy and goodnight to Tats and Valera for me."

"Alright sweetie. Have fun with it." Lisa left her to her own devices shortly afterwards, not that the thief was paying much attention.

Museums were better guarded than most stores, so this would require a bit of careful planning. Possibly just careful doing as well, but she'd see later tonight.

Setting the list of targets aside, Sonya glanced through the paperwork on the desk to be sure she had nothing too urgent to handle right away. There were the resumes for possible teachers, but those were pending background checks by a few of the clan's vory. A three-hundred-year-old letter from a previous Storm Arcobaleno, but she needed to source a middle Germanic dictionary and translation guide to finish.

Sorting out the results they had so far from the Chinese contingent was something Galina could do for her, as well as the rest of the paperwork she had from the various branches of Flame training going on. Gedeon was recruiting for his little team, so he was safely busy and out.

Confident nothing would implode on her if she left early, the Storm-Cloud snatched the list up again and headed out herself.

Museums were tricky, and that was her excuse for calling it a day barely past noon.

(Thursday the 17th of April, 1969. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

'It's possible' her left foot.

Sonya tailed after the pair of thieves who seemed to be after exactly what she was. Way too much of a coincidence for them to be after separate items.

Since she had picked a less obvious route into the museum, a second story window was missing a pane of glass to a bit of duct tape and had been opened only for a few seconds for her to get inside, she had a higher ground than the pair who seemed to have snuck in via one of the back entrances.

Thankfully this was an older museum, the wiring was old enough that with a bit of flexibility Sonya had a range of available options open to her. The guards were mostly the lazy type, holed up in a security office with closed circuit cameras watching wide swaths of area for them and only emerging out for bathroom breaks or the odd coffee run.

She just... didn't know how to deal with the two sneaking a bit slower than her into the building.

Keeping pace with them wasn't hard, nor was keeping well out of their range of sight. They were halfway decent, in most respects. The pair of boys, they really couldn't be much older than Usov was, were carefully and slowly picking their way forward. Checking periodically to ensure their way...
was clear, that the guards weren't becoming curious over any odd shadows, checking a few of the displays to be sure the security on them weren't changing.

Figuring out what she wanted to do about the whole thing was another issue entirely.

Since it had been her foster mother who gave her the job, Sonya didn't intend to fail. However, that meant the two young teenagers would have to.

Thankfully, she didn't want to kill them. The sheer lack of reaction she had to Fadei's death apparently didn't mean she was perfectly alright with causing death to anyone, probably just the really annoying people. This disinclination to kill the two encroaching thieves at least meant her morals hadn't degraded that much.

Sonya could steal the items out from under the pair, but… that would leave them open to retribution from whomever hired or set them on this job. She could set off the alarms, then come back some other day when the brats were safely jailed and out of her way… but that also left them open to possible harassment from their client.

Stealing both the items and them, only to dump the whole mess on Lisa's feet probably wasn't the best idea either. Possible… but way too much of a headache.

Slinking low to the ground as one guard made a meandering path straight down the gallery the pair of teenaged thieves were stalking down let the Zolotov thief watch the two scramble for hiding places.

She was situated on a second-floor walkway, which gave her an impressive view of the entire display of sixteenth century Christian tools of worship that were once used by the Tsars. It also gave her the height to be not immediately spotted from someone on the ground level, and the position to best spot the security cameras.

Still undecided about what she was going to do, the Storm-Cloud calculated the probable angle the next camera had and where it covered before deciding that staying on the second-floor walkway wasn't going to work for her anymore.

As an old, repurposed building turned museum, the walkway she was on was a later but very ornate addition to what had once been a ballroom. In turning it into a gallery, some architect had built the supports to resemble sweeping archways. Mostly to prevent blocking all the natural light from the two-story spanning windows, partially just to make it look fancier and less out of place compared to the original style.

Tipping over the railing, while one guard made a lazy sweep of the entire gallery and two other thieves jockeyed for better hiding spots, Sonya twisted herself around a pillar and used the fancy arches to support her weight well off the floor. Still high enough to be out of general view, but now with the added complication of impaired vision and the possibility of losing her grip and falling.

The slightly overweight guard hadn't gone very far, he was on the opposite side of the room inspecting a stained-glass window display. Her ‘rival’ thieves, and she used that term lightly, were finally getting their act together in progressing at a decent clip while also keeping themselves hidden.

Abusing circus-level acrobatics again, she really should go crash one of the Großes Volksfest winter practices at this rate, Sonya picked up her own pace if only to keep herself in the running. Swinging down to check on the progress of the others in the room, then crab walking forward using the appropriate arches, stone, and the occasional windowpane.
She reached the end of the hall slightly before the other two, dropping down in a suitably shadowy corner to finally put herself on the same level as the others. The three thieves then had to pause, to let the guard wander his way back in the direction of the security room.

Then the overhead lights flickered on.

Sonya ducked, mostly instinctively, and pressed herself in between two display cases.

"Yolkov, there was something-"

"Of course there was. I was in here!" Yolkov the guard cut off his apparently junior partner waspishly, blinking in the sudden brightness. From what parts of his face Sonya could see from her corner, he also had a very impressive scowl working up his face as well. "What did you expect? That I wouldn't show up on the screens?"

Slowly creeping up to the base of another display to hide herself better within, the Storm-Cloud missed what the other guard mumbled in his defense.

A rather loud scoff echoed out as she curled up in a hopefully decent blind spot. "Very well, let us see this 'something' of yours."

Not good. Sonya glanced around, but there really was very little to hide behind where she was.

Most of the cases this far back were glass on all four sides, to give the maximum viewing possible out of the stupid overly ornate apparel and gaudy jewelry. Straining her ears let her know the pair of guards were at least starting on the other side of the gallery, so she stopped looking for hiding places and started inspecting things for a route she could take out.

…wait, there was a display upstairs that-

Ducking out of cover for a split second, the thief made a few semi-improbable jumps to get back up to the overhead walkway as fast as she could. A breathless moment of listening, just to be sure she hadn't been spotted by the guards, and she slunk her way over to the corner display.

She might be able to use this to hide, as long as she was both quick and silent enough.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 17th of April, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Siyangulov Kirill Innokentievich triumphantly snagged hold of a ragged jacket and pulled the struggling little brat out of his hiding place. "See, Yolkov? I told you-"

"Yes, yes. Fine. You told me." His ill-humored superior muttered, hastening over with his own flashlight and checking the nearby displays for any tampering. "He's young, might not be alone. Keep hold of him, I will do another sweep."

The scrawny teenager attempted to kick out Krill's knee to help him escape, but the guard knocked the young boy down and planted a knee in the middle of his back. None too gently, either.

Roughing up one kid soon drew out another, this one a little ragged brat without a jacket that tried tackling a grown man outweighing him by at least a factor of two.

Unperturbed by the assault, Kirill managed to grab the fist heading for his head and slam that brat
"Got another, Yolkov!"

"Good, keep them there." Puffed the older guard, stomping his way up to the second story walkway. "I have to… finish checking the room out before we are to call the militsiya on the little thieves."

Kirill frowned pensively, but since Yolkov had been employed by the museum longer than he had he gave him the benefit of doubt. He would've called the militsiya after he found the first one, or maybe back when he spotted shadows that didn't come from his partner ghosting across the camera feeds.

Adjusting his grip on the second brat, the first one had started wiggling the very moment the other came in sight but he had a worse grip on the newer one, took up a few minutes of time. By then Kirill assumed his partner had at least managed one side of the gallery and spent a few sour thoughts about the older and overweight man's sluggish speed.

If he dropped even one of the kids, he'd be in for a reaming out when they finally reported the probable break in.

"…what in the…"

"Yolkov?" Prompted the guard when his partner failed to finish his sentence.

An ear-splitting crash of glass, one thump of a body hitting the ground rather hard, and an armored figure dropped to the gallery's ground floor after vaulting the railing on the walkway.

Whoever it was rose to their feet smoothly, as if nearly seventy pounds of sixteenth century ceremonial plate armor and chainmail was nothing more than a light cotton jumpsuit. Wide eyed, Kirill didn't even notice when one of the teenagers he had been pinning to the ground got free from him and ran for it as the armored figure made its thumping way to him at a near-run.

The blow of an armored kneecap to his temple knocked the guard for a doozy of a loop, but he scrambled to remain conscious enough to hopefully learn something.

Neither he nor Yolkov had a gun, why didn't they have guns?

Having rather completely rendered Kirill completely useless for most anything, the armored figure ignored the second little teenager as he also bolted the first chance he got. A few more thumping steps, another crash of glass, and the newer impossibly strong thief picked out a few more pieces of the display to steal.

Kirill let himself slump boneless to the ground, knowing full well he wasn't going to be able to out muscle whoever that was.

Hopefully the clatter of the ceremonial armor walking about would let the militsiya track down this thief, they had to already be on their way since that was the second display destroyed in as many minutes.

There was no way someone could outrun a few cars in full plate armor, right?

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 17th of April, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Sonya," Arseniy blinked slowly at his youngest daughter as she looked up, a slightly guilty cast to her features, "what the hell are you doing?"
She looked back down to the very shiny metal she was having some trouble wiggling out of. "Um... help?"

From the look of things, she had mostly managed to pry herself out of a suit of armor herself. The greaves were off her bare feet and calves, both of them poking up out of a backpack left next to her desk. Only one of the gauntlets joined them on the floor, the other seemed to be jammed on around her fist from how few of the fingers were wiggling.

That still left the plates on her thighs, a metal skirt thing with a bit of chainmail mesh peeking out underneath, the breastplate, the back plate, a chainmail shirt, and a rather uncomfortable looking steel gorget with the chainmail hood that restricted her from turning her neck fully.

Arseniy had been aware Lisa sent their youngest daughter off to lift a few things from a museum, but he was pretty sure an entire suit of armor hadn't been listed.

"How did you even get into that?"

"It wasn't that hard." Sonya mulishly informed him, glaring down at her mostly useless left hand. "I disintegrated the stuffing manikin they had in here while getting in, and I think it did some nasty things to my clothing. But it kept everything more or less upright, so I just... wiggled in. Might have actually had to tack weld the back plate on, to be honest, but it worked."

Now that the vor could take a closer look, it seemed as if she had done a bit of damage to the leather straps that would've held the armor together as well as a few of the clasps and buckles. Some of it was melted into slaggy bits of gilded metal, but even with the heat of metal pressed on her form the young thief looked totally unconcerned by her charred outfit.

He wouldn't be able to help, or even touch it, until it stopped glowing cherry red in spots.

He eyed the mess, then her slightly hopeful expression. "I don't think I can get you out of that. Not any time soon. We'd have to wait for it to cool down a little, then use either metal cutters or a chisel and hammer to break you out."

"If I wanted it destroyed I'd do it myself." Sonya dismissed after a moment's thought, wrenching her left elbow free of the metal with a few impatient tugs. "Damn though."

"Why damn?" It wasn't like she could keep the suit of armor, even aside the damage she did to it the whole thing was stolen property that couldn't be hidden quickly.

"...I kind of like the idea and wanted a working prototype to fiddle with." She took a deep breath, then pried apart the chest and back plates with only a wince to suggest any pinching that might have gone on. "At least the gloves and boots, I don't think I want to use chest plates again."

Arseniy blinked at her show of force, then shrugged out of his jacket and dumped it on her head when he realized she hadn't been underestimating the possible cost to her clothing when she moved to remove the chainmail shirt. Large parts of her clothing were simply gone, a faint charcoal film to her skin suggesting they just simply burned away either from her own Flames or the heat of the metal pressing in on them.

"You might want to think about Flame-proofing clothing, or some way to protect what you're wearing when you do things like this."

"Or at least my underwear, this is rather uncomfortable actually." Sonya ripped off the last few bits when they started charring his leather jacket, mostly the chainmail undershirt and the cowl she had mostly forgotten about. The gorget was similarly ripped in two with a metallic screech of protest,
which seemed to be the fate of anything she found rather annoying in her metal outfit.

With most of her upper body free, the young woman wrapped his jacket around herself and simply pried the metal encasing her lower body apart.

Arseniy sighed, eyes fixed on the ceiling. "I'll call Lisa and have her stop by your hotel for a change of clothes. Do I even want to see the news reports in the morning?"

There was a fresh blush to her face, and the thief sank to her office chair with a guilty sort of shrug. "Erm... maybe not? Can you tell Lisa I was right, though? There were another two heading for the same thing I was, who nearly got us all caught. Or it might have been me. I can't tell until we see what tipped the guards off on the news."

He glanced down, but Sonya had at least tiredly planted herself behind her desk and was merely toeing the still overheated metal armor she had been wearing. "The stone matching for your Triad fellows is done, so you've got the rest of the day to recover. Tomorrow you'll need to see them off, for politeness' sake."

"Lovely, then I think I'm just going to head to bed then. Can you take Lisa the backpack instead? It has what she wanted in it." As she spoke the young thief got up, giving Arseniy the confirmation that not even her pants survived being encased in hot metal and bits of spiritual fire.

"Sonya. Stay in this room until Lisa gets here."

He did not need even more foreigners after his daughter and walking around headquarters like that would just earn her a reputation she didn't need.

Sonya blinked at him, puzzled. "Why? I'm covered, it's early enough yet that it's likely no one will see me."

"...just stay here until your mother gets here. Please." Arseniy tacked on when she looked to want to argue more. "You'll get sick walking around outside like that."

There was also the little problem that since the hotel she stayed at was more or less Mafiya run that even skimpier dressed women had passed through it, so it was entirely possible Sonya would see nothing wrong with waltzing through the lobby like that if it was empty enough.

At least if she could find herself a pair of shoes.

This was a slight problem Tatiana had hinted at, but he hadn't quite believed before now.

Arseniy didn't plan to touch it, he had to think of a way to inform Lisa of Sonya's utter lack of any body modesty so she'd try tackling the problem.

Sitting back down, a little bewildered at both his usage of 'please' and the utterly out of character comment on getting sick if she went out, his younger daughter eyed him warily. "Arseniy? Are you feeling alright?"

"I'm feeling old."

How long ago would he have been perfectly fine with a blonde woman walking around headquarters like Sonya had been intending to?

He wouldn't have gone after anyone like that, Lisa would've done some bloody double homicide had he tried, but appreciating the view offered had never been something he had been shy of.
Her proposing to do it just made him feel unhappy, and very damn old.
Chapter 45

(Friday the 18th of April, 1969. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"I am never letting you forget this."

"Tats, do shut up." Sonya tiredly grouched at her sister, pulling at Renato's old dress shirt so her shoulder wouldn't slip through the neck any further then sinking backwards into her picked spot. "And I was limited on options, it wasn't actually the worst I had."

Tatiana snickered, attention glued to the television set in the younger woman's hotel suite as the news feed playing the results of the thief's late-night spree. There was a tiny if grainy black and white image of Sonya in a suit of sixteenth century armor vaulting a second story railing over the news anchor's shoulder. Probably the feed from one of the close circuit cameras on the other side of the gallery, judging from the angle.

The screen of the newsroom cut out, then on came one baffled sounding guard who had an utterly magnificent bruise from the Storm-Cloud's armored knee spreading out from one temple.

Apparently, it was a pre-recorded bit of him being interviewed. Explaining how someone got the drop on him and his partner while wearing the museum's donated plate mail.

Current speculation the sisters could hear was that someone had snuck into the armor sometime before that night, since nothing else had been disturbed and the two guards had only started searching the same gallery due to two additional teens breaking in as well.

"An entire suit of armor. Almost for no particular reason at all." The redhead marveled out loud, leaning back to monopolize more of her younger sister's rented couch. "And you just ran off with it. While wearing it."

With a frown, the Storm-Cloud looked over to the Sun sharing the couch with her. "...I may actually have parts of it still. The... greaves, Arseniy called them, and the gauntlets. Well... one of them."

"You going to keep using them?" She asked, still highly amused as she poked her in the thigh a few times.

Sonya gave her sister an ugly look... but had to shrug after a moment. "...maybe. For the more risky assignments I get from Mafia Land. Some armor is better than none, and I think we might be able to make better armor in this day and age than they could back in the sixteenth century."

"You have an entirely strange fondness for history. You suck at it, but... your little collection of weaponry? Now plate mail? Really, Nya."

Scowling, the thief stretched out one leg to nudge her in the hip in return for the poking. "Did we ever figure out a Storm compatible metal? Silver works... but it's more like a wick than a resistant or conductive metal for it."

"No, not yet. The closest you'll get is ivory." Tatiana shrugged at Sonya highly skeptical look, flapping the hand that had been rudely pushed into the younger thief's side from side to side. "I'm not even joking. Storm Flames eat everything else at a steady rate, unless a certain selection of stones resists it for a short while. Sometimes old bone resists for a whole second more."
"What about tungsten? I have a few weapons made out of the stuff."

Shrugging again, the nurse picked up her little sister's feet and inspected them. Ignoring the twitches and flinches Sonya made as she pressed on certain sensitive parts. "That's a better question to pose to Galina. I don't think so, but I was only involved for half of the metal and element testing. We had a good idea for what metals might mean Sun Flame conduction, after all."

She got distracted by the news report, which was now on speculating who had been in the stolen suit of armor.

Sonya sighed at her snickering as a rather bulky if shorter than average male was suggested. "That actually happens to me a lot."

"What, you often get mistaken for a slightly undersized, male, muscle builder?" Tatiana asked gleefully, now pointing at the television set and allowing her younger sister the leverage to pull her feet back.

Glaring at the same feature of her rented rooms, the younger thief got up to finally head to bed instead of entertain the hyper Sun. "Either a male of considerable stature more than me, or any number of thieves working in concert. I'll see you later tonight, or tomorrow, Tats."

"Night sis!" The nurse did turn down the volume but didn't seem to be in any hurry to miss even part of the newscast covering Sonya's spectacular break in of a museum.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 18th of April, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Sonya, can I have-"

"Can it wait a moment, Lisa?" Interrupted the blonde apologetically, sorting out a folder of paperwork with Galina's aid. "I've had a late morning and apparently I have to talk to the Pahkan in a few. After I'm more or less free... I think."

"I'll come with you, I think I he might have a few questions I can answer." The older Russian decided, pulling open the door she had almost shut after her once she had a moment to absorb the fact her foster daughter interrupted her at all. "Then we really do need to talk, sweetie."

"...alright?" Sonya inspected her wryly amused expression, while blindly accepting the finally assembled packet of information she needed from Galina.

"You two might as well do lunch." The Lightning suggested, still nose deep into the mess and snagging a couple more folders full of different papers for herself. "Afterwards, you need to talk to the Wo Hop To Triad members, to get their feedback on the stone-matching process and preempt any complaints about the quality or number we're sending them off with. Finally, since I'm doing the interviews with the teachers, I'll need you to overlook my notes before we actually hire someone sometime in the next few days. Oh... and Gedeon has his selection ready for you to check off when you have a free moment."

The thief grimaced at the things starting to stack up on her in spite of the effort she was putting in to try and stay on top of it all but nodded as she accepted the suggestion. "Lunch then, Lisa?"

"Sounds lovely. Let's go, sweetie." She gave her fellow brunette a thankful smile. "Good luck, Galina."
The older woman earned herself a bland little smirk as Galina straightened up her own significantly larger stack of papers and folders she apparently needed to review. "Thank you… ma'am."

Sonya let her mother lead them out of the borrowed office and off through the hallways, looking over the proposal Tatiana had written up for the Mafia Land hospital as she absently followed along.

The proposal wasn't all that bad, even discounting they would lose about five young Flame users from it in the short term and two or more in a more final sense in the long. Her sister might be a decent nurse in her own right, even discounting her Sun Flames, but there were things she couldn't handle yet.

Major surgeries, creating vaccines, giving physical therapy if needed, and to top it off she was only one person. Even Suns had to sleep sometime.

Mafia Land's hospital wasn't exactly exorbitant in their prices, but the cost was still punishingly high compared to any average middle-class family's income. To any criminal, even one not in a syndicate to help absorb such costs, it was merely a price close to a middling lucrative contract or two.

Sonya got her own medical bills discounted already, for being actually a part of the island's pool of manpower and for her agreement to let Doctor Kappel study her baseline health and how her Flames impacted it. Partially why Scruffy's own bills had been rather reasonable rather than expensive as hell, after she volunteered him as a baseline extremely stressed Sun example they reduced the costs for him by a decent margin.

Bjørn had opted not to be involved, skittish about anything she didn't expressly control even still. Since she had practically upset his entire life for her own aims, she let it go on without complaining about the cost. He was saving her some time and possibly sorting out her money now. It at least somewhat equaled out.

Glancing up when the vory guard outside old man Zolotov's office opened the door for Lisa, Sonya let her folder containing the proposed offer Tatiana wanted given fall closed as she followed her foster mother.

"Good afternoon, Pahkan." Announced the older Russian woman brightly, stepping aside so the thief following her wasn't concealed by her form. "I have an appointment with Sonya after you, forgive my imposition."

"Elisaveta," the Zolotov Pahkan greeted blandly as he discarded whatever it was he had been looking over in favor for the women in his office, "mayhap you could give me some additional insight to your girls' plans."

He snapped his fingers, holding out the same hand to Sonya. She offered the folder of the proposal to the old man to pour over at his leisure obediently, if a little queerly disgruntled that anyone would snap their fingers at her for any reason.

"Tatiana might not be the best one to ask, since she is mostly keen on applying these young ones and their different skills to her chosen profession. However, if we can trade ill-trained youngsters for a fewer numbered but well-trained medics later? It would free up our so far only Sun Flame medic for more serious incidents. Such as the knife wound my Arseniy suffered through a… incident last year."

The younger woman blinked, eyeing her mother's back in only slightly surprised appreciation.

For someone who only recently heard the proposal, that was a fairly comprehensive summary of the offer and what the clan could have from it.
"And your opinion over why this should be accepted, Bazanova?"

"Aside the more specialized training a few of the Flame users we'll get back will possess, who can teach others that would like to know, there is the fact the hospital is offering a discount for anything we need actual doctors for rather than just a medic or two. So, surgery and those kinds of things in a place safer than even the hospitals here." As that was the actual worth of the offer, because there was no way to know how well the young Flame users would do as medical student until they actually tried to learn. "We might be losing a few young ones for it, but the ones we will get back will be trained for a specialty that is almost universally useful in any situation."

Old man Milos made a hawking cough sound he tried to muffle with one hand when turning the pages she had offered him, which Sonya only really took notice of due to the comments Tatiana had given on the age of their clan's Pahkan.

He didn't look any more frail or aged as he normally did to her, he was an old man after all, but he was still a silver-haired old criminal mostly desk bound these days that she'd rather not see dead just yet.

Should he sound that bad, or was that normal for him at this age?

Why had she not paid attention to that before?

"So, the trade favors us in the short term. What about the long?"

"...they will likely expect a more favorable trade later on, using the ones they trained and sent back to recruit more for them from us in time." The younger Russian continued slowly, pulling her mind back on the subject being discussed. "That is something we would need to keep track of, and occasionally discourage or encourage as need be."

He gave her a skeptical look. "That's it?"

"Well..." Sonya glanced at her mother, who wasn't looking at her, and then back to the expectant old man, "...in the short term, it might also wordlessly suggest to foreign mafia syndicates that we either have an excess of Flame users available for various specialized training or are more selective for what we send them out for. Assuming if they do well. Which isn't actually done outside of certain major underworld powers, from what I've seen. In long, it would mean we might be able to take over the Mafia Land hospital if enough of our sympathetic Flame users make up a stronger presence there."

Milos blinked at her rather long comment, and even Lisa gave her a strange sideways look. "...and the downside opposite to that?" Asked the Pahkan after a moment of contemplation only broken by the tick of his office's wall clock.

"We might come to be known as a criminal clan of healers and researchers, instead of thieves, abroad." Admitted the Storm-Cloud warily, and only a slight bit wryly. "If the number of medical students outweigh the number of thieves and vory we have in Mafia Land. Here at home? The negative impact will be lesser overall, Flame users will never outnumber the number of criminals that don't have Flames. So even if we come to specialize in both thievery and medical aid if this does wildly well, the balance will still lean more to thieves than medics."

The old man leaned back in his office chair, probably musing over both the thief and her words. Before deciding how to continue. "You sound sure of that, but I've had a look at your intake numbers. They don't bear out your belief Flame users won't outnumber regular criminals."
Sonya sighed through her nose, well aware how bloated that number had been by outside influences. At least she knew how to answer this non-question for once, if only by treating it as a question rather than a statement by tacking on a 'why?''

"It will inevitably level off. That number is likely to grow in the next few years but things will start to slow, probably when we've doubled or even tripled the number of us. Currently, we know of one Sky and his possibly Sky Flame bearing offspring that are encouraging the emergence of more Flame users."

Even if that Sky and his possibly Sky bearing offspring were never going to become an active user of Dying Will Flames, the presence of even one alone was still an encouraging influence on the Flame users around them.

"However, only a slight fraction of the population ever awaken their Dying Will Flames, half of that who would ever gain a hold on them, and then there's the fraction of that who will never seek out a criminal syndicate for answers. Even by only the numbers... it wouldn't support more than one or two syndicates of pure Flame users and getting them all to behave in that kind of number is more of a headache than anyone not a Sky could tackle."

Vongola beat the odds in that respect, but that was likely because they seemed to have always had an active Sky as their Don. Even then, Flame users in Italy's Iron Fort were always the Mafioso and not the hired help.

They were all trained and mostly in combat roles for their respective famiglia. It would be possibly interesting to see if she could find any syndicates that didn't immediately weaponized their Flame users, if at all possible. Just for the comparison.

Would the Zolotovs count for that?

Not all of the trainees that could use Flames were lining up for combat roles later on.

"You've done surprisingly good work keeping ahead of that number," Milos acknowledged musingly, much to her surprise, "and since you were the only one to guess it would burst as it did I'll believe you about it leveling off."

"How did you know it would explode? The number of Flame users, I mean." Lisa asked before Sonya could sort out how to answer the Pahkan's next non-question comment she couldn't answer.

That comment she couldn't answer with a why tangent, it didn't seem to sound right even in her head.

"...you gave me the first hint, Lisa. When you told me the number of Flame users shrank for the last century. Back when I first started." She admitted blandly, because it was true enough. "It's similar to epidemic numbers, when diseases crop up. After both Tatiana and Dmitriy, helping Usov and running into a Sun on Mafia Land and he brought along another Mist, then Galina and Björn? I had the suspicion that was born out when I got ahold of the actual numbers back here."

Snickering, the older Russian woman looked back to their clan's leader.

Milos' expression was equally as dryly amused. "Interesting comparison, Bazanova."

"Gedeon's opinion of Skies is... off, even if it is applicable when things turn wrong. No Sky would intentionally seek out to turn their prospective Guardian Elements into obsessed stalkers, but the child Fadei scared the reaction out of likely didn't know any more than just 'strange man wants me for whatever, do not want'." Sonya gave the both of them a shrug. "The kid's rejection of Fadei was
understandable, even if it was… undesirable for his sanity."

He harrumphed, then a noise she thought meant he had painfully cleared his throat sounded. "Will that ever change? My son's opinion, I mean."

"Unless he actually meets a compatible Sky, hopefully who already has a Sun Guardian… no."

Giving her a raised eyebrow, the Pahkan returned to the folder she had given him. "So… your opinion on this… trade, Bazanova?"

"It's a good one, even if it will take some careful managing to prevent the trade from being taken advantage of."

"We just must out-sneak a bunch of criminal doctors, then?" Milos set the folder aside, on his desk instead of pitching it entirely. "I'll think about it and give you an answer in a few days."

That was… a good sign then, right?

Sonya glanced at Lisa's profile, but gained nothing as the older Russian woman made their farewells.

She didn't know what she should tell Tatiana about how the offer was being considered, but maybe her mother could handle that.

"Come along, Sonya." Flashing her youngest daughter a smile, Lisa took her arm and led them both out of the Pahkan's office. "Now for something equally as important. What would you like-"

"Erm…?"

With a sigh the brunette released the blonde and turned to pleasantly smile at the apologetic looking Xiasheng, who seemed to have been waiting for them in the hallway. "Please tell me it can wait."

"Ah… we are to leave tomorrow, and this is the only time I will have free for something more or less personal in nature." The unfortunate Triad member informed her regretfully with a little wince. "We have been gone for far too long already and cannot delay more for anything but an emergency."

Lisa gained a slightly strained looking tilt to her smile. "I understand. Sonya? Tomorrow, breakfast. No excuses."

The thief winced slightly as she walked off, well aware her foster mother was not pleased at all.

She had started it, since she did have a meeting with their boss, but Xiasheng probably didn't help at all.

"As far as I am aware, we are hosting a farewell dinner for you and your fellows later tonight."

Sonya started, once her mother had left them mostly alone in the hallway of the Zolotov headquarters. The only ones who could overhear were the vory guarding the Pahkan's office and the guide that brought the Triad member to the third floor of the building. "Is this something you can't tell me then? How personal are we talking?"

"I have something for you, from Fong." Admitted the Chinese Storm sheepishly. "It requires some… ah, explanation."

She gave him a skeptical look, wondering what the martial artist had sent along for her and why he would do so at all.

"Your own reputation benefited from this trade, as well as his for opening it up to us." Xiasheng
swept an arm down the hallway, inviting her to walk with him away from the office she emerged from. "He is aware you put in much more effort into this to ensure it would go through, even if you would gain the most information in return, as well as conforming to our request for your time that your mother is so upset by."

"...I would apologize, but it was unnecessary to demand my presence. Even I was exasperated by that."

"Proof is in the action. We didn't know the same non-Flame using younger members did similar things for your own Flame users, only that you could and have matched Fong to his." He gave a mostly dismissive shrug, not remotely apologetic seeming about that part. "However, as you have delivered exactly what you offered and gave in to our demands, we would like to express our appreciation."

Sonya paused just before the second-floor landing, which Xiasheng didn't so he ended up on the second floor before turning back to her. Now that they were off the highly sensitive floor of the thieves' clan headquarters, the vor escort wandered off back up the stairs. "Express it how?"

"Fong was... very amused at my loss to your unconventional methods with a staff. The bō was supposed to be a gift, but as you ended up destroying it in the process of... ah... knocking me around."

"Oh..." Sonya wasn't sure if she should apologize or not for that.

"It is no problem. I brought an extra just in case you did break it before we could gift it." Xiasheng continued with a wry smirk as she finally took the last steps off the staircase to rejoin him on what seemed to be a walk out of the Zolotov Headquarters. "However, after Fong heard my report of our spar, he wanted something else sent along for humoring my request."

She regarded him warily. "...Fong used you to get a better report about what I can do, didn't he?"

"Possibly." He temporized, attempting a bland smile for her.

"He can do his own research. I have no objections to fighting him again if he would like."

"I will pass that on, and... about that." The Chinese Storm offered Sonya another smile, this one a bit strained. "Getting to the reason why I've interrupted your mother, and apologize to her for me if you can, but Fong was very interested in hearing how well you used a bō staff."

"I believe you said that once before." Sonya informed him, slightly tartly.

"Enough so that he found an excuse to send along more staff-based weaponry to see what you make of them." Xiasheng continued on, touching the likely still tender side of one black eye. "There's a... few of them he had shipped express."

"And this is the part that requires explanation?" Questioned the thief, still confused as to why Fong was sending her things.

She had gotten things from Renato, but he had pissed her off and that had been part of an apology. As far as she was aware, Fong hadn't pissed her off.

She should've at least noticed that if he had, right?

Maybe it was for the harassment he had to do before Tatiana suggested a spar and she finally got one after blowing up at Renato?
The martial artist hadn't seemed at all sorry about it, not even when he finally got what he had been after.

More like smugly pleased with himself, the asshole.

A few of Xiasheng's fellows, included the Rain Yanlin who would be staying behind for her own reasons, were waiting for them on the ground floor of the complex that served the Zolotov clan as a base. They were each holding a staff or two, some of which had very interestingly shaped cloths draped over the heads.

"...Xiasheng? I would like an answer now."

"Ah... well..." The Chinese Storm shuffled slightly in place, almost looking sheepish. His fellows mostly looked amused as they planted various ends of different staffs on the floor, so she could get a good long look at the oversized arsenal. "Fong sent these for you, mostly in gratitude but also... in the hopes you would learn them and then give him a fight... using them. He seemed... very interested in what you would make of them all."

The first, or rather the closest to her, was a naginata. The man holding it also had a staff with a fork looking thing on its head, which she could not for the life of her recall what they were called. The next man had a freaking oar, and next to him was a man holding the monk staff with four rings threaded through the rather ornate head.

The next to last man, standing near the back of the group, had a plain wooden bō staff and a slightly shorter one in his arms.

Lastly, there was a spiked mace looking thing with a big ass ring on one end. He had planted it on the glossy floor of the reception room rather than put the spiked end against his shoulders like his fellows.

Sonya blinked at the collection of brightly colored Chinese men and their various staff-based weaponry she was apparently being gifted with standing around the very generic looking room used to deter anyone not in the know walking into the criminal syndicate's home base by looking like a super busy business office. Then blinked again when her right eye tried to twitch in an attempt to keep hold of her temper and not put holes through either people or walls.

She was going to shove the most uncomfortable one up Fong's ass for this. Probably the big spiked mace one, the naginata looked rather pretty for something she hadn't wanted in the first place.

Her collection already had axes and picks on a stick, why not add a freaking sword on a stick?

How about a pitchfork of all things?

What's more, they were full-sized.

Sonya pinched the bridge of her nose as she cursed the missing Chinese Storm out in her mind.

He knew she had a miniature collection she used for any day-to-day fights, sending full-sized versions probably meant he intended them only to be used when training to use them... or trying to maim him using them.

Xiasheng coughed awkwardly, from the sounds of it shuffling again on the carpeted bit of floor they were standing on. "I tried to tell him he was probably going overboard, Miss Bazanova, but-"

"Oh, don't worry, Xiasheng. It's not your fault." Drawing the hand pinching the bridge of her nose
down her face in exasperation, the thief braced her jawline with the same hand and considered the entire collection. "I know exactly who to blame for this."

Her plans to maim Fong with the entire 'gift' he had sent to her was probably the point of him even getting her anything like this collection in the first place. She wasn't sure if she was ornery enough to go against that reaction just because, or if she should go along with it because it promised to be somewhat fun to try.

The asshole. The smug, perverted, fight-obsessed irritant.

What kind of gift was this all, anyways?

*He'd* eventually get a benefit from all of it, if Sonya stuck to what she really, *really* wanted to do with each weapon.

Xiasheng was probably being rather smart in ensuring she had only a small audience around when handing over the collection. Even if she was only half a Cloud, it seemed as if her reactions and a typical Classical Cloud's reactions did coincide sometimes.

Sonya huffed an almost unwilling laugh, morbidly amused by the entire spectacle. "I'm going to have to ask you all take these up to my office, please. I'll find… something to do with it all."

If she tried to do it, and she could even if the combined weight might be stretching it for her bizarre strength, she'd end up smacking one of the rubbernecking gawkers that were coming to sneak a peek at what their visiting Chinese contingent were giving her. Some of those spikes and points looked rather painful.

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(Saturday the 19th of April, 1969. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Lisa took a seat across from Sonya, in range far enough to feed her son at the same time. "Do you know what I wanted to talk to you about?"

"No?" The young blonde blinked up at her, distracted from playing with her food.

Probably already missing her sister, decided the older Mafiya woman with a bit of exasperation.

Her youngest foster daughter could pretend to be as prickly as she wanted, but it was fairly obvious she really only got engaged with something if one of her siblings or her few specially picked underlings were also involved.

Tatiana, with the hospital she worked for proposal already given to their leader and her prospective fellow to-be-medics picked out, had no real reason to linger back in Moscow anymore. The red headed nurse had left last night, after one last day of re-meeting her little brother and… well, teasing her little sister.

Lisa wondered if Sonya could do anything without at least verbally fighting someone about it, even spending time with Tatiana was marred with petty little fights the both of them seemed to enjoy more than actually mean.

"Is there anything wrong?" Sonya prompted when she seemed to be wool gathering a little more than normal.
"Everything is fine." The older woman hastened to state firmly, giving Valera more omelet to try stabbing with a child-friendly fork. "I didn't mean it like that."

She lowered her fork to her plate, apparently not that interested in eating as much as she was confused. "Lisa? What's going on?"

"You know you can talk to me about anything, right?" At the continued blank look but accepting nod to her question, Lisa wondered yet again how to go about this particular topic.

Damn Arseniy for have no clue in hell how to have this conversation with Sonya, just that it might be needed. *Might be*, Lisa wanted to huff out a sarcastic laugh at that.

When their youngest daughter could literally *rip people apart* if they tried anything funny with her...?

She wasn't entirely sure this chat was even needed, but her lover hadn't let up until she agreed to do it.

Sonya's little fight with a much better trained but foreign fighter had put down a lot of the nasty kinds of rumors about her off-putting behavior, but that probably wouldn't last very long.

Even after those nasty Rains stopped spreading vicious rumors, popular opinion around the clan wasn't entirely in the Storm-Cloud's favor outside her small niche. Now that it had been stopped, and the thief in question had put in a little face time with the various young her Flame section of the clan dealt with, it was slowly getting better.

Galina was a lovely assistant with multiple uses, but even she could only do so much in rumor control.

Given her younger foster child had absolutely no interest in socializing, and rarely credited that it would affect her at all, even one or two rumors of the wrong sort getting to someone with ill intentions might end up all sorts of bad.

Within the Zolotov clan, Sonya was admired in an 'ice bitch' kind of way. Pretty to look at, but not someone to get close to unless you wanted frostbite in awkward places. She was known to be rather rude, curt, or possibly verbally sharp, but she didn't go out of her way to make trouble for others so it was tolerated as long as she kept it to her small circle of influence.

Her sheer lack of any romantic foolishness of the type Tatiana was fond of did her a service, they didn't feel threatened because Sonya was utterly disinterested in stealing their men and had no problem showing it. It was pretty damn obvious when the thief barely twitched at the raunchier comments thrown her way and ignored it whenever someone tried to chat her up.

Lisa was fully aware of what her eldest was up to but, as she had yet to mess around with someone she shouldn't and *could* manage her own damage control when those things flared up, she wasn't yet worried for her.

Any change to that sheer disinterest the Storm-Cloud extruded would get the women's backs up and probably destabilize Sonya's reputation. Such as wandering around the clan's headquarters half-naked, or extravagant presents from foreign suitors.

That didn't include any men who got it in their heads to try for the foster daughter of a particularly well respected vor in hopes of gaining his favor, or what they would do when Sonya broke them in half for trying that with her.
"I know I gave you and Tats a talk about maturing and the facts of life, and that Arseniy did the same for Cherep…"

Sonya hesitated a moment before speaking up, probably highly wary of another smack to the head. "…actually, Arseniy took Cherep to a whorehouse."

Lisa pressed her lips together but had to admit her lover wasn't the most verbose of men. Not exactly stoic, but also not a chatterbox.

That had probably been for the best, even if wondering how that conversation had gone had been a favorite pastime for her. "I'm not going to ask how you know that, as your brother likely told you right afterwards and I can guess his thoughts on the matter. But you realize those loose women have bad reputations, right?"

The still mostly blank expression on the younger woman's face didn't even twitch. "Yes…?"

"And for a woman of your… status, you can't afford that kind of reputation?"

As she had been afraid of, nothing seemed to be clicking on her daughter's end.

"I'm not… exactly interested in sleeping around causally, Lisa." Sonya started off with her usual brutal frankness. "If you've heard anything… I didn't do it."

"I know." Slightly concerning, even Lisa had explored around a little at her age. However, she would admit her youngest daughter was a bit more than strange. Not a typical girl, they wouldn't even need this conversation if that were the case. "I haven't, sweetie. But… before you end up doing anything you might not think is important but ends up being so, I'd like to sound this out with you. Some of the things you can do outside of the Soviet Union isn't the same as what you can do within it."

"…okay?"

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 19th of April, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya was still utterly confused two hours later, when Lisa deemed they had spent more than enough time talking and she should probably go into work.

She got something out of that conversation, but probably not what her foster mother had meant to convey.

Obviously, she was doing something wrong. Or if not wrong then not entirely correct.

However, Rachel had very much been a modern woman before her death. Sonya… might still be thinking of the world much like how it had once been, even if the history was slightly different and the people involved a bit more murderous. That the culture wasn't much different, which to be fair it wasn't in-your-face like the two-thousands' sex sells thing but a more reserved kind of thing building up to that.

Sort of similar to the situation with Tatiana and her future all over again. Like the rest of the Russian Mafiya the Storm-Cloud didn't intend to ever get married, the only name she'd take on were her father's and her brother's.
That didn't mean she was going to never get a boyfriend, it just wasn't... a need for her.

In the sixties, it was apparently still a thing for a woman to be to be defined by her man. Probably not until the Sexual Revolution would Sonya stop hearing about this and things like her 'reputation'.

That was baffling. What could she do to control how others perceived her?

It wasn't like Sonya really gave a damn who didn't like her, those who did would know better and that was that. She might give a damn for being feared unnecessarily, but that was more a comfort-thing than a reputation. She hadn't earned that honestly, so it did bother her somewhat.

Maybe that had been the point?

Still mystified by the morning's conversation, the thief came to a stop in the middle of her borrowed office. Derailed by the errant thought, and respecting Lisa's opinion enough to give the talk some serious thought.

'A woman of your... status' Lisa had said. What about it?

Her 'status' was a temporary thing, the moment Dmitriy was out of prison she was going to try and bail out of the clan entirely. During changeovers of power in a criminal syndicate any number of things got mixed up in the shuffle, and if old man Zolotov was really going to be retiring...

Hopefully that would kick up enough fuss so that her bowing out in favor of Valera's development as the Zolotov's resident Cloud could be more or less set in stone before anyone thought to ask her what she was doing.

Since there seemed to only be one dominant, active Cloud in any one territory... Sonya had to leave for Gedeon to get his 'Cloud that isn't female or entirely disinterested in Moscow'. Visit might be one thing but living in any kind of close proximity would turn little Valera into something much like her.

A, as Cherep put it, beta Cloud 'entirely disinterested in Moscow'.

She wasn't going to let her littlest brother suffer through the headache she was, of biting her tongue and not bucking the system for reasons even if that grated against her sensibilities, even if that would gain him range to do whatever he wanted in life.

She wasn't ruthless enough to turn the situation to her favor as another Cloud might be, because while irritating it wasn't actually all that bad to her in her day-to-day work. Depressing, confining, and a little stifling, but not bad.

The fact it would probably wind up to mean little Valera would take over the Zolotovs somehow eventually wasn't really all that important to her. More power to the brat, but Sonya wouldn't be staying.

Well aware that even if she pulled that distance getting off that she would be stuck paying her and Bjørn's dues for the rest of their lives, or until her baby brother did his probably-hostile takeover, Sonya absentely glanced around the office once more before finally moving to see if there was anything new for her to look at in her piles of work to be done.

Even if she had been working out of here, she hadn't touched much. There was a collection of various staff weapons in one corner, but she'd get those shipped to Mafia Land this weekend.

The upholstery was still mainly blue with green highlights, without even a red or purple throw pillow. That ugly lamp of Dmitriy's had survived this long, it would probably make it to when the
Rain was released.

One wall was patched, but well… she wasn’t sorry about that. Galina had torn apart the built-in bookshelf on the far wall, but it was more-or-less back together now.

Sonya had wondered if she even wanted to be part of a criminal syndicate while her foster mother was trying to inform her of ways to manage one's reputation. It wasn't much use to her, for some pricy benefits she could probably get elsewhere. She'd think fondly of the Zolotovs… eventually, for her foster family and the security she got as a not-quite-a-child.

However, she was utterly, uncomfortably irritable with someone holding her leash.

Metaphorical or not.

Trying to leave a syndicate without their say so might be mostly lethal to the individual trying, but frankly Sonya was at the point she didn't much care. She’d pay her dues for the rest of her life if she had to, give them discounts for hiring her, but she was tired of being confined here and unable to check up on her brother or sister when she wanted.

Again, probably not what Lisa had intended with her little talk.

"Sonya?" Galina prompted, which made the Storm-Cloud blink in surprise. She hadn't heard the other woman come in. "What's... going on?"

She glanced up to the Lightning, inspecting the rather dependable aide she had gotten rather used to while here. "You absolutely sure you want to leave this place? Tats will be coming back, eventually."

"I'll thank you to not question my intents." Sniffed the brunette in mock offense, planting a hand on a generous hip and glaring back. "I don't want to go back to being Dmitriy's office girl. Whatever you've got planned is fine with me."

Tapping the fingers of one hand on the desk, the thief thought about that. "Even if... I don't particularly want to come back?"

Startled, the slightly older woman quickly crossed to the office door and shut it. "You are so lucky that after the rock testing we did in here no one wants the office underneath us. Any conversation we have at normal tones in here is entirely audible downstairs in that one room. Now, what the hell is this about?"

"I'm a little fed up. Have been for a while, I just hadn't realized that was what it was." Sonya marveled aloud, not greatly bothered by the prospect of being overheard. "You're probably going to have to go out with your school plan, but I've got another."

"Oh?"

"...Gedeon gave it to me surprisingly," the thief dredged up a smile from somewhere, but it wasn't a particularly nice one, "with a little help from Tats. I'm going to name you vice principal for the school, once we have it up and running. You'll probably do better at it than I could ever do. In a few years, once things are more or less stable and running right and the agreements for those teaching need to be unaffiliated gets put in by whichever greedy asshole that wants to take charge of it, bow out to Lisa."

Galina blinked, then peered at her suspiciously. "What are you going to do?"

"I? I'm going to give Gedeon exactly what he thinks he wants."
An unholy terror of a Cloud, who will probably not respect him either but would consider Zolotov territory his and not the to-be Pahkan’s.

(Sunday the 20th of April, 1969. Giglio Nero Headquarters, Lecce, Apulia Region, Italian Republic.)

Renato ran his eyes over the gathering from under his ever-present fedora, slightly bored and already planning on what to do when he got to go bother a particular Russian thief of his acquaintance.

Donna Luce had a traitor-free famiglia finally, this little midday lunch party was partly to reopen lines communications to other famiglias and partly to show any of the traitors’ surviving associates that they completely failed in their bids to remove the Ottavia of the Giglio Nero as Donna.

Not very risky at all to hold, anyone with a lick of sense that had been involved would be wise to keep their damn heads down for at least another week or two.

That didn't mean there wasn't the few idiots that tried all-or-nothing attempts to finish the jobs they started, but such desperate elements were laughably easy to counter.

It would've been even easier if Luce had Guardians.

Suppressing the sudden scowl, the hitman cast another glance through the crowd to see if there was anyone he could take his sudden ill-humor out on.

He had yet to get a straight answer out of the Sky on the reasons for not having any Guardians.

Renato would've accepted that she just hadn't found anyone strong enough, Luce was a very powerful Sky so obviously just anyone off the street wouldn't do for her.

Hell, he would've taken an excuse that she didn't want to impose on anyone like that. She was bewilderingly nice about things, a little reserved maybe but in her position a woman had to be, even if she was a mafia Donna.

The Sun was suspicious, and not very happy about the fact.

Every Sky had Guardians, or at least that was the driving point behind a Sky's Harmony. To collect and gather together compatible Flame types to protect themselves.

Any one Sky's territory ended up having outstanding Flame users of each type, it was natural since they were encouraging influences to any budding Dying Will Flame user. No Sky ever really had to venture far for their entire array of Guardians, or at least for the first set.

It wasn't the lack of options that prevented the Giglio Nero Sky from finding her own, it had to be a personal choice of her own. One that went against her nature as a Hard Flame Sky, or even against her own normal outlook from what he had seen of her.

Why didn't Luce want that protection?

Even when actively seeking out a strong, un-bonded Element for aid?

The hitman wouldn't have bonded as a Guardian with her, even if she had reached for him like that. He had… personal reasons why he would've refused. Gently, for she was a lady and a respectable
one at that.

However, expecting something that never came had made him tense and merely stroked both his curiosity and suspicions.

He wouldn't ask such personal questions to someone he had only known for a month and some, and not knowing or being able to get the answer was a new sensation he didn't much like.

Luce kept herself at arm's length from him. Wisely, since he wasn't a very moral or respectable person, but it also prevented him from just dipping into her mind to find the answers for himself.

It didn't help his suspicions or irritation much at all.

Not seeing an acceptable target for his ire, Renato unbent his lanky frame from where he had been leaning against a stone railing to see if Don Vongola would offer him any distractions.

Timoteo gave the hitman a sly smile when he got close enough neither man had to raise their voices over the quiet courtyard's babble to talk. "You do fine work, Renato. It's been what, a month? It seems you have a gift for straightening out various... ah, problems."

"It wasn't really much of a challenge." He brushed aside the praise absently, straightening his cuffs as he came to a stop near the other man. It was likely the Don was planning something, but as long as it might be interesting the Sun Flame user didn't really mind all that much. "How have you been, Timoteo?"

"Neck deep in negotiations with the Cervello Organization." Admitted the Sky rather wryly, giving a heavy sigh and turning his face to the sun overhead.

"I haven't heard of them." Renato prodded, curious now.

If he hadn't, how did they come to be so important a Don of Vongola's station was talking to them directly?

His verbal poke merely earned him one raised brow, and the older man looked back at him with a polite smile. "I didn't think you would, they're fairly new. Formed up over the empty territory the Giannotti famiglia emptied last year when they were wiped out."

Which would mean they were uncomfortably close, for a newly established syndicate within throwing distance to Vongola's allies. The closest to the specified area would've been... "Don Cavallone didn't want to handle the issue?"

"He was a little busy on another situation." Timoteo deflected without really saying much. Most Dons were very busy people. "As I have some time free, it isn't a problem."

Renato sensed he wasn't going to get much more out of that line of communication, Visconti was also drifting back to his Sky's side with suspiciously narrowed eyes.

Brown Nie didn't seem too alarmed from where he was near the buffet table, but the two Suns had quickly sorted out their individual aims to one another back when Renato had only just met the Ninth head of Vongola, that wasn't surprising.

Renato hadn't seen a need to murder the other Sun and take over a Guardian position, Brown Nie didn't want to tangle with the other stronger Italian Sun much at all ever. It worked out.

"I should probably get back to 'pulling security duties'." The hitman informed Timoteo, very
regretfully.

Just talking to someone that wasn't watching him suspiciously for any weapon pulling was very nice, after a few weeks of having people flinch from his very shadow. That kind of behavior became wearing very fast.

"I think Donna Giglio Nero would appreciate that." Observed the other man with clear amusement. "She's glanced over here twice since you wandered in."

"Ho? Probably worried I'm about to shoot someone." Depressing that would make a pretty lady flinch from him, but Renato was a murderer. He wasn't going to pretend he wasn't.

Luce had been sheltered from that side of their lives so far until the hitman had become involved, and while he did regret killing in front of the lady… her safety was a bit more important to him than her nerves.

"I wouldn't have guess that myself." The Sky noted slyly. "I wouldn't be unhappy if you decided to become a Don again, Renato."

"That will NEVER happen. I don't particularly like the responsibility… but mostly the paperwork." He was going to ignore the implication Luce was watching him for any other reason, his love life was more than complicated enough as it was. "I'm afraid this will be as close as I will ever go to the position of Don from now on."

"That's… not a bad thing." Timoteo mused, reaching up to smooth down his rather thick mustache.

"Timoteo, you can be a very irritating person." Especially if the Sky was plotting something.

Renato wasn't quite fed up with the antics of Skies, but after being suspicious of one for damn near no reason all month he had been looking forward to going back to taking hits for a good few years.

By that point Visconti had wound his way through the party-goers enough to be within earshot, and the Cloud Guardian glowered at the unaffiliated Sun for insulting his Sky.

Said Sky merely laughed, waving a hand to dismiss the unaligned hitman's rather sour comment. "I believe that is the first time someone has had the gumption to accuse me of that. Always refreshing to speak to you, Renato."

"Timoteo." Touching the brim of his fedora in an absent salute of the dismissal, the hitman stalked off before Visconti could make a fool of himself puffing up any more than he had already.

Renato still thought Sonya on a Cloud Flame fueled rampage was more terrifying than the Vongola Cloud Guardian. Especially when she was furious with him.

The thought made him remember the advice Nilda Guerra gave him late last month, which was at least something to think about when posturing himself for security reasons.

He wasn't sure what he was going to do with most of it, as some was just sound advice for having a Cloud friend at all and how to work around their prickly natures he could fully use to avoid the Russian's sharp edges.

A quick glance to the guard positions on either side of his balustrade informed him that at least the morons he had drilled all week for this little event had put his instructions to some use. His leaving of a post had gotten the guards on either side of him to draw closer to cover the gap, and now that he was back they were drifting apart again.
Not quite as smoothly as they should, the fact they were moving at all drew some attention from the guest in attendance.

Field drills tomorrow then. The poor saps would probably be horrified to know Renato did just as much and then more than what he had put them through when they screwed up on a normal weekly basis, but he was also a pent-up Sun and they weren't.

Sucked to be them.

He could not wait to drop Shamal off on Sonya and spend at least a month and a half running hits until he stopped feeling so restless. Exploring a bit of Moscow's criminal underworld might draw enough of it off to be relaxing, but only if it wouldn't harm the thief's reputation any.

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(Sunday the 20th of April, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Someone is very, very annoyed with you."

"Someone needs to be more specific." Sonya snapped back absently, writing out yet another list of things in her master research journal.

Ziven popped up on his toes just long enough to read the upside-down title she gave it, Ways of Committing Suicide via Flame Usage, and sank back to his heels with a bewildered expression.

"Dorokhov." Only the very reason the vor was away from the clan so damn much. "The leader of the little gang up in Khimki? The one I'm mentoring, and you beat the snot out of once before?"

The thief paused, glanced to her apparent rough draft and compared it to the list she was making in her heavily altered research journal, then finally looked up only to pin him with an annoyed expression. "I'm probably going to regret this, but why?"

"Some little birdy informed him of the spar you got with some Chinese man." Ziven started slowly, electing to sprawl out on the free arm chair in front of her desk instead of continuing to stand. "So now my little birdy is very irked you fought some no-name foreigner instead of coming to him for another smack-around. It's disturbing to watch him mope about it, and kind of hilarious."

Rather disturbing to think about, as well. Timur was depressed Sonya hadn't somehow arranged a beating for him. There was no way in hell the little teenaged Cloud had improved enough to go toe to toe with Sonya on an equal level just yet, he could barely nick Ziven in an odd scuffle or two.

Disturbing, hilarious, and strange. A Cloud Flame user in a nutshell.

Probably more terrifying than hilarious to someone that didn't know a Cloud user's quirks, but... Ziven somehow ended up half-raising a gutter brat Cloud and knew his one rather well. He had also grown up with the Zolotov Cloud, and knew how her head worked somewhat well too.

Sonya merely looked annoyed at the news he brought in. "...please tell me you're joking."

"Nope!"

She wasn't irritable anymore, so in fact Ziven would put good money on it possibly happening. As his fellow thief hadn't dismissed the whole thing out of hand, it did mean she was at least thinking it over.
"Has he gotten any better?"

Seriously thinking it over, apparently. "Err... it's been only a month and a half. He's learned to dodge?"

The expression aimed at him was now 'unimpressed'. He was also losing her attention to the work she was in the middle of, so he quickly suggested something else.

"Maybe when he can reliably score a hit on me?" Ziven offered sheepishly.

He hadn't exactly thought of what Sonya would do past hearing the issue, the vor had been more interested in stopping Timur from creeping out his little gang any more than he had already.

They were strangely fanatical about their leader's moods. With some of them he could understand, the Khimki Cloud had beaten half of them up before they joined him so they were probably terrified they were going to be beaten again if the issue wasn't fixed to the picky Cloud's liking. Some of them were duly impressed Dorokhov had a full-fledged vor advising him and were loyal because it seemed as if he would be going places that weren't more gutters and slums.

Some of them were just... probably as crazy as possible. Ziven wasn't going to be guessing any on his end until Sonya could see their ridiculous reactions for herself.

"Find a place outside our respective territories. It might be possible to do such a thing inside Zolotov territory, but don't risk it." The woman instructed firmly, returning to her work and flicking a wrist at him absently. "When he can tag you at least once a day for a full week, I'll visit."

"Right then, I'm just going to go... bug Lina for a bit." Taking that as a dismissal, the vor hopped up.

"Ziven. It's possible that in the course of such visits, the things we don't want found out early will be." Sonya glanced up, more than serious enough to make him pause. "Be sure everything you need is in place before such a thing happens."

"Yeah, but exactly how long can we stretch things out?" He asked back without expecting a real answer.

Some syndicates had already scouted the Khimki territory out a few times, which Timur had ousted with full vindictive glee and a minimum of mercy. The fact there was some kind of player in the old smuggler's den was probably common knowledge already, which would just mean eventually someone was going to send in more than just runners or a few of their Shestyorka to see what.

Ziven was not looking forward to it, for then all he'd have at hand to keep control of the Khimki Cloud and his territory was the teen himself and his passel of almost-fanatics. Maybe they'd number a good fifty in another month or two, but even fifty badly trained kids against even one someone armed with a gun or a rifle and enough bullets?

He did not like those odds.

"...anything you want? Even if it's just because, I wouldn't mind sourcing something to help." Sonya offered after a long moment of studying his expression.

Arming the brats with guns did not seem to be a wise idea to him. Ziven gave it more thought anyways, because even if he wasn't going to ask for firearms from the thief that didn't mean he had to turn down the offer.

Timur might be a stubborn little shit, so nothing in the way of luxury items his 'boys' can do without
for a short while until they sourced it some other way, but… maybe…

The vor's gaze landed on a stack of polearms Sonya somehow had acquired, fetched up against a corner. "Think you can get me some serviceable weapons? Maybe a gun or two, but more like what you've got over there."

Her eyes flicked over to see what he was pointing at. ". . . I'll see what I can do."

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 20th of April, 1969 continued. Karachi, Sindh, Islamic Republic of Pakistan)

Cherep cautiously looked around, then kicked the engine giving one of the ride operators massive trouble with his steel toed boots as hard as its steel could stand.

The clunky thing choked on its own intake, but finally spluttered to life again.

He made note it needed to be pulled apart and really cleaned as he hauled himself out of the service hatch and spoke German to the man waiting on him. "There you go, Safak. I'll check it again once you're done for the night, but I at least know the gasket isn't going. Something in there is clumping together that shouldn't. I'll know more tomorrow."

The swarthy man sighed thankfully, moping at his receding hairline with his ever present if stained handkerchief. "I was worried you might not be able to do it this time."

"She might be old, but not out yet." Quipped the part-time mechanic good naturedly, kicking his toolbox lightly to edge it away from the opening he had just crawled out of. "But... if it's what I think it is, it's going to be expensive to fix."

If a kick did the job, when caulking the casing hadn't helped, then it was an internal problem. Might be something with the pistons, the crankshaft, or even the case itself.

Worst possible option?

Metal shavings from one or another fouling up the oil.

If an hour or two of running idly didn't choke it up again, then probably nothing that dire. Might impact the operator's intake a fair bit but was safer than it breaking down mid-ride.

Safak lowered the heavy metal grate that kept curious fairgoers from getting into the dangerous insides of his portable carnival ride, padlocking the thing so no mischief was possible. "I think we will probably miss you the most, if you insist on continuing with your plans for next year."

"Hell yeah I'm still going." Cherep was going to do a world tour as Skull de Mort, he was almost impatient for next year to come around already.

Master Liam had already signed off on it, and he'll even still have a spot with the Großes Volksfest the year after when he got back.

He did feel slightly sorry for leaving the circus in a bit of a bind with having to hire a temporary mechanic they probably wouldn't like as much for a year, but not enough to decline a talent scout that wanted to see where Cherep could take his stunt driving solo.

Sonya might bitch at him when she heard, but he had put in the effort to be sure it was entirely legal and upstanding before agreeing. Not quite as well as he could when Viper poked their nose into
things for him, but well enough.

He had even popped into the underworld in England’s Cambridge to check things out, and in there no news was good news so it wasn’t likely it was criminally motivated.

Of course, it didn’t mean there was no motivation behind some Englishman’s sponsoring of a ‘Russian’ stuntman’s act but that was probably purely money motivated.

Cherep didn’t rightly care much, he’d get to do what he loved to do for an entire year and possibly get paid on top of that. The reputation was what was important, and with that he could stop worrying about his shady past coming back to haunt him.

"I’ll be right back." Said stuntman told the other man, ducking out of the operator’s booth and vaulting the railing. "I need to get some of this oil off before I smear it over something. Like my lunch."

Safak huffed a laugh, sinking down on his stool gratefully for while he watched his tilt-a-whirl’s engine gauges. "Take your time, I shall remain here."

Dropping to the ground, he took off for the performer’s tents where he had abandoned his lunch when the service call had reached him.

Before Cherep could start thinking of next year, there was a few things he really had to get around to this year. One was head back to Moscow for the summer break, if only to see his adorably grumpy nephew hopefully in a better mood and do his uncle-ly duties in riling the brat up for Sonya. The other was… well…

How, exactly, did one invite a gender-ambiguous friend over for Christmas with your… less than legal foster family?

Of course, in order for him to do the asking said friend had to actually show up.

A month or two wasn’t entirely odd for Viper to take between visits, the Mist had once taken three months to show back up utterly unrepentant for the worry it caused him. Fully aware that his friend was aware of the risks on their life or not, he worried damn it.

A lot, really. Cherep had only shallowly dipped into that life as a teenager, and both Sonya and Arseniy had kept him from the really nasty things. That didn’t mean he avoided hearing all about it.

He could tell himself that Viper was an adult and had Mist Flames powerful enough to really fuck someone over if they wanted… but it didn’t really help much.

The time he spent waiting at least let the stuntman plan out how to ask Viper to attend a family gathering for a holiday, but that just made him come back to his original thought.

How?

Viper wasn’t really someone that liked a lot of fuss, and Lisa would fuss. Gleefully. Probably roping Tatiana in on it somehow, through those bewildering female communication lines that were indecipherable for any male. Sonya would probably blink a few times, equally as baffled.

Arseni would… probably get very drunk instead of deal with it.

Ooh, what would Valera do?
Probably throw a fit at attention getting pulled from him, he was a very demanding little toddler.

Cherep realized he was going absolutely nowhere with his original thought, so tried to pull his wandering attention back to the problem at hand.

"Oh, Cherep!"

Damn, BAIL!

The problem with dating within a close knitted group like a wandering circus was that your ex could find you just about everywhere. Ivanna was one of the trapeze girls, one who had been rather cold and snippy to his little sister at first that he had only recalled after the first time they got into a petty fight.

Jaq maybe had to remind him, but at least the ebony skinned strong-man hadn't seemed too amused at the oversight. Faris had laughed his ass off enough for all of them, anyways.

Cherep would maybe admit to breaking things off with her because of that behavior she had to his sister, but frankly if the two ever met outside the circus he was pretty sure Ivanna wouldn't survive with her dignity intact. Then he'd hear about it, from both women.

"Ivanna, lovely to see you again." His smile probably looked a bit strained, but at least in the middle of the lanes between the various tents she couldn't do anything too bad.

"I'm pretty sure these are yours." The woman claimed, holding up a pair of-

"Ooh, I was wondering where those got to." Purple, black, and white drawstring pants. Part of his Christmas gift from Sonya a few years ago. "Err… thanks."

She merely looked highly amused as she pitched the cloth at him, tossing her rather pretty gold curls over her shoulder with a smooth movement. "I'm sure. You don't have to run, Cherep. I don't bite… hard."

Right… that was the other reason he broke things off rather quickly. Ivanna was rather petty when things didn't go her way. His favorite pair of lounge pants now had oil streaks on them.

Probably still mad at him, then. "Yes… thank you. I'm going to go… finish my lunch."

Cherep edged out of there as fast as he could, mostly so he could try to salvage the cotton before any stains set in.

"You could have interrupted. I wouldn't have minded."

"You might not have… mou, but I think she may have." Viper observed idly as she swept out from a nearby tent to join him, a wicked looking smirk on the Esper's visible lower face. "No 'Hi Viper, it's good to see you'?

"Hi, Viper. It's good to see you." Cherep deadpanned back, trying and probably failing to keep the amusement out of his voice. "You've been gone a while."

"I was doing a little something, then your sister had a favor she wanted." The Mist informed him blandly, tugging off her cowl because while it wasn't hot it was rather muggy. "Frankly, I'm still dealing with her little favor, but I needed a break."

"Which sister? I have two."
"The oh-so touchy one."

Kind of odd, Viper didn't tend to discuss her business with him normally. Maybe because it was Sonya this time? "Oh really?"

"She has me instructing her little Lackey in how to manage money, in return for some non-specific aid."

Oh, poor Bjørn. The stuntman blinked a few times as he ducked into his tent, shared with the other mechanics, as his eyes adjusted to the darker interior. "I wonder if I should get a bank account somewhere."

"Yes, you should." Viper snapped, hovering near the entrance because she didn't like staying in any of the tents very much when she was around. "Mou, what the hell have you been doing with all your money?"

"I keep it in a box."

"...please tell me you're joking."

Nope, it was in a strong box Liam kept for him. However, he wasn't that stupid to tell the money-grubbing Mist where his funds were kept. He needed that if Betsy ever broke down or ended up in pieces due to his stunt work. "Entirely possible. I don't get off for a couple hours yet, Vips. So, do you want to fetch lunch for us? Someone ate mine."

Probably one of the other mechanics who had to bolt for another engine breaking down somewhere. Cherep would likely find out tonight, when whoever it was apologized and paid him probably twice what it was worth.

Viper would be proud, not that he was going to tell her because then she'd demand a cut.

Somehow, he'd end up agreeing to it too.

Said Esper held out a demanding hand, making a 'gimme' motion when he merely grinned at her while slumping to his cot and digging out something to remove grease and oil from cloth he kept on hand.

"No, not doing this again. I'll pay you back, but you're going to have to show the receipt for how much is my share first."

"...I think I liked it better when you were gullible, mou."

"You want to come over for Christmas?" He wasn't ever going to figure it out by worrying about it, even if just blurted it out made him want to smack himself. "We do it the first week of the New Year, and there's a hotel nearby if you don't want to sleep over."

Viper stared at him for a long moment. "...I'll think about it."

"That's what you said about taking a spin on my bike." Cherep all but cheered, because he had gotten the Mist on his bike for a mile. She'd demanded to get off pretty quick, but that was more of an 'I'll try' from his friend than a 'no'.

She hunched her shoulders a little, scowling at him. "We're eating something expensive, and you're paying the entire bill."
Eh, worth it.
"Get into a damn line and stay close. If you get lost here, I'm not coming back to fetch any of you."

Sonya snapped over one shoulder, to the pack of various Flame users bobbing along in her wake.

She had felt like a damn mother duck herding them along, with all her little ducklings in a row and following her. She didn't really appreciate the feeling.

Old man Zolotov eventually agreed to the proposed trade between their thieves' clan and the Mafia Land hospital, and since the next one heading that way was the Storm-Cloud herself she got stuck with babysitting the entire collection until she could hand them over to Tatiana or some other representative of the hospital.

Well… most of the collection, they had no Lightnings in the group.

Finding a semi-decent place to set up while they waited for the next leg of their journey to start, with just enough seats open so she wouldn't hear any bitching, the thief gestured for the gaggle of teens to seat themselves.

Behind her came Avdotya the Inverted Storm, Raisa and Stella the Classical Rains with their Inverted fellow Traiko, and Edik the Classical Necromantic Sun.

The two that weren't on her list to be taken with her were Klavdia the Inverted Sun and Sergej the Mist. The thief was pretty sure the Mist was along just because Usov had paired him with the Sun intending on becoming a mortician to hide his undead Activations. Klavdia was along for… Sonya didn't really know and didn't rightly care much.

She only thanked whatever deity was in existence here that Galina's Lightnings hadn't decided if one or more of them wanted to join in on the medical training being offered.

If she had to do this she might as well take all the damn brats at once, so she didn't have to do it again. Tatiana could come back and fetch any more.

She hadn't quite appreciated how much of a headache guiding seven teenaged Dying Will Flame users to a criminally run island currently in the middle of the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

There wasn't a land-water path she wanted to take this time, which did cut down the time she spent herding brats, but airport security kept asking her if she was on a school trip or some such bullshit.

Thankfully Mafia Land flights were billed publicly as intraregional flights, so at least her various brats didn't need to go through customs as well as domestic security. Since they had to go east instead of west, it also was less remarkable overall than taking a western flight to the Atlantic Ocean.

Each of the seven teens had their own little trail of luggage, and their carry-ons that held a day or two worth of necessities. The Storm-Cloud had seven little claim tickets for each of them, so they could get their stuff once they arrived.

While that might have cut down the amount of stuff Sonya had to keep track of, because since she was the adult they collectively decided she was the one to complain to even if she didn't want to hear it, that didn't mean they were getting along well.
Raisa and Stella were both fine with each other, but they didn't get along with Klavdia. While Raisa got along with Sergej Stella didn't, she preferred talking to Avdotya who only got along with the female Sun but was stiff with anyone else. Edik was apparently too hyper for Traiko, who also disliked each of the girls and refused to be even polite to any of the four. Klavdia got along with exactly no one but Sonya herself, not that she tried all that hard. Sergej would get along with almost all of them but one of the Rains, but he found poking them was more fun.

The thief had a migraine, and they hadn't boarded their plane yet.

Sonya carefully adjusted the light summer weight coat she had worn to stay dry in the early summer storm over the Sheremetyevo International Airport. Once her entire left arm was fully concealed, the thief summoned one of her axes to her hand and carefully placed the bladed edge on Traiko's thigh heavily enough that he could feel it sharply but not hard enough to actually cut him.

"I'm sure you could be a lab tech easily enough without these. Or even something a bit higher than this, if you really want to be a little bitch."

Paling rather sharply, the Inverted Rain spat a quick if insincere apology to Klavdia. The rose hair girl looked contemplative for a long moment, but eventually the Sun shrugged instead of making more of an issue over his behavior.

"I believe we've come to the end of her patience." Sergej mused aloud faux-seriously, tapping his fingers against his baby smooth chin. "And it's only been two hours so far."

"I wonder how we're ever going to survive another ten or more hours, trapped together in a tin can suspended in midair." Edik snuck a quick look at the Storm-Cloud's stubbornly blank face, then shared a grin with his assigned Mist support. Apparently, they had become decent friends in the last few weeks. "Or any more delays to our flight."

"In pieces if you all do not find something else to do than bicker."

Stella suddenly pulled a thick paperback out of her backpack, snagging a glossy magazine to toss in Raisa's face before she could say anything. The lone Mist observed her actions clinically for a moment, then copied her actions but with Constructed journals Sonya was pretty sure would allow both Sergej and Edik to write messages to each other. Klavdia pretended to watch the board listing which flights were delayed was the most fascinating thing ever, even if Avdotya was charged with keeping an eye out for any changes.

Traiko gulped slightly, shifting and getting even paler when the ax posed over his thigh moved with him. "Bazanova? Can... you move your...?"

"Shut. The. Hell. Up."

"...yes ma'am."

(ooo000ooo) 

(Monday the 21st of April, 1969 continued. South beach, Mafia Land.)

"I'm kind of surprised they're all alive, actually."

Sonya snorted tiredly, stretching out a bit more on the towels Tatiana brought out so she could get some sun and fix her fading tan. She might need to touch up her tattoos this winter, if she kept getting enough sun. "Traiko was one more bitchy comment from becoming a paraplegic mid-flight. Or a eunuch."
Moving her mass of sopping wet red hair off her back, the nurse hummed absently. "Which one was he?"

"Rain, Inverted. The hospital can keep him, I don't want him back."

Not that she intended to stick around in the clan for the gaggle of bratty Flame users to finish their training. However, she was pretty sure the sullen teenager was probably one of the more damaged Rains. Bitchy, sexist, and probably entirely a typical example of a young Russian male.

With a sigh, the thief looked over at her sister. "What's the plan for the rest of the weekend?"

"Mainly? Testing if you can alter your immunity to be drugged and if it is easy or hard, then… well, if you can do it I'll sign off on you returning to our Fut Gar classes."

That held promise, but it also reminded the Storm-Cloud that she had to go pick up her own shipment. Where the hell was she going to store Fong's gift anyways?

…also, could Han-yue teach her anything about the various weapons that made it up?

The old bitch that ran the dojo Tatiana learned out of was a strict old woman, but the thief knew for a fact the naginata was considered an ancient Japanese noblewoman's weapon.

Sonya scowled slightly at the sky overhead. She was pretty sure Han-yue was actually Korean and not Japanese or Chinese. She could be wrong, she hadn't asked yet, but asking either question might end up being racist or something.

"…we could probably get a head-start, by trying to get me drunk." She was in fact looking forward to being able to get drunk again.

Although the immunity to alcohol trick was going to be kept for the odd drinking game or pumping individuals for information… and the possible suspicious drink or two.

Tatiana's head popped up, flashing a grin over at her. "Ooh, that's a lovely idea. You want to go out drinking or just buy a few bottles and stay in?"

Since she had discovered her hopefully temporary immunity to liquor, Sonya had abstained from visiting bars simply to drink. Wasn't much of a point if she couldn't get drunk, but the possibility to go back to that would prove to be some motivation to get the willpower to reign in her Storm Flames.

…did she ever pour the money she set aside for drinking into something else?

She didn't think so.

That was what?

Two-three years of interest on top of whatever she had in there since the circus?

Maybe Bjørn could tell her now.

"A bar, it's been a while."

Tatiana pushed herself upright, to a kneeling position in order to scan the boardwalk behind the sisters. "I know of a few around here…"

"Now?" Sonya had kind of intended to get in a shower and maybe find some pants before she went bar hopping again, not for them to go right this minute. Going drinking in bikinis kind of sounded
Also, she had no money on her. While pickpocketing was still an option, she would have to rely on her sister to pay unless she found a decently stupid criminal to rob.

"They're positioned around here expressly for those criminals escorting their families that don't particularly want to go swimming as well." The nurse informed her as she got up, kicking up the towel she had been sunbathing on to wrap around her hips. "And for those that would rather do something else than try the roller coasters."

The thief followed suit, absentmindedly wondering what kind of bar she was talking about. Sonya might actually like tavern-style ones, but Tatiana had a certain fondness for cocktail bars with the occasional lounge/dancing halls for variety.

Instead of taking the time to put on her sandals the Sun merely scooped them up and walked barefooted across the beach. Following her example with her own footwear, if only to not be left behind, the younger Russian elected to just carry her own towel than wear it.

There was, in fact, a tiki-style bar near one end of the boardwalk that Tatiana was headed to.

Sonya stopped before reaching the wooden walkway it had connecting it to the main beachside, using one of the torches as a support to at least slip on her sandals. Using the time to scope out the entire thatched-hut looking building, and the kind of people lingering either at the semi-crowded bar.

One of which the Sun neatly pickpocketed before placing an order of her own.

The thief smirked as she stepped up onto the walkway offered for bar patrons, since apparently the two of them had the same idea about how to pay for things when they had no pockets for money or purses with them. Apparently, her elder sister hadn't let her thieving skills fall much even if she was more focused on medical skills now.

"Here." Tatiana handed an entire green skinned coconut over, only one end sliced open enough to allow for a straw, a spoon, and a little umbrella to poke out. "Try this, and we'll work our way through their menu until either I'm tipsy or you are."

Dubiously, the thief took the offered drink as she followed the redhead into the bar for the shade from the late afternoon sun. She didn't think she liked coconut, or at least Rachel hadn't liked it much.

Maybe it was different now?

Given the slight height difference and the slighter bone structure she had now, she couldn't have the exact same body as in her last life.

The thief knew she still disliked mushrooms, but that was more of a texture thing than taste. Rachel hadn't liked the times she could get some coconut, but… also that had been dried and shredded stuff.

"Sonya?"

"Sorry, thinking." Testing how to turn off her Storm immunity was going to be more or less hit or miss until she understood what she was doing, but for right now… weren't coconuts brown?

Whatever it was, and Sonya could taste rum in the concoction with enough of a bite she was sure there was more, it was very different than the memories Rachel had of the nut. Sort of milky aftertaste dulled the burn of the liquor, and with rum that made for an interesting taste overall, but not
as bad as she had been expecting.

Maybe fresh coconut was different than the dried stuff?

That was an interesting thought.

Had her tastes changed any from one life to the other?

While pondering that over, and how to allow herself to take in what was functionally a poison willfully while taking a few more sips of whatever it was her sister had given her, the thief turned her attention back to the others frequenting the bar.

Tatiana had to resupply her three separate times before Sonya hit on a way to do more than appreciate how her liquor tasted, a browner nutshell drink that had more alcohol than coconut milk that told Sonya she didn't like the older and firmer coconut flesh as was served in a sweeter drink that came in a mason jar.

The two of them traded off who was pickpocketing the money each round, meaning for some very contrived reasons to wander the length of the bar.

She was pretty sure willing herself to get drunk would be the easier than letting herself get sick from a vaccination or succumbing to sedation. Having only half-recalled sensations of getting tipsy to go by, and of slamming beer down just to avoid tasting it for long, it took a while for her to start thinking it was working.

By then, the sisters had wandered up to the actual highly polished teak bar and picked seats near one end for the privacy and the space to scope out further targets for drinking money. It also had a rather impressive view of the waterfront and was tucked neatly away out of sight from the two entrances to the bungalow inspired bar.

Sonya finally found the lit lamps used for interior lighting rather annoying with how much they flickered as the sun started setting, around the point she was firmly sure she might possibly be slightly tipsy, giving an absent nod to Tatiana when she announced a food run.

They had skipped dinner to start in on drinking.

Unfortunately, that left the tiny blonde woman drinking at a bar alone in a skimpy swimsuit.

The thief found out what was wrong with that quickly after her usual people-buffer had waltzed off to find them something better than bar snacks to eat.

The bars of Mafia Land sold cigarettes both in packs and individual ones, and since the nurse was off elsewhere Sonya had bought a single one to have while she had the time. The lack of a lighter was no issue for her, but before she could even light up a blue silk clad arm offered her a lit zippo.

Said man in blue silk dress shirt leaned up against the bar and gave the bemused Storm-Cloud a smirk, still holding his lighter. "A lovely lady like you shouldn't be drinking alone. Why don't I join you?"

"My sister will be back shortly, then I will no longer be alone." She dismissed, using her own Storm Flames for her cigarette instead of taking his offer. "So, no, thank you."

"Aww, little lady. Don't be like that." The man looked over to the two wide open entrances in the bar then back at her. "Sisters, huh? Perfect."
"Can you get lost?" The thief snapped, not sure what he was after and not happy he was so interested in the missing Sun. She really only had so much time with her sister and didn't want any interruption to what she would get. "Or at least go somewhere else?"

"Am I bothering you? Very sorry." He pushed off the bar, flicking the unwanted lighter closed and slipping it into a pocket. "How about I buy you a drink as an apology?"

Sonya examined her drink through the smoke, which was getting a little low. While she might trust Tatiana's taste in liquor, she wasn't sure about accepting a drink from some random guy she didn't know.

Something fruity and peach colored was set down next to her almost empty mason jar of milky coconut rum. Whatever it was looked more tooth-rotting than what she had.

"Here, on me."

The bartender looked highly nervous, hovering nearby only to be flatly ignored by her rather persistent irritant.

"You are new here, right?" Sonya asked blandly, pushing the unwanted fruity thing away from her with one finger and hooking an ashtray to replace it. "It is not generally accepted to harass people you do not know, especially not here. Occasionally, they turn out to be rather dangerous."

"What, you got a boyfriend?" Apparently, her continued dismissal had at least irritated him back in return as his question was just on the side of snide. "Going to threaten me with him?"

A click of a gun's hammer cocking wasn't a rare sound around here, but then the asshole's head was forced forward a little as Renato pressed the barrel of his favored pistol against the side of his head. "Actually, she has a hitman for a friend she can threaten you with."

"Not that I need to." Poking one last time at the fruity cocktail she was pretty sure she didn't want got the bartender to take it back. "But I appreciate the offer of your services, Renato."

"Look, man. I'm sorry. I didn't know she was your girl." The man in the blue shirt protested, looking both pale and queasy. "But maybe you shouldn't let her wander around alone like that."

"What kind of backwards-assed country did you just crawl out of?" Sonya asked sardonically around the filter of her cigarette, more than fed up with the jackass and his behavior.

'Let' her?

She had known that kind of thing was more common in this day and age, but she rarely if ever had it shoved under her nose like this.

Behind him, Renato didn't even look amused at the chauvinistic pig. "Nowhere of note, if that's how he thinks to behave in front of a lady. Maybe you should think about apologizing to her, before I blow out that sorry excuse of a brain from your head."

"The bartender does not deserve to have his bar painted in gore because he's an idiot," the Storm-Cloud informed the Sun drolly, "equally as much as he does not deserve to lose it to mass property damage due to the same reasons."

The look he shot her was strangely blank, slightly considering around the edges from what little she could read.
"Look, I apologized to you already." Baby mafia asshole informed the both of them sullenly. "I won't bother your little whore-"

Sonya winced when a compact Beretta hand-cannon fired not two feet from her right ear and swore colorfully in six different languages when his shot speckled her with flicks of hot gore as it splashed off the top of the bar she was seated at. "GOD DAMN it, Renato! If you were going to kill him, you could have taken him out of here first."

Her ears were ringing and wiping off her cheek showed she had gotten blood splatter on her face. That was disgusting and all over her.

What the hell was wrong with him?

Worse yet, there was blood in her liquor. Even as she watched, her milky rum something was turning a delicate shade of pink. The splatter had gotten on her cigarette too unfortunately, a nice fat droplet had hit the filter. The thief spent a moment mourning her lost chance for possibly seeing if nicotine could work for her under the nurse's nose, then stubbed out her only just started smoke.

"Well, I feel better." The asshole she called a friend drawled out after a moment of contemplation, the tininess to his voice probably just her hearing recovering, huffing out a breath hard to blow off the smoke creeping out of the barrel. He kicked the fresh corpse as he holstered his weapon, which made the dead body slumped off the bar with a wet smack in response. "Good evening Sonya, I had hoped to get a minute to talk to you."

"Fuck… well, you can wait then. You also owe me and Tats new drinks and I'm still waiting for that pack of cigarettes you owe me." Sloughing off the worst of the mess now dripping on her thighs before it could clot and make her skin sticky, Sonya also checked to ensure there weren't any skull fragments on her before she could get stuck by one. She didn't know where the dead asshole had been, and she didn't want to risk anything. "Stay here in case my sister comes back, I am going to take a fast dip to wash this off."

"Two seconds. I need you in Italia come June sixth, or even earlier if you could." Renato spoke up as she got off her barstool, flicking the empty containers the Russian sisters had gone through then flashed the still apprehensive bartender two fingers in order to get himself something different. "For the ah… well, graduation."

For what?

…Shamal's graduation?

Elementary schools had graduations?

Whatever, probably a good idea to be early for his summer vacation visit to Moscow. She supposed he wanted her to coordinate the trip, since it wasn't really likely he had done more than surface things in the Soviet Union since he would've stuck out a bit to the underworld there.

Odd… did he know already how well the bratty Mist did in his classes?

"Fine." Easy enough she thought as she turned to leave the bar, two months then head to the Iron Fort.

Picking a mostly blood-free way around the corpse on the floor, the Storm-Cloud only got another foot away from him.
"I'll inform your sister and your Lackey, just so you can remember to show up on time." He shot at her over one shoulder with a smug little smirk as the bartender poured him some whisky.

She stole it before he could reach for the tumbler, emptying it like a shot and slamming the glass down again. It needed to be pried out of a little depression before the bartender could get a new tumbler for the hitman.

"...deal with the corpse for the man behind the bar, my sister and I intend to eat here." She was going to hear about that for years, but she probably deserved it.

Rolling his eyes at her, the hitman stole the wallet off his kill and pulled out more than enough euro bills to both pay for his tumbler and refill of straight whisky and the bullet hole he put in the bar's rather handsome wood, snagging the leg from his fresh kill to do as she asked as he headed for the opposite exit than where she was heading. "You fight with melee weapons, like you've never covered yourself in blood before."

"Given how rarely I have to kill?" Sonya shot back as she left him to it, still disgruntled with the entirely unwanted and literal bloodbath. "Less than you think. I have polearms for this exact reason."

Noting that absolutely no one was particularly concerned by the fact the Italian Mafioso had just shot someone in the head and was dragging his corpse through the bar, the thief descended the few steps to get back on the beach. Rather unmolested for a change by uninformed people brushing past her, but that might have to do with the gore she was flecked with.

A good thing her bikini was red, otherwise it would've ended up irreparably stained from this.

It probably wasn't the first death on the island that night, nor would it even be the first or last in the bar either. Killing happened often enough for the bar-goers and the people out late that they didn't care that it had happened again.

She might be a little concerned that the hitman had shot someone right next to her, but mostly because Renato had habit of keeping violence away from her normally. Even when he had an excuse, he normally waited until she was gone. The time she had been with him when some idiots tried ambushing him for example.

Disturbingly, despite her disgust with how it happened so close to her, she also felt better now that the asshole that had been bothering her was dead.

Renato's issues could hold for a minute, what the hell was wrong with her?

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 21st of April, 1969 continued. Mafia Land.)

Apparently, Viper's lessons for Bjørn had included how to launder money before the Mist decided to take a week-long break. 'For his nerves' according to the hapless student.

Sonya didn't begrudge the other for taking time off, two weeks of constant instruction to the same student was something she was pretty sure she couldn't do without attempting or committing homicide.

As she had mostly wanted at the least, her Lackey was very nicely caught up with her accounts and how much was in each for what reasons. She even had a supply of more-or-less-legal money now, cleaned of the transaction history any bank or enforcement agency could track it through.
Not a whole lot, because without Viper there to okay whichever venture or investment her Lightning-Storm Lackey was being super careful of what he poured her money into or how he cycled investments so she would at least get back half or more of what he put into them.

Considering the price hike for using dirty money on the island compared to clean funds used to buy things elsewhere, it wasn't a bad transaction for her. The Storm-Cloud might be getting less back, but she could use it in more places without worry.

She caught up with him about it, apparently in the time he was spending keeping track of various investment opportunities for his miser of an instructor to prevent 'stupidity fees', in a business block of an office that made her feel out of place once she stepped inside. It was a very hyper-modern looking bank office, or stock trader's office, that screamed posh-ness to her thief-sensibilities.

She caught herself thinking of how to break in and steal shit on her short walk through the building several times. From the look the little secretary girl kept giving her from the far side of the meeting room she met her Lackey in, she was apparently already known to be a thief and they were watching her.

White collar crime was something she didn't have good skills in, so while she could probably fake belonging she didn't see much of a point if they already knew she didn't. Björn seemed to belong with his new clothes and absent acceptance of what was around him, so at least her more casually dressed presence was going on unremarked.

Since this was also a Mafia Land service, breaking and entering the building just because probably wouldn't be looked upon kindly. Even if the stares made her want to steal something and make away clean just to stick it to them.

The thief was rather idly pouring through various manila folders with investment prospects as her nervous Icelandic minion laid out what he had done under Viper's tutorship for her and why he did this or that.

She was more than a little distracted, because this was the first time she had seen him in a suit and tie. A rather understated and dark grey, with red tie and a light green dress shirt.

Ever since the kid, teen really but she would probably forever call him 'the kid that followed me home' in her mind, had finally gotten himself attached to her he had favored well-worn but comfortable clothing. Casual like sweaters and pullovers on jeans or trousers, or a tee shirt with shorts if it was uncomfortably warm for his northern blood.

Björn had forgotten to shave for about two weeks, he had a scraggily ass beard growing in. It was neat for all it was a patchy growth yet, and the sixteen-year-old blond didn't seem too bothered by the bush growing on his face.

The she tuned back into what he was saying and started a little in surprise.

"…wait, what?"

"Erm… it turned into the Woodstock Ventures, Incorporated." Her Lackey scrambled to assemble the information he had available, handing it over to her instead of what he had in hand already to show her. "One of the more risky things, a new business that started up earlier in the year. They're… err, not accepting any more investors Dama. I passed it up at the time since it seemed a little… the word is sketchy, yeah?"

Yeah… Sonya didn't much care if they were or not. That wasn't the point of her asking for
clarification in the first place.

Woodstock?

The music festival?

The *damn near legendary* music festival that exceeded all expectations and would never be held again?

Huh… she totally forgot about that was to happen.

Tatiana would probably *murder* her if she knew it was going to happen but passed up the event for whatever reason. Especially if she might be able to take the nurse there. Frankly, since some of her current favorite performers were supposed to be playing, the thief wouldn't mind going just to say she had been there too.

Cherep might like it as well, but that was more questionable if he could attend.

Fall, right?

Possibly three or more days in a row, she couldn't really remember too well. Fall started early in Russia, so it was possible he *might* have the time.

Maybe they could all go if Sonya got them warning to clear some vacation time early enough?

She had the school… *fuck*. Galina could take it for a weekend early in, right?

Better to halve the work for it then, so the Lightning would be better fit to take care of anything that cropped up.

…wasn't the event a really down-to-earth type?

The town of wherever it was held, someplace in New York, hadn't had the supplies or services to keep up with a massive pack of hippies that converged on the… field?

Hadn't it been held in a field?

There had been a lake and a lot of mud from Rachel's memories of hearing about the event. That really didn't help a lot, but maybe she could plan for it happening anyways.

Getting two or three Russians into the US of A might be a headache but hiding them in a crowd as large as this might become would be easy as long as they could get rid of Russian accents and adopt another. Actually attending a music festival that lasted longer than a day would be another stress all its own… but Sonya really wanted to try to attend with her siblings.

It had been a while since all three of them could spend time together. Not since Tatiana had left home, excluding Christmas time, had they managed it.

Point being, she *really* wanted to try at least.

First thing first, was scoping it out to ensure it was what she thought it was. Mostly to get the details if it was the music festival she thought it was for. "Continue, Bjørn."

The Storm-Cloud let his slightly less nervous rambling wash over her as she leafed through what information had made it to Mafia Land. She puzzled over the location the information held, 'Wallkill' wasn't a city she had ever heard of before and wondered if it really was what she thought it would
be.

However, it was nineteen-sixty-nine, and the venture was billed as a 'Woodstock Festival'. It was possible the venue had changed and this hadn't been updated, she thought wherever it had been held started with a 'B', especially if the people running this were no longer accepting investors. Even more likely, what she remembered was a last-minute change and it would happen where she thought it would anyways.

...if that bit of history was unchanged.

Was it likely any mafia presence in America would change anything about a hippy music festival? It shouldn't be like the Vongola-euro issue, right?

"-ama? Dama Sonya?"

"Yes?" Pulling her attention from fragments of half-forgotten memory and trying to make them make sense, the thief focused back on her Lackey. "What?"

"Err... Viper's bill. It is... steep. Already." He pulled an itemized list out for her from his stacks of paperwork, hesitantly giving it over like he expected her to be angry over it.

Sonya barely gave it a glance, and certainly didn't take it. "That is nice, be sure to pay the Mist quickly so he keeps teaching you."

"...Dama?"

"I do not care how much this will cost. If we start to run out, tell me so I can supply Viper with more money. You will eventually make up for what you are costing me," she gave him a pointed glare over the top of her folder, to ensure he knew that was what he should be doing with his free time, "later. For now, your job is to learn and learn quickly so you can put it to use."

Additionally, so he could also go back to picking out her contracts for her. Sonya would do it herself this next go-around, but that had better be the last time. He had at least kept up with possible good ones to give her a list of, even if none really appealed to her to skip out to do.

A negative balance still, but the prospect of her Lightning-Storm Lackey earning enough to pay his own way was still tempting to try for. She could deal with a dip for right now, she wasn't exactly spending a whole lot outside of her own hotel bill and food expenses.

"I'll... keep... this for my own records then." Bjørn retracted the scorned list, shuffling it into his papery pile with a mixed expression of relief and exasperation.

Sonya was more interested in wondering how to manufacture an excuse to visit the United States, so she could scope out this tidbit, than what he was doing.

Maybe she should look for another lucrative contract real quick near New York?

Somewhere in the area, so she could at least understand if this was a false alarm or what. A heist or two shouldn't take her more than a few days, planning and actual stealing of random shit aside, so a week break sometime in the next month would be needed.

She could also start in the States, then fly over to Europe to handle Bjørn's mother's jewelry, and then finish off her second attempt at cramming ten or so heists in a month's time.
Also… where was Cherep in acquiring his 'Skull de Mort, the Immoral Stuntman' fame?

Did a few acts cancel their Woodstock appearances?

Could her brother make up an act or show to put on with limited time and supplies?

Hmm… way too many questions, not enough answers.

Luckily, the folder of information on 'Woodstock Ventures, Inc.' also had a clipping for the ad taken from some newspaper from the feel of it. Sonya would advise her siblings to free up the dates included in a clipping from the magazine and send for tickets for all three of them for all three days, but she had some major scouting to do before telling either what it was about.

Mafia Land information brokers were apparently not the type to do things halfway.

The proposed dates where there, August fifteenth through the seventeenth, where it might not be held was listed, and the slogan '3 Days of Peace & Music' were all fitted in a black and white glossy ad page. It also gave the address to send money for tickets, even if Sonya thought the damn thing had been free when it was hosted in Rachel's memories.

The part that sold her was the little bird perched on a guitar's neck, an image she vaguely recalled from Rachel's memories ended up the iconic image of Woodstock. It had its place next to the tag line calling for peace and music, in sharp black and white.

"…Björn, I need an American post box."

"A-ah? …alright?" Her Lackey looked entirely bewildered at her behavior.

She gave him an entirely bland smirk, which was probably of no help whatsoever. "I want tickets to this thing. Three of them for all three days."

Sonya tapped the folder before handing it back.

"And keep an ear out for what is going on with it. Please."

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(Tuesday the 22nd of April, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Lose seven Dying Will Flame trainees, gain thirty-five more. In just a few days.

A range of ages, so not entirely all children or preteens wandering in. Small mercies.

Sonya scowled at the pages of information Galina had handed her the moment she got back into the office.

There had to be another Sky somewhere, some of the newcomers didn't originate from within the Moscow oblast anymore. If it was radiating influences from the one known Sky and his Sky possible offspring or the influence of a new Sky in the country was debatable, but the fact was that emergence of Flame users had sharply spiked for some reason.

Probably in reaction so she wouldn't likely find the reason until another such spike happens again and she can compare what was going on.
Whoever it was, if it was a new Sky, he or she was unknowing and probably not actively using their Flames. Probably had their near-death experience to awaken it but didn't have a reason to keep on pulling.

The only other explanation was one of the kids of their known Sky popped with Flames, but she should've gotten at least a report on that.

Right?

"Erm… Bazanova?" Irinei flinched when she flicked her gaze to him but gathered his courage to clear his throat and continue on with what he wanted. "Yanovna wanted to know what she should do with the Rain from the Khovrino Association. Apparently, they've been… err, bad-mouthing you. A lot."

"Like you and your little fellows did to her already?" Galina snipped at him bitchily. "How galling, someone else doing what you did, just better. I've heard the same rumors, Sonya, about an 'uppy little bitch running things' here."

The thief seated behind a desk pinched the bridge of her nose.

Scruffy gave a little uncomfortable cough behind Andrei, his fellow Sun looked as exasperated as he looked uncomfortable.

Usov merely snickered, which echoed Mikhail's smirk but with less of a sneer. The Mist teen made a Construct of a thunderbolt somehow chasing rain float over the Lightning's and Rain's heads. Purely for his own amusement, apparently.

Sonya tried to breathe normally and told herself that beheading her 'command team' was a bad idea. Repeatedly. In nine different languages.

It didn't help much.

"So." Andrei clapped his hands together and turned to her with a rather fixed smile on his face. "Five new Suns, three of which are very interested in medical courses rather than criminal training. One is well over the age of consent, and he… ah, took off the moment a non-criminal path was suggested. He's likely already on his way to your sister."

…fuck. The asshole could've at least taken the Lightnings with him. Please let another 'adult' be ready to go so she wouldn't have to escort the brats herself.

"Somehow, hopefully, he'll get there on his own. I don't think the fact of where such training was taking place was made clear to him."

Staring at him flatly, the Storm-Cloud barely resisted the urge to palm her face. Really?

Andrei's expression remained in his plastic smile, which was becoming rather strained as Mikhail's snickering became more audible. "Otherwise, the four remaining new Suns are getting caught up to the rest of us at a respectable pace."

What, exactly, was a 'respectable pace' for a Sun?

The speed of light?

"I have thirteen new Lightnings." Galina picked up after a beat of silence, side eyeing their so-called 'boss' strangely. "Two of which would like to join up with the other three that expressed interest in
the medic's courses now available. Finally."

Mikhail finally decided to grace her with his report. "Seven new Storms, to replace that one you took off me. One of which comes from the Kozlov Brotherhood. He at least seems somewhat competent, unlike the little girl that left."

Sonya should not behead her current lead for the Storms. She didn't have the time, nor the inclination, to teach a pack of brats herself. And with Avdotya's leaving, she had no other Storms in a teenager's age range to take over for any asshole and sexist Storm she was not going to name.

"Six new Mists." Usov, blessedly useful and helpful Usov piped in. "I lost one to your sister yes, but only one of the new Mists have prior connections to any syndicate. A minor one, but she seems intent on returning to them once she stops conjuring rainbows everywhere."

"…and the last four are?"

The lone Rain in her borrowed office coughed sheepishly. "Three are more Rains, I… err… didn't say that."

Sonya gave him another flat stare. Yanovna could not get her spine fast enough for her. "Then the last one?"


…okay that wasn't too terrible, and it was more likely to see wolves at all near the edges of Moscow so she supposed she could see why they had that name, but that was half the city away.

South and a little… maybe west of her?

Between her, the Khimki Cloud, and now this new one, they had the entire western side of Moscow. That was what?

About forty kilometers between the edge of Dorokhov's and this new one's probable territory. Twenty-five miles, in other words, in diameter for any one Cloud.

Probably not entirely made up from one of three different Cloud's picked land, but given the range?

Hopefully there was a buffer zone of sorts between them, otherwise having more than five Clouds in any one spot would be damn impressive.

Which made her think of the Varia, and of Vongola's previous record of six Clouds in one Christmas party. Was that supposed to have been an impressive feat she didn't pay attention to?

"This new Cloud isn't coming here, right?" If there was a new one, attention would fall less harshly on her Khimki Cloud when his continued survival was discovered.

She just… had to handle this delicately. If she could show that getting a Cloud some instruction paid off better than idiots trying to collar one…

"No, we were passed along a request for… a visit from you."

The Lightning sounded hesitant, and rightly so.

Sonya sighed heavily. "Unless they want us to kill each other, bad idea. Tell them to locate an empty
field outside of their Cloud's normal patrolling range for me to teach him whatever I can."

She nodded thoughtfully, making a note of it on a notebook she stole off the thief's desk. "I'll see that it's passed along."

Mikhail snorted again.

Giving the asshole Storm a fixed smile of her own, the thief wondered how to contain whatever sexist behavior he might be spreading through the Storms. "Mikhail, I need you to start thinking of who can replace you. Your help has been exceptional, but you really are past the point to get started on the rest of your career. Use the next year or two to train someone up so you can become an example of a competent Flame using vor for the rest of them."

'Better than the Rains' went unsaid, but probably not unheard from how red Irinei went.

Someone had been insulted in the process of being complimented, so the Storm she was addressing puffed up as his vanity was stroked. "Will do."

Usov made some very convincing motions as if he was getting up to leave, which had the irritating Storm walking out of the office before anyone else could. The Mist waited a beat, but then sat back down. "Looking to replace him?"

"Preferably quickly." Which wasn't possible, not with someone at least half-trained given the status of things. "I'll settle with knowing who to work on to get someone less irritating. You have my apology, Irinei. But it was either that or throwing an ax at him."

The Rain blinked, probably shocked he got anything out of her about it.

"I still have a point." Galina informed him archly, clicking her pen before turning on one two-inch heels to follow Mikhail out so things would seem less suspicious. "I'll be right back, Sonya. I need to place a call."

"Are we done for the week?" Andrei asked in the silence the Lightning's bitchy comment earned on her exit. "I have a few dozen Suns going unsupervised right now."

"I have nothing for you right now if you have no outstanding issues. Scruffy, stay a moment." Ignoring the slight face the man pulled at the nickname, Sonya looked at both Usov and Irinei. "Usov, thank you. But if you need nothing for your own efforts I have nothing else for you either. Irinei... when will Yanovna start taking over to free you up for the school effort?"

By the grimace that painted itself across his face, apparently not any time soon.

"Allow me to rephrase that. Yanovna has two more weeks to grow a spine, then I need you on the teaching crew more than you help her. Keep going to help replace the bartender all you want, but that shouldn't be your entire day."

The Mist teen's snort was audible as he walked out of the office.

With a sigh of his own, the beanpole like Rain nodded as he smoothed a hand over his stubble. "I'll... figure something out."

The teenaged Sun gestured for him to leave before him, leaving only Sonya and Scruffy alone in the office.

"How well can you understand me now?"
"The... Mist Flames have worn off." Peter McScruffy admitted slowly in clumsy but passable Russian. "I have... need... of practice still."

"Fair enough. You will get it in enough time here." The thief managed a slightly more real smirk for the man. "Two, three more years here. What do you want to do after that?"

"...is this a trick question?"

"No, I would really like to know. If I can make use of your aims in my goals, I will fund whatever it is." It had been something she had thought of between seeing Galina make more serious plans for the future and where Bjørn was in learning money laundering. "Preferably while you finish what I need warm bodies for."

She'd have the money to fund almost anything on her next spree, and if it really got down to it she could go on another jewel hunt.

Scruffy gave her a skeptical look for a long moment, then glanced out her borrowed office's window. "...where's the catch?"

"Catch?"

"You pulled me from hell. Got me to a hospital. Admittedly I demanded you to do it, but I figured you would make use of me however you wanted." The man turned back to her, suspicion plain on his face. "You don't want the jewel cutting skills I have? The cartel that had me before kept me for them."

"Are you offering?" Sonya hadn't known that, actually.

Gem cutting?

Was cutting diamonds different than other gems?

"If you do not want to, I will not force you. There are ways around needing you do it."

Still wary, the Sun fidgeted in place before getting up to pace off his nervous energy. "I hadn't thought of it."

"Understandable." Sonya wasn't the chattiest Cloud, but maybe she really should've had this discussion before.

She had little objections to using Bjørn as she needed, but the Icelander had pushed himself forward to the point she would. Using Scruffy like that did the man a disservice, he wasn't her Lackey but his own man.

"Think on it, please. I can make better use of you if you enjoy what you do and keep you out of what you would not like to do easier if you have specific limits."

His movements swung back around until he was facing her again. "...can I see the information you're compiling?"

"Why?" Sonya wasn't against the man reading through it, a new perspective might actually help them make new sense of it all.

Scruffy was also hip deep in the mafia life since he came with her, so it wasn't likely the information would fall into the wrong hands if he had a glance or two over it.
Peter was going to snap something off quickly, reconsidered his words for a moment, and then went back to pacing. "I would guess no one, or very few people, have access to the information you've got. Which means what can be done with it isn't well understood. You made your weapons into portable versions, Galina has those… nails. You're selling matching people to certain types into a business. I think… I would like… to see what else can be done with it."

"…fair enough." It really took a fair amount of her time up, so if he wanted to take that and free her up around five or so hours a night he could. She would be keeping an eye on him while he did so, but… "Fine. So long as you stay in this office, and pitch in with sorting the information correctly, you may see what you make of it."

Scruffy came to a sudden halt and whipped around.

"…I would like it if you can teach someone to keep track and help sort the newer information, so we might have more help in that as numbers rise." Really, why did she do it alone?

Galina made off in various ways when it came time to compile but given Dimitry probably left it to her in the early years when she hadn't been around it was understandable.

"And you may only speak Russian while you do so, for the practice."

"Right. Yes." Clearing his throat a few times, the Sun switched languages. "I, ah… understand more than speak."

"Noted." That wasn't much of an issue and forcing him to speak might help more than merely letting him hover over Andrei's shoulder. "As long as your reading is faster than your speech, it won't be a problem."

Waiting a beat just to be sure the man understood all that, the thief gestured him over.

"The information is hidden in several different locations. While the separate leaders of each training groups have their own sets of their respective information," Sonya fetched her much amended master research journal from the bottom drawer of her desk mostly so Peter had enough time to process her words, "I have a master copy. Actually, I have two. This one is this office's, mine is actually in Mafia Land."

She wasn't sure how much of that he understood, but apparently the bulk of it got across the fading language barrier well enough. Scruffy accepted the bound papers and cracked it open immediately.

"I will not demand anything from you about it, but if you can make anything from it I can use… I will either get you something that you want but isn't a necessity or help fund you to do whatever you might want to do."

Giving her an unreadable glance, the Sun retreated to the office couch in order to peruse the information she had so far.

The last thing Sonya had to do that day was Gedeon's pick list, now that the Flame leader meeting was over. Which, with a quick glance over, didn't seem too bad on paper.

Cross-referencing it with Galina's more detailed lists of who was which Flame user and how long they had been in training, she had to admit it looked promising on paper.

Obviously, a Sun lead in Gedeon himself. Two Storms, both male, as slotted to be trained as heavy hitters. A pair of… twinned Rains?
Interesting, she hadn't realized they had a pair of those. The twin Rains as something more surgical and clandestine, but both were male yet again.

A female Lightning, probably someone intended to end up like her own Lightning, and a female Sun tentatively listed as a healer. One last Mist, male again, probably just to round out the whole selection.

…it was going to implode.

Two Storms, and if he was really unlucky, of opposite Polarization?

If Gedeon wanted that one Lightning to end up like Sonya's bitchy Inverted… this was just all bad all over the place. A pair of Rains wouldn't always smooth things over, and they could get annoyed with others just fine.

Slap a hyper Sun somewhere in the middle and finishing it off with a contrary Mist?

Sonya bemusedly signed off on it. All of the names were newer, and the while the ages were on the high side for how young most Zolotov trainees tended to be, she could deal with this.

She needed to place some bets. Galina should know who was the bookie this year, right?

That team build was going to rip itself apart in a fast hurry. If she was lucky, in such a spectacular manner that Gedeon's second attempt would be less… grandiose.

If she was insanely lucky, he might admit he knew little about Flame users yet and seek more information.

She didn't think she would be, though. Pity.

Galina would have to keep watch for her… or Usov, someone to catch the teens and kids before they did something lethal to themselves out of frustration.

It was really the only part she didn't like about this plan, but ironically it held the lesser risks to it. Gedeon becoming *Pahkan* without understanding anything beyond the raw basics would mean some serious drawbacks to what Tatiana was doing and Valera's future as the Zolotov Cloud.

This wasn't ideal, but workable in the long-run than just letting things go on as it had.

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*(Wednesday the 23rd of April, 1969. San Francisco State College, San Francisco, California, United States of America.)*

The bespectacled green colored man hunched over a bewildering collection of printouts and mechanical parts was very familiar to Adrik, so the other man was ignored while the vacationing Russian Mafiya member poked at the coffee maker plugged in a corner in hopes of acquiring free if terrible tasting caffeine.

The San Francisco State College computer lab was a beast of a thing, banks of ticking machinery up against two of the walls surrounding a few tables to work on. Blandly painted white only where metal broke up the beige eyesore, it looked even worse under fluorescent lightings to the point of eye searing.
Only one and a half of them were occupied, by the other man, so Adrik appropriated one on the opposite side of the room.

He knew that much, at least, about his lab partner. Incredibly picky about his work was one, which most ended up learning the first and only time they tried to interrupt him. Incredibly brilliant was another, but the Russian pickpocket only learned that after three months of sharing workspace with the other.

"Verde." Adrik didn't know what his real name was, he highly doubted anyone but his academic advisor knew. "Coffee?"

He got a wordless grunt in return, which he was taking as 'yes'. It normally was.

Clean mugs were a luxury, but there was always at least one favored expressly by certain students that traveled everywhere with them. The checkerboard one was his, but the acid green one was Verde's. Black for his lab mate, and cream with no sugar for him.

Adrik also got himself a dismissive green glance when he brought the scalding hot liquid over to the man. Quickly gaining some space, he didn't feel like getting verbally ripped into today, he went back to the technical issues Professor Kleinrock had assigned his class to hammer at.

ARPANET, in the Russian's opinion, was fantastic. He had so many ideas for how it could be built upon but working out the kinks in getting it working was a challenge of its own. Kleinrock was handling what was actually being used to transmit information to the other side of the country, but he was allowing his senior class of 'computer technicians and operators' to take their own crack at solving the issues he was coming up against.

Real world experience, without the issues of crushing expectations or time restraints. Which, in Adrik’s opinion, was a load of bull since they still had project deadlines but since the American was the one grading all the projects he could demand all he wanted as long as the Russian got what he wanted out of the course.

Thankfully it was easier to actually attend classes, now that the nearly yearlong student strikes and sit-ins had ended. Protests of the Vietnam War and some of the Ethnic Classes offered, not that Adrik paid much attention since he was illegally in the country and didn't intend to stay much longer.

It was resolved, either last month or the one before, and that was all he really cared about.

Nicolai would be getting out of jail in only a year and a half more, and the whole gang knew the plan of meeting back up in Moscow once their leader was free once more. He did wonder if Galina or Tatiana would return, but those two were more unlikely if he had to be honest.

"Adrik."

It took him a long moment to realize his normally silent lab-mate was addressing him, and looked up with a start when he really understood who was talking.

Verde had his coffee in hand, the rather haggard looking scientist dully eyeing the printout sheets draped over the Russian's workstation. "What are you doing?"

"You know the ARPANET collaboration? I've got one of the problems here, it crashed after two transmissions of a letter each. So, what they had worked, but... not well." Adrik had both the telephone calls and the timestamps when the transmissions were sent and when they were received, on top of a copy of the circuitry being used and a printout of the program doing the transmissions. "Want to take a crack at bettering the results? I don't think my professor will mind all that much."
Verde was about as brilliant as he was fickle, as he found out after the man's academic advisor bitched the unmoved green colored scientist out for changing his major yet again.

Apparently, the man had switched fields of scientific study as most men changed clothes. He kept studying and kept up with the newer findings in each sphere, but it was only whatever caught his attention that the man dedicated the most of his brilliance to furthering.

Probably why the other was almost midway through his twenties and still studying in college.

While that jumping around kept Verde in college without a degree to show for it yet, it also meant that the various professors wouldn't object to the green scientist poking his nose into their respective projects.

Everything went faster when Verde was involved.

Flicking his round glasses back up his nose, the man accepted what Adrik passed over.

It let the Russian see what he was working on, something in geology... or chemistry, related.

Both?

Blinking, he peered over the chemical lists for earthly elements. "Quartz has a chemical structure?"

"Everything does." Verde informed him blandly, pouring over the binary codes Adrik had supplied him with. "Atoms are the building blocks of everything, I can break down almost anything to a chemical formula with enough time."

"...including gems? Glassy rock formations?" There was that one thing still pending the Russian owed another.

Way back when Sonya had that thing with her jewels, which she taught to Tatiana and got passed to Galina. Did the jewel thief know her stones had chemical compositions?

Would that buy him some leniency for skipping out on her before replaying that favor he owed her for his Programma 101?

It was unfortunately outdated now, but actually having some experience with one had got him past some iffy situations at the start of his academic career in the States.

Erg, he still had to repay it but with the most modern example. Sonya had weaseled herself out of stealing him new computers for it too.

Adrik belatedly realized Verde was giving him a bug-eyed skeptical look through his glasses.

"For a... old childhood friend of a friend. She had a thing for jewels, but not because they were sparkly, what she could use them for." He wondered why he bothered caring what the scientist thought of his question, but... he was the longest lab partner the other man had so far. "I owe her something, and if so...

"...I'll give you a list, as long as you introduce me to your professor."

Ah, he was going to switch majors yet again. The man's advisor was going to scream at the Russian this time, but Kleinrock was going to be thrilled. "Sure. His office hours aren't for another three, so just familiarize yourself with that until he's in and we can go."

Score, his professor was probably going to let him co-op his project with Verde until the
administrative paperwork was processed. Between him and the brilliant scientist, they should find something spectacular to hand in. Maybe even something that would end up used.

A faint ringing sound drew Adrik's attention outside their shared lab space, but Verde was already well distracted with the new information. Curious, and without anything to work on until the scientist had his own copies, the Russian wandered to the computer lab's door.

Adrik was, first and foremost, a criminal. Just past dawn, few witnesses around, he was always highly suspicious in the early mornings. He really couldn't help it, and the thoughts of how hard or easy it would be to rob his fellow students of what little they had to their names.

A wire-thin fellow now that he was fully grown, he did have enough muscle to prevent the normal hazing most geeks experienced from jocks in the States, but there was always the overachievers that tried something stupid.

This wasn't a college prank. Might be a college prank gone wrong, since there was the scent of burning things in the air of the hallway, but whatever it was Adrik didn't want to deal with it.

"Shit… Verde! Fire!" Not the wing where the computer lab was set up, there was only a hazy look to the air in the hall and a faint scent. Problem was, the chem-lab was next door. If the chemistry lab was on fire… "What? What the hell are you doing?"

The green haired, green eyed scientist was calmly packing his station. As if there wasn't the possibility of being blown up on them looming. "I do not have copies of this information and would rather not have to repeat my experiments for the technical details. Some aid, Adrik?"

Slightly incredulous, that kind of composure was up there with Sonya's when the pigs ended up two seconds behind them, the Russian scrambled to hurry his possible project partner's actions.

Adrik was surprised over the weight of Verde's book collection, but with him snagging the book bags at least his fellow student only had to bother with the loose paperwork. Arms full of printouts, loose sheets, and the odd packet of chemistry formulas, Verde might be more unburdened but he also seemed to be more fatigued than him.

The effects of an all-nighter to get in what he could before his interest waned, probably.

Uncomfortable with how long they were taking to get out, the Russian set the pace and their direction. Unfortunately they were on the second floor of a newly built wing to house the massive if reduced in size computers, and they didn't quite make it to the ground floor before flames started spilling into the stairwell seeking more fuel.

Tiles and painted concrete weren't burnable, but the fake foam ceiling tiles and the odd bits of rubber and carpet were. What wouldn't help were all the paper printing supplies, cleaning fluids, and posters that littered the first floor. Adrik wasn't exactly sure where the fire had started, or how it had spread in the few minutes he needed to realize there was a fire, but obviously one side of the building was engulfed.

"Back the other way, Verde. Quickly, we're getting cut off."

The scientist merely looked highly irritated, trying not to crease the information in his arms, as he wordlessly turned on a heel to head back down the hallway.

Getting more and more nervous the longer this went on the Russian swore softly in his native language when the other stairwell proved less smoke choked and hot. Breathing easier once they were on the ground floor, even if the fire alarms in this building were wailing hard enough to be
earsplitting.

Verde made his shuffling way out the doors, which brought them into the sight of the billowing flames pouring out of the chemistry lab.

Adrik swore again, audibly this time.

Again in Russian, which got the green scientist to glance back with wide eyes.

Then the other building blew up, spitting burning hot fragments everywhere.
Chapter 47

(Wednesday the 23rd of April, 1969 continued. San Francisco State College, San Francisco, California, United States of America.)

Verde had half a second to register a large piece of flaming debris was on a trajectory that would doubtless impact right on top of him, even if he threw himself to the ground.

Frustratingly, even as he watched as his likely murder weapon streak through the early morning air, he could do nothing but stare.

Not… how he had expected to die. That wasn't even his own experiment.

Finally, he managed to flinch and shut his eyes just before impact.

Verde paused, mentally and physically, as something hard and hot bounced off him.

There was a beat of absolutely nothing happening, in which the scientist stood there and seriously wondered if he was dead without first experiencing the pain of being crushed into the ground. Then something impacted the back of his left knee sharply, and unlike the prior impact he both felt pain from that and fell backwards onto Adrik.

Wiry strong arms seized him and wrenched him around before he could get his feet under him again, pushing him in a staggering course to where the flickering emergency vehicle lights flashed. His ears were ringing from the initial explosion and obscured any other sounds Verde might have heard, beyond seeing someone's mouth move he wouldn't have known anyone was speaking.

His lab-partner, who he was starting to doubt was really from West Germany, kept one hand on his back. Pushing him forward and past the police line and a few other early-bird students and professors.

Verde only became marginally concerned when Adrik didn't stop near the parked ambulances.

The tinnitus resulting from being at ground zero of a chemistry laboratory exploding ensured no conversation would be less than at maximum volume, preventing the scientist from discreetly inquiring what the other was thinking. Also about what exactly had happened, as that was both dubious and possibly not something he would know.

He did manage a look backwards, but the wiry man of dubious nationality wasn't even looking at him. Adrik's attention was more on the milling students and staff of the college with the odd skeptical glance for the emergency personnel.

Allowing himself to be pushed on, he wondered if continuing to follow his lab-partner's directions was a wise idea. The scientist wasn't nearly as fit as the other man, and Adrik had been the one to identify the fire starting before the fire alarms triggered, but…

A sharp jabbing push to his back had Verde stumbling into a causeway bridging two of the campuses' buildings, twisting around to protect the information in his arms only earned him a far view of the ongoing battle against the flames eating the chemistry lab building.

Adrik sharply ramming a head into a brick wall that attracted the scientist to where his lab-partner had gone.
The probable 'attacker' scrambled to pry the wiry man's grip on his skull off, two sharp heel-strikes to the inner wrist had Adrik's fingers losing their grip enough for the slightly more muscular male to twist free.

A fisted handful of his lab-partner's tee-shirt had the shorter man heaved into the wall next to Verde's rather dumbfounded person.

"Fuck…” Was Adrik's opinion of his unceremonious introduction to a vertical surface. "Hey, the fuck did you blow up the chem-lab for? Jerk move, asshole."

The heavily tanned male with visibly greasy hair shrugged his shoulders in a rolling motion. "Not my problem, boy. Someone just wanted an interruption, but… indulge me a bit. Did I see what I think I saw?"

"The hell am I supposed to know, dumbass?"

Unfortunately, that brought the man's attention to the scientist's person as he slowly reached for the small of his back. "Maybe you can explain then, nerd-boy."

An entirely confusing pause occurred.

"Oh yeah." Adrik put in from his position on the ground. "I stole your gun."

The aforementioned firearm was pulled from the farther side faced away from both of the other men and waved in the air before being cocked and aimed at their assaulter.

"Fuck off, jackass."

"The pigs are right behind me, you don't have the guts."

Adrik visibly thought about it for a long moment. "Pretty sure I can get a shot off and still run for it in time. Well? You like those odds?"

When the man glanced back to where the emergency personnel were located, Verde's lab-partner rolled up to his feet and fixed his aim with the stolen gun in a steadier position.

"Hey man, keep walking." Glancing at the scientist only briefly, the man tipped his head back to indicate the causeway they were on. "I'll catch up, but right now you need to get some space or more assholes like this will come after you."

Verde almost moved a hand to push his glasses back up the bridge of his nose, only to belatedly realize his arms were still full of their homework. Their spotlessly unburned homework. "…right."

His lab partner did know what was going on.

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 23rd of April, 1969 continued. San Francisco, California, United States of America.)

"I wasn't aware Soviet Union exchange students were a thing." Verde commented neutrally as Adrik dropped to the bus seat next to him, shifting his slightly charred lab coat so the burn marks would not visible by casual inspection.

They were skipping out of San Francisco, if only for a day or two. Adrik had to go back and steal
any suspiciously spiky green energy caught on tape, but right now he just really wanted to get some space from the site of a Dying Will Flame activation.

People got weird around Flame users, which… frankly the Russian couldn't really see why.

Some of them figured out awesome things to do with their supernatural abilities… but the few others he had seen since leaving the Soviet Union were one-trick ponies that didn't innovate with it.

"I could have sworn it was mentioned that you were an exchange student from West Germany. Just so you know, when you are stressed you have a Russian accent. And tend to swear in the language."

"I may or may not be in the country illegally." Quipped the thief sourly under his breath, shifting to get his weight off the stolen pistol he had acquired and continuing in a normal volume. "If you tell that to anyone, I'll deny it."

"I'm from France." The newly found Lightning continued as he inspected the crack through his left lens as the bus pulled out of the station. "Legally, in my case. You may tell whomever you wish."

"Yeah, yeah. Rub it in why don't you." It really was rather sad that his involvement in school of all things was illegal.

There was the whole concern of learning American secrets and then heading back to the Soviet Union with them, but frankly the former pickpocket didn't much care. It wasn't like he was involved with the motherland's government.

"So… where is my homework?"

Verde replaced his glasses and gave him a deadpan stare. "I have no knowledge of what you speak of."

"Not funny, man. I really want to figure my assignment out."

"...I purchased a new rucksack to contain them, they are in the storage space under this cabin. Is there not more important things to discuss?"

Preferably not something to do in a public space like this, but there was little reason for the scientist to be aware that was a bad idea.

He also really, really hoped that the brief flare of green Lightning Flames he recognized from Galina's own attempts to harness her ability would be excused by the chemicals that had been in that fire. Grainy, live televised newscasts were also kind of sketchy evidence for Dying Will Flame usage.

Hopefully there were more black-and-white showings of the incident that might have caught the scientist awaking his Dying Will than there were colored ones, but Adrik wasn't in the habit of relying on miracles.

That, of course, didn't mean the local criminal mafia syndicates had glossed over what they had seen. They had another reasonable explanation for what they saw, and a man who remained standing without visible injury after a slab of flaming wood from half a desk slammed into his back obviously meant something.

Equally hopefully not that much detail made it on camera… but he hadn't weaseled out of jail time in West Germany himself by being careless. One had been one too many already.
Adrik wasn't sure if him kicking the back of the shocked to stillness Verde's knee to get him to at least fall over had helped or not, but he did know if the man he killed had managed to pass word to an associate then Verde would probably be unable to step back into San Francisco without being near-assaulted by every criminal syndicate in range.

A new Dying Will Flame user, pressure from local mafia syndicates to 'recruit' his lab-partner, and highly possible the man had no idea what to do about it all. He'd have to reach out to his connections back in the Soviet Union to keep the scientist intact at this rate.

"What do you think about the mob?"

The other man's expression switched from something suspiciously contemplative to a study in 'dismal skepticism'. "Any particular reason you ask?"

"It's either join up with one or get some high placed patrons to keep them away from you. Right now, those are your options. Until you get enough of a rep that no one will fuck with you because it's too costly." The former pickpocket might not have been back in Moscow for years, but Galina sometimes called to let him known the major things going on. Adrik lowered his voice for this next bit, even if the general noise level should guarantee their conversation remained just between them.

"That stuff you can do? The green stuff, the why you were unharmed after getting bashed in the back with a slab of burning wood. It's rare, enough to have you on the watch lists of everyone that caught sight that even so much as suggested you doing it."

Tatiana was still in Mafia Land, right?

It wasn't like he could place a long-distance call to Moscow to ask Galina about her Lightning Flames personally as he didn't have the Flame office's phone number. She would know where the other Lightning was and how to get a fast message to her. Tatiana's sister Sonya might be more help, but she was… he already owed her a favor, and more would mean she'd own his ass for the rest of his miserable life.

"You know what it was." The scientist observed clinically, green eyes narrowing suspiciously under an equally green fringe of hair. "I had wondered why you hustled the both of us out of the police cordon so quickly, and how you knew we would come under attack by shady individuals trying to recruit me."

"…basic rules about it are those that have it can't hold office, can't enlist, and if you have it you have to teach the basics to anyone else you find with it. Which is… basically what I've just informed you of. They'll murder you, or make you disappear, if you try to go against all that." Adrik gave a dismissive, helpless shrug as their bus made its ponderous way through mid-morning traffic. "I can't do it. Teach you about it or use the ability either. I can get you some help, and what information there is about it, but…"

"Criminals." Verde finished for him dryly. "I will be required to bow to the whims of ill-educated thugs and sell my skills for preferential consideration if not just survival."

The Russian hesitated, taking a long look at other the man sitting pensively next to him. "Well… half the time, yes. Some of us don't have good educations, but others do have a decent or better than the normal. There's me, for example."

"So why are you helping me?"

"…that's… actually a very good question. Probably because I really want you to take a crack at the ARPANET issues." Adrik scrubbed a hand up one side of his jawline, noting he probably should've
shaved when he got up today. "I don't think I can go back to school. Whoever caused that explosion probably triggered a closer look at which students were present, and it's possible my… erm, paperwork won't stand up to that kind of thing."

"Where does that leave me?" Asked the scientist, gesturing first to his charred lab coat to the very streets the Russian had been gazing out at. "Not to sound ungrateful, but there seems to be some high level of unwanted interest in my person. Some of which have proven to be hazardous to refuse, as we saw earlier."

The man might have a point, but there was a limit to what the Russian could and would do.

"Frankly, there's little one person could do to change that for you. Best scenario would be to get back to France and lie low for a year or two, after clearing your name here and making an orderly withdrawal from the States entirely. I'm going to… cover your tracks a little over the next few days, wiping out the evidence that might have caught your initial ability spiking, but then I've got to go."

Verde remained silent as their bus pulled onto a highway, but once they had crossed from the inner city to the suburbs he had seemed to gather his thoughts together again.

"If I wish to seek further information, how would I do so?"

The question had Adrik hesitating before admitting those same criminal syndicates he didn't seem that enthused with were probably his best bet.

Frankly, the quickest route he knew of was directly through the Zolotov clan from how rarely Adrik had ever heard about Dying Will Flame users after his former gang leader guided a Lightning through developing the ability. Even here in the melting pot of numerous different races and cultures, and no few numbers of criminals that had sought new pastures after becoming too well known in their native lands, there weren't any more than a handful of local users stumbling their ways into being better through sheer accident.

"There's a book…" Adrik started slowly, trying to dredge his memory for the entire fiasco he hadn't been remotely involved with. He had caught a bit of the irritation Galina had suffered when writing it, but he really didn't know what it was called or if it was available in any other language than his native one. "…this would be so much easier if you were part of a structured group."

"Why?" Verde questioned, now with an edge of exasperation. "Adrik, you are making little sense."

The wiry Russian scratched his scruffy jawline again, basically buying time to think.

He didn't want the Vindice after him, and all he knew of those Flame rules was 'tell them what they can/can't do'. There might be more, which he should be either giving the scientist or enabling a way for him to find out himself.

Then there was the whole fact the only way he knew to get certainty or for the Frenchman to get his 'further information' was through… the first Zolotov Dying Will Flame user, Sonya.

Maybe it could be done through Tatiana and Galina, but Adrik was a little wary of involving his former gang members. The Sun user was super busy with her medical career, what few times he had managed to talk to her she was either tired and cranky or harried and caught between shifts. It didn't help she was on a free-floating island in the middle of international waters, so guesses had to be made for when the woman wasn't busy or otherwise occupied.

He wasn't sure if taking someone as painfully new as Verde to Mafia Land was a stupid idea or a horrible one.
You weren't really supposed to get in after the very moment you learned there was such a thing as a networked criminal underground, as the entire place was more for the veterans and the established to rub elbows or find something interesting to do with their time or for criminal families to have some non-police involved vacations. It was different if you had a syndicate behind you, mainly just so someone would stop idiots from reporting the island's very existence to the wrong person.

Taking the scientist Lightning to Galina was pretty much the same as taking the man to Sonya, for now at least. Both women were back in Moscow, had the most information Verde could possibly want or could be gathered, but it was the same as tossing the scientist straight into the Zolotov's collective feet.

"Let me make some calls, man. There's a few things I think might be possible for you, and a few things I'm not entirely sure would be a good thing." If there was any hope that there was a possibly non-tapped phone line where he could make a few long-distance calls, it was probably in a Mafia Land servicing port. Sea or air didn't really matter much. "We've just got to get the hell out of San Francisco for now, you to obscure the trail anyone might be able to follow and me because lingering around when people are looking for either of us isn't really a smart move. Make an orderly withdrawal from college, and I'll… find you when I have concrete answers."

Verde raised his left eyebrow. "That is not an answer. Do you have the information or not?"

"Not me, no."

However, the man probably did have a point. A few scuffles with the local syndicates and an explosive building weren't the kinds of things most people found fun, and a man who had been a civilian just hours ago probably was very damn confused.

"It'll take me a bit, but I can get you what you want eventually… hopefully. But… it's not up to me."

(Thursday the 24th of April, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Do we do house-calls?" Galina asked of Sonya when the blonde woman was parsing through yet another stack of reports on the Flame using trainees with Scruffy.

Blinking a few times at the sudden subject shift, the Storm-Cloud eyed her assistant. "...I guess so? I'm kind of forced to for any Clouds, so I don't suppose it would be too odd to have one or more of us sent out if there's enough of a reason for it."

"In France? Or America? Because… Adrik would really like to know."

Handing off the Storm's notations to the Sun, Mikhail really need to stop sending her little comments that boiled down to 'yes, Storm Flames can eat through…' because she got that much from her own Flames, the thief studied her Lightning. "Those are two very different locations, Galina. Why the hell would we go that far for anyone, much less some new Flame user we're not connected to?"

"The Vindice Laws?" Tried the brunette, sounding skeptical of her own words even as she said it. "It's a… friend? Of Adrik's. A new Lightning. He said the man's a scientist, if that helps any."

Yeah?

Sonya had Scruffy for anything scientific she needed. Well… eventually.
Case in point, the man was perfectly happy to dive through reams of information on how or why certain teenagers and a handful of adults developed their abilities. He seemed to think the rock testing held more promise but was gamely pitching in with the documentation they had on damn near a hundred and fifty Flame users.

"While I'm sure it would be fascinating to know how Adrik met a scientist that popped with Lightning Flames... you should know what to pass on for the laws and send this man a copy of the damn book for anything else to call it good."

Actually… now that she thought about it, Sonya could probably put a visit to France to good use outside any 'obvious' reason.

Pierre-Antoine Carpentier might have made enough of an impact in French criminal circles enough that a few mentions could have survived the years between then and now. If she really was going to take a crack at this 'mafia historian' thing, that might not be a bad place to start.

She could always get the Zolotov history, and the bare basics of Vongola's was easy enough to get. She'd have to suck it up and play nice with Daniella of Vongola for the rest of it, but aside a headache or two it would be tolerable enough.

"This man of Adrik's apparently does not speak Russian or read Cyrillic." Galina continued cautiously, looking a moment away from slamming the receiver down on the cradle if the Storm-Cloud did anything more than twitch negatively. "And apparently he can't answer the kinds of questions Verde keeps asking him."

…Verde? Weird ass nickname. Rather fitting for a Lightning user, and a little ironic he might have had that before discovering his Flames.

Sonya heaved a sigh, and really thought about it.

She had two months, well a month and a few weeks, until she had to be in Italy for Shamal. Frankly, being gone from the office before anyone could decide to fuck up and prevent any vacation she was due to take from the place might possibly be a good plan.

If she spent a week on whatever it was Adrik needed some help with… she could probably use a month to try another spree counting ten or so contracts for Mafia Land. The remaining weeks she could spend in Mafia Land or just out of the Soviet Union for a little personal break of her own.

"...doesn't Adrik still owe me a favor?" For the stupid computer shit that made her decide against taking 'cutting-edge technology' contracts.

Galina wasn't listening to her anymore. "What the hell do you mean 'oops', Adrik?"

The Lightning's expression switched between several emotions, from irritation to frustration tinged with a bit of fear and finally to pure anger.

"...Sonya, you owe me a favor."

Sighing, the thief rubbed her temple. "Yes, I do. What do you need?"

"San Jose, can you get Adrik and his little boy-toy out of there?" Galina flinched away from the receiver next to her ear, paused to listen a little longer, then hung up the phone with more frustration than an inanimate object deserved. "I have no fucking idea why the hell he didn't just ditch the dead weight, but he's being… stubborn."
Sonya considered her assistant, and her now mainly worried pinch look. "It will take me near ten or so hours to get to the States from here. And that's not including customs or changing planes in order to get from the Soviet Union to the United States."

"I know. Still, please. Tatiana would be supremely upset if one of us died through stupidity, and especially if you could stop it."

"Blackmail? Really?" Rolling her eyes, the thief got up and started to head for the door. "Get me a plane ticket then, Galina. You've got to handle the office until I get back. It might take a month or so to finish off whatever it is Adrik is up to, I'll call to keep you updated. Who the hell am I going after, anyways?"

Galina threw a dirty look at the phone as Sonya passed her. "I don't know, whoever they were they had accents. Not ones I know of."

Accents her Russian Lightning didn't recognize in California?

Great, that covered just about everyone. Tatiana's gang had been mostly active in the Soviet Union and some of Europe, mainly the northern parts. California had once been part of Mexico, and… didn't a large part of the American crime families ended up being imports from their European brethren?

Well that at least cut out any Russian, French, or German syndicates. Left the Spanish, Italians, and any native homegrown gangs.

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(Thursday the 24th of April, 1969 continued. San Jose, California, United States of America.)

"So now what?" Verde asked irritably, as the two of them were shut in a very bare little cell with minimal furnishings.

Rather, there was one bare light bulb high overhead with two chairs and exactly nothing else in the little basement they were now stuck in. Not exactly classy, but also without anything he could use to engineer an escape for the two of them unless something changed.

Adrik scrubbed his non-broken hand through his developing beard thoughtfully, trying to get the dried blood loose so it would stop pulling on strands. "Well… now we can start in on a conversation that isn't wise to be held in public."

"Adrik… we are at the mercy of others who likely wish us further harm, we both likely require medical attention, and we have little if no privacy for discourse." Observed the slightly battered scientist sarcastically, checking his much abused spectacles for durability. The left lens, which had a crack from the explosion earlier, finally gave up the ghost and fell out of the frame much to the ire of the man holding them. "Forgive me for pointing this out, but should you not be more concerned with our imminent troubles?"

Galina knew what was up, and the girl was ruthless when she was perturbed. The Russian blinked a few times in the dim lighting, deciding he had spent way too much time with the other man if his speech habits was starting to infect his thought process. "Give it a few hours."

Slumping to one of the rickety chairs, because he hadn't suffered through a beating like this since he left Moscow, Adrik pensively inspected his likely broken left hand before he wrenched some of it around to set the bones.
Rumors were rumors, and the Cerrito Crime Family couldn't exactly know who the Lightning was between the two of them.

The one with some criminal background, in the country illegally?

The one without even a parking ticket to his name, here on a legal student's visa?

The fact the scientist had cottoned on and went along with the Russian's refusal to say which was which probably saved his life, if meant the man would get a few licks his way for his troubles.

Then the fact the man was a scientist held off the worse for him, as eggheads could be put to so much use in various ways. Adrik wasn't that lucky, but he had also been better trained to take that kind of abuse than the other man.

At least they were more or less safe until the syndicate they were ever-so-unwilling guests of got some outside verification or one of them used the ability unique to that version of Dying Will Flame users, then it would be patently obvious who was who. That outside help was thankfully highly unlikely, from how stupid some people got about the whole thing.

As long as any syndicate had less than ten, they were still vulnerable to any old criminal syndicate that hated them. At least according to those weird rules that apparently came from the Vindice themselves.

No, Adrik did not want to know how someone from their clan managed to speak with one of the Vindice Officers. The fact they had been involved at all with those rules gave him the creeps anyways.

The point was, that until that mythical line was crossed criminal syndicates could murder each other as they pleased without serious research into who hailed to them. Which made for anyone finding a Flame user a big deal until you got to the more Flame-common areas, where the syndicates had a number of them then used that numbering system to help clarify how badass they were then and who they could deal with safely.

America, with it's basically transplanted criminal underbelly breeding even more local crime gangs, had a truly atrocious patchwork of old boys from the old country running structured crime rings and the new upstarts picking at them for honing in on their turf and being so racists or selective on who they took on. No matter where you stepped, it was a toss-up if who you were dealing with were mafia men exiled from their home country or mafia brats just breaking into that world.

Worse yet, the only Flame users in America were those that were either too dangerous to attempt recruiting or were temporarily loaned out to whichever syndicate from their parent one. No one apparently let their Flame using lines be exiled, instead opting to just bribe or pay off who they needed to keep them in their home countries.

That gave the two of them at least a day or two of time. Maybe more, if this was to be an interrogation and impressment for the Lightning into whichever role the San Jose Crime Family wanted.

First step, no matter what situation it was, was to wait for the hubbub to die down. If the Cerrito Crime Family was smart, they'd still have people out looking even if they already had the two of them. If not, then someone would catch on and try to wipe them out before they could build up to that mystical number ten. Points if that other syndicate could recruit a Flame user or two from the ruins of the other before anyone else could catch on.
Once things had died down, then he and Verde would have to worry about coercion and torture. Maybe an invading turf war for the new Lightning, but that was really something that would take time to happen.

Adrik had more faith in Galina. She'd get them some backup, hopefully a vory or two who would not be pleased one of their clansmen had been basically kidnapped.

…or sent Sonya.

He really, really hoped the Lightning hadn't sent the other woman. No offense to the thief, but she was really more the loner type who could barely work with others when needed. Mystical, magical ability of fire aside… he still wouldn't bet on her facing a gun.

There were a lot of guns here.

Finally satisfied with the set of his broken bones, the Russian clumsily pulled off his shirt to use as a bandage until a better solution could be found. "Frankly… I've got nothing. Even if I could escape with you or alone, we're not exactly in the condition to do more than lay low until we look less like someone worked us over. My syndicate is now aware I'm not where I want to be, and that another is attempting to poach from their people. Basically, all we can do is sit tight and wait for an opportunity."

Verde impatiently took over for him, roughly tearing the garment to strips and bandaging the abused digits tightly. "I do not find that encouraging."

"Yeah… I don't like it much either."

There was no reason for a Cosa Nostra syndicate to treat with a Soviet Union Mafiya syndicate, so Adrik didn't hold much faith in any negotiations could get him out of here. It would basically devolve to a 'yes you do' 'no I don't' argument if any was tried, and long enough spent at the mercy of any decent interrogator would probably end badly for him.

Besides, if it turned out there was enough of a cause to get one old world syndicate pissed at a new world one Adrik could really only look forward to a bullet through the head.

Much easier to kill an interloper then dump his body so anyone could say 'there he is, you liar' to any accusation of kidnapping rather than try to work around prior loyalties.

(Friday the 25th of April, 1969. San Jose, California, United States of America.)

Sonya had little idea for what the hell she was looking for.

Knowing where helped little, San Jose had two major syndicates and a number of home-grown ones. There was the Cerrito Crime Family and the Bonanno Crime Family, two of which she really didn't want to touch at all, and about a handful of small gangs and rackets on the outskirts.

However, since it was coming up on the twelfth or thirteenth hour since Adrik had last talked to Galina, the Storm-Cloud was about as unequally willing to procrastinate on the whole issue.

The thief was basically reduced to stalking and eavesdropping on various grunts scurrying around, at least until well past moonrise when breaking into the established headquarters of both major families was possible if really not recommended.
Using the time until the early morning hours to rule out the lesser gangs and see if there had been any major movements from any not of the two main syndicates of San Jose was probably the best use of her time. She got not only a general layout of the city but also where and who moved in what territory.

No one was saying much of anything important, which will good in the whole 'Omertà' thing was bad for her aims.

About two or three in the morning Sonya gave up on the streets, turning her attentions to the mansions and various hideouts she had assembled over the course of the night.

One of the two major syndicates actually ruled themselves out after an hour of digging further into their smaller holdings and general amounts of eavesdropping. The Bonanno Crime Family's holdings were mostly just that, holds on property and smuggling routes for one of the American Dons. The positions their men were in was apparently either a route to retirement or punishment, as most of their attention was directed to the happenings in New York rather than California.

That left Sonya with the Cerrito Crime Family as the likely culprits. If she was wrong, then she'd have to come back and try her luck with a bunch of old hands and plucky upstarts here. If not them, she'd try the next major gang which seemed to be the drug dealers dabbling in cocaine running a racket on the north side of the city.

Now almost fifteen hours after Adrik had called for help, the thief snuck into the other criminal syndicate's major holding for a day of eavesdropping. She couldn't move quickly with daylight out, and she really needed some rest herself but stalking after a number of mafia men in their own home didn't sounds very restful.

Sonya settled into a very nicely shaded veranda thing when the man stationed to guard the roof was being exchanged out for a fresher one at dawn, crawling forward at a painfully slow pace to position herself better over the kitchen's open windows. Moving only when the leafy vines and potted plants she was hidden in moved with the wind kept her from notice.

The scent of baking bread would drive her nuts, but in her experience the kitchen was always the best place to gather gossip. Especially outside it, if any particular criminal wanted to keep things from the staff but not from his buddy so he could complain about boring things.

The man watching the roofs was more interested in the outside of the building, enabling the thief to steal a little of the food being prepared as she waited. Nibbling on a cluster of rather good grapes, Sonya's waning attention was snagged by an order of two loaves of bread and some plastic bottles for water interrupting the gossip of who might be sleeping with who going on.

The dead silence that happened as this order was filled told the thief it wasn't a usual request. Sonya still hesitated, as much as that might be something given to someone being held against their will it was also possible someone was in major trouble for something. She didn't have the local news, aside a lot of chatter about the situation that happened up in San Francisco that might have resulted in a Dying Will Flame user being discovered.

The man that collected the food and water left the kitchen, headed out of the sprawling Italian villa with enough intent the thief realized she wasn't where she probably needed to be.

Moving to figure it out was going to be an issue, though.

The watchman near her position might not be looking in her direction much, but if she moved too
quickly all bets would be off. She also didn't want to kill him, as that would only tip these people off if they had the man she was looking for. All she could do was memorize the man gathering food for possible prisoners, his face, body build, and what he was wearing for now.

Sonya was going to finish her food first, then figure out how to extract herself from her position so she could move around.

She'd have to catch him on his next run, hopefully it would be the same man again. Either way, she was going to follow whoever was sent for the food back to whatever it was they were hiding.

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(Friday the 25th of April, 1969 continued. San Jose, California, United States of America.)

Verde was now past the point of being worried.

Adrik wasn't an *ideal* companion for what amounted to a kidnapping, but he seemed to know more than he did about what was going on. Unfortunately, his one best lead for what was happening had major injuries that hadn't been looked at by a medical professional and was now sick with something Verde had no knowledge of.

It *probably* wasn't shock, as the man had been fine for hours after his hand had been broken.

However, as the hours drew on even Adrik himself had realized there was something seriously wrong in between discussing various criminal syndicates and how they normally operated.

Aside the broken hand, a possible fracture of the jaw, and a sundry of lesser bruises and cuts, it seemed as if something was now infected or he had contracted an illness.

The symptoms were generic, chills, fever, and pallor. His breathing was off, no longer the steady rate he had maintained all throughout a rather brutal beating and the first few hours afterwards.

At a loss, for there was little someone unfamiliar with the medical side of science as he could do, Verde really could do little more than ensure the other man drank something and kept on sleeping to help boost his recovery.

The dawn of the second day of their captivity resulted in a change of pace. The Frenchman had noted they received a measure of food and water on a six to seven-hour basis, if that would hold true for this day and others was subjective. As he required more water to pour down the Russian's throat, he had been expecting the next delivery shortly.

It didn't happen.

Even as the sun rose to a position no longer visible from their cellar prison, no one came to so much as ensure they both were still breathing.

Which was shortly to become a real concern. Adrik had gone from slightly pale to nearly bloodless, and his breathing was coming in gasps. In the rare moments he was coherent, he spoke in a babble of Russian and some German words.

As concerned as he was by his cellmate's condition, Verde supposed it was expected he jumped when the door barring them in was wrenched open.

Not in a 'slammed against a wall' wrench either, a *ripped off the hinges* wrench.
As he watched, a strip which he assumed was half of a hinge finally lost the battle against gravity and clinked to the wooden staircase leading up out of the cellar.

Whoever it was delicately placed the slab of wood down so it wouldn't make noise, as if the screech of tearing metal hadn't alerted everyone in range that it had happened.

…that should not be possible.

Verde blinked blearily at the tiny blonde woman, who likely gave him an equally puzzled look back before her attention landed on Adrik and what he could make out of her form was no longer aimed in his direction.

"Oh… well fuck." Unceremoniously announced their… 'rescuer'? Ignoring him for the most part, the woman strode across the cell to check on the Russian. "…Galina's going to murder me if he dies."

"I… take it you are also a criminal, associated with him?" He was no match for a woman who could rip metal apart, so he didn't try protesting her movements.

He hadn't been much of a match for anyone, really. Verde had been perfectly aware he wasn't the most physically imposing of men, but this was the first time in his life that lack of muscle strength had bothered him.

"…I suppose you can say that. His former gang leader is my sister." Her dubious credentials so offered, the woman bent and easily lifted Adrik up in a fireman's carry. "Look, can you get the door? Or doors."

As it was likely he could regain his own freedom through the acts, it wasn't an imposition.

However, the scientist still hesitated. "Where are you taking him?"

"That conversation should wait until a better time. As in when there is no risk the people I knocked out might wake up again and become more hurdles to navigate while carrying a burden."

As she did have a point, and was the one doing the rescuing, Verde turned on one heel to lead the way out.

The hotel had been very accommodating to the men that had apprehended himself and the Russian, ignoring the fact that the both of them were being held in its lower levels. He might have been a bit viciously pleased to see the woman had exercised her impossible strength to impact the walls using the various people now unconscious next to them.

That work didn't last probably as long as the woman behind him had counted on, one of the men near the service entrance doors was awake and shakily holding a gun to Verde's position when he opened the door.

He shot, which might have been either in hopes of getting his attacker when they came back through or just because he had been startled. Verde wheezed out a breath painfully as something impacted him in the chest, driving him back a forceful amount.

He fell backwards, and the woman that had been behind him leapt forward over him.

He was pretty sure he imagined the flair of painfully bright purple, but there was no way he could have missed spotting the existence of a polearm that reached about five or six feet in length. Whipping it around, the woman embedded the few inches of spike on one end into the man's head.
Dropping the weapon, which dissolved into similarly bright purple fire that informed him he wasn't seeing things, she carefully laid Adrik down and skipped up the service stairs in one jump for him. "Shit, you okay? I did not expect…"

Cutting herself off, the blonde poked at the hole in his lab coat. Verde winced, still winded and now likely suffering from a broken rib but curiously not bleeding or experiencing the pain of a hot bit of lead ripping through his chest.

"…Lightning, huh?" She poked the hole a few more times, which had a painfully hot bit of something falling out of the folds of his shirt. The flattened bullet bounced and clattered to the concrete under him, until she poured a bit of red fire on it and it melted away to an ashy smear. "Come on, up. You are lucky I am fond of Lightnings. You can come with me and Adrik."

Had he been uninvited beforehand?

Painfully levering himself up to a sitting position, Verde only hesitated a moment before taking her hand and allowing her to pull him up to his feet. She might have ripped metal apart, but she had also come back to check on him instead of leaving him as dead as most might have.

"You make a good bullet catcher, by the way."

Any goodwill he might have felt to his rescuer gone, the scientist dearly wished he had a suitable pair of glasses as he blurrily followed Adrik's mass over her shoulder.

She only took them as far as the parking lot, leaning her presumably fellow Russian against a car and breaking into it through a window with little trouble. Verde couldn't be sure what she was doing, as he was regretfully nearsighted without his glasses, but in short order the car's engine spluttered to life and she unlocked the doors to allow both his and Adrik's inclusion.

"My name is Sonya Bazanova." She offered to him as he slid into the passenger's seat, ensuring the other man's feet wouldn't get caught in the driver's rear door if she closed it. "How much do you know of what is going on with you?"

"Very little." Adrik had been focused on mainly explaining his limited experience with Flame users and the syndicates that were built around them rather than risk informing their captors of more about the people able to use it than they had already known. "If you are 'fond' of Lightnings, then I take it you can instruct me better?"

"I know a Lightning that might not mind instructing you for staying with Adrik." Bazanova countered easily, shutting the rear door but not moving to get in the driver's seat. "I have to go deal with that dead body. Try and find a local map, will you? I get lost easily trying to go by roads."

…fantastic. Verde regarded the blurry dashboard dubiously, reaching under to search for any catches that might lead to someplace a person would place maps.

From captivity against his will to being guided about by a thief with limited directional skills and an appalling lack of care for his well-being. While definitely a step up from this morning, it was possible she was riskier than staying in one place and conforming to whatever was demanded of him.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 25th of April, 1969 continued. San Jose, California, United States of America.)

Sonya was pretty sure the Lightning Adrik had found was painfully nearsighted, he had to squint something fierce at a map she bought from a convenience store in order to supply her with directions
to the local airport.

Thankfully, it was a Mafia Land servicing terminal. Even if the business of choice in America seemed to be drugs and that was outlawed by the island's ruling groups.

There would be a hop from San Jose International Airport to Los Angeles, but while that was perfectly acceptable for her and the Lightning… Adrik required a more direct option.

"There." The man who had still not introduced himself but was probably 'Verde' pointed to a highway exit, which did indeed have signs saying how to pull into the airport.

"…the fuck did they send you for, Sonya?" Adrik slurred from the back seat, not bothering to straighten himself up or move at all from where she had put him when she glanced back.

"I was closest."

"To the States?"

"No, to Galina."

There was a painfully sucking chuckle before the man fell silent.

'Verde' worriedly looked back at him for a moment, before turning back to attempting to read street signs and match them to his map. "Why are we heading for an airport when he requires a hospital?"

"There is a hospital for those like us." Sonya was also unsure of how Adrik got into the country, whether illegally or legally, so it was safest to default to criminals and those that could be bribed. She didn't know the country, depressing given she had once lived here in another life, so Mafia Land's hospital was their best bet to get him help. "Unfortunately, it moves."

"…I beg your pardon?"

"Given, but you will see what I mean when we get there." Ignoring the 'passenger on/off loading only' signs, the thief pulled her stolen car into a tunnel intended for airport personnel only.

It took only about fifty feet for a security guard to stop them, a dour looking man with a dead eye and the facial scars to suggest a knife wound. Flashing her Mafia Land ID got them waved on through.

Obviously realizing something was not quite right even if she doubted he could have seen what, the Lightning opted to remain warily silent until she pulled into an underground bay area.

Here there was the fleet of shuttle cars and baggage loading trains going about their business without caring much of an additional vehicle, in fact Sonya got attention only after she had put the car in park and opened the driver's door.

"Adrik? We need to move now. I'll try to get you a straight shot through to Mafia Land and to St. Julian's, and warn Tatiana, but if I can't..."

"I'll live." The wiry man dismissed with a floppy wave of one hand. "Seriously, nice to see you. Even if... I was hoping for actual vory… wait, that place has an actual name?"

"I won't take that as an insult." Sonya promised bemusedly to his rather rambling comments, beckoning a more well-dressed man over to the car. "I need a straight flight to Mafia Land, one passenger needing immediate medical attention. Two more, but we can wait. Do what you want with the car, it is hot."
"May I have… ah," the man inspected her ID carefully, checking for the flaws or misalignments of a fake, "…very good, miss. Should we bill you directly or your accounts?"

"My accounts." Like she had the cash on her right now to pay for an emergency extraction. Crooking a finger at the now very puzzled Verde got the man out of the car. "Is this a standard set up?"

His lips twitched upward at the question, no two Mafia Land ports were ever the same and asking was something of a security question but maintained a straight face. "Of course not. Lounge is the third door on the left-hand side, it connects to the main terminal via a staircase. I will alert you when the young man is on his way and when your own flight is boarding."

There should at least be a shop that sold generic brand prescription eyeglasses somewhere, so the poor man wouldn't have to squint anymore. Once she knew Adrik was on his way, and put in a call to Tatiana, then they'd see about the Lightning's rather battered clothing.

Verde was highly unwilling to actually abandon the car and the Russian still laid out inside, which Sonya tolerated because they had been imprisoned together for however long. He did take a few steps back once a medical team had wrangled a stretcher out for Adrik and started to transfer him onto it, and finally wandered to her once the stretcher and man was wheeled out of the underground.

(Saturday the 26th of April, 1969. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

**Kappel** eyed the test results thoughtfully. "Sepsis. Or to use a layman's term; blood poisoning."

"That's… antibiotics, and basic drip regimen while monitoring heart-rate and pressure." Nurse Primakova translated the cause to a cure under her breath, then turned to her understudy to spout off an explanation and a few orders in their native Russian.

"Your young friend should be fine, your sister sent him in before it could worsen to the point of no return."

Better for the young man to be languishing in a hospital with a bacterial infection in his blood than running about who knows where. The former Nazi doctor was well aware his recommendations for said young man to take it easy would be ignored the moment he woke up, but maybe his usual nurse could keep this one in bed for his recovery.

Criminals were such impatient beasts.

Point in case, his nurse's understudy who barely looked fifteen. Nurse Avdotya, the Storm had only given one name instead of the usual three most Russians would, was a very unassuming looking girl with a disturbing ability to melt things into dust.

No, he didn't care it was correctly called 'Disintegration'. It looked as if things melted away, and so he was calling it like he saw it.

Interesting ability, but a lot of kinks had to be worked out before she could use it in the hospital.

Then rigorous testing had to be done to ensure no debilitating side effects for any patients occurred before a Storm using nurse would be a desirable thing. If a Storm-resistant metal could be found… the sterilization of medical tools would be so much faster.
Why the hospital was in such a tizzy over them all Kappel could barely see.

While the girl Sun teenager they were sent had some skill healing with her ability, the others didn't. The only other Sun the hospital received from the Russians was more fascinated with dead bodies and human anatomy, so he and his little Mist friend were mostly haunting the morgue.

The Rain girls were proving… interesting. He had yet to find a baseline for any Dying Will Flame users of Rain, but their ability to knock out troublesome patients had made them a favorite of the surgical teams and kept them away from his baseline study.

Unfortunately, both girls didn't have the stomach for surgery. Which left their fellow if more abrasive Rain boy to stand in as an anesthesia specialist. He stopped being a little shit the first surgery he had attended and was now just surly.

They were not used against any users of Dying Will Flames, since none of them could even make Primakova sleepy, but for normal criminals they were fine.

Some interesting abilities, some of which were useful but ultimately only usable in certain situations, and the possibility they wouldn't continue any medical career made him honestly think it would have been better to wait for them to leave behind the troubled teenage years and learn a proper amount of English first.

True, most couldn't be like his usual nurse. For all the Primakovas out there, there were a few like Klavdia girl who was more interested in breaking people with her healing ability and a couple more like Avdotya who was honestly interested but didn't have the unique Flame skill to match.

Kappel would deal, as this wasn't his hospital and he couldn't make the rules.

He really didn't have the patience to teach more than he had right now, the Sun and Storm nurses were at least mostly self-sufficient. What Primakova knew was translated to Avdotya and she handled questions until she was stumped, as she took on teaching her understudy most of the basics she had learned so the younger nurse was catching up fast.

It was nice to not have to repeat lessons, actually.

"Piperacillin and tazobactam, doctor?"

"Start with ampicillin first, see if there are any changes before we start combinations." The Lord only knew what kind of bacterial infection his nurse's little friend had picked up was, and until the lab identified which strain it was they were limited to general use antibiotics. "The moment it looks as if the infection is dying we may set his broken bones, not a moment before."

The grimace that painted itself across his usual nurse's face was her only protest. Likely she knew just as well as he did that they would have to amputate if any infection set into her young friend's bone marrow and cutting the antibiotic off from reaching any infection there would make it their fault.

Especially if she used her abilities to encourage bone knitting.

"I really should have sent you away, or to another part of the hospital." Kappel sighed heavily as he admitted that, but the rules here weren't the same as the rules in other hospitals.

Primakova tossed her fiery red braid of hair over one shoulder, giving him an irritated look of her own. "Prying Sergej out of the morgue to translate for you would've taken too long, Avdotya wouldn't be able to confirm or ask you questions in an accent anyone else could understand until she
has had more practice."

They should have at least waited until all those Russians could speak the common language of the hospital. It might have been why the Mist teen had been sent along, he was apparently continuing some kind of Mist Flame therapy that gave a certain mastery of a language to the recipients started by a more experienced Mist in their country of origin.

It didn't help much when the teens could only speak in such a heavy accent it was near unrecognizable as English.

That wasn't so much a problem with the three Rain teens or the other girl Sun nurse, as mostly all they had to do was obey with their abilities as they learned to enunciate the language. Being able to ask questions could wait for them. Sergej, who had some kind of ability to make himself understood in English anyways despite his accent, translated for Edik.

As the only other Russian native in the hospital, Primakova translated for Avdotya when required.

Kappel intended to raise that complaint with Bazanova the next time she was in for a checkup, even if the board of directors wouldn't until they felt they had enough decently competent Flame users from the trade. Ensuring they spoke English before sending them on would solve several difficulties they had right now with communication, which wasn't a problem anyone wanted in a hospital.

"Either way, you should not have to spend time hovering over a friend's bedside while on the clock." The exiled German observed dryly, neatly gathering the x-rays and lab reports together in a neat pile to be added to the hospital's store of them. "I can do just as well, if you would like to find your sister and get the whole story."

"She's not going to be here for another few hours." Primakova shot down quickly, accepting the bag of saline solution from her understudy to hook up on the stand next to her friend's still form. "I'm staying at least until an improvement is noted."

She still had remarkably steady hands even when tending to the young man laid out on a cot before them, inserting a cannula into a vein in his forearm regrettably easy to locate do to his pallor. Avdotya might still pull faces at the mere thought of inserting something foreign into the veins, but she had become adjusted enough to no longer hesitate with the bandaging that would be placed over the site of insertion.

Kappel wondered if he should suggest to his main nurse to try a stint in surgery herself.

General overview of the different fields was required to ensure one was aware of what or who to recommend for certain afflictions, but those steady hands could do wonders as a surgeon rather than as just a general physician.

Entirely, ironically backwards that those same steady hands made her an apparently decent pickpocket and an even better safecracker.

Before ending up here, he had never wondered what traits would be valued by any criminal community. Now he thought about it way too much.

"Primakova, I can stare at the same heart rate monitor just as well as you can." There really was little more they could do than just wait it out now, at least until the hospital's lab got back to them with what bacterial infection the young man was suffering from. "Send the younger girl for some dextrose solution, take a personal hour to go eat, tidy away anything you were in the middle of, come back in a few hours."
By then they would know if he would pull through or wouldn't, and his nurse really shouldn't be forced to wait and worry over every minute change in her friend that could mean anything. From the man waking up to his fever breaking to slipping into a coma or finally just dying.

"Please, Tatiana." Kappel continued before she could snap whatever it was she was about to spit at him. "You shouldn't have to, let me do it."

"That's not very fair." Insisted his nurse, but even so still rattling off another order and explanation to Avdotya. The young Storm flashed him a look before scurrying off to fetch the latest demand. "You still haven't told me your first name."

"I've decided it is going to die with me." The doctor informed her without much humor. "Easier that way."

"Is Kappel even your name?"

"...no."

The Sun blinked at him in surprise. "Huh… I wouldn't have figured that. You're much better at taking a fake name than some people I could mention."

"Years of experience from using that name." He dismissed that as the young Storm came back with the IV solution he had requested. "Did you explain-"

"...that dextrose was for the energy Adrik hasn't replenished since it's apparently been more than a day since he last ate? Yes."
Chapter 48

(Saturday the 26th of April, 1969 continued. Mafia Land.)

A green-eyed, green haired scientist type with Lightning Flames.

Sonya didn't really start wondering until she purchased Verde a set of generic prescription reading glasses somewhat close to what he actually required. Not exactly what he needed, but at least he could now see and not be forced to squint at everything.

He picked out some round frames, and his entire general look tickled a vague memory about others Rachel once knew about who had odd coloring that matched their Flame types.

It was basically how she recognized Cherep as who he would become later on after some dubious doubting on her own end. Admittedly she had required Shamal's inclusion to recognize Renato as what he would become, but in hindsight she really should've put the Sun flames together with his curly sideburns and job title.

From what little she was sure of about the next set of Arcobaleno was that the Storm guy wore red exclusively, the Sky was an Italian Donna, the Mist was… a Mist, the Rains were soldier types, and the Lightning was a scientist that matched his natural coloring with his Flames.

It really didn't help her much that most Far East Flame users tended to match their clothing to their Flame types, something she learned from both Fong and his fellow Triad members, and Skies were such insular creatures that they rarely interacted with their own non-affiliate Flame using countrymen much less lone Flame users from other countries. The military Rains were probably two she would never be able to meet herself, at least until after Skull met them.

However….

While green eyes weren't that rare, paired with equally green hair and Lightning Flames was kind of a unique combination.

Then, of course, how many scientifically trained Lightnings in their age range could there be?

Vongola had pretty much pounded the idea that they were best used as bullet catchers and shock troopers into most of Europe's underground criminal minds. Which… with the Hardening ability it was true they had a decent defensive-oriented skill that let them absorb a lot of damage before being taken down, that couldn't mean all Lightnings were suited for that.

Kind of like the assumption prevalent about how all Suns should be healers. For some like her sister that worked, but… then there were Suns like Renato.

Verde seemed to be of the same Polarized cut, at least from what little she knew of the man over a day's acquaintance.

Lightnings were basically the people you wanted to take a stray bullet for you, because they were rather unaffected after the fact once you pulled them back to their feet. Galina had done it for her once and now the scientist had done it again.

Useful people to have around for sure, but they could be handy for more than just that alone.

Sonya puzzled over if Verde would be the Lightning Arcobaleno or not their entire flight to Mafia
Land. The man in question took the opportunity to fall asleep on the second leg of their trip, if only because he had apparently spent an entire night tending to Adrik before she reached them and was pretty much badly exhausted from the events of the past two days.

If Verde really was going to be an Arcobaleno, then… that was what, three?

Four of the Arcobalenos she had met so far?

Cherep, Renato, maybe Viper, now Verde.

She still wasn't sure about the Mist, to be honest. Viper had the tattoos, the Flames, and the whole 'Esper' thing going on… but hadn't the Varia Mist been male?

…right?

Sonya had seen the other as male more than female, but Cherep had nearly defaulted to calling the Mist a 'she' in his letters home.

…so that one was still a maybe.

Verde had the window seat, because he was probably the only unarmed man on the plane and her next to him prevented anything from being started with him. The jostling of the plane landing didn't wake the man, the thief only woke him up once passengers started debarking.

She wasn't really sure if bringing the man into Mafia Land was a good idea, but it beat out just leaving him in California with criminals hunting after him. She also wasn't entirely sure if Adrik was done with the man either, but she also didn't really want to babysit a civilian with brand new criminal ties at a place like this.

Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be another option she liked.

Babysitting the scientist it was.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 26th of April, 1969 continued. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

Verde could have gone years rather decently without so much as knowing a place called 'Mafia Land' existed.

His first glimpse of the island, after the suspicious and surly seeming passengers that had been on the same flight as him, was of several so-called 'mafia men and women' reloading various firearms after debarking.

Just… loitering outside of their plane, loading bullets into everything from handheld pistols to a semi-automatic rifle.

The second view he had of the place wasn't much better.

Still sore and disorientated from sleeping in an upright position with a possibly broken rib, not to mention a headache from dealing with a pair of spectacles that were only close to what he needed, he had followed the blonde Russian Bazanova into a reception area. Actually well-appointed in white marble and vaulted ceilings with the occasional two story window, professional looking staff and with quickly moving lines processing traveling records and what seemed to be IDs.

He had sort of appreciated the visage laid out right on up until Bazanova outright bribed the clerk she
had been dealing with to ignore the fact he had little to nothing on him that would work as identification in this place. That bribe was split, the greater amount staying with the clerk and some of it being passed on to the guard doing a double check near what seemed to be an exit.

Nothing was said of it, the whole act merely passed along as if it was usual to bribe the officials here in plain view.

By then, he was sufficiently prepared enough to ignore the riot of different pedestrians occupying the same space in the concrete main and paved side streets here. Probably hitmen, conmen, thieves, family units, couples out on what seems to be dates, most of whom were all visibly armed.

Verde had only walked down two main streets and three side streets, and had witnessed two muggings, a possible murder, someone beating up another for unknown reasons, and yet… no one seemed to care.

It wasn't quite right to say he was greatly bothered by the violence. ‘Uncaring asshole’ was the nicest way anyone referred to his non-existent human empathy. He instead was alarmed that kind of thing was being done in broad daylight, which likely meant the only law in this place was up to the individuals involved.

At least he was decently equipped in that area.

Bazanova could rip iron apart, summon her own preferred weapons in a blink of an eye, probably had a reputation here, and was more or less ensuring that he was following her. As long as he remained in her presence he doubted she would allow anything too uncomfortable to happen to him, his disgruntlement over being called a ‘bullet catcher’ aside.

St. Julian's General Hospital turned out to be a six-story affair built in a Victorian Gothic style, built with light grey bricks with off-white stone edging. It basically looked as if it had been transplanted as a whole out of some metropolis area, as the buildings around it ran the gamut for various services from cafés to retail to even a horticulture shop in wildly different architectural styles.

More foreboding than the people on the streets was that a mortuary office and funeral parlor, built out of a tan shaded brick in a Romanesque style, was right next door.

As a matter of fact, it seemed to have its own express entrance to the hospital's basement, which was likely where the morgue was.

Verde was at least more prepared to deal with a criminal-serving hospital now that he was fully awake and had a few glances at what else this island had to offer. The fact the staff seemed to only conform to a uniform of scrubs and white coats half the time and three-piece suits on occasion was… not entirely unexpected.

While Bazanova was conversing with a woman in an impractical sundress manning what seemed to be the reception desk, he spent a moment cataloguing the various visible reasons these people had to seek medical attention.

There were the more usual suspects, as a man with a vivid rash spreading across his face or the woman that seemed to have broken her wrist, there was also an older man with a steak knife stuck clear through his forearm who had someone actually seated next to him plucking glass shards out of his own badly bleeding hand.

"One, it is not only impolite to stare… it can also be lethal here." A hand placed at his back might have been made of the iron she could tear through for all the leeway it gave the scientist before she
propelled him forward. "And secondly, pay attention. Adrik's awake, but they are not sure for how long. Room one-oh-seven."

Hastening his pace to prevent more 'guidance', Verde made for the hallway indicated by his roughly maneuvered person.

Adrik was a more familiar person to him than Bazanova could possibly be after a bare full day.

Something familiar in this twisted amoral mirror of a tropical tourist trap would be welcome.

The man in question in a lavishly appointed recovery room was awake, speaking to a young teen girl dressed in red scrubs while a bespectacled older man dressed in a vest over starched shirt and trousers ensemble under a lab coat overlooked what she was writing down.

"Miss Bazanova, I've a bone to pick with you." Spoke the probable doctor as he entered with the named woman just behind him, sliding those half-moon glasses up his sharply bladed nose. "A word, please?"

The Russian merely glanced at him, then spoke a spiel of her native language to Adrik. She waited until he stumbled over something in return before given the supposed doctor a nod.

"Doctor Kappel, Verde here requires some blood tests to be sure he didn't pick up what Adrik got."

"And a possibly broken rib." He tacked on himself, wondering how he was to pay for medical aid.

He had the money, just in a bank account. Which, sans his wallet, left him rather divorced from his inheritance and any identification to prove he was the owner of said account.

Kappel spoke something sharpish himself to the young nurse, then followed the woman out of the hospital room.

Adrik coughed a little painfully-sounding, then cleared his throat a little awkwardly. "Shit… well, welcome to Mafia Land?"

"Are you addled?" Verde was honestly interested, because in this place he was so out of his depth it wasn't remotely amusing.

"Erm… low grade fever." The Russian he was only faintly acquainted with defended himself weakly, flopping a hand listlessly to the bed he was reclining upon. "There's an infection in my blood, apparently. And to make it worse they're using an experimental set of drugs on me. It's working… but I'm kind of fuzzy right now. Best part about this hospital, cutting edge medical advancements. Bad, well… we're the ones used as guinea pigs for human testing."

"While fascinating," and it was in a way, "I must inquire as to why I was brought here."

A tug on Verde's possibly-stolen but definitely not his shirt sleeve redirected his attention to the young red-clad nurse, who held medical implements to do the testing Bazanova had ordered.

Said nurse spoke in a trill of what he was coming to recognize as likely Russian, which Adrik helpfully translated for him.

"Avdotya want you to remove your shirt. And, as to your question, it's possible Sonya thinks I still have business with you. Which I do," pressing himself upright into a sitting position that earned him an alarmed yelp from the young nurse, "dude… where is our homework?"
"Quite possibly still in a San Jose's alleyway… and likely placed in the trash, not returned to the campus, if it had been picked up in the first place."

"…well, fuck."

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(Sunday the 27th of April, 1969. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)

Verde… wasn't quite how Sonya had expected him to probably be.

"No, no, no. It is willpower, you can will it to spark."

He was quite obviously a civilian, or at least painfully green to the whole criminal thing if no longer qualifying for the label 'civilian', but at least that much had been expected when Galina sent her out after him and Adrik.

A gawky nerd kind of guy, more interested in his studies than earthly concerns. Very reserved, very dry wit, and an inclination to wait to judge until he had all the facts when you got his attention.

"That makes little sense."

She knew that much pretty well now, given the man was using her room while she bunked with Tatiana until Adrik was more available to help him figure out what to do now. Nudging the man out of her book collection in order to eat usually fell to her, given the Sun nurse's electing working hours.

"Not want, not demand, not desire, it is will. Dying Will Flames." Björn picked up his own tiny cut gem of white sapphire to give another demonstration. "Watch. I will it to spark."

Aside that mostly just ignorant fumbling that would wear off after he knew more and was more comfortable, the scientist took the opportunity to pick Björn's brain about being a Lightning while she was in the process of translating a French version of her Lightning notes.

"What is the difference? Exactly?" Verde gave his own larger chip of white sapphire a frustrated look. "I require more information."

Sonya had also took the opportunity to update her copy of the master research journal if she was copying out a section anyways, which had attracted said new Lightning's attention like a lodestone. Not even the few stories she had on Dying Will Flames in French or English had distracted the man.

"Think of… what you will do. You will be… what? It is kind of personal, but I sparked when I vowed to be useful to my Dama. She saved me from a beating, and I wished to return that assistance to the only person to interfere with my life in a positive way."

Sitting at the kitchen table of their condo suite, with a highly curious Lightning hovering over her shoulder even if he couldn't read the parts she hadn't translated for him, was a little annoying.

"...resolve?"

Verde did have the self-awareness enough to keep his mouth shut while she was working, but when she wasn't translating things for him he tended to pose a volume of questions to her in rapid progression. It was worse than initial instruction of Shamal, when the little brat had rambled his questions about anything and everything she said and how she said it.
"Um… yeah, maybe? Try, all that will happen at worst is that it will not work."

Sonya found the man kind of reckless, in his search and consumption of her research efforts. Otherwise, when he was occupied with something else once Bjørn chased him off her case, Verde was at most disinterested in anything that wasn't written down.

Aside the other Flame users he could get to.

She wasn't the only one subjected to a massive list of questions, each of the Russian Flame using nurses that he came across when visiting Adrik we exposed to the same if at a lesser rate. Sonya was tasked with translating for them if they couldn't speak English themselves.

She didn't so much mind that, the conversations were at least interesting and helped her adjust the pre-nurse course for the other Zolotov Flame users due to join their few fellows… including Kappel's complaint over the language mastery of the new nurses.

Adrik cringed every time he saw her, since he owed her for taking care of the man that saved his life until he could do it himself to repay the favor. Anything on top of that… including handling the Dying Will Flame beginning instruction, translating on demand, sending her Lackey out for clothing and necessities the scientist needed, were things he had to pay her back for.

She might owe Verde something like consideration for the whole bullet catching thing, but she was reduced to pretty much acting as the scientist's bodyguard for the time being and that canceled part of that out.

Tatiana was just highly amused at the whole situation, helping very little to curb their temporary flat-mate's attentions. Not even for an old gang mate would she take Verde on temporarily, for one she didn't have the free time to escort the Lightning around a criminal city like Mafia Land and another her job sometimes had her running off at odd times.

It was pretty much what Viper walked into, coming to fetch her Lackey to continue his financial education.

"Mist?" Verde echoed after Bjørn obeyed the Esper's curt demand to know what he was bothering with instead of the tasks he set him. "May I ask-

"No. I'm being paid to teach that moron, not answer questions." Adjusting his cowl, the miserly Mist snapped his fingers to get Sonya's Lackey to jump to it. "Hurry it up so I can finish and move on."

Scrambling for the discarded parts of his now-usual suit, the Icelander gave the scientist a hasty shrug. "Viper's… ah, Viper's not interested if you can't pay. Cash."

"I will be unavailable come June and July," Sonya informed the other absently as her Lackey scrambled around and Verde pondered something, "and I must ask you to stop using me as a threat."

"I've never directly used you as such." Viper responded with audible amusement, a wicked looking smirk crawling up the visible part of his face. "Those assumptions occurred on their own."

The thief snorted. "I suppose then it would be a bit much to ask you to stop… encouraging the assumption?"

A shrug was her answer. "I'll refute the rumors. After I have what I'm after."

Probably the best she could hope for.
Bjørn scrambled back into the main living room of the sister's condo suite, a freshly ironed suit jacket in hand and his tie loosely draped around his neck. Only to be jerked to a halt by a lacy Construct of something around his legs as Viper advanced on his hapless student to yank harshly on his beard.
"This… is not professional. Remove it."

Verde eyed the Lackey's bound legs curiously.

Sonya kind of wondered what he was thinking, ignoring the look her Icelandic aid shot to her. "Viper would know, Bjørn. And given how much I'm paying out, I highly doubt he's giving bad advice."

Besides, she had yet to get used to his beard. It was not something she saw often, massive facial hair.

While Bjørn's person was his own, she had no standards for how he looked or dressed while carrying out tasks in her name, she was currently sharing him with the Mist and it was possible he did.

Before she could return her attention to her book or put it away and pick up Verde's lesson from where her Lackey had abandoned it, the man in question turned to her curiously. "What are you costing me?"

A disgusted scoff came from Viper, either from the scientist's inquiry or from whatever defense Bjørn managed to muster for his beard. It was kind of hard to tell. The only-sometimes male Mist gave another sharp yank to the Icelandic teen's beard then turned on a heel to stalk out of the condo. "Catch up once you removed that face-rug. Sonya, another two weeks or so and I might call it good."

"Noted." She spoke to the Esper's back, waving off her Lackey when he looked to her for either dismissal or support. "Hurry it up, Bjørn."

Returning her attention to the scientist, the thief kind of wondered herself about his question.

"Adrik will pay me back for most of it. Except this teaching thing to get access to your Flames, that you do owe me something for." She started honestly enough. "Bringing you here was on someone else, so that much is not something you need to worry about. You did save me the hassle of a gunshot wound, so I do not mind putting up with you until you have other options. As Adrik claims you saved his life during one of your confrontations with the Cerrito Crime Family, Tatiana does not mind either."

"…and getting access to your book on these Dying Will Flames?" Verde questioned a bit more intently, as he had been after all of it since the moment he knew it existed. "What if I dislike the idea of relying on Adrik's aid to get out of your debt?"

"Explain." Sonya demanded sharply, abandoning her book on the coffee table set out before the sofa she was sprawled on.

She had enough people so far, frankly.

She had almost all of Tatiana's former gang, temporarily but they were still 'under her'. Adrik she wouldn't greatly impose on out of respect to her older sister's relations to the guy, so by the time Ziven would likely seek out Nikolai she'd dissolve whatever else the man owed her by then.

Galina would do whatever she'd like when that time came.

Scruffy and Bjørn were more than one thief needed, really. She had things they could aid her with,
but only one of them was useful as her Lackey. Peter McScruffy was more of a personal thing, if he stuck it out with her long enough instead of wandering off or getting into trouble she might start tasking him with more important things to do with the research than just pitching in as a warm body.

"I want access to the rest of your information. The parts you have not made available to me."

"I know."

However, that was a risk she couldn't justify. Especially not if she was going to abstain from putting the scientist under her thumb.

Yeah, the man was possibly the greatest Lightning of their generation… but being owed a favor from Adrik wasn't enough to make her more comfortable in blindly handing over the entire compilation of data she had on a possible maybe that he might end up working with Cherep.

Sonya was even starting to limit what information made it into the clan's copy of her research journal, to prevent all of it getting out through inter-clan political mishandling. Galina did wonderfully in limiting the scope that was basically given away, but the Storm-Cloud was still holding a kind of grudge against that situation.

She might not mind handing the relevant parts to the people that could make use of that information, they would normally give back a bit or more for that favor. However, even the thought of handing the bulk of that kind of information to those that wouldn't or couldn't make use of it made her thief-self baulk, much less allowing someone she had no control or connections to pursue the entire thing.

The more that was added, the more the research was worth. Which… well, she was a thief. If someone else was getting their hands on the work she did or contributed to, then she had better be getting paid the worth of it.

Speaking of, she was running out of loose cash to cover yet another dependent. Bjørn and Viper were taking up the funds she had from contract running, and Peter McScruffy was living off the funds she had tried to set aside for her and the people that looked to her dues with the Zolotovs.

Verde's evenly toned voice drew her out of her thoughts. "Is that a refusal?"

"…I highly doubt you can afford that." Sonya insisted, pushing herself upright to stand and distract the man with finishing his lessons on managing to spark Lightning Flames through a piece of white sapphire.

As he had a combat-awakening, the most common way most came into their Dying Will, he had to put a lot of effort into duplicating his initial use of Flames or managing even a bit of control over voluntary usage.

"Furthermore," she continued as she took Bjørn's abandoned spot across the dining table from him, "you should first ensure you are not getting in over your head."

"Far too late for that." Observed the man tartly, picking up the stone that showed only a tiny fracture on one facet after three days of straight work on it. "My presence here alone should suggest that I am already out of my depth."

"It can get worse."

About to snap something back, probably a facetious 'how', the Lightning actually paused and looked around the condo he was currently living out of free-of-cost. Which was a far cry from a bare basement cellar he and Adrik had been imprisoned within when she found them.
"...I will give you that point."

Sonya picked up the stone Bjørn had been using as an example, but before she could start in on helping Verde figure out a reliable way to pull on his nearly unresponsive Lightning Flames Tatiana's bedroom door slammed open.

The nurse, who had finished a third-shift stint not a few hours ago, her pager clutched in one fist as she staggered into the open room. "Adrik relapsed."

"What?" Verde twisted around to fully see the rumpled Sun searching for her shoes. "I thought-"

"I don't know yet." Tatiana snapped at him irritably, straightening up with a tennis shoe in hand to rub at her left eye tiredly. "It could be anything from the medication not finishing off the infection completely or him getting sick from something major while his immune system was compromised or something we haven't even thought of. The lab should almost be done with the cultures, so we should know more in a few hours at most. Don't bother visiting today."

Having said her piece, the nurse hopped a little to pull on the shoe she didn't have on and left without so much as greeting her little sister.

"Verde." Sonya spoke up after a moment, glancing down to the stone in his hand when he shot her an irritable glance. "Anger or frustration is not the best way to reach this level."

The man instinctively released the green sparking stone, which cracked straight through the middle after it hit the tabletop. Eying his left hand, and the impression the rock had made on his fingers when he clenched it, the scientist poked the broken stone curiously.

"It took Bjørn a damn near month of steady work on it to accomplish that, with an invasion on top of everything. Congrats, you're apparently stronger than my Lackey."

Verde shot her a wary look. "...I will probably regret this, but... invasion?"

"This is Mafia Land." Sonya reminded him. "Every now and again, someone thinks about taking over the island and ruling themselves or changing one of the long-standing policies."

"How often does that happen?"

"Invasion attempts? Anywhere from once or twice every few months, if a coalition of groups get together might get up to bi-weekly or even more. How often has someone been successful in actually taking over?" Digging out a new white sapphire for him, the thief slid it across the table with a shrug. "It has happened. Last time the Italian criminal superpower Vongola took over for two weeks and banned the drug trade from being allowed to pass through here. That was... almost thirty years ago."

Han-yue, the sisters' Fut Gar instructor, would talk more to Tatiana than Sonya. However, she had lived on the island for almost forty years since it was officially opened up as a vacation destination.

The Korean woman had been initially brought in as an enforcer for one of the long-gone hostess establishments and managed to secure a job teaching the island's residents self-defense after it fell.

It provided the Storm-Cloud more motivation and patience in getting the old bitch to regard her less as a threat and more as just any other student. She wanted those stories.

"Now, try that again. Without getting frustrated or shocked or getting irritated." Lightly flicking the stone placed on the table so it would hit him in the chest, the thief prepared herself for a few solid hours of likely answering a spread of yet more questions. "Do not be surprised if it takes you even
longer than this last attempt. It is generally how this part goes."

(Sunday the 27th of April, 1969 continued. Socialist Republic of Croatia.)

"No."

"Lal."

"Stop calling me that." Lieutenant Commander Lalia Murgia snapped over one shoulder near-reflexively, at the blond man who was proving to be both infuriatingly persistent and gallingly competent at his job. "We're not conceding. There is a way to win this, without losing half or more of the troops."

The Socialist Republic of Croatia's military had the better position and the advantage of home ground, as they had the lesser numbers and were more inexperienced than COMSUBIN. As Defiant Seed's operating procedures stated, her mission was leading a mix of trainees and a speckle of seasoned soldiers through a Croatian defended front to a designated field outside of the city of Šibenik.

Lalia did not intend to let some near-brand new upstart Soviet state beat her even ill-trained selection of COMSUBIN forces. They were good, yes… but she and COMSUBIN was better.

She had to use the better trained soldiers to get their lesser competent fellows through the defended zone, that much she couldn't change. If she left the rookies in charge they'd likely go harrying off to do something stupid like storm a fully defended base out of misguided heroism.

For the same reason she couldn't task the more competent enlisted with other duties, they were needed to provide the better example to follow and supply needed situational support if things went wrong.

Then there was her squad, which was peppered with a generous helping of both rookies and leaders… and one very annoying blond sniper.

Looking around the command tent they had been issued, one of three tents allotted for COMSUBIN force's use during the war games, Lalia contemplated the assets she had to work with.

Two Sergeants who were decent cavalry scouts, a Lieutenant communications officer, a Chief Marshal pulling duty as her field commander, three Chief Corporal-Majors, six fresh-faced soldiers… and that sniper that irritated the hell out of her.

"This is what we're going to do. The men will go up the west bank of the Krka River, well past the city of Šibenik, then cross the river and double back to reach our end-goal. Chief Marshal, your job is to keep them together and keep their heads down. Take the scouts with you to help navigate, duck into the river if you need the cover, but get the men up there before dawn tomorrow." Turning to the lone Lieutenant, she eyed the short-wave radios one of the other rookies and the blond recruit had somehow acquired for him. "Your job is to keep pace and call in anyone threatening either flank or any barricades to my group. Take two of the rookies to help you cover the needed space."

That left her with four more wet-behind-the-ears soldiers and that one she was pretty sure was suicidal.

Lalia was good with a semi-automatic rifle, but she had to admit Cornello Grillo was better with a long-range rifle than her. If he somehow survived this without her putting a bullet through his head,
then she'd maybe recommend him for a fast-track officer's commission.

It might be what the annoyingly cheerful sniper was after, but she intended to personally ensure he regretted ever entertaining ambitions in COMSUBIN. Especially for flirting with her the first time they met and keeping up with it after being brushed off.

…although she had to admit throwing things at his head when he hit on her was a wonderful stress-relieving, but she could spend time on a firing range for about the same effect. Except for times like now, when there wasn't a range around.

"You five… we're going to provide a distraction." Even if Lalia got captured, as long as the bulk of her forces reached the target point she would still win.

She didn't intend to get captured, but the possibility was there.

Hopefully hit-and-run tactics would pull scrutiny off the main host of her forces, letting them slip by without too much action.

As it was the last stretch of this war game, she didn't find joining the field at this late date was that risky. Her forces had managed to get themselves off the island they had been airlifted to without alerting the opposition quickly, managed getting up the coast and all but the last twenty-five kilometers as a cohesive unit, until they ran into the 'defiant' part of the game.

"What do we have to spare, Chief Marshal?"

"Two Beretta Modellos, enough Mannlicher M-one-eight-nine-fives to give at least one to each of you, and Private Grillo's non-standard Fucile Armaguerra Model thirty-nine." The older man actually sounded amused as he tacked on the blond rookie's preferred rifle he lugged around everywhere with him. "Five smoke grenades are left, an entire box of flares, and two binoculars. The rest I require to give the men field experience."

"That's fine." Lalia could just about make off with that one crate of flares and manage on her own…but this was to give the lesser trained soldiers more useable experience in a mostly-friendly military operation. "As soon as the sun sets, set the men on the march. Get things started, people."

Planting the butt of his ever-present rifle on the floor, the blond annoying the ever-loving hell out of her joined her uninvited in watching the controlled chaos kicked into gear at her dismissal. "You know, Lal…. if you wanted to take a moonlight walk with me, you only had to ask."

…she would not shoot the asshole until she was given the green light to torture the idiot to turn him into a COMSUBIN-grade officer. He would regret every damn time he had the gall to hit on her.

Pressing her lips together, the Lieutenant Commander gave the irritant a pleasant smirk instead of using the butt of her service piece to smack that sly look off his face.

"I would highly suggest you invest in some good body armor." She informed the man, looking for something to pitch in with and getting even more frustrated when she found nothing that needed an extra pair of hands.

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(Monday the 28th of April, 1969. Socialist Republic of Croatia.)

Lalia crept through the sparse ground cover with two of her squad, picking their way through past
two patrolling squads of Croatians.

One of her soldiers was carrying a good two dozen of the spare flares, and Grillo was using his scope instead of needing one of their binoculars to scan the ground up ahead.

Her other four men were set up to ambush a patrol once oh-one-thirty rolled around, meaning they had less than fifteen minutes to get into a position to create a distraction that would hopefully let them disengage and head for the spot she had picked for a rendezvous.

"...two, on the far side." Grillo reported as she scaled a lone tree for the height. "Gap looks like... three minutes at best."

Checking his estimation herself, the Lieutenant Commander had to admit he had a good sense for timing the speed of patrols. Given their collective speed, or what should be their speed to stealthily cross a field, they should be able to make it. "Right, leapfrog across the field in sequence. Run fifteen seconds, wait for the other two to hit, wait thirty before running your next stretch, until we hit the closer corner. If they look this way field crawl instead on your own judgement. Go."

The sniper dashed off first, and the soldier holding their flares counted down the seconds under his breath nervously. Making a mental note he was a little fast, Lalia put her boots on the ground as he darted off himself.

Taking a moment to be sure if she moved she wouldn't be spotted, the COMSUBIN officer followed her soldiers on. She hit the ground a little hard the first time, misjudging how much give it would have this far away from the Krka River.

The sniper purposely held his position a bit longer than she appreciated but ducked the last sweep the pair gave before leaving the side of the base they were assaulting. As the soldier behind him went too quickly, it evened out enough so that Lalia was the one that had to duck the next patrol.

Crawling forward on her stomach and dragging her lower body across dirt and grass was just as uncomfortable as she remembered it, but she reached the wall just after the patrol passed her. Hauling herself to a crouched position revealed Grillo was closer than his fellow, and it only took them seconds to reassemble themselves to actually sneak into the selected base.

"Now what?"

Lalia double-checked to be sure she had the rubber rounds loaded in her service pistol. "Now? We storm the base and plant those flares in a... tank. Or something else large and attention getting."

"Can we steal the tank instead?" Grillo had copied her in double checking his rifle, even if it was still probably lethal at close enough range and flashed her a cheeky grin as he crept past the two of them to take the forward position.

Leveling a glare at the back of the sniper's head, the Lieutenant Commander held in her temper because shooting now would just give their position away.

If he tried that... she was going to run him over with the tank.

Her now weirdly calm flare carrying soldier looked between her and the sniper, then quietly snuck off after the other man.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 28th of April, 1969 continued. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)
"Adrik is very lucky we get a discount these days." Tatiana informed both Sonya and Verde tiredly over the dinner table, picking over the *ribollita* soup the thief had picked up instead of try cooking that night. "Appendicitis on top of the blood poisoning and, since we only treated the infection and not the appendix issues, it worsened to acute appendicitis until Kappel ordered more x-rays and caught it."

The scientist, who had not been happy to be dragged out of the book he had selected that day for after his Flame lessons for something as trite as dinner, looked up from his own listless poking of their food. "…so, did that occur when we were being assaulted?"

"It's possible. It wasn't on the first set of x-rays, but we weren't inspecting his guts just his bones then." Pausing to swallow a spoonful of the thick vegetable soup, the nurse gave him a shrug. "Entirely subjective if it happened before or after being admitted."

"He requires surgery then?" Sonya asked, really not that interested in Adrik's medical worries. Not because she didn't really care about the guy, she did as long as Tatiana did, but because if anyone could make the man healthy again it was Kappel and her sister.

"Had it." The Sun informed her between her next bites of the soup. "On antibiotics again, he should get better now and stay that way. Hopefully. Unless something *else* happens to set him back."

The Storm-Cloud might care, but she didn't care that much. Now completely disinterested in the conversation involving her sister's old gang member, she ignored the questions Tatiana posed to Verde in hopes of narrowing down exactly when the Russian's appendix gave out.

"Nya? Hello?"

Pausing with a spoon in her mouth, the thief looked back up from her portion of dinner.

Tatiana gave her a wan smile. "Can you scrape up the money for Adrik's hospital bills as well? I know you picked up Verde's and Adrik owes you that as well, but I can't cover the entirety of it myself. We'll pay you back… just later."

…mother fucker.

Sonya stabbed the vegetables left in the bottom of her bowl a few times, trying to remember how much she had free for random things and how much of that her Lackey had gone through under Viper. Good thing she planned on another spree, with the rate she was going through her funds she would need it to not end up broke again.

"…I think I can. If anything, I can take some of the money I have set aside for my dues and Bjørn's and replace it later."

"Thanks, Nya. I'll ensure he pays you back quickly."

"What happens if you are unable to pay?" Verde inquired to the nurse curiously.

Tatiana laughed weakly, spoon paused halfway to her lips. "Trust me, you *don't* want to know. We can piece you back together, but… doctors can be surprisingly bloodthirsty too. *Especially* when they feel they aren't appreciated very well."

"I don't think that happens very often." It was the first time she had heard of it, and the thief couldn't recall if anyone she had ever saw on the island had been rumored to have tried to stiff the hospital on a bill.
"Mostly during invasions, when the bill collectors get a bit overworked." Confided the nurse as a matter of fact, waving her spoon about as she talked. "Most of the people here have the kinds of funds saved to pay even a towering hospital bill, or their syndicates will pick up the tab. But those just visiting, and those sent in to try taking over the island, are different stories."

The scientist glanced to the doorway that connected to the rest of the floor the Zolotov Clan owned. "Would your syndicate not pay for Adrik?"

"Erm… maybe? Adrik's not done much but pay the minimum dues for the last couple years. And… he got injured and sick while on his own time. It would be different if it was me or Nya, so… possibly not. I'd rather not risk it."

"Wait… why am I different?" Sonya interrupted, confused.

She knew why Tatiana was, the healer closest to getting her doctor's license was something any organization would shell out the cash to keep in good health.

"Nya, sweetie. Really?" Flashing a smirk at her younger sister the nurse dropped her spoon to her empty bowl, so she could serve herself seconds. "With the work you do, and the importance of your Dying Will Flame research, the clan would likely pay any of the reasonable bills you might rack up. Especially if it would cement their hold on your ass."

Verde suddenly dropped his own spoon into the half-full bowl of his own. "So that is your own work? The journal you transcribed me a passage on Lightning Flames from?"

"…mine and a few others." Sonya confirmed warily, shoot her sister an annoyed look for spilling that apple cart. "I can only use Storm and Cloud, so I had to find others to write in the others."

"Whoops." Was Tatiana's entirely unapologetic comment, getting up with her second bowl of soup to escape the likely conversation that would happen now. "You know someone would mention it eventually, Nya."

Beating a hasty retreat, the nurse ducked out of the room to likely finish her food and go back to sleep now that the emergency that called her out was over.

The thief decided to go back to eating instead of pay attention to the increasingly pointed glare being aimed at her from the scientist.

"Why will you not supply the rest of it to me?"

"…mainly? I want to see where you go without it." Sonya admitted flatly, shooting the man an irritated look of her own. "We, and I mean the Zolotov Clan, are not going to hold onto you. For one, only I have any kind of hold on you and I do not feel like dragging you into that. For another, I think you can do more on your own than get into the work already done."

Verde looked suddenly less ticked off at least, but annoyance was still painted across his features. "And how do you postulate I can do so? I only hold these Lightning Flames, according to the exercises you have tasked me to accomplish."

Abandoning her own only half-finished dinner, the thief pushed her food away and crossed her arms under her chest. "By finding other French Flame users. I have contacts in Italy that would likely have good intelligence on the syndicates of France. Once Adrik is back on his feet, I have a month of contracts to run then I am due in Italy for personal reasons. I can ask for well-known syndicates and what they're involved in, you and Adrik can pick through them for one you can join for the protection."
"You sound sure Adrik would do so. We have only known each other for a few months."

"You saved his life, Verde. Or at least Adrik thinks so. To balance that out, him helping you find someplace you can thrive not just survive is not that much of a stretch." She had no information but the children's stories on Dying Will Flames from France, and since he was a native son Verde would be a lot less suspicious when asking around.

"If you wish to see where I go with the information, then I still require the basics of all the types." Verde concluded shrewdly, pressing the finally correct prescription glasses up the bridge of his nose. "You would also require frequent checks on my progress."

"You are not exactly in any position to negotiate here." Sonya pointed out shortly, even if the asshole had a point. "But I will give you that I will need to supply the barest basics of the other types and keep in contact. Eventually."

"Your proposed experiment is already contaminated," pointed out the scientist blandly, "you allowed me to converse with the Russian trained users of Dying Will, from your sister to the other nurses in the hospital. Some of whatever I would eventually conclude would be based somewhat on the information I gained through speaking with them."

"You will also have to make it through the Italians' views on Dying Will Flame users that will likely try to influence your own findings." She countered, getting steadily more irritated with both the man and the whole topic. "There are reams of misinformation you will have to work through in order to find the true facts, validate or discard old superstitions, attempt to replicate legends, and the widespread misconceptions that are only partially true because certain users believe they are. I am not interested in anything but confirmation for the basics I have, I am more interested in the direction you go in to make use of it all."

"…you know, most scientist are given grants to research into various topics."

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

"In light of the services rendered already, I can agree to both the aims and directions you have posed." Verde concluded with a very irritating self-satisfied smirk, pushing away from the kitchen table to likely wander back to her books given for scientist distraction while he was waiting for Adrik to get out of the hospital. "I will await a basic copy of the universal facts about each type of Dying Will Flames, as well as a list of suggestions for French criminal syndicates."

"I am pretty sure I am supposed to be the thief here. And I did not agree to that." Leaving the table herself, she'd put away the leftovers in a bit or take it to the vory also on this floor for them to finish off, Sonya hurried after the man. "What each Flame is known for, physical descriptions, possible personality types that are known to show certain Flames when they pop, and the few ways each we have found that one may kill themselves via them."

Stopping short just before her room, which was technically his for the time being, the Lightning turned around to face her again. "I will also need to know what the views of Italy’s criminal syndicates are, as well as your own Soviet Union’s views, in order to test both. All of it."

"You have adapted to this whole criminal cut-throat business rather quick." Sonya observed dryly. "You can probably gain Italy's view on the subject easily, and if you continue in the vein you already have you will likely acquire my motherland's. Only after you have decided you have the basics will I supply the version we have discovered for comparison."

"I learn quickly." Was Verde's dry observation, before the man shrugged. "I can agree to those
terms. Now, how much will you pay me for this?"

"You are really pushing your luck. If I was not the one responsible for your continued good health…"

"Indeed, I am aware of that. But as this will provide me and possibly Adrik leeway for choosing my next move as carefully as dealing with criminal groups require, I feel I must be reckless to obtain the best position possible."

Thinking about it critically, the thief had to admit he might have a point. Not that she quite appreciated it but having a commission under his belt would make him a bit more desirable over even his Lightning Flames.

It would be a real waste if Verde got tasked to soaking up bullets in high-risk situations. He’d be good for it, once he got voluntary control over his Flames, but again it wasn't what he was probably best for.

She had to check, but she was pretty sure Renato introducing her around Vongola's top echelon as a Soviet Flame Expert might actually help the Frenchman in getting a more science-orientated role instead of a combat one.

"Twenty-five thousand, francs."

"Eighty thousand, euros. I've seen the prices around here."

Sonya paused, because yet again he had a point. Everything was more expensive in tourist traps, and Mafia Land wasn't quite that different. "Forty. I will not have the money until the end of the month, but you may remain on my tab until you leave."

Verde weighted that for a long moment himself. "Sixty, as it is I will be heading right into another criminal commune with inflated prices until I establish myself."

"Fifty, and I expect priority if I ever pose an inquiry to you."

"That should go without saying." After another moment of consideration, the man gave her a sharp nod and held out a hand. "Agreed. I look forward to working with you, mademoiselle Bazanova."

Giving him a rather sharp smile of her own, the thief gripped his hand hard enough he winced. "Charmed and call me Sonya."

Extracting his likely smarting hand from her grip, the scientist gave a rather strained looking smile back. "Gilles Verninac."

"I do not care." She tossed over her shoulder, intending to have words with her elder sister before the nurse could pretend to sleep on her. "But I will advise you to remain with 'Verde' for security reasons. Those like me can hunt your family and hometown through full names."

"…understood."

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 28th of April, 1969 continued. Istanbul, Republic of Turkey.)

Cherep coughed painfully, feeling a few of his ribs snap back into place at the harsh jarring movement.
Fifteen or twenty more seconds before he could move his upper body without too much pain.

That was a sensation he had not missed in the years between getting kidnapped and being taken in by Lisa and Arseniy. Kind of made him wonder why he kept risking himself by doing stunts that might end up hurting like this but knew full well the next time he succeeded the high and cheers would make it worth the aches.

Thankfully, it seemed as if his shoulder was only dislocated now, not completely broken in a few places.

Of course, it would be the weekend show after Viper left when he messed up again and the Mist couldn't help distract from the admittedly terrible crash that ruined another motorcycle on him. At least he wouldn't have to pay the Esper as well as replace Betsy.

The stuntman had thought he could regain control of a ballistic bike after the rear wheel had clipped the hoop he had been jumping through, so he hadn't released his grip and dropped to the safety net Master Liam had insisted to supply for his shows. Turned out to be a very bad idea, and he could now confidently say shoulder checking the ground at nearly fifty kilometers per hour hurt like hell.

He'd need another meter of ramp at least before trying that one again.

Another deep breath didn't make his diaphragm twinge in agony again, so the undying Cloud got up to deal with his dislocated shoulder. Belatedly recalling the last time he had to reset his own shoulder socket, he probed his collar bone to ensure that wasn't broken as well.

"Ah... Skull. You have... visitors." Claimed the circus master from outside the performers' tent where the stuntman had been set to recover from his latest crash. "These gentlemen are... ah..."

Knowing criminal types and how they postured themselves when they had something to prove, Cherep was totally unsurprised two rather muscular men forced their way into the tent without Liam ever giving them permission to. Eyeing each of them in turn, the Cloud slowly reached up to clutch his right shoulder and suddenly wrenched it back into place with a sickening sounding pop.

"How can the Great Skull help you two?" He drawled in his best 'Skull' voice, which Viper had helped him make as arrogant and shallow sounding as his vocal cords allowed. "I'm afraid autographs are at least two euros each, gentlemen."

The beefier of the two merely eyed him severely, but his rat-faced companion gave a greasy-looking smile. "Oh, while we might be fans of your shows... we're not here for autographs.

"The after-party isn't until later morning then, if you wanted to go drinking with a great stuntman like I." Sniffing, half pompously and half to prevent a likely nosebleed from having his head rattled hard spring up and make him even more suspiciously healthy after a bad crash, Cherep flicked his wrist and placed his other hand on his hip. "Other than that, I couldn't begin to guess what two people like you would want with the Great Skull de Mort."

"That was a really nasty crash, de Mort." The rat-faced of the pair, which to be honest wasn't really rodent looking but it made the stuntman feel better even if it was petty, insisted ambling a few steps forward deeper into the tent. "It's surprising you're standing there looking perfectly fine."

Deny or distract?

"Death hates me." Skull decided on in a split second, taking any longer would just stroke their suspicions and he was a showman. "Aside that little bone of contention, I will admit the Great Skull is a lucky bastard when it comes to stunts going wrong."
Thank the Lord bruises weren't covered by his abilities, he had more than enough to show in order to throw off these two. Holding his right arm low and stiff, the Cloud stuntman awkwardly peeled off his leather jacket to finish checking himself over for anything too out of the place so his Flames could finish knitting himself back together.

Broken bones were harder to spot through skin than bruises, so it was the lesser risk.

"Nasty." Observed the bigger man blandly, in a voice that was hilariously a few octaves higher than Skull had assumed such a big guy would speak in.

"You! Are awesome. The Great Skull has changed his mind. We're going drinking, now."

Abandoning his riding leathers, the stuntman snatched up the tee-shirt he had been wearing before gearing up for his show and ignored his face was still caked with purple makeup. "How do you feel about stunts and circus acts?"

"Skull… a word before you go harrying off?" Liam posed from the tent's flaps in a perfectly pitched tone halfway between disproving and concern, not a hit of the worry that had to be running through the circus master's mind. "And what would your doctor say?"

"Not to mix my medicine." Tatiana would cut out the middleman and murder him herself once or twice if he tried something so stupid. "Besides, alcohol works just as much as these pills to dull pain."

It was true, just not something Skull required very often. The lingering pain was dulling down to a manageable and ignorable level and getting these two drunker than skunks would make anything they said seem exaggerated and possibly not true when they reported back to wherever.

"But sure. Gentlemen? Give me a moment, then we'll hit up whichever bar is the closest."

He got a suspicious eyeball from the rat-faced of the pair, but big beefy was mollified by Skull's enthusiasm over his admittedly jarring natural voice to shoo the man on to hopefully get that drink with someone that appreciated that feature.

Entirely likely he had been harassed for that before, especially by his slimy partner. He seemed the type to tear down even his 'backup' just because.

Liam switched from the circus' official language of his native German to Cherep's Czech. "Cherep, should you…?"

"Running is worse and trying to hide anything will just provoke them to dig deeper." Reassured the Cloud in the same language, rolling his sore shoulders to get his shirt on now that he wasn't being eyeballed for supernatural immunity to pain or damage. "You know this is the best option of the bad ones, Master Liam. I'll be fine, I know how they work."

"By possibly getting drunk with two men suspicious of you?" Liam questioned in a desert-dry dubious tone of voice. "Yes, wonderful plan my young friend. If your younger sister asks, I protested this course of action."

"I'll be sure to mention your vigorous protests to her if the subject ever comes up." Clapping the man on the shoulder, the stuntman gave him a backward wave. "Besides, Jaq taught me a few tricks to make it look like I'm drinking more than I should while only really downing half or less of it."
"It's kind of hard, you know. With a voice like this." The muscular George, probably wasn't his name but Skull was going to call him George anyways, mused in his jarringly high natural tenor. "I look like a tough guy, I can intimidate just about anyone by standing a little too close… but the moment I open my mouth…"

"I can imagine man… but the Great Skull still maintains that you sound completely awesome."

Skull had to mouth the few fingers of straight whisky, but as it wasn't Skull his Flames still boiled most the alcohol off before he swallowed under the suspicious eye of George's rat-faced fellow.

Tatiana had so many ideas to use from their younger sister's continuing discoveries, especially working around the fact that five or six out of seven types didn't have Storm Flames for different possibilities. Swallowing burning hot whisky-flavored liquid was a little hard, but then generally swallowing fifty proof or more liquor was anyways for him.

His Flame-induced heat can't harm himself, indeed. Unexpectedly awesome Chinese Triad skill to boil suspicious water and cooking off alcohol before swallowing for the win.

Woo, criminals. Sarcasm fully intended.

"Or," Skull continued, after setting down the tumbler he was drinking out of for another refill, "you could go into show business yourself. I mean, I know you seem to not like your voice, but it is pretty awesomely jarring. Make it your own, instead of a thing to be ashamed of. Radio personas aren't seen. Or, if you can do it, you'd have a decently good career in comedies playing a role as an unexpectedly competent but awesomely voiced thug-typed muscle man. But you'd be making money for it, making it work for you."

George was a depressive drunk, so he was pretty sure no decision would be reached right now. The point of the conversation was that the little niggling ideas he had just planted in the man's head would be highly distracting for him until he decided on what to do with it.

That just left him with George's pointy sharp featured partner.

Risky to go drinking with two possible criminal types?

Undoubtedly. Especially on his lonesome, without even asking some of Sonya's old circus friends like Jaq or even Crina to join them.

However, 'Skull' was supposed to be reckless and overconfident to a jarring degree. More so than most criminals would want to deal with for longer than a few hours or so, and especially not someone they would want to scout out for long or contemplating recruiting.

It made him uncomfortable to be here more or less alone and put himself out like this in a situation he knew wasn't safe, but he had always intended to use this method to throw off any unwanted criminal
attention he ended up with.

Having foster parents like his and two criminal sisters that worried after him on top of a good friend who was a bit more than crooked their-self meant the Cloud was very damn well prepared with his 'persona' for the inevitable attention his undying skills earned him.

Mr. Rat-face wasn't going to be the one to upset his picked lifestyle or career, or his name wasn't Cherep Bazanov.

"So... you've been kind of quiet." Also kind of charry about his own drinking, merely matching the stuntman for every other glass. "Anything you'd like to ask the Great Skull?"

Squinting at him, and a not so stealthy side glance at the bottle of whisky they were sharing, the man gave a crooked smirk as he set his own tumbler down for a refill. "I was wondering how you survived that spill earlier. It looked nasty."

Equally crooked teeth. Not that it had any bearings on the conversation, but the Cloud gave it a moment of attention anyways.

"Erm... heh, so long as it remains between us... I think I could tell you." Slinging an arm over both George's and his less awesome partner, Skull brought them both in close. "It's... stage illusions. The ramp looks to be higher than the stands because the stands are built low. So, while it was painful... not really life threatening."

"...seriously?"

"I know... I want to do it all without the stage tricks, but my circus master is way too cautious about it all." Putting a mournful tone in his voice even if he wasn't really feeling that was too easy, just thinking about having to replace poor Betsy did the job. "Maybe he has a point about it."

Putting his right arm over George's shoulder had made it twinge really painfully, so the wince was completely natural as he let the twosome go.

"...meh, still think I could do it." Skull picked up the half-empty bottle and poured three times for each of the empty tumblers on the table they were seated at. "Do me a favor and keep that under your hats... not that we're wearing any."

Reckless, a bit stupidly overconfident, and arrogant comments right there. He was pretty proud of also mismatching it to his slightly exaggerated painful movements.

George absently clicked his filled glass against the stuntman's, his rat-faced partner sourly following suite in the next second.

"And on that note, I probably need to start heading back. I've got to salvage what I can of my bike and probably a visit to the hospital tomorrow to look forward to." Actually swallowing his next mouthful of liquor without altering it, the Cloud slammed his tumbler upside down on the table. "George, I'll leave you the bottle just because you are that awesome."

George blinked at him blearily a few times. "George? ...my name is Mikko."

"Even better." Slapping the man on the shoulder on his way out, the stuntman left the bar and spent a tense few minutes waiting for someone to jump him on his way back to the circus.

When nothing like that happened, Skull breathed out a relieved sigh.
Close, but no cigar he thought as he wandered only slightly unstably on his way out of the township.

Might not be a great idea to immediately contact either of his sisters or his foster parents. He kind of wanted to in order to reassure them his plans for his life, not to mention his backup plans, were working as intended.

Maybe Master Liam would agree to give him a bit longer on the mid-summer break, in order to replace his bike or just for the 'recovery' illusion he now had to put up.

...damn it, what was he going to replace Betsy with?

(Tuesday the 29th of April, 1969. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

"You either have the biggest set of balls I've ever seen or have no idea what you just risked." Adrik informed Verde in a deadpan tone of voice. "I can't quite figure which one applies."

Verde flicked his glasses up absently, turning a page in the report he was reading. "I have no idea what you are going on about."

"...you realize those red rose tattoos the girls have mean they've murdered before, right?" The Russian continued in a bemused tone. "I know Sonya's being very... accommodating, but she's kind of forced to be so since you took a bullet for her. If she was even a touch less duty-bound, I think she might have killed you for that arrogance. Or at least break your hand for it."

The scientist looked up sharply. "Who has she killed?"

"We don't ask those kinds of questions, man."

"I still don't see how you think I have either erred or overstepped myself." Verde picked up the topic a few moments later, after a moment to mentally adjust his views of the women he was living with to include the description of 'murderesses' instead of just 'criminals'. "Negotiations for future services is a generally accepted feature of discussing future business transactions."

Adrik shifted a little painfully on his medical bed, sliding down a little likely to take more pressure off the healing incisions in his abs. "Negotiations? Is that what they're calling it today..."

"If you have nothing constructive to offer with that criticism-"

"Okay. Let me try to put this into perspective for you. Criminals tend to negotiate with the number of bones they're going to be breaking and causing blunt force trauma, a bit more often with how many of your teeth they'd like to pull or break." His tone was completely flat, which didn't help the newfound Lightning much. "I'd highly advise you to avoid Sonya the very moment she's no longer responsible for your continued health."

"She does not seem-"

"...the type to hold a grudge? You're entirely wrong in that, she's turned getting her revenge into a skill set. Utterly disinterested right up until she has the perfect moment to get back at whoever. Until then, she'll remember. When we were kids, she had this thing about those talking shit about her siblings." The Russian's tone was very certain, and given Verde now knew how long this group of Russians had known another it was more than likely he knew what he was talking about. "We had mandatory combat-classes, and each week at least one or two of us had broken fingers from her. It
was fucking creepy, because her expression never changed from her usual blandly bored one even when breaking someone."

There was a pause.

"Like seriously creepy. Serial killer grade creepy. As bored as she normally is, breaking a bunch of snot-nosed brats' finger bones without so much as a smirk or flinch."

"At least you will admit it."

Adrik barked out a laugh, groaned as the action pulled on his stitching and the drain put into the incision to drain away the remains of his infection, and pretty much folded over from the pain. "Yeah… no, we were a bunch of fucking pricks way back when. Her, me, just about everyone else from our neighborhood I could name. Of course, you don't stay that way for long when those you wrong can get even the next time we had combat classes. We learned to respect each other real damn fast."

"You are in an oddly reminiscent mood." Considering he had never heard such a thing out of the man before in their months of acquaintance, it did deserve comment.

"They got me on the good drugs… and seeing the sisters together again? Reminds me of a lot of things."

Putting a finger into the loose papers in his hands, the scientist took a moment to study the other man's slightly feverish complexion. "And having your finger bones broken is one of such things?"

"Not mine, precisely." Carefully positioning himself, the Russian equally as judiciously shrugged the shoulder furthest away from his healing surgery wounds. "I never said they were good memories. Some of them are, but… well. We didn't exactly have pleasant childhoods."

Verde set aside the report he was no longer reading, as it was his own copy of Sonya's Lightning Flame research he had already read through a few times before.

Since young Bjørn had returned to his usual tasks under the reticent Mist Viper, he had been receiving instructions directly from the Russian Storm-Cloud. However, the woman in question had a finite amount of patience and some work of her own to complete on her plans for the coming month and so he often got exiled to the recovering Adrik's bedside.

Besides, a rambling drug-fueled discourse over a way the criminals raised their next generations might be more interesting that recovering information he already knew. "How so?"

The Russian might've been drugged up, but he wasn't delirious. His question earned a suspicious side-eye, not an in-depth answer. "Did you really expect us to have good ones?"

"I am not unaware of the statistical probability of what type of early years most criminal—"

"See, that's bullshit." Adrik interrupted sardonically. "You think that abuse or living off the streets was why we turned to crime to support ourselves? What of those Ivy League lawyers and politicians that turn to in-trading and blackmail? What excuse do they have?"

When he remained silent pondering that point, the man continued.

"Tatiana, Sonya, and I were raised for this life like some people raise kids to become athletes or artists or to take over the family farm. It wasn't fuzzy Hallmark shit, but probably better than most orphans and a portion of the lower-class brats in even first world countries have it."
Verde blinked that sharp rebuke. "That is not what the under-

"Most civilians like to think criminals are ill-educated thugs who just continue some habit of violence acts from childhood to our adult lives. And frankly, it's convenient to let those who would never need our services to look down on us. Makes them underestimate the conmen and overlook those of us that need to operate under their radar." Holding up a finger before he could speak the rest of this thought after being interrupted so rudely, the Russian posed a few more questions. "Did you ever suspect that Dying Will Flames exist before you popped? That your lab partner was a thief before this? You didn't expect a college student to be a full-fledged criminal, did you?"

"Well… no."

"We are about as diverse as any other multinational group or world-wide organization you could name. Just… a little more vicious than most."

"I have everything but the paper diploma for a master's degree in Foreign Affairs." Sonya interjected blandly from the doorway, leaning against the jam and crossing her arms under her chest. "Tatiana legally qualifies as a nurse in about thirty countries, and in two years will be a fully qualified doctor."

"Not quite ill-educated thugs, are we?" Adrik gave a careful shrug, beckoning his fellow Russian thief further into his recovery room. "What's going on, boss lady?"

"Are you really going to call me that? I thought it was Galina's title for Tats."

"It is, but since you pretty much outright own my ass right for now?"

Sonya huffed dismissively at him, then glanced at Verde. "I need to steal your Lightning. If I am to leave this weekend, he must be able to protect himself while you are still shaky."

"…how are you going to do that?"

"I would be interested in that as well." The scientist spoke up for himself, not sure what to do with the information just dumped on him as well as the Russians talking over his head when he was present.

The lithe blond woman gave him an utterly pleasant little smile. "I am going to punch you through a few walls."

Adrik mouthed 'I told you so' while she wasn't looking at him, switching to a likely faked mien of concern when she turned back to the bedridden Russian. "Won't that kill him? I thought you wanted him alive?"

"He is a Lightning. As long as he can Harden even a fraction of himself as he did when you saw his Flames pop for the first time, then he will be fine." Turning back to the man being discussed, Sonya lost the pleasant smile for a more serious look. "While the method we have been teaching you will result in a similar end result eventually… you are annoying enough I feel you might require some control of your ability sooner rather than later."

"…you'll forgive me if I am still dubious over the prospect of surviving an assault you make upon my person."

She merely shrugged. "We will work up to it. Adrik, I am leaving Sunday."

"Erm…" Adrik looked down at himself, and the drain that was lodged in the incision made during his surgery. Due to the need for the drain, the surgery wound would not be healed in time for the end
of the weekend. "…Sonya?"

"Tats has the day off after I go. If worse comes to worse, I am leaving her with enough money to bribe Viper into helping out." She glanced at him, then back to the other Russian. "Not enough for questions, however."

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 29th of April, 1969 continued. Mafia Land.)

Sonya lit her cigarette with a curious new trick she had wondered about.

…because why know how to breath fire if she wasn't going to use it?

She could use her knife juggling skills to whip around her axes and hammers, and her acrobatic skills in both her spars and set-up for her heists. Hadn't had a chance to try bullshitting someone as she had led others into Crina's grips, but she tended to avoid talking to people unless she couldn't anyways.

Blowing a concentrated stream of burning hot air over the tip of her cigarette still lit it, tiny flecks of red Flame licking the sharp exhale showing how she conjuring the heat. It wasn't quite the same as lighting one with a swipe of a fingertip, but the trick wasn't that different in execution.

Merely a bit of added air to extend her range.

Now she knew how to breathe fire using her Storm Flames and just about anything as an accelerant. Maybe even just water…

That was a curious thought, what did her Storm Flames do to pure H2O?

"This is not a place that seems conducive to the experimentation you have suggested." Verde observed dryly, gingerly seating himself in the chair across the café table across from her. "Expressly not the initial proposition you started with."

It was a little strange to have the French Lightning scientist in the spot an Italian Sun hitman normally occupied. Sonya took a second to ponder over the weird vibe she was getting from this slightly different situation than normal. "That is for another time. As I said, we will work up to that. Give me your hand."

"Why?"

She just stared until the man with a hand stretched out to take his left.

"…I may have heard that you used to break fingers some time ago."

"Years ago, yes." She admitted to it blandly, suspecting that Adrik had been the one to tell him about that once-habit of hers. "I have upgraded to amputations or merely crushing all the bones in the hand if truly irritated."

Verde's expression was completely deadpan as he firmly kept his hands to himself. "That is not reassuring."

"It was not supposed to be. Now give me your damn hand."

Visibly steeling himself for a moment, the scientist slowly complied.

Sonya gripped his left by the wrist as soon as it was far enough, then jabbed the lit end of her
cigarette into his middle finger knuckle joint. Tightening her grip and placing her thumb over the corresponding finger to hold everything in place when the man swore viciously and tried to jerk his hand back.

It took another two seconds before Verde recalled his Flames were an option and desperately summoned his flickering green energy to where she was burning him. Letting go before she could find out what happened when unfocused Lightning Flames hit another not the user, the thief leaned back in her chair while the man cradled his injured digits close to his chest.

If she was that curious, she'd ask Galina what happened when that occurred.

"Mon Dieu," the man muttered under his breath, examining the ash-flecked blister now rising on his knuckle before looking back at her, "what was that for?"

"You have until I finish my cigarette then we will try that again." Flicking the squashed end of her smoke to knock the rest of the ash off, Sonya replaced it back between her lips. "Tats has volunteered to heal you tonight and tomorrow. Today you risk only burns and maybe a few superficial cuts. Tomorrow, broken bones and amputation. The day after, we will head out to the abandoned sector to do a bit of demolition work using my fist and your body."

Verde's left hand twitched, and he firmly shoved the injured limb under the café table. "In what aim?"

"I refined my initial combat-skill, my strength, through repeating the same actions that resulted in me cracking a fully-grown man's arm and a brick wall at the same time at eight." She admitted blandly, taking a moment to blow smoke and wondering if the nicotine would affect her this time. "Your combat-woken ability was to withstand damage completely as far as Adrik was able to witness. You had no bruises, cuts, or broken bones directly after the incident with an exploding chemistry laboratory throwing a large chunk of flaming debris at you. Some superficial burns on your clothing, but not your skin. Withstanding a cigarette burn should be trivial to you."

"Practical applications… now? I've barely managed to light your gemstones with green lights."

"Verde, take a moment to appreciate what is going to happen." Crooking a finger to get the slightly wary waitress to finally come over to take the man's order for a drink, the thief took another long drag then flicked off the accumulated ash. "I am a known entity here. I have a reputation, mostly unearned but still one that will cause most residents here to ensure they do not cross me. Adrik does not. You do not. When I leave, the only thing that will protect you from unwanted attention is my lingering connection to you and the other Russians. Unless you hole up in the condo, any number of criminals will try to either con or mug you for anything of worth."

Sonya paused for another long pull on her cigarette.

"If they do not just outright murder you for looking at them strange."

Verde glanced at the waitress bringing him a glass of ice water and a lager of beer from his home country, then back at her as her usual tea order was placed before the Russian thief. "Then why leave at all?"

"I have things to be doing. Actually, I am already delinquent in some of my duties just remaining here as it is."

"More important than instructing me in these Dying Will Flames or ensuring your fellow Russians are unbothered?"
"Yes." More specifically, a promise to her sister and being able to take Shamal for a few weeks was more important to her than he was. Taking a moment to sip at her tea, she idly watched the man press a chip of ice to the burn mark she gave him. "Tats has her own way of discouraging unwanted attention, Adrik knows how to manage himself in a place like this. I am sparing an entire week for your care and instruction, which is out of my usual habits already. The last one I taught personally was a Mist in de-Construction several years ago. Usually, I hand those I find a selection of tips and facts and allow them to find their own ways."

Sonya held up her half-finished cigarette between them.

"Pain is a very good motivator. I will stop burning you when you can resist it." She gave him a slightly smoky smirk. "Then we will move on to Hardening yourself from knife wounds, hopefully near the end of the day. If you can get good enough fast enough, maybe we will see if you can resist my Storm Flames."

Ironically, it seemed as if the bait of letting him actually try something with one of her Flame types seemed more motivating than the prospect of her giving him cigarette burns or knife stabs.

Go figure.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 29th of April, 1969 continued. A cargo plane.)

"You ever notice something odd happening when you get mad?"

"I swear to God, if this is another pick-up line... I don't care if we're in a plane, I will shoot you."

"No need for that, I'm still sore from the tank treads." Grillo sheepishly laughed and coughed awkwardly, almost knocking one of the larger parts of his stripped sniper rifle into the middle of the cargo plane the COMSUBIN forces were taking to return to Italy.

Lalia ran her own gun oil-soaked rag over the inner parts of her pistol's trigger mechanisms, trying to ignore the sniper that somehow got the seat next to her.

"Seriously though." The blond man tried again, policing the leftover rubber rounds he had left after the war game. He had more than she did, but then again with a sniper's rifle power they were more likely lethal than her own weapon. "It's like if you get mad, you soak up all the stress around yourself."

No, she had never notice something like that. Why the hell would she?

"...erm, Lal?"

She ignored him and the twitch of irritation at the unwanted nickname as she reassembled the finicky parts back into the grip. A bit of a feat to do so in the back of a plane, shoulder to shoulder with either slumbering soldiers or others maintaining their own weaponry.

"Lieutenant Commander?"

After damn near three months of only being addressed as 'Lal', hearing her rank out of his mouth was jarring. "What?"

"Has that always happened around you?"
"How would I know it was odd if it always happens around me?" Not that she was taking this conversation seriously, but he seemed to be honestly interested in her answer. "But no, can't say I've ever noticed anything like that."

Leaning in a little, like they weren't the only two awake in a circle ten men deep so any conversation they had would be mostly unheard anyways, Grillo lowered his voice in an even more unneeded security measure she didn't appreciate. "Everyone around us is asleep."

Of course, they were. "It's the middle of the night, moron."

"Yeah, but didn't the Chief Marshal want to consult the rookies about how well they did and what they wanted to improve on while we flew back to base?"

Lalia jerked her head up as she realized the sniper had a point. The man in question was knocked out two soldiers down from her, and she personally had spoken to the man about what he intended to do just before they boarded.

…but again, it was the middle of the night and the man had been working hard to keep the three hundred plus troops all aimed in the same general direction. A debrief could be done the moment everyone returning from the exercise had enough rest and had stowed their issued equipment.

Also… if any of that was true, then why the hell was he unaffected?

"They all fell like dominos the moment after I flirted with you. It's been happening like clockwork, I rile you up and everyone around either gets sleepy or calm."

"Coincidence. We just finished a field excursion and very few of us got any real rest last night. They're entitled to some sleep." Dismissed the commissioned officer, re-holstering her service piece and finally stretching out her legs. "Besides, we're COMSUBIN, we are at least competent if not numerous. Everyone should at least know what they're to do when setting out for a march."

The sniper heaved a sigh, coralling the parts to his rifle so her movements didn't knock them away from him. "I take it you don't believe me."

Settling in for a nap of her own for the last hour they had in the air, she gave him a sardonic glare. "You will need more than just flukes to convince me."

"Well… I certainly don't mind keeping it up. You're a beautiful woman, Lal. It's no hardship to flirt with you any day."

After a three-week long excursion in a coastal region with a rough sea voyage, weeks of hard marching, and a night raid to top it all off Lalia did not feel especially pretty or feminine. She did feel pretty grimy, actually.

Not able to control the flush turning her face beat red at the shameless flattery, she pulled one of the spare rubber bullets out of her cargo pants pocket and loaded it into the breach of her newly serviced gun.

"…um."

"Run, asshole." Lalia pulled back the hammer, aiming for the man's ass as he scrambled to gather up his rifle's parts and put some space between them without stepping on anyone. "And DON'T SAY THAT TO MY FACE, IDIOT!"

She got slightly distracted when she noticed no one had woken up from her yelling.
"I heard from Tatiana." Galina informed Adrik rather tartly over the phone. "You could have called from the hospital, not wait until you were released."

"Yeah, sorry Lina." He didn't sound very sorry, which just made the Lightning even more upset with him. "But why the hell did you send Sonya after me?"

"She owed me a favor."

"...so, I don't owe her for that? Thank God."

"From what I've heard, you still owe her a load of money. But no, you owe me that favor." She ruthlessly shot down any kind of relief he was feeling. "Do you realize what I've taken on to free her up to fetch your ass?"

"...she has an actual job back there?"

"Adrik, did you read any of the letters the boss lady and I have sent you?" If he hadn't, she was going to find out if electrocuting someone without Flames was possible with hers.

"Half of it is in code! Like I can decipher it in a reasonable amount of time without the in-jokes and code words you had to be there for in order for them to make sense. Then I had to burn them, so... they went mostly unread at that part. I'm generally working off the bits I learned from the boss lady and the information Sonya's taught Verde so far." After that flimsy excuse was interrupted with a warning beep for the thirty second warning on his pay phone connection, the man sighed. "Look, Lina. I'll pay you back after Sonya's gotten her pound of flesh out of me. She's headed off for parts unknown and... I'm kind of stuck with the French Lightning I was involved with before everything went to hell."

"You deserve it." New Flame users were either spastic paranoid idiots or way too enthusiastic, let the asshole feel her pain. "Call me again from the boss lady's apartment, so I can chew you out properly."

"Yes ma'am."

"Try not to spend so long away again."

"Should I be calling you boss lady?"

"Adrik, fuck off." Galina hung up on him before he could be a smart-ass again, looking up to Gedeon's form standing smack dab in the middle of the office. "Sonya went to go pick up one of our clansmen that got into a bit of trouble, for your information."

"She had to?"

"There was a Lightning involved. She is the most experience we have with dealing with foreign Flame users." Picking her way through the reams of new information sent in by the various Flame training leaders was a bit of busy work she could do while bullshitting her possibly not soon-to-be Pahkan.
As long as Sonya had it her way, anyways.

The Sun wasn't fucking off himself, she was finally appreciating how annoying the Storm-Cloud must have found the man. "When will she be back?"

Galina looked up with a tight smile. "When she's finished. I think there was something about another syndicate from Italy she had to deal with, then she would be heading back for at least the rest of the summer before anything else is scheduled."

Sonya intended to not be around for the opening of their Flame users' criminal school so that next scheduled item would be the concert she made some noise of the last time she risked checking in with her.

"These new Triad people are asking for our Expert, not for some random clansmen." Raking a hand through his hair, the man glanced from her to the Mist Usov flatly ignoring him to Scruffy trying not to pay him much mind. "If she's not here, then what the hell are we going to do?"

"Tell them she's busy." Sonya would likely murder him if she was dragged back into another nightmare of a headache like a matching job. "We do have other Flame users that could be called 'experts'."

"Mikhail is a possibility." Piped up the Mist mischievously. His smirk growing at her ill-concealed wince at the mention of the Storm. "Irinei is another. He's been a Rain almost as long as Galina's been a Lightning."

Which really didn't say much, Galina was of the opinion she and Tatiana had managed more with their Flames that either even put together.

"Both of them have contributed a fair bit to this." She offered evenly to the Sun.

Frankly both Usov and Andrei had as well, but both of them were under the age of fifteen and did not cut very imposing figures for dealing with other criminal groups. Ditto for herself, she couldn’t carry off the Storm-Cloud's air of dangerous irritation herself and women were generally less respected starting off than men were.

Actually, since it was Sonya they wanted, maybe their oriental fellows were more progressive when it came to female criminals?

Was it only because of the Storm-Cloud's connections she was sought after, in spite of her gender?

"Fuck, I might as well do it."

Galina's head snapped up and she pinned the vor with a pointed glare. "You do that, and I will call as many countries and hotels as I must to track Sonya down so she can yell at you. You rarely interact with the rest of us."

That had the Sun snapping his head down to glare back at her. "Excuse you?"

"You're like a little rich boy dabbling in a trade he only knows the basics of." This was probably going to get her in trouble, but no one else would say this to his face. "You wouldn't let a two-bit crook claim to be a vor get away with it, why the hell would you claim to be an expert on Dying Will Flames of the Sky?"

"Because I am at least one, and the only vor."
“Sonya would trust Scruffy to be an expert over you, he's actually been over all the information at least once.” Snapped back the Lightning sardonically, planting her hands on the desk as she stood up and ignoring the other Sun as he slowly rounded the couch to hide himself. "You're a terrible example of a Flame using vor, even if you are the only one we have. At best, you're a part-time Sun. Dig out Mikhail to bullshit an expert, or break out Dmitriy, if you can't negotiate your way out of it. Which I doubt."

Usov whistled lowly, not even bothering to pretend an intent interest in his half of the office work she had bribed him to handle when the Sun shot him a glare.

"Sonya's not here, stop kissing her ass."

“No, she's not. But, you could stop fucking up her work for once.” Galina's head snapped to the side, but as she had half-expected to be hit the slap it didn't hurt thanks to her Flames. "Beating women, now?"

"Hey!" Scruffy snapped, standing ramrod straight and almost vaulting the couch he had been hiding behind. "Hands to yourself, asshole."

"Shut up." Gedeon snarled back without turning from the Lightning who was neither cowed or in pain. "And you, watch your mouth."

"Or you'll what? Hit me again? I'm a Lightning." Not to mention Usov looked decidedly less amused at what was going on, if he tried it again he likely wouldn't connect with her. "Just because I'm being honest about why you're not tasked with helping out here you feel the need to shut me up however you can? Real brave of you."

"Or you won't be here when Sonya gets back." The Sun vor corrected heatedly. "If you have nothing to-"

"Why have this office if you won't bother to listen or take our advice? Or even learn what you were tasked to do?" Galina interrupted, being validated in her belief in the Mist's probable actions when the next backhand missed by a good foot. "You keep this shit up, don't be surprise if Sonya gives up on you entirely."

"Miss Galina…"

"Shut up, Scruffy."

Gedeon was more focused on her previous comment than his fellow Sun. "The hell do you mean by that."

"Kazimir, Zaryna? Either name ring a bell? Fadei? Flame users that were cut loose, even if we really could use older experience Flame users. You're about that level for us, just above Irinei, a Flame user but not a useful one." She gestured to the teenaged boy who led a good sixth of their efforts sitting in the office. "Sonya makes use of anything she can get her hands on as long as they can be useful, why do you think she doesn't make use of you?"

"Maybe that's because I have other shit to do."

"Keep telling yourself that." Galina seated herself as the Sun stormed out of the office, a sinking feeling in her guts that no matter what she did now would derail this next disaster.

The other Triad group's Flame users were frighteningly competent with their Flames, especially paired next to the still raw bulk of the trainees the Zolotovs had. More along Sonya's and Tatiana's
levels than even Galina's.

If these other groups seeking gem matching services were anything like the Wo Hop To Triad, then they'd figure out Gedeon was only a middling amateur quickly. She had the feeling the clan was about to get a little embarrassed on the international stage.

The Storm-Cloud would not be amused when she returned. Especially not if she learned through her contacts in China about this.

Likely part of the reason she was getting fed up with lingering within the clan. The Lightning was getting fed up dealing with the impending second fuck-up, and while the blonde probably could solve this in a few short hours… constantly keeping things on track wasn't easy on her.

Especially not for a woman in a thieves' clan.

A light touch on her face had her snapping back to reality to pin Scruffy with a glare, but the Sun merely huffed and kept prodding her cheek with his Flames to try healing any damage her Flames didn't shield her from. "You should be more careful, Miss Galina."

"At least I can tell Sonya honestly I tried."

"You should probably avoid him for a while." Usov chimed in blandly.

Reminded of the teenager in the room and having satisfied himself that her Flames had worked as rumored and she was actually fine, the older man turned and shook a finger in the Mist's face. "Do not hit a women. If you can't deal with one without violence, avoid them."

Galina huffed sharply at his back. "I did ask for it."

"I don't care if you begged for it on bended knee, a man shouldn't hit a woman."

She gave him a flat look, which turned into a glare when his irritated expression didn't change. "He would've hit anyone that talked back to him in such a way, male or female. Only, if I had been a man, he would've done more than just slap me."

"And that makes it better, I'm sure." Coughing a little sheepishly after that snarky little quip with a quick glance at the closed office door, the Sun shuffled back to his project abandoned on the floor. "Definitely not in Kansas anymore."

Frowning in a puzzled manner, Galina rummaged around the bottom desk drawer for her master list on which semi or precious stones did what for which Flame. "...Kansas?"

"An American state? You know, what Dorothy said to Toto after the tornado and touching down on the other side of the rainbow?" At her continued blank look, the thin as a rail Sun huffed a completely disgusted sigh. "The Wizard of Oz? It's a book they turned into a movie, one of the first colored ones. Haven't you ever seen it?"

"Did they translate it into Russian?" She would count the grimace as her point. "Then no."

"...I'm going to find a copy, somewhere." Scruffy promised stridently, picking up his own collection of notes made from her amended lists. "Then I'll make you watch it."

"I am unsure if this is a conversation I want in on or not." Usov interjected idly, sprawling out again on the opposite end of the couch from the Sun user. "It sounds interesting... but I have little idea what it is about."
"It's a book, people." Peter protested, sounding equal parts exasperated and annoyed. "Reading will not kill you."

"Or so you think." Chipped in Galina absently, paging through her notes for a Lightning mineral that was preferably colorless. "We're in Soviet Russia."

"...oh."

"It might have escaped the censors here, it might not have. But even still, finding a copy of any movie translated to Russian might be a bit more difficult than you expect. Although there is the Thaw to think about." Privately, she still rather doubted any film made outside of the Union would be translated and released within it even now. "You should ask Bjørn instead, he will likely have more luck."

There was… barite, monazite, spessarite, rhodochrosite, and rhodonite. Galina considered the results of those five Lightning minerals, and their colors.

If she wanted a powdered blush she could also use to help reinforce her face if someone else ever wanted to try smacking her, she needed a reddish mineral.

…rhodochrosite it was. It was cheaper.

Marking down a clean sheet of paper with her choice, the Lightning locked her notes back up. "Peter, I have an errand to run."

Since he wasn't allowed unrestricted access to the Flame-stone research efforts, her comment meant his studies this evening was over with. To his credit, the man didn't sulk or sigh over her announcement.

Then again, the man was a lot older than those she was used to dealing with. One would hope he was equally more mature.

She accepted his notes, which were a confusing mass jumble of chemical notations and random Cyrillic words interspersing his English.

Learning another language via Mist Flames tended to jumble the target's grasp on their native one. At least in small ways here or there. Galina figured that was enough of a drawback as it was, doing more than just one might end up having a person babble in a horrible mishmash of tongues.

More motivation to limit whoever got the Mist-therapy languages crammed into their heads.

"I have to go pick a few things up from the inner city. Is there anything you need?"

Without Sonya, he was kind of limited in who he could turn to for aid. Especially since he was only here on her say so, and only knew some of the other Suns well enough to ask them for help.

"...um..."

"Either write a list or grab your things and come along."

(ooo000000)

(Wednesday the 30th of April, 1969. continued Cerrito Crime Family Headquarters, San Jose, California, United States of America.)
Stalking up the neo-Romanesque steps, Renato tried not to roll his shoulders to get his shirt to stop sticking to his back.

The movement would ruin the line of his suit and look entirely unprofessional, so he merely stuck to reaching up and adjusting his fedora providing him some shade instead.

This was a recommendation Timoteo Vongola had sent him on, for one of the split-off branches of a minor player in the Vongola Alliance. They’d been embarrassed somehow and entreated their parent syndicate for aid with it. However, with a lack of any evidence for who did whatever it was they were so pissed off with… eventually Nono was asked for some help.

Hence why the Italian native was paying a south California American mob syndicate a little visit. A little far outside Vongola's nominal reach, and in decidedly hostile territory, Nono decided to rely on the more… 'dangerous' of solo troubleshooters he knew of.

His orders were to find out whoever it was that had the skills to do something like this, then report back to Timoteo about it. Depending on what was found, either that person would be invited to join Tyr's still budding Varia Assassination Squad or… if whoever it was proved stubborn, kill them.

Looking and acting like the hitman he was wasn't normally an issue for him, Renato prided himself on his professionalism after all. Very few things could make him regret dressing as the *Mafioso* he was, but extreme heat was pretty much it… and suffering through Shamal's messy attempts at 'art'.

While Italia was hot and humid, it wasn't as scorching as California was. This close to the Pacific Ocean at least put enough salt in the air that made him slightly more comfortable. The Sun just wasn't used to heat this dry when the wind blew in from the east.

"Sigñor… Sinclair?" Asked a straw-blond maid waiting on the top of the steps, fidgeting a little with her apron as she continued in slightly clumsy Italian. "*Don Cerrito is ready for you."

Not entirely surprising that he was expected, Timoteo would've passed on he was sending someone, but by name… interesting. "*Lead on then, señorita."

Pretty little thing, for all she was highly unnerved to be the one to greet him. She hadn't wanted to be, but none of the other servants in the manor spoke Italian.

From what little else Renato could get out of her mind about it, that was part security and just part local preference. Most around spoke Spanish if they spoke another language than America's version of English, and since Italian and Spanish had a few differences it just made any 'business' talk that much more secure if ever overheard.

The hitman still found that rather lazy, but supposed if it worked for them…

One entrance hall, a courtyard, two more hallways, a staircase, and yet another hallway later Renato was a bit cooled off if more annoyed at the obvious security he had been just led through.

Waste of time, considering someone *had* evaded their security once before if the reason he was there at all was considered.

*Pointless posturing is stupid,* the *Mafioso* mused bitterly to himself as his guide knocked on a door.

Oh, there was a reason. The obvious one was to impress on him that they *did* have some, and that *obviously* it was working as intended with how many side-eyed by visibly armed men he got following the timid blonde maid through the manor. Another to show the outsider that this incident he was being contracted to look into was a one-off, and that they weren't some haphazard collection
of criminals that could barely work in the same direction.

However, given Renato was there at all, obviously their security wasn't quite up to par. At the moment all the excessive showmanship was doing was wasting time.

He'd probably appreciate the spectacle more if he wasn't in a sour mood not even a pretty door-greeter could get him out of. As his ill-humor wasn't her fault, he did dredge up a small smile for the now no longer unnerved girl as she bowed herself out once someone more well-appointed than the grunts downstairs answered the door.

That man waited only long enough for the pretty maid to get decently far down the corridor before addressing the Italian Sun. "You are the expert?"

"Renato Sinclair," he drawled out blandly, while a pretty face would get some of his dwindling consideration some exiled fop or native boy was exempt, "Sun Flame user, hitman, and current outside troubleshooter for the Vongola Famiglia. Oh, and the Giglio Nero."

There was a long moment of silence, within which he tried really hard not to roll his eyes. He didn't need a mind-reading trick to tell the other man was skeptical and wary, and the internal monologue as he attempted to stare down the hitman was only enlightening in respects to how much familiarity this mob syndicate had with Dying Will Flame users.

As in, not much. Nearly had a Lighting, but the real reason they were so upset at whoever embarrassed them in front of their fellow mobsters was due to someone stealing their 'found' Lightning.

Quaint.

Renato really was in the outskirts of civilized crime now, wasn't he?

The things he did for Nono… and for Shamal.

"…Boss Cerrito would like it if you gave up your weapon for the meeting, Mister Sinclair." Insisted the young man stubbornly, with a look to match.

Did they really think he wasn't as dangerous without a gun?

Sun Flames didn't always mean healer, as a matter of fact he excelled in using Sun Flames to kill with untraceably. However, the hitman merely pulled his favored M1911 pistol and his reserved moonstone inlaid backup Beretta M1934 to hand over.

He supposed being allowed to keep them up to this point was a mark of respectful consideration, not even Timoteo had let the hitman keep his guns on him within the Iron Fort in their initial meetings.

Might have been more his Guardians, but even so things had been a lot more intimidating on that first audience with the Sky than these people could ever hope to match.

"I do expect them back in the same condition."

"Of course."

Renato idly wondered about how things had changed for him since he had entreated to Vongola's Ninth Sky for a breach of conduct on Mafia Land as his weapons were first inspected and then handed off to someone further in.
A lone freelance hitman might not ever get into the *famiglias* he now dealt with, but he was acquiring a rather decent reputation overall he rather liked.

"Follow me." The short order regained the hitman's wandering attention as yet more posturing had been going on, and he followed the thoroughly ineffectual 'threat' that was his newest guide to his temporary employer.

This office was smaller than Don Vongola's, actually smaller than any number of the rooms the Iron Fort could boast of. Understandable in a way since they were relatively 'new', even if they had ties back in their home country. Dark brown and tan tones told him the man that owned it probably had little to no taste, or it wasn't him that decorated.

Joseph Cerrito was a man in his late fifties, had wavy brown hair that was greying at the temples, and enough of a presence to suggest why *he* was the Don and not any of the younger men arrayed in his office to provide security for this meeting.

Renato was… not impressed.

He had did a little background research on the man before ever stepping on American soil, and the American was uncomfortably close to violating *Omertà*. Through no initial fault of his own but trying to sue a magazine for daring to suggest he was the boss of a syndicate hadn't exactly caused it all to blow over.

Why he didn't just have whoever was that foolish killed instead of trying a legal route was beyond the Sun. It would've distracted attention from his crimes, instead of involving an entire FBI task force investigating into his prior and current actions.

Too much attention now for a clean murder, and it would just work as confirmation that everything he was accused of was correct.

Having spent the time they were using to try impressing on him the importance of the man in the office and what he was called in for to woolgather instead, the hitman decided enough was enough. "Don Cerrito, I presume?"

"I take it you know why you were sent to us." Cerrito started smoothly, ignoring or at least overlooking the Sun's disinclination to be intimidated. "I want whoever it was found and buried six feet under."

"I understand that." Not that it would happen if things worked out in a certain way. Really depending on who and what kind of person had done it all. Tyr was very keen on someone that could bypass the security even a moderately minor syndicate had to make them complain so much. "What do I have to work with?"

Renato would like to get this over within a month, he had a standing date with a particular Russian of his acquaintance and a Mist brat they both looked after. He didn't intend to be late for it, teasing Sonya about her time-keeping habits was too amusing to pass up.

The Don gestured to a set of files sitting on his desk, which one of his mooks swept up to do the actual handing over.

He didn't get anything else too interesting out of the man's head, other than some bitter thoughts his way for needing outside expertise. Flame users were not what this syndicate was used to dealing with, and with the sheer lack of any trail to follow they suspected someone with Flames was involved.
However, a stray thought had Renato immediately cracking open the file to see the pictures for himself.

…there was no detail on where the pictures were taken, but the craters in the walls and floor captured on the Polaroid images of some sparse hallway were very indicative of a Cloud user's rampage.

"I can tell you right away it was a Flame user." Not Mist, interestingly.

It had been the prevalent assumption about the situation back in Italia, since Mists were generally thought of being the stealthier of the available types. That didn't mean none of the others were, but that they had more to work with when it came to clandestine actions.

"A Cloud… which makes this more interesting."

A little more surprised beyond his ability to hide it, the head of the Cerrito Crime Family leaned back in his office chair and raised an eyebrow at the hitman. "Oh? You can tell that just by glancing through a few pages?"

"I know a Cloud. The last time she was pissed off she left behind craters much like these."

Storm Flames caused less obvious craters, but the damage Disintegration left behind was distinctively both soft and charred in its own way. A Lightning with sufficient leverage could've mimicked the same residue of their passing, but the hallway in the image was cramped and indicative of utilitarian use normally kept clear of any obstructions. No blown light bulbs or transistors, either.

A Rain wouldn't even have to leave behind any damage if they didn't want to, as well as Mists, which meant that unless the circumstances were even more unusual than he thought they were ruled out as well.

With a tight timeframe, and limited things to work with, the only one that would've left behind such craters were either Clouds or Suns. No scorching, or necrosis, or weirdly hyper behavior indicative of leaking Sun Flames reported on those knocked out disqualified his own Flame type.

Broken bones, though. One dead body, with a curiously deep wound to the temple that was the cause of death. Which just lent more credence to the Cloud theory.

Nothing else would put craters into concrete walls without the noise of a gun of a sufficient caliber to account for the damages, and to do enough damage to penetrate the thick skull of a human required more than a bit of elbow grease.

"I'm going to need more than this." Before anyone could protest or complain, or worse yet question him, Renato carried on. "Clouds are very much creatures of habit. So either one took exception to whatever you were doing, was somehow linked to it and objected, or just decided this is their territory and hasn't accounted for your syndicate yet. But since young Clouds starting to establish themselves are rather noticeable… odds are it's a foreign one that objected to something."

A stealthy Cloud… Renato wondered how unusual or normal Sonya was compared to her fellow native Russians. She couldn't be the only Cloud that could keep their cool if need be, Visconti was equally as self-possessed if he could manage it.

One was and one wasn't linked to a Sky, which meant it had to be within the range of behaviors a Cloud user could exhibit.

However, it was very likely they were now looking at Soviet Russia and her criminal syndicates for the culprit. Most others treated their Clouds like the tanks and natural-born fighters their Flames
encouraged them to be, and right on up until he had met a thief Cloud from the Soviet Union the Soft Flame Sun user had pretty much figured the same thing.

The hitman wondered what Sonya would do if asked to check into anything. He really had no other Soviet Union contacts, but the thief might not want to rat out someone she knew. While he didn't know every Italian criminal of his home country and didn't expect her to know every Russian criminal from her motherland, she was his best bet in somehow completing this contract.

The thief had been sticking to a semi-predictable schedule lately. If he was quick about it, he might end up getting the opportunity to talk to her about any other far-ranging Russian Clouds. It possibly would only be useful to get her side of what it was like being a Hard Flame Cloud user that traveled any distance from her 'home' territory, but it would be progress nonetheless.

More than likely, they were looking for a middle-to-late aged local Cloud. An import, rather than someone established here for any length of time. One that had evaded any local scrutiny, so borderline civilian more likely. Either once was part of the mafia and retired or left for their own reasons.

America wasn't a bad place to retire to, he supposed. Lots of wide-open space to get lost within, and with only sketchy nets thrown by disjointed syndicates to avoid.

Not his preference, but a decent one.

The older Clouds seemed to be able to keep their heads down if it suited them, more so than the younger types Renato had the unlucky fortune to witness the behavior of in Vongola territory.

Worst case scenario, it was another free-ranging Cloud like Sonya he was looking for that had already skipped town a long while ago. He had never expressly looked for a Cloud that was as territory-less as her, but he also never had much of a reason to either.

Now a lot more interested in this job, since it was looking like it would take some real skill to do instead of being completely routine and obvious, the Sun user tucked the files under one arm and looked squarely at the Don he was temporarily working for. "This will take some time. Finding a Cloud that doesn't want to be found will be tricky. Especially if you want to survive the encounter. I'll reach back to a few of my own contacts, see if they can't chase down the target on their own ends."

"I had my doubts about needing an outside set of eyes, but I can see why you came recommended by Don Bergamaschi. A few seconds, and you can already narrow down the type of person we are looking for?"

"Flame users can be very distinctive, if they feel they have no reason to be circumspect." Renato offered idly, his mood restored at the tricky and probably frustrating task set out before him. He didn't get interesting hits often, and even with the bare amount of information he had to go on now meant this would be very satisfying to close out. "This one seemed to not care and given how little other evidence was left behind they had a good reason to be that dismissive."

"Oh?" The question was soft, reminding the hitman this wasn't a man he knew well and probably took his words the wrong way. Admittedly, that did sound rather condescending on second thought.

"They probably already left town. Whoever it was, I'd lay good odds that it wasn't a local." Unless they were incredibly stupid about it, but the complete lack of anything else noted right away counteracted that assumption. "But... I love a good chase. If there's anything to find, I'll find it."
Renato had a month to do it all in, or a month to get the footwork covered and the locals ruled out. Rather tight deadline, but he didn't intend to miss a trip into the Soviet Union and a good look at what environment produced a woman like his favorite Russian.

"Now… what, exactly, were you doing that a Cloud objected to happening?"
Chapter 50

(Thursday the 1st of May, 1969. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

Renato had missed Sonya by a few days, and from the sounds of it for the rest of the month.

"Sorry," Tatiana informed him without a touch of regret, "but she left Sunday afternoon. She really only intended to do this last week, when a few clan things came up and finally freed her up a little. Nya does intend to take the rest of the summer and some of the fall off for various reasons, honestly."

The hitman heaved a nearly silent sigh, but since they had never really urgently needed each other's aid before there wasn't a way to get into contact with the woman quickly. He could try leaving a message that he wanted to talk to her with her Lackey, but as it was not that time sensitive he would merely leave it at that.

He could afford to wait a few weeks to get a solid answer from her, but until then…

"You're Russian, know any Clouds like your sister?"

"I haven't been back home for any longer than a week or so for the last few years. The most I could say anything about all either already pass through here or are not Clouds." The nurse informed him wryly, sliding shut the folder in her hands to hand off to a little brunette girl shadowing at her elbow. "I know there are other Clouds, one of which my sister has semi-regular dealings with and another she's about to have some with… maybe one or two more I haven't heard of yet, but not much more than that."

Of course not, he didn't tend to have that kind of luck. Then again, the rarity of the Flame type he was asking after would help narrow down the suspect list… as soon as he got one.

He slanted a look at the younger Russian hovering just behind the redhead Sun, but all she did was pointedly stick her nose in the air and wander off determinedly with the file clutched to her chest.

"Avdotya might know, but I don't think she's going to talk to you." With a gesture tossed her aid's way to let him know who she was talking about, Tatiana tapped her lips with her other hand as she considered him thoughtfully.

"What?" He had refrained from getting close enough to pick up some of her thoughts, so he actually had to ask.

If Sonya had blown up at him for just getting details out of her head on her siblings, he really didn't want to know what she would do if she ever suspected he was violating their privacy even accidentally.

Those mauls hadn't been expensive per say, just… highly unnerving to gift to a woman still pissed off with him. He'd still rather not feel like what it would be to have one crush his ribs if at all possible.

"I'm not entirely certain she would even tell you about it, honestly." Offered the nurse a bit more hesitantly than she was normally talking to him. "Some of those Clouds she knows of are rather young, still. Nya's actually surprisingly protective of those within a certain age range."

As she was with Shamal, he had noticed that.
Adjusting his hat to sit lower on his brow, Renato merely shrugged that warning off. "I'm not looking for a younger Cloud, more one around our own ages or older."

"From Russia? I think the eldest in our area we have active is Nya herself. You can't quote me on that, because we really only deal with most of the eastern side of the Soviet Union and there might be more a lot west of us, but as for one that goes outside of the Iron Curtain…"

A niggling little suspicion was planted in his brain, but the hitman shoved it aside forcefully. Sonya was a professional thief yes, but she had never stolen people before… or at least he had never heard her getting into kidnapping. Ransoms took a while to be completed anyways, and the AWOL Lightning had yet to be ransomed back to the mob syndicate that lost him. It had been nearly a week, anyone looking for money would've already contacted the Cerrito Crime Family by now.

Why the hell would the Russian woman deal with or inconvenience an American mobster syndicate anyways?

Sonya wasn't normally vindictive unless there was a damn good reason for it… but he couldn't say with any certainty if she even had contacts there.

He eyed the Storm-Cloud's bouncy Sun sister warily, wondering if he should ask if the woman in question had gone on any recent trips to America or not.

Tatiana either missed or ignored his look, pulling her hand away from her lips and giving him a slight smirk. "Now, unless you're going to finally give in to Doctor Kappel's insistence that you at least get semi-regular checkups… I should probably go back to doing what they pay me for."

"You can tell your doctor that I am fine." Renato ordered shortly, a bit less irritable than he would like to.

It wasn't her fault the medical practitioner of Sonya's liked to bug him about it, especially after taking Shamal in for his next set of immune shots and a physical to record the brat's rate of growth.

"And that's sure to put him off your case, if the last few times were any measure." Rolling her eyes, the nurse turned to follow her little protégé's path deeper into Mafia Land's hospital. "I'll let Nya know you were looking for her when she next checks in with me and Bjørn, tall, dark, and snarky."

"Thanks." Renato drawled sardonically at her back, turning on his heel to stalk his way out of the building.

Not quite a bust, but also not something he could work on for now. He might as well hit up the information brokers while he was here, see if they had any information on Soviet Flame users either around his age or older.

He kind of doubted it though. After first meeting a tiny Russian thief that could use Cloud Flames, he had specifically checked to see if she was following in anyone's footsteps. If Sonya was, it wasn't one known of outside their icy corner of the world.

Fuck… that would mean any information on older Soviet Flame users would be expensive no matter how slight or circumstantial.

Perfect. Price wouldn't be a decent judge if the information is worth shelling out for.
(Saturday the 3rd of May, 1969. Kingissepa, Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic.)

Sonya's first heist of the month was a minor milk-run contract, but excusable in that it was really only to get her in range of the favor her Lackey had been patiently waiting for.

Rovaniemi, Finland, was surprisingly farther inland than she had been expecting. Björn must have been at least exhibiting the faintest signs of his Lightning-Storm nature to be stubborn enough to illegally cross the North Sea, the Baltic Sea, the Gulf of Bothnia, and half of Finland before finally selling off his mother's jewelry for the funds.

Two decades after the Second World War, the city was back on its feet after apparently being nearly demolished entirely by invading German soldiers. Almost all of the buildings were built in the last twenty years, but there was still a hodgepodge of city planning where temporary infrastructure important services had once been before being relocated to newer more suitable buildings.

Leaving gaping holes in some of the main street thoroughfares, which had yet to be plugged up by another shop or business.

Subarctic terrain, which at least meant that since she was visiting in the summer it was nice and balmy out on the streets instead of sweltering hot. A few mid-summer rain storms, but she could deal with the wet if it wasn't icy cold out.

Both the temperature and the frequent rains helped her out a lot, since she didn't have to resort to questionable Flame skills to keep herself warm or hidden while scoping out her target and spending a few nights delicately picking through a certain pawn shop's books before robbing it.

Some of Björn's mother's jewelry had been sold, so she wouldn't be able to get back the late woman's wedding ring or her locket in the same condition her Lackey had sold them in. Sonya regretted that slightly, but as it seemed they were sold years ago that wouldn't have changed even if she had come for them right after the Lightning-Storm mentioned the pieces.

She did get back the dead woman's pearl necklace and an heirloom silver bracelet, as it was likely they had never been sold... as well as a fair number of other jewelry and trinkets the pawnshop contained after double-checking their mafia connections.

Little to none, so the thief had no compulsions against looting them to the bedrock for anything else she might ever want to use. Some of it she put to use right away, when she exchanged out the slim gold wedding ring with the Celtic knot pattern for a fancier version holding a sapphire chip that didn't have a connection to her Lackey.

The locket she just stole off the old biddy with it, pissed off that any pictures it might have held were long gone now.

After carefully packaging her Lackey's keepsake jewelry so the Mafia Land sorters wouldn't put it up to be hawked with the rest of the pricy stuff she robbed the pawnshop of, she tucked it into a bulk shipment of caviar and added in the diamond tiara she had been actually contracted to steal off some little debutante twit's head.

That done, Sonya left Finland behind and crossed the Baltic Sea herself for the more immediately hostile lands of Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Which was part of the Baltic States that, technically according to three world powers, was part of the Soviet Union... but to most other countries the three countries that made it up were illegally occupied. Careful wording and legal loopholes were taken advantage of to argue the issue either
way, but it was the Soviet Union in charge of the land in the end.

There was also still an anti-Soviet guerrilla force active in the Baltic States, which she hadn't actually known about until Arseniy pointed it out to her.

It was more immediately obvious now that she was looking, but the Soviet censorship was still strong here and the newspapers and radio only said what the government wanted. The murders, and the skirmishes with the Red Army, rarely if ever reached past the local to the national news services. You had to come in range to even hear anything about it, which made her wonder how her father had known.

No wonder Master Liam and the *Großes Volksfest* had avoided the country. Unless they went out of their way, the circus would have to cut across Võru County to even skim the lower half of the country.

A Russian traveling circus in expressly anti-Russian territory?

Liam might risk China's ever tightening insular policies, but there hadn't been any wide scale hostilities to Soviet civilians when she was with them. With the armed forces, maybe, but not the little people.

Yet, anyways.

The thief wasn't going anywhere near Võrumaa where the local chapter of *metsavennad* , or 'Forest Brothers', seemed to operate out of. She did mentally kick herself for not giving the term to Björn to research a little for her before coming out here. She didn't remember them from her time as Rachel but then again, she was starting to not remember a lot of things.

Thankfully, her heist was to take place on the opposite side of the country. Kingissepa was a port city on the island of Saaremaa, which had been restricted to only Russian nationals allowed.

In… Estonia. Which was a Soviet Social Republic state, but still.

Confusing, and a little disturbing in some way, but she didn't really have the time to investigate.

Sonya's nationality hadn't greatly affected her work before this point, and as a first she supposed she didn't mind this. However, it did bring to mind the fact she didn't even really consider herself American anymore.

Not surprising, given she almost now had just as many years of being a Soviet girl as Rachel had been an American one. It was just she hadn't intended to change that part of her identity, and now that she belatedly realized it had changed some time ago she was a little bothered by the fact.

Not her now being a Soviet girl, she was curiously unbothered about the fact even knowing full well the Soviet Union wasn't the best government in existence.

Not the worst, but what government didn't have drawbacks?

The thief supposed this was what it was to 'go native'. Interesting, slightly bemusing to only now realize, and something that occupied her for hours puzzling over.

Her contract here in the island port town of Kingissepa was to steal a defunct noble's crest from the walls of the local fortress/castle. She had a couple speculations for why, but without more information it was probably wrong.
The actual target she had only glimpsed of that very afternoon was set into a stone plate in the walls of the cloister, and probably weighed a good half ton. That was part of the reason the contract was more of a middling-difficult one… well, for most people.

She was going to bullshit her Cloud derived strength to both pry the stone loose and carry it to the ferry specifically re-routed for her contract that night. It would be the heaviest thing she ever tried to lift and sustain the weight of herself, if she couldn't there was all the heavy-duty carts left dotted around from the refurbishing efforts on-going she could appropriate. Would be stupidly easy to track her path with the marks those would leave behind, but an option.

It just was… well, until the castle emptied enough and she got a measure of the guard patrols Sonya was stuck in the rafters with little to do but think in the dim lighting.

What was she?

An American girl that lived in Soviet Russia, or a Soviet girl that once lived in the United States?

She was leaning more to the latter than the former, if only because she really didn't have much of an urge to return to America's shores just yet. There was little there for her, most of her family lived or returned to Russia so that was where she considered 'home' was.

Frankly, the thief hadn't even intended to stick it out in Moscow as long as she had.

Did the fact she was still intending on heading back for at least another year or more mean anything in that dilemma?

…why hadn't she intended to linger in the Soviet Union?

She had a reason for that, right?

Sonya couldn't remember what it was now, which was highly concerning for her. She did recall that it was a fairly important one…

Blinking a little owlishly in the sudden gloom that enveloped her, she peered over the edge of her perch in the support struts holding the vaulted ceiling of the refectory up. What she was taking to be the local equivalent of a janitor was making his ponderous way through the halls, flicking off a few of the lights as he passed the switches.

Well… to work. She'd have more than enough time to kick the problem around in her head over the next month, so she shelved the issue and set about getting down from her perch.

…there was a pickaxe somewhere around here, right?

If not, she'd have to use her Bec de Corbin and that would leave behind some distinctive marks. Not that she was too concerned by that at this point, but best to be safe about it.

She was pretty sure the criminal remnants of a noble house either wanted their crest either back or removed from easy civilian access before the refurbishing of Kingissepa Castle was finished. If not, the next likely reason behind her contract was that someone wanted any marks of their rivals erased.

Sonya was betting the latter.
"This is not going to end well." Galina confided to Lisa in an aside, neatening her copy of the latest trade agreement between the Zolotov Clan and another Chinese Triad group called the Luen Kung Lok.

Apparently, a syndicate that had good ties to the first Triad group they ever matched who also worked in Hong Kong near them.

The older woman gave her a measuring look, tinged with a bit of sympathy, as she ordered her lover's copy of it all for easier transport as soon as they left. "Oh? You know that for a fact?"

"With your daughter gone, Gedeon intends to take the lead."

"It's his right." Lisa lingered with her as most the other vory that would be involved with security filed out of the meeting room, the only exception was her lover who didn't look particularly pleased at the hold up. "Look Galina, I realize Sonya's more their level… but if she is elsewhere then he is the next one in charge of your group. He might surprise you, as Gedeon does have some diplomatic skills. Maybe just not the best luck with them."

"And I'd feel better about that if he actually spent more than the odd afternoon just hanging around. It's not about his ability to deal with others, I'll reserve judgement on that, it what he's going to try to pass himself off as while he does so." Stated the Lightning sourly, as she finally got to air her grievances to someone that would listen and might be able to do something about it. "I do know Sonya has business in China coming up, so while I'm sure she wouldn't care much at any other time…. now is not a good one for Gedeon to test his leadership skills of us."

"No? Why do you believe that?" Asked Arseniy instead of his lover, who merely now looked a bit concerned.

"Gedeon doesn't do more than visit the Suns when he has to spend time with any Flame users. Sonya never minded, because he is one and that is where he might get more ideas for his own use." Galina held back the sigh, it wasn't the place or time. "But since that's so, he's not really that well known beyond more than ten of us and half that is the Suns he's deemed worthy to bother with. Any other Flame users tapped for helping out might inadvertently make that obvious. A lot of us are still rather young."

Lisa sighed instead, drumming her fingers on the conference table they hadn't gotten up from yet. "Is there something else we should know about this?"

"…err, ma'am?"

"You are asking us for help, aren't you? That's why you're bringing this up at all… right?" Not being foolish or slow on the uptake, as well as having a hand in shaping most of the girls in how they grew up by being the woman most went to for when they needed help, her elder arched an eyebrow when it took her more than a second to respond. "Galina? Speak."

"Sonya… doesn't intend-"

"-to stay with the clan?" Lisa's smile was a touch wry, but just mostly unsurprised despite her fellow brunette's surprised look.

"We've been expecting that." Arseniy informed her blandly, relocating himself closer to the both of
them to keep the conversation as clandestine as possible without Flame users nearby.

"For a while now, actually. We almost lost her around her tenth birthday, to be honest. I highly doubt we'd've heard a word about her after she finally left home if it wasn't for… oh, one specific thing she needed our help with." Continued the older woman lightly, another sigh given before she started picking up her things. "Can I at least hope Sonya is going to be careful about it all?"

"…the only thing I know about her plans is that she is going to 'give Gedeon exactly what he thinks he wants'."

Snorting back a still obvious laugh, the vor helped his lover collect herself and moved off to open the door for her.

"We'll see what we can do on our own end, Galina. Just try to keep things smooth on your own. That does mean getting your little trainees to play along." Lisa gave a smile to him, looking back at her briefly. "I don't think Sonya will mind much that you told us her plans, but…"

The Lightning winced. "Thankfully I'm not that wary of pissing off anyone else in the clan, Lisa."

"Smart woman."

(Wednesday the 7th of May, 1969. Kursk, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Next for the Russian thief was a very disappointing visit to the Polish People's Republic, where she got a pointed reminder that the further away one got from the inner blocs of the Soviet Union the worse it was.

This heist was a rather risky theft from a government office, information for a local crime syndicate that needed it to avoid crackdowns in the future, then Sonya moved on to Soviet Ukraine.

A brief detour to get her boots adjusted and to commission a few more pairs now that she had pretty much reached her final adult height of five foot four, then Sonya moved onto a new contract much closer to her heart.

She was contracted to steal books again.

Alupka Palace-Park Complex held the Vorontsov Palace, which held a truly phenomenally large library. Everything about the castle was large actually, surprisingly enough given it was over a hundred years old and had somehow survived the recent world war and Nazi occupation intact.

Excluding the manuscripts she was contracted for, she also stole a number of history texts and a few journals from previous owners as well as a random selection of other books she could add to her collection.

Out of storage, because of course the Soviet censors wouldn't want information that could or might contradict them about history to be used by anyone. Even if they were only on display to pad out a library shelf. Easier in that she didn't have to steal out of a room with large windows and more than a few KGB officers wandering the halls, harder in that there were a lot of boxes to clandestinely get through to locate what she was there for.

It just meant she had a good look at what else was available to add to her own collection.
It also reminded her she was running out of storage space on Mafia Land. Her storage unit was nearly crammed full of paper already, so much so that Fong’s gift had been regulated to a lonely corner of her room in the condo her clan owed until she could address that.

Oddly, when she called in to her Lackey to get her next contract and trade off the information of which shipment her last contracted target was on, Sonya retraced her steps that same night and made away with the large lion statues in the palace's front yard as well.

Weird, but… books. She didn’t care what use someone could put the lion statues to, she had new things to read.

It was a good mood that lasted until she entered the USSR and reached her next contract.

Grave robbing was a new one.

Stupidly easy, and minimal security meant minimal contract fees, but it was in the direction she wanted.

However, she found it distasteful.

Sonya did realize she had a few more morals left and stealing from the long dead crossed one. Admittedly she was there to steal a body not something off one, but still.

She was merely digging up an old World War Two soldier to be sent elsewhere, curiously with exact directions to where the man was buried. Not in a graveyard, but a park on the outskirts of Kursk.

She kind of understood why no one had tipped off the local government that there were dead bodies under the local park, Soviet Russia probably would not be gentle or circumspect about the whole find, but it was still rather creepy in a way.

That strange job over with, and one dead body on its way to being redirected through Mafia Land's ports sent on its way, Sonya took a very long shower and then called her Lackey for her next contract.

She got Tatiana instead. "Tall, dark, and snarky wanted to talk to you."

"Oh?" She thickly mouthed around her fork. If it was a reminder to be in Italy in a few weeks she would somehow convince her sister to slap the man again. Swallowing the bite of her dinner and scrubbing her hair with a towel with the hand not holding a phone, Sonya tossed the cloth to the side and pulled the fork out of her mouth to speak more clearly. "What did he want?"

"Not sure if it was the same thing he wanted to talk to you about, but he did ask me about older Soviet citizens that have the same skills as you." There was a pause and a rustling of some papers, and then the Sun rattled off her next coded contract details Bjørn had likely handed her.

Sonya jolted the whole thing down on a scrap piece of paper her hotel was providing for later translating, abandoning the rest of her mostly uneaten dinner in favor of speaking with her sister. "So, were you just hanging around my Lackey's apartment just waiting for me to call in or something?"

"Something like that. It's still my apartment, thank you very much."

Smirking wryly, the thief tapped her pen against the pad of paper a few times as she wondered what the hell an 'Altai' was. It sounded familiar, in a something she read recently kind of way. "Yes, sorry big sister. My mistake. Was that all Renato wanted?"
"Like I said, not sure if that was exactly what he wanted to talk to you about. Tall, dark, and snarky did look slightly frustrated that you weren't available."

Sonya rolled her eyes at the semi-teasing tone her sister had adopted, then frowned as she realized there was still graveyard dirt under her fingernails. "Ever so sorry about that. Kind of busy here."

"Mmm… speaking of, you might want to call Lina."

…fuck. She knew something like this would happen the moment she stepped out of the office.

"Is it going to blow up?"

"It might? I don't have all the details, but I do know she's fairly frustrated."

Sonya's Lightning assistants didn't normally get frustrated. As a whole, the entire Flame type seemed to view frustration and aggravation as kind of useless to them which was a trait she highly appreciated. At least the Russian versions did.

The French versions too, she tacked on as she recalled Verde's one-man crusade in getting access to her research. He hadn't gotten frustrated, every time she stymied him he just went about it in another way to get the results he wanted.

Staving him off via a semi-bullshitted excuse until she knew his character better was all she could do in the end. It was either that or kill the man, and she was pretty sure someone would be pissed off if she did that.

There was the wonder if they even really had the patience to feel frustration, but that was actually kind of stereotyping on her end.

Lightnings could feel frustration and aggravation, it was just with their attention spans it didn't last long for them. Either it passed too quickly, or they basically ignored it as they thought a way around whatever was frustrating them.

That wonder didn't help her much with trying to figure out if she should leave it to Galina or call in and see for herself what was going on. She was technically close enough to the clan she might be able to do a quick fix and go back to what she was doing… but it held the risk of getting mired again.

Of course, if it wasn't something she could quickly fix that would mean she'd probably get stuck behind a desk with extra attention on her ass so she wouldn't hightail it off for her own purposes.

"Tell Galina," how to word it so she wouldn't get passive-aggressive paperwork revenge dumped on her the moment she got back in the office… "that… I trust her to manage things. If it all looks to be going to hell in a handbasket I'll cut my work short and go back, but someone fairly important had better be dead or dying in that case."

"When the hell did I become a messaging service?" Tatiana bitched rather good-naturedly, a rustle of paper echoing down the phone line they were tying up.

"When you decided to remain in a predictable location for a few years."

"Real funny, little sis."

Sonya very quietly lit herself a cigarette. "Anything else I should know?"
"Put that out when you're talking to me, little sister."

How the hell did she always know?

"And yes," the faraway nurse continued only after she stubbed it out, "Cherep called in. He crashed, so expect a very bored stuntman to show up when you want him this summer and fall until he replaces his bike."

Sonya froze, and tried to convince herself that no she didn't need to check up on her brother.

Obviously, if he called Tatiana then Cherep was fine. Could talk and supposedly walk and made it through a conversation with their eldest sister who was quite a health nut in her own way.

…it didn't help much. "Where is he now?"

"Apparently the outfit he's with made it all the way to Denmark this year." After a pause that was a nearly audible shrug, the nurse continued in a markedly more business-like tone. "Should I inform Björn to aim you in that direction?"

"Please."

Tatiana didn't bother taking a note of that, she merely repeated it verbally to her Lackey. The Icelandic young man made some noise she couldn't understand on the other end before her sister continued. "That should be it, I think."

"Well, I've got nothing for you myself." Aside a request that Björn never pick up another grave robbing contract ever again, but she could give that anytime in the next few days. Preferably on a phone she would have to be less circumspect on in order for her to be able to sleep securely after said call.

"Alright then. Have fun shopping for phones."

Sonya blinked a few times as the dial-tone informed her she had been hung up on, wondering if that was what an 'Altai' was.

Time to find out, anyways.

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 7th of May, 1969 continued. Björn's apartment, Mafia Land.)

Shuffling the deck of cards and letting Tatiana cut them, Adrik doled out another round of hands. "Are you sure she's not going to mind too much?"

"Nya won't care. I'll give you good odds she won't even ask what happened to the money she left for just in case." Replied the nurse, seating herself neatly next to the Lightning-Storm and the Mist in the room. "She's got a really weird sense of value for things. I ever tell you she gave a Ming Dynasty vase to our mother, to be used as a flower vase, for her birthday?"

Viper pinched the bridge of her nose. "Mou, I do not want to hear this."

Adrik warily eyed the interloping gender-fluid person warily as he traded three cards from the deck for the discarded with his 'partner' for the night. "Maybe this was a bad idea…"

"It's not like you have been instrumental in preventing us losing the money." Verde observed dryly from his other side, shuffling his new hand thoughtfully before tossing the bills for a raise on the card
"Either somehow gain more skill or be silent."

"Our mother was so amused, she actually uses it to hold sunflowers when they're in season." Tatiana continued her little story wickedly over the two of them, folding her own hand and forsaking her initial buy-in for the pot with only a glance.

Given the Lightning was the only reason their little tag-team pairing had yet to be ruthlessly cleaned out, Adrik reluctantly shut his mouth and gave the Lackey his two new cards to make up for the discarded ones.

Either both it and her folding or just the story irked the Mist user something fierce, earning the nurse a flat glare over Bjorn's head. "Silence."

"Aww… what's the matter, Viper?" Cooed the Sun Flame user, leaning over enough to nearly shove her ample chest into the suddenly beet-red face of the fortunate young man sitting between the two. "Tiny bit vexing?"

"…a genuine Ming Dynasty vase goes for half a million in euros, easily, in any auction house." Groused the money-grubbing Mist sourly as she picked up two new cards after discarding a few of her own, indigo Flames floating a raise to top Verde's bid into the middle of the table. "Who the hell uses such a thing for a flower vase, mou?"

Anything that upset the damn card shark was good to him. Maybe Verde could get back half of what he'd lost unknowingly to the Esper's damn good poker face if the nurse kept it up.

'Teach Bjorn a few tricks of ingraining himself in high stakes circles' Adrik's ass. The Mist just wanted all the money she could make off the Russians as possible, which was blatantly obvious from how little coaching the young Lightning-Storm had gotten at all through the rather cutthroat game taking place in his living room.

Viper had made impressive work on trouncing them all too, right on up until Verde started getting the hang of poker with criminals and stymied the miserly individual with some underhanded aid from Tatiana.

The young Icelandic man hadn't done too badly, and he called Verde's raise with an impressively straight face, but he was barely hanging on even so.

Before Sonya's call, and a disqualification Verde had successfully argued for on his behalf, he had almost lost the small amount of cash he had managed to hang onto throughout two hours of learning the ropes.

Admittedly, Adrik had gone into the 'friendly game' a bit arrogantly, gambling was a pretty minor vice considering the job descriptions the people here normally had and one he thought he could keep up with… but as the Lightning said he had nearly been cleared out in short order as well.

His old gang leader was of no help whatsoever. All she was interested in was finding a way to get under Viper's skin and was making good inroads if the semi-belligerent expression the other was wearing was any indication. The money she was throwing down the drain in both pursuit of that goal and to keep the Mist's interests in the game enough to ignore the times she hit too far under the belt barely made her flinch.

Adrik finally stopped putting it off, glancing at his pair of cards. Letting the truly dismal pair of threes, a seven, an ace, and a jack go as he wordlessly folded. He would've played it any other time… except he was getting disturbingly low on funds.
"…if the card table is made out of Mist Flames, does that mean Viper can see the cards dealt out onto it?"

The Mist user in question eyed him suspiciously. "Of course I can."

"Da, it's why we asked you to hand them to us." Bjorn tacked on miserably, having to go all in to match his tutor's and Verde's counter-raises.

Tatiana flashed her former gang member a tight little grin. "Aww… poor Adrik. Are you only now realizing that?"

…well, they were all cheating.

Adrik was pretty sure Verde had long since resorted to counting cards, the Sun nurse had made a few suspicious burn marks on a few of them, fuck… even the Lackey was fiddling around bending certain corners. With a Mist in play, there were probably numerous ways she could cheat that he would never think of.

"Call." Verde decided to cut his probable risks that round, matching the limits of what the Icelander could afford and not dipping into the rest of what they had.

Viper made a moue of disgust, but also matched the funds with the other two. "…fine then."

The Mist had been holding onto a set of three Aces, which were beaten out by Verde's Full House, but both hands lost to the Lackey's Straight Flush.

Tatiana burst out laughing as Bjorn tripled his funds all in one instant. The kid very pointedly did not look his current teacher in the eyes as he raked in the pot.

Viper's expression was livid. "Trying to surpass the master there, Bjorn?"

"No!" Yelped the youngest in the room, cringing under the highly unimpressed look leveled at him from that corner. "It was just luck, I swear!"

"I think it's time to stop playing nice, then…"

Verde turned and looked Adrik in the eye. "I suggest we withdraw anything you do not wish to lose."

"At this point, I think Viper might engineer a messy murder for us all if we tried."

Thoughtfully considering what they had left, the scientist slanted a look at the very irked Mist user in the room and then at the Russian he had been more or less stuck with since Sonya took off. "How about a compromise, then?"

Viper shot him a seething look as Tatiana took possession of the deck to dole out the next round. "What?"

"Now that Bjorn has the full amount Sonya left behind to pay you secured, I will forfeit the rest of what we have left if you will submit a few answers I would like to pose."

Adrik spluttered as he was unceremoniously sold out shamelessly by his so-called 'partner', dropping the newest and still dismal hand he had been dealt in shock. Viper abandoned her own to pounce on the money the twosome had left, fanned through it with a thumb, then gave a short nod. "Two."

For a very long moment, it seemed Verde would argue to try and raise the number of questions he
was allowed. In the end, after another side glance to him then back to the miser, the scientist just gave a tight nod. "Very well. Two in-depth answers on the subject of your Flame type."

"This is some bullshite."

"Next time, don't lose too badly. Most of it was Verde's to handle anyways." Tatiana put in her two cents from the other side of the table, folding her own new hand and handing the much-abused deck to the youngest player. "I think I'm going to call it a night, before I have to dip into my savings."

Adrik made an admittedly rude sound in her direction, getting to his own feet. "Come on, Verde. Or you'll have to walk back yourself."

By his expression alone, the scientist was none too pleased the night was being called in early. Especially not after finally getting the Mist to finally agree to answer a few of his burning Flame questions.

"You've paid, mou," Viper intoned blandly from where she was stubbornly sitting on Bjørn's couch, "I'll find you later."

Dismissing the Lightning for the time being, the miser then pinned the younger Lightning-Storm with a hard look.

Hunching his shoulders, the Lackey merely secured the larger chunk of money that was the funds Sonya had left behind for bribing the Mist if more aid was needed. His expression when they shut his front door behind them was torn between highly wary and resigned.

"That's why Nya's never going to ask." Tatiana confided to both Adrik and Verde as the three of them left the Icelander's apartment behind. "She knew full well that if Viper heard a word of any money left behind explicitly for him, he'd do anything to get a hold of it. A poker game is pretty tame compared to what she was sure he'd try."

The Russian man idly scratched at his still healing surgery scars absently, only for his hand to be batted away irritably by the nurse who fussed after it for a moment until she was sure they were fine. "Was male the gender of the day for him?"

"If I can't tell, I just go with male."

"Does-"

"Viper never seems to mind when I see him. Even the day we were introduced through Bjørn and I accidentally called him a 'he' when she was wearing full skirts and somehow had a bust a girl her size would be proud of." Shrugging, the Sun waved the interrupted scientist's irritated look for interrupting him off. "I think it's his preferred standby if you can't tell. Because if he didn't get tetchy then… when she was obviously female…"

"Eh… still kind of squicky." Adrik dismissed after a moment of contemplation. "Can we change the subject?"

Tatiana clicked her tongue at him as they made it to the streets. "So sheltered, aren't we?"

"Sheltered?" Verde asked curiously, plodding along in their wake. It was the safest method to travel for him, given the nurse's medical badge ensured only the very foolish messed with her and Adrik could at least flash a stolen pistol to clear his own way.

"Homosexuality and transgender people are persecuted in pretty much all corners of the world.
Which means…?

"They go underground with it." Verde concluded obediently to the expectation to finish her thought. "So, they often end up here?"

The nurse shrugged absently, sternly eyeing some of the people they were passing who were speculatively eyeing the Lightning in turn. "Not here, exactly. But they're pretty common if you know where to go. There's always a district or two you can dig up with enough effort. Very sympathetic about hiding you if you word it right too. There were these girls, and I used the term girls lightly here, back in Germany…"

"Ugh. Viper's bad enough, can we not bring that up?" Adrik bitterly asked, pulling a face at her.

Tatiana flashed Verde a smirk over a shoulder. "They really liked him when we were there."

(Thursday the 8th of May, 1969. Voronezh, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

As it turned out, Altai was actually an incredibly clunky looking precursor to mobile phones.

The Soviet Union's version of them, maybe, but they were still multi-channeled portable car phones.

Sonya realized why the contract was paying so much out for a few hundred units of brick-like technology and the control tower for them that had been produced for a couple years already pretty damn quick, she had to steal them from the KGB.

The reason why the thief hadn't realized the cellular age was creeping up was because only Soviet government officials and apparently some emergency services had access to them. If she didn't want to steal them from hospitals or risking the police to get theirs, one would invite Tatiana to bitch for years if she ever found out and the other was just bad news all over, it meant she had to go after either the production factories or the politicians and government spies about it.

Heading a good distance east, the Storm-Cloud ended up in the city of Voronezh. Having ruled out actually uninstalling the target bricks of technology from places they were already installed, since they were likely highly guarded and it was entirely impossible to do nearly two hundred units all in one night before security got sicced on her ass, her target was the Voronezhskiy Scientific Research Institute of Communication headquarters and it's attached factory/lab/production buildings.

…and more importantly, the factory that produced the all-in-one 'mobile' communication units.

Sonya flatly refused to call them cell phones even in her own head, they really were more like bricks you'd install into a car's dashboard or which needed it's own suitcase if you carried it around with you. Regardless of what they were the forerunners of, she was calling them phone bricks.

Sticking above the weird, fake-foam ceiling that seemed to be a staple of business offices and public buildings for the most part, the thief managed two relatively quiet nights of scoping out the factory and the offices than handled production. She ended up pretty dusty and had a few tight moments when the fragile ceiling didn't want to support her weight over people she never wanted to come to the attention of.

However, the easy time she had staying out of the way rapidly lead her to the conclusion something serious was needed to interrupt the normal security before she could even set a toe into the factory for what she needed.
The KGB were not slouches in any respect and were of a caliber higher than private security firms she had tangled with before.

Security patrols were way too tight for her to take advantage of any holes, and while she could rewire some of the alarms and security feeds she couldn't do all of them before someone checked up on them and plugged the holes she might be able to make.

All in all, not something she could ghost through like she preferred.

Taking one extra day, which she could afford in terms of the contract she was on if not happy about the delay personally, Sonya carefully inspected each of the females that even remotely could enter specific offices. Picking someone at least generally her size, she made careful note of the hair color and her behavioral ticks.

Sonya had no expectations about somehow avoiding the KGB’s attention on this one, all she really could do was muddy the trail as much as she could. When they traced her movements back, they would likely realize there was a blonde woman involved then run into the fake passport and ID she had been carrying around and using in favor of her legal ones since she left Mafia Land.

Thank fuck she had, even if she had wondered if she should bother getting fake papers this time since she was just going back into the Iron Curtain.

Hopefully she could make a case that there might be more than one thief involved like usual when her acts came to the attention of anyone.

(ooo0000oo)

(Thursday the 8th of May, 1969 continued. Voronezh, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Excuse me!"

Rapidly clicking her way towards a pair of KGB security men, a harried looking secretary wordlessly handed over her identification to the elder of the two and used the moment when they checked it to regain her breath.

"I left my house keys in my desk. Please tell me the office is not locked down yet, my husband will be very unamused if I do not have dinner waiting for him when he gets off shift." When all her babbled excuse earned her two highly unamused blank looks but one grudging nod, the young woman straightened herself up and returned the nod sharply an attempt to hide her obvious nerves. "I have no objections if the two of you followed me in, I just need to unlock the bottom drawer of my desk for a moment."

They both smoothly stepped aside, ensuring she felt every inch of their suspicious glares.

Still nervous but determined, the secretary led the way into the VNIIS headquarters building and down the correct halls to the office she worked in front of without so much a twitch in the wrong directions. The key was removed from around her neck, and it took only a moment before the lock turned and the drawer in question opened up.

Retrieving a set of keys from inside, the young woman closed the drawer and twisted the key in the opposite direction to re-lock it. "Thank you, gentlemen, I'll get out of your way now… oh!"

With a wince, a part of her left earring that had caught on her suit jacket popped off and clattered away further into the dim semi-lit hallway.
She held a hand to her smarting earlobe but glanced at the two security officers instead of go after the broken end of her earing. "...I'll just find that tomorrow."

"Smart idea, miss. Now, please exit the building."

"Of course." With a nervous little smile, the young woman turned on her wobbly heels and clicked her way out of office as asked.

They stalked her completely out of the building, and down one street, until she was definitely on her way home and less nervous overall.

The moment they turned back Sonya did not deviate from her path, making three turns down the street she knew the secretary she was impersonating actually lived down. Once past the apartment building's front doors, the thief took an immediate left as the girl she was impersonating always did to avoid the elevator.

Once in the staircase, she slipped off the impractically high heels she was still wobbly on and peeled off the suit and skirt ensemble in favor of the other change of clothes she wouldn't mind losing at the end of this just in case. Stamping the generic boots on her feet, promising herself she would only destroy the damn things even if then she'd have to go barefoot, the Storm-Cloud darted up the stairs to the apartment she had been heading towards.

Sonya carefully broke into the home of the married office girl she had impersonated, carefully sneaking around the young woman in the kitchen and replacing the ID she had pickpocketed out of a purse for her own use. She also stealthy slipped into the girl's room, leaving the earrings she had borrowed and slightly modified to break so easily.

Exiting via the bedroom window, the thief scaled the brickwork using only the tips of her fingers and her Cloud Flame given strength. Once she reached the roof, she spent a moment to Disintegrate the clothing she had purchased in the city so they hopefully couldn't be traced back to her.

Then she looked out in the direction of the office building she had just visited and willed the small kernel of Storm Flames in the gemstone she 'lost' in the offices to burn.

If this didn't work to start a fire she'd have to risk sneaking in, without the cover of civilians wandering around to cover any inadvertent issues she came across, to light one. She did not want to risk that, in fact she would greatly prefer the cover of an industrial accident for her first interaction with the KGB…

Narrowing her eyes at the silhouette of the Voronezhskiy Scientific Research Institute of Communication building, Sonya's night-adjusted eyes picked up the faint glow of something fiery going on through a window.

…did it really work?

Staying put for five more minutes confirmed the fact there was a fire going on where she wanted it. The mechanically grinding siren that belted out a warning of a fire belted out in the rapidly fading evening was her signal to move as well.

Re-covering the ground she clicked her way down in heels took less time via rooftops, at least until she reached the industrial sector of Voronezh. By the time she returned to street-level, the fire she started had consumed a fair bit of the office she had impersonated her way into.

A fire was a very disorientating thing to manage security patrols around, especially since it could spread. Storm Flame started fires had a bad habit of melting its way through things plain fire really
shouldn't be able to get through, adding even more confusion and disorientation for the KGB agents on the scene.

Using the distraction the disaster provided as cover for her more risky actions, Sonya leapt over an electrified two story tall chain link fence and hit the ground a little more heavily than she liked. Gritting her teeth, she slunk her way past a guard shack with only one man currently glancing through the feeds of nearly thirty monitors on his lonesome.

Summoning a palm full of red fire to her hand, the thief carefully and slowly brushed it to the bundle of cables right at the juncture they entered the shack. Mimicking the burn pattern for phosphorous to prevent immediate replacement of the severed cables for as long as possible.

It blew the assumption this was just an accident or electrical fire that started somehow out of the realm of possibility, and they'd connect this to the office building's sudden fiery issues, but if she didn't want to be caught on security cameras there were literally no other way to take the recording devices at least temporarily down before they could catch her image.

She had tried to plan for that, only to give up when the redundant camera angles kept tripping up anything she could think of.

Immediately ducking out of range around the corner of the tiny building, the thief only just barely missed being spotted as the guard bolted out of his assigned shack with a semi-automatic rifle in one hand and his radio in the other.

He barked out the report of what little he could see, which was basically that his security monitor bank's cables had been somehow melted instantly. No fire, possibly chemicals used.

Another siren cranked to life a few beats after, this one wasn't ever going to be mistaken for a fire alarm but she was already making good time towards the warehouses supposedly holding the production of the factory and labs. Supposedly, because this was the part she had been unable to actually get personal confirmation it was as blueprints and office memos suggested it was.

The riskier part.

Sonya could afford a bit of time to locate where exactly her targets were with everything going on but couldn't afford to somehow spark off another night of distractions. After this, she was pretty damn sure they'd call in even more KGB agents to beef up security to the point she would either have to murder her way in or give up.

As she didn't intend to murder her way through her contracts if she could just steal things instead, tonight was her only window.

Assuming there was security within the warehouses themselves paid off, abusing her inhuman jumping and her circus-trained acrobatic skills to enter the great building after prying up a bit of a roof, from what she could see right away just by looking down.

Five. More than enough to split off a team to investigate any noise she made without seriously compromising their guarding or leaving someone as the odd man out.

Perfect.

Sonya moved painfully slowly, aware that the fire she started had long since run out of Storm Flames and was likely already being controlled but unwilling to rush and make any mistakes now that she was within reach of pulling this off.
but this was the wrong warehouse. She only had to slowly and carefully pry open three crates to realize that, and she had no use for airplane parts.

Even expecting a few misdirection problems going into the night, it still was aggravating to run into. Nearly half an hour of precious time wasted on a red herring, and now she had to exit and try a random other warehouse in hopes she might get lucky before security finally tightened up.

They only had another large one and a few smaller, but this part was the one that could easily trip her up. Her assumption was that the larger warehouses were for shipments waiting to be shipped out, and the smaller ones were just storage for completed parts until assembled on orders. If one was shipment, and the other wasn't…

She stopped that mental train of thought before she could convince herself to doubt her plans.

Retracing her steps back up a stack of crated machinery parts and up to a position that would hopefully let her jump to the rafters without any horrible clanging noises that would give her presence away, Sonya accidently kicked a loose nail she couldn't see in the gloomy unlit interior. The background sirens and muffled noise of the ongoing fire concealed it striking wood until it fell into the partially opened crate she had started with and it rattled around more noticeably, which she had left open because even pressing the nails back into the wood might end up creating a screeching noise she couldn't afford.

She also could barely afford that noise.

Swearing in every language she could in the privacy of her mind, the thief leapt for the roof's supporting braces to get herself the fuck out of there quickly. Barely escaping ahead of the flashlight sweeps, she did spend the time carefully and slowly bending the sheet of corrugated metal roofing back down to make her entrance point less obvious.

There was only one other large warehouse where assembled bundles were kept before shipment, and while it wasn't too far from the first one she tried it was far enough away from anything she could use as cover to reach it.

Sonya spent two minutes, all she could convince herself to spare given she knew her time was running out quickly, to inspect the area and ensure she knew where the patrols were running.

Flat out bolting once she could convince herself the coast was clear, the thief ran nearly bent in half to keep her profile low and hopefully out of any unfortunately timed glance by any of the farther patrols.

Since she couldn't be sure she was unspotted anymore, she abandoned the slow and silent method for a distraction-heavy one.

A two-handed strike of one of her Cloud Flame mauls on the sliding of the next warehouse almost rattled her teeth, and possibly half deafened the guards within. Going with another inhuman jump got her out of the way when the great bay doors were slid open, a long pause happened before one guard who got the short straw poked his head out to see what had hit the building.

The fact there was nothing around that could've created the very obvious dent in the metal walls drew out another two, but Sonya only knew that because she had peeled away another part of the sliding far above their heads and on the opposite side of the building that was taking up so much attention. Slipping inside from an angle that was not under so much scrutiny gave her the few moments to be sure this was the correct building.
Thankfully, because she was pretty sure those guards on the warehouse's floor were being chewed out for opening the bay doors for any reason from the flinching going on and the muffled sounds she could hear so far up so the maul trick wouldn't work again, it was. The shipment she was after was sitting neatly near the ground, almost ready for loading onto a truck.

Now she had to get nearly a ton of circuitry and packaging out of here, without getting caught or doing anything stupid.

Sonya crawled back up the towering stacks of boxes and crates to take a moment to catch her breath and settle her nerves, considering the open doors that gave a very nice view of the scrambling KGB agents both swarming over the smoldering building in the distance and crawling all over the wide-open wasteland of concrete that was the shipping and receiving area of the complex.

Unfortunately, the memos she had spied upon had been either intentionally wrong or just lying to the people they were sent to. The shipment might be all together, labeled and packaged correctly… but it wasn't on a shipping truck.

She couldn't get out again the way she planned on. Not with her fire-distraction already dying down and even more security pouring into the industrial part of the factory in response to her cutting the security feeds. She also couldn't stay here until she or someone else could move it all in some other way, the security cameras would only be down for however long until patches could be made to the wiring she had destroyed.

There was no residue normal phosphorus would leave behind on the burns she made on the wiring, and she had no doubts that this place didn't had the lab to test for that, so barely a few hours of no security cameras was all that earned her.

Pursing her lips after a long moment of thought, the thief glanced first at the shipment and then at the far away trucks.

…maybe she could still use her original idea.

It would be tricky, and risky especially since she was pretty sure a very thorough sweep would be done in response to her break-in… but she might be able to actually get away with this if she did it right.

It was just a matter of guessing correctly.

(Friday the 9th of May, 1969. Voronezh, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Someone broke in?"

"That's what the rumors say." Grumped the driver that had been called in hours ago and was still expected to work his regular shift to his enviously more rested younger counterpart. "Nothing was taken, they only know it was a break-in and not an accident because the fire 'mysteriously' spread to a part of the building not connected to offices."

"So what... was it? Someone breaking in?" The fresher man lowered his voice and leaned closer to the other. "Sabotage? Some kind of protest?"

Shrugging, the wearer of the two picked up the clipboard of which truck he would be driving and where he had to take it. "Don't know. No one's talking. Supposedly, one of the girls from the office
was taken in for questioning… but if anything comes from that…"

With an uneasy expression, the man he had been talking to picked up his own orders and wandered off to his truck.

Running an eye over the destinations he would be driving to, and exactly who and where he would require signatures on delivery, he made sure he looked properly put together as a delivery man was supposed to according to his employers before heading off to the truck he was assigned. Apparently already loaded, he merely had to wait for the guards to finish inspecting almost every inch of the truck cab and the shipments he was responsible for.

Once he was waved over, he experienced another few moments of getting eyeballed by all corners as his IDs were meticulously examined and compared to his own face before being dismissed to actually do his job. Grumbling under his breath, the tired truck driver hauled himself up to the driver's seat.

Almost buckling himself in before he realized some asshole had failed to close the passenger door all the way and it was swinging open again.

Once everything was firmly shut and he had pulled out of the shipping and receiving area… he was already an hour and a half behind his schedule.

While bitching under his breath about unnecessary searches and assholes that would never accept security as a valid excuse for being behind and keeping an eye on early morning traffic, he never saw the hand that suddenly snapped out to gripped him by the hair and smash his head into a window only just hard enough to shatter it.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 9th of May, 1969 continued. Voronezh, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya rather roughly hauled the insensible body out of the driver's seat, barely stifling a wide yawn that still made her eyes water as she rolled the window down to conceal the damage.

A long night playing peek-a-boo with several search parties all around this damn truck's underside and interior cab as well as the rest of the fleet of vehicles had done nothing for her nerves, and the high-strung Storm-Cloud would maybe admit she hit the man a little too hard… but she really didn't care right now.

Grumpy was going to be even later than he thought, and she'd let him wake up without blunt force trauma sending him back to dreamland… once she reached a secluded enough stretch of road to hide a stack of crates nearly half a story tall.

Then she was going to take a goddamned nap before arranging alternative transportation for the shipment and clearing out of Soviet Russia for a while.
That wasn't the end of it.

Of course not, Sonya didn't have that kind of luck.

An hour into driving down a highway, which was a hell of a lot easier than somehow navigating urban streets with the Russian version of a big rig truck plus trailer, there was a bang on the cab. From within the trailer.

"Pull over, the rookie needs to piss."

…charming.

Her shipment of Altai communication bricks was infested with what was probably a few KGB members, likely along for the ride to ensure everything reached where it should be going.

Not exactly part of her plan, there.

The thief obediently started slowing the stolen rig, running a few ideas of how to deal with this little upset through her head.

The easiest way to deal with it was to kill them, obviously. However…

Slitting a sideways glance to her insensible co-pilot as the stolen truck came to a fairly gentle halt on the side of the highway connecting Voronezh and her second birth city of Saratov, she pulled the brakes and turned off the engine before slipping out of the cab.

She didn't want to be forced to kill people on the job, not even KGB operatives that would likely throw one hell of a monkey wrench in her future plans if they ever ID her as a criminal of an international flavor.

Likely they knew she had the connections already, from even being related to Arseniy alone if not the Zolotovs as a whole, best not to add to their suspicions.

Also, killing them would throw even more suspicion and possibly kill the secretary girl and her insensible co-pilot. They were really just in the wrong place at the wrong time, she didn't really feel like inconveniencing them even more than she already had.

…even if getting fingered by the KGB would mean she'd have a legitimate excuse to avoid the Soviet Union entirely for a good few years. She was pretty certain Usov would have the skill to really mess around them as he wanted, he had become a damn fine Mist, but that wouldn't be for another few years yet.

With a fairly powerful knock of her own to the back-trailer doors, she unlocked them with the truck's key ring and pulled a door open in a way so she wouldn't immediately be seen.

Sonya then darted back to the cab, hanging out of it only long enough to pick up the sound of two pairs of boots hitting the gravel on the side of the highway.

"Hey, Palyulin! Come here."
How about… sure.

Getting a good grip on 'Palyulin' unformed shirt and ducking down a little in the driver's seat, the Soviet Storm-Cloud waited until the cab door moved under force not her own or the wind's.

Then she dumped the still out-cold driver on top of the KGB agent before he could catch a glimpse of her and cranked the engine.

A startled shout from the 'rookie', the grinding crunch of gravel being churned and sprayed by heavy duty rubber, and the entire rig lurched forward again. The wide-opened trailer doors banged against their hinges before slamming closed… hopefully.

She would pull over and check that in a few more miles.

Sitting back up straight as she got the entire vehicle back up to speed, Sonya double checked the map she found in the glove box. The whole ensemble had passed a small city back a little while, about fifteen minutes. Which… might just get her a few hours of a head-start before the stolen rig and shipments was reported.

She had to ditch the rig somewhere or swap the trailers with another that would be less searched for.

Musical trucks… lovely.

The next city was Rogachevka, which sat in the fork of M4 and A114. Hopefully she could find both what passed as a rural truck shop and a few pay phones.

She had to tell Bjørn to never pick up another grave robbing contract and tell her where the closest Mafia Land servicing airport was. She'd go all the way to Saratov if she had to, but if she didn't have to with a hot rig then she'd ship it all off early.

Besides, if she took a few days off… she could see what the hell Renato had wanted and go see Cherep for a few days before getting back to it.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 9th of May, 1969 continued. Saratov, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Sonya? Is… is that you?"

The named thief twitched violently when she recognized the voice, a lacework of spider webbing cracks spreading up the water glass she had been in the process of taking a sip from. Putting the compromised glass down on her table gingerly, she turned slightly in her chair to behold her male genetic contributor. "…Mikhail."

This was why she hadn't visited Saratov in years, not any order he gave her or just plain disinterest. She had frankly never wanted to see her so-called biological father ever again.

Mikhail looked better than he had a few years ago, if she was forced to be honest. Less gnarled with age and more… distinguished with it instead. Obviously, something in his life had improved since the last time they met and from the look of tall, blonde, and shapely hanging off his arm… his quality of life wasn't the only change in the last few years.

Sonya still didn't like him. On top of a truly tiring long night, the fact she hadn't slept in nearly twenty hours, and the complications of managing a trailer truck that might just so happen to be
illegally acquired… that probably was not going to change any time soon.

"Do you two know each other?" Inquired the woman clinging to his arm hesitantly.

No, they merely knew each other's name *magically*.

Apparently, his type included the brainless variation of blondes. Which… after her bitch of a mother, was probably predictable.

Dismissing the girl who was probably only a few more years older than her, Sonya glanced one more time at Mikhail before returning to her interrupted lunch. *Either say what you want and leave, or just get lost.*

"Misha?"

"…Ilik, this is my… daughter."

Said 'daughter' sighed heavily, aggravated and more than a little pissed off he wasn't leaving like she told him to. She did *not* have the patience or desire to deal with him today.

The woman who flounced excitedly to the seat across the little table across the Soviet version of a deli she had stopped to eat at was treated to a glare that bounced off her bright grin.

"I didn't know Misha had a daughter! Oh, but you're lovely…"

"You seem to be laboring under the mistaken impression I give a damn about him at all. I don't." She informed the older woman bluntly, avoiding the grab she made for her hands sharply. *I was fostered out for a damn good reason and have no desire to have anything to do with him.*

"Sonya."

"Shut the hell up." Giving the man a sharp glare over one shoulder, turning back to the surprised looking and only now slightly uncertain looking girl who was probably her father's girlfriend or fiancée. *If you will excuse me.*

If they weren't leaving, she would.

Wrapping up the last of her *pirozhki* for later, she had already polished off the bowl of soup that came with the stuffed buns so the dishes were stacked together and the tray picked up to be handed back across the service counter.

Bubbly blonde and brainless darted around to plant herself in the thief's way, making a frankly ridiculous and overblown expression of pleading. *Lovely, won't you please just spare a few minutes? Misha met my sons, I really do just only want to get to know you a little.*

"No."

"Can I at least ask what you do these days?" She pressed on rather recklessly, but then again she was quite obviously civilian and had no idea what she was harassing. *Before you go, and I'll stop bothering you…*

Mikhail obviously thought she had nothing prepared for answering that question when just anyone off the street asked her. He took a step forward, gripping 'Ilik's' arm gently. *I don't think-

"…I'm an author and amateur historian." Sonya spoke over her genetic contributor again nearly gleefully. *When not researching for my next book, I work for an international trading company*
acquiring the things on our clients' request."

The older man's mouth shut with a snap, and his lady friend folded her hands under her chin and beamed at her. "We'll get out of your way, you're probably busy. Are you staying around here for long?"

"No. I'm currently on the clock."

"Oh... maybe we can see you again some time?"

Sonya huffed silently, cutting an irritated look at Mikhail. "Preferably not."

On her way out, she caught brainless blonde's voice over the mummer of other midday diners looking for a cheap lunch.

"Why does she hate you so?"

The thief in her had her immediately ducking down the way for the restrooms, mostly to see if she could hear what her biological father was saying out of sheer morbid curiosity. It would also be something of a good idea to see what he was explaining her absence with.

"Sonya's a headstrong girl, much like her mother." The voices were getting louder, so she effortlessly broke into the cleaning cupboard to remove herself from view if they happened to glance her way. "She's decided I was at fault for an incident in her childhood and hasn't given up her grudge ever since."

Copout. It also didn't address anything about why she was missing from his life or anything about how he contributed to it.

Feeling slightly more disgusted with the man, she left the tiny space and followed them out at a distance.

The young teen that had been about to open the door she hid behind gaped at her as she brushed past him without a backwards glance.

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(Saturday the 10th of May, 1969. Renato's Apartment, Mafia Land.)

Her hand raised to knock, Sonya blinked when the door she was standing in front of was opened before she could rap her knuckles on the reinforced wood.

The ruffled looking but still pretty brunette woman that had done said opening looked just as surprised as she felt to see her standing there behind this particular door.

She was maybe around her age?

Not much older, if at all. She was really pretty even after a recent shower and what was likely yesterday's clothes, more so than Sonya was without at least an hour put into dressing up.

"Who the hell are you supposed to be?"

Lowering her hand in bemusement, the thief merely blinked at her blankly.

Why, exactly, was this woman opening Renato's apartment door?
...beyond the obvious 'because she was leaving'. As far as the Russian was aware of via a small island's rumor mill, the hitman wasn't the type to bring home his girls for the evening. He was a more 'their place' kind of guy.

Did she follow him back or something?

"Oh... wait. I recognize you now." Giving her a once over, that somehow managed to be both sarcastically judging and dismissive at the same time, the other woman pursed her lips for a long moment. "You're Sinclair's Russian bitch the rumor mill twitters about."

Sonya cocked an eyebrow at her. "Am I supposed to know who you are?"

The ugly look she got for expressing her truthful ignorance of whoever the hell she was didn't improve her looks any. Might be a pretty lady when not being bitchy, but good lord could she sneer.

"Camilla, leaving so soon?" Drawled a shirtless, and hat-less, hitman as he sauntered into his living room. Obviously not expecting the Russian to be in his doorway, but the man adjusted to it pretty damn fast. "Little lady Sonya, I thought you were busy this month?"

"Tats said it looked sort of important. I could totally go back to what I was doing if you are..." What was a diplomatic word for 'in the middle of screwing somebody?' "Busy."

Renato glanced at his current fling, including her incredibly embarrassed expression at getting caught sneaking out, then gave the shorter blonde a wicked smirk. "I think I'm free. Unless you wanted something else, Camilla?"

"No." The girl stuck her nose in the air and swept past Sonya stiffly.

Nearly marching down the bland hallway, as if she wasn't the most interesting thing in it.

She just waited until the other woman was barely far enough down the hall to make eavesdropping an only somewhat lower risk. "Very pretty."

"I do have good taste in women." Insisted the hitman lazily, buffing his nails on his pants for lack of any other cloth.

"Not very smart. Or unforgivably green." She hadn't heard of the Russian's Flame type, otherwise she would've been markedly less bold in trying to insult her to her face.

Either that or she had little to no experience with Flame users of the Sky as a whole. Amusing in a way, but her little 'walk of shame' was more than enough comeuppance for Sonya.

"She's new here and tried for my head. Got a very different one, in the end."

Fantastic, Sonya was a bro.

The downsides of being friends with a womanizing pervert like Renato... she wasn't sure if she liked this development or not. Before she had been too young for him to be really raunchy towards unless someone he was flirting with was nearby, now apparently she was old enough to hear all about it.

"Yes, very... interesting. Look, was it really that important or can I go without feeling too bad?"

"Did you break off?" Asked the still half-naked Sun in a markedly more serious tone.

The thief shook her head, finally walking fully into the man's apartment if only for the sound-proofing Mafia Land apartments were known for and shutting the door behind her. "Between
contracts. Though I probably could have with this latest one. I just… didn't feel like it. Something else came up however, so I figured if I was going to delay my next one for a few days I might as well see what you needed on the way."

Renato gave an absent nod as he smoothed a hand along the underside of his jawline, turning on one heel for his bedroom while giving her an absent wave. "Let's grab lunch. I need to pry into older Soviet Flame users."

Well… she did need to eat. At least the company for this next lunch would be scores above the company she had at her last one.

"I heard that from Tats." Sonya called out, idly inspecting the room she was lingering in.

A few things had changed since she helped Shamal here.

There were the obviously the more fragile things he had probably put away so baby Mist brat wouldn't break them. What looked to be an antique glass and brass oil lamp and a little crystal figurine of some sun god holding his bronze sun icon collecting more than its fair share of dust on shelving for example. There was a crucifix hanging on the wall that had a little more care put into the upkeep of, laid out on his coffee table was the likely interrupted leftovers of him cleaning his pistols, and there still were no dishes left in the sink.

He was a very neat bachelor type. Whereas her brother's things just tended to explode in slow motion all over the area he lived in, sometimes even the places they were only temporarily occupying.

Sonya supposed with her hoarding habit of all things papery she really couldn't point fingers, but there it was.

The few standing lamps in the corners had a few more bullet holes behind them than she recalled, likely meaning he still had that habit of taking his frustrations out on innocent housewares. Renato had acquired a bullet press sometime in the last few years, which now occupied an entire corner, the boxes of casings and some tins of gunpowder sorted neatly around it. It and a rather expensive looking coffee maker that now dominated his kitchenette's counter where the only things she could see dust free… and there was a rather nice rug on the living room floor now.

No personal picture frames even still, but he was a hitman. Probably didn't want to risk anyone hunting down the people he had pictures of.

A few nice landscape paintings he apparently didn't care too much about, but those were still impersonal forest clearings and one mountain profile.

Actually, it was rather dusty in here. Maybe he just got back, or did he mostly live on the road as she did when working?

"Unfortunately, I am not going to be of much help right away."

"Why not?"

Toeing the rug with a boot tip curiosity, she wondered if he got it to cover bloodstains or damage, the Russian glanced back to the door of his room really quick and pulled up one end to peek underneath it. "I do not deal with older Soviet Flame users at all. Mostly the younger ones. I can find out, I have the position and leverage for them to be more or less truthful to me about it, but off the top of my head I only know of younger or inactive Soviet Clouds."

Renato had apparently come back into the room to talk to her as he got dressed. With shoes and
socks on his feet but a shirt in hand. "Sonya."

Dropping the rug, the thief gave him a small smirk. "I was curious."

"You could just ask."

"Would you tell me?" He hesitated a moment too long, one arm thrust into the sleeve tie gripped between his teeth as he looked at her funny. "I thought not. So, back to topic, I am actually somewhat interested in finding out myself."

He frowned thoughtfully as he puzzled over that, keeping a wary eye on her likely so she wouldn't get into anything else under his nose as he pulled the length of fabric from his mouth. "How difficult do you think getting the answer would be?"

"I still have not the vaguest idea why you would like to know." Sonya reminded him a bit pointedly.

"A bit of a thing for Nono." The hitman informed her easily enough, looping the tie around his neck and nimble fingers doing up his buttons in short order so he could tie it. "One of the Vongola Alliance Famiglias have this splinter branch that was wronged by someone I'm fairly certain was a Cloud that had some skills in stealth."

"Is it that greatly odd? Stealth Clouds?" She was a stealthy Cloud, and Cherep could sneak if he wanted.

On the rare occurrences when he wanted to.

Surely it wasn't that unusual…

"Yes." Renato shot down that hope in short order, not even looking at her as he snatched up his keys and wallet from a table near his bedroom door and went in search of his suit jacket and hat.

"Whoever it was, they weren't European. Our Clouds tend to be bruisers or overwhelming fighters in type, great for taking on a veritable army of men or knocking down a few walls. Stealth is seen more as a Mist skill, and with that rivalry between the two? I would've heard of another Cloud that behaved like you, if only from sheer coincidence."

"So… you're thinking Soviet instead?"

That… was really flimsy. There was more to the world than just Europe and the Soviet Union. Africa and the Orient maybe. Hell, even North and South America.

If they were taking all the active Soviet Cloud Flame users she personally knew into it, there were two to one for stealth. Well… excluding Cherep, because he was Polarized… that was still… half…

If the Khimki Cloud was going to be typical for those allowed to run feral at first, then Sonya's supposed beta Cloud nature really was the odd one out. Frankly, with how many Clouds there seemed to be all in Vongola Territory alone, the fact her nature wasn't copied even to the vaguest degree in them meant there was another thing she was missing, or her strange nature either had to do with bullheaded obstinacy or her Storm aspect.

Okay, fine. She was weird. Renato didn't have to rub it in.

"Is that it? That's a rather broad search parameter." Besides which, asking for what level of stealth any Clouds she heard about might have had would be a little… questionable.

"Preferably still alive or rumored to be alive. Retired or just gone missing. If they're in the Soviet
Union, then those that left in the last couple of months. I've got other methods to try, you're just one I think is the correct one." This time the hitman came out of his room entirely put together. Noticing her looking, the fop bushed down his lapels and gestured to himself. "Well?"

"I am kind of interested in why you put your shoes on before pulling on a shirt."

Renato glanced down distractedly, straightening the lay of his tie. "Long, really not that interesting, and stupid story."

Sonya crossed her arms under her chest and cocked an eyebrow at the man. "Now I really want to hear this."

"Your curiosity is going to be the death of you one of these days."

"Not today."

He apparently had nothing to argue against that ready, from the entirely disdainful glare he shot her as he shooed her out of his apartment. "Ever had to run down an alleyway barefoot before? In a big city?"

Sonya pursed her lips and thought of what issues that might incur as he locked his door. "Broken glass?"

"A fucking rusty nail. Right through the sole of my left foot."

Yes, but why would he be barefoot in such a situation in the first place?

Unless he was somewhere he shouldn't, and mostly or completely… buck… naked…

"Stop smirking." However, even his mouth twitched in what was probably a stillborn smirk of his own.

She pressed her lips together, but still couldn't completely remove the tilt to her lips. "Mm… no. Not happening. That is… ah, I should have guessed."

Renato rolled his eyes at her. "A long time ago, learned my lesson, and all that horseshit. Now, what do you feel like eating?"

"How old are you, exactly?" Ignoring his attempt to change the subject, the Russian tapped her lips with a finger. "Also, that was not a very long story. What are you not telling me?"

He gave her a stern look, shot a glance at the ceiling, and shook his head as he stalked off down the hall. "We're eating Italian if you've got no opinion on it."

"I do not, really. However, I have a story about my first attempt to jump higher than humanly possible?"

Pausing mid-stride, the Italian Sun deliberated a moment before finally shrugging and heaving an exasperated sigh at her. "I may or may not have shagged some gang leader's girl and was found in bed with her. Escaping the city when every two-bit thug that answered to him was after me and limping rather badly was an experience I don't particularly want to have again."

Hmm… that was probably the end of it. Obviously, Renato escaped his situation. He was standing in front of her after all. Might have been his first incident realizing that no, Sun Flames couldn't quite heal everything and there were some wounds you didn't want healed instantly.
"I got stuck on our roof."

Renato looked about as surprised as his blurted bark of laughter sounded. Whipping his head around, one hand holding his ever-present fedora safely secure in the motion, he eyed her expectantly. "Really?"

Sonya nodded regretfully. "It took about half an hour for my foster mother to realize my brother was laughing at me and that I was positioned oddly from where he was looking before she came out to help me get down. I figured out I could jump higher than a story or two, but at the time I hadn't given a thought to the landing…"

The hitman snickered, glanced at her again, and laughed some more as they descended a staircase. She didn't help him when she added, "…it was very cold half hour wait while being laughed at."

He knew her when she was around that age, he could probably picture the incident pretty well even if he didn't know what her childhood home looked like yet. He did stop snickering, about the time they reached street level and were about to leave his apartment building.

"I once ended up under the bed of an adulterer and her lover while waiting to kill her husband." Renato offered next, a little hesitantly. He was fiddling more with his hat than looking at her.

Sonya considered it. "I once ended up dodging around an old married couple in the middle of an argument trying to rob their study, while we were all in it."

The hitman shot her a smirk. "Oh… we're going to have fun with this."

(Sunday the 11th of May, 1969. Dresden, German Democratic Republic.)

Although perfectly aware crashing in the middle of a stunt show and totaling his bike meant he wouldn't be doing anymore shows for a while, Cherep was nonetheless a bit depressed when Master Liam filled in his usual slot with Faris' fire-breathing act.

The undying stuntman wasn't entirely done with this circus, the Großes Volksfest held a lot of fond memories for him and his place here was very comfortable, but he was pretty sure after another few years he would be breaking away. Either going solo or just finding a bigger operation to join that covered more ground than this one.

He wouldn't be leaving until Master Liam had the extra hands to afford it, not like how his sister ditched the moment it became both too hard for her to continue and after she had gotten more than thoroughly bored with how 'slow' they were.

That all being the case, then he really had to make sure this coming up world tour of stunt acts would be enough to see him on his way. Cherep could afford to replace Betsy as it was, not quite with something of the make and model she had been but then he also had his little sister chipping more than a bit in on that one.

Something second-hand?

Probably would be something in desperate need of a tune up, and maybe some elbow grease, but it would save him a bit of money depending on what repairs would be needed.
He didn't mind that. Not even if his next bike, he was contemplating naming his next one Cleo, needed significant rebuilding before he felt confident enough to do something reckless with it. It would just mean he would know it's limits and capabilities very well.

The entirely civilian Cloud Flame user just could, and would, use his unexpectedly free time to devise more stunts. He couldn't get away with testing them out just yet, any number of people both in the know about his undying skills and not would yell at him.

The stuntman tapped an open notebook full of mathematical equations on vectors, speed and weight calculations, ramp measurements, and the formulas for lift with a heavy non-aerodynamic object with a pencil. It was already half full of stuff he had both tried out and only dreamed were possible, but the thing about show business was that any act had to evolve and develop more and more as time went on.

His thoughts were wandering again.

With a heavy sigh, the former Czech runaway banged his forehead on the wooden shipping crate doubling duty as a writing desk.

Great, he was drawing a blank.

Cherep mournfully stared at the blank page opened for him to write on, maybe possibly pouting at the damn thing as it mocked him with its clean and unmarred paper.

Glancing around at the empty tent, which really should be housing his fellow other mechanics but a fairly nauseating repeated malfunction with the tilt-a-whirl had called the other two 'day' mechanics out, the stuntman ripped the mockingly blank page out of his notebook and set it a-Flame.

Watching it burn under his purple Flames gleefully, he totally did not jump when someone cleared their throat.

"I came all the way out here because I was worried." Sonya remarked blandly from a tent corner, eyeing the paper crumbling into ash in his hands after what was probably a third or fourth glance over of his entire self to see if there were any lingering injuries. She could be a worrywart like that. "I see that I should not have bothered if you are fine enough to be messing around."

He tossed the ball of Cloud Flamed paper over his shoulder. "Sonya! Just lovely to see you, little sister! I have no idea what you mean."

Looking off in the direction he had thrown his incriminating evidence in, his little sister gave him a fairly odd look. "Would that not burn this down?"

"It's still my Flames. And I say it won't." Of course, just after claiming that he realized that pretty much blew his attempts at playing innocent out of the water. Not that it was really any good of an act, but he had appearances to maintain. "So! You came to visit me… fantastic. Let's go."

"Go where?" Demanded the newly arrived thief, planting her hands on her hips and not missing his wince when he straightened up too quickly. "I just got here."

He had to keep that in mind, both sore ribs and shoulder that weren't technically injured and her state of mind. Travel-worn Sonya was not as much fun as rested-Sonya, also she was a lot more snappish right after being forced to deal with other travelers in enclosed spaces, but he just really appreciated that she had shown up at all.

It had been a while, he wasn't going to waste this opportunity letting her sneak off to get Crina
drunker than a skunk or chatting up Jaq for general news instead of spend time with him.

"Anywhere, really. I'm stuck, so a break to let my creative process mature on their own sounds like a plan."

The Storm-Cloud looked at him dubiously, and there may or may not have been a mutter of 'creative process festering, maybe', but after she stuck her hands in her pockets and hunched her shoulders she did nod. "I am going to regret this later… but there's a lot of parks in this city. And theaters. We could find something to do in one of them. But…"

"Well… don't leave me on tether hooks." Cherep complained good-naturedly as she drew out the pause for longer than anything really deserved.

All semi-decent options, but ones they've done before. It would just be in a new place, and that just made it less interesting after the first few times they could rubberneck around.

"…also, being a port city and all… I need to learn how to officially drive a big rig." Continued his fellow Cloud slowly. "May or may not have done it a couple times, but the license and actual training course would be nice."

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask 'why', 'when', and 'how many things did you run over', but the stuntman reigned in the impulse. While it was entirely Sonya to do something practical and technical in her free time… he had to admit it was a good idea.

Even a useful one. Not only for while he was still with the Großes Volksfest and helping with the getting of things from point A to point B, but also after when he was on his own.

A trailer of decent size could even be used as a sort of mobile garage shop, one big enough and he might be able to live out of one after he left established wandering setups like the Russian Traveling Circuses for his own thing.

Transportable living… in a box. Self-contained, would move where he wanted…

He could then go where he wanted to and live how he liked, without needing to deal with landlords or flat mates, or the paperwork or even the fact that most homes would require him to return to one set place in order to unwind.

Cherep was weirdly in love with the whole idea for it only have been mentioned as a thing to do in some spare time. "Sure. Sounds fun."

"Are you not working?" She peered at him in a puzzled manner, then pointedly glanced around the empty tent.

"I'm on 'light duty'." Claimed the Cloud Flame stuntman absently, slapping his notebook closed and tossing the pencil on the crate so one of the other mechanics could use it to make note of anything they needed picked up from a city's industrial sector. It mostly got use writing dirty jokes to trade off in-between service calls honestly. "Pretty sure that A, we're going to need new parts for a total overhaul of a ride that keeps breaking down and B, Master Liam would not mind me learning to drive a truck during operating hours if that means I can also sub in for the drivers on long hauls between more remote cities."

"Well, at least someone has sense."

"I do too have sense." Sniffing at her with faux-insulted dignity, he waved his notebook at his little sister. "Let me go get permission from him so someone knows where I am and drop this off."
"What is that?" She spared another look to where he had tossed a ball of Flaming paper, then back at him skeptically. "Aside a convenient target for your frustrations."

"I'm trying to think up new things to do with my act." It wouldn't hurt to be honest, and she could be very creative when she felt like it.

Likely wouldn't feel like it when it came to creative ways to potentially hurt himself, but he could dream.

"What, like jumping through hoops of fire?"

"That's…" Cherep couldn't help it, he laughed at her. Then some more at her faintly insulted expression. "…that's pretty tame. Is that the best you can come up with?"

Nettled, she scowled as she followed him out of the tent. "Well… hoops that you have to light mid-jump then?"

Much better. "Not bad, is that it?"

"Can you be upside down while doing so?"

"…possibly." Actually… could he?

Hmm…

Sonya carried on, since she was behind him she couldn't tell if he was thinking or not and when to stop giving him 'ideas'. "Make the hoops move would add in a matter of timing. If you could figure out to set them off at different speeds and times to align up only once perfectly…"

Coming to a sudden halt, the stuntman patted down his pockets and muttered something not entirely nice as he realized he had nothing to write with. Spinning on a heel, which made his sister take a step back and regard him suspiciously, he lunged for her pockets. He was not entirely happy when she easily dodged him with a quick side-step.

"Come on, I know you have something to write with."

She obediently dug out a fountain pen out of a pocket, a questionably fancy one engraved with initials not her own but he didn't really care if she stole it or not from somewhere and snatched it when she pitched it at his head. "Really?"

Taking a moment to jot down the suggestion that he was totally going to use, while inching closer to her by tiny increments, Cherep stole her pen by tucking it behind an ear instead of returning it. Then wrapped his arms around her own, mostly so she couldn't steal it back.

Also, partially because he was that happy to see her again.

"You love me, Sonya." Wrenching her bodily around was just for fun, honestly. "I loove you…"

The mutter that resulted from the very disgruntled thief was probably something any normal mother would've rinsed her mouth out with soap for, but also probably something she learned from listening to Lisa.

Sonya wasn't pushing him away, prying his arms off her, or just being an unmanageable armful by trying to wiggle free. Which meant that careful distance she had held herself away from him until he
sprung this on her was deliberate.

"I'm fine. I swear. Some lingering pulled muscles, and since it's not damaged or missing just tender they twinge a bit, but I am fine." Cherep muttered into her hair, only loud enough for her to hear and any of the passing by circus workers would dismiss as nonsense.

If there was nothing missing, or in need of replacement, his Cloud Flames tended to ignore it. Same with bruises or any unnatural additions like his molar fillings. Dentists still sucked major ass when they couldn't be convinced to leave certain cavities alone.

She snorted against his forearm, which… was she running a temperature or something?

Her body temperature was noticeably higher than usual now that he was paying more attention.

"We still do not entirely understand what you are doing. I just would… like… to be careful until we do."

Yeah… but until he found a doctor or scientist slash research person he liked, which after his childhood misadventures was just a whole lot of no to him, that wasn't going to happen.

At least that got her to twist out of his hold, indefinitely more gently that she would've had he not recently hurt himself.

Her utterly flat expression when he plastered the back of one hand against her forehead was just hilarious, even if he had already known she was running a little hot. "Are you sick or something?"

"I hope not. There was a man seated next to me on the plane I am certain had something nasty. He was coughing a lot." Batting his hand away, finally none to gently which at least meant he was reassuring her somewhat, Sonya checked the underside of her throat instead of copying his actions. "My… red side, should have taken care of it."

Cherep's mental processes paused, which made him blink, as tried to adjust to that idea.

Storm Flame users could prevent themselves from getting sick?

Totally unfair. He could hope Tatiana would find some way to copy or adapt that for other Flame types, but until the nurse green-lighted a method he was a little charry of actually attempting to intentionally screw around with his own internal workings.

The stuntman had enough going on there as it was, knocking something askew would be all sorts of bad.

Although, he had never been sick for very long himself. Maybe his Flames did do something in response to him being ill. He had to pay more attention the next time he got a cough or the flu.

If he didn't have to figure out how to do some emergency ill-thief corralling, because Sonya was a weird sick person, then they should hurry up. He didn't know how long she would be sticking around, at least a day if she kept to her usual wandering habits but maybe more depending, and he wanted to get in his time with her before she headed back to whatever she was up to.

Rolling up his notebook, one with the spiraled bit of wire holding it all together so it took to being rolled up fairly well, Cherep pointed it like a sword in the direction of the visitors' entrance to the fairgrounds. "Let's go then."

"You still need to inquire with Master Liam if you can, and I would like to at least see Crina first."
Sonya popped his enthusiastic bubble ruthlessly with her pointed logic and general all-around practicality. "Also, the training course I found for this will not start for another day."

Err... shit. "How long are you sticking around for?"

"...if I can get us both in the class, however long it will take." She paused and glanced at her left wrist where there pointedly wasn't a watch. "Or at least until the end of the month. I have somewhere to be then. If I cannot, then two or three days."

More than just a surprise visit. Awesome. "You're not... putting anything off, are you?"

Cherep was her favorite distraction when it came to things she disliked contemplating. Maybe he shared some of that attention with his nephew now, but he was still first.

His little sister had no immediate tells, or at least she could keep a straight face even when anyone normal would've cracked some kind of expression. However, in public places like this where she would actually try to be non-expressive her hands would show what she kept off her face.

Smoothing the palms of both hands down her thighs was pretty much her equivalent to a normal person's nervous cough.

"You are, aren't you?"

"I should really call Galina." Sonya admitted sourly. "I have been putting it off, because I really do not want to know. And, if I do not know, I cannot stress over it. Or get as frustrated as her or mad at the situation in general."

Cherep eyed her flat expression.

Seems he wasn't the only one feeling like they were finished someplace. Now, was that a 'Cloud' thing or just a 'them' kind of thing?

They were rather wandering individuals at heart, never really happy with being bound to someone else's march instead of their own. "Met back up here in an hour or two?"

Tilting her head back to eye the sky, his little sister sighed softly. "Fine. I should go call Tats to warn Galina I will call her."

"If you're not here, I'll find the nearest phone box." Cherep promised cheerfully, grinning widely at her entirely disgusted look for that comment.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 11th of May, 1969 continued. Dresden, German Democratic Republic.)

Galina trailed off when she realized Sonya had been completely silent for maybe a touch too long. As a Lightning, she didn't tend to miss much at all and had probably picked up on the thief's dangerously waning patience. Probably through some divine bureaucrat skill she inherited to go along with her ninja office skills.

"...Galina." The Storm-Cloud found herself all but purring lowly. "Would the moron in question be available at this moment?"

There was a lengthy pause, more so than her aide really required to process some of her stranger requests. "He's... not here. I could fetch him?"
"Put Usov on the phone while you do so." Waiting a moment for the shuffling of happenings to take place in the far-off Moscow office, Sonya started talking before the Mist could even greet her. "I will personally guide you through a break-in of both a KGB headquarters and another law enforcement agency of your choice. Give that asshole more than enough nightmares to make him ineffectual for the duration of the Triads visiting while I am not there. Regardless of what he tries to do or not."

"You still owe me from breaking Dmitriy out of jail." The ever-diligent Mist remarked happily from the other end, from the sounds of creaking leather and dull thumps of something hitting wood probably sprawling out on the Rain's chair and desk. It wasn't like she cared if he did, it wasn't her office. "But, I supposed, I will agree to those terms. I have a rather long list of things I would like to know you could help with."

"Delighted to hear it." She really had to do something nice for the kid.

He, along with Galina and Andrei, had been the saving graces of her being forced to cover Dmitriy's work while the ass dealt with his prison term. They were interesting, and competent, enough for her not to mind being required to interact with them more than she would want to on a normal basis.

Sonya would clue the kid into Renato's request. Hunting down former or prior Soviet Flame users might sound challenging enough for him to both cover the leg work she may or may not be able to do from an office and make independent inquires she wouldn't think of.

Usov could maybe then embellish on his network of Misty contacts he was spinning from within his corner of the Zolotov Flame training regime through other syndicates that wouldn't have to go through the thieves' clan for their unmanageably fresh users pouring in.

The brat already pretty much now controlled the information that got out about the Zolotov Flame users and was working on hiding their real numbers to those Sonya didn't want to know about them. Andrei was pitching in with him, the Sun was making markedly steady progress getting all the other types used to looking at him for orders now that the branches were co-opting each other's Flames for their own investigations and experiments.

Galina took on the things the both of them were either too young or too green to handle yet, making the three of them very nice stand-ins for when Sonya left them to it. She'd be stealing the Lightning when she left Dmitriy his office again, but then the Rain should fill in her cracks even better than the brunette could now.

Hence why Gedeon's idea of putting himself forward as both the leader and expert wasn't going to work.

Out of seven types of Dying Will Flames of the Sky, five of which were the only ones being trained up, Andrei's Suns and Usov's Mists paired with Galina's Lightnings represented the vast majority that had a pretty good idea of what went on at Sonya's level.

That… Rain girl might make an upset before things finalized again from recent shifts, but her section was the Suns' main focus at the current date. The Storms, who had finally lost Mikhail as their lead shortly before the start of the month, would be the only neutral block that might be swayed to either side.

Mikhail's hand-picked successor was another misogynist like he was, but Sonya was privately betting Galina was going to ruthlessly stamp that out of the brat before long. Probably before Dmitriy even got to his first parole hearing.

Also, the thief technically counted as a Storm. She wasn't the one giving orders, because she was
temporary and Dmitriy would have to do it when he got out so to save on confusion when the time came she kept out of the way. However, she was female and a Storm and the girl half of that section might just flock to her side if pressed for that alone.

The Flame trainees at least understood that Andrei was the one giving day-to-day marching orders for whichever reason they chose to believe. Gedeon, as that guy that hung around and talked to only the eldest if he had to at all, would be still regarded as a kind of outsider.

Bunch of green ass kids, wary of one loudmouth Sun strutting about?

Fong would have no trouble seeing through that, hell… Shamal wouldn't be fooled.

Either she helped the charade along somehow, which she wasn't going to do for various reasons which boiled down to 'didn't care to', or foiled it so Galina would have to be the one to do it.

Sonya was not feeling generous right about now. She also wasn't feeling like chit chat, which the Mist on the other end seemed to know somehow, so she was understandably slightly confused when a brief mummer of talking happened and Usov cheerfully agreed to something.

"…erm Bazanova?"

"Scruffy."

"Do you know how weird it is to hear English after months and weeks of just Russian?" The man responded in the same language, sounding half exasperated and half concerned. "Galina left something out of her report."

"Ho?" …damn it, she was really spending way too much time with Renato. "Do tell."

"Gedeon hit her." Peter announced with all the subtlety of a freight train for the force the words hit her. "I mean backhanded her across the face. Miss Galina insists she asked for it, and her Lightning Flames kept her from being bruised or harmed, but that's not something I thought you would let slide by as easily. Also, I don't like him."

"...really." She was going to kill him. By increments, maybe, but fuck that asshole if he thought hitting her Lightning was something he could get away with. No one abused her people and got away with it.

*Could* she get away with that?

…maybe not. However, that didn't mean she couldn't make his life hell while she waited for Valera to grow up.

She knew just the way to do it, too.

However, Scruffy wasn't going on with any grievances he had with the vor. It was, in fact, suspiciously silent on the other end of the line. "Peter. Give Gedeon the phone. Please."

There was another beat of total silence, and the she caught the faint sounds of the Sun's 'It's for you' and a spate of childish laughter she was fairly certain was Usov's.

"What?"

"Listen and listen well." Biting back the 'you inbred shit stain' that probably wasn't diplomatic right now. "You ever hit another of my people, I will break every bone in your body and let you heal, then
break them all over again until you end up a pile of human mush. As a matter of fact, that's what we're going to do the very moment I get back."

"You can't-

"Oh, I can. You are a Sun, and Suns heal. We will just be figuring out exactly how much damage you can sustain and still keep going. Something any vor should know about themselves." Sonya was frankly tired of him. Of him, his attitude, and his general all around unhelpful behavior. If only to keep him away, he was going to learn to fear her very shadow. "As far as I am aware, you are to be in the middle of assembling a Flame using team from the trainees. Exactly how do you figure you will have the time for hobnobbing with the Triad groups?"

Gedeon was getting rather annoyed, from the sounds of things. "I told-"

"No, let me stop you there. You. Were. Told. To do this by yourself." She really should've foreseen that.

The Sun was high enough he was probably well used to pawning off the less interesting duties and jobs to others, and all the Flame trainees were too young and still unsure of themselves to buck anything he told them.

"The next words out of your mouth had better be 'to meet me' somewhere."

There was a suspicious amount of silence going on.

"Gedeon. For the last fucking time. BUILD THE TEAM YOURSELF. That means training them, actually dealing with them, and ensuring they can work together. That also means with YOU as well. You shouldn't have the time to be fucking up anything else, why you thought so is beyond me."

Why the hell was she doing all this anyways?

He probably wasn't going to be in power for long, Valera would likely not even wait until he came of age to do some forceful rearrangements of local criminal powers.

Poor Arseniy, really. Lisa would probably just help her son. Fuck, she'd help at this rate honestly. A decade was just long enough for Shamal to grow up, so she was entirely intent on not spending that much time in Moscow for as much time.

Screw him, screw his father, and screw the Zolotovs. If it hadn't been Arseniy that asked her…

"When I get back," Sonya continued in a markedly even tone, "I will be bringing another Inverted Sun along. I had thought you would like to get his opinion on how his Flames help and hinder his lifestyle as a hitman, but at this current point in time I think he might just put a bullet through your head instead of actually talk to you."

That was a real worry, too. Renato was enough of a gentleman he could be reliably counted on to interfere in any harassment a girl got when he was nearby. Part of the reason why, although he was a known womanizer of the highest degree, the women on Mafia Land didn't actually mind his shameless flirting habits and him sleeping around with them so much.

What would the hitman do if he heard the other Sun had backhanded someone like Galina, or even if it happened in front of him?

The Lightning was his type, frankly. Curvy, frightfully competent, and pretty. Bonus, Soviet Flame user.
Sonya distractedly glanced down at her small bust line and stifled the sigh that wanted to escape. Kind of depressing in a way when she kept getting overlooked in the middle of conversations with him for someone with a bigger rack but then again, she had known she would have a ‘willowier’ body type since she was five.

Having known exactly what his type was since she was about thirteen, she held no expectations that she would fit them ever.

…actually, thinking back to that lunch they just had, he hadn't gotten waylaid by the barista's coy attempts to flirt with him. She had ignored the girl, as per usual when someone decided to try to get the Italian's attention, but Renato had kept talking to her about similar misadventures in their separate fields instead of flirt back with the serving girl.

Maybe she just caught him at a good time?

"Furthermore, you can't tell me what to do." Gedeon continued on in her ear.

…whoops. She had missed everything he said while thinking on her friend. "You are mistaking me for someone that gives a fuck what you think. Since you have decided to squander both your own and my time, I am going to end this all one way or another. Either you shape up, get off your ass, and actually become something of an expert without talking out of your ass… or I give up on anything that has to do with you for the rest of your pitiable existence."

"…do you really think you can get away with talking to me like that?"

"Do you really think you can stop me?"

Sonya then hung up, more than finished with his entire situation in multiple ways.

God fucking damn it all, but she hated the mind-set the larger bulk of the world was stuck in.

What was so hard with refraining from being dicks to others for being slightly different?

People were assholes all the damn time, herself included, there really wasn't any reason for there to be more labels and traits to hate each other with.

Cherep, who had fulfilled his promise to come looking for her if she took too long, had one look at her face and opened his mouth. "What do you think I would look like with piercings?"

"More girly than you usually are." Sonya answered automatically, then gave him a strange look. He was missing his 'Skull' makeup, so his features weren't quite as delicate seeming as they could be under the purple tinted face paint.

"…you would make a prettier woman than I do. This is entirely unfair."

What. The. Fuck. Was wrong with her?

That had never bothered her before. He had made a better-looking girl than she had back when they first met and she hadn't cared a whit then.

"Well… not quite what I was going for, but okay." Giving her another once over, the stuntman casually slung an arm around her shoulders and gave her a one-armed hug. "Wanna talk about it?"

"I do not even know what 'this' is." Sonya bitterly admitted to his chest, feeling in general just frustrated and unhappy all over the place and the non-stifling hug was actually rather nice for once.
This wasn't usual for her, actually. Maybe it was just everything all together?

Getting back momentarily to what she had been missing while stuck in a Moscow office dealing with vory that thought they knew better than she did about the whole Flame phenomena, visiting her brother for once, and yet being forced to deal with more issues back in Russia even still?

"I do not feel particularly feminine." She started with what little she did know on her current feelings. "I am fine with that, I am who I am and that is nothing I will ever feel ashamed of. But then my gender is held against me with things back in Moscow, and then I get treated differently because I am female. I can ignore it, even if I dislike it, but sometimes..."

"Fair enough." Offered the Inverted Cloud as they started wandering somewhere. "Then… do you want to feel more girly than you are, or is that just a thing to hate on today?"

The Storm-Cloud sighed, and finally pulled away from him slightly. "I will get back to you on that if it lasts."

Shrugging, the stuntman pointed a way to their left as the next direction to wander in. Well used to following his lead in unfamiliar places, she obediently turned. "Anything else?"

"…I do not want to go back to Moscow." Seriously, she didn't. Not even with Shamal, which was a much-appreciated bonus when she had to in a few weeks.

Less than that, actually. Thirteen days until the first of July, and she was to be in Italy then.

"I really do not see the point."

"Erm… not even for Arseniy and Lisa? And Valera?"

"He is another one of us. My side, even." The thief had snuck him a largish chunk of un-faceted white sapphire when Lisa's back was turned, and it did spark with violet lights when she took away his toy for a moment. "And raised smack dab in the middle of their territory? Arseniy takes him on patrols, I do not even think he consciously realizes what they are, to calm him down for nap time or for the night."

Cherep came to a sudden halt, and with his arm across her shoulders that pulled her to a stop as well. "Oh… well… huh."

"So… eventually, in a decade or so, there likely won't be a clan anymore."

If the school was set up and established in time, the Flame training section she was shaping would head there and rally around it instead. Which made her at least willing to continue to slog through the problems and issues getting it outfitted and equipped correctly to last that long, because it would last.

The clan, on the other hand… she was starting to doubt Gedeon would keep it all together for Valera to take over whole. He wasn't lazy, no Sun could physically be lazy, but ineffectual was a good term. There, but not particularly involved much. Sidelined, ill-trained, arrogant.

"Also, eventually, you will not need to fear your prior dealings with them will come back to haunt you. He will likely take care of it."

"Well… that's a… thing." Managed the stuntman, violet eyes glancing up at the sky as a smirk pulled at his lips. "Damn though. Are you catnip for those like us or something?"

Sonya elbowed him in the ribs, wincing as she realized she had forgotten he had recently cheated
death and they seemed to be still sore.

Cherep didn't actually seem to mind, other than the wheezing laugh she made him choke on. Another squeeze, and he let her go to rub his abused side. "O…okay. Fine. Not catnip."

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 11th of May, 1969 continued. Dresden, German Democratic Republic.)

While waiting for Cherep to get his things together for their class on how to drive big trucks, Sonya wandered to Crina's tent to at least say hi or something.

She came to a sudden halt right in front of the old gypsy woman the moment she got a good look at her, ignoring the Chinese apprentice she had been religiously avoiding for some time.

There was something seriously wrong with her old master of mysticism. Aside the fact she was old, and creaky, the Romanian native had lost some weight she couldn't afford and was almost slumped on her tarot card table.

"Crina?"

"You better have a bottle of booze with you, girl." Again flat out ignoring the hesitant motions of the young man hovering at her elbow, the old woman pried the cork out of the bottle of rum and downed a good swig. "Fuck, but I've missed you."

"Me or the alcohol?"

"Your alcohol, obviously." Sniffing, the old bat waved off the now highly conflicted looking man and made a shooing motion for him to leave the tent. "Girl talk. Go stalk her brother or whatever else you were sent here to do."

Nothing was wrong with her mind, at least… but the Russian was sure they were not about to talk about men and sex like Tatiana had her assume 'girl talk' covered.

"Liver cancer." Crina announced unceremoniously once they were left alone. "Drinking like I do, hell like you do, takes a toll. One I'm paying now, but I got myself into this so…"

'Should you be drinking then' was probably the obvious question, but it didn't seem as if the older woman cared much if she should or not. She was hitting the bottle pretty hard.

"Are you going to stay with the circus until-" Sonya couldn't even say it.

She was still jarred by the realization the old bat was going to die. Not just eventually either, it was a more 'sooner than later' from the looks of things. Even just talking to her was taking a visible toll on the gypsy woman's strength.

"Yes. I have nothing else." Eyeing her once-apprentice, that was only favored for illicit booze apparently, she took another swig of the rum. "I never had a daughter, you're sure as fuck not the one I never had. But you stuck around, and I appreciate that."

She kept her mouth shut, staring at the older woman blankly.

"First experience with death?" Asked Crina after a long moment of contemplation.

"No, but…"
"First one you gave a damn about."

"…pretty much."

The other woman nodded sagely, a rather morbid picture of a wise woman with the bottle in hand and her rail thin appearance. "I take it most of the death you've seen is the way your type likes to go, the same way you all came in. Bloody and screaming. Be happy you don't have to be here and watch me die by inches, then."

"…what if I got you some help? A doctor? I-"

"Sonya. I'm old. Let me die with what dignity I have left." Crina cracked a truly bitterly amused smile at her. "I might even go in my sleep as I want. Would really put it to the assholes that tried to kill me through two wars and the upheavals that came afterwards."

"I am probably not going to visit again." The thief wasn't into torturing herself, and frankly she would rather keep the old woman in mind as she had been.

Not a wasted away version as morbid as this.

"I figured that."

She was going to punch Cherep for not telling her.

"I asked your brother not to tell you." Crina informed her shortly, digging around in a box set neatly at her elbow, when her glare at the tent flaps became apparently noticeable. "I wanted to do that myself."

She still didn't appreciate being blindsided like this.

"Here." Sliding a pack of cards too big to be normal playing cards but too small to be the pack of tarot cards she used in her business across the table, the frail gypsy sagged against her chair. "I want you to have that. My first deck, I got it from my mother and so on so forth. I don't want to know when you'll ever use it, or for what."

Sonya picked them up absently. "I… am going. Then."

"Don't join me too quickly, girl."
(Sunday the 11th of May, 1969. Dresden, German Democratic Republic.)

Peizhi was lying in wait for Sonya to leave Crina's side for the last time, looking impressively blanked-faced as he stood with Cherep a polite enough distance away.

"I've already talked and have dealt with the Wo Hop To Triad group, and the Luen Kung Lok is in the process of getting what they want." Sonya started impassively in Chinese, even if that earned her an exasperated look for speaking in a language the stuntman didn't yet know.

"Ah… I am from neither. I belong to the Long Triad, miss Sonya."

The thief studied him for a long moment while tucking a pack of ancient painted cards into a pocket, and his mildly expectant expression. "The ones that originally hired me first, I take it."

It had to be them or the Luen Group. The Triad she originally thought Fong had belonged to, before she double checked that and learned differently.

"The same." The man claimed with a small nod. "I would like a word."

"Of course you do." She glanced back at Crina's tent, then back at the man. "I will hear you out. If you stay with Crina and keep her as comfortable as possible until she dies."

Peizhi frowned at her in disapproval that she didn't remotely care about. "I have already been waiting to speak with you for a few months now."

"And if you do not agree, you will wait longer. I had no reason to speak with you, I still don't… unless you agree."

Folding his arms together tightly, which was probably the limit of all the disapproval the man would show towards her, the Chinese man drew out the pause before giving her a tight little smile. "I will ask in return that you instead speak with my superiors."

"Fine, whatever. Just ensure she's not greatly bothered for her last few days, however long that takes." The old woman didn't look all that good, Sonya bitterly regretted not visiting more but that wasn't something she could've changed even if she had known this was going to happen. "Then I will speak with whomever you wish."

Peizhi gave her a half-bow, stalking past the Cloud siblings to return to the dying gypsy woman.

"Finally bit the bullet?" Asked her brother in a tone that was both part amusedly and part somber, stuffing his hands into his pockets as she fell in step with him. "We weren't able to finesse out what he was here for, other than the fact it was you he was after."

"He will be sticking around at least for a little while longer, sorry." Sonya took the opportunity to stop and punch her brother hard in the left arm. "Asshole."

Cherep flinched, rubbing at the bruise she probably left behind. She'd feel guilty about that… later. "She asked me not to. I may not like the old bat, but…"
"I know." He was an inherently nice person, respecting someone's dying wish was a given. It was something she didn't know if she could say about herself. "I… will stick with passing Jaq my gifts to her until…"

Sonya still couldn't say it.

She wanted to say Crina was a fucking bitch for dying now, but it was her right to refuse medical aid for a meager few more days… or a truly painful year or two. It didn't magically make her any happier someone she knew was dying, especially not in a painful way such as cancer, but… if this was how the old woman wanted to go the thief would respect that.

Not like it but respect it.

Throwing an arm over her shoulder, apparently just for the excuse to give her another of his weirdly non-stifling hugs, the stuntman gestured to where the visitors' entrance to the fairgrounds was. "Not to make light of the situation or anything, but she's not dead yet and we've things to do. Besides, you know Crina would just snark at you for dwelling on morbid shit when you've things to get done."

Then kick Sonya's ass out of the tent with a demand to go pick her up some more booze, which really had been the old woman's favorite way to get the thief out and about when she wanted the limited space they had to herself.

Snorting softly, she shrugged off the arm that was really too warm to be under in the middle of a summer day and started walking again. "I suppose so."

"So…" Jogging lightly until he was even with her again, her brother poked her in the arm. "You've been weirdly accepting of hugs lately. Is there a story behind that?"

"You have been weirdly non-crushing with hugs lately." Slapping the finger away, Sonya gifted him with a flat look. "Is there something I should know?"

Cherep shrugged unhelpfully. "It just seems as if you've had a couple really bad days and needed a hug."

"Then I just needed a hug because I had a couple really bad days." She paused, then lightly tapped his ribs with her elbow. "Thanks, Cherep."

"Anytime, little sister." His smirk was something she itched to wipe off somehow. "I'm always up for hugs."

(Thursday the 22nd of May, 1969. Dresden, German Democratic Republic.)

Since the Grobes Volksfest was leaving the stuntman behind for a few weeks, Cherep ended up bunking with Sonya in her hotel room for the duration of their driving classes. Neither sibling seemed to mind overly much, Sonya just because she had bitterly missed her brother and him for whichever reason he had.

Maybe because she had upgraded the suite she rented to one with separate bedrooms and a full bath. She remembered full well what the usual living conditions the circus could normally scrounge up for the workers, and had no problem splurging a bit of her earnings this month on a few weeks of better than decent living for him.
Her fellow Cloud took the opportunity to, as per usual, sprawl out in more way than one. Which, oddly, didn't annoy her as much as she thought it might from previous times they shared a living space.

Even when she ended up having to step over crated parts he was taking advantage of a longer stay to order special for the circus left near the hallway door. Not repeatedly skirting around a lonely toolbox which he apparently outright owned set next to the bedroom door he claimed, which apparently held his plans for various ramps or implements for his stunt work so it ended up moved, opened, and rummaged through a few times.

Even when she had to step over himself, especially when he decided to take a nap or fell asleep in strange places.

Sonya supposed it was because she still had her space that wasn't so cluttered, and her brother had learned to corral his stuff to specific side instead of all over the place, was why she wasn't as bothered.

She used to be bothered by it if ever so slightly, and it was interesting to think how the both of them had changed slightly since they had split up. The thief hadn't thought she gained more patience, and something had to have happened to make him more considerate for those sharing his space.

A weirdly cozy summer night, about halfway through their driving classes, Cherep absently repeated a question to her. "…do you really think I would look more girly with piercings?"

"I think," she started cautiously, since this seemed to be something he was debating on doing rather heavily, "that Skull will look more… punk rock with piercings, but Cherep would just look more effeminate. That is just earrings, mind you."

He gave her a weird eyeing, upside down from where he had half sprawled on a couch and half on the coffee table. "…huh."

"I have a question." Sonya offered delicately after a beat, turning from the little crappy table provided that she had taken to study a German version of a trucker's handbook. "Why do you not get some tattoos?"

Her brother pulled an unhappy face at her, finally lifting his upper back off the wood he claimed was 'cooler' in order to sit up and face her. "…eh. It's a criminal thing, isn't it?"

"While yes, it is more associated with certain underworlds and the tattooists you will find probably have their own connections… not necessarily. Tats and I have… adjusted our ink schemes to also represent our Flame types. And… well, I know they're not the greatest of role models, but some biker gangs and various military branches get them as well."

Blinking, the stuntman got up and wandered over to her to get a better look at ink he had apparently not paid that much attention to before.

"I am not suggesting you get anything related to the designs we have, just something else." She paused as another idea occurred to her, and the thief gave her brother a small smirk. "You would confuse anyone that might think you are or related to one of us."

"…I'll think about it." He had a smirk, so she figured it had good odds he would maybe get matching tats if not completely related ones. "But, I think I'll stick with the piercings for now."

Tossing a bookmark into the handbook, Sonya got up and snagged a lightweight sweater to cover her art while they were out and about. "Alright. Let us go then."
"Now?"

"Why not? We also need something to eat, and I am slightly interested in what kind of place you can find to do your own piercings." She may or may not be interested in getting a few more herself, maybe up around the shell of her ears. It wasn't like she had any standards of dress to conform to in this life.

'Not professional looking' her tiny Russian ass. If she was to be a professional and had piercings, then it was professional looking.

She would not be trying out the whole nose ring thing. She knew Skull would eventually have one, it was just she wasn't sure she wanted one. "Come on, let us go make you even prettier."

Cherep snorted, straightening up to let her get up without colliding with him. "Are you still on that?"

The girly thing? "I am not frustrated or angry about it… but it is still… something."

"We can go get you some girly things." He suggested idly, bouncing on his toes as he followed her to pull on his own work boots. "If you think that might help a little bit."

"I was never into retail-therapy." Sonya informed him dryly. "So unless this is a bid to be able to shop for cosmetics for Skull without looking foolish or attracting the wrong sort of attention…"

The entirely sheepish cough the stuntman gave confirmed that suspicion.

Smirking in amusement, she laced up her left boot and let him pull her up. "Okay, fine. Retail-shopping therapy it is. I want makeup tips in return."

"Deal."

She waited until they were decently far from their hotel, in a nicely balmy twilight instead of the semi-heat wave of East Germany's summer days, to continue. "…but you know this is just going to give Lisa more ammunition about the whole-"

"Shush."

"-and also, Viper visiting this-"

Cherep plastered a hand across her lips, badly fighting off an amused smile of his own. "I said shush."

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(Monday the 26th of May, 1969. Dresden-Klotzsche Airport, Dresden, German Democratic Republic.)

After nearly two weeks of just slumming with Cherep to get her large truck certifications, Sonya didn't finish the class but took the provided book and a copy of the regulations European big rig drivers were required to obey and had some fun on their driving course, she packed up to leave.

The stuntman had another week to go in East Germany to actually finish and test for his certification, which made the thief rather antsy about leaving him behind.

They had gone shopping for cosmetics and Cherep, who actually had a sense for fashion, had talked
her into a few boutiques when they could find a decent one. Which meant that if he went without
her... there was still that stigma against those of a different sexual bent than hetero that he might get
captured in.

It really was very questionable at first glance what orientation he had, because for all he claimed to
like women he still looked feminine enough he got checked out by equally questionable people.
Also, her brother had known a hell of a lot more than she had about applying cosmetics and the
current 'in' fashions of Europe.

It was something Rachel had once known as 'metrosexual', but that wasn't a thing in this day and
age. Cherep, for all that he kind of lived like a clean slob and had perpetually messy bed-head, took
very good care of himself. His lifestyle was actively demanding, which also meant he filled out with
a decent amount of muscle in a lighter way than most of the men she tended to see.

The fact he didn't look as muscular as the other 'old-hands' of the circus was possibly due to his
Cloud nature alone. It really did make it hard to keep up decent amounts of muscle, even if their
strength related to their size was entirely deceptive.

With his strikingly uniquely matched eye and hair color, which was one of those 'rare' things she had
seen maybe seven people with in her lifetime here, she found it easy to see why he had phenomenal
success flirting with the service girls in the stores they had frequented. He was at least better about
flirting around her than Renato, he left picking them up for after they were done.

"I'll be fine." The man in question repeated firmly, juggling a few of the new traveling cases she had
bought to go along with her updated wardrobe. "It's not the first time I've ended up on my own, and I
promise to keep calling Tats while I'm here... Nya."

Not even upset he was picking up the stupid nickname of their sister's to use for her, she set the
pieces of luggage she had taken on the trolley left out for airport passengers to use for large loads.
Maybe she had gone a bit overboard in letting him dress her up, but she had needed an update to her
clothing.

She couldn't even be upset at the expense, because her business account with Mafia Land had been
still maxed out from her work the last three weeks and she was able to use that here. Frankly, even
with Viper draining her various accounts, Bjørn had gotten the hang of things enough that the six
accounts she had for various uses were starting to generate more than just interest.

Which was promising but given her spending habits it wasn't going to last for long.

"I just..." Sonya didn't want to leave, but she also wanted to go pick up Shamal. Having spent half
of a year looking forward to having the brat all summer long the thief wanted to head straight to Italy
in order to do so as soon as possible. However, it was pretty rare nowadays for them to spend
uninterrupted time together. "...don't want to leave."

Crina's old tarot card deck was also burning a hole in her pocket. She hadn't glanced at it again until
she found the damn thing when packing up her side of the hotel room, which just reminded her the
old bat was dying. She should at least look at it before deciding on what she was going to do with it
all, or at least until the reminder stopped making her want to dent her surroundings.

"It was nice to see you again." Cherep offered in pure amusement, dumping the shopping he was
mostly responsible for her buying on top of her usual luggage. "And once you get things finished off
back home, you can come visit more often."
He had a weird superpower in making her talk. Sonya hadn't noticed it until she was in the middle of telling him all about Gedeon's latest stupid idea and why she was bothering with a criminal school of all things.

If there was one person she wasn't at all upset knew more about her life than even their mother, it was him. Even still, that was still jarring to realize halfway into an explanation on why she was sure the Zolotovs wouldn't be hanging onto the Flame user's training regime.

"Stop tugging at it." Batting his hand away from his left ear, where a shiny new silver hoop sat, Sonya glared at him until he very pointedly shoved his hands into his pockets. "Do not even, I know the moment my back is turned you will continue."

"But… it's itchy." He eyed her own ear in return. "I have no idea how you can stand to have metal pierced through cartilage."

"I have had worse." Sonya delicately touched the still stinging three studs punctured through the shell of her ear, then forcibly lowered her hand.

Cherep blinked his purple eyes at her in a weirdly seriously way, then he cocked a crooked smirk. "Self-inflicted, I hope."

Well… breaking her foot in Doctor Kappel's office had hurt worse. "Pretty much. Promise me you will be careful, Cherep. Jaq's not around the corner if you need help now."

Instead of answer right away, the stuntman gave her a rib-cracking hug that lifted her off her feet. "I'll miss you too, Sonya. And yes, I promise to be a good little boy."

With her nose mashed into his shoulder it made snorting a bit of a trick, but she managed it. "When was the last time you were a 'good little boy'?"

"Err…" Delicately placing her back on her feet, he straightened up and scratched at the back of his unruly hair while glancing around. Suddenly pointing to the large clock embedded into a wall, Cherep made shooing motions with his other hand. "Oh, look at that! You need to hurry to catch your plane, sis. I'll see you later?"

When she looked back at him, he had already made decent progress on bolting out of the airport entirely.

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(Tuesday the 27th of May, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Well, color me surprised. You're actually on time for once." Renato looked up at her from under the brim of his fedora, smirking at her likely disgruntled expression.

"…did you just buy the pocket watch to annoy me with?" Sonya was honestly curious about that, too.

Letting the heavier clock end go, he pulled down on the chain to get it back into his left hand to snap shut the little door and slide the thing into a pocket. "Merely a convenient side benefit, I assure you little lady Sonya."

"Right."
It wasn't *that* surprising the hitman was lying in wait for her in the Iron Fort's entranceway, he likely had contact here that would report her arrival in town to him with little to no bribe required.

She was a little disappointed not to get bratty Mist ambushed as well, but it *was* a school day. "*How long until I can abscond with Shamal?*"

Renato waited a beat, in which she dumped her arm chain and assorted mini-weapons attached on the plate the doorman was holding out expectantly. "*Really, any time this week. It's not as if brat's school is doing anything of note with the students. However, there is a graduation ceremony on the thirty first...*"

"...*it is a milestone thing we are expected to attend, isn't it?*" At his tight nod, apparently equally as unhappy as she was to hear about it, the thief cursed in three different languages."*Is Shamal at all interested? Can we skip it?*"

"*Unfortunately, he's been looking forward to showing off his work at school to you.*" Having shot that remote hope down, the hitman stalked forward and absently frowned at her. "*Where's your luggage?*"

Since that seemed to be what the doorman seemed to be wondering, Sonya answered honestly. "*In a hotel room.*"

"*Don't want to bribe Nono for another week or so again?*"

"...*something like that.*"

He eyed her sternly, but she merely raised an eyebrow in return.

"*Nono would like to speak to you.*" Renato said instead of continuing that line of conversation, more than close enough now to pick up her reasoning for doubting the security of Vongola's territory out of her head instead of needing to ask. "*And Ganauche would like a word as well if you could.*"

He flashed the doorman a smirk, which was apparently the sign the man was waiting for to dismiss himself. Then a hand was placed on her upper back, instead of her lower, and without the pressure normally associated with people trying to steer her about.

"*I don't think either will mind if you decide to postpone for the day, and instead just make arrangements for a meeting some other time this week. But I do know Nono was fairly insistent about it.*"

Sonya was exactly a *fan* of Vongola as a whole at the moment, much less of their current Sky heading them. Why the hell did she care that Timoteo Vongola or his Lightning Guardian wanted a word with her?

"*Because Shamal lives here.*" Renato leaned in enough to keep his words just between them.

"...*is there any reason why you're touching me?*"

"*So, I don't do something stupid like try to move you again.*" He removed the offending appendage, which irritatingly left a chilled spot between her shoulder blades in the excessively over air-conditioned foyer. "*If you don't feel like waiting around here and making yourself available, we could always continue trading stories.*"

"*We need to turn that into a drinking game.*" Sonya stated, starting off down a hallway picked at random.
She'd find a mostly empty room to wait until Shamal was released from school, and she had packed a book just in case.

"Ho? That's... not a bad idea." When she glanced back at him in the pause, he was eyeing her frame thoughtfully. "Are you sure you could keep up with me, though?"

The thief smirked at him.

"What am I missing?"

"Figure it out yourself." She then stuck her nose in the book she pulled out of her purse, so he couldn't get the reason why out of her head for once.

"Sonya."

Of course the nosy man wouldn't be able to leave that alone, the thief couldn't help the small laugh as she sped up a little so he couldn't take away her book and try asking again.

Not put off by her refusal to answer in the least, Renato stalked after her and tried to snatch the bound paper out of her hands more than a few times before she found a decent room.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 27th of May, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"What are you doing?" Shamal asked the hitman curiously from the doorway.

Renato instantly straightened up, trying to look as if he hadn't been chasing the thief around the blandly decorated waiting room in hopes of getting his hands on her book and an answer to a question she was refusing to answer. "Nothing, brat. Someone's here to see you."

Sonya slid off the window frame she had taken refuge on top of, one of the arched types that required her to brace a foot on the frame of another or plant a hand on the ceiling in order to remain in place. It was two stories high, hence why the man had been having issues cornering her again, which she took the landing a little off but without putting cracks on the floor boards.

"Hey kid. Miss me?"

"Mamma!" Roughly fifty pounds of child impacted the Russian's stomach at full tilt, and with her wrong footing from the fall it just meant Shamal knocked them both over. She didn't even see the brat move. "You're on time!"

"Well... you don't have to sound so surprised." Sonya muttered sourly from under him, not even able to sit up before Renato grabbed the back of the kid's shirt and hauled him off her. "I'm here for the week, then we'll all take off for parts unknown."

Shamal squirmed delightedly in the hitman's hold, wiggling out of what seemed to be a uniformed sweater vest just to jump on her stomach again. This time with his boney as fuck knees. "For how long?"

That was actually a good question.

Sonya looked to Renato to answer that, who was instead eyeing the sweater he had been left holding skeptically. "Why are you wearing an oversized sweater, Shamal?"

"Um... reasons?"
"Mist reason or just mischief reasons?" Asked the Storm-Cloud as she picked herself up off the ground, shifting him to her arms instead of allowing his knees to continue to dig into her stomach.

"Both." He cheerfully informed her, wiggling to sit on her hip so he would have the reach to try and grab his vest-thing from the older Italian with a hand. "My teacher had a nervous breakdown."

"Today?" Renato demanded, easily keeping what was apparently a piece of incriminating evidence out of his grasp.

"Apparently last week." Shamal crossed his thin arms over his equally child-sized chest, forcing her to compensate for him shifting around without him holding on as well. "Or at least according to the teacher's gossip."

He studied the brat hanging off her for a long moment before passing back the garment. "Good work."

Sonya shot him a searching look for praising him for something a bit out there, but he was pointedly ignoring her now.

"So," continued the hitman while the brat shrugged on the sweater causing her no small amount of difficulty keeping her hold on him, "your mamma has taken a hotel room in town. You can either stay with her or just-

"I'm staying with mamma." Shamal informed him pointedly, as if he found any other suggestion silly and the older man equally so for even thinking he would go with anything else.

Renato huffed at him back with some amusement, glancing up at her next. "Please remember Nono is going to want to talk to you."

"Nono can kiss-"

"Sonya."

She shot him a heated look in return for the tone he was taking with her. No one talked to her like that, not even her own mother.

"…Wednesday. While the brat's finishing up his last day. If he cannot fit me in, oh well."

"You didn't used to mine the Sky." Renato commented in a tone deliberately neutral as Shamal was set on the floor again and instructed to go pack what he would need for a week with her elsewhere. "What changed?"

"My brother visited the brat and ended up involved with something almost lethal, within Vongola's home turf." The thief reminded him pointedly, waving absently when the brat double-checked that she was still standing there as he dashed away to pack a few things and presumably his lizard.

Good thing she had ensured her hotel would accept small pets, even if the 'pet fee' was annoying to have to pay as well.

"I still have not heard a word through normal channels of anything that was done or any reparations to be given for his injuries."

"I thought…" He stated completely blandly, giving her a more or less wary look she was slightly surprised to see him aim at her again, "…that Cherep encountered no significant damage from that… event. Which was what Octavia's Revelli reported in his medical amendments to the situation."
Really?

Was that why the stuntman had spent so long hanging back while in Vongola's medical wing?

Might've been a really good idea, to hide his Cloud Flame ability from the more active members of the mafia.

Sonya shrugged that off, for his lack of permanent injury wasn't really the issue. "He bled."

"…fair enough for a Cloud, I guess." The hitman still gave her a skeptical look, but eventually seemingly accepting that and changing the subject. "Will you now tell me what I'm missing?"

With a soft snort, she bent to recover her slightly abused book from off the floor. "I said to figure that one out yourself, I am giving you no hints."

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 27th of May, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Shamal came across Crina's tarot cards in what seemed to be three seconds flat after being let into her hotel room.

Sonya knew it really wasn't that fast, there was the situating of 'Luigi the Chameleon' on the rented table that had to be done first and then the brat jumped on the bed for a few seconds until she told him to stop. Then the Mist found the cards that had been slipped into her luggage and asked her what they were.

"They don't look like playing cards." The kid informed her dubiously, surprisingly enough carefully going through the admittedly detailed hand-painted cards that were already showing heavy wear with distressed and faded edges.

"…actually, modern-day playing cards are based off of tarot card sets like the ones you hold in your hands. Slightly altered in a few ways, but more or less similar in the uncounted Fool or Jokers, four suites, and face cards… except for the twenty-one Major Arcana cards." Picking up the few he had already gone through, Sonya critically eyed the pieces of heavy paper.

Once she got to Mafia Land they were going into storage, but maybe she should invest in something to keep them preserved. Eventually, she might actually like to display them… once they stopped causing her a pang every time she remembered Crina's health situation.

"A… friend of mine gave them to me."

Shamal inspected the fancy, gothic looking design on one side all of them shared then at the rather intricate rendition of 'The Lovers' on the opposite side. "What are they used for?"

"Telling the future. Honest." She added when he shot her a bewildered look, grinning slightly as she took all the cards and shuffled them together again. "Want to see?"

"Can you use them to tell the future?" Scrambling up from his spot on the floor the kid joined her on her bedspread a bit impatiently, causing her to bounce a bit and nearly lose control of the cards she was trying to be careful of. Glancing at the cards she was truly mixing up and her face. "Where did you learn something like this?"

"Some people believe so, and I used to work in a circus like your zio. That's where I learned." Sonya admitted dryly, presenting the deck to him to cut. "Both Cherep and the friend that gave me these
are still with the same one we all worked for."

Shamal made four neat little piles of cards, then messed them all up into a heap. "Why did your friend give them to you?"

"Ah... she's not doing too well. My friend, her name is Crina, she was old when I met her. And she's even older now." Gathering them together and laying ten cards out in a Celtic cross pattern for just general predictions, she set the rest of the deck to the side for if he had more questions. The thief figured it was a safe bet, he was a Mist. "Now then, ready?"

He blinked at her curiously a few times. "Sure, mamma."

Sonya flipped the first card and stared. "...huh."

"Mamma?"

"Page of Wands." She identified in bemusement, continuing the description Crina had drilled into her head about what it meant. "This represents your present, a young if steadfast man. Generally known to bring strange tidings, if good ones, he sometimes is considered to be in search of a young woman."

Shamal had just given Renato some news he found important but had confused the fuck out of her, and the brat had probably been looking forward to her visiting.

...strange, but probably just luck. Tarot card readings weren't supposed to be that accurate.

"That was your present," she slid the card under the Page of Wands out and laid it back down face up on top of it as she had when placing all of the cards facedown to begin with, "this one is the immediate challenge to you."

Sonya looked down and twitched as she recognized the next card.

"...the King of Swords."

He seemed more interested in the artwork depicting the royal with a naked blade than her reaction, at least. "What does this one mean then?"

"...he sits in judgement. What he judges is up to the self, either life and death or justice and crime. Generally, this means you have a turning point coming up where a decision can go either way. Can also mean you may have issues with a lawyer, a senator... or a doctor."

"Neat." Was all the Mist brat thought about that.

She had a different opinion. Like the reading might be mentioning a meeting with her mother. If she wanted to be even more paranoid, there was also the decision to become a doctor she was still waiting to see if it would happen again. Even more generally, it was the decision to follow in her and Renato's footsteps to be a criminal as well looming before him.

Warily eying the deck laying innocently to the side of her knee, the Russian reached for the next card. "This is your distant past. Inverted... Five of Pentacles."

Okay, this was getting ridiculous. She wanted a cigarette, but with the kid sharing her space that was probably along the 'bad idea' part of being an authority figure.

"Come on, mamma. What does this one mean?"
"Mist things." Sonya deadpanned in exasperation. "Disorder, chaos, ruin, discord. Sometimes it represents trouble in love when reversed like this."

Distant past, meaning how he came to be the ward of Renato in the first place and how that affected a certain hitman's plans and lifestyle. Probably. Could also mean his Mist behavior in general as well.

Shamal blinked at his barely started reading. "...wow. This is awesome. Next one!"

"Recent Past." Sonya flipped that one over, not even surprised anymore by the card revealed. "The Three of Cups. A conclusion, generally a good one. Can also represent happiness, healing, perfection, plenty, and victory."

This was getting creepy.

Without bothering to wait for him to cajole her on, the Storm-Cloud reached for the next one. "Best Outcome is... Nine of Cups, Inverted."

Well, if she really wanted to read into this at all, that was a decent kind of outlook for the future.

"Good business, truth, loyalty, and liberty."

Shamal made a face at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"When flipped, it's a material card indicating good fortune. Inverted like this, it's not quite as materialistic and can sometimes come with imperfections or mistakes. While this is a good card, it just foretells a good bettering instead of a great one."

Hopefully, this means he and Usov would come to terms in a decent way. Maybe he would strike a bargain with Lisa about calling Arseniy nonno?

That would be kind of funny.

"Next is your immediate future. The... Six of Pentagrams, Inverted again." Well fuck. "Representing desire, envy, jealousy, and illusion. A check on ambitions, not generally a good card but also not a bad one either like this."

An obstacle in other words. Something Shamal would have to contend with that might not be expected at the time he runs into it.

"I can do illusions. So maybe I learn something about them?" Puzzled out loud the Mist brat, looking tiny and serious as he struck a thinking pose while still sitting on his knees across the bedspread from her. "A challenge, I like the sound of that."

...eh, it was his reading. If that was how he wanted to interpret it, then he could.

Sonya picked up the next card and tried to put that out of her mind. "This one is supposed to represent anything that might affect you. Either positively or negatively. It's... the Card of Judgement."

Self-explanatory, mostly.

"Something is to be judged, and this will affect you in nearly all ways." Again, meeting Lisa. Which Sonya was a little nervous about too, really. It was her mother, and the brat was... well, her brat.

"Next is external influences, the things you will not be able to change or affect."

The brat snorted. "Let's see about that."
"The World Card. Representing assured success, voyage, flight, and changes of place. We do have a trip coming up, brat." She teased the kid mildly, smirking at his gob smacked expression. "I'd like to see you change that."

Shamal pouted at her, then shot a nasty look to the card in question. "Hmph."

"Hopes and fears, the Queen of Wands." Sonya paused, eyeing the card then glancing up at him. "You're not nervous about meeting my mother, are you kid?"

"...a little?" Flushing a bit, he squirmed in place sheepishly. "It's your mamma, mamma."

Point. "She represents a woman, friendly, chase, loving, and honorable. Generally reprehensive of a good harvest, love of money, or certain success in business."

Not quite how anyone she knew would describe Lisa, except that business success part... unless she was being motherly.

"Last card, the final outcome. Ace of Wands." That was... actually a fantastic card to draw. "Creation, invention, and enterprise. A good sign for a beginning or industry, meaning to be busy in this brat, it's a card of good fortune."

"This is really neat, mamma." Shamal informed her as she gathered them all up again and slid them into the carved wooden case they had been gifted in. "Can we do this again sometime?"

"Not all readings are good ones, brat. You just got lucky this time." Unfolding herself from the bed Sonya replaced them back into her luggage, so she wouldn't forget them when she left. "Come on, there's still daylight out. We can find something to do in the town other than sit here and play with old things."

"Can we get gelato?" Scrambling to follow, he skidded and made an about face to snatch up his shoes from where they ended up underneath the massive dresser provided.

She rolled her eyes, beckoning him out of their temporary room for the next week.

Why did both the Mists she knew best have a sweet tooth for icy things?

Maybe it was the fact they both were pretty much kids still. "Sure, whatever. But we're also taking a walk so you can get the sugar out of your system."

...thinking about it a little more, that reading could've also applied to her just as much as Shamal.

She had no real question when laying out the cards, just wanting a general spread to serve as an example. However, she couldn't think of any 'young man' looking for her... nor could she think of who the 'Queen of Wands' would then represent as 'hope and fears'.

Also, who the fuck would try to judge her?

(Wednesday the 28th of May, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"You wished to see me, Don Vongola?"

The Ninth Sky of the Vongola Famiglia glanced up from his ever-multiplying paperwork on his desk to the Russian woman being led into his office. "Miss Nikishina, good morning. Allow me to
start by apologizing for the harm your brother came to while within our territory."

The thief remained impressively blank-faced as she came to a stop in front of his desk, but she did nod in acceptance.

No return of the greeting, not a word on how her brother was getting on, just non-verbal acknowledgement of his person and possibly not his words.

Timoteo barely withheld a grimace.

She hadn't seemed overly 'Cloudy' to him before because apparently, she had still been making up her mind if she liked him or not. Meaning she had come off more as a Storm in personality. Impressively quick-witted and sharp as a tack, if oddly obstinate in a roundabout manner and immune to any kind of polite intimidation.

Now that she had squarely decided she didn't like him, he was getting the same feel of most Clouds he met from her.

Not the best situation, especially not when she was assisting Sinclair in the little favor he had asked of the hitman in her own corner of the world. Not entirely a bad one either, as apparently even if she disliked someone or something she could still deal with it instead of trying to destroy it or whomever raised her ire.

Just… maybe put it off for as long as possible.

Even with his Harmony, he had the sinking suspicion he wouldn't be able to get the same things from the Storm-Cloud as he had before. Truly a pity, but then again she seemed to have an even better relation with Tyr than he ever had with her so it wasn't an entire loss.

Additionally, it was partially his fault.

Even after being told the pair of Russian siblings were Dual Cloud Guardian prospects, he hadn't thought of any of the other people affected by the attempt on his Lightning Guardian's life until well after she started her little protest and removed her brother and herself from the Iron Fort entirely.

Timoteo had thought it was his mother that sparked that, but apparently Daniella's actions were merely a convenient excuse from what Renato reported earlier this week.

"I wanted to speak with you about a few rumors we have only just heard from our fellows in the Far East." Continued the Sky when she flatly refused to verbalize anything. "Am I correct in guessing it is your famiglia that is providing Flame-stone matching services?"

Sonya slitted a glance to the side, to where Sinclair had taken up a slouched position against his far office wall. After a long moment, the Russian thief looked back at him. "My clan, and you are."

…if trying to get information out of her wasn't like pulling dragon's teeth in the first place even when neutral to someone, Timoteo didn't really want to go through the headache of getting her to tell him something when she didn't like him.

He glanced to his own Cloud Guardian, who took up the questioning again for him.

"Is it worth it?" Visconti started with their Flame type's typically favored blunt mannerisms.

"Not really." Stated the Storm-Cloud even more flatly than she had spoken to the Sky. "If you are asking for monetary value, no. In a research manner, only possibly."
Timoteo suppressed a wry smirk as he realized the thief wasn't actually giving anything but her personal thoughts about it away. Not reporting what her clients in the Triads thought, or if it would be to Vongola's benefit to pursue the topic, or even if she thought what personal benefits the ones matched would find.

This was Sonya Nikishina being deliberately obstinate, and he settled in for a verbal duel between two Clouds.

"Then why sell it?"

"We are thieves. Hoarding money and selling sparkling rocks is something we do on a regular basis." The woman replied boredly. "If it is what our clients wanted, then good. If not, oh well."

"Isn't that a bad position for any customer-oriented service?" Tried his Cloud Guardian on another tack.

"I've found that people rarely know what the hell they want. And, unless I am interested, I don't care to find out on general principle."

Timoteo was thankful for his thick mustache, as it concealed his frown if he held his head low enough… like as if he was contemplating his paperwork.

They might actually be forced to go through the Sword Emperor or rely on what the free-lance hitman felt up to giving out about the whole situation if he knew anything. Since the Soft Flame Sun and the Russian Storm-Cloud seemed to be practically paired off whenever they were together, he wasn't entirely sure if Renato would carry tales on his little lady if she didn't want him to.

While fully willing to be associated with Vongola for the moment, the hitman had also made it clear it would only be a temporary thing. In reality if not reputation, but he was a competent enough Mafioso to be put to use on various things that inevitably cropped up in criminal groups and more than thankful of the aid he was given to prevent his actions from harming the Famiglia.

Hopefully his misstep with Nikishina wouldn't translate over to Tyr by mere association alone.

Otherwise he would have to see what he could do to help about his mother's crusade to try ensnaring the Storm-Cloud into her circle.

Timoteo wasn't even sure how a Cloud from Soviet Russia managed to travel so far from her originating territory and yet was still a model guest without a mitigating influence of another Sky, much less how far the Soviet branch of the underworld had approached and made use of Dying Will Flames.

The Iron Curtain did more than just cut the civilian news and traffic off, which made the woman standing as bold as brass in his office a unique link into that corner of the world.

Really, the only reason why he was humoring the woman's behavior was due to her providing assistance to the Mafioso working on a favor for him and because she was a Soviet Flame Expert. Above that, the possible natural crystal-gemstone Flame focuses she might be able to provide in time.

The few pieces of spinal, which was the bribe she had handed over the last time she stayed within the Iron Fort, had worked as she had claimed as a general basic focus for any type. Not well for those with more Flames, but for those with only slight amounts to pull on.

More promising, when a few emerald cut stones of spinal were sourced from a local jeweler's store they still worked as described.
The coloring was a bit oddly mismatched, and a few shades worked better for certain Flame types, but it was a decent generalist stone for those new to Dying Will Flames if usually a one-use kind of thing.

"to inquire about it?"

"You have a few pieces." Was Nikishina's non-helpful answer to Visconti's latest track of inquiry as the Sky started paying attention again.

If only to see exactly how much she was going to be a brick wall to any Vongola inquiry.

Renato was staring a hole into the side of her head, was this a bone of contention between the two?

Her decision to dislike Vongola, while the hitman was still working for them?

He was more than certain Sinclair would try something if only because he had a good working relationship with the man, but he was also uncertain as to who would be the target of him trying to mitigate the Storm-Cloud's behavior.

Timoteo decided to cut this short, glancing at his Cloud Guardian to have him take a step back. Croquant Bouche was motoring the conversation from another room and would give the entire transcript of the thief being stubbornly short to Visconti if he asked, but the Sky was certain anything given unwillingly would be more or less useless.

"Miss Nikishina," by the look that earned him, she had apparently caught on to the polite interrogation this time and wouldn't be letting it slide again, "thank you for answering a few questions."

She merely nodded to him in answer.

"Have a good day, then."

Utterly unsurprised when the woman just turned to stalk out of the office without so much as a backward glance, Timoteo turned a wry smile to the hitman that had followed her in. "Well… interesting."

"Nono, I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault she has decided to be difficult." Interrupted the Sky with some amusement. "Then again, we really should've guessed she would be after the situation. Your little lady wasn't shy about reminding people she was a Cloud, however strangely she behaves."

"…if it makes it any better, she was as equally stubborn with me at first." Offered the Soft Flame Sun a bit sardonically. "She didn't like me when we met."

Timoteo laughed, trying to think of anyone who would actually believe that if they saw how the pair acted now. "I will try to keep that in mind."

Might mean his mother had a shot in ensnaring the little Russian thief, or that it was possible to recover her more 'neutral' behavior with enough work.

"I don't think she would be so stiff if she didn't really care, so at least I can assume she does care at least a bit about Vongola as a whole." Renato continued after a beat, a sideways glance to the door the woman in question had left through. "Not a whole lot, but at least enough to not try to brush you off entirely."
Silver lining. The Sky nodded to show he heard but gestured to the same office door the hitman kept glancing at. "You might wish to ensure she doesn't cause any trouble, Sinclair."

"She won't." The younger man visibly paused as he considered it. "...unless it's one of Ottavia's people. Excuse me, Timoteo."

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(Saturday the 31st of May, 1969. Convitto Nazionale Tommaso Campanella, Reggio Calabria, Italian Republic.)

Shamal's graduation from his first year of schooling was mainly held in an auditorium.

With four classes worth of parents and other interested parties, the school officials, and multiple displays in the scuola elementare wing of the building showcasing what the students did all year.

Given the sheer amount of money the school was charging him for Shamal's education at a private and elitist facility such as this, Renato expected and was satisfied with the basic principles the brat was now drilled in.

He could now read and write in a shaky hand, do basic addition and subtraction, and could read both a calendar and a clock face. He also had an introduction to geography, basic literature staples, and had a general introduction to some fields of science.

You had to start somewhere, and while he found the information beyond dull the young Mist was at least thrilled to show the work he did off to Sonya.

The little Russian thief was just bemused all over, if he was reading her right.

She occasionally drifted out of his range, usually when Shamal pointed out the results of some class project for her to inspect. At least she did return in time for the speeches, which spared him a headache the size of Sicily with the press of people crammed into tiny school rooms all damn near broadcasting their thoughts in yells with how close they were.

He almost didn't even need his mind-reading trick, what most the people around him thought was plastered across their faces and only ill-concealed by what they took to be polite expressions. The sheer amount of overblown pride in one classroom alone made him itch to wipe it away, and he would too if it wasn't pride in their various sprogs.

Sonya's running mental commentary on the likely hazards within the room, which he half suspected she started up just for him to focus on instead of accidentally catch the thoughts of the civilians they were forced to interact with, was at least somewhat amusing. Especially when she started inspecting the place with an eye to break in somehow, and the hitman learned more about the fake foam ceilings overhead and their weight tolerances than he had ever had need of.

Renato hadn't known there was actually a crawl space up there and enough room to use them to get past a room or hallway that otherwise would be difficult to circumvent.

Interesting.

"Are you trying to open a school or something?" He asked her in her native tongue when she ran out of thoughts about the truly shoddy crafted windows with each and every way she could think of to force them open.
With the added inclusion on just what the criminals she knew best would do with that if they disliked something about the classroom or the grades earned within them.

Even quietly spoken, the non-Italian language earned him suspicious looks and various ugly stares. She just earned them more when she replied in the same manner.

"Not exactly. Our school will open this fall, actually. My mother is getting too busy to do the teachings on her own, so I made an alternate." Pausing to politely clap when the substitute teacher presiding on the stage that had taken over Shamal's class finished reading off the apparently prepared little speech about how brilliant the whole class was and how ready they were to leave their first year of school behind them, she turned to him instead of half-listen to him go on about what was displayed as if they didn't have eyes and could use them. "Making a school for those like us is a fairly involved process, which I've found to be very exasperating overall."

Renato already planned on signing Shamal up for Italy's Mafia School as soon as possible, but that was more of a secondary school level kind of thing. Now apparently there was a Soviet Mafia School in the works, and he wondered if anyone in Italy's knew they were about to have a sister school.

Any question or reply he could have made would've been lost in the sudden surge of people rising to their feet to tour the level of the school their brats had dwelled within for nearly a year. The both of them rose as well, even if it seemed neither had plans on moving until the press of people lessened somewhat.

"Mamma, we have to go to the fourth floor."

"I know, brat. But let's wait out the rush first." Snagging Shamal's hand before he could get swept away or even lost in the halls outside the auditorium for a bit, the thief hauled him up to a hip. "I don't feel like being pressed against someone else's shoulders today."

The Mist gave her an odd look. "But you're against Mister Renato's. And now mine."

She sighed and tugged a lock of wavy brown hair. "Allow me to rephrase that. I do not feel like rubbing shoulders with people I do not know. Or at least any more than I have to."

"Then introduce yourself and ask for their names." Was the brat's smartass reply. "Then you'd know them."

The hitman coughed to hide a bark of laughter, pointing out a relatively people-free pocket starting to develop on one side of the large room. "Let's get out of the way, shall we?"

The glare the thief tossed him was unamused, but she started moving anyways.

She replaced the brat on his feet once it was less likely he could get swept up in the crowd and pulled away from them. "The crowd is already thinning, I don't think we will have long to wait brat."

"So, I probably should've asked this before, but... where in Moscow are we going?"

"...hmm? The north-west side of Moscow's outskirts. My... fellows, occupy a stretch of territory that goes from the east side of the Golovinsky and Voykovsky Districts to the west of the Severnoye Tushino District, on the outside edge of the North-West Administrative Okrug. We basically straddle a section of the Moscow Canal." The infuriating woman smiled at his flat look for the unhelpful answer. "I have everything set up, from the reservation of a hotel suite to the train tickets. So long as you let me point a few things out and stay away from certain things I'll also make clear, it shouldn't be a bad visit."
'Shouldn't be' was a very suggestive turn of phrase.

Shamal tugged on Sonya's skirt, attracting not only the thief's attention but the hitman's as she turned away from him.

A girl that looked younger than the blonde with him, impressive considering Sonya herself was barely just legal herself, gave the both of them a nervous smile before directing her attention to the Mist brat.

"Miss Abelli." Greeted the kid just shy of excitedly.

"Mister Nikishin, good afternoon young sir. I take it these are your... parents?" The nervous little substitute teacher glanced from Shamal's coloring to the thief's blonde hair and grey eyes, to even Renato's darker coloring.

"Godparents." Sonya flatly informed the girl. "I am Sonya Nikishina, this behind me is Renato Sinclair."

She winced as she realized the usual way one's godparents had to stand in for a child, flicking a glance down to the brat. "I... see. My apologies. I just came to say goodbye, actually."

"Aww... are you leaving Miss Abelli?"

"I was invited to teach elsewhere, so I won't be returning next year." The girl confirmed softly, looking back up to the thief and hitman. "Sorry for interrupting."

Sonya lifted a shoulder in an absent kind of shrug. Only really allowing the girl her way since it did look as if Shamal actually liked her.

Renato dearly wanted to flirt with the girl, if only to see if she would stutter or blush if he did, but bit it back.

The hoops he was going to have to jump through to turn the thief's head... Guerra's advice had better show some sign of working soon or he was going to give up.

"Are you sick?"

Speak of the devil.

Renato gave the tiny blonde woman a sardonic look, reaching up to tilt his fedora down a bit more. "I'm not, thank you."

Sonya gifted him with a dubious one back, glanced to the girl that had been distracted by Shamal pestering her for where she was going, and back to him. "Are you sure? You never required an engraved invitation before."

"As if I'm going to have the time." He shot back lowly, watching the brat enthuse all about the Russian his mamma was teaching him to the substitute absently. "Besides, there are a few more important things to be done. And, leading a lady on is very rude."

It wouldn't be the first time the hitman had to turn down something in favor of the brat or something he needed. He was getting depressingly used to doing it too.

For a tetchy baby Mist he hadn't intended to keep on for long at first, it was rather surprising how far he was going for him.
Maybe he would've kept tabs on Shamal, but really… what would a barely mid-twenties hitman do with a toddler?

If it hadn't been for Sonya taking an extreme interest in the brat, he might've just left him in the local orphanage or the Iron Fort's equivalent for Flame using kids after sorting Shamal out.

Renato was almost juggling way too many things at once, and if it hadn't been for Timoteo taking an interest in the Mafioso that appealed to him for help with something wrong in Mafia Land… he probably would've been forced to give up the brat before long anyways.

This parenting thing was expensive. It was looking like he'd have to subsidize his income somehow or go on a binge of hits like Sonya did her own contracts.

Nearly a month, or a month and a half depending, of free time was going to be a damn blessing.

He had a point to this mental meander, right?

No, he had been distracting himself while waiting for Shamal to exhaust the things he wanted to babble to his pretty teacher lady. "Alright, brat. Your mamma probably won't get crushed into people if we go now."

"Oh yes, blame me. Like you weren't as uncomfortable." Sonya muttered lowly enough only he caught it, giving the other girl a short nod of farewell.

"Um… actually, have either of you noticed something… well, odd?"

The thief froze for a split second, before turning back to her with a politely curious expression. "I'm sorry, but odd?"

Wincing slightly, the substitute teacher waved a hand rapidly as if to physically dismiss her words. "Never mind me, it was just a thought."

"My dear, I professionally investigate odd things. I'm a writer." Bullshitted the Russian pleasantly, giving the girl an artfully encouraging smile she didn't feel at all like giving. "I've found younger people generally tend to notice more, even if they understand less at the time."

Renato placed a hand on Shamal's head, for one to get him to stop cringing and to include himself in the discussion. "Odd is never really bad. We are all odd in some ways."

Some more than others.

Emboldened by their encouragement, the teacher clasped her hands and held them in front of herself. "Well. I meant in that a few strange coincidences happen around young mister Nikishin. I've never been able to put a finger on it, and it ranges from knowing about a malfunction with the bells before they ring to some… strange weather patterns."

"…thank you for informing us, Miss Abelli. We'll keep an eye on him." Sonya promised after a beat, taking the younger woman's hands in her own, pressing on them lightly before patting them. "If there is something, we'll let you know at least. Can I have a phone number, or an address to send a letter to if something does come up? I'll give you my office one in return."

"Um… sure." Digging through her pockets, the teacher came up with a few scraps of paper and a few pens.

"Can I borrow that? I'm afraid I've left my pen somewhere." Asked the thief absently as she came
out of her own purse with a heavily abused pad of paper herself.

Renato blinked, but keep his mouth shut.

The Russian always had a pen, it was more likely she didn't have any paper to go with it. It wasn't unusual for her to still have illegible writing on her skin from when she made do without some.

Why she never wrote in her ever-present books was a question. What she was doing was another, but it was possible this was her version of damage-control.

After writing out their contact information, the women traded bits of paper and the thief waved off the substitute teacher.

"…Shamal, you're going to have to do some emergency damage control." Kneeling down to the Mist brat's level, Sonya held out… a case for a pair of reading glasses.

He didn't even see the thief steal that.

Shamal took it, looked it over, took out the glasses, then glanced up at her. "What should I do?"

"While your ability is great for making things that aren't there, it's also able to be used in more subtle ways." She started quietly, forcing the kid to lean forward in order to hear her. "Will anyone that holds or wears these to overlook coincidences, to forget about those with brown hair once they touch them, or even to just encourage the holder to ignore anything to do with one Shamal Nikishin."

"…does she have to forget me?"

"It's better than the alternative, brat."

Renato pressed his mouth into a thin line as he kept a lookout for the pair.

Frankly, he wasn't sure if Vongola did background checks on substitute teachers. Hopefully they did, and he'd be able to report the girl as suspicious of Dying Will Flame use. If not, then he'd either have to do something he really didn't want to or bribe another Mist to do what Sonya was trying to coach the brat through.

"…kay." Shamal cradled the glasses, eyed them a long moment, then snuck a peek up to his mamma's face. "…how?"

"Imagine, clearly, what you want to be done when someone holds, uses, or touches the item. Say… putting them on makes her overlook things that are strange. Or that touching them makes her memories of you fade a tiny bit. Small things that will build up for… a year. Then, put that together with the sensation of building your Constructs, and add your will to that mental image."

As the hitman didn't have Mist Flames, he had no idea if that was decent, vague, or direct instructions for one to do what they wanted. The thief sounded certain, and also had no thoughts on why that would fail at all, but he didn't know how much of that was just faked for the brat's peace of mind or how much of it was pure certainty.

He had gotten pretty used to Mists and their work in general over the last few years, so he was able to at least tell when the glasses took on Shamal's Mist Flames. Not what they would do or what about the glasses was Constructed, but just that they were.

Strange.
Sonya held the glasses case open for them, snapping them shut once the brat had put them back. "I'm going to go return this, you two head upstairs. I'll meet you both up there."

She pressed a kiss to Shamal's forehead, gave him a nod when he helped her back to her feet, and stalked off with enough purpose in her stride to deter any of the other faculty members from trying to derail her.

"Well… maybe you were a bit too good this year." Renato suggested after a moment, yanking his leg back when the brat went to kick it. "Hey, I didn't screw up."

"I didn't screw up either." Shamal insisted snottily, pouting up a storm and trying to kick the hitman again. "You told me to get my teacher to quit."

…he hadn't wanted to half-hear a mental fantasy of how to romance the thief from mister mouse again, so the moment he heard there would be a graduation thing involving the faculty he had set the Mist brat on the case. "Never mention this to Sonya, and I'll buy you… something."

The brat shot him a heated glare.

"I'll take you up to see that stupid film from West Germany you wanted to see."

"And mamma too."

Renato shot the little brat a glare as he got them both moving. "How the hell am I going to explain that to Sonya?"

"Don't care." Insisted the Mist, stomping off a bit of his irritation. "We're all going to go see it, or I'm telling."

…so now he had to suffer through some inane children's movie and somehow convince Sonya to go along with a slight detour to her travel plans.

Damn it. That was going to be a fairly awkward situation, sitting through however long the damn thing was.

Chapter End Notes

So… I have a deck of tarot cards I'm going to be basing any reading Sonya does with them off of. I received them before I joined the US military, they've traveled pretty much everywhere I've been in the last couple years, and they've just been gathering dust on a shelf or a box. My fictional character having a deck and I having a real if more modern one being the case, I dug mine out and shuffled them up to write the reading she gives Shamal.

Originally I had thought to just go through the deck and pick-'n-chose until I got a decently-vague card to give… preferably starting at random and continuing on until I had what I wanted.

In reality, the reading Sonya gives Shamal is exactly what I drew for it first… no alteration needed. Not even the three extra 'draws' allowed to try and seek clarification on what the cards in certain positions meant. I only laid them out first in an actual pattern to remind myself what they all meant in what spot, and I will admit to looking up the
meanings because it's been years since I messed around with tarot cards.

Sonya's thoughts about it are actually mine as I went through the reading to see what I should write.

I didn't actually notice it could apply to the both of them and not just Shamal until well after I started to end that little scene. So, creepy little back-story and a story of sheer coincidence from the chapter for you all to puzzle over. A wonder how things work sometimes…
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

Edit (01/19/2017) : Fairly long conversations with about three different people who speak Russian, I still am not convinced I was wrong. However, I am correcting a few ways Russians are addressed in-story just to stop the arguments. Because I'm never 'wrong', merely 'country-ish' or a bit 'awkward' with how a few are addressed in-story. And while that was acceptable to me to have Sonya a bit off or confused on a few things, apparently not so to others.

(Monday the 2nd of June, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Why in the seven hells would we?"

"There's nine circles to hell, and because I promised." Renato informed the highly skeptical thief in a bland tone of voice.

He had figured Sonya wouldn't be too happy with a detour and being proven right was annoying. Not that it annoyed him nearly as much as she was at the moment.

"Who cares how many levels of hell there are, what I want to know is why you would want to go out of your way for something like this. You don't even like going to the park and sitting around while he runs off some energy." She glanced up the staircase, in case the brat in question had finished with packing enough for a month or two and was on his way to them. "Fuck… next time tell me when you do things like this. I've planned for some extra time, but I thought that would be delays and maybe an overnight in some town."

The hitman suppressed the wince, because the whole situation was just awkward. Thankfully it was for the brat, and Sonya was nothing if not consistent in bending to Shamal's reasonable whims.

This one was a bit unreasonable, but with Renato throwing some weight on it…

Seeing a film a bit up north probably wasn't greatly out of their way, Italia was firmly south of the Soviet Union after all. Throwing a kink in her traveling plans was also an iffy thing, she knew where they were going and into what… he didn't.

The basics, yes. How she knew to get past the Iron Curtain with two non-Soviet tagalongs, no.

Getting through the Iron Curtain seemed to be something she did on a regular basis at least, if not with passengers.

The Soviet Storm-Cloud sighed, tightening her hold on Shamal's chameleon before the damned thing squirmed out of her grip. She eyed the thing severely, which got it to stop moving for a long second as if it sensed the bigger predator that had it was losing patience. "Where, exactly, is this taking place?"

"All I know is that there are showings of the film in Germany. More likely West."

She eyed him severely next. "Does the brat even speak or understand German?"
"...after five minutes with Croquant Bouche, he does now. And Russian, you just need to teach him to read it now."

Sonya clicked her tongue at him. "Lazy. Fine, whatever. I can arrange something in West Germany easily enough. Not quite the way I'd want with the brat with us, but it's doable. We will not be coming back the same way, however. That's a little too difficult to do with a child along, with or without you. I'd be denied trying the legal ways, and the illegal ones are a bit more risky than I'd want to expose him to."

Luigi the Cape Dwarf Chameleon suddenly nipped her left thumb, which only earned the thing another glare. Its attack having an undesirable effect, mainly not getting the thief to drop it out of surprise or pain, the lizard sheepishly went back to nosing about her slim fingers.

Renato rescued Shamal's pet before Sonya went through with a half-formed plan to squish it before they had it shipped off to await them in Moscow. She might have initially discarded it due to Mist dramas they'd have to suffer through while on the road, but she was still wondering if they could conveniently 'lose' it at the train station if she bought Shamal off with the promise to get him another one.

Even if he had only rarely interacted with the dratted thing, the chameleon knew him better than he did the strange Russian woman. It settled down willingly enough, investigating the hitman's cuffs and trying to eat his cuff-links instead of trying to spring to freedom.

She sniffed irritably, digging a pack of cigarettes out of her purse but not opening them. "Aww... it likes you."

"It's a gift." He snarked at her mildly, with an added glare of his own for her thoughts of the brat abandoning the lizard to his clutches the moment she could find a house in northern Italy. "...do you know where Mafia School is?"

"Should I?" Asked the thief mildly as she pulled a fragile tube of tobacco from the pack and flipped it around her fingers. "I assumed it would be more or less near Vongola's territory, but the only thing I know about it is that it exists."

A decent stab in the dark, for a non-Italian.

"How about I find some real estate near it for you, and you can pick which one you like."

Sonya gave him a considering look, tapping a finger not tied up in her one-handed gymnastics with something easily broken against her lip. "...it better not have a balcony or trellises. A better 'rob me I'm stupid' sign I can't think of off the top of my head."

"How many rooms?" If that was her only criteria, this would be stupidly easy.

There were any number of people that would give their left arms to have a Cloud move in next door, or even within a local city limit. Admittedly there would be some adjustment needed for all involved, but even a temporary Cloud resident would force the unrulier criminals in a radius to step lightly. Especially if they were hunting retirees in a Cloud's territory.

...or what seemed to be a Cloud's territory.

"...four? I guess." The thief bit her lip as she thought, looking slightly conflicted as she tried to think of anyone that would ever want to bother her before they tried. "...shit. No, six at the least. Well..."

"At least ten, got it." Who the hell was 'Scruffy'?
She flattened out her expression in her version of ‘sheepish’, tucking the unlit cigarette behind her right ear. "...actually, I think that's not going to be enough. With the rate of people that have been attaching themselves to me..."

"...that third Flame type you have, it wouldn't happen to be 'Sky' would it?"

Instead of actually think of what it was, or wonder about that herself, the thief just rolled her eyes. "No. Not Sky."

Then she forcibly redirected her mind to wondering how long, exactly, did Shamal need to pack nearly or everything he owned for a... "...how long do I get him for, anyway? You've yet to answer that."

"Depends. If your syndicate is more or less stable, at least until the end of August." If not, well…

Renato would just have to wait and see. He would much rather just investigate for a week or two, dump the brat off for the rest of the summer, and have a month and a half of completely free time to himself.

"...define 'stable'."

"For fuck's sake, Sonya."

"It's Russia. I'm not sure how much news of the internal workings get out to you all here, but it's very subjective as to who the criminal and who the law enforcement is. Frankly, half the time the civilians approach the bratstvo just because the government's methods are worse than us. Or slower than humanly decent. Or... actually more expensive."

She shoved a hand through her hair, raking it back and dislodging the cigarette which she caught absently, and the glint of something shiny high in arch of her left ear derailed him a moment.

Earrings?

"That being the case, it's actually not that unusual for a bit of a turf war to erupt between the KGB, the militsiya, and the local chapter of vory."

Renato thought hard, smoothing a hand over his mouth and ignoring Luigi as the chameleon crawled up his arm to reach his hat. "So, what, is it never stable?"

"It depends on your definition of stable. Stable enough to walk the streets during the day, sure. There's no wide scale gang-warfare going on, but that's just because no one currently is in the position to do so near us." Sonya shrugged, waving a hand as if she could pluck the words she wanted out of the air. "I really wouldn't suggest you take a walk after dark, especially not in Moscow proper. A bit like Mafia Land, just a bit more civilized due to the civilians and with the risk of catching the KGB's attention heaped on top."

Dearly beloved fuck, no wonder the twelve-year-old thief had no issues wandering the island on her lonesome.

He hadn't given it much thought at the time, because she was a tiny Cloud and frankly with that Flame type what they said went and all, but... a young girl on her own in a den of criminals spoke of either a hard past or ingrained familiarity with the antics of hardened murderers.

The fact her family let her wander that far on her when she was so young own meant they didn't see any harm in it or was incredibly used to that level of violence.
…where did that cigarette go?

"There's really little to nothing threatening where we're going. The Zolotovs are pretty much normally on top of everything that goes on around us, I just have little to nothing to do with that side of the clan."

The hitman bit back the 'is it safe' question, because of course it wasn't.

Life wasn't safe, and if coddled too much Shamal would never learn to deal with risky things as cautiously as whatever threat required. Asking her to compare her native territory to Vongola's was also supremely unfair, for one this wasn't his territory either and for another very few syndicates ever reached a similar size without imploding.

"The thing is, Shamal will actually be safer than the both of us." Continued the Storm-Cloud after a moment of thought. "The old hands, my foster parent's generation and older, will leave him alone even if you piss them off. He's a kid, after all. Just... the newer vory are less concerned unless you belong to them."

"The old school?"

Hmm... he had noticed that too. Like their generation somehow didn't pass along the same standards to the new blood coming in.

She waved that off. "Pretty much. There's also... technically the brat qualifies for Zolotov protection through me... but we need Lisa, my foster mother, to agree to that first."

"Speaking of." A different voice had the both of them turning to see Ganauche the Lightning Guardian coming down a hallway to where the two of them were waiting on a Mist brat in the foyer. "I did a bit of poking... don't your own vory-code prohibit any vor from having children?"

Sonya took a second to adjust to the eyepatch Nono's Lightning was fairly self-conscious about, then ignored it in favor of answering in a non-helpful way that had become her norm to Vongola people all week. "None of your damn business."

"Sonya." Renato called her attention to himself, before Ganauche could do something ill-advised and poke her more, interrupting her deliberation on if she was irritated with the Lightning or not. "We are guests."

The thief obligingly turned away from the interloper to look at him again. "Not for long."

"I would like to come back and still be a guest." Preferably a favorable one.

His initial reception to the massive underworld superpower had been risky enough for him.

"So, what would you call us in your Russian ranks?" Continued the other Italian, which just made the hitman want to plant his face in a hand.

Why was Timoteo's Lightning Guardian so defective?

Poke a bear, see if she mauled you for all he cared... or rendered him limb from limb, depending.

"...avtoriuyets. Brigadiers." Another long pause, in which the Lightning's faulty sense of danger finally kicked in and he stopped approaching the two of them, and Sonya narrowed her thankfully still grey eyes at the man in her still mainly blank-faced expression of irritation. "Did you require something?"
Ganauche winced at the slightly iced-over question, surprisingly the action was less noticeable with the black patch over his eye socket. "Erm... I wanted to say I'm sorry. About your brother, and you, getting caught up in..."

"...did Don Vongola put you up to this?"

"No, you two left before I could say anything. Before I was even released from the Suns' wing. I wasn't allowed to even go this far, until I learned to shoot a gun with... this." The man gestured to his missing eye and then scratched the back of his head, knocking the straps holding the patch askew. He cursed, readjusted, then cleared his throat to continue as he shoved his hands firmly into his pockets. "I got chewed out for bringing back something suspicious?"

She stared at him hard for a long moment, then gave a one shoulder shrug and basically dismissed him from mind as she pulled the missing cigarette out from somewhere to light. "You're going to get yourself killed doing stupid shit like that."

"Yeah... that was pointed out to me, several times." The Lightning seemed to almost physically weigh his chances for a moment, then sighed and held up a finger. "One last question?"

Since Shamal was thundering down the second-floor staircase, that was all they really had time for.

Sonya glanced to the same sight he did, then back to the Ninth Generation Guardian irritably and exhaled a smoky sigh. "What."

She might have decided she wasn't infuriated with him, but that wasn't the same as not minding his presence.

"...how can you take a brat on? Regardless if he's related to you or not?"

Besides the automatic reflex in sinking a hand in Shamal's hair as a footman placed his luggage down on the landing for another to load onto a trolley, Sonya didn't stop her near-glare at the man. "...women cannot become vory. I am not held to the same standards."

Queerly, the thief wasn't even annoyed at the thought. Just that Ganauche was still bothering her.

Well... frankly, female Mafiosi were technically non-existent by traditional rules.

That didn't stop Italian women from keeping up with and sometimes outperforming their male counterparts, and it seemed as if they had that in common with their fellow females in the USSR as well.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 2nd of June, 1969 continued. Napoli Centrale, Naples, Italian Republic.)

Shamal was beyond excited for his first train ride.

Sonya... not so much. If only because she knew how damned boring they tended to be.

Renato didn't look too enthused either, if only because he knew they'd have at least three trains to catch to get from Villa San Giovanni to Munich, West Germany. Several hours on each, as well.

Half a day on a train, and then they apparently had a movie to catch too.

Brat was going to be bouncing off the goddammned walls if they didn't find something for him to do.
A once-frequent train passenger herself, Sonya hadn't thought to get them a compartment at first. It was rare she managed to take the same train for longer than a few hours, which made it not really worth the expense.

The quarter hour drive from Reggio di Calabria to Villa San Giovanni changed her mind for her.

Shamal wasn't annoying, per say. Just Renato was already surly seeming about something, the kid was about to get his hopes of a dashing adventure cruelly curtailed by the very civilized and mostly routine trip, and she really didn't feel like being anyone's buffer today.

Screw them all, she'll take a first-class compartment.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 2nd of June, 1969 continued. A passenger train.)

By hour five, second train of the day, Shamal was thoroughly bored of watching the sea whip by the window interrupted by short spurts of land and maybe a city or two.

He had gone through the simple Russian story books she had brought him twice, long since adapted to the sway and occasional clangs of the train moving under them, and had picked his way through an on-board lunch in the dining car only to eat her traveling snacks the moment they came back to the compartment.

"Mamma? Do you have your tarot cards?"

Sonya frowned thoughtfully as she pulled her nose out of her book. "Somewhere, why?"

"Tarot cards?" Skeptically repeated the lump of a hitman who had sprawled out in front of the doorway like a perpetually napping gargoyle.

Renato tipped his fedora up in order to actually see his fellow passengers.

She shot him a glare. Of course he was awake now, after the Mist brat's eighth time needing the facilities.

The asshole had pretended to be solidly asleep all morning, so he wouldn't have to entertain the brat or deal with responding to his hyperactive chatter. Forcing her todamn near climb over his long legs near barring the compartment doors whenever she and Shamal had to leave for whatever reason.

"…they were a gift."

By smirk alone, the Sun still seemed sardonically amused at the fact she had a deck at all as his tilted his head back to see her fully.

"Can you show me again?" Mist brat asked sweetly, batting big brown eyes at her.

…well, whatever. Letting him mess around with them might occupy him for the last hour they had to go before they could get off the train and go find something to eat for an early dinner.

The thief was not looking forward to the next leg, which was the detour Renato had insisted upon.

It would still take two days, either way. An overnight in Munich or across the Iron Curtain in Czechoslovakia near Babylon wouldn't do more than make it late evening instead of morning for their arrival in Moscow.
"I think they're in my bag." Think, because it was entirely possible she shoved it into the largest of the three suitcases she had with her at the moment.

That one was in the luggage compartment of their train currently. A bit more than she usually traveled with, but really only a fraction of the clothing she had shopped for with Cherep.

Shamal still looked expectant, so she assumed he was waiting for her to dig them out.

"Do you know what you want to ask?"

The unhelpful lump near the compartment doors snorted as he pulled himself upright instead of continue blocking the compartment doors like a surly guard dog.

"Hey! Mamma's really good with those cards! She predicted the… uh," a reminder of his substitute teacher had the kid hunching his shoulders a little defensively, "the thing with Miss Abelli."

The inverted Six of Pentagrams had shown up in Shamal's immediate future, meaning a check on ambitions.

Huh… she had, actually. Weird.

Cocking an eyebrow at the brat's behavior, the hitman nonetheless wiped the skepticism off his face for him in exchange for a blander, faintly superior cast to his features. "I'm sure she did, brat. But things like these always relies on you fitting them into your life somehow, and they're fairly useless before an incident happens. For example, you knew something was going to happen that wasn't good but didn't stop or mitigate it… did you?"

"It really is based a lot on coincidence, kid." Chipped in the thief as she dug out the box from the depths of her luggage.

It hadn't been in the newer, bigger case but the smaller and worn one. Her old one she was seriously contemplating giving to someone. Maybe Scruffy.

Sliding the cards out of the little wooden box as she sat back down, she shuffled them anyways. "Not to say it isn't something fun to do to pass the time, but you shouldn't put much stock into it."

Shamal rolled his eyes at the both of them, plopping himself down across from Sonya on the other bench. "I want to know… if I should do what I'm thinking of doing."

Sonya blinked at him. Renato gave the kid a sideways look.

Mist brat pointedly shuffled away from his guardian with a semi-suspicious look to him before turning back at her expectantly. "What?"

"…okay..." Five card spread, then.

Maybe just four?

She could draw an extra one if there was need.

Offering the deck to be cut, which he did in his usual messy fashion, and the Russian laid them out on the bench next to her. "So, starting off, this represents you right now."

Inverted Tower. That was… actually slightly alarming.

Preferably they could take it literally. Shamal was a bit confined in a train car. He wasn't particularly
happy with that, or wouldn't be, given enough time.

Otherwise… she'd be bothering Renato for a list of places she could buy in fairly short order.

…because if the brat was being confined or stifled in the Iron Fort...

"...moving on to your actual question." Sliding the foreboding Tower card into the bottom of her deck before Shamal could bug her about what it meant, she was much happier to see the next card was less dire. "King of Cups, fitting."

He gave her a look, because this card had a very obvious water-theme going on. There was even a dolphin depicted leaping out of water, usually it was just a statue or a carved fountain instead.

"Probably referring to your Mist, it's obviously a sign of noble things and water. Generally, the King of Cups is thought to be a fair man. One of business, law, or divinity. Also, generally favorable to those that are scientifically inclined, have a mind for the rules and laws, or those with artistic talents."

Mostly Mist things, in nature. They had to know what rules they could break and still be believable with whatever, be creative in the application of their Flames or risk someone breaking through the Constructions, and it was a water-type Flame. She only suspected where the 'scientist' part came in, which would or wouldn't be born out in the fullness of time.

Shamal puffed up a bit, pleased with it so far. Renato looked less sold, but at least less dismissive overall now.

"Things you need to address… Eight of Wands. Motion through the immovable. Activity in undertakings. Speed, hope, and a general understanding that which they signify is at hand."

Was haste a bad thing or a good thing if this was what needed addressing?

Well… whatever the brat was planning on, he needed to pick his time well. "Could mean anything from the fact we're traveling now, or the best opportunity is now, approaching quickly, or you only have a limited but fast window of opportunity."

Sonya picked up the last card.

"The downside, or what you need to consider. The Fool… inverted. Negligence, absence, carelessness, apathy. Whatever you plan on, there is a risk of it not being appreciated or cared for."

Shamal's eyebrows about meshed with his hairline. "Wow…"

Fairly obvious advice. A creative kid, needing to be careful of his timing, because there was a risk whatever it was wouldn't be taken care of or appreciated by the recipient. Maybe just Sonya and Renato wouldn't appreciate whatever he was planning, too.

When that seemed all he was willing to give for the moment, the hitman looked over at her instead of the old tarot cards in her hands. "Is this why you keep thinking 'Classical' and 'Inverted' for Hard or Soft?"

"…sort of." The thief was still of the opinion the Polarizations had gotten screwed up somewhere, and that someone really needed to go through it all and sort out which should be which, but also 'Classical' and 'Inverted' sounded a hell of a lot better than 'Hard' and 'Soft'.

They were Flames. Will-fire. Physically affecting they might be, but they had no physical presence
themselves. Using *hard* and *soft* for an additional descriptor for Flames was a bit weird.

Unless they were counting Mist Flames. Which were as heavy as the user wanted.

Fucking *Mists*. Always a damn exception to everything.

"Alright. I've a question for your deck." Still suspiciously eyeing the thing in her hands as she absently shuffled them. "How do we do this?"

"…you don't have to tell me what the question is, I can just interpret better if you do. Think of your question, cut the deck however you want, and I'll lay out five cards which should hold some advice."

The man plucked the cards out of her hand, shuffling the oversized deck himself as he thoughtfully studied the likely hand-painted backs. He did hand them back eventually, well after he had mixed up the deck even better than Shamal's messy piles could hope to match. "Alright. Impress me."

Sonya gave him a flat glare for his challenging tone as she laid out five cards. "First card represents the main issues. Five of Cups… a loss, but something remains. Three have been taken, but two are left. Generally favorable in spite of the cost, sometimes taken to mean success in enterprise."

"Second describes current challenges and obstacles," she blinked at the next one strangely, "Six of Cups, inverted. It's… the future and renewal. New relations, new knowledge, new environment. That which will come to pass presently."

"Now that's more like it." He muttered as he slumped back into the upholstered bench. "Next."

Sonya threw her book at him, irked even more when he ducked his head and it bounced off the wall of their compartment. "Behave."

"Yes, mother."

"Third card, underlying and hidden factors you need to be aware of." Eyeing him severely first, if only to be sure he wasn't going to keep on mocking her and that he handed the book back, she only looked down at what was drawn when he gave her a tiny shrug of a shoulder in apology. "The Ace of Pentacles. Contentment, ecstasy, swift thought, and gold. Hmm… it's actually the best card to draw, but why you got this as hidden factors is strange."

"Because it's random, Sonya."

Right. Still…

"Fine. Next is the people, things, or ideas that may help."

…the hell?

"Renato, you did mix these up, right?"

"Of course I did."

"…you got another Pentacle card." After two Cup cards in order. One of which was inverted, how they got back in order if slightly twisted was something to wonder. "The Ten of Pentacles. Gain, riches, family matters, archives, and the abode of family."
He looked about as confused as she felt, at least until he considered her thoughtfully for a long moment. "Last one?"

"How to improve your chances of success. The… Six of Pentacles, inverted. Again?" She pulled the next card, which was the Eight of Pentacles. At least the one after was the Two of Wands, inverted. "Well… this means a check of ambitions like this. But… I pulled this for Shamal earlier in the week, and it was with some of the Major Arcana cards..."

Eight of Pentacles was literally translated to 'a young man in business who has relations with a dark girl/the questioner', and since Sonya drew it… it was referring to the Inverted Sun across from her as he was the answer to her wordless question. An inverted Two of Wands was surprise, wonder, emotion, trouble, and fear.

Seriously… the hell?

The hitman shrugged. "Luck. By statistical probability alone, there is a chance to shuffle any deck and end up with all of them in exact order. Don't worry about it, little lady Sonya."

"…still kind of weird, Mister Renato." Shamal contributed. "Aren't we going to visit a thief's home? Which would be a place of riches, and with mamma likely a library or two for the 'archive'."

"MY library is in a storage locker somewhere else, thank you." She paused and tried to recall if she had shoved another load of books from her room in there or not. Additionally, if there were still a crate of books or something in Lisa's attic. "…mostly."

"And I already think little lady Sonya can help me out with something." Renato drawled out, batting a hand at the kid absently. "I asked her about it nearly a month ago."

"It wasn't that long." The thief in question muttered, shuffling the deck a few more times just to see what the top four would end up being. "And I set a few of my people on it, a Mist and a Lightning. They should have the bare basics to be found locally for us when we get there."

He tipped his fedora to show he heard, kicking out his legs again for another nap. "My thanks, Sonya."

A rather sharp bump on the tracks had her tarot cards sliding off the bench to scatter on the floor. Shamal helped her pick them up again, but Renato merely lifted his shoes to the bench seat across from him so he wouldn't be in their way.

She ended up holding the Hanged Man Card, inverted, when the rest of the deck was picked up and neatly returned to her. Which when upright was a symbol of martyrdom and wisdom in suffering.

As a symbol of the man across from her and even to what she was returning to, wasn't too bad of a representation.

Selfishness, indeed.

(Tuesday the 3rd of June, 1969. Munich, Federal Republic of Germany.)

"Several hours out of our way, into a country we really don't have to visit and isn't great for crossing the Iron Curtain… all to see a Pippi Longstockings film?"
"It's not showing anywhere else." Renato answered the thief he was following a bit defensively. Awkward hadn't been the word to use for the hour and a half the film took to play out. Excruciating, maybe.

Shamal had made up for a bit of it, because the Mist brat was truly that thrilled to be taken to see the movie made of a little Swedish TV shows one of the maids got him hooked on. Sonya's truly baffled expression the entire time had been actually slightly amusing, as a pig-tailed redhead girl who could maybe last a whole second arm-wrestling her got up to inane domestic things on screen.

The whole issue the mother of the friends took with a girl living on her own kind of sat ill with him, given the sheer number of parentless children he knew for a fact ran about every major city and then some. He was once one of those children, Shamal would've been too had he not realized one particular contact usually had a son with him that was conveniently missing from the local police reports.

Hypocrite fictional mothers aside…

"Where are we going?" Shamal asked in some truly horrible accented German from the hitman's side curiously, which the older man had to admit was a good question.

The train station was behind them.

Sonya stopped only long enough for the both of them to get closer to her, reaching out a hand so the brat could hold it. "Well... since we're here... we might as well do the things we'll need done to cross the Iron Curtain. I dislike going through the Germany section, but I still know how to do it."

Renato's metaphorical ears pricked. "We're still a few hours away from the border, aren't we?"

"Which just means the people we're looking for keep to about here in order to avoid any suspicious traffic giving them away." She tilted her head as she studied the road signs, tugging the brat along with her as she picked a direction. "We can't go the usual way most of the travelers go, for one that takes weeks even if I... ah, hasten the paperwork along. So..."

The thief came to a stop at a rather dingy looking bar.

"Hungry, gentlemen?"

No, Renato wasn't going to touch a damn thing in there in order to avoid whatever disease it was festering and the brat filled up on popcorn and lemonade during the movie. Sonya didn't even wait for an answer, setting off... pass the door she had stopped at.

The hitman blinked, shared a faintly confused look with Shamal, and headed off after her. Instead of the actual bar, the Russian had rounded a corner and entered the backdoor into the kitchens. By the time the Italians had caught up, she was already deep in conversation with a matronly cook with a nasty scar on her face that gave her a permanent scowl.

Whatever language it was, it wasn't German or Russian.

She gave them both a backwards glance, before returning to the other woman. The elderly cook didn't dismiss them from mind as easily. "...I'll tell my boy you've got another trip for him, but you're still paying extra, girly."
Switching to German as well, the Russian shrugged. "Obviously. I know for a fact he's more than happy to do so, so stop trying to convince me to pay more for that too."

"Of course he is, getting paid to stick it to those Communist Bastards? He'd do it for free anyways." What seemed to honestly be a smirk ended up looking more like a sneer on her face, with how the scar bisecting her lips pulled at her features. "You can take offense."

"I'd rather not." Sonya replied flatly, handing over their ticket stubs and a fair bit of money. "I expect it all to be waiting for us in Babylon."

Giving a sharp nod, the steel-haired matron of the kitchen glanced to the males with her. "You all eaten yet?"

"A little, but not dinner. Anything good?" The thief planted a hand on her hip. "Preferably what you haven't spat in?"

"There's the onion pie… or you could try the goulash."

"I'd rather keep my taste buds, thank you."

"…you really are your mother's daughter, aren't you?" With an extra expressive roll of her eyes, the older woman gestured to a rickety table in the back of the kitchen. "Seat yourselves, I'll bring it out."

"Her name is Maddalyn, she runs a smuggling ring through her extended family." Sonya informed him helpfully in Italian as she hoisted the brat onto a bench and took a seat herself next to him. "Luggage isn't quite as risky as people, so her son will take our things from the train station to a bit north of where we'll end up."

"How do you know her?" The woman didn't seem like someone the Storm-Cloud would've ever bothered to talk to, especially if she practically lived in her kitchen as it seemed to be the case.

"She's one of my mother's old contacts. Maddie helped me out a lot when I started, until I learned to do things myself." Sonya gave 'Maddie' a nod of thanks for three plates of pie, which honestly looked a lot better than Renato had been afraid of. "But there's only so many times you have yourself smuggled through the Curtain before you figure out how to do it yourself."

"Speak in a civilized tongue or not at all in my kitchen, girly."

"Of course, Maddie." The thief responded in English, earning herself a harsh sounding snort. "I do not have much use for smugglers now, so what little I do need smuggled is pass through her."

"Aren't there quite a few of them around here?" She had made mention of the 'people they were looking for', more smugglers maybe?

"Yes, but I would not trust them with a toothpick. Some of them rob their clients blind the moment they can, usually right after you cross somewhere tricky and only one-way." Sonya polished a fork with the hem of her shirt that she pulled from a pocket to stab her presumably 'onion pie' with. "We have a few hours north to drive, to about near Lindburg. That's where we'll be crossing."

"Are we going to take a walk?"

"Something like that. You will see when we get there." Whatever it was, and she was deliberately not thinking about it either, had her smirking again.

The damnable thief had hit on a way to keep her own secrets. Small ones, but after several years of
being able to skim thoughts it was rather novel to him not to know again.

Shamal, after an experimental nibble, went to town on the food. Since both him and the Russian saw nothing wrong with what they were eating, Renato tried it.

…not bad. For a hole-in-the-wall little German pub of questionable sanitary habits.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 3rd of June, 1969 continued. Outskirts of Lindberg, Federal Republic of Germany.)

"…you have to be joking."

"Nope." His expression was so worth the small headache she gave herself in not thinking about it.

Not quite Lindberg, but near the outskirts, there was a nice forested stretch of land. Within the forest there was an old, overgrown barn. Fifteen feet away from its non-existent doors was the burned-out cellar of a long-destroyed house, which had another basement level underneath.

That level was still occupied.

By a very smarmy, oily man that claimed to be the owner of the land.

Sonya didn't buy that for a moment, she had known the guy that had been here before him, but he did have the safest underground tunnel from West Germany to Czechoslovakia carved out of his 'back room'.

Thankfully the man who made the Storm-Cloud's skin crawl was also as greedy as any good thief. Part of her arrangements with Maddie included paying him off the moment she called back to her from the other side, ensuring the man didn't try anything funny.

"Same as usual for me. Three hundred extra for the kid." She informed the man in German, then pointedly glanced to Renato's highly skeptical features. "I wouldn't suggest you try anything with him, frankly."

He was greedy, unscrupulous, and quite possibly a degenerate of the worst sort… but not stupid. Greasy tucked the couple thousand euros she bought him off with into a pocket and sauntered off back to the habitable parts of this underground passageway.

"…Sonya."

"I know. Part of the reason I don't come through here anymore." She suspected he had 'disappeared' the man that originally ran this smuggling route, back when she had been fifteen.

It had been an unpleasant surprise, but thankfully she had been with the Großes Volksfest at the time and had hadn't had to rely on him to get out of the country and back into the Soviet Union.

"But it's the closest one to where you had us get off, no complaining now."

The Mafioso's shoulders twitched as the greasy man barred the doors behind them. "You could have said something, and I would've picked a more northern city. Can we trust him?"

"Of course not. But this was here long before him and will continue to be here long after he's gone."

It was one of the ways the underworld helped smuggle the Jews out of Germany back before World
War Two officially broke out. It had been utterly fascinating to find out, because she couldn't remember reading anything about tunnels in any history book she ever picked up.

"Come on, it's about a five-kilometer walk."

"In a tunnel?" Shamal pointedly kicked the wall, dislodging dust and all manner of other things into the air. "How are we going to see where we're going? There's no light."

"You're a Flame user, are you not?" Sonya let her Cloud Flames light up her right-hand fingers and held them out, so they would work as a torch. "I wouldn't suggest you do this anywhere but in underground areas you can secure somehow… but it's a good light if you need it."

The light purple light her Flames gave off made them all seemed washed-out a little, right on up until Renato added bright yellow to the mix and they could see exactly how dingy the walls really were. Shamal's watery Mist Flames actually didn't give off enough light to see by alone, until he made it.

…interesting.

This would exhaust him something fierce and letting him tire himself out would at least ensure he'd sleep… even on a moving train. She'd still be carrying the brat probably more than half way.

"I think… next time, we go a different way." Renato informed her drolly as they started walking.

"There is a very nice Mafia Land maintained contact I had originally planned on us meeting with out in Federal Yugoslavia, who has a very nice scenic sea route past a bribed stretch of a blockade. But you insisted on this detour, Renato."

The hitman snorted at her as he stalked off down the pitch-black tunnel before the woman and child.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 3rd of June, 1969 continued. Šumava, Czech Socialist Republic.)

"Is that it?" Renato inquired skeptically as they reached daylight on the other end of the West Germany–Republic of Czechoslovakia smuggler's tunnel. "This is how people get past the Iron Curtain?"

It actually was closer to evening than just late afternoon, but there was some light still out. A sliver of moon and the last blush of sunset, but it was still more light to see by than they had five seconds ago.

"It changes, depending. But pretty much." Sonya shifted where Shamal was napping on her back, getting him to stop sliding down her shoulder and instead sit firmly between her shoulder blades.

She wanted a cigarette… but didn't have a hand free.

Also… smoking when the brat was so close to her was a kind of bad thing, right?

"The tunnel will be close up for about a month, meaning no one else can go through it until anyone suspicious of how we got across runs out of leads, and then it'll open up again for another group. Close down, open up, so on."

"Is there anything we have to do on this side?"

"Yes. Last thing we need are forgeries that says we passed the border legally, we'll get them… in another kilometer or so." She stepped out of the tunnel, to let the hitman drop the trapdoor over the breach in the ground and kick over some of the soil and loam that hid it from casual inspection.
They really didn't have to, but it was polite.

Scowling at the dirt that was now coating his shiny Italian leather shoes, he gave her a pointed look. "I'm feeling distinctly underwhelmed by all this."

Sonya sighed heavily, hunching a bit against the chilly wind starting to bite into her despite a brat laid out over her back and at least two layers of clothing. "Tell you what. One day, when we don't have the brat with us, I'll take you through one of the more risky routes. There'll probably be a murder or two needed just to endear ourselves to some petty crime lord, someone will double cross us at a bad time, and we'll lose our things at least once if not more to some idiot looking to make a quick mark."

Renato, the murdering asshole, looked delighted by her description as they left the forest clearing behind them. "Sounds like a date, little lady Sonya."

Date?

Was that what he liked to do on a date?

Well… no wonder why the man never kept the same girlfriend for very long. Very few women would consider a night of death-defying criminal activities to be something to relax with.

"…you sometimes miss the point so badly I sometimes wonder if we're even speaking the same language."

"I beg your pardon?" Snapped the thief, incensed. "There is nothing wrong with my understanding of Italian."

Shamal's pointy chin dug into her left shoulder. "Mamma… argue later. M' tired."

"Sorry, kid. Few more minutes of walking to go, then we've only have two more trains." The tired Mist brat made a sound halfway between a groan and a hum of acknowledgement, then apparently decided to doze a bit more and buried a cold nose in her hair… and coincidentally the nape of her neck. "...also, I feel I must point out that your statement wasn't a 'no'."

She wouldn't put it past the brat to be trying to make her shiver just because he was bored, tired, and slightly cranky. A bad combination for any Mist.

Renato actually stopped dead for a second to contemplate the issue. "I've never tried that, if you wanted to know. A tour of some city's seedy underbelly with someone competent and beautiful actually sounds delightful, now that I think about it. I would also like to point out that you didn't deny it was a date."

"A date to be set, yes?" It was an outing with a friend, why he wanted to make a point of it was beyond her. Sonya came to a stop as well, even if they were one damn hill away from the rendezvous spot where they'd actually get a lift away from the scene of their little border crossing crime. "When two people plan on doing something together at a predetermined time. Why are we going over this?"

"You know, I'm starting to half suspect you're doing this deliberately."

"Do what deliberately?"

Recognizing her patience was thinning either by using his mind-reading bullshit or just from simply knowing her that long, the hitman dropped the subject… with a little ill-grace. "One of these days…"
you’re going to look back on this conversation and feel foolish."

"…if it's not today, can we keep going? We're almost there."

There were indeed flickering lights up ahead between tree trunks, and at least she knew Maddie's son was the dependable sort that wouldn't abandon them if they were slightly late reaching him. Damned if she could recall what his name was, though.

Renato sniffed in irritation, glancing to her and the brat. "He's not getting too heavy for you, is he?"

"…Renato, I can bench press a train engine. The brat's not that much of an issue."

There was a very long pause, wherein only the crunch of dead leaves underfoot sounded since they were avoiding the dead branches. "…can you?"

"Thereabouts." Sonya shrugged, which earned her a grumpy Mist complaint as that jarred him out of his warm spot on her back. "I've moved a couple tons before with little issue. For short bursts, admittedly."

He made a tisking sound, softly because they were coming up on something he probably wasn't entirely sure of. "I thought you weren't sure if that was a sustained thing."

"I'm not. But it seems as long as there is force, I can sustain anything. I've also never run out of Cloud Flames before. Only came close once, and I was pretty young then."

"Ho?"

"I was… nine? Or ten. No… it was somewhere around there, I didn't really pay much attention back then. Tats and I, and her gang, robbed a local jewelry store." She visually judged how far away the lights were, and how much time it would take them to cross the distance to them. "Ask me about the Cartier job later."

Renato adjusted his hat, side-eyeing her thoughtfully. "I know a Cartier Jewelry branch... don't tell me you cleaned one out before you even had double digits to your age."

"Okay, I won't tell you then."

"Sonya."

"Renato. We're almost there." Grinning slightly at the brief flash of something torn between exasperation and rueful resignation aimed in her direction, the thief lengthened her stride even if that bounced Shamal slightly.

He had to wake up for a little bit anyways, or he'd never get to sleep tonight.

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(Wednesday the 4th of June, 1969. Babylon, Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.)

Babylon, a tiny town in the Federation of Czechoslovakia, had about a hundred residents. Officially.

In reality, there was closer to four hundred that would call the place home.

Mainly smugglers, even if there wasn't an actual underworld route through the Iron Curtain for about ten kilometers in either direction. It was actually a staging area, where those that used the place either
setup or recollected after ducking the border patrols.

More than half of them were either there illegally or straight out criminals.

Unfortunately, there was only one tiny inn that charged truly *exorbitant* rates for even one night.

Even knowing the reasoning behind *why*, which was to discourage anyone not a resident either legally or illegally from lingering too long and messing up their 'cover' as a tiny farming village that had little to nothing to do with the borders, Sonya still shelled out the money and endured the glares.

Shamal was dead asleep the minute he could gracelessly flop onto the bedspread. On *top* of the blankets, the brat.

Setting both her own and his luggage down next to the door, she sighed and removed his shoes for him.

She had to admit, she was pretty damn tired herself.

It was *probably* tomorrow already, but they could catch the Trans-Siberian Express and make up some of the time they were losing if they reached Brest in the Byelorussian SSR in time.

However, this *wasn't* the best place to catch some sleep.

Again, about three hundred criminals of various flavors lived around here. If someone wasn't awake enough to respond to any tricks the natives tried, they'd end up robbed of anything of value in three seconds flat.

"*Why do you think I slept all morning?*" A jab to her back nudged the thief towards the bed as well when she would've moved away to deal with the kid's footwear, the hitman taking a rickety chair from a corner and setting it where he'd have a decent view of the door. "*Get some rest, you're the one we're following.*"

…but point. Even still, she hesitated a moment. "...*you'd have a better sightline from the bed.*"

Between a rickety, possibly splinter-filled chair and a worn if comfortable looking bed wasn't much of a choice. The hitman eyed her, the bed, the brat, and the door in order while she sat on a corner of the bed herself.

Hiking up her skirt to unlace her boots while Renato deliberated on how comfortable he wanted to be tonight, Sonya only got one boot off before he reached a decision.

"*You better keep the brat to your side of the bed.*"

"*Will do.*" Wasn't much of a hardship, Shamal tended to be a grabby bed-partner.

Stripping off her jacket, wiggling out of her skirt, and toeing off her other boot, she was about as ready for bed as she felt like getting. Mist brat didn't even stir as she swept him under the covers with her.

"...*Sonya?*

"*Hmm?*"

The bed dipped under his weight, she supposed he was finished losing what parts of his outfit he didn't want to spend a night in, and there were a few light thumps as he removed his own shoes to that end. "*Why is your skirt on the end of the bed?*"
"Because I don't feel like sleeping in it."

Sonya shivered as icy air brushed over her bare legs, snapping an eye open to glare at the asshole that had lifted the bedding up. "Renato... unless you want to lose a hand, drop it."

"Very sorry, little lady Sonya." There was still a beat before he released the covers. "...goodnight?"

She snorted at him. "Night... asshole."

(ooo000000)

(Wednesday the 4th of June, 1969. Babylon, Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.)

"Do you think she's awake?"

"...probably not. Go get cleaned up, Shamal. Let your mamma wake up on her own." She had carried the brat for most of the night, Renato wasn't surprised she was still sleeping.

A bit with exactly how she was, but even Clouds got tired if you kept them awake long enough.

The Mist bounced off the bed, causing the still sleeping thief to twitch and tighten her grip on the hitman's shirt reflexively. The older Italian found himself bodily hauled downward a little more, when her arm tried to return under the bedding and pulled him with it.

Renato was just impressed she hadn't broken anything yet. Himself, the brat, or just anything she slept on. As far as he knew anyways.

He was pretty sure the maids would've gossiped about it had she broken some furniture in the Iron Fort at least.

Trying to not pay attention to the half-naked Russian in bed had caused him to miss her initially reaching for him, but he certainly noticed when her hand took up residence on his stomach. Trying to ignore this particular thief burrowing into him for the extra warmth was also highly impossible.

He blamed Shamal. If the brat hadn't woken up earlier needing the bathroom he would've remained between the two of them and fulfilled what seemed to be Sonya's cuddling quota.

Whether or not he should reward the kid for this was another thing.

On one hand... half-naked Russian woman curled up to him. On the other... the probability of startling her and getting punched or beheaded by a sleep-befuddled Storm-Cloud.

She still had her armlet of weaponry around her left bicep.

Thus, why he hadn't removed her hand before it fisted in his shirt and the whole idea of moving it became moot. His finger strength against hers was no contest.

He also wasn't sure how much touching she'd accept when asleep, especially if it didn't come from someone she was used to like the brat.

Renato was sure he'd appreciate this more if he wasn't so fucking tired.

One of these days, he'd get her cornered in a room somewhere and get his preoccupation with her sexuality out of his system. Bed optional, he'd probably be happy to make due with a wall at this point. In spite of her likely habitually learned blind spot when it came to him and sex in the same conversation.
Preferably without the brat.

Shamal's ill-timed interruption last night jarred the Russian's thought process off connecting the idea of an actual romantic date with him and herself together. In the middle of a near-perfect conversation to lead her in that direction as well.

'When two people plan on doing something together at a predetermined time' being all she thought of a 'date', he seriously pitied the idiot that seriously tried to romance the thief when they had been already long regulated to the 'friend zone'.

Oh wait, that idiot was him.

Sonya snapped awake all at once, like someone had thrown a switch, when Shamal's luggage hit the ground as the kid searched for something new to wear. He would admit to holding his breath as the thief sleepily blinked to clear her eyes and she pulled her face away from his side.

She eyed him severely once she realized what was going on. "You're warmer than the brat."

Shamal looked positively insulted as his head popped up from beyond the foot of the bed, his slightly rumpled but clean shirt only half-on. "Hey!"

"Suns. Suns run at higher body temps, brat." With a massive yawn, the thief rolled over to slide out of the bed on the end that wasn't held down by nearly two hundred pounds of Italian hitman. "Tats, my Sun sister, is warmer than me too. It's just… something about them."

"What's your excuse, then?" Renato shot back, hauling himself upright again now that she had released him without so much as an apology for manhandling him. Literally.

"Mmm… 'm a Storm." Almost stuttering out her answer, the completely shameless half-naked woman stretched out first before even glancing at her discarded skirt. Then she eyed her luggage thoughtfully. "Second highest? Erm… don't know about Skies, I think Tyr's never going to let me check his temperature. After Storms is Lightnings, Rains, Clouds, and Mists… I think."

Out of range for his little mind-reading trick or not, Renato could guess what she was thinking probably well enough. There wasn't an en-suite bathroom in the little closet of a room she rented for them, if she wanted to change she'd have to do it in front of the both of them.

Either Shamal was going to get more of an eyeful than he could've gotten before given her habit of sleeping in too-large shirts, or she'd redress in yesterday's clothing.

Since she snatched up the skirt, it appeared as if the brat wasn't going to need an emergency anatomy lesson besides the whole 'big girls have curves and bumps' general knowledge he had to date.

Renato blinked and paused in the act of getting up off the bed himself. One of them had to give the brat 'the talk' still…

…he needed to get some sleep. The kid was not even seven yet.

Admittedly, it seemed as if Shamal slept with his mamma with his head nearly buried in her modest chest. There was probably some major encouragement of hormones going on, but not that much.

Dragging a hand over his face, and firmly pulling his mind out of the gutter when it came to his light-fingered friend, the hitman snatched up his suit jacket and belt. "Are we grabbing something to eat here or later on somewhere else?"
"Later."

"Aww... mamma, I'm hungry."

"Sorry kid." Responed the thief behind him absently. "But I really wouldn't put it past the people here to sell us something poisoned to hasten our leaving. In whatever way it would come about."

"If they're that against outsiders hanging around long," he started, eyeing the creases in his pants irritably as he tied his shoes, "why did they rent us a room?"

"They're criminals, not heartless. It was pretty obvious Shamal couldn't go on much farther." A stomp of something heavy on the floorboards, probably the Russian seating her heel into her boot. "That being the case, we probably have exceeded their generosity already."

"They charged you through the nose for this room." A cupboard of a room, too.

Barely big enough for the bed, the two-shakes-from-firewood-kindling chair was pushing it.

"Again, criminals. Generosity with a price tag." Sonya swept into his line of sight, thankfully dressed, to snatch her oversized purse. Digging into her seemingly bottomless bag, she pulled out the only thing the brat hadn't chomped through yesterday. "Here, have a few of these."

"What are they?" Mist brat was hungry enough to nibble on a dried end of whatever baked good it was tentatively, taking a bigger bite when it apparently agreed with him.

"Rye bread crackers. Biscuits, cookies, whatever. With bits of dried fruit. My mother makes them occasionally, and I made away with a few. They keep really well."

Rye bread cookies?

Renato poked her in the shoulder to get her to hand one over, and indeed it looked as if a small loaf of rye bread had been roughly sliced when fresh to make these. He took a cautious bite, rye wasn't his favorite kind of bread but he also didn't dislike it.

…this was what passed as a Soviet Russia sweet?

A bit like a biscotti, really.

Not bad, the bits of raisins and apricot did cut the bread's strong flavor rather nicely, but it also wasn't what he expected a 'cookie' to ever be. It wasn't crammed with sugar, for one.

No wonder she didn't like Shamal's excessively sugary desserts if this was what she grew up on for 'sweets'.

He tried to swipe the little bag from her, got his fingers slapped for his troubles, and the thief doled out another one for both him and the brat apiece. "You two are not eating all of them. Come on, let's get out of here and feed you both something more filling."

Renato blinked at the little biscuit then at her back as she bent to help Shamal re-pack his suitcase.

He felt strangely insulted he suddenly got put on the same level as the brat after the damn woman spent half the night practically hugging his hip.
"Son of a-" Sonya straightened up upon sighting her foster parents and baby brother waiting for them on the platform at Moscow's Yaroslavskaya railway station, the main service station for the Trans-Siberian Express.

She thought she would at least have time to force the brat through a shower or something before introducing him to her mother.

Renato, who had taken another nap on the sleeper berth in favor over playing yet another card game with a Mist that cheated every moment he thought he could get away with it and a thief that knew quite a few card tricks of her own, nearly rammed his head into their compartment's ceiling as he almost jolted upright while reaching for a gun she knew he had on him. "Shite. Sonya?"

In Russian, since she had barred Italian from being spoken for the rest of their time in the Soviet Union.

"We're… being picked up."

The man slid off the berth quickly, stepping lightly around Shamal's side of the 'go fish' pool to try and see what she had spotted. "Wasn't that the reason you kept calling in? To ensure we were picked up by someone?"

"…I thought they'd send a vor to drive us, Galina said that was the plan the last time I called."

Well… Arseniy was a vor, but not one that usually could be bullied into running a very strongly-opinionated Lightning a small little favor.

"Kid… Lisa's approval will make or break this little visit. I can do everything for you myself… but it will be so much easier if she honestly likes you."

Shamal looked startled at the sudden change of tone, the cards drooping in his hands and about every pair she suspected weren't actually pairs on his side suddenly getting revealed due to him losing his grip on the Constructions obscuring what suit and number they really had.

"Who is Lisa?" Renato demanded shortly, running a hand through his hair to help him wake up a little more and snatching his hat from the peg near the compartment doors.

"…my mother."

"…just your mother? Foster mother, I'm assuming."

Sonya barked out a short laugh, rummaging in her purse for a comb. "Lisa's not 'just' my mother. She, and Arseniy, pretty much run an entire Brigade for my clan. She almost knows everyone and has little strings and favors she can pull for whatever reason comes to mind. My siblings and I were raised as professional thieves in their home, and we never got away with anything under her nose."

Now the hitman was looking slightly blindsided before he slid it all under a professionally pleasant mask, not that she cared much as she was preoccupied with neatening the Mist brat's perpetually disordered brown hair.

"I recognize the big man with the tattoos everyone on the platform is giving a wide berth around as your father, but the kid on his shoulders is…?"
"Valera. Primakov Valerian Arsenevich, my little brother."

"And the brunette lady standing next to him is Lisa?" Renato questioned her absently, then waved back slightly sheepishly as Lisa gave him a pointed smirk and a little politely terrifying wave of her own.

"Yeah. That's her. Primakova Elisaveta Rostislavovna." Tucking away her comb, with naturally kinked waves it was never going to be neat without serious product aid, Sonya caught sight of Shamal's slightly terrified expression and forcibly calmed herself down. "Breath, brat. She's my mother, she's halfway to liking you already just because you're my brat."

Renato waited until the debarking was in progress before giving her a sideways look. "I probably should've asked this before as well... but how do you politely address a Russian?"

"Usually with their last names," Sonya informed him wryly as their passports and papers were being checked and their ticket stubs voided, "like how I gave you Nikishina way back when... actually, to do what you did and address me by my first name without permission is frightfully rude."

"...noted."

"Arseniy should be vor Bazanov if you want to be strictly polite, and obviously Lisa is Primakova. However, since Tats goes by the same name you can also address her as Elisaveta or Elisaveta Primakova without too much issue." Seeing that the brat was also paying her words strict attention, she continued even as they stepped down from the train onto the platform. "While I'll call them Lisa and Arseniy, and Valera, do not until they invite you to."

Renato slid his own paperwork, which was mostly just forgeries, and Shamal's equally fake paperwork into a vest pocket. "Can your little brother invite us to? Or will it be your mother who does so?"

"He can talk. He just... doesn't very often." Then they had no more time for last minute advice, because Lisa wasn't the type to stand by when she wanted something.

The older Russian woman waltzed past the security guards usually stationed to prevent people from getting in the way of those disembarking, Arseniy and Valera on the vor's shoulders in her wake, and swept Sonya up in a firm hug that only lasted a few seconds.

"Daughter. Introductions." Lisa gave her perfectly bland smile, the one she recalled most often from the start of her life under the woman.

Ruthlessly suppressing the wince, as it seemed as if she had done something to annoy her recently, the thief gestured to the hitman first.

"This is Renato Sinclair, a... co-worker and a friend of mine. And this," pulling the Mist brat from out behind her so her foster mother could see him fully, "is Nikishin Shamal Tringali."

The older woman blinked at the kid, and Sonya breathed easier. Apparently, her foster mother hadn't expected the kid to continue using her name even if she knew the Storm-Cloud had offered it.

Shamal slightly stumbled through a Russian greeting, even if she had worked all morning with him on how to pronounce it all correctly.

Obviously recognizing the work of a Mist-imbued language after the work her section of the clan had put into perfecting and exploring that feature of Dying Will Flames, she glanced at her skeptically.
"Wasn't my idea."

"My apologies, but it is standard procedure for trips outside the border where we're from." The hitman chipped in his two cents in a perfectly controlled tone of voice. "It was done before Sonya made mention that it wasn't up here."

Lisa gave him a look of his own but turned back to the visibly nervous brat.

Shamal started cringing under five seconds and fidgeting after ten. 
"...is it true you caught mamma every time she was being naughty?"

Sonya face-palmed. Arseniy made a sound that suspiciously held similarities with a laugh. Valera suspiciously eyed the goings-on from his perch on his father's shoulders.

"That's awesome, mamma! You're sneaky, and if your mamma can still catch you..." While his still horribly accented Russian made the inflections sound off, the gist was pretty obvious.

At least her mother now looked visibly amused. "Sneaky, huh? You're going to have to tell me all the times you've seen Nya being sneaky, young mister Nikishin. I'm sure I have a couple stories I could tell you about your mamma."

"Nya?" Renato repeated amusedly in a near-whisper.

She elbowed him in the ribs. He would've heard that nickname before had he bothered to show up in Mafia Land any time in the last couple of months, so he had no right to tease her about it.

Now, how to ensure the kid didn't make any mention of the Great Christmas Blanket Chase of ’68?

Renato coughed, unconvincingly, to hide a snicker. The thief glared a hole into the underside of his jaw.

Lisa hummed her dratted, horribly inquiring noise at the byplay going on.

Fucking perfect. She gave it half an hour before Shamal spilled the entire story under her foster mother's sweetly inquiring expression.

"Ladies," the Italian hitman glanced at the vor and his son, "gentlemen. I believe we might happen to be in the way."

Arseniy glared to the group's left, Lisa and Sonya glared at those on the right.

Everyone else suddenly found that going around was a phenomenally brilliant idea.

"...I now see where she gets that from." Renato muttered, mostly to himself, after a moment.
Chapter 54

(Thursday the 5th of June, 1969 continued. A Zolotov run hotel, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

One rather excruciating, at least from the few cringes she gave the thief thought so, car ride later and they were left in front of the doors of a very well-appointed hotel.

In the middle of several equally as utilitarian as the other buildings set next to it, down several streets that were nearly jarring in how closely they resembled each other. It was something he had noticed on the short drive, which seemed to be repeating itself rather often.

Size, shape, and use may be different… but the facades of the buildings were similar to the one next to it. And the one next to that, so on and so forth.

Just like how the people on the street had clothing that was very similar to each other's, only differing in size, cut, and a few colors.

Even his own apparel would fit in, if a bit finer in quality it still fit in the suite and ties of the business class. The brat's was more subjective, but the Storm-Cloud's usual blouse and skirt combo seemed to be wildly popular. She had the same issue as him, but it seems quality was one of the few acceptable differences allowed.

"We've been invited to dinner." Sonya informed him shortly, handing the last of the luggage and the reclaimed cage of one Luigi the Chameleon to the bellhop.

Shamal's lizard seemed to have survived the trip and a short wait with her parents decently well… for first class shipping. A few days in a crate in pitch darkness didn't even seem to put the thing off it's feed, it was still ridiculously happy to crunch on a few summer bugs that crawled around Moscow in the Mist's hands.

"With your parents." Renato checked as he accepted a copy of what was presumably their hotel room's keys from the concierge that had come out to hand them over, just because.

Elisaveta had pulled her daughter aside for one mainly serious and half-whispered conversation while the younger woman checked them in. He supposed the invitation had been issued then, while Arseniy was giving Shamal a hand with removing his luggage and the lizard cage from the boot.

Dinner with someone's parents was new. An… odd new.

Didn't things like this happen after you started dating someone?

He might've technically shared a bed with her but she had been dead asleep, and he spent the entire night counting the wood grain in a battered door and listening to Shamal snore.

…why was this all so backwards?

The Soviet Storm-Cloud sighed and gave him a nod. "With my parents. It'll go one of two ways, and frankly I have no idea what Lisa is planning."

"But you know enough to guess how it is going to go?" He asked next, following along as she took the Mist brat by the hand not occupied by his pet and tugged him into a rather elaborate plain looking hotel lobby.
Not a whole lot in what would be termed 'pricy' decorations, but a lot of decorations anyways.

"I've seen her work before, so I know the method... just not the point this time." She tossed over a shoulder with a slight bit of disgruntlement in her voice, bypassing the front desk without glancing to acknowledge them greeting her.

Renato could think of a point but didn't say it as they stepped into a lift. Frankly he was starting to suspect she'd miss it entirely by at least a kilometer or so unless someone took it upon themselves to expressly outline it to her.

Probably with a bullet point list and graphs. Flow charts. Maybe even a diagram or two. Definitely a comparison or three and topped off with a thick book of references she could check against.

The bookworm.

He was sure he'd feel a lot different about the whole 'suffering through dinner with Sonya's parents' if he was actually screwing the woman. At the moment, the hitman really did just want to say no.

...however.

It was sort of like how he kept making her behave even if she didn't want to in the face of the Vongola's upper echelon. She played nice and bit her tongue on occasions when all she really wanted was to tell whoever was bothering her to take a hike with varying amounts of violence, because they and her behavior to them meant something to him.

So... dinner. A likely highly awkward dinner, with the parents of the woman he was not dating but wanted to be.

Just... bloody... fantastic.

"I'll make it up to you." Sonya promised her slightly strained tone of voice, tipping their bellboy who had finished unloading their luggage next to what seemed to be their door with probably more money than the teenager saw in a month and waving him off. "Just... please don't piss Arseniy off."

"I beg your pardon?" Renato splayed the fingers of his right hand across his chest. "Are you implying that I would specifically go out of my way to irritate or annoy a lady such as your mother by insulting her man?"

"Did you or did you not reduce a grizzled old vet to tears on the island for... what was it again?" The thief pretended to think for Shamal's amusement, even tapping a finger against her lower lip for a moment. "Oh, right. For 'fouling the air with sheer moronic stupidity incarnate'. Was that before or after you apparently shot his kneecaps out? And what did he do anyways, spill something on you?"

"...a two-hundred-euro bottle of scotch. That's not the point, little lady Sonya."

"Was it any good?"

"Decently, which made it quite irritating when I lost half the bottle to the clumsy ass, but back to topic. Since your lady mother has not irritated me, I see no reason why I should go out of my way to be an ungrateful guest." Besides which, if he sabotaged Shamal's chances to get his mamma's mother to like him, he'd have to be on guard for the brat's Mist-inspired revenge tricks for years.

Sonya tossed him a still skeptical look, shouldering their hotel room door open.
Renato blinked at the interior her actions revealed. "Are we in a penthouse?"

"...sort of. My clan owns the hotel, there's suites of rooms on certain floors you can only rent for any number of days if you have their backing. I usually live here when in Moscow." Shamal ran ahead of her and jumped up on the couch, both hands wrapped around his equally curiously energetic lizard, earning himself an exasperated look of his own. "Brat, go pick a room and unpack your dratted lizard's cage. I do not want to see it crawling around without you somewhere nearby."

"Exactly here? This room in particular?" He continued when the kid ran off to investigate all the rooms and pick one for himself.

More than likely intending to move himself into her own, just to undercut any attempts to convince him he was getting a bit old to be sleeping with her from happening.

"Yes, why?"

It looked actually lived in, not like her austerely decorated and seemingly rarely used room in her clan's condo on Mafia Land. Said couch of Mist jumping had a blanket that looked hand-knitted tossed over the back, a towering stack of books had taken up residence on the coffee table before it and a stack of even more books ended up used as an end table for the freaking lamp and a glass ashtray. That was just what he could see from the front door.

Sonya had so many books she had started using them as furniture. He didn't know why the thought amused the hell out of him, but it did.

"No reason." Of course, it looked as if she didn't remotely believe him. "What are you doing?"

"Looking... for the... bugs." She twisted something out of the receiver of the in-suite phone, crushing it with a small but audible pop between her fingers then tossing the broken bit of metal and plastic onto her book-coated coffee table. "The KGB, or whomever is it, are not particularly inventive with where they put them... until they are. I guess they'd figure eventually I'll get lulled into a false sense of security and miss one or two... or something."

The Italian stalked into the suite finally, eyeing first the phone then curiously around to see if he could spot another before she found it. "You're on someone's watch-list?"

"Everyone in Russia is on some list somewhere. I'd be more surprised if I wasn't." Next one was under the lamp's shade, which made the hitman snort at how predictable that one was.

What next, a couple in the walls hidden by the paintings?

...yeah, there were. How droll.

There were three she stabbed with something pointy and with a red-tip that didn't look like painted metal pulled from her hair.

"I wouldn't really care, if I didn't find it just creepy." Sonya continued, tucking the pin back to wherever it was she pulled it and reseating the picture frame. "So generally, if I have to leave these rooms for any amount of time, I sweep for bugs on a general principle."

Renato eyed the painting of five dogs in a library reading, an interesting take on the more famed version of five dogs playing poker, which probably said more about her sense of humor than he expected to find in a hotel. "So, I should check everywhere then?"

"I've found them in the bathroom before, which is why I think it's so creepy."
"Noted. One last thing… if they're watching you…"

"…don't worry about it. It's mostly just due to my father being… well, Arseniy, and it's known I both lived with him for a time and also visit the same places he does. Besides… Usov and I have a little… side project coming up. I'll deal with it then."

She was planning something with the KGB. Renato almost wanted to ask… but there was the great possibility anything said at the moment would be recorded by her homeland's government.

It wasn't Mafia Land related, he'd be able to follow up on this some other time and get the full story of what she was planning or did about it. Possibly it might even happen before he left, and he would hear the details then.

…again, interesting. Another puzzle piece of what made Sonya herself.

Regular attempts to monitor her words and actions, even in a place that was supposedly secure like a hotel suite in a building her syndicate owned, would make her naturally more inclined to assume her words were being recorded on general principle. Regularly evading or avoiding people tailing her would've had a hand in shaping some of those maneuvers she used against him last Christmas.

Meaning her habit of staring hard at fixtures or random things held the chance it wasn't the thief contemplating stealing something but her wondering how to bug it and how to remove any recording devices if it was.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 5th of June, 1969 continued. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"I left you alone for fifteen minutes, after we left the hotel. How did you find a flower shop to give Shamal a bunch for Lisa?"

The Italian Mafioso Sinclair drew himself up stiffly, sticking his nose in the air under her daughter's skeptical grey eyes… but flicking glances to the roof for some odd reason. "A gentleman is always prepared, little lady Sonya. If you must know, there is this little thing called asking that helps a small amount when you need to find something fast."

A pet name?

Interesting.

Also interesting was that he didn't deny he got them for the tiny Italian boy to give her.

A spike of yellow agrimony, a couple of thin lacy branches of pale pink peach blossoms, spaced with tiny clusters of white alyssum, and framed by a few green ferns. Thankfulness and gratitude, a compliment of her virtues, surrounded by worth beyond beauty, framed by sincerity.

Lisa was leaning rather towards impressed with Sonya's young hitman friend with the curly sideburns. She could count on one hand and still have fingers left over for males that knew the language of flowers around here.

Then again, it was more a thing done when one wanted to impress a woman and very few actually recalled what more than one or two meant off the top of their heads.

Given the blonde had described said young man as a 'womanizing gentleman' to her before, it was
entirely possible he was using those skills in a way they weren't normally.

Lisa wasn't going to assume he knew more, but she also wasn't going to assume he specifically asked a clerk whose job it was to know exactly what certain flowers meant. Any way it happened, she was given a gift of nature with a double-meaning by a little young boy trying really hard to impress her.

Where, how, or who bought it was mostly irrelevant. Just… interesting to know.

"Thank you, they're lovely." She informed the kid peering up at her hopefully, moving back a step to invite the group into her foster daughter's childhood home. "Would you like to help me display them?"

Shamal wrinkled his tiny nose a little, brown eyes glancing skeptically to the small bundle of plant life in her hands as they entered. "...but they're dead. Not even the plastic ones back home that will last weeks and weeks. Why would you display them?"

"They're not quite dead yet. We'll have a few days of them in bloom before they really die. I would like to display them, so I can appreciate them and their scents more before they're gone."

Her smirk might have been mostly for him, but also…

She and Arseniy had gotten Sonya only well after she held an unnaturally learned abhorrence of asking questions. Kind of fitting in a way, the child she picked up would be full of the ones she'd never ask.

Tatiana had been full of questions for this and that for everything under the sun, even Cherep had asked more than a few of his own when he was still uncertain of them. A lover of all things written of her younger foster daughter's quality never quite ran out of inquiries, and yet when she was about his age she had kept her mouth shut and tried to find the answers herself instead of asking the adults raising her.

It was only well into her teens that she started verbalizing her issues to them in order to get help when she exhausted any other option and, slightly awkward as it was answering some things almost a decade late when other children would've asked them, the older woman had just been happy that learned impulse to keep her mouth shut had finally faded.

Of course, sometimes Sonya convinced herself of some things that weren't quite right using faulty information sources. By the time they realized she had slightly off or outright incorrect assumptions about things it was often an uphill battle to try to fix it.

Renato suddenly cut a glance over to said blonde in question, who only arched an eyebrow in response. He flicked a glance back to Lisa and then to her again, which strangely made her daughter a bit annoyed by the narrow glare he got in return. A tiny shrug and a gesture to the entrance way of the house was her only answer.

"...I'll tell you later." Sonya muttered lowly before sweeping past both him and her foster mother, patting Shamal on the head as she likely went to go actually greet her little brother this time.

…again, interesting.

This was the second silent conversation in the same day she had witnessed the two of them have, and she still had no idea what they were communicating. The fact they could at all, when by all reports they had infrequent meetings to catch up in, said very good things about what kind of relationship they shared.
One might have been a 'shut up', 'are you joking', 'I said shut up' kind of conversation… but she really had no idea what this one could be about.

She hadn't held any real concerns, Arseniy had seen them both together once and held none either but being able to get confirmation yourself was always appreciated in their line of work.

"Mafioso Sinclair, would you do me a small favor," best get this part out of the way first, no matter who it was they always had to comment about it, "take the vase in the living room, where Nya went, and bring it to the kitchen for us?"

She gained a slightly confused and semi-scrutinizing look, but the man touched the brim of his hat in acceptance and stalked off down the hall to follow her daughter.

Lisa gave a highly curious Shamal a serene little smile and held a finger of the hand not holding flowers to her lips.

"…Sonya."

"Hmm?"

"…the only vase in here is a Ming Dynasty vase."

"Yes? I assume Lisa wants it?"

"…a. MING. Dynasty. Vase."

"I gave it to her for her birthday."

"Sonya. She's going to display flowers in it."

"That's why I gave her it. What else would one do with a vase?"

There was a very long pause.

"You gave your mother a MING dynasty vase… to display cut flowers in."

"Renato, I just said that."

The young Italian child of her daughter's probably didn't know why the older one was so confused, she doubted he knew or cared much that a vase like the one in question was almost priceless, but he found the humor in hearing the exchange and the man in question's frustrated and confusion laced statements anyways. He had a tiny fist shoved between equally tiny teeth with a slight gap showing where he had lost a baby tooth, biting down hard to muffle his snickers as they listened.

"The only other thing a vase can do is collect dust or hold some kind of liquid, and I don't think it would work right to hold lemonade or juice." Sonya's voice continued in a matter of fact tone, slightly distracted sounding as Valera probably demanded more of her attention. "It's too big for the fridge. Also… it's kind of… ugly. Flowers makes it better."

"I…" A pause. "…you…" Another. "…I give up. Fucking thieves."

"Excuse you, there is a toddler in this room."

"…sorry." After a few floorboards creaked, the hitman came back with a very flat expression carrying the vase in question. He glared down at the child laughing at him, then flicked a very frustrated glance at her.
"No one,"Lisa started in a low tone, gesturing for both males to follow her,"has been able to convince Sonya that the vase in your hands shouldn't be used for flowers. Nearly everyone that has ever seen it has tried and failed."

Nearly, because Tatiana had just found it funny and Arseniy hadn't cared much beyond his favorite gifting his lover with a bit of the fine quality loot she had stolen.

Renato Sinclair had some impressive control over himself. Aggravated and more than a little confused he may be, he still didn't snap at her for setting him up for that conversation. He also didn't snap at the child still snickering as he trotted along into the kitchen with them, however annoying or galling it had to be for him.

"I did that for two reasons. Firstly, everyone has tried it and now that it's out of the way you can hopefully focus on something else." Filling a pitcher with water after checking the color of the soup on the stove, she poured it into the exotic and priceless vase in question as the older Italian held it out for her like the gentleman he apparently was. "Secondly, we do not value the same things most others do. We're thieves, after all. Something's typical price in general means almost nothing to us."

Lisa smiled at Shamal as the kid held up the bouquet for her to take.

"Honestly, I like these better than any old vase. Even if my daughter gave it to me for a birthday."

The child looked thrilled with the success of the token, but it was the older man's reaction that interested her more.

"I didn't require that lesson." The elder of the two informed her blandly, still holding the vase for her as she ensured the fern leaves weren't dipped in water. "I noticed. About two years ago."

"I regret to inform you it's going to be a theme here, as she comes by that quirk honestly."

That was news to him, and he eyed her skeptically.

"You've seen Sonya's apartment, yes? The end-table of books? Bad habit she's had since childhood. But within that stack is a complete seven-volume set of Fyodor Solntsev's Drevnosti Rossiskago Gosudarstva that I honestly think she's forgotten is there. But collectors would pay a pretty ruble to have it, not that she would ever give up a book... and she uses it to support a lamp." Lisa smirked slightly at the both of them, taking the arranged vase from the man to set back in its place. "There is an antique Louis XV couch stolen from the Winter Palace in our clan's headquarters... we use to seat people waiting to see a nurse or one of the Sun medics."

Such as they were, and usually only when Tatiana was visiting.

The hitman twitched once before he followed along with his young charge out of the kitchen.

"If you are lucky enough to follow her to work one of these days, if you get anything to eat at the clan's internal bar it will be served on priceless antique china with real silverware." She continued on pleasantly, maybe a bit ruthlessly but if they reacted like rookies did when here on Sonya's reputation... "The goblets are gold and sometimes have gems impressed into their forms, not that very many actually ask for a glass to go with their liquor. The rugs on the second floor could probably buy a small country, the furniture on that floor or higher probably cost more than you could make in a week, not to mention all the stolen paintings and wall hangings, and... my daughter once robbed the contents of three jewelry stores, in a row, on a whim."

Sonya gave her an odd look from the floor across from Valera, as she had grown more than used to priceless things being used as everyday objects and probably didn't know why she was bringing it all
up if it was just a fact of daily life here. "It wasn't on a whim, Lisa. Dmitriy needed those rocks. And it was five."

"My apologies, sweetie. Five jewelry stores, mainly so they could melt, break, and pulverize the remains into pretty gem dust." Lisa set the truly elegant if bulbous vase down on a stand she had gotten after being gifted the item it displayed.

She really did think it looked even better with the flowers, honestly.

Renato opened his mouth, shut it, and then glanced at her daughter. "Sonya, quick question."

"...okay?"

"How much money have you blown through finding those gemstones of yours?"

The younger thief on the floor blinked at him once, before frowning and absently accepting the plush toy thrust on her from her little brother. "Was I supposed to keep track? I don't know, Renato. It's been a couple years and we've gone through several jewelry store contents. Maybe Galina would know..."

Sonya frowned even more at Valera when yet another of his toys was shoved into her already occupied hands.

"Are we really doing this?"

Apparently, the answer was yes because the moment she took the little horse figurine Valera next held up a set of building blocks in pudgy child hands.

Eying the youngest child in the room and the results of his antics, the hitman tilted just enough to see into the toy box her son had dragged into the middle of the room where his big sister was sitting.

Even Shamal looked curious, if uncertain he would be welcome to sit next to the younger woman.

"What is he doing?"

"It's a Cloud thing, I think." Lisa blinked in surprise, shooting her daughter a look she missed because she was already accepting a set of tin soldiers with the plush sitting in her lap and a horse figurine balanced on one knee. "He's giving me first use of items that are important to him, because I'm older and stronger and... well, pack. It's... a show of respect, I guess... if a bit childish."

Since exactly when was her son a user of Dying Will Flames of Cloud?

"He's not active, Lisa. Like Arseniy." Sonya had glanced back up at them, apparently catching the unspoken question on her face. "...of course, I don't really expect him to stay that way."

"We'll discuss this later." Especially why it was happening when Valera was two years of age to the point her admittedly very experienced daughter could identify and attribute certain things to it. "Dinner's almost done, go wake up your father."

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 5th of June, 1969 continued. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Aside one tricky bit, when she told Renato exactly what made borscht so red and tangy that made
him pause for a full second deciding if he was squicked out by that or not, dinner wasn't totally horrible.

Shamal hadn't cared a whit for why the soup was the deep red color it was or what went into it, he liked it anyways. Aside for asking for more sour cream that made her wince slightly, he cleared two bowls by himself.

Sonya supposed she should ask Lisa to teach her to make the stuff, including the beet sour.

Nasty, smelly beetroot-based liquid that it was. Most fermented things reeked to high heaven, she supposed it shouldn't be that surprising.

Arseniy, Valera, and Sonya herself were all the kinds of people that ate with a purpose. They didn't really tend to talk much if they were eating a meal. Lisa was less so and had taught her foster children to be but bad habits persisted, so she could keep up with asking Renato a bit about daily Italian life since the hitman was the type would could both eat and talk. Shamal chipped in a few times, eyeing her foster father speculatively and her foster mother hopefully.

Valera got semi-cautious looks from the Mist, probably because Shamal had likely gotten the idea Sonya was just an odd Cloud and most Classical Clouds wouldn't like him on general principles and he was mainly flatly ignored as inconsequential in return.

She hoped delaying that wouldn't adversely impact how her baby brother viewed her brat, but that was an unknown at this point she really couldn't help.

The youngest thief in the room still actually did wonder how that would go when they were formally introduced to each other. The two of them hadn't had to interact much yet, Valera ended up traveling either on Arseniy's shoulders or in Lisa's arms and rarely left the house without one or both with him.

She kind of wanted Usov to go through what Shamal knew of Mists, Clouds in general, and any misconceptions he had first before trying to introduce her little brother to her brat.

"Nya, basement." Lisa instructed her once she was done eating. "Take your Italians with you."

"...can I?"

"You'd do it anyways, wouldn't you?" Asked the older woman, giving her son a slight smirk in return for the expectant look suddenly pinned on him. "Sorry, Valera. Still too young yet. You can go with your sister downstairs in another year or two, not a day before."

"...maybe." Sonya admitted to her mother, earning herself a snort from Arseniy, before sliding her seat back and crooking a finger at her brat. "But it is easier with your permission."

The older Mafiya woman shot her an amused look, hefting her disgruntled son up into her arms, even as Shamal started to ask where they were going. Renato was just as quick on her heels, although he kept quiet.

"You're the brat of a thief, aren't you? Anyone that knows that will expect you to have a few thieves' skills under your belt." Unlocking the basement door via her own picks instead of locating where her mother put the key, she led the both of them into the training room under the house. "Every morning while you're here, you and I will come down here and I'll teach you a few things."

"So... does this mean Shamal has gained your mother's approval then?" Asked the hitman, already more interested in investigating the wall made up of safe doors she probably was going to be asked to put in a few hours going through again.
"Not yet. This is about as far as I can get him, honestly." Picking up and seating Mist brat down in front of the table used to shine lights into lock mechanisms and hold picks for practice, Sonya dug out the slightly battered practice sets from a nearby chest of drawers. "I've got the head of the Mist trainees to agree to help him develop his Flames more, and I could've taught him some of this myself without needing this room... so anything further will be on his charms alone."

Shamal had wide, shiny eyes locked on the tools she had set in front of him. "You're going to teach me to pick locks, mamma?"

"At the very least this much, yes. If you get good enough quickly, I might even source you your own picks and we'll move on to picking pockets."

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 5th of June, 1969 continued. Sonya’s hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Question."

"Hmm?"

Shamal grumbled as the voices of his guardians permeated his brain and drew him out of his wandering thoughts, settling a little more firmly on his mamma's legs when she threaded her fingers into his still wet hair from his shower.

Her other hand was a bit occupied holding up a book to read, and while Mister Renato had picked up one to browse through it apparently wasn't enough to keep his attention.

"Shamal, go to bed."

"I think he's about five seconds from dropping off anyways." Sonya responded absently, shifting her book away to glance downwards to him. "Making him move will just make him more curious and have us eavesdropped on specifically because you sent him away."

Shamal gave her a fuzzy return look, more than warm and sleepy enough to not really care about whatever was going on if it wasn't for his curiosity for what his guardian wanted to discuss without him present.

Yeah, he totally would try to listen in even if sent to bed.

He was stretched out on top of her, the both of them laying down on her couch. She had tugged off the funny thick but knotted up blanket that had normally just lay across the back of the furniture on to keep them both warm as night and the temperature fell.

Her heartbeat made it a little hard to hear what was going on, but he was a Mist.

"Well... if you don't care... what the hell happened in your childhood?"

Blinking as he woke up a little from his cuddle induced daze, Shamal scrunched up his nose and rubbed his face into his mamma's stomach to pretend he wasn't really interested in the conversation his godparents were about to have.

"I thought you satisfied your curiosity about that a while ago." She responded a bit tartly, the book she had been reading being lowered to the point the Mist could feel the hardcover settle on his back through the thick blanket. "What, exactly, do you want to know now?"
"...I apologized for that." Mister Renato answered quietly, a thump sounding which either meant he put the borrowed book down or put up his heels. "Not the part I was asking about."

The book in his mamma's hand ended up fully on his back as she released it, but since Shamal was feigning sleepiness he couldn't turn his head to see what she needed the hand not petting his hair for. "Now what?"

There was a bit of a bite to her tone, which Shamal had a unique position to appreciate with an ear set on her sternum.

Mister Renato remained silent for a long moment, in which the Mist considered faking a stretch to reposition into a better spot to actually see what was going on. He didn't, if only because his guardian would then catch on to him not being too sleepy to follow the conversation and likely send him to the room he was sharing with his mamma.

"What happened... before you ended up with your foster parents?"

Before?

Like... like how Shamal was with his father before he ended up with Mister Renato?

Sonya didn't respond right away, keeping up her absent petting of his hair that was actually doing a good job making him drowsier.

"Little to nothing. I was born in Saratov, and I didn't spend a whole lot of time with my biological parents before... things happened. Then I came here. Which I'm fully aware you know of, so that will not be rehashed out."

"Nothing?" Questioned mister Renato skeptically, in a half-mocking tone. "Then why does your mother consider the fact you refused to ask questions of her as a bad thing?"

"She does?" Her tone was bewildered now, faintly but enough for Shamal to pick up on it. "...I didn't know that."

"Are you still going to insist nothing happened?"

"Nothing did happen. They may not have wanted me and let me know it in various more or less subtle ways, but I wasn't stupid enough to hang around someplace I wasn't wanted." Mamma snapped disgruntledly, the book that had been on the Mist's back getting picked back up. "So, I avoided them as much as I could and didn't really talk to anyone ever until Tats introduced herself to me one night after things finally happened."

There was a very long period of nothing being said, which made Shamal intensely more curious about what was being gestured but equally unwilling to interrupt it just to see.

"...I'm going for a walk."

"Be careful." Was all the thief he was sprawled on top of responded with until a door shut firmly, and she sighed. "Any questions, brat?"

Shamal popped his head up, as pretending to be sleepy anymore wouldn't get him answers. "What was that about, mamma?"

"I'm fairly certain you understood all that." Sonya informed him dryly, tugging a semi-damp hank of hair before returning the bulk of her attention to her book. "And as for what Renato was fishing for,
"your guess would be as good as mine."

Yeah… but… his mamma's original family hadn't wanted her?

The Mist almost couldn't wrap his head around that, because she was… well, mamma. Sneaky and playful and never really minding when he wanted to do silly thing with her just because.

"Bedtime, I think. It's already really late, and don't even try to tell me you're not sleepy." Her book abandoned yet again, Sonya whipped off the weird knotted blanket and Shamal blinked in surprise at how cold the air really was without it. "I really do have to work tomorrow, so we can't sleep in."

"Aww..."

"Yeah, I know. Day after, we'll just be lazy all day. But there is a little something I have to do in the office, so you can meet Usov and Galina in my office while I do… work-things." She continued, and his ears pricked at the very flat tone of voice she used for 'work-things'.

…hmm.

( Friday the 6th of June, 1969. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya didn't normally pay a whole lot of attention to her fellow clansmen.

They were there or not in headquarters, it was obvious she belonged just by the virtue of making it past the reception desk, and more often than not she had very little to do with any of them. The number of times she talked to anyone she didn't have actual business with and remembered it could probably be counted on one hand, so besides knowing they were thieves and very she knew little else about them.

With Shamal with her, she started paying a whole lot more attention to things she never had before. She didn't get three steps before something made her non-existent hackles rise up and put her in a sour mood.

The stares, which started up right after the young Mist got nervous and fist a hand into her pants leg, made her tense and unhappy, then irritated that she was so. Renato had picked up on her disgruntlement, somehow from a decent distance behind her, and decided to act like some kind of overcompensating bodyguard which just made her more on edge.

Not even two hallways into the Zolotov Clan's headquarters, she decided screw everything and just hauled Shamal up to her arms in order to spend less time walking under such attention while he hampered her stride.

Galina's expression was a cross between confused and slightly horrified as Sonya gently placed Shamal on the floor of the office and shot a nasty glare back out to the people still craning around corners to sneak peaks.

"Sonya… that's a child."

"Obviously." The named thief snapped, taking a deep breath and shooting another acidic glare out the office door before the Italian hitman shut it firmly behind himself. "Galina, why are people staring?"
Her Lightning's delicate eyebrows arched up in a decent attempt to merge with her hairline, glancing from the so identified child to her nominal underboss and back. "Because I don't think anyone ever expected you to pick up a child at all, much less bring him in?"

Sonya shot her a disgruntled look.

She merely shrugged, pulling a few pages off the desk which she apparently had to deal with. "Face it, Sonya, you didn't even like being a child yourself. The fact you showed up with one at all is gossip-worthy."

She decided snatching the summary report, which included everything that happened while she had been gone, in favor of actually acknowledging that fact as true was probably the only thing she could do.

"So," continued the Lightning when it became apparent the Storm-Cloud was going to refuse to speak more on the topic, "introductions? I knew they were coming, but I believe you've made it a point to not even breathe their names to date."

"That much, miss ah…?"

"Galina, Sonya's secretary."

Renato tipped his fedora to her in a pleasant acknowledgement. "That much I can do for you, miss Galina. I would be Renato Sinclair, Italian hitman and the brat's nominal guardian. Said brat is Shamal Nikishin, our godchild."

"He's a Sun, Galina. Same Polarization as Gedeon. Speaking of him…" Dropping the list, which really was only a reminder she really didn't need to know given how few points there were on it, Sonya eyed her aide pointedly. "…I need a word with our Pahkan."

"Now?" Galina asked bemusedly, glancing over the abandoned list first then inspecting her face for what else could be up. "Right now?"

"As soon as you can get me a slot." The thief demurred with a probably not very pleasant looking smirk. "For as of right now, I need a word with Usov."

Renato had made some movement in the direction of the couch in the office, likely more out of curiosity of the shelving built into the wall next to them and their occupants than intent to seat himself, but he checked his momentum rather abruptly when upon speaking the name of her head of the Mist trainees said Mist did his usual thing with phasing through her office door.

Usov looked merely amused at the fact he was suddenly staring down a barrel of the Mafioso's gun the very moment he looked up.

"Renato," Sonya called out in a pointedly neutral tone of voice, "meet Usov. The reason why I knew how to help Shamal when you asked me. Usov, this is a very good friend of mine and my godson Shamal."

She hadn't exactly said who the older Mist would be tutoring over the summer to the preteen before, and frankly she was slightly worried Usov would deem Shamal was infringing on whatever insanity his Mist Flames had developed. As she wasn't blind, the kid had an unhealthy fascination with her which she tolerated because it was convenient and to her benefit normally, this meeting could go… sideways, very quickly.

Usov inspected Shamal intently, the younger Mist giving him a mulish look back for a long moment.
Renato shot her a mostly blank look, edged in that expectant confusion she had become regretfully understanding of when he missed something or just wanted her opinion.

Sonya merely sighed heavily. "Usov, I'm afraid I must insist on this one."

The older Mist gave her a speculative look, turning back to the suspicious younger still standing where she placed him. "He is yours, is he not? I can accept that... for now."

Fantastic. Usov had decided to take umbrage with the fact she personally took on the second Mist she ever helped.

"You still have your parents, and my aid if need be."

Looking not a bit mollified at that, the preteen shrugged that off and cocked his head at her brat. "I think Anna will oversee this, Sonya. You do not need to get on my case as you tend to be forced to with the others."

Shamal's expression did not lose a whit of his suspicion, but a more calculating edge appeared at the mention of the second Mist in the Zolotov Clan. He flicked a glance to her, to his godfather looking entirely too blank to take any indication from, and then back to the older Mist.

"You've been stalking my mamma."

Sonya blinked at the Misty twosome.

While she had been aware of that, the fact Shamal could pick up on it in the first meeting? Kind of impressive.

"Of course I have been. As long as it's me, we know no one else has tried." Usov scoffed in disgust, waving a hand to dismiss the kid's observation. "Besides which, sometimes she calls for me and it's only really polite to respond in a timely manner."

A short if eerie stare down later, the younger Mist cracked a very worrying little smirk. "Can you teach me? I'll support your ties when she's with me, as long as I can do the same."

…Shamal wanted to stalk her. Sonya did not like where this was going, and privately resolved to do something about removing Mist Flames from her person.

Either learning a new trick or doing something to regularly remove such things, because some of the time where she got to would be very risky to have any Mist drop in on her unexpectedly.

From the utterly flat look Renato had pinned the older Mist with, he wasn't a fan of that idea either.

Usov, being neither slow on the pickup nor stupid by any measure, only shrugged. "Only if your... 'mamma', agrees to it."

"Hell no." Sonya put in before the kid could even twitch in her or Renato's direction. "Be gone, the both of you. Usov, I want to know if he's been taught anything we know for a fact is wrong. Shamal, behave. They don't have to do this for me."

"A summer camp for Mists?" Renato questioned quietly after Usov had wrapped Shamal in his Mist Flames to whisk the kid to wherever the Mists headed to meet up.

"Something like that." She responded absently, merely nodding to Galina's quiet request to excuse herself from the room. Rounding her borrowed desk, the thief slumped into the desk chair as the
hitman finally draped himself over one corner of the office couch. "Sorry about this, but there's one little something I can't actually ignore for a full month or two."

He snorted. "You're teaching Shamal skills for later in his life, arranged for something to also occupy his afternoons, and this trip was mostly for him. Why apologize to me?"

"Because I'm pretty sure just following me around while I deal with politics and stupid people isn't your idea of fun."

"You'd be surprised." Renato countered wickedly with a smirk she didn't even have to look to know he was wearing. "Where is the brat now, anyways?"

"I don't know. So long as I don't, I've never asked Usov about his security arrangements or what measures he's taken to protect his faction of our little group. Shamal should be with about thirty other Mists right now, and with Mists... no news is kind of the best news with them." What little was left out on the desk, because her Lightning had secured most of the important information in the drawers the moment she caught sight of the Italian Mafioso, was merely phone transcripts from calls Galina had decided she needed to know about. "I'll have them introduce themselves to you if you'd like, over the course of a week or so."

"Of course they will, and you will also impress what will happen if they so happen to do anything foolish like 'lose him'... or worse, right?"

Sonya pinned the man with a highly unamused look. That was also her brat, he'd have to beat her out to whichever idiot that was for the right of murdering the morons that tried something like that messily.

Renato cocked a smirk at her, throwing an arm over the back of the couch he was occupying. "So, anything interesting in there?"

"Just so you know... I have thrown hammers at people trying to sneak a look at my paperwork."

"Duly noted, little lady Sonya. I'll contain my curiosity." Then possibly find out via other means just to irritate her with his knowledge, she was sure.

Usov may not be happy with Shamal, but at least she knew the older Mist would be unfailingly correct about how he handled the younger Mist until such time she no longer had him on the kid's case.

With the brat off with other Mists, learning things that would probably just exasperate her to hear about all for the reaction she'd inevitably give when Usov did the reporting, at least he was no longer at risk of overly curious vory and their assorted underlings within the building.

Sonya would count that as a win.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 6th of June, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

'Renato Sinclair' was easily convinced to remain behind with Galina as Sonya went to talk to their boss, so the Lightning occupied herself with neatening and sorting the daily intake of information coming into the office.

Frankly, she was pretty certain the man was remaining in place to give a challenging stare at each of...
the Shestyorka that were finding inane little excuses to walk in only to gawk at him and cast little glances around to see if they could find the little brunette brat the Storm-Cloud brought in with her.

What Sonya was thinking bringing the man into headquarters was more than Galina could say.

One of his country's vor equivalent or not, he really didn't belong in this den of vory and thieves.

For fuck's sake, Scruffy noticed the man certainly didn't belong the moment he walked into the office for his daily investigation into the information already compiled. The still painfully thin Sun warily eyed the darker one lounging on the couch he normally monopolized when Gedeon decided to not grace them with his presence before turning to her with a lost expression. "Who is he?"

"Sonya's… friend." Galina informed him shortly, still trying to sort through the incredibly tangled mess the last idiot that came into the office gave her.

She was pretty sure half of it wasn't intended for this office but the one next to them, which tended to deal with counter-espionage efforts the clan undertook. Maybe they wanted the Mists to interfere without actually stopping whatever it was?

"…ah." As apparently that didn't answer anything of what Peter wanted to know, the man eyed the other for a moment. "Exactly why are you here?"

"Any particular reason you ask?" Asked Renato almost pleasantly… if it wasn't for that edge of mocking amusement in his tone.

"I wouldn't risk it. Or her temper." She informed him tartly before anything could be said.

Scruffy's shoulders fell slightly. Given that the constant interruptions to his research had to be annoying he was doing fantastically well with the disruptions that kept popping up. Stuffing his hands into the pockets of his threadbare slacks, the gaunt Sun shot a look first to the infringing one then to her. "Anything else you might need me for then?"

"Not today." Galina answered him slightly apologetically. "Did you need anything?"

"I did wanted to speak with Bazanova today, if possible."

"She's in, if not here right now. Take a seat."

Creepily, the hitman sitting on the couch merely looked even more amused as Scruffy hesitantly skirted around him to take a seat on the other end of the couch.

Galina eyed him severely. He should not be that amused to be waiting in an office located with vor territory, no matter his connection to a nominally important link in the office.

What the hell was the man sitting on that gave him that kind of composure?

"Heh, you need a better poker face." Renato drawled out, wearing an absolutely infuriating smirk. "Worried what I'm up to, are we?"

"Of course I am." She snapped back, roughly returning her attention to her work and attempting to ignore him. "I don't know you, nor am I inclined to think well of you. Right now, you're a threat and I intend to keep treating you like one."

"…he's just sitting there." Scruffy pointed out quietly, utterly unsurprised when they both ignored him.
"You need to work on your intimidation as well." Lazily observed the Italian next, pulling the brim of his hat lower to shade his dark eyes. "I'm still more amused than concerned, kitten."

Changing tactics, and taking a leaf out of her boss's book, the Lightning tossed her head to get the bangs falling out of her bun to resettet out of her vision and refocused on her work. "I don't really care, you're not that important in the long run anyways."

"Ho? Confident in that, are you?"

"I'm the one sorting through her work."

"I'm the one she's given parts to." Renato countered smugly.

Galina paused, jerking her head up to pin the asshole with a glare.

If her prickly and normally non-helpful leader actually gave something away to someone outside the clan, after damn near throwing a bitch fit for Gedeon doing it on a larger scale…?

Fuck. The asshole was here to stay, wasn't he?

"Of course," Renato all but purred as he got to his shiny leather clad feet, "I wouldn't say no to learning a bit more about little lady Sonya or the things she's up to. Only the foolish or the dead stop learning."

Weirdly disgruntled with the man's attitude and composure, on top of being infuriated and more than a little bit scared for some reason she couldn't pin down, Galina set her teeth and flatly ignored him.

"Renato, stop riling up my Lightning." Sonya flatly ordered from the doorway. "I thought you were a gentleman."

"She wanted something to snap at." With a complete about-face in tone, the Italian returned to looking entirely too self-confident and a touch bored and waved a hand as if to dismiss the whole subject. "I was merely giving her an outlet. That it just so happens to include a bit of baiting is merely par for the course."

"And then playing mind-games with her. I heard. Stop messing with my assistant." Insisted the thief dismissively, turning to said Lightning. "Anything important?"

"Just… one thing." The Wolf Pack gang had finally gotten back to them about possible places Sonya could meet up with their Cloud safely, or as safe as two Clouds could be meeting each other for the first time. Having seen what happened when such a thing occurred once, Galina did not wish to be there again so she just merely handed the note that information was on to her. "And Scruffy wished to speak with you."

"I can wait, if this is… err…" The Sun in question glanced from the tiny blonde to the Italian hitman now fetched up against a wall idly watching the conversation happening. "…if you're busy."

The silent implication that the two of them had something going on made Galina pause. She dearly hoped Sonya wasn't doing something of a personal nature with the foreign hitman, because for one the man was completely infuriating and for another that would mean she had to get used to him.

Dark eyes flicked to her, and the utter asshole smirked.

"Scruffy, spit it out."
"Wait, Scruffy?" Repeated the hitman incredulously, slanting a sideways look at the so named Sun. "You're the one called Scruffy?"

Admittedly, for someone that didn't know how and in what condition the man came into the Storm-Cloud's clutches as, it was an odd nickname.

Peter had religiously kept himself clean-shaven and his curly if slightly silvered sandy blond hair neatly groomed ever since Galina met him. Almost fanatically keeping himself well put together as best he could with limited options open to him.

Although from what she heard from Tatiana about what he had looked like only just after getting rescued from Sierra Leone… the nickname fitted him at one time.

"…um… yes?"

Renato eyed him skeptically, then sat back against the wall firmly. "Well… never mind that apparently."

"Never mind what?"

"Never you mind, little lady Sonya."

Galina paused for one flabbergasted moment, but it seemed as if her underboss was more than used to being brushed off by this man. All she did was roll her eyes, and flatly ignore the infuriating asshole in favor of the other Sun in the office.

Scruffy pulled a very reluctant little face of disgust. "The people you set me up with for room and board are demanding more money for rent. Mostly for, ah… insurance against government raids of their building."

"…I'll deal with that later tonight." The thief informed him, looking faintly puzzled. "But firstly… where did I set you?"

"Wait… did you get approval?" Galina blurted out, before catching herself from saying anything more and giving Renato a suspicious look. "For… um, that one issue?"

"I am currently the head of this department, as much of a joke as it seems to be to have a woman my age standing here. Obviously, I know what I'm doing even if the side results aren't what were implied to be the effect I am looking for." Sonya informed her dryly, with more of an edge in her tone than was probably wise in front of an outsider. "What I say goes, so long as I get results. And I do plan on getting results."

Milos was going to allow her to beat the ever-loving shit out of Gedeon?

The Lightning hadn't expected that, for as much as vory tended to be sink or swim teachers and learners that tendency didn't normally lend itself to brutal hands-on lessons unless someone royally screwed up.

It kind of made her wonder what happened in that short meeting to produce such results.

"Speaking of," now the Storm-Cloud turned to the Italian looking highly curious over the topic being discussed, "you're going to have to excuse me for a few hours every day. I don't expect it to take longer than an hour or two, so say a bit after lunch when I drop Shamal off with the Mists? They'll bring him back around supper, Usov does stalk me so the brat will probably be dropped off exactly where we end up."
Renato seemed to ponder the suggestion a moment, seemingly shrugging the whole issue off if it wasn't for that keen edge of curiosity in his contemplation of the woman making it. "Fair enough. Do you intend to follow me around then?"

"More or less, I want to see how you operate. It's been something I've wanted for a while now, but we don't tend to operate in the same areas at the same time." Turning back to the Lightning, Sonya gave her a very polite little vicious smirk. "Galina, would you kindly go fetch the idiot in question? I've had to agree to do it all in nonpublic settings... but... well... social pressure may actually give the lout the kick to the rear he's been needing since he became attached to this office."

"...sure."

With a sharp nod, she turned to the two Suns in turn. "...Scruffy, I do need your address but then I also need you to clear out for a few. Go with Galina and deal with that, please?"

"And me?" Renato asked almost silkily.

"...technically, you're not public to this clan." The thief offered delicately, but when her eyes slid back to the man they were solidly purple and not her usual grey. "But I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist you wait for me on a lower level, Renato. Normally I wouldn't care, but this is a slightly delicate internal matter."

Galina very quickly removed herself from that room without waiting to hear the man's reply.

Baby, bratty users of Dying Will Flames were pretty good at being self-control deficient. Thankfully they all came with built in warning lights for when things were getting a bit much on what was left of their rational mindsets after popping with Flames and starting puberty. The less trained users could end up causing all sorts of property damage and injuries on accident much less when they turned their attentions to doing it on purpose.

What happens when her normally very self-contained Storm-Cloud boss decided to be less self-possessed and more like her main Flame type was something she didn't want to know.

Ziven had enough horror stories of his little Cloud duckling going berserk on him. Sonya doing the same might be less terrifying to witness, but also could end up being more.

She had seen two Clouds go at each other once before, and the slightly younger blonde had been restrained through that. Being that close to a Cloud getting into violence was as far as she wanted to go.

Scruffy scurried out of the office after her in short order, scribbling down something in a horribly cramped writing using the surface of his palm as a writing surface. "...I'm going to go... sit in a park for a few hours."

"Lucky you." The Lightning huffed, taking the baffling mix of Cyrillic and English words that would hopefully be enough for Sonya to find what she had to look for later on.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 6th of June, 1969 continued. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

The chandelier overhead was swinging.

Renato kind of wished Sonya had let him stay around, or even on the same floor, as whatever it was
she had specifically come into this building to do today.

He eyed the swaying light fixture absently, without sure knowledge of what the building was built of and exactly what else was in here he couldn't say with confidence that a very irked Cloud was responsible…

…but it really was very likely.

There were the usual heavily reinforced signs that would prevent sniper shots through windows or easy eavesdropping without getting further into the building than the 'public' floor, and the force needed to create tremors in such a reinforced building was considerable.

Sonya's Lightning had disappeared from his sights the moment she could once he hit the ground floor, heading further down into the building's depths determinedly after noticing him. While curious over the bar supposedly down there, and to see if Sonya's mother's claims about it were true or not, the hitman had refrained from following her.

It seemed as if it was true from what little he had managed to see so far. Renato wasn't entirely a snob about his environment, although he did prefer the finer things if possible, but these thieves had proved a bit more eclectic than him.

Point in fact, the chandelier he was eyeing was made of what he would bet his hat was gold and at least crystal if not actual gemstones. Allowed to be tarnished through age and neglect to dull the shimmer of genuine wealth to aid in hiding it in plain sight, but still installed in the most public part of this syndicate's stronghold.

It wouldn't seem to be a wise idea at first glance, keeping around things that could incriminate yourself, but Renato supposed that if there wasn't a buyer for something obviously stolen or someone tried something foolish like backing out of a deal or trying to double-cross their hired thieves… very little else could be done with such high value items than displaying them as some kind of trophy.

He did wonder how long that had been there, if it was placed here and not say within one of the other unused rooms filled with extra if random assortments of items like the one across from Sonya's office. The one with the not-quite-professionally patched hole in the wall.

There was a story there he kind of did want to know if the thief was involved with. It was very conveniently directly opposite of her doorway, and he was sure the woman had admitted to a temper-control issue when apologizing to Shamal a few months back.

"Renato, forgive the delay." Sonya spoke up unexpectedly, making the hitman twitch, as she slid up next to him quietly. "We can go now."

Renato eyed her severely, then the staircase he was facing that both her people also used and the greater bulk of the traffic he had seen so far. She hadn't come down using it, so that had to mean there was more than just that way to navigate the building's floors. Par for the course in criminal holdings, but... why did she deem that necessary when she was normally very careful in how she approached him to prevent a repeat of the first time she asked a favor of him?

"Where to then, little lady Sonya?"

"...around, I guess. For now." Shrugging, the thief flicked a glance upwards to the same chandelier that had occupied most of his attention until she returned. "I should avoid being here for a bit of time, so you can check the lay of the lands and decide for yourself if this is safe enough for the brat to be here without you."
Turning on his heel, the hitman stalked his way out of her syndicate's headquarters. As interesting as it might be to investigate the place fully, with her help getting past some of the blocks put in place to prevent such a thing from happening, he wasn't interested in earning the ire of Sonya's clan.

He was a lot more interested in the syndicates around that wouldn't be neutral to him at best. "Think you can keep up?"

"Do you really think you can outrun me?" Countered the Storm-Cloud with audible amusement.

Renato huffed a wry laugh. "I wonder what your mother would say if I told her about the 'Blanket Chase of sixty-eight'?

"…low blow."
"How well do you know these streets?"

"Fairly. I did... once, used to patrol around here a few years ago." Sonya informed him easily, actually near lazily for someone like her, as they walked down the pointedly geometrically different streets bleeding into each other as far as color went.

Not too bad temperature wise, but then again Russian summers probably wouldn't be able to match the heat or intensity of Italia summers. Renato found it balmy rather than harsh, which apparently was not the reaction the locals were going to go with by how they were dressed.

Most of the time the scenery was a nightmare of publicly regimented sameness, but occasionally... it was obvious the residents didn't care a damn what they should look like. The hitman found the brief spats of disharmony rather interesting, in an absent way.

Easier to mark out who the conformists were and who were shamelessly criminally inclined aside, the small pockets of nearly hidden color proved to be a relief from the eyesore of beige public buildings and grey concrete office complexes. He was really just getting the lay of the land right now, same as he did last night marking out the streets around the little thief's hotel and what usually went bump in the night around here.

Sonya seemed entirely too willing to merely follow him around, if that was due to her expressed interest in how he 'operated' or due to a post-violence catharsis was debatable. She seemed more peaceful than earlier this morning, as odd as it seemed to call a Cloud that at all. Might be because she was used to these streets, or just because she was 'patrolling'.

They were currently locked in a near city block of urban hell, for the last few streets nearly nothing stood out with the small marks the hitman had come to believe the Russian Mafia left behind where they worked. As equally unwilling to miss anything out of disgust as he was uninclined to study something he had seen now a hundred times before and would again while here, he gave his erstwhile companion the majority of his attention instead of contemplating what kind of building codes Moscow had in place.

"Used to?"

"This isn't my territory. It's Arseniy's." Shrugging the difference off absently, the woman merely glanced to the side where he nearly overlooked a set of eyes inspecting them suspiciously.

Per usual, frankly, since he didn't look Slavic or behaved with the ticks that separated long-term residents of the region from tourists and yet was waltzing about in broad daylight. The both of them moved past the alleyway quickly enough, but not before he caught the more suspicious look thrown to him than to the thief.

Likely another Zolotov, then.

They weren't out in force, but there were enough little hints of being followed they both caught on a while ago to pointedly suggest behaving in the best possible manner was required. In another time,
he might be tempted to just shoot the idiots or have a little… *fun*, but this was *her* syndicate so behave it was.

"*I did once used to patrol for him occasionally, but now he has his heir and he takes care of the patrolling with him instead. Usually before naptime.*" Sonya continued, as if that wasn't an interesting tidbit and actual insight into the very violence prone Flame type that rarely bothered to explain themselves ever. "*Cherep and I used to actually, but I think he was merely following me. He was a lot more… random, before we ended up in the same household. Keeping up with him before we became friends was challenging for a bit, but then he decided he liked me.*"

Before their Flames entwined enough to be counted as two halves of a whole, in other words.

Sonya had possibly been even *more* Classical in her Cloud nature, which was then possibly *tempered* by her brother.

Did said brother end up more centered in a way, then?

Or more violent?

Interesting. He really *wouldn't* have liked Cherep before Sonya's inclusion in his life, much less now when the man's irrelevance and almost *innocent* outlook set his teeth on edge.

Renato eyed the next intersection exasperatedly, they had left the interesting pockets of color far behind and were now heavily into what seemed to be the very *civilian* sector of Sonya's syndicate's territory. Either way he picked there would be more of the carefully cultivated urban hell, but one direction probably had even *more* if they were getting into a more governmental side of the 'oblast'.

A soft tug to his suit jacket sleeve had him looking at the thief, who tilted her head to indicate the right-hand road as she released the fabric she had taken a careful grip on. "*This way. The other way has a Rain bar, and while I'm sure that would be interesting I am required to protect those kids from outside influences until they can reliably defend themselves. Which I am sure will be no time soon, unfortunately.*"

Ho?

Apparently being wrong in his assumption was marginally exciting. Depressing, but exciting.

The hitman noted which street intersection it was and crossed it out for further investigations regardless of how interesting a 'Rain bar' did sound.

'Kids', she had said. Meaning her business with the 'Flame Training office' they had just left expressly, not just a syndicate secret. As getting in the way of baby Rains practicing Tranquility was not generally a good idea if one wished to remain coherent for the day, it was an easy lost.

Cute of them though. Very clever way to hide themselves.

Scowling at his own errant thoughts, Renato turned to her sharply. "*You've infected my thought processes.*"

Since *when* did he use the word 'cute'?

Sonya *shrugged* again, the blasé irritant. "*You've infected mine, turnabout is fair play. I never used the word 'ho' to inquire for more information before a few weeks ago.*"

…point. At least it was a two-way street.
Glancing around at their surroundings, which was… surprise, more beige and grey buildings with signs being the few differences apparent, the hitman nearly slouched as he concluded merely a surface look around wouldn't help him more than any plain map would. Although child's play to get, marking it out with any Mafia related landmarks wasn't a good idea if it happened to be 'misplaced'… however that came to be.

While interesting to catch sight of the non-same fractions of Moscow himself, he wasn't making nearly enough progress alone. That wasn't to say Renato was done exploring, just that he was a little tired of beige, grey, and the occasional swath of green in tiny groomed plots of lawn and bushes for the day.

"Sonya."

"Mmm?"

"Where would you go for a quiet word around here?"

The thief glanced up at him, then turned to scan their incredibly drab surroundings with faint curiosity. "I don't think that's fair, I want to see if you'd spot it yourself."

He drew himself up and stuck his nose in the air, playfully because if she wanted to get stubborn about her desire to 'see how he operated' he wouldn't get anything done in a timely manner this week. "I have contacts for local things not readily apparent where I go, little lady Sonya. Of which, you certainly are one."

She gave him a look, not even having the decency to pause in her stride as they continued wandering down a sidewalk.

"I've seen the surface, surprise me with how far this rabbit hole goes."

The smirk was tiny, but very wicked. "…how much do you trust me?"

Interesting question.

As a hitman, only as far as he could throw her. Which was probably some distance truthfully, she was a dainty little lady physically. Had they not known each other as long as they had, probably not even a fraction of that amount.

As her friend for something near a decade?

That was another matter entirely.

Renato offered a hand with a slightly mocking flourish. "Surprise me."

A young woman like Sonya really should not be surprised to be offered a hand to take hold of, nor should her first reaction be to back up a step from him. It was polite, and what the hell were the men approaching this woman doing wrong if she was scared of being offered a hold on him?

He wasn't blind, not nearly as much as it seemed she was. There were admiring looks she flatly ignored, double entendres spoken in her direction she would merely blink at, and he had recently permanently removed a too forward pest trying a more forceful method of turning the thief's head. Sonya, upon being flirted with, was more bemused if she recognized it and merely irritable at the confusing interactions if not.

As long as it didn't come from him, or Shamal, anyways. He could comfort himself that he was at
least special in earning that reaction if it didn't sound so damn pathetic.

While she never responded when she recognized it beyond some bemusement, the fact she sometimes genuinely couldn't tell when another was flirting with her was galling to him.

Renato flirted a lot, but half the time it was only to show his appreciation for the beautiful women around sparring his eyesight with something pleasant and occasionally to compliment a lady for being ruthlessly competent. That it made them happy to be admired was a nice bonus, and really if they put all that work into looking good they deserved even just a little something for the effort.

While he could understand some hesitant when contemplating the idea of 'flirting with a Cloud', he had the same qualms recently debating what to do with his attraction to her, it was not nearly enough to understand why even civilians refrained from flirting with her. Her tattoos might put off some in her native land, but she traveled for work just like him.

Tucking that spike of irritation away neatly, it wasn't her fault she seemed to have few facts when it came to dealing with other people from all blatantly obvious clues he had gathered so far, he merely wiggled his fingers invitingly and waited with patience he didn't feel but forced anyways for her to make up her mind about the offer.

Since she tensed up when he touched her regardless of where, waist or upper back or her hands, another step back was getting her used to touching him. He'd figure out why she was so against being touched eventually, but for now all he could do was help with the symptoms that made her avoid physical touch and stiffen up even when she knew the individuals touching her for something as innocent as a dance held no intent to harm her.

Frustratingly, the damn thief finally opted to take hold of his sleeve instead of his hand. In that same careful, loose hold she had used to gain his attention when he wasn't looking at her.

While it wouldn't crease his suit jacket and he did appreciate the silent acknowledgement that she would care for his appearance since he did so, it also wasn't what he was after.

"This way." Sonya decided on after a moment of careful inspection of her hold, a tiny tug with no force behind it leading him back down to the alleyway they had been spied from.

Progress, she didn't let go the moment she had him headed in the right direction and seemed satisfied she hadn't ruined his jacket accidentally. It might not be what he was after, but the fact she was holding on was something.

"Do I get to know where we're going?" Renato drawled out idly, musing more on the complications this upset might have.

Two weeks was certainly enough time to figure out if they could even coexist well at all, or at least rule it out if not, but her disinclination to being touched prevented a few things he might have tried to investigate if she actually held any attraction to him.

Thankfully, neither of them were the type of people that would or could do a 'house in the suburbs with two kids and a dog' thing peacefully. At least that wasn't a worry he had to contemplate even if things got serious on him.

He'd probably continue on being a hitman until some greenhorn scut managed to get lucky and she certainly seemed to be the type to go on stealing, even if only for the books she could get, until she finally overreached herself one time too many.

Their different jobs and their likely bitter, inevitable conclusions aside, having spent at most a few
days together spread out over the course of her visits to Shamal in the Iron Fort were not the kind of things you could make many assumptions about. They got along well in short visits interspersed with long lengths of time apart, and his forays into more casual settings with her ended well so far. If that could translate over to close quarters was what Renato wanted to know.

So far it seemed alright. A bit eye opening in how annoying his expectations for her behavior remaining pleasant in Vongola territory might be, but fine.

Sonya hadn’t immediately responded to his question, so when she glanced back mischievously once they reached the spot their inept tail had been spotted down the hitman was taken aback for a moment. "You said you wanted to go down the rabbit hole, Renato. I'm merely providing what you asked for."

Playful Sonya was still a new thing to him. Shamal got it more than he did, she was usually just witty or dryly sarcastic with him.

Definitely something he looked forward to more of, though.

The thief let him go and bent to lift an unsecured grate out of the alleyway's paved ground, gesturing down with a nod. "Down you go. Try not to land too heavily, Alice."

Renato gifted her with a dry look, holding his fedora in place as he lightly dropped down at her bidding.

The hole went a lot farther than he had expected, and he did land rather heavily due to not properly looking where he leapt. Eyeing the surprisingly dry and well maintained if dim tunnel he was now in, and the shifting light overhead that was Sonya likely maneuvering to replace the grate after she dropped down, he backed up against a wall to allow the thief room to follow him.

Contrary to his expectation, there wasn’t much clanging of metal that preceded her decent.

She landed on the balls of her feet, carefully also dropping into a near-crouch to take the impact on her knees instead of her ankles. Dusting her hands off and rolling back up to her feet, the thief slid a sly glance to him. "Welcome to Wonderland."

"Ha ha." Not really that upset at the little trick she pulled on him by not thinking about the longer than sewer level drop before sending him down, Renato gestured to the bricked walls. "Where are we really?"

"Way back in the day, before the days of snow plows or even central heating, the nobles of port cities needed a way to move food and goods along for their parties and balls in the dead of winter without the risk of thieves or the desperate usurping them for their own use. These tunnels are kind of common in larger, older port cities." Gesturing to the only exit from the node they had dropped in by, Sonya let him take the lead and merely returned to following him as she told the story. "Thus, underground tunnels connecting a few of the palaces and important landmarks to certain exits near certain docks far underneath any basement level would go were dug out and carefully controlled for generations. Not too long ago, before the first Great War but after the end of the Tsars, some enterprising young vor carefully collapsed the known entranceways and a few segments of the lesser known ones here and destroyed all the maps he could track down."

She paused, checking to be sure they were still alone as they rounded a corner into a more main-tunnel looking segment, before continuing.

"This is what is now commonly called the 'Jewel Run', it's a section of tunnels the Zolotovs control
for those that need to get off the streets quickly near the dockside. They're not connected to anything but a few exits you don't have to climb out of, to prevent anyone really stumbling on something we don't want them to or shutting down these tunnels if they find them, but one of the exits is somewhere that will match what you requested."

"Ho?"

"A bar, of course." Sonya quirked a small smirk at his mildly inquiring look. "This is Russia. Worse, you're dealing with Russia's Mafiya. Most of our business is taken care of in gentleman's clubs or bars if we need a neutral place."

Even more interesting. "How well does that work out for you?"

She rolled her eyes. "The one time I had to, things were rearranged so the meeting would take place in a hotel's conference room instead. Honestly, I think Galina did it for her own comfort as I wouldn't have minded the strip club originally agreed upon."

Renato was almost gleeful at that admittance. Really, the woman used polearms as her weapons of choice and it really should not be that much of a stretch to remove the 'arms' from that… and with her grace?

Obviously, she had either martial arts training or dancing lessons at some point in her life.

Stripper Sonya. He'd do more than pay to see that.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 6th of June, 1969 continued. A bar, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Mirror Lady Anna was the one to return Shamal to them, looking… distinctly amused as she did so. Another of her too-young Flame users, she was barely two years older than the Mist lead… who was twelve.

Anna at least had the maturity a probably traumatizing childhood accident caused, which made her very wickedly minded when it came to Constructing horrors to emerge from her mirrors, that it was likely people who didn't know differently would assume she was on the short side of fifteen or sixteen.

She barely waited for Sonya to introduce Renato to her, and only long enough for Shamal to thank her for enabling his return, before she sank backwards into a plate glass window in a flurry of indigo Flames and fading away from view.

Shamal gave Renato a pointedly excited look. "She's going to teach me how to do that."

"There's a reason we call her 'the Mirror Lady'." Confided the thief into the ringing silence the Mist duo's unusual arrival and the teenage girl's abrupt leave taking had caused in the very criminal friendly dockside bar. "If she could get away with it, I'm fairly sure that Anna would've been perfectly happy to dwell within a mirror instead of actually live like any other human. Great spy, though. Unfortunately, we have little to give her so far."

"Curious." Renato mused, plucking up his whisky on the rocks up and away from curious bratty Mist hands once the kid hauled himself up on the barstool left open between them. "You need more stealth before I'll let you have a taste, Shamal."
"Are we going to encourage that?"

The hitman shrugged lazily at the question. "He's going to experiment anyways. Would it be better if he did it with us or against us? It's stupidly easy to get ahold of alcohol or drugs if you put some effort into it. Especially with those like us."

"How does telling him to get sneakier about his curiosity in your whisky factor in?" Sonya asked dryly, not even twitching when the brat immediately dismissed his godfather's drink in favor of eyeing hers speculatively.

It had cream, it was sort of healthy. Kind of. Maybe not for a six-year-old… but the point stood. It had calcium in it.

…yeah, no. A glass of wine, maybe.

A glass of hard liquor?

Hell no.

"The minute he can out sneak the both of us, he'll be more than old enough to tolerate it." After snorting at the brat's pout when the thief removed her White Russian from easy Mist-grabbing range, the older Italian looked at her more seriously. "Do you want to remain here or go somewhere else now that we have the brat back?"

'Here' would be in a bar filled by more criminal types than either could shake a stick at, who were either all shameless or just blatant in their perusal of both the Sun and Storm-Cloud that just had a delivery of a Mist brat in their midst. It really wasn't the best place to be if she didn't want to be overheard, but as she figured at least a Mist or two were probably eavesdropping on her for Usov anyways…

"Give it a minute. We can't be that interesting." Sonya decided, hooking an ashtray over from the far corner of the bar and lighting up a cigarette. "What did you do today, Shamal?"

"Usov mostly just introduced me around and asked what I knew… and shook his head over a few things." Named bratty Mist informed her willingly enough, sulking slightly as she gestured for the bartender's attention. "But… can you tell me why he laughed when I told him I was minded by other Mists when I was younger?"

"Mists don't make very good Mist wranglers." She had wondered why Shamal had been tailed around by that one Mist woman, whatever the fuck her name had been. There might have been something she didn't know about her, so there was the benefit of the doubt she was better with other young Mists. As much as that thought felt grudging. "Storms actually make better Mist wranglers… Disintegration verses Construction, and with an older Storm paired with a younger Mist?"

From the expression that crossed the Mafioso's face, either he swallowed the last of his whisky wrong or was intensely disliked something about what she said.

"Renato?"

"Why… did you not say something?"

"It's Vongola." Actually… why hadn't she said something to him about it before?

That was odd, she had intended to do so… right?
Sonya rubbed her forehead irritably. She needed a goddamned list, or a minder, to remember everything she wanted to do these days.

"Shouldn't they have known more about this shit? For fuck's sake, the Flame users in Russia practically died off in the last two hundred years. They should have forgotten more than I've rediscovered about Flame natures."

From the hitman's expression now, that wasn't buying her leniency.

She flipped him off. "For all that I knew, she could've had a reason to be with Shamal and not some Storm. Anyways, screw Vongola and what they do or don't know. Bartender, our bill please."

"In a hurry?" Renato asked as the flat-footed bartender who obviously had thought the same thing scrambled for what she requested.

"...I forgot. We're users of Dying Will Flame, even worse showed a bit of it, at the moment we're the most interesting thing in the bar." Sonya really didn't like being the center of attention.

However, there really wasn't another good place for criminals or the lawless to talk around this part of the docksides. Especially not with a child in tow.

"If we want to avoid being stared at like circus freaks, it would be so much easier to just go back to the hotel."

"You need to get out of your ivory tower some more, Bazanova. You would've known that if you hit the streets every now and again."

The thief frowned but refrained from telling the old vor down the bar a bit that spoke to her to take a hike. If she remembered right, he was one of Arseniy's friends. She wasn't sure about that, the number of times she had seen any of her father's closer-than-co-worker friends could be counted on a hand.

"...I'll keep that in mind."

Renato cocked an eyebrow at the exchange, but besides swiping the bill for their drinks from the barman while she was distracted he kept from commenting.

Shamal, eyeing her less 'adult looking' drink a bit sullenly, paused to give her a weird look of his own. "Are we leaving? But I just got here."

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 6th of June, 1969 continued. The Pahkan's Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Father-"

"I just had a very interesting talk with our resident Cloud." Milos cut his son off sharply, paging through the reports others found important enough to give him.

Pyotr raised an eyebrow, but when the Pahkan didn't dismiss him from the room like he had most of the Avtorities or the boyeviks earlier he assumed he was finally going to hear what had happened earlier that day with Elisaveta's youngest foster child.

Given the meeting in question had been the point Milos had tossed his usual retinue out on their ears,
curiosity had run rampant through the clan. Added in the two foreigners the girl in question had tagging along with her, and a large number of Zolotovs that normally just reported in every week or so had found excuses to come by their headquarters as soon as they heard.

"I rarely," the elder Zolotov continued when his son was caught too flat-footed to respond quickly, "have young ladies barely into their twenties asking if I really was trying to kill her via stress induced homicidal suicide. Oh wait, no... I've never had that happen before."

"What." Gedeon managed, still cradling sore or possibly broken ribs which prevented him from straightening upright in proper posture.

He also had a pair of magnificent black eyes, and more than enough damage had been done to wonder if that was caused by a broken nose or just the general battery the young man had apparently just suffered through.

To be fair, Pyotr was wondering the same thing he managed to say.

"Young miss Bazanova has no territory, but she has people and that worked for her to be less aggressive to date. You assaulted one of her people. All those little Clouds imploding in spectacularly messy ways? Some idiot they can't fight against infringing on what a Cloud considers territory... so said Cloud ends up taking out the major threat so even if they are dead that particular threat to what they claim is no more."

Putting those two ideas together painted a particularly grim looking picture.

The Pakhan gave Gedeon a pointedly even look, ignoring the younger vor's visible injuries. "We have one Cloud. One very easy-going Cloud compared to the other examples of her type seen so far. I've had Triad representatives in this office who marvel over her self-control and how little damage she causes us. You slapped young Galina, finally ticking off Bazanova's territorial instincts. She wants to murder you."

Pyotr was fairly certain his expression was frozen in something resembling 'polite inquiry'.

"She can't kill you. Said as much to me in as many words." Milos smoothed the silver hair at his temple back, plucking the gold rimmed glasses off his face and settling his old frame into the plush office chair firmly now that he had given up the pretense of picking through his reports on how the clan was doing. "You're not only my son, but a vor. If she started murdering off the clan's vor they would take it as an affront, and her actions would end up backfiring on her. The results would end up the same anyways even if you weren't one or the other. Do you know how disturbing it is for a father to hear a young woman point out exactly what would happen if she killed his only son, Gedeon? And the petty, self-indulgent reasons why she wasn't going to? She wants to see her little brother grow into himself and visit her family, that's why you're still alive."

"…Father, I-"

"Shut up." The elder snapped harshly. "You caused her to get stuck in a rut where she wants to kill you, won't because she knows it's a bad idea, but is also forced to play nice with the same idiot to start it all and which irritates her all over again. What do you think will happen once her rage surpasses her common sense?"

Gedeon showed a bit of the intelligence both elder vor knew he had somewhere by remaining silent.

"I approved of this last lesson because Bazanova can no longer deal with you. The last thing she
said she might manage is ensure you can heal yourself automatically and know exactly how far your talents go in healing or what kind of damage you can walk away from, then she's washing her hands of you entirely. Even that much I didn't want to allow, but then she pointed out you've done nothing when it comes to learning how to apply your Sun Flame abilities and she refuses to completely fail in teaching you something!"

Well… this was awkward.

Pyotr contemplated coughing or even lowering his dignity to fidget to remind Milos that he was in the room. Frankly, as disturbing as it was for the Pahkan to hear Sonya point out why she couldn't allow her 'Cloud' instincts their way it was equally so for him.

Elisaveta's youngest foster daughter might not know Pyotr raised her mother figure, but that was still his granddaughter. Contemplating her killing the son of a friend and boss was… an experience.

"I am not a stupid man, Gedeon. I also know that if Bazanova gives in to her impulse to kill you, it could potentially cause enough internal strife to destroy a good portion of what I've spent my life working on. Intentionally or not, she has enough weight behind her to do that." Milos carried on in a markedly milder tone. "All because you slapped some uppity girl, you've burned whatever bridges you had or could make with Bazanova. What's more, apparently the girl in question was well aware she would be at least reprimanded… but you had to hit her because she pointed out how stupidly you were behaving."

Gedeon went pale under his patchwork of bruising, unsure how to deal with the admittedly rare disapproval from his father.

"The only saving grace I can see," Pyotr interjected blandly when it seemed neither father nor son would break the silence after a very long, awkward moment, "is that Sonya is temporary. We will lose 'her people', I highly doubt she will leave whoever it encompasses at risk if they are not able to defend themselves. But once young Dmitriy is released from prison most of this will be smoothed over."

Milos sniffed derisively, glancing at his longest surviving companion as if just noticing he was still standing there. "Apparently, Elisaveta's son is the next Cloud for this territory. Even younger than the rest of that pack of supernatural brats, but we will at least still have one in the long run. What I'm more concerned about is how the others will take it. News will get out, eventually. Galina teaches a sixth of it, and they might not want to be as restrained as the elder Cloud we have."

He had to give the other man the point. Pyotr sighed, raking a hand through hair as equally as grey as the Pahkan's. "So now that Gedeon's finally irked Sonya's last nerve, what are we to do with her?"

"Is there anything we can do about her?" All but growled out the leader of their clan. "Pressing things when we have representatives from the Triads here able to carry tales if things go wrong doesn't seem to be the best idea I can think of."

"…it would be so much easier if she was born male."

His answer was a snort. "If wishes were fishes, no man would go hungry."

He rolled his eyes at his old friend's whimsical counter to his comment. "More seriously, Milos. Sonya will not follow Gedeon now, nor lend her contacts to his use as she will to you. Unless you can scrounge up another two decades for us to try again or pick someone else… she will likely quit entirely once you leave."
"Were we ever going to keep her? The bitch is nearly too much trouble as it is."

"That," Milos observed after both elder vory gave him a flat stare for interrupting, "might actually be the first smart thing I've heard out of you yet this week."

"Speaking as your financial manager, that is actually a stupid question." Pyotr interjected, feeling slightly alarmed over where that topic might go. "It's through Sonya's contacts we currently have an on-going lucrative trade with the Triads, for a service she pioneered, using information she compiled over nearly a decade. That's really the tip of the iceberg. More importantly... Gedeon, that 'bitch' is my granddaughter."

Elisaveta might now have the biological baby she always wanted, but that didn't devalue the effort she poured into her foster children when she thought it was never going to be possible.

Milos regarded him reproachfully. "And here I thought you were the last hold out on the fostering project not really being family."

"Elisaveta will have her way anyways." Even before he lost his lover, Pyotr hadn't really wanted family. Fostering children was enough of a cover story for raising their own thieves, very loyal thieves, that back when the Zolotovs were new he had picked up a girl so she wouldn't be able to ride his coattails and called that good. "She always was too stubborn for her own good."

"I am going to assume you mean 'your' own good." The Pahkan muttered mostly to himself. "Aside all that, Pyotr, how exactly do you propose we 'manage' her? It might have been possible before Gedeon blundered all over her 'Cloud' side, by getting her more interested back here with either more work to be done she's better suited for or throwing some vor at her as a lover. Now?"

"I'm pretty sure whichever unlucky sod you tried to 'throw' at her would end up dead in short order... but to be honest we have never 'managed' Sonya. She never was one that needed it." He countered frankly. "At most, we are merely someplace she can go in Moscow that a few of her fellows linger around and take on some of her excess. Frankly, even if she just keeps paying her dues up to the point you retire, we're still better off than actually trying and aggravating the situation."

"So, what, you're just going to let her go? What-"

"You brought your own pain on yourself, deal with it!" Milos snapped, cutting Gedeon off before he could really get going. "We've seen what unrealized, preteen Clouds can do when they decide enough is enough. Do you really want to see what a fully grown, fully trained Cloud can do when they decide the same?"

"One who might go berserk in the middle of the clan's headquarters no less." Pyotr tacked on in a less forceful tone. "You made a time bomb with your actions, Gedeon. One which frequently visits this building a floor down."

"So, no, we're going to have to let her go. The only question is what we can get out of her before we are forced to."

He hesitated a moment. "...that might not be the case. She belonged with us before Dmitriy got himself jailed, she was merely never around. It is entirely possible if we go back to that, she will not try to forcibly sever her ties. Might even keep paying in order to not deal with Gedeon anymore."

Milos snorted again, waving a hand dismissively. "Are you really going to try to convince me she's not going to scorn anything Gedeon becomes the head of just because now?"

"Up until that point, I mean."
"And if Gedeon loses or kills Bazanova, even if she just distances herself, with a hand-over happening? What do you think those outside the clan will believe is going on?"

"That Clouds might not follow the son even if they followed the father. That you are one of the few people smart or crafty enough to keep a Cloud happy and to dwell in territory not their own." Countered the equally as old vor stridently. "No one really knows much about them since they keep dying off when spotted. Sonya's a benchmark for all of Russia when it comes to Clouds. Most of what little we know come from her. If she stays until you step down, it will suggest a more peaceful reason than your heir pissing her off."

The Pahkan drummed his fingers on the wood of his desk, pondering over all of it. "When is Dmitriy due to be released?"

"…next year. I can get a closer estimate to you once I return to my office."

Milos scowled at the news, heaving a rather weary sounding sigh. "Gedeon, go clean yourself up. And for fuck's sake, learn how to heal yourself so it doesn't look like Bazanova's beating the shit out of you every day."

Surprised and confused why he wasn't being dismissed, Pyotr gave his old boss a sideways glance.

"It's possible she's faking it. Equally as likely as she's being her usual bluntly honest self." The Pahkan informed him the moment they were left alone in his office. "There's no way to tell without calling her bluff, and if it isn't a bluff…"

"So, what do you intend to do?"

"With her? Nothing. We already blew her patience with us. The fact she's giving warning instead of just murdering her way through the clan has to be enough of a blessing given what could have been. Even if it makes me more than sure she's bluffing." Raking his silver hair back, the slightly older of the two men opted to stare at his ceiling. "My retirement has already been delayed once, again won't be too much of a problem. Next year, Gedeon will take the reins."

Pyotr didn't ask if that was wise or question the Pahkan aloud. Privately was another matter, but his job was to keep things working so long as Milos was happy with it.

"I would like to know why it is our best expert also happens to be the most volatile one."

"Because before this, she was also our most stable Flame user." He pointed out, a bit unnecessarily.

Milos gave him a decidedly unimpressed glower. "Pyotr, I would much rather not let your granddaughter cut her ties with the clan. The hit to his reputation if Gedeon completely loses the girl for any reason might be a bit too much with the unrest this Flame thing has caused in the local balances of power. Not to mention her contacts and the work she might yet put into their research in coming years. Find me a way."

"So, all that before this…?"

"To get my sometimes idiotic son to start thinking." Answered the Pahkan repressively. "If he had just stopped to think… we wouldn't be in this mess."

"…it might not be possible, especially if this isn't a bluff."

"If it's not then so be it. But if not… well, then we need to take steps that she doesn't join anyone else either."
"I'm starting to think Ganauche had a point to his question."

"Which question?" Sonya asked absently from behind a book as Renato used the copies of a Moscow map for whatever little project he wanted them for.

Why the hitman had wanted local maps was beyond her, but as it was possible he was plotting either escape routes or his movements when he went for a 'walk' tonight she refrained from commenting. He was old enough to watch himself, and since he didn't bite the dust that first night she wasn't worried he'd do something stupid.

The Italian in question glanced up to her briefly but returned to his plotting after a moment. "The question of 'are vor allowed family or not'?"

"...there's a few levels to that answer." Sonya admitted after a long moment, because that one was a bit closer to home than usual and not entirely cut and dried of a topic. "Normally it's no. But there's the issue of those who are just recruited and those who have enough rank behind them. Newfound vor, recruited from prison, occasionally have family. That's not so much of an issue, because if they earned it then they've already agreed to give up said blood family, so they normally end whatever association they have with them quickly. Sometimes an idiot knocks up his girlfriend, but those are dealt with basis by basis and generally end with the vor giving up said girlfriend and just sending money to help her raise the child. Then there are the Pahkans and adtoritets, both of whom are pretty much authorities into themselves. It's not odd to hear they have wives or children."

Dumping the maps off her coffee table and onto the books he moved off of it in order to have the surface to work on, he stretched out his back as the half-bent-over position had looked a bit awkward. "You have a little brother."

"...Arseniy's situation is technically different than any usual vor."

"So, he's high ranking enough it doesn't apply to him?"

"That's really only for the Pahkan and whoever he decides to bless such with, usually his inner ring. No, technically... Arseniy doesn't have a son." At his completely unimpressed look, because it was more than just a bit obvious that he really did at first glance, the thief rolled her eyes. He only got that view of the situation because of her, otherwise this probably wouldn't have been brought up. "Look... as far as the clan or anyone else is concerned, Lisa has a son. She actually has two sons and two daughters, only one of which she bore. Arseniy's just... along because he's her lover."

"That is flimsy as hell."

"Yeah, so? So long as 'everyone' knows vor do not have blood family, and it's at least observed to the letter of the law in the lower ranks, our higher-ranking criminals having family is actually a decent cover." Not to mention a 'privilege' those who really wanted the whole 'wife and kids' thing and to motivate vor who would otherwise end up resenting their syndicate if that ever hit them.

Renato got comfortable on her couch, almost putting his heels up on her coffee table before he noticed her glare and aborted the movement to place his right leg over his left knee. "Alright then, what about you?"
"…me?"

"You, Tatiana, Galina? The ladies of the Russian Mafia."

"We're not held to the same standards." Sonya reminded him a bit tartly. "Lisa having children at all should've been a fairly big sign of that."

"Personally speaking then, little lady Sonya." Drawled out the hitman, arranging himself in a more comfortable position on his end of her couch since she wasn't letting him put his heels up. "You going to follow along to the letter of that so-called law?"

Honestly?

"…probably. I will never take on another name without a damn good reason, my brother's and my father's is enough for me. And I have Shamal, so why would I need another brat?"

"No wispy sighing over missing his baby years?"

"Renato, do you remember how annoying it was when he was young enough to question everything? Repeatedly? Do you really want to contemplate the diaper messes and sleepless nights on top of that?"

"…I'm pretty certain that it's less of a chore when you're actually related to the brat in question or wanted one in the first place." The hitman offered dryly, stroking a thumb along his jawline. "Not quite what I was asking, Sonya. Do you want children?"

The thief eyed her current house guest oddly. "It's not a life goal of mine. Right now. If it happens fine, but…"

"Huh."

"Why are you asking, anyways?" Sonya wondered aloud, because this was a fairly odd topic for her to discuss with a friend.

Maybe not so odd if it had happened with her mother, Lisa's attention might shift from her biological son to getting grandchildren as soon as Valera hit the general age her foster children had come to her at. Which was… in two years, because Sonya technically hadn't quite been quite five before being sent to live with her foster parents.

Renato shrugged the whole topic off with an added flick of his wrist. "We're on the topic of children and I was curious. Especially if you were planning on dropping out of our lifestyles in order to pop out another brat or two."

"Hmm… no. Shamal's enough for me, and I wasn't even going to mother him at first."

With a frown, the hitman raked a hand through his spiky black hair. "Why did you? I know he was a bit demanding when it came to your presence, but you didn't have to keep coming back for him. I know you really weren't all that fond of the Iron Fort or the servants within it."

"…Cherep is of the opinion that since I do not have physical territory, I have pack instead. Shamal is young enough that I would at least help him if he wanted my help, which then evolved into being his 'mamma' since he asked."

Which, honestly, the pack thing Sonya still didn't buy.
Her rather irrational desire to murder Gedeon in cold blood aside, because that really could just be because she found any male striking a woman out of mere irritation distasteful and wanted her people away from such abusers but couldn’t move them due to reasons, the only ones that could be called ‘hers’ was either family or Shamal… and Galina. Maybe Usov.

…possibly Scruffy.

Even if she was using it as the excuse to start distancing herself from her clan, there was enough reasonable doubt that she was still highly skeptical that it was what her Cloud nature expressed. If Scruffy got himself beaten up, she’d really only shrug and continue on with her day.

If he got killed was another matter but the only ones that could kill him were her clan since he lived within their territory, and that held another kind of situation entirely that she’d rather not deal with.

"…is that why you’re beating up some moron every day?” Renato scowled as he picked up her thoughts… that informed her his range was improving. Normally being on separate ends of a couch was far enough away to not let him skim thoughts, but it seemed as if polite distance was no longer going to work for that or he could pick up further thoughts if he actually tried. "Tisk, want some help?"

"Again, that is a marginally sensitive clan matter. And no, I’d rather administer the beatings myself.”

Debatable which it was, but as nothing in her thoughts were things she’d rather not let him know about it was fine. Just… something to note.

Renato looked her over carefully, then shrugged and relaxed again. When did he tense up?

"…very well then, so… people?”

"Supposedly. Still not sold on that." Mostly due to the fact if she had pack-like instincts… wouldn’t she be more paranoid over Cherep?

Tatiana?

She really wasn't, although catching up with her siblings was nice and she preferred to do so once or twice a year from all signs. Then again, both were old enough and stubborn enough to go their own ways and make it work for them, so it was possible she wasn't worried because those parts of her pack were able to take care of themselves.

"Might explain why I’m more social than most Clouds, but not entirely.”

"Sonya, whoever calls you 'social' would either be suffering brain damage or had personally met an unbound Cloud." With that parting shot, the hitman abandoned her on the couch and strolled lazily into her very tiny kitchenette that saw little to no use regularly. "The brat should be here in a few, right? What are we doing for dinner?"

"Probably going out." She admitted a bit wryly. She still wasn’t a very good cook without Lisa hovering at her elbow, despite the effort she had been admittedly absentmindedly pouring into learning the culinary arts. Easy breakfast foods aside, she didn’t want to give either Italians food poisoning. "I really don’t cook much here."

"I noticed. Your cupboards are nearly bare.”

"I have dishes." Not very many, and it was mostly just plates, cups, and cutlery.
Honestly, she didn't even have a saucepan to her name.

Renato gifted her with a sardonic look, gesturing to said bare cupboards as he investigated them for what was probably the second or third time just to make a point. "You don't even have a lone, abandoned bag of flour. Salt and pepper maybe, but really Sonya... I've seen crusty old men who have more food stocked than you do, and they seemed to have only lived on take away for several years."

"Is there a point to this?"

No, Sonya wasn't a very good cook. If she didn't have to live off her own cooking, she wasn't going to.

"Want to learn?"

"...really? Lisa's been teaching me a few things, and I've gotten to the point I no longer forget and leave things to burn."

With another tisk, he finished opening and closing each of the little doors which made up her kitchen storage options. "And frankly I'm slightly terrified for the brat, if he has to live off your cooking in a few years."

Sonya scowled at the man. "I'm not that bad anymore. I can make breakfast, and if the brat eats at school then I only have to figure out what to do for dinner."

"And on the weekends, vacations, or holidays? What then?"

"...alright, maybe I do need to learn a bit more."

Public schools, or even private ones, wouldn't have class on the weekends either. She could hire a cook, or a maid that could cook... but she really didn't like the idea of adding more to the people she had to manage already. The security concerns were also something to think about.

Before Renato could capitalize on her admittance and force her to figure out some way to avoid being taught to cook more by an Inverted Sun, there was a Mist equivalent of a knock on her door.

"We're not done here."

"Apparently, the world thinks differently." She shot over a shoulder as she made for the door that lead into the hotel proper.

Another second of unlocking, because while she didn't really trust a lot of locks since she learned how to pick them deadbolts were still amazing in the alarm sense, and she yanked it open to see which of the Mists that brought the brat back today.

Shamal hugged her thigh before she even got a good look at him, wandering past her and further into the apartment with a tired air about him.

The Mist, male this time, was one of the older ones. Which conversely meant he was a lot greener than the younger ones, and that explained why he didn't just Mist-warp the both of them into her apartment instead of knock like any other person.

Well... knock as in the Mist-sense of things knock.
"Chudov Miron Innokentievich," the Mist introduced himself quickly when she gave him a skeptical look, "we were seeing what Shamal could do today."

Sonya found it a bit interesting the brat crashed on the end of the couch Renato had been occupying before taking potshots at her inability to cook. "How soon until Usov starts teaching him things?"

"Another day or two, he said. One more day for assessments and maybe some more talking, then we'll see what he can do when it comes to our skills." Miron gave a kind of fluttery shrug, seemingly having no idea what to do with his hands other than fidget with them. "I am... ah, very sorry about ringing instead of knocking?"

When she gave him another skeptical look, because honestly in the list of weird ass shit Mists did around her when they announced their presence he was actually pretty mild compared to phasing through a mirror-like surface or just walking through walls or doors, he cringed slightly and slid away without actually lifting his feet.

"I'll... shall go now, excuse me."

The Mist immolated himself in his own Flames, and she dearly hoped he was just doing their teleporting trick through the floor instead of committing suicide.

In the silence he left behind him, Renato started snickering.

"Oh, shut up." Sonya slammed the door a bit irritably. "...I hate it when they do that."

"Tiny, little lady Sonya, the scariest thing in the room." Mocked the hitman, turning away from the door.

"Mamma isn't scary." Was all that Shamal supplied to the conversation in a matter of fact tone, at least he did ignore his godfather cracking up in the kitchenette in order to blearily glare in Sonya's general direction. "...but apparently only me, Usov, and Miss Anna seem to think so..."

"Fucking perfect."

How the hell did that happen?

She had next to nothing to do with the Mists!

"Brat, what do you want for dinner? Neither Renato or I can decide."

Bratty Mist hauled himself up in a semi-upright position, resting his head on the couch arm. "Um... can we have lasagna?"

Renato gave her a pointedly expectant look. "Just so you know... it is his favorite..."

Sonya kneaded her temple, already more than done with today. She was going to stay in tonight, and if the hitman wanted to go wander a bit after dark she wouldn't give a damn for what he might wander across. "Fine, whatever. Renato... what do I need for that?"

He gave her bare kitchenette, and the cupboards of bareness, a dismissive look before turning on his heel and heading to the coat rack next to her that held his suit jacket and fedora. "A lot of things you don't have currently. Really Sonya, you don't even have a pan to bake it all in."

"I already said I don't cook here, why would you think I have pans when I don't even have pots?" Lisa had more than she ever seemed to need, and if it was that important she'd go borrow from her
mother. "Brat, you may stay here alone as long as you screw with any visitors to leave right away."

"Kay." Shamal was already in the process of settling himself for a nap, pulling the knitted blanket she stole from who knew where over himself and turning his back to the door.

"Really? He's six." The older Italian informed her needlessly as she followed him out of her apartment. "What do you think he's going to do when he wakes up?"

Sonya pulled the door shut behind her again, giving Renato a pointedly exasperated look of his own. "Usov, guard my apartment please."

"Of course!" Said Mist merely beamed when the hitman twitched violently and gave him a blistering glare for materializing right next to him again. "May I…?"

"Yes, we'll make enough for you too." She eyed the preteen for a moment. "Usov, you wouldn't happen to know why your Mists are afraid of me, would you?"

He rocked backwards on his heels and then gave her a perfectly innocent looking smile. "It just seems to be a Mist thing, Sonya."

"Mmm…"

From the look on Renato's face, he was lying through that innocent smile… or the hitman was irritated with the thought of another mouth to feed. When he gave her a blandly irritated glare, she decided the former since he returned to skeptically eyeing the kid between them when she decided.

Sonya decided not to be bothered. For while it was fear from shit she didn't do, and that was annoying… frankly Mists were the kind of Flame users you had to take in small doses. Between him, Viper, and intermittent periods when Usov was inexcusably busy and sent Anna instead, she already had a set of Mists she could deal with.

Furthermore, if she didn't have to see or interact with the Mists that feared her for no reason she was less bothered. For the next week or so it would be irritating, but after that it was highly unlikely she'd deal with them at all.

However, that really didn't excuse the fact that yet more rumor mongering was irritating her. "Stop it, Usov."

"Stop what?"

"I wanted to know if that was natural or synthetic reaction between Clouds and Mists, kid."

"Ah… well, they're easily mislead through word of mouth if they have no reason to disbelieve it?" Usov gave her a slightly strained smile. "Sorry, Sonya. I was merely looking to keep thing contained when the Rains decided to be stupid."

…this was not a conversation she wanted to happen around an outsider, and from the raised eyebrow Renato probably now knew more about that situation than she ever wanted a non-Zolotov to know. "Fine, just stop it."

"Of course." Practicing the better part of valor, the Mist immediately removed himself from view to lurk wherever he was going to in order to keep an eye on her apartment containing a tired Mist brat.

Renato waited only long enough to reach the lobby of the hotel. "…you know, the kid was lying…"
"Of course he was. Whatever the reason, I'm not too bothered. That experiment is already screwed regardless, and it was my fault for not informing him."

Where were pots and pans sold at?

If they couldn't find what she needed for lasagna, she'd have to go borrow from Lisa... so was it better to look for them before or after getting what ingredients were required?

"Before. That pan isn't the only thing we're going to need, and you can use them for multiple things rather than just lasagna."

...son of a bitch, she was going to get cooking lessons from an Inverted Sun anyways, wasn't she?

"Yes, yes you are." Renato informed her smugly.

"...you know, if anyone's listening in on us, they'd be terribly confused on what the hell we're talking about."

Frowning sharply, probably recalling that Usov did enjoy popping up whenever he was called, the hitman knocked his hat askew in order to scratch the back of his head. "Well... screw them. Speaking of ingredients, do you know where to get egg pasta? Specifically, the sheet pasta?"

"...probably might find it in the underground spice trade. Thankfully we're near the docks, so it shouldn't be that hard..."

"...the underground spice trade?"

"Don't ask." Sonya had never figured out why there was a roaring black-market business in spices and random exotic foodstuffs in Moscow. Sometimes she could find the black-market spice trade in other major cities too. It just was, and at least some of it were foods she enjoyed outside of the USSR so while tasty she wasn't going to question it. "It exists, it'll probably have everything you could need, and that's all I want to say about it."

"Huh. I didn't know it reached up here."

(Sunday the 8th of June, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Do you have anything interesting for me today, Nilda?"

"That would depend on what you find interesting this day, Daniella." Admitted her current guest blandly over her coffee.

The Ottavia of Vongola found it slightly disappointing she already had a Rain Guardian at the time she had found this particular lady of the Mafia, but Beretta had her own niche in her Sky's retinue. Nilda Guerra was delightfully through at gathering local intelligence and was a fair hand at being a hatchet woman, but her darling Beretta was more suited for even more indirect subterfuge than the Rain sitting prettily in her foyer.

Well, she hadn't survived being a Donna in the middle of World War Two by letting tradition stand in her way. Although some traditions were very useful, some just... were not. Claiming another Rain Guardian had to be possible somehow. "Anything abroad that might upset things here?"
Nilda nibbled on her lower lip, contemplating what she knew and what the Sky might just be after. "It has actually been fairly quiet since the Cavallone gutted the famiglias in the northern end of Sardinia. Most are just waiting to see what happens from that, but since that is so there's little going on that I can get information about."

"Nothing?" Daniella questioned archly, not used to this particular agent admitting she had nothing.

"Very little of worth." The Soft Flame Rain admitted sourly. "What I have been getting is a lot of the same as last week's rumors, Ottavia."

"Alright, what about things you heard but are not sure of?" If that didn't get her more Intel, then she'd worry.

Italia was a moderately large country, there was always something going on. If no one was talking about what was going on, then someone was trying very damn hard to keep hidden.

"There might be a new famiglia in the works up in L'Aquila. Estra-something or another. They've yet to declare themselves, so that is still only a maybe. Opposite side of a mountain range from a famiglia based out of Tivoli, the Murtas famiglia." Tapping a finger on the handle of her coffee cup, the silver-haired Rain frowned slightly at the Sky she was having a drink with. "Aside that, the Underworld Cooking Tournament Committee has settled on a city this year, it will be held in Dublin. There's... some rumors coming from Switzerland I cannot get confirmation about, some suspicions that a group of Rains might have become active in Croatia but since the supposed location the Flames were identified were part of an ongoing joint military exercise there's been little done to confirm it."

Mostly since if those Rains were military and Flame active than someone would likely have to kill them, Daniella mused wryly. "If the bit in Switzerland comes to you, fine... but concentrate on those Croatia rumors. See if you can't get someone to actually take up responsibility for it before the Vindice get involved."

Nilda nodded at the order like the lovely agent she was. "I'll see what I can find to send me out there. More locally, rumor has it the head of the Giglio Nero has actually accepted this year's invitation to the Christmas Ball. Apparently two northern Italia assassin groups have joined up and have been wreaking havoc up near Turin, although they haven't turn their sights on any of the Vongola Alliance members."

"Going back to dear Luce," Ottavia interrupted, lifting a finger to keep the younger woman from continuing, "how sure of that one are you?"

"Not very, Daniella." Responded the Soft Flame Rain a touch regretfully.

"Well, spread the rumor if she's going then I might as well." Really, it was beyond time for the younger Sky to get out of her famiglia's territory and gather up some Guardians. If she was going to leave Giglio Nero territory, Daniella would also bestir herself to help her son and dear Tyr in keeping the rabble from swarming the unattached Sky. "Didn't Sinclair spend some time in her household? Does she need a Sun or did she fail to capture that rascal as well?"

"...Renato's in Soviet Russia at the moment."

Feeling her eyebrows starting to rise, Daniella blinked a few times to keep her expression to merely 'mildly inquiring' instead of 'gossip hungry'. That was a very specific location to give, she could've just said that the Sun hitman wasn't newly bonded to a Sky. "So, he's not caught then."
"No, Ottavia."

"It will be interesting to hear what kind of information he will get away with." Daniella continued in an even tone. "We rarely hear anything from our Soviet counterparts."

Nilda smiled, although it looked slightly strained. "Of course."

"…spill, girl."

"I gave him relationship advice for female Clouds."

She was nearly seventy, a grandmother thrice over, a well-grounded Sky with a full Harmony of Elemental Guardians, and had survived a world war. Daniella refused to cackle in glee like a schoolgirl. "Oh my…"

…but really, Cloud producing bloodlines were middling-rare and most were spoken for even in Italia. Not quite as so as Sky, and very implosive if handled wrong, but the ratio of Skies and Clouds was still rather dreadful even now decades after the end of World War Two.

Even a Russian import would be something to address the imbalance. Her son's Visconti and her own Solothurn both came from the same famiglia, which hadn't produced any children this generation yet.

Three or four bloodlines were appallingly slim pickings if any of her three grandsons came into their Sky lineage and needed a Cloud Guardian.

"Well, I'll just leave you to that."

Sinclair was quite the skirt chaser, it might not be a permanent arrangement. However, if things continued in this vein then it was likely little Miss Nikishina would end up spending a decent amount of time in Italia. More exposure would mean more chances to have a battle of wits with the girl, as well as possibly tempt her to stay.

Odd that she wandered, but Daniella could and would work with that.

"Thank you, Ottavia." Nilda all but sighed into her coffee, earning herself a fondly exasperated expression from the Sky in question.

Really, the dear was already on the case. Unless something went catastrophically wrong, she'd content herself with becoming a verbal opponent to merely help cement the Russian girl's interests here. "Continue, Nilda."

"Of course, Ottavia…"
Chapter 56

(Monday the 9th of June, 1969. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Shamal curiously eyed his godfather's reflection in the mirror as he washed his hands and rinsed off his toothbrush. "Do you really have to shave every day?"

"Yes." Running a wet hand down the side of his jawline he had finished with, Renato tilted his head to the other side to finish scraping off the whiskers that had grown overnight. "It looks unprofessional if I don't. Or just stupid. Suit and tie with a shadow of a beard? I'd look like… urg, a cut-rate detective."

Sliding backwards, he had to balance on his stomach in order to reach the taps, the Mist watched until the older man was done with the razor blade and was rinsing it off. "Can you teach me?"

"Brat, you don't even have one whisker on your chin yet." Lazily drawled the hitman as he inspected the cleaned blade, with enough of a mocking edge in it to let him know he was being teased but without any true malice as far as Shamal could tell. "Maybe once you've got something on those baby-smooth cheeks, we'll talk then."

"Even shaving on a moving train?" Pressed the boy, keenly interested in how the man had accomplished that during the trip out to his mamma's home city.

That train had moved a lot, and yet Renato hadn't nicked himself like how some of Nono's Guardians sometimes did even when in the Iron Fort. Mostly Ganauche, but one-time Schnitten Barbanters had tiny white papers stuck to his face and claimed it was a shaving accident.

"Possibly. Your zio might teach you a bit, but I'll finish whatever education he gives you."

Uncle Cherep was kind of weird, though. Fun, but a lot different than mamma. He wore makeup.

"Maybe your mamma will teach you about cosmetics before I can teach you how to shave… makeup is very good for altering appearances, and she once used some to make her look male way back when." Renato slanted a very amused look down to him. "You made a very pretty young girl…"

He yanked his shin out of retribution range faster than Shamal could kick him.

"I just wonder where the pictures of that little incident ended up… oh wait, I have a few. Kick me again, brat, and all your little friends at school will get a copy."

"You're sharing then, I want one." Mamma drawled from the doorway in her best approximation of Renato's lazily mocking tone. "And hurry it up, boys. You two are not the only ones living here."

Snagging one of the towels off the little railing for them, Shamal's godfather replaced the straight razor in his shaving kit and picked the whole thing up to tuck under an arm. "All yours, little lady Sonya."

"I'm done, mamma." Shamal announced in the next second, just to get another fond hair ruffle as he passed her.

"Then think of what you want for breakfast." Sonya tossed over a shoulder as she shut the bathroom door behind them to get started on her own morning routine.
"A little late to be waking up..." Renato mused as he rubbed the towel over his freshly shaved skin, his curly sideburns popping free even before he removed the cloth from his face.

"Yesterday was a being lazy day. She's been up since before I got up." Shamal corrected the man, wandering after the hitman as he retreated to the second bedroom. "Mamma does... ballet warmup stretches when she gets up like you do push-ups."

"Ho? A ballerina? Called it."

"And pretzels from the circus."

After placing his kit on the dresser, Renato sharply turned around to look at him squarely. "She does what from the circus?"

"Pretzels." It hadn't looked comfortable to Shamal, he hadn't known people could bend that much. "She can sit on the floor and put both ankles behind her head. It's weird."

He couldn't get one leg up that far, and his mamma could do splits. Both ways.

Shuddering from phantom pain from the one time he tried to copy her, and then cringing from the memory of him turning down her offer to teach him how to do it immediately afterwards, the Mist looked back up to his godfather only to wince at the pointedly disappointed look he was getting.

"The minute Sonya's done with her shower, go accept her offer to teach you flexibility. Damn it, Shamal, that kind of thing might just save your life."

"But... dancing is girly."

"I know how to dance, brat. Timoteo, all of his Guardians, Tyr, and any other decent Mafiosi I could name can dance." Renato shot back repressively, pulling the suit he would be wearing today out of the closet he hung his clothes up in to toss on the already made bedspread for later. "Federico Vongola is being taught to dance, and I'll bet you anything so will his brothers the moment they're old enough. It's just a skill you have to grit your teeth and learn. Besides, ladies appreciate it when their dance partner doesn't step on their toes."

When the hitman sat on the corner of his bed to polish his shoes, Shamal scrambled up to sit next to him while holding his toothbrush between his teeth. Carefully, because he would be dumped on the floor again if he creased the suit set out. "Can't I just use Mist Flames to make people think I can dance?"

"Not against a Storm. Nor me, your mamma, any Mafiosi worth their weight, most other Flame users that have dealt with Mist users, or other Mists. You're learning, end of story." Eyeing the creases that happened from a day of walking around, the older Italian snatched up the rag that had been stored with a half-empty tin of shoe polish in his luggage and started working the glossy black goo into those cracks. "Speaking of, dining etiquette."

Shamal groaned, flopping backwards onto his godfather's bed. He also lost his toothbrush….

Somewhere.

"Don't moan at me, brat. Your mother has it, I have it, and by God you'll have it and not embarrass us as well."

"Is she?" He hurried to distract the man with, because he knew he had to learn but… he wasn't really sure if Sonya was just going along with the nickname because he wanted it and she was letting him
or if she was willing to actually be his mamma.

"I asked her yesterday why, and if she wanted other or more children." Renato drawled out dryly. "You wouldn't believe what she-"

"What did she say?"

The man just rolled his eyes and snorted when Shamal plastered himself to his bare back as if that would help force the words out faster. "I was getting to that, brat. Back off."

Shamal thumped back onto the bed mulishly, satisfied when the jostling made the hitman smear his shoe polish over the base of a thumb.

"Since you asked, and you're young enough she'll help you anyways Cloud instincts or not, Sonya's really accepting of the whole damn issue. She really is your mamma now, and you'll live with her in a few more years until you no longer need looking after. Although why you need that reassurance when she's teaching you thief skills any brat of hers would need to know..." After considering the smear of black polish on his tanned skin, Renato reached over and wiped it off on Shamal's shirt before he could jerk backwards and avoid it. "You might even go live with her earlier if I can find someplace she really likes."

"Really?"

No more Iron Fort, no more Federico?

Shamal wasn't even that upset he got used as a rag, as while he may have started it his godfather was always going to finish it his way. "How soon can you do that?"

"I haven't even started looking yet." Renato pointed out exasperatedly, dropping one shoe to focus on the other. "Give it time, brat. If we want your mamma to be happy with it and stay for a few extra years on top of your Mafia School career, it has to be perfect."

That didn't put much of a dent in Shamal's excitement. He had always been the 'outsider' in the Iron Fort, as his godfather wasn't a Vongola Mafioso when every other kid there had at least one relative working for the Famiglia.

The news he was getting shot of them a lot sooner than 'in ten or so years' when he was old enough to live on his own was fantastic.

Blinking at the semi-searching stare he got, one day his godfather would tell him how it seemed he could read minds, the Mist shrugged. "It's not that bad, mister Renato. Just... they use it like it means anything when I'm sure you could beat up their Mafiosi relatives."

Snorting again, this time dismissively, he refocused on the left shoe in his hands. "Damn straight."

Flopping backwards on his godfather's bed, Shamal pondered the black smear of shiny polish on his pajamas as he basked in a plan well-executed and resolved. He was going to live with his mamma, the topic of conversation had been derailed, life was pretty good.

"Back to the matter at hand, brat. Table manners."

"...aww..."

"...I take it breakfast has yet to be decided upon?" A dressed for the day Sonya asked from the open bedroom doorway curiously, leaning up against the door jamb and dabbing at her dripping hair with
her own towel.

"Crêpes. With eggs and bacon." Renato informed her without pausing to check with Shamal, kind of annoying even if that was what he wanted. "Can you cook that without burning the hotel down?"

She threw up her hands exasperatedly, turning on a heel to head for the kitchen. "For fuck's sake, Renato, my oven is old and temperamental. You said so yourself last night. And yes, I can do crêpes and eggs without burning them. Savory or sweet?"

"Savory. And I noticed you didn't say anything about the bacon!" The hitman shot at her back, pausing to think before continuing. "Can you make coffee?"

"...I'd much rather you handle the beast of a machine you bought last night." Dryly called back the thief from further in the hotel suite. "I'd normally use a French press if I wanted some."

Renato rolled his eyes, glanced at him and rolled them again. "I'm pretty sure if she gave the option, there's a sweet version you can have."

"Hmpf." Pointedly snubbing his godfather, Shamal slid off his bed. "Mamma is not a bad cook."

"She burned the lasagna."

"Only a corner! And mister Usov ate that part."

"Mostly because your mamma was annoyed with him." Hooking a finger into the neck of the Mist's pajama shirt, Renato prevented him from leaving the room with a strong hold he didn't have a hope of getting out of without unusual force. "Table manners, brat. For the next week watch how we eat and try to mimic it, you better not force Sonya to clean you off after any meal. We'll teach you the methods later on once you master that much. And stop stuffing your cheeks like a chipmunk, I dread to see what your dental bill will be like this winter."

Shamal was not pouting. Just... irritated. Yeah, irritated. He didn't want to do any of the fancy adult things yet, being a kid was more fun.

"The bad part of growing up, you end up doing a lot of things you don't want to do."

Blinking, he really did wonder how his godfather could answer his thoughts without actually reading minds, the Mist peered up and over to him. Nearly bending over backwards to accomplish it. "Do you do a lot of things you didn't want to do, mister Renato?"

The flat look he got in return said he was fooling absolutely no one with his attempts at subterfuge. "I'm here, am I not? I could've split after you got here, yesterday at the latest. Sonya's syndicate is very on the ball about security and have no issues letting me know it. Instead, I'm playing house with a thief and you for two whole weeks. Enjoy it, brat, I probably won't be able to muster up this much time off with Sonya for a long while."

Shamal managed a nod without doing something embarrassing like crying a little or hugging the man's knee, feeling his godfather release his shirt and ran after his mamma in order to ensure he got the sweet type of crepes for breakfast.

"And for fuck's sake, ask Sonya for flexibility training!"

The thief in question peered around at him as he came up to her side. "I thought you said no?"

"I'm being told to say yes." He reported to her obediently without sniffing like a baby, looking at the
ingredients laid out for breakfast instead of at her. "Sweet?"

"I have some blackcurrant and raspberry jam I can make into a sauce." She pointed out the jar of thick purplish stuff to him next to a red jar he recognized as raspberry jam easier. "Besides, splits don't hurt if you do them correctly, and you really should work up slowly to doing full ones. You can boggle the minds of those little brats you live with by being able to do them at all."

"I'm not going to have to wear a pink tutu, am I?"

"No, that's more of a performance thing than something to wear in ballet training." With a sigh, Sonya eyed the package of bacon warily. "It will also help with your balance, I was pretty clumsy as a kid."

"Really?" That… did not jive with what Shamal knew of her now.

"Really, even broke a chair and a few plates… but that was more my Cloud strength going haywire than unintentional clumsiness." Visibly thinking about it a bit longer, the Storm-Cloud shrugged. "Hit the floor a few times misjudging things, and occasionally lost my grip on a few others… but that's more distance. Hmm…"

"…mamma? You have to put the bacon in a pan to cook it."

"…I was never very good at judging when it's done." She admitted slowly, opting to start with the crêpes instead of the meat. "It's either going to be undercooked or burnt, I'm afraid."

"Eh, mister Renato wants the bacon. Serves him right."

Sonya smirked evilly. "Yes, yes it does."

Something thin and hard suddenly impacted the back of Shamal's head, making him scramble to catch his temporarily missing toothbrush before it hit the ground.

"Keep better track of your shit, brat." The hitman in question drawled out as he entered the kitchen, buttoning his cuffs. "And I heard that."

Mamma sniffed and pretended to ignore Renato as Shamal trotted off to put his toothbrush back with his things.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 9th of June, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"…so, who are you?"

Lifting a corner of the 'reports' he was reading through, although as the kids involved needed some serious handwriting lessons maybe 'deciphering' was a better term, Peter peered suspiciously down at the brunette Mist child.

He didn't have the history with these people to explain to him why it was such a big deal Sonya had a child, aside the age issues but he was pretty sure the kid was adopted so that was that.

Intermittent periods of actually seeing his 'patron' aside, he didn't know the woman well enough to say anything about the fact she had a kid at all.
What he did know boiled down to about three things.

First of all, Clouds were territorial bastards and completely shameless about it. Secondly, Cloud Flame users were *aggressive* about their territory to the point preemptive attacks against threats were likely the norm. Lastly, Sonya was unusual for a Cloud.

Most of that came from *vor* Ziven and his unknown Cloud Flame source, which he was going to say nothing about because even he got to hear the rumors of what happened when baby Clouds were spotted.

The last part was due to the fact Sonya scorned most of the 'usual' things Clouds were known for and merely shared the 'violence-inclined' facet with her fellows so far.

In short, Scruffy was confused and keeping his head down until things made sense again. That wasn't helped when the kid responsible for kicking up the furor started pestering him with questions. *'I'm Peter McScruffy.'*

A dual set of snorts told him both Galina and Sonya were listening in on the conversation from where they were around the desk on the other side of the room.

The Sun sighed heavily at the continued needling about his current name. *'Allow me to rephrase that. I picked Peter, your… mother, has named me McScruffy to go along with it.'*

*'Oh… I'm Shamal.'* So needlessly introduced, the little Mist scrutinized him hard. *'What are you doing?'*

*'Helping your mother with her paperwork.'* Which really should be obvious, even if the kid probably wouldn't be able to catch on to the fact he was restricted to the non-clan and non-criminal parts of it. *'Mostly the compiling of data into more easily read formats for later comparisons.'*

Shamal gave him a deadpan look. *'Are you trying to confuse me into leaving you alone? It's not going to work. A lot of people try that against me.'*

Peter was utterly unsurprised to hear that. *'Care to help then?''*

That got him space, as the kid wrinkled his nose and shot the work in his hands a glare. *'No, thank you.'*

Shrugging, the Sun pointedly raised up the pages of filled in reports to compare them to what he had done already.

If things continued as they were, and he got the same amount of work done as he had last month, then he might be able to make a graph of Flame quirk tendencies contrasting age and experience against a general non-Flame user baseline.

It was very unscientific to assume, even if based off of a large grouping of each Flame, and state it as a fact to others. Scruffy intended to get some hard data to be used instead. Where to go from there mostly depended on the result he got.

*'Why are you called 'McScruffy'?'*

Pausing, Peter lowered the paper again to give the kid a flat look.

…and then got a *blistering* glare from the Mist's Storm-Cloud mother.
He didn't even have to turn and look to know, Galina's voice cut off abruptly from whatever she was muttering to their underboss and very few things had the professional Lightning stop everything. One thing he knew of for sure of was the kid's mother's temper, and the quick look he risked merely confirmed his suspicions.

Not purple, thankfully. Still grey eye color.

So… he did anything she deemed 'untoward' to her kid and he could kiss his ass goodbye. Nice to know…

"When we met, I was very… scruffy. So, it's a nickname. And when I opted to pick a new name my nickname stuck and ended up as my surname since I hadn't picked one." Thankfully it seemed as if the Mist kid was satisfied with that and having already exhausted his curiosity in his work the child wandered back over to his claimed mother.

"How did McScruffy meet you, mamma?"

…or not.

"I found him in a Freetown jail cell." Sonya informed him absently, her attention already sliding back to the work Galina was trying to get her to finish off for the day before she absconded to do whatever it was she was doing. "He was not happy I prevented him from wandering into a firing line."

"Well… that's stupid."

"Mmmm."

Peter risked another look, but as it seemed the icy blonde was now disinterested in him he gave up his pathetic attempt at subterfuge to give the pair his full attention.

Talking to Sonya when she didn't feel helpful was headache inducing, and yet she was volunteering information the kid hadn't asked?

She was already dealing with the paperwork she had, which normally put her in a curt mood… maybe…

Galina was also a bit discomforted with Shamal pulling information out of his mother, but she resumed reeling off the verbal reports she had taken in Sonya's stead while she was off doing other things. After a beat to be sure the kid wasn't going to pester the Storm-Cloud with another question.

Scruffy waved a few fingers, getting the tiny Mist's attention. It netted him a suspicious look.

With a roll of his eyes, he waved the kid over with a broader gesture that wouldn't seem so shifty. When Shamal did trot warily back over the Sun put his work aside, leaned forward, and put both elbows on his knees to address him. "Bored, kid?"

"No, really?" The colossal brat sneered back at him, giving a frustrated 'hmph' and pulled tightly crossed arms close to his chest. "But mamma has to do her boring paperwork, and the one taking me to the Mist Classes isn't here yet."

He was pretty cute when he pouted like that. "Look, do you want something to do? We don't have a lot of child-things in the office… but you're a Mist, right?"

The gleam in the kid's brown eyes as he was treated to a lengthy considering look probably meant
little good for him, but Peter was pretty sure getting into his boss' kid's good book would likely just help him.

He was relying on Sonya for his living situation, and young children were supposed to be less judgmental… right?

"*There's a game we play in Italia.*" Shamal informed him as he hauled himself up to sit on the opposite end of the couch. Holding up a hand, he directed indigo Flames to pour from them and into a table shape between them. "*It's kind of like chess, but less boring.*"

Having next to no actual interactions with Mists, he didn't know if that was supposed to be impressive or not. He was going with impressive, if only due to the fact the kid was maybe around five years old.

After the flat surface firmed up two castle structures then built themselves out of Mist Flames, the one on Scruffy's side lacking a ceiling and parts of the walls in his direction to enable him to see into it. His was medieval in looks, the kid had a tree-fort.

"*Pick a race of creatures.*" Shamal instructed him with a slightly worrying grin.

"*Human knights.*" It would fit the theme the Mist had started him with, and since the kid knew the rules and he didn't Peter was accepting of the fact he was likely to lose badly the first go around.

That was fine, he could withstand the hits to his ego. This game was shaping up to be actually really interesting, even if it smacked of playing with dolls or tin soldiers.

Much to his chagrin, he got *tin* knights formed out of the kid's Mist Flames. There were a couple of what looked like turquoise horses decked out in tin armor, maybe enough for an entire wing of mounted knights… but they were still mostly miniature shield bearing, sword or pike waving soldiers in tin cans.

"*Touché, kid.*"

Shamal was apparently a smart one, or just smart-assed, and just as likely he was frequently patronized instead of taken seriously from other adults not his mother or the other Italian man here with him.

Scruffy didn't mind he was getting a laugh at his expense. It was funny.

"*How do we play then?*"

"*We're playing the quick and dirty version.*" Shamal explained, the started pointing out things on the Constructed tabletop battle zone. "So, it's more like 'capture the castle' than 'wipe out your opposition'. We both have a set number of pieces, and they can heal between skirmishes and age to death if you wait too long. They can't build things in this version, otherwise I'd have to build an entire map to play on… and I might have to leave in the middle of it."

Probably not the kid's invention, but he had to admit this already sounded ten times better than chess. "Alright, but since you're supplying the Mist Flames do I have to tell you how to move my... units?"

"*Scruffy, Activate Shamal's Constructions instead.*" Bazanova called over, shoving an entire section of paperwork to the side as either done with or to not bother with. Galina's expression was no help in figuring out which was it.

…right. If she could Disintegrate a Mist's Constructions, he should be able to do a similar thing in
making them Activate. They really were only made with the intent to do certain things, so supposedly…

Peter prodded a knight with a yellow tipped finger, getting the selected warrior to mount up on a jeweled horse. "Huh… neat."

He looked back up in time to catch Shamal's gob smacked expression. "How'd you do that? I didn't know Suns could."

"Your, ah… mamma can Disintegrate Mist Flames. And I'm older than you, so my will is apparently stronger than yours." He explained his thought process to the kid before the spiel of words spilled over what he could handle, because he looked more excited than dismayed.

"…decent. Thank you, Scruffy."

Peter risked a skeptical look in the Storm-Cloud's direction… but she wasn't looking at him again. What in the world had she been looking for?

"Okay, I'm not going easy on you." Scrambling up to his knees on the couch cushions, the Mist eyed his tree-fort and made a cloud of winged people for his own units. They fluttered into the tree top, and Scruffy got hurriedly involved with mounting up and directing regiments out of the disorganized starting positions they had formed into existence with.

He didn't want to really lose that badly. The kid might decide he was boring.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 9th of June, 1969 continued. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"What do you know of French syndicates?" Sonya asked as she joined her guest in her tiny kitchenette.

Renato gave her a strange look over the top of a plain vanilla file. "A lot of hookers. Mainly."

"All of it?"

Dearly beloved fuck, Verde was going to pop a blood vessel if she tried setting him up there. She had thought there were a lot of women on the hunt when she passed through the less beaten tracks with the Großes Volksfest, but all of it was like that?

Cocking an eyebrow at her, the hitman leaned back in the dinner chair her hotel suite provided as seating. "Who? Why are you asking, Sonya? So I can figure out what it is you want to know."

"There's this… um," hesitating only another moment, frankly he knew a lot about her now and she was only slightly wary of the whole 'he's a hitman' thing these days, Sonya sat herself in the chair across from him, "Tats used to run a gang. Like, before she set up in Mafia Land. One of said gang members found a French Lightning not in France. Said Lighting, Verde, saved Adrik's life so I'm going to get him set up where he wants in return for keeping Tats' boy alive for her."

"So now you need to know about French syndicates because it's his home country and they won't exclude him for not being a native." Renato finished with audible amusement, setting aside the paper in his hands. "Seriously speaking, Sonya, France is the country for prostitution. Some of the seaside country got caught up in the drug running, and since the number of prostitution rings outsourced
security there's a few number of protection rackets on-going, but it's still mainly hookers and pimps."

"Excluding them." She insisted, waving a hand to dismiss that option from the table. "Verde's an egghead. Scientist type with apparently broad interests and an appetite for information he's sort of bull-headed about getting access to. Enough to go toe to toe with me about it, and I've murdered in front of him right after he wasn't a civilian anymore. Where would he not mind building up his reputation, until he's stable enough to do whatever?"

"Well... Lightning. Of course he is." Cradling his jaw with a hand, he mulled over her question more seriously than he had spoken about the nature of a Lightning. "You're going to have to look in the southern parts. I think. Vongola does have some connections out there, and with that complete ban on drugs and human trafficking they have it's safer for a green Lightning. Still expansive Flame user territory, not as dense as Italia but decently enough numbers he won't be immediately hunted for his Flames."

"...isn't prostitution still part of the skin trade?"

Renato pulled the arm holding his chin away from his face and wiggled the hand back and forth. "Eh... yes if you look at it sideways. But it was an established underworld trade long before Vongola was a glimmer in Primo's thoughts. Some syndicates will put a lot of sanctions against prostitution rings that treat their girls badly, but sex and the trade of sexual favors for monetary value isn't something any one syndicate could ever stamp out."

Sonya studied the man's expression. "Should I be worried that you know a lot about this?"

The return look she was gifted with was highly amused. "Jealous?"

"...I'm going to say to you what I said to my sister. There are these things called sexually transmitted diseases..."

"But that's actually part of why those prostitution rings exist." Renato countered, her comment not denting the lazy smirk on his face. "They know who their girls have been fooling around with and can track back anything that pops up in health checks. IF the girls get them."

"I think you're reaching with that. What happens to the girls after they get sick? The men that 'fooled' around with them between the infected one and whenever it's caught?" Sonya waved a dismissive hand. "Aside the fact that they may or may not be doing health checks that wouldn't be standardized to anything, and it would have to be by rumor you'd know what you were playing with was clean enough to not infect you with something nasty unless you're unlucky number whatever before it's caught, hookers don't tend to keep a lot of the money they make doing their work."

"...that's your major complaint against whores?"

She huffed at him. "No. My major complaint is that prostitution is rather uncomfortably linked with the slave trade to provide those 'girls'. And frankly, sometimes those 'pimps' and madams running things are little better than slavers themselves."

The hitman nodded, mouth pressed into a thin line. "I know what you mean, and I can assure you I've never visited one that did so."

"...so, you have done so."

"I was fifteen, and it was my first time outside of Italia. Of course I did." Renato tossed his head back, leaning back on two chair legs and kicking his heels up on her dinner table. "I've had a lot of girls, Sonya. But I've never had to pay for it."
"You just admitted to visiting a brothel."

"Never. Paid. For. Sex." He repeated smugly. "Maybe traded a few favors for it, but I've not spent a bit on buying sex."

Sonya gave the man a flat look. "That's nice, Renato. Not what I was talking about."

"Some of them like their jobs!"

"I'm aware of that, more power to them." Dismissed the thief, getting up to try and figure out what she could cook for dinner. Renato had bullied her into buying a lot of groceries, but her cooking skills limited the fare she could make from it all. "But again, sexually transmitted diseases are a thing and some of them are nasty. You've shared a bed with me and Shamal. Are you sure you're clean?"

She caught sight of the impressive glower he was aiming at her back through her shiny new kettle. Which was probably why Lisa always had hers out on the stovetop.

"Oh, stop pouting."

"Are you germophobic?"

"What? No, I've had to trek through sewers before for my work." Sonya considered it seriously, because it was sort of a valid question. "No more so than anyone else, I think. I just... don't like taking stupid risks. Especially when it comes to things that could put me down for a good few months."

"You never had sex before, then. Or you wouldn't call it stupid."

"Well... no. But it's still stupid." Not in this lifetime, anyways. "There are more than enough people willing to do it for free, of whom at least a decent amount would be honest about their sexual experiences. Why pay when you could get sex for free, and with someone you don't have to wonder how many other men have 'played' with her too? Or him, not judging."

Soup. She could make some soup, and possibly not burn it.

Right?

Was it possible to burn soup?

With that decided, she puzzled over the greens she had heaped in her refrigerator.

Salad maybe?

Renato would bitch, but she actually liked salads. Not nearly as much as Tatiana though.

She had chicken, right?

Baked chicken, salad, and soup for dinner. She still had some bread to go along with the soup too. The chicken would likely end up burnt, but she could blame her oven for that.

Brat was due back soon, he'd be ravenous if the same thing the last few days repeated today. Usov had taken her very seriously when she asked him to double check everything he knew about Mist Flames. She and Renato would go back to wandering around Moscow during the day the moment Shamal wouldn't want a nap right after he was done with the other Mists, spending a few days indoors wasn't too much of a hardship after three straight days of travel to get here.
"Some people either are ugly or of nasty enough temperament to require paying their partners to stand them." Renato observed mockingly from behind her.

"Then those people probably shouldn't procreate." Sonya shot back absently, eyeing her brand-new collection of spices dubiously. "What do I use to season chicken with?"

"...basically anything. Thyme, rosemary, and olive oil are good standbys, but you have parmesan and garlic as well... which is better in my opinion." The hitman abandoned the table and the dossiers Galina had put together about Moscow local possible Cloud vory around Arseniy's age that were either missing or only presumed dead, popping the buttons on his cuffs and rolling up his sleeves as he came to stand beside her. "What else are you thinking?"

"Soup and salad, because I can make salad easily enough and if the chicken bakes I can try to not ruin the soup as well." Depressingly, that was probably the very limit of what she could realistically handle right now.

She eyed the man's hands, and the knife he had picked up to help her with the cooking, dubiously.

He sighed gustily when he caught her look. "If it bothers you that much, I can go see your physician and get a clean bill of health."

"It's your health." Sonya shot back, pulling various bits and bobs that would be going into dinner out, so she wouldn't have to touch her cabinets with raw chicken juice or anything else's ick on her hands. "You want to risk it, that's up to you. But Renato, you are my buffer for the brat. If something happens to you and I'm not ready to take him..."

He made a sound that wasn't agreeing, but also wasn't remotely mollified, as he deboned the chicken for her.

"Also, you're a really good friend of mine. I'd be rather upset if you died."

Rolling his eyes, Renato hooked a cabinet door and opened it with the edge of his Italian leather shoe. "Fetch a pan with the baking sheet, would you? And also, as your friend, trust me to know what I'm doing in that subject."

"Well... if you hadn't a clue what you were doing after all the experience you apparently have by rumor alone, I'm really screwed. Which pan? I now have... three."

"Thank you kindly for at least admitting that much. The cake pan. Fill it with water and put it in with the chicken while it bakes. It'll keep the meat from drying out and also diffuse some of the uneven heat your oven puts out." The hitman ordered, pulling the last of the bones out of dinner and moving on to the breading it was apparently going to have. "Now pay attention."

"Right, awe me." She smirked at his deadpan look, keeping that trick with the water pan in mind for the next time she had to bake something.

Would it work for more than just meat?

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(Tuesday the 10th of June, 1969. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"You can't use logic in this argument!" Shamal declared huffily from a few rooms away.
"Ho?" A very out-of-patience sounding Renato drawled back icily, just loud enough to be heard as well. "And why not?"

"Because I'll lose! I always lose when you use logic. That's not fair!"

Lisa snorted into her cup of tea. She coughed a few times as it burned it's way down the wrong end, waving off the hovering Sonya who was a little alarmed at the sudden attempt to inhale her boiling hot beverage.

"I know I never tried that one..." The younger woman commented neutrally, probably just to make polite conversation, when the pause in the argument went on a bit long.

Her two Italians were probably in the middle of a glaring match of battling wills in the living room, which the hitman was likely to win honestly.

"Tats tried once, against Arseniy." She informed her throatily, clearing it in the next second to continue in a more normal tone. "It went about as well as this attempt seems to be doing. You were in the middle of very pointedly not being in the house at the time, so you missed it. It's just... he sounded so exasperated..."

"It's been going on all morning now." Sighed the Storm-Cloud, absently swirling her cup of tea. "Had he decided to just say something I would've agreed."

"About what?" Lisa inquired curiously.

"Taking a break. Shamal's been putting in some good hours with the Mists, and he's pretty young still. He's been wiped the last three days when he gets back to us. We've got two months, a day off here or there wouldn't be a big issue. Renato just took offense to the brat's stance of 'I don't want to'."

"Ah... yeah, that would do it." How did her difficult child end up the one with parenthood troubles first out of all the children she had mothered?

Lisa might know, intellectually, that Sonya was serious about raising Shamal and everything that went into child rearing... but that sometimes clashed with what she knew about her daughter.

Sonya disliked childish behavior even if it came from a child, and Shamal was a child through and through. She had little patience for mischievous or disruptive behavior, and her brat was a Mist with the personality type they normally encompassed. Shamal was a curious if not particularly driven child and all over the place with it, Sonya tended to prefer the company of others that knew what they were doing and firmly believed about how to go about it.

He was... well, nearly her complete opposite. Outgoing where she was introverted, a little suspicious social butterfly who could chat with anyone if not turn his back on them when she doubted her daughter knew the names of even five Zolotov vory she didn't have years of working with them behind her.

Cherep had been like that as well, bewilderingly so very different from Sonya.

Oh... they shared a few things, innate suspicion of everything at first and a habit of wandering off at any moment they could, but more than enough had been contrasted between their personalities that Lisa had initially assumed the boy-child had gotten a bit of blackmail or something on her then-youngest.

He had, sort of, but in a far more innocent way that she had given him credit for at first.
Being actually just friends that Sonya worried about had not been her first assumption. Their shared Flame thing, she wasn't sure if it was part of that 'such-and-such Flame users prefer/hate such-and-such' or something else, had apparently been more than enough to get young Cherep under Sonya's skin quicker than anything else in her scant handful of years alive.

Lisa knew for a fact the assumption of 'Clouds' like her daughter not particularly tolerating 'Mists' was more or less actually true, so why Shamal was different was something she wondered about.

Then there were things like this current incident, that she knew Sonya had to have dealt with at least once or twice before or would in the coming years... but was at a loss to explain or even imagine how the younger woman would go about it.

Sonya was, at least to those she chose to keep close to her, only verbally argumentative so long as she knew the topic. When it came to things like circular logic or childish beliefs, she refrained from getting involved. Tatiana and Cherep had any number of silly arguments about nothing that had baffled their little sister to no end, and her brother's stout belief in the tooth fairy well into his teenage years had been completely avoided.

Both adult influences in Shamal's life seemed to be putting in some work in trying to let the child have a measure of an actual childhood around the less innocent-friendly lessons that would arm him to survive in their world. Lisa could assume, if a bit guiltily, that on Sonya's side it was to ensure her brat had something she never did have much of herself.

Only a bit, because the Storm-Cloud had been done with being a child long before she got her to foster and nothing they tried had changed her mind about maybe trying the child thing for a second time.

Lisa didn't worry... but concern was a good word. She was slightly concerned about how her youngest foster child would tackle that childish belief side of rearing children, especially when it came to young Shamal's Mist Flames.

…which was another curious thought.

If enough Mist children or adults believed in it, would there be a tooth fairy supported by their collective Flames?

Something to mention later, she supposed...

Aside childish behavior, there was also the question of discipline.

Obviously, Mafioso Sinclair was a strong believer in that personally and was in the middle of correcting their godchild's behavior. While Sonya did have her own version... did she implement it in young Shamal's life or did she leave the instilling of self-control and behavioral correction solely to the hitman?

Lisa didn't actually know how to ask Sonya that besides bluntly stating her curiosity and hoping for the best. Which frustrated her, because she had been able to discuss everything with her children before and had never worried they would take it wrongly.

"I wonder if they're done?" Sonya mused aloud as the silence stretched.

The elder Russian seized the opening gratefully. "Not going to get involved?"

"I will if Renato can't get the brat to see sense, but I think he's got more experience than I do in arguing with Shamal." She spoke wryly, and a bit self-deprecatingly.
Ah, they were taking turns then. That was better than Lisa had been half-afraid of, even if the possibility of Sonya tolerating spoiled behavior was astronomically low.

"He's a good kid."

Normally, when they weren't tired or cranky or feeling stubborn, most children trying to live up to their guardians' or parents' expectations were. As far as Lisa had seen in a handful of days, Shamal was trying really hard to show both his godparents their investment in him wasn't wasted on someone that wouldn't appreciate it.

"I don't get to see him as often as I'd like." Admitted her daughter lowly. "So, while I've found I don't appreciate the difficult parts like I had expected it's not as much as I had assumed. Even if he's being bratty, I'm happy enough to just see it."

"That sounds normal." A slight bit out of her normal range of behavior, but motherhood did that to women. "How difficult is it to spend so much time away?"

"...I get weirdly antsy a couple months without seeing him."

Lisa frowned at her, puzzled. "Weirdly?"

She hadn't known the younger woman could get antsy. She had long since grown out of getting cases of nerves before heists and, from what her Lackey had to say about it, even when dealing with law enforcement.

"It's... not as bad as when I wonder how Cherep's doing. But I can't go visit Cherep as much as I'd like, I'd attract the wrong sort of attention to him if I go too often. The Großen Volksfest goes off the beaten track and differs enough from year to year I can't keep up with it unless I'm actually following it closely anyways. Worse than when I can't go see Tats. I get... frustrated. And snappish."

If Sonya thought something was 'snappish', it was probably her 'ice-bitch mode' as Galina delightfully put it. That social layer of ice she and her lover spent years chipping through and only broke through a fluke.

Lisa puzzled over the information as her daughter refreshed their tea.

Was... Shamal an outlet?

If her brother was correct on Sonya's expression of her Cloud Flames, the pack idea, and she couldn't 'patrol' a good chunk of her territory...

Then possibly Shamal had come along and gotten the receiving end of that pent-up Cloud fussing, because he was young and in need of it from how that story went, decided he liked it and was now trying to keep the woman doing said fussing in his life.

Sonya was happy with it, Lisa had the possible motivations pinned down, and really there was little for it now.

Renato stalked into her kitchen almost like a living storm cloud, not as Sonya was, sneered at the black tea the women were nursing but visibly checked himself when Lisa gestured to the small pot of coffee she was now used to supplying him for the morning visits.

"So, how is young Shamal?"

"Occupying a corner of your living room." He drawled out, choosing to glower at the coffee he
poured himself as if it had done him some personal offence. "Very sorry about this."

"No need to apologize, I'm surprised he lasted this long doing work all day when he's on summer vacation." She gave the two of them a smile, a bit of a calculating one but with her daughter's brat nailed down she could focus on the man she brought home. "Why not leave him with me for today? I'll be sure to give him a few lessons in-between the chores I have to do today, but the two of you don't have to derail everything because he's being cranky."

She received an absolutely beautiful look of dubiousness from Sonya, as she likely recalled a few of the lessons Lisa was responsible for giving Zolotov trainees.

More specifically, 'How to Structure an Effective Argument' basics she gave Cherep and the 'Manipulating Emotions 101' she gave all three of her trained children.

Since Shamal had a problem winning against logical arguments, Lisa should probably give the kid some pointers in 'Creatively Countering Logic with Bullshit and Getting Away with it'.

Surprising how often that one helped her more than 'Countering Logic in Ways to Provide Reasonable Doubt'.

"I'm sold." Renato gave in after pondering it over his coffee, at Sonya's exasperated look he continued in a pointedly patient tone. "It's better than giving in to the brat and rewarding him with what he wanted and threw a fit over. Chores are a good idea."

"Not the issue, Renato." She sighed, rubbing at a temple. "If you want to Lisa..."

"What's the issue then?"

The look her daughter then gave her young man was equally as beautiful as the dubious look she earned before. Just more… despairing. "Lisa. Trains. Thieves. For. A. Living. And you want to leave Shamal with her for several hours."

"You've said that, but also that she's... wait."

"Too late." Lisa chirped happily, setting her empty teacup down. "How far are the two of you going to go today?"

"Probably around the very edges, so Renato can see how the buffer zones between syndicates work here. They're a bit more risky, but I don't believe we've had recent troubles with our neighbors." Sonya admitted before draining her own cup and setting it down. "We'll be back around... dinner time? Or just after, I think. Can you feed him for dinner as well? We'll be back well before his bedtime."

"Sure, sweetie. You might want to go introduce Valera to your brat in a way he can't ignore before you go. They'll be back soon." She reminded her daughter, gathering up the tea service to either put away or wash but leaving the small pot of coffee. "And inform Usov and Shamal of the change in plans."

"Mmmph." With that less than articulate response, the younger woman got up to go handle the arrangements.

"...in hindsight, Miss ah..."

"Call me Lisa."
"…Lisa then. In hindsight, I may have been a bit hasty about agreeing…"

"Shamal's also partly Sonya's. He's entitled to the training anyways. He's just old enough to begin it as well." She countered pleasantly, curious how the man was going to try and handle this.

"Well… yes." Renato's expression briefly crossed into 'conflicted' before getting smoothed out to a very flattering consideration heavy look. "You're a very… evil woman, Lisa."

Lisa gave the hitman a pleasant little smirk. "I'm the mother of your girlfriend, and apparently a grandmother at not-yet-forty. Suffer."

"Not my girlfriend." He countered, almost on automatic before his mind caught up to his mouth and he tacked something else onto that seemingly oft-repeated defense. "Sonya and I are friends."

"But you want to be." She pointed out the obvious. "Otherwise you wouldn't put up her horrible cooking, much less be so conforming when it comes to the scrutiny you're under here. I know Sonya's noticed the clan scrambling to keep an eye on her, but she's too used to being watched here to be bothered overmuch."

He studied her thoughtfully over the rim of his coffee. "I'm teaching her a few things, and I could be 'conforming' because this is the way I expect her to behave around the syndicate of my choice."

"I find it interesting you're trying to counter my points without trying to 'delicately' discourage my opinion that you want my daughter at all."

"Your daughter is a beautiful woman, anyone with eyes can see that." No mention of the fact he was male and the likely reasons he would notice, smart man. "But Sonya is also not interested in anything like that."

"Yet." Lisa stated.

"…yet."

"But either curiosity or just her very belated hormones will eventually catch up to her, and you are the male I think she trusts most outside of our little family." It was entirely possible, if not likely on both sides, that it really was just friendship. Something like Sonya had with Cherep. "You are the only male my children have introduced to me at all."

"She might opt to try a man she could easily kill instead," Renato countered like the devil's advocate, but he couldn't quite keep all the disgust at the idea out of his voice, "instead of risk a long-standing friendship."

Oh my, he had given this a fair amount of thought for his supposed position of 'just friends'.

Lisa hummed noncommittally as she started filling her sink to do the breakfast dishes, waiting.

He'd either give in and try pumping her for help or keep his silence. The first option would be like admitting defeat, the second would preserve his non-statement of intent and leave him reasonable doubt.

"In the interest of conjecture," Renato finally capitulated with after several long moments, "if I was interested in preventing some unknown bastard suddenly coming to the attention of a highly curious woman we both happen to be very fond of and taking advantage of her… any advice?"

…or he could be stubborn about it.
Lisa was very amused, few people were willing to argue against her anymore. She was pretty sure what she had assumed was true, but without actual confirmation she couldn't really meddle either.

Alas.

Well, she had a bit more time to try and pin down his motivations.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 10th of June, 1969. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Arseniy didn't like being asleep when some foreign criminal was poking about, so for the last few days Lisa had been waking him early enough to be upright before their youngest foster daughter was due to show up with either the younger or both Italians.

With little to do in the mornings, he had settled on distracting Valera from the fact his sister was teaching some other brat the skills he wasn't allowed to learn just yet.

'Cloud patrols' his ass. He'd been casing his 'territory' out of duty, not desire.

He was a vor in charge of a section of the clan's territory reserved for brats, it was his job. After several years of duty, it was habit not instinct. Familiarizing Valera to the area was just common sense, this was where he was growing up.

He was not going to address Sonya taking on some 'patrols' for him, for he didn't really know how to explain it. During the time she had been leaving the house the moment she could, and even when she was out with Cherep a few year later, he was fully aware he didn't go out as often.

Why could've been any number of things.

Swinging Valera down from his shoulders onto the front stoop, the vor shouldered open their front door and concluded Sonya and her guests were still present. She and her brat weren't downstairs, at least, so he didn't stop his son from homing in on his sister's voice and heading off in her general direction to get his daily dose of her attention.

He ambled after the boy, vaguely wondering what Lisa was discussing with Sonya's Mafioso in the kitchen and came up short when he realized what was going on in the living room.

Sonya had placed her brat squarely in her lap, which from all appearances Valera did not appreciate.

"Do not flinch back." The blonde thief muttered to Shamal in his native Italian, pretending to not see the ugly glare on her little brother's face. "No Cloud will respect someone afraid of them, nor will be willing to deal with someone that does so."

Shamal peered up at her in favor of acknowledging Valera's less than pleased look. "Are you sure about this, mamma? This isn't what they tell us back in Italia."

"Who would you trust more, me or a bunch of old men who continually flinch from their Clouds?"

Arseniy finally entered the room but lingered behind the strange collection, rather interested in how this was going to go.

After getting over his shock, and inspecting the situation in every angle he could, Valera decided to try removing the obstacle in his way. He was stymied not by the interloping child, but by Sonya
catching his hands before he could lay them on her brat.

"No." She stated, switching back to Russian and giving the child a firm look to hammer her point home.

Valera huffed angrily. Thwarted but not giving up yet, the near-two-year-old hauled himself up onto the couch and plopped himself into Sonya's lap right next to her brat.

Wide eyed, Shamal regarded first the other child then his picked mamma cautiously. "Now what?"

"...nap time, I think." With that warning Sonya clutched the both of them and rolled them all over, so they were sprawled out on the couch with her blocking the easy way out. "You're a bit old for one, but eh."

"...mamma? Seriously?" Shamal ended up under a still vexed Valera, who decided sleeping on top of the boy that had interfered with the bonding time he had with his sister was a great idea too. The older boy tried really hard to hide it, but from the signs he couldn't erase he was still a bit freaked out at the sudden closeness. "Mamma!"

Arseniy wordlessly walked out of there.

Lisa was cheerfully washing up various dishes, Mafioso Sinclair was glowering at his coffee.

He didn't want to know. "They're taking a nap in the living room."

"All of them?"

"Sonya handled it." The vor explained to the startled hitman, which didn't touch on what seemed to be Valera's passive-aggressive thing against his sister's brat nor the fact Sonya seemed to think it was over.

He didn't think so, Valera loved having his sister's attention fully and any upsets would take some time to prove enduring.

"Paper's in the usual place." Lisa tossed over a shoulder, waving a soap slicked hand in the air. "Did you eat enough this morning, or would you like something as well, Renato?"

"...I cooked this morning. We had more than enough, I was showing Sonya how to do French toast."

...smart man. Arseniy had eaten a lot of questionable things before when Lisa wasn't with him, but some of the things his youngest foster child could make…

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 10th of June, 1969. Unknown Location, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Usov returned without the little brunette child, and Anna took a stab in the dark. "Shamal's not turning up today?"

"He's apparently in trouble." Her nominal leader answered, raking a hand through his hair and scratching the back of his head as well. "So, no, we are to go on without him for now."

She gave an absent shrug. "That means we're free to return to our normal things, right?"
"I'm going to insist you don't run away into the nearest reflective surface. We've got a few things to cover first." Usov informed her snottily, using his Mist Flames to call the rest of their fellow's attentions to them.

As thirty Mists, physically or not, converged on the same room things got a bit… muted. Reality took on a less important edge, and the floating chairs as various more experience Mists tried to subtly broaden the minds of the inexperienced ones with all the tact of a bull in a china shop started making things a bit crowded.

"First of all," Usov stated to both nothing and everyone there or not, "I have been instructed by the resident Cloud to stop spreading rumors that she is scary. So, I will say she's not. Trust me."

Like that was going to work.

Anna repressed her desire to sigh or palm her face in exasperation. Somedays like today, Usov was just a wee bit off. They all had learned not to take each other by their words, as verbal things could be so suggestive in certain ways.

"Secondly, if any of you have government relatives I require a list of who and if you have no problems with them losing their jobs or just being embarrassed in general. Either this winter or next spring is the tentative window of opportunity I will have to double check and conceal our existence from the government."

Anna was pretty sure their newest Mist Nikon had a brother in the KGB and made note to check over whatever list was compiled to be sure the ones named were not messed with. While they were apparently to stay away from government jobs and the military, she was depressingly sure that some of them had taken it as a direct challenge.

Usov wasn't too worried, since the wording was 'taking government office' or 'joining established militaries'. He insisted those loopholes of 'puppeting government flunkies' was left open for a reason, and they couldn't be the first ones to think of it.

"Finally, a new direction of study has been handed down from on high." Continued the preteen Mist, as if she wasn't giving him a deadpan expression behind his back. "A Sun has been able to Activate a young Mist's Construct after it had been willed into existence. We are to investigate the limitations and possibilities behind that. Any takers?"

As Usov cheerfully bullied a few of the less interactive Mists into co-opting that avenue of study, Anna slipped away and returned herself into the second reflective surface she found.

She liked Usov, and the rest of the Mists that came after her, but Anna was fully aware she probably owed her life to Miss Bazanova. She had very nearly killed herself with her own Constructs before she had been brought into the Zolotovs, and they used the fact the Storm-Cloud had proved to be one young Mist's Construction's undoing to help her.

Anna had not liked Mikhail the Storm at all, and her lack of regard for the other had been shared fully by him. Additional reason to gain control of herself or not, she still disliked the Storm even now they had next to nothing to do with each other.

She had long ago decided to be less annoying than Usov in how she supported their Storm-Cloud leader, but she did share keeping an eye on everything she was up to with him. She also knew Usov had said nothing of her help to Bazanova, he was a Mist and if she didn't take credit for her work he would.
Eventually things would come clean, so she wasn't too worried there.

While Usov watched what Bazanova held personal to her, Anna watched the clan and the other Flame user training groups that she had taken on professionally. The fact her job kept her out of a lot of the drama that came with their Flames aside, she had a particular niggling concern over Gedeon’s future reaction to having the shit beaten out of him on general principle.

Although he was a thug of a vor, he was at least pretty to look at when not covered in bruises.
(Wednesday the 11th of June, 1969. Tirana, Kingdom of Albania.)

When one was asleep, normally the introduction of a hundred and some-pounds of soaking wet human impacting them suddenly put them in very bad moods.

Cherep, on the other hand, was at first just exasperated.

"Seriously, Vipes?" He rolled the Mist off himself despite some grabbing of arms going on, reaching a hand to the tiny table lamp plugged into the extension cord that provided most the resident tents with electricity from the main generators. "I have a trip-"

The light switched on, giving the tent he lived out of a cast of yellowish light. The stuntman cut his words short when he realized Viper was glaring at him.

"...uh, hi?"

"Turn that off, you fool!" The Mist hissed, pressing… (no skirt + lack of a rack = male) himself backwards more firmly on Cherep's now soaked cot, out of view of the tent flap as far as he could go. "I might've been followed."

As his arm was still extended, he switched the light off obediently.

Cherep pressed his lips together and wondered what the fuck was going on in the dark as he readjusted himself to be more comfortable. Well, as comfortable as he could be with a very wet Viper shivering next to him and getting water into what passed as his bed and pajamas.

He wasn't really much of anything to hide behind, why the Mist came to him after outrunning something was... concerning.

…he had an extra blanket somewhere, right?

Probably under his bed. Groping around with one arm did net him something thick and possibly blanket-like, and he tossed it on his likely freezing friend before going back to trying to find the wool blanket he had for winter weather.

"...why did you just give me a pair of sweatpants?" Viper hissed in his ear.

"It's thick and warm. More importantly, dry. Shush." The water leaking onto the immortal stuntman was chilly, after all.

He was pretty certain had silence not been required for whatever maneuver the Mist was doing he'd be getting an earful about the methods of 'giving' used. Finally he gripped something thin and itchy, the wool blanket he bought a few years ago, and pulled that up and over the both of them.

Eventually, Viper stopped shivering as he leached off the stuntman's body heat reflected by the winter-weight blanket. That was also about the time someone nearby decided either to go for a way too early morning stroll or start poking around the circus' living tents.

They didn't have a dedicated security team, as the circus was civilian and didn't need one, but the odd patrols they did have had predictable routes and anyone needing a bathroom would've been direct about it.
As the steps got closer to his tent, Cherep eventually figured what the hell... he could at least do something to help. It wasn't like anyone could kill him.

Tugging the miser that was his friend abruptly to end up half-sprawled on top of him earned him a very nasty sounding hiss, and he got pinched harshly for tugging off Viper's cloak. Tossing the sopping wet garment to the floor, the Inverted Cloud kicked out just so to get the wool blanket to fall out of it's folds more and cover them both up.

That left the two of them in a reasonable facile of a lover's embrace, and without his hood and his violently indigo hair spread out everywhere Viper did look a bit different. Half sprawled across another warm body, very few people familiar with the gender fluid Mist's normally hooded visage and neatly contained behavior would think it was him in bed with someone else.

Cherep shut his eyes the last moment possible, after ensuring his friend wasn't trying to wiggle out of this. He pointedly did not hold his breath or shiver at the expectant pause and the brief draft of cool air happened, and just as pointedly did not open his eyes until the footsteps moved off far enough to be inaudible.

"...I am going to kill you."

"No," He whispered back just as softly as his friend hissed, "you're not. Stop moving."

"Why should I?"

"You were freezing. Shut up and get warm before doing anything."

Viper did finally stop pinching around his ribs viciously in exchange of burying his icy cold nose into his already clammy bare chest.

"Brat."

"…mou, you asked for it."

"Stop flirting and fuck already. Or go to sleep like the rest of us." A very different voice called over sourly, yet softly enough to show they were also aware of the unauthorized late-night visitor.

The stuntman tried really hard not to laugh at Viper's wide eyes as the other likely recalled he shared a tent.

A Flame user friendly circus wasn't in existence yet, but the *Großes Volksfest* was probably the closest any purely civilian outfit could get. Master Liam was aware of Mists and Clouds, and likely knew more that he hadn't stated right out yet to him.

None of the circus members were combat trained, but that didn't mean they had no combat skills for when unpleasantness popped up in their travels. He was pretty sure Jaq could take a few people out from sheer surprise or use his bulk just as handily as a weapon as he used his mauls or dumbbells, and that Faris could use every shiny and pointy thing in his arsenal he normally used in his acts.

Another voice popped up from the farthest corner of the tent, slurring his words together and causing both Cloud and Mist to strain to make out the words. "...is it over yet?"

"Pretty sure." Cherep informed his tent-mates in a still quiet whisper. "Give it a couple more minutes, though."

"Fuck. Well... stop flirting even still. Some of us are trying to sleep." The first voice carried back to
them from the cot directly across from the stuntman's, the man in question punching his pillow for a better fit around his head.

Grinning down at his friend, he earned himself several more punishing pinches from the now highly vexed Mist he had pinned to his chest. Extra for each hitch and jerk of his chest as he silently laughed some more.

Fifteen minutes of getting pinched drove the Cloud out of his still dripping wet but now mostly warm bed, hauling Viper still wrapped up in his wool blanket with him. "Don't wait up for me, men."

"We won't. Fuck off already."

Their third tent-mate sat upright before the two of them escaped, apparently more awake now than his earlier slurred comment had suggested. "...should someone warn Master Liam?"

"I will. Go back to sleep." The stuntman assured him, pushing the Mist out of the tent before anyone could get a good look at him in the sliver of dawn just peeking over the tiny cityscape of tents set up. He shivered as they started off, because damn was it cool being slightly damp and it just barely past sunrise. "So... what is that all about?"

Viper blearily peered up at him mulishly, blinking rapidly in response to the sudden change in light levels and clutching the woolen cloth closer to himself. "I miscalculated. Mou, they had a Mist working with a Lightning at the... node I was checking into. I didn't expect the Lightning. Or anything but just other Mists."

Cherep hummed as he picked his way across the lanes set up between the various circus performers' tents, already resigned to frozen-feeling bare toes before the walk started. "I thought we were naturally supposed to gather up in groups."

"Limitedly. When there's a Sky structuring things, completely mixed groups happen. Outside of a Sky or Rain, or at worse a Cloud enforcing things, you mix more than two or three types together and things get... nasty." Insisted the miser sourly, hunching more into the thin wool blanket replacing his usual cloak. "A Mist group working with a Lightning, mou, Hardened Constructs that were extra responsive through that extra set of eyes. I had... issues. I can adapt now, but I was taken by surprise and forced off balance."

"Ah... so... why come to me? Vipes, I'm not a fighter or very imposing."

It was kind of the one thing that was bothering him as he didn't mind helping out his friend, but being pacifistic by nature meant he would have greatly preferred taking a lethal blow for the other than wonder how to stand harming someone else.

He could survive a lethal blow, Viper couldn't.

There was a very vicious, low mutter he couldn't make out.

"...come again?"

"...I panicked when I got forced out a window and survived a three story drop into a river. I thought warm and safe and... mou, ended up with you. Feel lucky part of the river didn't come along for the ride."

Cherep couldn't help the smirk that crossed his face. "Aw... you're my best friend too, Vipes. Outside my little sister, I mean."
He got a boney elbow in the gut in return.

"I help you out of the goodness of my heart... what's with all the abuse?" Especially his chest, he was going to have bruises everywhere over it and Tatiana was never going to let him live down if she caught sight of it.

"My nerves are shot, forgive me if I'm irritable." The Mist hissed out, then sneezed violently enough he came to a complete stop or would have risked face-planting in the muddy track they were on.

"...right. Lucky for you, I was leaving the circus for a stint anyways. You can come with me until you get over your cold."

"...that's not a good idea." Viper muttered through cloth, flesh, and bone, holding a hand and a corner of the woolen blanket to his reddening nose.

"I'm pretty sure you can't be worse than a delirious thief that will abandon her sick bed when you turn your back for a moment only to sneak around and curl up with the strongest person in the area." Cherep commented blandly, slinging an arm around his probably sick friend to keep him aimed in the right general direction and on his feet.

"...really?"

"Sonya never seemed to remember it. That she gave us all heart-attacks and basically was responsible for our father's first grey hair." He confirmed wryly. "Then it turned out to be a non-issue because she would seek out our foster father anyways if he just remained in place. But yes, that happened."

A sniff, a snuffle, and then the Mist sighed heavily. "Sick Mists lose control over their Constructions, Cherep. Mou, things are about to get very... strange around me."

The stuntman rolled his eyes, then spotted their destination around the 'corner' of a makeshift intersection of cloth, tent poles, and dew-soaked dirt. "Viper, my life is strange. I'm a stuntman that can't die violently, who hates violence but has very violent family and friends. I've come to terms with that a while ago, and since you're not scaring me off or can't kill me... I'd probably be the best one to nurse you back to health."

The next violent sneeze out of the miser served perfectly well to both prevent the next protest he was going to ignore anyways and announce them to the circus master just finished dressing himself. Likely to see to someone's report of an unknown poking about himself.

Master Liam gave first the stuntman then the shivering wet ex-apprentice an expectant look as he joined them outside of his tent. "Good morning? Cherep, and... I wasn't expecting to see you again, Miss... -ter Viper."

"I'm taking off a day early, Master Liam." Cherep informed the man a bit sheepishly. "Viper is... err, in a bit of trouble."

"Is that what this morning's early visitation was about?" Mused the older man, stroking his bristly mustache thoughtfully.

"I didn't mean to lead them here, mou." The Mist offered on just this side of sourly bland, sniffing hard. "But they can't visibly hunt me, so if I go and someone says they saw it they'll leave."

Smoothing down his facial hair one last time, the circus master finally gave a nod. "We'll be sure to lay various false trails to conceal the right one."
"Very proud, this one." Liam tossed to Cherep, then looked back at the former apprentice. "We are a Russian circus that travels to some distinctly unfriendly lands to Russians or anything that comes from the Soviet Union, young master Viper. Risk and Danger are old friends. You belonged once, and still do if you need it. I do think you need it... don't you?"

There was a moment when the only thing the Mist could do was grip the woolen blanket shielding him from wind and the cold compulsively. "...then what's the price?"

"Why, advertising of course!" Cheerfully announced the circus master, clapping the much slighter man on the shoulder once. "Spread the word of the Großes Volksfest's wondrous sights and amusements as far as you can, if you please. Ah... not the part where we give you sanctuary. That is for members only. And let us not make a habit of this without warning, yes?"

Almost knocked clean off his feet, and not by a sneeze this time, Viper stumbled into Cherep as Liam moved off to handle things.

"Best be on your way before we get into the swing of things, Cherep! We have a, ha, play to put on!"

"If I sit you down so I can gather my things, are you going to bolt on me?" Asked the stuntman dryly as he steadied his friend again. "Because if I have to hunt down a sick Mist like I do a sick Storm-Cloud, I'll be annoyed enough to get a recipe of some soup from my sister. She can't cook, Vipes, even I think it's inedible and I can eat most anything."

"...I need my cloak back. Mou."

"Sure you do."

Well... maybe he did, as since he was coming down with something he possibly couldn't Construct a replica to sneak away with.

Eh, he'll work with that.

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 11th of June, 1969 continued. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"So... I'm going to be a little late getting there, little sis."

"It's fine." Sonya muttered through a filter then sighed, removed the cigarette from her lips and repeated herself more loudly when he tried to protest. "Cherep, it's fine. I've got the brat for two whole months, only a week's past and anytime in the last seven weeks we have will work. This one isn't as time sensitive, but you pull this one on me this fall and I will be annoyed. That one is."

She waved off Renato's curious look, and she was pretty sure he only went back to his own work because she said her brother's name.

"Eh, I'm taking advantage of that one to purchase a new bike in a capitalist country. It's business, I'll be there. I need a bike next year."

"Tats will be very unamused if you miss her entirely." The thief continued, tapping the ash off her cigarette into her ashtray. "She's already annoyed she missed 'tall, dark, and snarky' meeting Lisa for the first time."
The hitman snorted harshly, then busied himself with refreshing his espresso under her narrow gaze.

"It should only be a couple days. I don't think Viper's any worse than you are when sick."

"I refuse to believe that." Dismissed Sonya stoutly, huffing out the last of her lungful of smoke. "A week, or two? Right? I'll tell Bjorn not to expect his tutor for a bit, anything I should pass on as well?"

"Ah… hold a moment."

She pressed the phone receiver to her shoulder while the stuntman asked for the answer to that, looking at her guest as she replaced her cigarette between her lips. "You're being spared my brother's presence, enjoy."

"I only have few issues with your brother, little lady Sonya." Insisted the man sitting at her dining table, flicking a wrist in her direction. "None of which would irk me enough to pick a fight with him. You may rest assured even if he finishes up whatever he's off doing early and shows up I won't make an ass of the both of us."

"Delightful." Sonya deadpanned, taking a drag of her smoke and resetting the phone back to her ear to wait for any marching orders Viper had for her Lackey.

They really had to figure out a better system to contact and speak with each other, besides this phone tag thing they were playing now. How long until beepers were a thing? An actual cell phone might actually make her break her vow of never doing cutting edge technology again… and possibly murder a few people for.

"Vipes said she's only really lingering now because Bjorn's not entirely situated in his role just yet but is mostly trained for what you wanted. Apparently, the last few things require a spectacular mess up and how to mitigate the damage and handling business meetings in person." Cherep reported in an absent tone, likely repeating the Mist's quieter explanation to her in something she could actually hear. "And also, because you're… hey. Vipes. Not cool."

"Because I'm paying regardless?" Guessed Sonya, not remotely surprised at his grunt of confirmation. "It's fine, Cherep. My Lackey will earn back the money in the coming years anyways."

"Still… that's my sister, Viper."

"Cherep, again. It's fine. Viper and I have a different arrangement, I can afford it, don't mind paying, and we both are happy with it."

There was a tinny tisking sound, the then stuntman finally relented with a sigh. "…fine then. I'm pretty sure the world's not ready for the two of you to be friends, it might crack apart or something."

"Quite possibly." Drawled the thief, busying herself with the act of smoking as Viper made whatever rejoinder to that accusation they wanted to.

The snort, with actual amusement this time, told her the Mist had finished with their defense. "That's all on my end, Nya. Anything I should know on yours?"

"Not really. Valera decided his favorite statement is now 'mine' and is repeating it in Shamal's face all the time now."

"So, he's finally actually speaking to others?"
"If you can call it that."

It was frustrating the little Mist something fierce, he wanted to share but the baby Cloud wasn't willing to. Apparently, her brat could care less when it came to the toys Valera had but Sonya's lap and Lisa's attention alone... she was waiting for the moment Renato's person or his attention became a bargaining chip between the two.

She'd laugh, like the ass was doing to her now.

Shamal had at least lost that wary edge to him when it came to Valera, so really now it was just getting the baby Cloud to appreciate the little Mist as someone that wasn't afraid of giving back as good as he got. That much the brat had to do on his own, Sonya was only going to help him where his upbringing in Italy might've screwed a few things up for him.

Likely the two wouldn't really get along well until after Valera came to the unpleasant realization there were pitifully few people either reckless or irreverent enough to not be afraid of Clouds in the beginning. She had the same issues, but that also let her know that people like Shamal... or Renato who was her 'first reckless friend', were pretty fantastic ones.

Of course, it was rather annoying when confronted with a new reckless or irreverent person. She knew that one just perfectly well too. Fong was still annoying but edging into a decent one. Just as soon as she showed her displeasure with him and his idea of 'gift-giving'.

She maybe put way too much thought in it, but she wanted her brat to get along well with her family and that was the only comparison she could think up. There also wasn't another young Inverted Cloud around she could likely find for him, so a 'Renato-type' for Valera it had to be.

"Tats will be here when you get in." Sonya changed the subject with, stubbing out her still smoldering cigarette out. "Prepare yourself for a grilling about sick Mists and their behavior."

"Will do." Cherep confirmed with amusement. "Talk to you later sis."

"More like see you later, I highly doubt you'll call before you get in." She hung up before he could finish sputtering or protest that crack against his terrible communication keeping skills.

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(Thursday the 12th of June, 1969. Sheremetyevo International Airport, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Tatiana swept Shamal up in a crushing hug the brat apparently had no idea how to deal with.

"Baby! It's so lovely to see you again!"

Sonya's brat made some kind of noise of either greeting or protest for the treatment, one arm waving a bit frantically poking out near her waist, his words muffled by the nurse's generous chest where his head ended up.

Thankfully, the airport terminal was decently busy with other reunions and people rushing about, so the fiery redhead's behavior wasn't attracting undue attention. The thief wondered if her sister would've even cared if they were attracting attention in droves.

She could almost feel Renato's conflicted expression from the other side of the pair. Giving him a questioning look had the man press his mouth into a line and refuse to look at either sister.
"Okay. "Tats, stop suffocating my brat."

"Whoops." Digging the red-faced kid out of her cleavage, she gave him a slightly lopsided smirk as she set him back on his feet. "Sorry about that. Habit when I'm off the clock, really. I've never gotten complaints before, though. Hopefully you won't be the first."

Shamal, after a couple gulps of fresh air, gave her a slightly wary grimace that was probably supposed to be a grin. "It's okay… uh, zia. I'm… I'll live."

"Trust me, you'll appreciate it in a few more years." Tatiana assured the kid with a few pats to his now very messy hair. Then she returned to standing straight up to mostly address her sister. "So, I know he's had the first of his bi yearly checkups earlier this spring, but you are kind of due for one around the end of the summer. You want me to…?"

"If you want. I don't really mind going to Doctor Kappel for it if you'd rather."

She then eyed the hitman who was apparently pointedly ignoring them. "And he's going to be continually stubborn, isn't he?"

"Actually…" Drawled the man for himself, tilting his head to the exit. "I've something to request. On your sister's insistence nonetheless. For later."

The nurse hummed Lisa's unspoken demand for more detail, but the Italian hadn't been raised to obey that and it was easier for him to dismiss it. Even if he apparently realized what she was doing and gave his fellow Sun a sardonically mocking flat stare in return.

"…zia? Can I ask you something?"

"Sure baby, you can ask me anything." Looking back up to the blonde sister, she held out her luggage claim ticket. "Can you fetch my stuff for me, Nya?"

"Sure." A little put out Shamal apparently didn't want to ask his question of her, and from the frown Renato didn't know what it was about either, the thief accepted the ticket.

The hitman would likely tell her if she asked.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 12th of June, 1969 continued. Sheremetyevo International Airport, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Shamal waited until his godfather was distracted bringing the car they had taken from the Zolotov motor pool to fetch his 'aunt', before looking up at her as they lingered in a quiet corner offset from the arrival/departure curb. "When did you start working… 'professionally'?"

"Is that what this is about?" Asked the nurse thoughtfully, studying his expression before she knelt down to his level and lowered her voice a little so her words would remain between them. "Let me guess, Lisa said something about Nya working the streets as a pickpocket before she hit eight and being a jewel thief by nine… and now you're wondering if you need to know what you're doing with your life soon."

"Mister Renato was apparently on the streets and already a hitman about the same time frame." He confided quietly, edging closer to his favorite nurse. "Even earlier, if not a Mafioso then."

Doctor Kappel had a couple nurses the four times he got taken in for a checkup so far, but the
redhead was his mamma's sister. She was always happy to see him for his checkups, always had a hug for him when he arrived at the hospital she worked at, not just professionally pleased to see a patient.

The Mist knew perfectly well the difference between the two, and never minded checkups or shots so long as he got to see her.

"I only started after I hit thirteen. And your mamma helped me with my start. I also didn't stay in that profession, you know." The female Sun smoothed down his hair, absently as she thought. "Baby, people like Nya and tall, dark, and snarky are a bit... different, from you and me. They're the types to be good at almost anything they put their minds or hands to, especially with what they landed doing, and are both industrious people by nature. Matching your development to them either now or then will do you no favors. Take my word for it."

Shamal gave her a worried look.

He was six and had no idea what he wanted to do with his life.

While his mamma's thief skills were interesting, they were more fun to do as practice and scary to contemplate actually using as intended. He wasn't... even entirely sure what his godfather did for a living besides the contract 'murders' he took on and was definitely sure he was probably not ready for that either.

"No, baby. I mean it. I tried matching myself up against Nya when we were growing up. It made me miserable." Insisted his zia strongly, a faint frown on her bright red lips and a worried pinch to the rest of her pretty features as she stared at him seriously. "Your mamma was good at so much I wasn't, and what I was good at meant little to her. I focused too much on the skills, so she'd have a reason to look up to me or seek my help, and overlooked the fact Nya just liked me for being her sister and putting up with her... not because I could help her professionally."

"But... you heal." As far as the young Mist was aware, Sun Flame healers were jealously guarded back in Italia.

Mister Renato didn't like it when that was pointed out to him and would have nasty things to say about people who assumed things later.

It was the same here, right?

"And healers are the best. But I didn't know I was good for it back then, didn't know what I was, and I was trying to be just as good as my sister at our original profession." Tatiana tapped his nose, rising up to her full height as she caught sight of the car being driven by an Italian hitman and her sister muscling her luggage about. "Baby, if it worries you that much... talk to them about it. I bet you, Nya will call you silly for worrying about this."

The sisters shared a look, strangely pointed on his zia's side and faintly confused on his mamma's.

"I'll give you one more bit to puzzle over, baby. I'm better than Nya on a few things naturally, just as she's better than me in a few of her own. Try figuring that out, what you're better at than your mamma or your Mister Renato. Then make that your profession if you want to be needed."

Shamal's mamma still looked confused as she handed the luggage over to the Mafioso. "...I'm not good with people?"

"Ho? No, really? I never noticed." Renato tossed over a shoulder, loading the boot of the car with the nurse's things. Then, after shutting the boot door, caught sight of the less than pleased look both
women were giving him. "...what?"

The blonde thief glanced at Tatiana, who pressed her very red lips together and sniffed in mock insult in his direction. "Stick with Nya, baby. Apparently at least she has some modesty."

"I am perfectly modest... when it's called for." Insisted the hitman, glancing first to Shamal as he passed the man to climb into the back seat with the nurse then to her. Then finally to Sonya before he left the Mist's view. "Brat is having qualms over if he needs to work now or later."

"Ah..." Hesitating, the thief bent to look at the faintly red-faced Shamal inside the car trying to hide his blush instead of shutting the rear passenger door. "Brat. When you're ready. I don't care how long it takes."

"I might." Renato muttered somewhere behind her, skirting around the backwards kick his mamma aimed blindly in his direction to round the car and get back to the driver's seat.

"I do not expect you to do anything job related until you're fourteen, and that's just picking something by then. I won't even care if you decide to follow your zio's footsteps and go completely civilian. I'll help you on your way anyways." She caught the hitman's skeptical look as he seated himself behind the wheel and made a face at him. "Not that it's likely, but it's possible and should be made clear."

The Mafioso snorted sardonically as he settled in behind the wheel. "Yes, possible. When we all tend to scorn the law enforcement, disregard the military as a matter of fact, and rarely have good things to say about most civilian occupations we come across."

Rolling her eyes in response, the thief straightened up and finally shut the car door.

"So... what did you expect that to be like?" Zia Tatiana asked teasingly, helping him with his seat buckle that his mamma was very insistent about.

"...not that." Shamal had kind of been afraid his mamma was teaching him her skills because she expected him to follow her footsteps.

Which wasn't a bad idea, he hastily tacked onto the thought before his godfather could somehow reach around the driver's seat to whack him for thinking unflattering thoughts about a massive favor his mamma was doing for him. After a frozen moment where he wasn't knocked upside the head, the Mist blew out a sigh.

It wasn't a bad thought, or plan... just not one he was sure he wanted to do with his life.

He'd keep the skills he was being taught, and practice to keep them sharp. His godfather would have some nasty things to say about it if he didn't, but it was something of his mamma's so he wouldn't have to be nudged.

The young Mist hadn't actually given any thought of what he was going to do for a living. His plans had mostly been either getting his godfather to start dating his mamma so she'd show up more or manage to get her interested in raising him more personally. Which happened, and he wouldn't mind that first one coming true either, but the one that was almost achieved was nice enough.

Taking a year or two to get everything settled and set, not to mention just relax with everything going alright finally since his dad died, was what he had intended on doing... until nonna said a few things about his mamma's career and when it started.

If he took a year or two to simply enjoy things... he'd be at the age his godfather and mamma was
when they set out to handle their own lives. If they started then, when did they expect him to start handling his own affairs?

He barely knew how to tell time using a clock, he couldn't keep appointments!

He'd end up like his mamma and end up late for everything… mostly.

"This is apparently going to be a thing." Renato informed Sonya blandly as they left the airport terminal for the highway, which got a bemused blink from her.

"How the hell can you tell that? You're not even looking at the kid's face. You better not be looking at his face and not the road. Moscow traffic can get… weird."

"There's a rear-view mirror, Tatiana." The hitman pointed out sardonically, readjusting it a bit to help make his point and so the two in the back seat could catch sight of his unimpressed look. "And I noticed."

"There was a bear on the streets on our way down here." Chipped in the thief, pulling her chin off the palm of a hand propped up on the windowsill and ignoring the fact the man driving the car tensed up while she talked. "Renato was not amused at the usual way we deal with such things here."

"Someone shot it in the head with a shotgun or an automatic rifle and someone else put in a claim on the carcass to make dinner with?"

"Surprisingly enough, yes. Exactly that happened, a rifle this time, right in front of us. As a matter of fact, we were asked if we were putting in a claim for the bear carcass since we stopped first. Renato said no, without checking with me." Sonya tossed back neutrally, waving a hand around in a very sarcastic manner. "Why… it almost sounds like it's done fairly often around here if you knew that before I said-"

"Shut. Up."

Zia's eyebrows, which were equally as red as her braided hair, rose up like nonna Lisa's did when she was highly amused. "...tall, dark, and snarky didn't happen to ask what happens when we come across them outside of automobiles, did he?"

"I did, zia." Shamal informed her gleefully. The opportunities he had to tease his godfather were few and rare. "Go to the nearest house and ask for something to hunt it with, and if they want a part in exchange for the use and bullet."

Little weird, but hey. When in Rome and all that.

Even better, he was gifted with a very proud smile from the nurse and a less suffocating hug. "Aww… baby. A little man after my own heart. Good work."

There was a very near audible sound of either a rocky growl or the grinding of teeth that came from the driver seat. Shamal was very impressed, his godfather didn't even have any Mist Flames to help him.

"…so!" The nurse broke the silence when mamma just returned to staring out the open passenger window next to her and the hitman fumed silently. "What else has been happening around here?"

"No, returning to that subject." Interrupted his godfather exasperatedly before anything could be mentioned, wheeling the car off the highway and down a faintly familiar road of downtown Moscow. "Exactly how many guns are generally available to the general households around here?"
Tatiana snickered. "So long as it's called a 'hunting rifle' on the paperwork..."

"An AK-forty-seven?"

"As long as it's used for hunting..." Sonya repeated some of her sister's words with a shrug. "...occasionally. More common to see that outside the city limits, though. I was expecting a shotgun."

"Those old soldier types frequently refuse to give up their service weapons." Continued the nurse, grinning at the back of the older Italian's head. "Especially when they purchase them."

"Our school children are taught to shoot as part of the public-school curriculum." Tacked on the thief, still with a very bland tone of voice. "You take the brat to the ranges around here for practice, you won't even be given an odd look for it. Fuck Renato, we have a firing range the trainees can go shoot things at a little higher than his age that doesn't require parental supervision for any firearms practice. We actually have two now, one I had to have built!"

The look he shot his mamma was blistering. She stared back at him even when he returned to scanning the road, looking entirely bored.

"Can we?" Shamal had never handled a gun but had to admit to some curiosity.

He had watched Mister Renato clean his guns and make bullets a few times, and it was always fascinating to see.

"If your Mister Renato is suffering from culture shock too much to take you, I can." The red headed nurse informed him cheerily. "I taught Nya, baby."

"No. I'll teach him to shoot." Snapped the hitman, waited a beat, then shot another look at the thief that was a lot less scathing. "...Sonya, you know how to shoot?"

"Of course I do." She frowned back for a moment, then huffed as they both turned back to the road. "I may not use guns often, but I can."

Tatiana beamed at Shamal. "Apparently it's going to be a family outing. Sorry, baby. I can teach you something else if you'd like."

Oooh, Shamal possibly had an ally for hooking his godfather up with his mamma.

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(Friday the 13th of June, 1969. Giglio Nero Headquarters, Lecce, Apulia Region, Italian Republic.)

In a natural alcove made by a pair of oaks, just off of an inner courtyard within the Giglio Nero Manse Headquarters, Luce fussed over the silver serving tray on a tiny wrought iron and glass table.

It was situated between her own wrought iron chair and the empty one across from her, neither with padding and no extra frills on the tray or table.

A few more references to the old family journals about how to set up things for her expectant guest, and she finally had to admit there was nothing else to do but wait.

Today wasn't a good day, but that did not excuse poor manners.
She might find the black iron and glass table ugly, the two matching chairs equally so and uncomfortable, but it was tradition. Her impending guest was also not the type to appreciate changes suddenly sprung on him, so the ancient heirloom items now set up and waiting with the hot tea and coffee were dug out of storage and cleaned for use.

Now she had to figure out what to do with them after this day, because if she didn't reuse them again some of her people might question why she had them refurbished and cleaned to very specific detail in the first place.

Pressing the journals back into the pearl and opal inlayed, Mist Flame imbued, wooden chest, Luce locked it up again and tucked the containers under her chair. Then she eyed the key left in her hand before returning it to the necklace she wore.

She really should get on moving and securing all the information her famiglia had on the generations of Arcobalenos and who they were. Sonya de Mort would not be a patient Cloud when it came to her at first, and Sky really wouldn't bet on even her best men successfully guarding her things against a woman that could possibly be the World's Greatest Thief.

There was still a buffer, but it was steadily shrinking day by day. Finding somewhere to hide it all the Russian wouldn't find in three seconds flat the moment she suspected the Sky had a secret cache of information connected to their situation was proving to be rather… vexing.

She had been staring out over the well-groomed lawns, it was the only reason she caught the sudden appearance of a man's shadow stretching over the empty chair across from her and the brick patio she was at.

…well, man wasn't entirely correct in this instance.

No flare of Flames, no wispy lingering Mist Flames. She couldn't even sense him until he decided she could.

Very, very well-controlled Flames.

"Ottavia of the Giglio Nero, I presume?"

Luce looked up at her guest with a serene smile she didn't feel. "I was named Luce, Uncle Kawahira. Tea?"

After a beat, the white haired being nodded absently and took the steps to seat himself across the Donna. "Every generation I come and ask, now?"

She very carefully didn't grimace or frown at the other. At his age, manners were probably of little importance.

However, she did know what he was asking from her ancestor's journals and that might contribute to his curtness. She could forgive that.

Was he finally going to have to sacrifice the last living relatives of a very old friend he once had, was the real question he wanted to know the answer of. Sepira, her ancestor who hadn't left a journal for her and the founder of her famiglia, was once a very good friend of his and for a long time his only surviving fellow.

"I'm afraid I will be the next Sky of the Arcobaleno, Uncle Kawahira." Luce answered him calmly, obediently to the script of the conversation she had foreseen numerous times to learn the pitfalls within it. "Your second choice would succeed for a small while, but the Elements will end up
murdering him before long due to a messy betrayal. The third would never manage to keep them from splitting apart before they come together as you need."

No offence Nono Vongola, the Sky added in her head, but only a few of them would really like you after they got to know how you work.

The only real reason she was the best option was because she had foreseen the hot button issues, and the few shaky ways to guide them all past them. Some of them… were entirely… not professional.

Why did it matter what gender Viper had?

Luce didn’t get to see that one fully but did know who to send after the Mist in order to smooth it over enough to keep things on track. Surprisingly, not the obvious choice.

The green tea she had acquired on the sly steaming away in front of him, Kawahira stared at her flatly behind his round spectacles. He had black eyes like the hitman Sinclair, but they were so much more… dead and flinty.

"I see." Kawahira answered after a long moment, examining the layout of the tray between them for a few moments.

"Also," Continued the Sky now that was tentatively accepted, "you have to wait another two years before even contacting them personally."

The wind blew, the birds twittered overhead and around them. She picked up her coffee to fuss with while the being across from her decided if he was going to actually believe in her prowess of her family’s legacy of future visions or discard her advice.

Eventually, thin fingers crepted around the fragile porcelain as Kawahira picked up his own beverage. "Explain."

"None of them are ready, the ones you need to last and take on the worst of the strain into this generation will refuse in the next two years for various reasons. Godchild, family, duty, business, violence, indifference. If you do not get them specifically… when that backlash of being cursed sets in, in Flame, body, mind… they will murder each other if they are not skilled enough to survive each other becoming… feral. None of the others I see you pick if the first set refuses… none of them will survive it and you’ll have to replace a few to all of them immediately anyways. With the third Strongest, who the first will know or find out about and will not be pleased with the results of what almost happened to them."

That was the test, she was sure. Luce was more than certain that her guest knew perfectly well what happened to his picked Arcobalenos when they were inducted, and he already had considered the most likely things that would happen this round and planned for it.

He was a Mist himself.

"And what of me if I wait your two years, little Luce?"

"Japan has lovely countryside. There is a small town by the name of Namimori, nothing bigger than a hiccup will happen there for almost thirty years. By the time something does happen, you will be fully recovered from your trials."

For you, Yuni. Hopefully, please, let this work…

Kawahira, the Man in the Iron Hat, Checkerface… he had spared the world of at least two or three
sets of Arcobalenos. The *side effects* of denying Tri-ni-set those fourteen or twenty-one or more sacrifices had already started showing up in the world much less in the faint lines of stress on his face.

Not to mention the reedy feel of his Flames, when she had been expecting *intensely overpowering* Mist Flames from her journals many descriptions of her ancestors' own single visits.

The fluxing numbers of Flame users available all around the world was merely the most visible sign of what he was doing and the ripples from it all.

"*Because you have put it off, we will not actually last very long. Strongest of our Era or not. I will last... less than a decade.*" Luce pressed a hand to her stomach, her last preparation in those two years would be to conceive and birth her Aria. Her daughter, who she was damning with her words in hopes her grandchild could finish this off for good. "*My daughter will take up the Sky Pacifier after me for almost as long, her daughter after.*"

A tiny crack split a side of the tea cup Kawahira held, which widened until a good half of the ancient cup fell to shatter against the glass table with the tinker of a glassy substance striking more solid glass, but no tea spilled out across pale fingers that didn't even twitch.

The light green liquid remained cupped as if the porcelain had remained whole.

That... would be a *bitch* to replace with either an adequate replica or an antique cup matching specific criteria still intact from someone else's heirloom set. Time, accidents, and just general age had already claimed the others from this set.

Her words were a massive blow to the other, and his long-held hope to never involve the remnants of his last companion into the cycle of sacrifice to the albatross he administered. She understood that much, if not the weight of age that made it all so much more bitter.

The breaking of the priceless tea cup was forgiven in the same instant it broke.

What she said was basically the end of her line, a decade for Luce and a decade for Aria who would probably only *just* afford the time to continue their family... then Yuni wouldn't last much more supposedly. Not even a pause between sacrifices, the very last of whatever her line meant to the other would supposedly end in the next thirty years.

Luce turned her mind to what else she had left to do while Kawahira adjusted to that bombshell.

Write her own journal for her daughter and granddaughter and hopefully more, which would only be updated well after the Curse was set and the Elements left her until her end. Letters for each of the next Skies, mostly just to beg forgiveness.

Hiding the damn secret section of the library from a damnably curious and suspicious thief.

If only half of Sonya de Mort's Flames weren't tied into all of Skull de Mort's, then she wouldn't have to hide the books and documents at all. She could've... well...

Luce only had to hide it for a decade, didn't she?

It wouldn't matter after the Curse was set, and personally she didn't have the bravery to face the recriminations for hiding it all in the first place from the people she was sacrificing. Hmm...

"*The others will last longer. The Cloud... well, the Clouds, I can't tell yet how you will decide to deal with that... it changes nearly every day still, will be the first to fall.*"
Via murder, murder and revenge, suicide via overwhelming opponents, grief and stress, or… well, that also changed day by day and she could not get a clear picture of what will happen.

It wasn't hers to see, for although she would be the first Sky Arcobaleno… they would not be her Elements.

"Usually, the Clouds are one of the last." Kawahira observed dispassionately, still holding only half of a teacup and not spilling the hot contents as he sipped it casually.

"Our Sun will be last." And… then either nothing would happen to him or the Vindice would have a new member. "Our Cloud is… well..."

"Twinned. I noticed. You wouldn't happen to know who is on the other end of that, would you?"

Faintly expectant, he was accepting that she could foresee strongly enough to offer some advice.

Luce felt the ball of ice lodged in her gut melt, because it really could've gone so wrong… "Brother and sister. She called herself Sonya de Mort in my visions. If that is her name now… I can't say."

"…sibling Clouds? Polarized Clouds twinned from birth? No… that's not actually possible. They don't both survive long like that or suppress each other and never actually find their Flames."

"Adopted." Luce explained simply, before those fact made the Mist suspicious of how truthful she was being about her visions.

Sonya would bitch in the coming years about it fairly often, how the thief was 'required' to care for Skull because he was her brother. Only for the immortal stuntman to counter with the fact they were 'adopted, genetics don't count' in a teasing tone.

The sister had never said anything against it in Luce's visions, letting her brother's words stand uncontested, and it really was the only possible explanation that fit all facts. They didn't look like twin siblings separated from birth, one was the older brother the other the younger sister with a year difference between them, and their coloring alone was too far off for them to be biologically related.

The faintly baffled expression that flashed across his face was probably the most humanizing thing she had seen so far from the other, but the Sky knew better than to comment.

"I don't know their history. The sister will not like me at all even if the brother will just fine in spite of it, and they will refuse to open up about it in my lifetime." To be fair, Luce was practically stabbing the siblings in the back right now.

Selling them out, more, but eventually… the term used wouldn't matter much. She deserved the always faintly suspicious and semi-hostile behavior from one half.

It wouldn't be much of an impediment in the end, anyways.

Frankly, since Sonya never would warm up to her, thinking of her at the end hurt less. Skull on the other hand, his turning from her… was probably one of the ones that hurt the most.

Funny how that worked.

"Aside the twinned Clouds and their situation, there's a pair of Rains possible… we will end up preventing their bond though just giving one a spot as the Rain." Lal Mirch and Colonello, and frustratingly she still couldn't see which of them her Arcobaleno of Rain was.
"Easier to do than work around an established one, if it can't be broken."

…bad plan. Very, very bad plan.

Luce couldn't quite keep the wince off her features or keep herself from paling as she recalled that vision.

Discorded Clouds… were never a good thing. A pair of them, one the functionally immortal Strongest Cloud of the Era and the only other one capable of very nearly matching him or knew how to go about copying his ability?

Kawahira caught the flinch she made from the thought, unsurprisingly enough. "No? Well… no matter. I've worked around such things before and will again after this."

"There's more to both sets, and."

"Of course there is." The other countered, no inflection in his tone to tell her anything about where to go from this point. "There always is. But… as I have another two years to gather more information and adjust my plans…"

Luce would not see Uncle Kawahira ever again after this, the next time she would lay eyes on the being he would be Checkerface instead. Handing out the invitations that would seal their fate, and already fully aware of what he would be doing and solid plans to act from.

After the 'Fated Day', she would only see him one more time on her deathbed to hand the Sky Pacifier to her daughter.

Everything, every single thing, had to be started from this one conversation. Even if it would take three decades and three Skies from her family and… two attempts. Somehow.

"I… might be too removed from it, but there is something… off, about the Representative Battles for the next generation after us."

She held her breath as his flat eyes flicked back up to hers from examining the shattered teacup he was still steadily draining.

"Both a false and a true one, both not done at first and done second." She explained, fully aware that was as clear as mud but unable to explain it more clearly. "It's not like the face of the Rain, how the Sun survives, the gender of the Mist, nor the fate of the Clouds, and how they clearly change every time I look. There is only two ways it goes, and I cannot see which will be. In one, the Battles are not called even when all but the third Sky of this generation and the other Rain die. Then do you call for it both after and before the first time you don't, once the issues within Tri-ni-set have been straightened out. The Vindice interfere, but back off for reasons I cannot see from here that involve the Sun and a young Sky he associates with then."

She already had his full attention, especially mention the… whatever it was Yuni would have to navigate somehow. Clouded as though that path was to her, the Eight Sky of the Giglio Nero could make out just enough about the Tenth's lifetime. The next version was harder.

Luce swallowed uneasily. "The other… again, at first the Representative Battles are not called… and you let this generation of Arcobaleno die off one by one again. And then, somehow both after and before, you call the Representative Battles before they weaken to the point killing them is possible… but the Vindice hijack it and refuse to allow it to play out. With that, Tri-ni-set cracks apart and the world with it."
That would be if the Decimo of Vongola failed in using the leavers she was going to try to put in place for him, to end the Arcobaleno Curse. Conversely, also if she failed to do enough in her lifetime that was about to be horribly shortened to maybe a bare decade more from now.

Kawahira was too old, too bitter, and way too tired to believe her if she said the grindstone he fed the strongest of each era to could be stopped cold.

Mentioning the end would have him discard it out of hand and ignore any further mention when the time came. This way… he might conclude that giving in when it comes up will just allow things to continue, only for things to end how she wanted them to anyways.

He had once tried to end the Curse he had to apply and reapply again and again in order to keep the world working… and failed miserably.

Admittedly, using the remnants of those that once bore the Curse to engineer a permanent source the Pacifiers could feed off of required that miserable mistake to have been made in order to be possible at all.

Luce had a headache trying to sort out everything she had seen, gathered together, and was either about to or was putting into play.

"…interesting."

She could almost believe her guest really thought that, as far she knew from her ancestors’ journals no other seer from Sepira's line had such convoluted visions.

The end was a confusing, jumbled mess.

Things she would and wouldn't do, things Aria would or wouldn't do, things Yuni would and wouldn't do. Then all the things this next generation of the Strongest of the Era would or would not do.

All of it kept assaulting the Ottavia of the Giglio Nero when she strained her abilities to see if she could do anything more to help.

It was too far beyond her, and the continued attempts were doing her no favors when she still had to check her work in her last decade against the future in hopes of the best outcome possible. While a parasite of a stone fed off her Sky Flames at the same time and made her life fall too short to finish everything.

Kawahira didn't intend to associate with her or Aria much… or just wouldn't. Guilt, self-hatred, pity, whichever reason he wouldn't linger with her or her daughter.

He did plan on trying something to save Yuni from the Curse of the Sky Arcobaleno after the Representative Battles. Something to preserve the last trace he would ever have of others like him aside the burden he intensely hated so much he was beyond numb to it.

Luce knew it, and probably more about him than most others since Sepria from the visions of futures that wouldn't end the Arcobaleno Curse. All because she kept pushing and straining for anything that might help or hinder.

Not what she had been looking for, but interesting to know anyways.

"I have nothing else for you, Uncle Kawahira." She finally admitted, still worried and impatient for the privacy to check to ensure she hadn't messed up the opening steps of this nasty and macabre
waltz with time, fate, and the end of all things. "As always, you have a-

"Thank you, miss Luce of the Giglio Nero." Interrupted the impossibly powerful and ageless Mist before she could complete the offer they all gave him. "Until next time."

"I will not see you, Uncle Kawahira, until my end." She corrected softly. "So goodbye, instead."

"...that is probably better, yes." The other observed softer still. "I'm sorry."

The Sky blinked as he just vanished from her sight and her senses.

She… had not foreseen an apology from him. Ever.

What did that mean?

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 13th of June, 1969 continued. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)

Blinking at the list of names and criminal specialties currently sitting between them, Verde glanced up to Adrik blankly. "...what."

"Apparently, prostitution is very popular in your home country." The Russian generalized for him with a smirk, as if the scientist didn't have eyes and could read that much for himself.

The Lightning wordlessly turned to his… 'tutor' in Lightning Flames.

Björn shrugged, grimaced, and tugged his suit jacket back into place. "I am only reporting what I am told. I have only been to France once myself, and not to do any of… that."

"I think..." Continued the only really fully-fledged criminal between the three of them, grinning broadly. "...I am not going to mind helping you pick a syndicate, Verde my man."

"You are not assisting, Adrik."

"What? Come on! Man, you're going to need help hawking your abilities, so you don't end up a..." He coughed once, then hurried on before finishing that thought or either sitting with him could ask. "Anyway! You're going to need help, Sonya's going to pave the way in sounding a few out... but negotiating with them to join up is going to be... tricky."

Pinching the bridge of his nose, the ex-college student heaved a tired sigh. "I have no objections to whatever aid you are willing to give me, Adrik. Just you are not assisting with the understanding of why Sonya has sent a list of prostitution rings in France rather than something more scientifically geared."

"Probably because whoever she talked to was a lot more interested in the prostitution available rather than anything else there. And this is what she's gotten so far." Relented his old lab partner, giving the list a strange look of its own. "You know, for Sonya... that is kind of weird. Who the hell can actually talk to her about sex? She's just so... bland when it comes up normally and that off-puts a lot of people."

"May we change the topic, please?" Asked the Icelander a bit desperately. "I do not wish to know that much of my Dama's life, or speculate about it."

"Dude, don't you have work to be doing?"
The Lackey grabbed that excuse with barely concealed relief. "Yes, yes I do. Forgive me, gentlemen, but I must leave you now."

He scrambled to snatch up the other list he wrote upon speaking with his boss, then barreled out the door fussing with the lay of his tie.

Smirking, the Russian shook his head and pulled the list they were given over to read through closer. "Well then… now we're alone and can gossip to our heart's content-"

"I'd rather not." Verde interjected flatly.

"-or give this some real attention and weed out the suggestions you'd rather not like." Finished Adrik without missing a beat. "Admittedly, you don't have to wait on the boss lady to pick a way for you. There's French syndicates that visit, and entire section of the island dedicated to the French underworld over with the rest of the European slices."

"We've avoided it because you said it was 'West-side', and therefore more frivolous than-"

"Ah! I said it was nightclubs, bars, casinos, and the occasional whore house. Stop prettying up my words, man."

"Regardless," snapped the Frenchman, "we have since avoided that side of the island since you could not guarantee any safety."

"I can't guarantee your safety now, it's just easier on me for you to stay in the more residential sections." Batting the whole topic away with a hand as if it could help to physically assault a line of communication, the Russian discarded the first page of syndicates and their nominal areas of expertise. "Seriously, you've been reckless before once in your life that I know of. In Sonya's face, nonetheless. Kind of the same situation man, you risk nothing you get little back… but risk more and it might pay off dividends."

Odds were never Verde's favorite parts of mathematical calculations. Too much chance getting in the way, but his… friend's words did make a certain amount of sense.

"…I suppose. I would rather not venture into an area you are not equipped to facilitate me in defending my life, but if they venture out…"

"And they have to, in order to get off the island. Eventually." Adrik peered at him from over the remaining last page of the report. "So… about this list…"

"Is there anything in there that is not a prostitution ring?"

"Well… yeah. Alright, there's a couple we can investigate for you here using the info brokers-"
Chapter 58

(Saturday the 14th of June, 1969. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Nya, the next time someone says to you 'are you bored, because I really want to nail you'… they're not trying to pick a fight. They want to fuck you."

Sonya paused and thought about it, and by Lisa's expression the halt in ministrations was not remotely appreciated, then shrugged the correction off. "Either way, probably would've resulted the same. I didn't even know the guy."

Probably… and she wondered why her sister was still a virgin. Tatiana sighed heavily, giving a despairing look to their mother on the opposite end of the couch only to get a very mildly chiding one in return.

How did that even work?

She should've seen Sonya and Renato together and how they behaved, it wasn't just in her head! It was so tooth-rottenly domestic Tatiana's teeth hurt just by being in the same room, and with their brat heaped on top it was even worse.

She slept on the couch in Sonya's hotel room last night, and she was pretty damn certain she had cavities from the whole production of making dinner much less this morning with a production made out of morning habits and breakfast.

The Italian stud in question was teaching her little sister a couple tricks in cooking in a teasing, high handed kind of way and the conversations… it was all about either Renato's pending work in Moscow or the brat and what to do with him in between their own duties.

It wasn't just her little sister being comfortable around someone, she was around herself and the rest of the family just as much and Tatiana knew what that looked like.

Sonya was taking advice from the hitman. About cooking sure, but she was accepting it without being a total brat about it or defaulting to a book instead.

The nurse was also pretty certain Renato stared at her ass this morning too, while they debated on if the man had enough information to start casing whatever it was he was looking for in the Soviet Union or if another few days of getting the system the Zolotovs had would help him any moving around.

"That is a horrible pickup line, though." Continued the youngest thief after a long moment of puzzling over the incident she was pulling the words from, working in the lotion the nurse supplied for pedicures into their mother's feet.

Bless her little sister for recalling this promise, and even following through with it while her brat spent time picking locks without someone guiding him through the procedure. Then again for testing out how hard might be too hard on her own feet before offering to do it for her older sister.

Sonya might be weirdly against being held and touched, but she was pretty good at the whole masseuse thing.

…and now she had to stop using her little sister's obliviousness for laughs. Damn.
Why did this have to happen now?

There were so many things she could've used... it would've almost been too easy.

Laughing lightly, because at this point it was either laugh or cry, the nurse racked her mind for the pick-up lines she found tacky. "Oh, I know. I think the worst one I heard was 'spread your legs. I'll give you a one-eight British invasion.'"

"Excuse me?" Lisa questioned sharply, eyeing her foster daughters skeptically as she lifted her head from the back of the couch.

"I know. Horrible." Commiserated the elder sister with their mother, flexing her mostly finished toes to help the nail polish dry faster. "I tossed my drink in that smartass' face, Lisa. Let's see..."

"I lost my virginity, can I have yours?" Sonya tacked on in complete deadpan as she finished with the cream and rubbed the remains into her hands, which startled a laugh out of the older woman in the room. "There was also some asshole in Mafia Land... what did he say? 'You've got a nice set of legs, what time do they open?'"

"Oh... oh no. I've gotten that one too a few times. There was a guy in the hospital... 'Don't be so picky... I'm not!'"

"Is it hot in here or just you?" Countered her little sister as she picked up the bottle of nail polish to shake up since it had sat between now and the last use, still in a bland tone of voice which made everything sound so much more ridiculous when repeating tacky pick-up lines. "You must be tired, because you've been running through my mind all day."

"If I told you that you had a beautiful body, would you hold it against me?" Tatiana breathed out in an over the top sultry tone to Lisa, getting a few more disbelieving chuckles from the elder Russian woman.

Sonya's next flat bid of 'I lost my number, can I have yours?' right on the heels of her own overblown suggestion had their mother finally giving an actual laugh instead.

"Hey baby, as long as I have a face, you'll have a place to sit."

There was a pause instead of the expected deadpan counter. "...wait, that's a pickup line?"

Tatiana face-palmed as their mother laughed harder. "It's a sex reference, sis."

"...sorry. Ah... 'Did it hurt? When you fell from Heaven.'"

"Better." Dear God, she had to get Sonya to read Cosmopolitan or something. "Um... darling, if you were cocaine I'd overdose."

"...oh."

The nurse refused to stop, because then she'd have to wonder exactly how many times her baby sister had heard the same corny pickup lines only to think about the logical interpretations rather than the flirty ones. "Baby, you're sexier than socks on a rooster."

"I call bull. That's not..." She pulled a face as she puzzled over that one, mindlessly twisting the cap to the nail polish she had in hand. "...that one doesn't even make any sense."

"They're pickup lines, they don't always make sense. Or get translated over correctly." Tatiana
commiserated with her, that one was weird. "How about… this one makes more sense in English so: 'Baby, you put 'Hot Ass' in my 'Shot Glass'."

"…this is going to go nowhere quickly." The youngest woman decided firmly, gripping Lisa's left ankle to finish up giving pedicures. "I'm ending on I'm not feeling myself today, can I feel you?"

"Are you a light switch? Because I want to turn you on." She tossed back with a waggle of her eyebrows, eyeing their mother's vastly amused expression as she laughed on her end of the couch.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 14th of June, 1969 continued. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Tatiana, please do not tell me you were trying to pressure your sister into something she wasn't ready for."

"No! I didn't! Nya had the power of veto the entire time and used it right up to the end too." Insisted the nurse hastily under Lisa's very well practiced 'disapproving-mom-glower'. "It's just… on our vacation to France, all the men I thought she'd like were basically ignored. Oh, she tried, but it was… just…"

While the younger woman struggled to figure out how to phrase it, the elder Russian breathed deeply and tried to keep in mind she was blessed with very smart children.

Occasionally they were too smart for their own good or her peace of mind, but at least they were decently intelligent enough to get themselves out of situations they didn't like.

Sonya hadn't mentioned anything she was annoyed at her sister about, so it was possible the younger thief wasn't particularly bothered by any undertones or even the whole incident itself.

"…how she was with them is nothing compared to her with her Italian stud, and you have to have seen it by now." Apparently deciding that either she could do it no justice with mere words, or to skip it entirely, the redhead continued despite her mother's less than pleased expression. "Those men barely gained ten minutes of her time, and she bored of them and the flirting quickly. Tall, dark, and snarky's been her friend for almost a decade, and they're raising a brat together."

"Be that as it may, if your sister is not looking at him like that it's her right." Lisa commented neutrally, rubbing at her suddenly aching forehead. "They're friends, Tats. Yes, they have an oddly close one for how few times a year they meet. But frankly… suddenly pushing them together would do nothing more than make your sister stubborn or uncomfortable with him or us, whatever he may want, like, or protest about on top of that aside."

No, she wasn't blind and had already started poking one half of that equation about things. However, up until her youngest daughter decided to experiment or that she wanted a lover it was only something to wonder about and a thing to keep an eye on him so he didn't make Sonya uncomfortable.

‘Adorably domestic’ wasn't something she'd label the two, but it was possible they were more like that when the Italians weren't on their best behavior for Sonya's mother.

"Around her age, I didn't want a lover either." She continued, picking absently through the few pieces of paperwork that she and Arseniy had to hand into the clan later tonight to get a few things around the neighborhood fixed up. "As a matter of fact, around eighteen was exactly when I was in
Mafia Land with the intent to never look back."

Tatiana goggled at her, flicking a glance upstairs where her man was sleeping with a napping Valera. "But... Arseniy?"

"Was in prison at the time, and neither of us really had known what we were doing in a relationship."

"...no, no, no. Lisa, you can't leave that story there." Insisted the redhead, placing her crossed arms on the table between them to peer up at her hopefully. "What happened?"

"Exactly that." Admitted the older woman wryly, thinking back to the time just after she learned about her supposed inability to have a child.

Decades before her youngest foster daughter decided that wasn't entirely correct and sought out the Italian Sun Flame using nurse to prove it with Valera's conception and birth.

Between Arseniy getting six years for home invasion and assault, taking it for another vor so there was enough reasonable doubt to prevent him getting longer of a sentence, and the confirmation of something she had been scared of... Lisa hadn't exactly been in the best frame of mind.

Sure, now those old contacts and her work for those seven years meant she could help the youngest of her foster children rather well... but if Arseniy hadn't decided that he didn't want just anyone and only her...

"After Arseniy got out, vor and all, he didn't like that I was gone. I may have wanted children, but to him it wasn't really a thing to be bothered with. After confronting me about it in Mafia Land, he came back here and specifically worked another year to get the position he's in now. The vor who had been in charge was around our Pahkan's age after all."

"...it was Aleksandr, wasn't it?" Her eldest asked slyly.

"Whomever it was, Arseniy got this job then went back to tell me if children was so damn important I could adopt someone instead and dragged me back here."

"Okay, but... Nya's never had a lover." Insisted the nurse, leaning back now that the ancient history part of the conversation was likely over. "She's, like... never has looked twice at someone before."

"All women are different, Tats." Lisa informed her firmly. "Up until Sonya decides to do something about the subject, do not pressure her into anything."

The younger woman sighed heavily, moping. "I'm going to get cavities from watching the two of them. It's so sickeningly domestic, Lisa."

"They are raising a child."

"He's teaching her to cook, and she's not being a nitpicking brat about it."
She had to admit, that was a strong piece of evidence that Sonya actually respected Sinclair's word. However, it wasn't romantic in nature, just advice. They apparently did have a professional relationship before becoming friends, so it was likely part of that. "Don't you have work to be doing?"

"Nya said to wait an hour or so after she left with her brat." Eyeing the lunch dishes that were her job to clean up since Lisa cooked and Sonya had been here for lock picking practice with said brat, the nurse pointedly turned her back on them and batted her lashes at the elder woman. "But this is more important, Lisa!"

"Your sister isn't a robot, and up until she decides to do anything on that subject I fully expect you to leave her alone about it."

"No… Lisa! You're supposed to be on my side! Tall, dark, and snarky's a well-known gentleman, for all that he's a hitman. He'd be perfect to at least get Nya involved in that part of life without risking some asshole that would think he's entitled to a little something just because she's female and he's interested."

"If your sister wants to start on an asshole instead of the Mafioso she knows, then she can." Lisa settled on firmly after a moment. "Seriously, Tats? Can you imagine what would happen to anyone she doesn't care for trying to force your little sister into anything?"

"What if she doesn't realize it? There are some slick operators around, Lisa. And she's socially impaired, if not outright incompetent."

Alright… when put like that it did seem to be a bit more possible.

She pondered the scenario a few more minutes but had to still shake her head in the end. "She's a fully-grown woman and allowed to make her own mistakes, Tatiana. I'm not saying you can't keep an eye on anyone showing her interest, just don't try to force things."

"It wouldn't even be 'forcing'? A nudge, at most."

"Tats…"

"A wake-up call? I swear, she's not even thinking of him that way… and if he moves on before she's fully ready we might have to suffer through some ass playing with her before she realizes it!"

"Tatiana."

"Someone should at least point things out to her, and Nya never believes me when I try! I've-"

"Oh dear, I wonder why." Lisa spoke strongly over whatever else the nurse was going to tack onto that. "Leave your sister alone to figure it out. If you keep doing this, Tats, she's never going to actually speak up when it happens and if she gets in far over her head and needs help."

Tatiana sulked, splaying herself over the kitchen table to obstruct the work the older woman had been looking over. "No fair, Lisa."

"Life rarely is." Just for that, the nurse could take the work in and she could take the rest of the afternoon off until the evening lessons.

"…but… but… Lisa. The cavities!"

"Suffer with the rest of us."
(Saturday the 14th of June, 1969 continued. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Well… not entirely cavity inducing shenanigans were at hand. There was at least one sour thing going on.

Tatiana eyed the rather bloody wreck of the man her usually blasé little sister had beaten the fuck out of warily. "…I don't even want to know."

Sonya opened her mouth with an aggressive air about her, paused for a full moment, then shut her mouth and turned back to the vor on the floor.

Apparently whatever it was would've ruined the nurse's opinion of Gedeon, and was choosing to leave it up to her if she really did wanted to know the story behind this or not. Although admittedly the fact the man had managed to royally piss off her normally even-tempered little sister to this point was… a very big black mark against the man.

"…teach him to heal himself, since it's apparent he requires to have his hand held." The younger thief settled on after a small wait and a struggle with her own temper. "After that… I will have no more reason to do this."

…did Sonya think Tatiana disproved?

The nurse wonder about that, because frankly she didn't give a damn. Gedeon would've tattled to his father had this not been allowed, and that was really all she cared about. That this wasn't going to blow up in her sister's face.

Cherep would've, though. Their dork of a brother would have protested anyone getting harmed for any reason, even for learning purposes.

"Easy enough." Tatiana dismissed after a moment more of puzzling over that. "Although… I have been tasked by Doctor Kappel to find out if those Lightnings can speak English or not. Recognizable English, we only just got the others speaking in something roughly approaching actual fluency."

"We ensured it after his… complaint."

She kept chatting about pre-nurse specifications, while her sister calmed down from eerily liquid body language to just mostly bored and stiff again. Eventually, Sonya rolled her eyes and left the empty office turned beating recovery room, calling that she would assemble Galina's Lightning nurse selections so she could see for herself later.

Now left alone with the vor, Tatiana seriously wondered about killing him even as she knelt to heal him enough to talk.

It was disgustingly easy, with Sun Flames, to give people over-Activated vaccinations or medicine that normally wouldn't be lethal in small doses. Hell, giving people tumors was easy for her… or Activating the breakdown of cellular regeneration until things started rotting.

Overstimulating nerves, Activating the chemical or hormone production out of order or in higher than humanly tolerated amounts, there were a lot of options.

"I'm not going to ask," the nurse informed her first patient of the day wryly, "because then I'll be tempted to kill you. Hope I don't learn whatever it was that finally ticked her off."
Prodding around the vor's jawline, she Activated the bone regeneration in his jaw so it would take mere seconds instead of months for the bone to knit back together. She resisted the temptation to give him a cyst or see if she could grow one of his teeth into his bone, but just barely.

Gedeon spluttered and coughed as the achy itch of fast-forwarded bone growth spread through his face, but by then she was checking the rest of his skull and his neck for fractures. "...the fuck."

"Well, that was coherent. No concussion, then? She's being really careful about it... huh."

The last man she'd seen her little sister beat up had a broken spine, and this one didn't even have an easy to cause head-injury?

Sonya was being very delicate about this indeed.

Probably using the things the girls were taught to ensure any male attacking them regretted it for a long time. Tatiana had put some of that to use before, so she did recognize a few of the injuries the vor had. Thing that were painful, but not always entirely disabling.

He was in a likely phenomenal amount of pain.

"So then!" Leaning back now that Gedeon could both see and talk, and hopefully hear but Tatiana wasn't too worried over that part, she beamed at the asshole. "Self-healing one-oh-one. Pay attention, I'm only going through this one more time for you."

"I paid attention." Gedeon bit out, trying and failing to haul himself either upright or away from the nurse.

Broken fingers, two sprained or worse wrists, and a couple clean breaks of both arms kind of hampered him.

"Apparently not enough if Nya has to ask me to do this again." Some of his breaks looked a few days old, so she was calling bullshit.

The last time Tatiana had been back here she gave the entirety of the Sun division a class on healing via Sun Flames and the possible pitfalls, and also helped a few of them learn to heal their own bruises. He was there that day... but still covered in bruises.

"...Flame users who use their Flames against themselves end up dead."

"...oh boy. Gedeon, shut the fuck up and stop trying to be smart." Had he been waiting for her to do it for him? What a lazy asshole. She had better things to do that wipe his ass. "I'm not touching you again, I've the rest of the clan to work though sometime in the next week or so. Heal yourself."

"You-

"Shut up. Sonya is our foremost authority on Dying Will Flames, and if she says it's possible... it's possible." Tatiana snapped disgustedly. "Stop trying to draw conclusions of your own. Apparently, you suck at it."

"She's a little girl that wandered into the right place at the right time." Gedeon snapped, actually finally managing to lever himself up and back from the nurse's position. "She-

"She put in the work. Nearly a decade of it, with me, Dmitriy, and Galina. And then you come along and try to decide for yourself that we fit pretty boxes and shouldn't put a toe out of line."
Yeah, she ran into that before. The thinking of 'Suns were all healers' that was thrown in Edik's face every time some asshole learned he was a Sun in a morgue instead of a nurse. That apparently Klavdia was a better nurse than Avdotya just because of their Flame types, despite the fact the Sun girl didn't have the temperament and was learning the skills to put into a career in torture because she was kind of fucked in the head.

That 'all Clouds' were murderous, possibly physically abusive psychopaths… and so her little sister was one too. Ignoring the blatant fact she gave no fucks about anyone else and was a mostly sweet, socially incompetent, adorable little grouch to her older sister.

The number of times she got sympathy for announcing Sonya was her sister and not some monster… Impressive that showed up back here without the social stigmas already developed for it.

"Stop trying to be a special snowflake or a trail blazer, Gedeon. You're not. You have specialist for this very reason. Learn to use them as they're intended, we'll all be a lot happier."

He wasn't going to believe her. He had the unconscious or not mindset of 'males are right and women sit on their asses at home to worry over nothing'. She knew it way back when she first met him.

Depressingly a common one shared with a lot of the vory and even those outside the Soviet Union, which made him doubt everything Sonya and now she herself told him as a matter of fact unless there were more outside influences that pointed to the same thing.

Dmitriy got out next year, right?

Hopefully a vor who was also a Rain before he got prison time could make a dent in this man's ego.

Whatever Sonya was hoping for with this, it wasn't going to happen. He'd use it as more evidence that her little sister was too 'emotional' or just not right for her position and justify all his 'actions'.

Shit was starting to go to hell, wasn't it?

Maybe she could argue being the nurse/doctor in Mafia Land for future little nurses and doctors to follow or contact about it was a thing.

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(Sunday the 15th of June, 1969. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"...what?"

"Church. Sunday Mass. Where?" Renato repeated the key points of his question sardonically, eyeing Shamal's progress through his breakfast. "We're Catholic, little lady Sonya. Shamal and I, and most of Italy. It's Sunday, where is Sunday Mass held around here?"

"...oh." The thief managed inanely. Well… alright. "There's the... uh... actually? I don't know."

"You've never been to Mass before?"

"...we're pretty much atheists up here, Renato. Or agnostic." At the completely blank look that earned her, she sighed and tried to recall what churches weren't ruins left to rot and which were
Catholic. "Atheists don't believe in God, and agnostic covers being skeptical of any defined religion's view on it to the point being faithful to the general idea but not sure what denomination or what structured method they prefer."

The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception was in ruins, she knew that much. She and Cherep found it once, and both basically stared at the wreck for a few hours one night.

"...you have got to be kidding."

"Technically… religion and religious worship are called 'cults' up here." Sonya added in just to see his very disgusted expression at the terminology. "...I think Lisa would know, but frankly I don't."

"Are we skipping it this week too, then?" Shamal asked curiously of the hitman.

"We missed last week due to traveling, we are not missing today as well."

"I can find out for you, but you'll be missing the morning mass anyways." She offered, wondering if he was expecting her to take the brat to mass when he left at the end of the week.

Renato shot her a look that was pretty much a 'duh' in less words.

"Shamal… are you Catholic?"

The brat gave her a blank look, confused.

"He's six."

"Exactly. Is it right to force a religious preference on him? So long as 'everyone else' is as well?" Sonya countered blandly, wagging a fork. "I'll take him if you insist, but you're going to have to actually sell this one to me, Renato."

Giving up on his breakfast, the man gave her a thoughtful stare instead. "...personally, I believe in God. I rather like Catholic services, but I'll be honest about my preferences likely stemming from taking advantage of churches being Mafia enforced neutral places in Italia back when I was green and barely keeping my head up."

"Okay, safe places and knowing how to reach them if needed is all well and good... however, this isn't where Shamal's going to run about in a decade or two."

"As I believe in God and like the occasional breathing room, I'd like to share that with the brat." Renato insisted instead of answer that. "Until such a point he can make an informed decision on what religion he wants to believe in, I'd rather keep up with what his father likely was and what's expected of a young Italian child."

"I was alright with that... before you tacked on the peer pressure 'but everyone does' shit." Sonya informed him blandly.

He rolled his eyes. "Not religious? And was that a yes or no?"

"...I'll do it, because of Shamal's father was likely religious and so continuing that until he's got the experience and sense of self to decide his own way sounds halfway decent." She could do that much, even if attending mass when she wasn't Christian smacked of patronizing that which she didn't really understand. "And no, actually. I was never much of a believer in a 'magic man in the sky that created all things on Earth', to be honest."
Renato eyed her for a long moment before flicking a finger to touch the brim of his missing hat. "Fair enough. I never was a great believer in 'we exist only on random chance just because' either. Give it a chance, Sonya? It really isn't so bad."

"According to the Christian doctrine I do know about, we're both sinners and immoral people." Murder was a sin, after all. They were both guilty of that. "But I guess I'll be attending a couple anyways, might as well listen."

"You need to talk to a Mafia priest about that." Suggested the hitman, eyeing his breakfast then apparently deciding he was done. "Not that I'd think you were stupid enough to speak to a civilian one about that little issue, but you might not have thought about it before actually meeting one."

Sonya blinked as the man got up to go do whatever he wanted while she took Shamal to Lisa's and figured out a church that would match his requirements.

Actually… a mafia priest was probably the closest she could get to a psychologist. That wasn't actually a half bad idea if he knew of one that was decent.

She was perfectly aware she had issues, but right until Renato suggested an alternative she had been pretty resigned to just suffer through it all the best she could.

"Mamma?"

"…church and mass, huh?"

"It's not too bad. A little boring sometimes." Shamal informed her as a matter of fact, poking his eggs and not actually eating them either so she figured he was done with breakfast too. "But they tell some interesting stories."

Sonya sighed, and started stacking the dishes up so the hitman could take care of them if he was leaving her the job of figuring out what they were doing today and where. "Duly noted."

She hadn't yet read the bible, had she?

Hmm… the King James' Version or should she see about finding an even older vision?

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 15th of June, 1969 continued. St Louis des Francais Catholic Church, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Well?" Renato drawled out as they got a few streets away from the church Lisa recommended.

"...it was long?" And more than a little awkward, as Sonya knew it would be.

Not as entirely as she had been afraid of, because apparently outsiders in Catholic mass was actually worked into their procedures.

Being allowed to merely sit and not follow the praying thing was greatly appreciated. If… incredibly awkward in being one of few people not kneeling when it was asked for the attendees to observe the rites.

She was still confused over the bread and wine thing. Intellectually she could understand the comparison between the blood and flesh to wine and bread and the giving of it to all who attended mass as they were respecting the supposed originator's sacrifice for them.
However, she was also pretty sure the priest wasn't advocating the cannibalism of their religious icon.

Renato snorted, shoulders shaking before he managed to stop laughing at her thoughts.

"What?" Shamal questioned from between them. "What's so funny?"

"I'm inept at religious worship." Sonya deadpanned for him with a sigh.

"You're not inept, just... uninformed. Which is correctable if you wanted." The hitman tossed back to her. "But still... that was amusing."

"I'm not entirely certain I want to." One or two examples did not a good comparison make, so she'd investigate a few more times before calling it either way.

"You're not going to come with me anymore, mamma?"

She eyed the kid who was tugging on her hand in an attempt to hold it instead of allow her to keep her hands free if violence was offered. "I will for the rest of the summer, but I'm not sold on doing it for any longer than that."

"Oh, neat."

"...so long as I can suffer with you, right?"

"I have no idea what you mean, mamma."

Sonya hummed, and rolled her eyes at the kid beamed at nothing.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 15th of June, 1969 continued. Moscow School # 3054, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Of course it was the newly built, barely just furnished firing range Renato demanded for teaching Shamal about guns and firearms altogether.

Which she only had the key for because someone had to play 'principal' for paperwork reasons.

...because this way the hitman could have the entire place locked down just for them and would be assured just the brat and the thief would be listening to him explain his favored weapon.

"Do you even have a gun?"

"I used to. Ugly little thing and I only used it once to cap a very annoying Rain."

Renato paused in the act of un-holstering his two usual handguns, pointedly sliding one of them away from the keenly excited Shamal. "...what kind of gun?"

"Revolver, an eighteen-ninety-five Nagant. Fairly common around here for law enforcement personnel."

The hitman gave her a considering look as he broke open the clips and extracted the chambered rounds. "A dainty little thing you slipped into your purse?"

"And then got about..." Sonya took a small step backwards and to the side, "...this far from the man
and shot him first in the chest and again in the head."

Before the brat could lay a finger on one of Renato's cherished hand-cannons, he again pointedly
snatched them away from curious little fingers. "Wait, Shamal. I'm not telling you again."

"Then stop teasing the brat." The thief informed him blandly, returning to leaning up against one of
the pillars that helped support the roof of the indoor firing range next door to the yet-to-be-opened
Mafiya School.

Spilling the bullets out of both clips with a thumb, he slotted her a very weighty look as he passed
one of the empty pistols to the gleeful Mist to hold and examine. Counting and gathering up the
bullets to slip them into his pockets, Renato took a few steps away from the table for loading or
disassembling the firearms before and after firing them. "Get used to how they feel, Shamal. And you,
little lady Sonya, are not the one that should be saying that."

"...I beg your pardon?"

Before the Sun user could explain, or say anything as a matter of fact, his gun discharged and
chipped a hole in the concrete floor under their feet. It ricocheted off the hardened fake stone and
shot out a light overhead.

"Sonya. I have all the bullets. The guns are mine, I know how many they take and removed even the
chambered rounds. The clips are still empty on the table." Reassured the hitman hastily, holding up
both hands in a 'wait' or an 'I'm unarmed' gesture. "Shamal. Your mamma does not need a heart
attack before she's thirty. Stop conjuring Mist Bullets."

"...sorry mammma."

Sonya hissed out her breath, feeling the ice that shot up her spine at the sound of a gunshot slide
away at the brat's voice lacking pain or fear. She did not appreciate the feeling of being startled, or
the fear.

"...alright. He's alright. You're alright. You're... still very... purple."

"I think." The Storm-Cloud managed evenly enough, which didn't last through the rest of her words.
"You should concentrate on teaching the brat range safety. Now."

Renato turned on a heel and snatched the recently fired gun away from the bratty Mist. "I said 'feel',
not how they fire."

Sonya ignored whatever else the hitman decided to hiss at the kid for a couple minutes, cradling her
forehead in her hand as she felt the onset of a very bad headache settle in her temples.

Holding her hands so close to her eyes also let her see the faint lilac glow from them and how it
wasn't fading as the seconds ticked by.

From a couple years of faking it, learning her own triggers for that reaction, and the comparisons she
could make from Ziven's reports on Timur… the thief wanted to beat the shit out of something.

It was one of the few failsafe ways to rid a Cloud of anxiety or anger enough to return to 'normal'
behavioral patterns, violence. An outlet.

Preferably, all-out violence. The mindless kind she only experienced once, and Fong had taken the
brunt of on to spare any unlucky asshole that might've come across her from causing a messy murder
or three.
Renato could probably give her a good fight, but well… Shamal apparently sorely needed a few lessons on firearms safety and handling. He wasn't an option. Tatiana was busy doing a few rounds in the Zolotov headquarters with shots and the few physicals the vory would request from the nurse, asking for some Fut Gar sparring was out. Especially since she couldn't do mindless with her sister or wasn't willing to.

She wouldn't risk accidently or otherwise murdering Gedeon, so that was out too.

…time to go see if that Cloud brat on the north side of Zolotov territory was any good. If it was still bad, she knew there was a Cloud somewhere south of her too. Any morons she caught in-between getting to either were… well… she didn't rightly care what would happen to them.

If that didn't work, she'd think of something else.

Another check… her eyes were still purple. Nothing for that, she had highly doubted it would be fixed with just a few moments of semi-peace and vicious thoughts.

"…Shamal." Sonya called as she dropped her hands and finally got a good look at the Mist brat. "I know you've grown up kind of idolizing guns and shit, especially since you're likely seen Renato use them to protect you a few years ago and live with more idiots that think they're the pinnacle of warfare…"

"Hey."

"I'm sorry, mamma. I didn't mean to scare you." Almost tripping over his words, the brat both clutched at Renato's forearm that was holding the gun for showing him the interior of one of his pistols and leaned over it to see her.

Knowing she was probably looking very, very scary to a kid that knew other Classical Clouds and what their tempers were like, she moved slowly. Kneeling down next to the Italians, facing the brat instead of down-range as they were, she gripped Shamal's chin gently and pressed a kiss to his forehead.

"I'm probably always going to react like this when a gun fires around you, brat. Unless I can see you're firing it and it's at something else. You're very lucky I trust Renato to not be stupid. Just… please, be more patient."

"Oh, trust me… he's not ever doing that again." The hitman still more or less bracketing the kid in place promised darkly.

"I'm going to step out a minute… or more… to get rid of… this." Sonya gestured to her surprise change of eye coloring, ruffling the kid's hair as she got back to her boots. "Behave, brat. And listen to him, he's the expert."

Renato shifted a bit, still keeping both knees off the ground even if the place was brand new and as clean as it would ever be. "Just to put it out there… you're kind of terrifying being both pissed off and reasonable like this."

"That's sweet of you to say, Renato." Sonya tossed over a shoulder as she left them to it.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 15th of June, 1969 continued. Moscow School # 3054, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)
"...ho?" Renato shoved his fedora backwards as he eyed the door the Storm-Cloud used. "...fuck, really? That's how to do it?"

"I'm sorry." Shamal repeated miserably, slinking back from the hitman's arms around him and into his chest.

"...she didn't seem mad at you, brat." He tried a bit awkwardly, caught in an unintentional half-hug the kid seemed to really need.

Losing a few years off his life in the irrational fear Shamal had somehow shot himself aside, he also lost a couple more suddenly staring down a startled and enraged mother Cloud who had been unconsciously flirting with him before. The sudden mood swing kind of sharply put things into perspective, but the brat was fine... the other was...

"But you should've known better than to scare a Cloud. That never ends well."

Renato wasn't the one Shamal went to for personal reassurances. Answering questions, sure. Protective when it came to threats to his person, fine. A provider he could request things from, at most.

The one he preferred to go to when he had a nightmare or was upset?

No. The brat saved it all up to bend his mamma's ear with.

The hitman greatly preferred to just shoot anything Shamal got upset at and shoo him to Sonya for everything else. He was good with women, not so children. He might be learning, but it was a work in progress right now.

However, the Storm-Cloud probably couldn't handle it at the moment. She likely removed herself upon realizing that and so she should calm down as quickly as possible to handle it later, which left him stuck doing the 'it's okay' routine until she recovered.

"I am going to be drilling you in disassembling and cleaning a gun until you're no longer fascinated by them. Maybe until you hate them." The Mafioso promised the kid pointedly, hitting the catch on the side of his gun and letting the slide close over the open breach as the general demonstration of how it fired was done and the Cloud-meltdown he had been distracting the kid from was out of the room. "We weren't even going to get around to doing more than practice shots at the end of this little lesson, but I think we'll skip that for tomorrow."

"I didn't mean to!" Shamal finally burst out, spinning around to glare in Renato's face only for the look to falter a second later and the kid teared up. "I didn't... I just wanted... I pulled the trigger! That's all I did!"

"And you expected it to fire?"

"I was just..."

Renato cocked his head to the side, unable to hear the words but able to read the brat's mind and finish off the sentence anyways.

Pretending. A Mist was pretending to fire the very real gun he had been handed and had been equally as surprised as them that it worked. Stupid, childish things that any kid would do in the same situation when given an inch.

The very thing the hitman had given the brat the gun for in the first place, because he wouldn't like
seeing that make-believe at all… only a bit deadlier in this case because Shamal's ability worked on his imagination.

They never had taught the brat how to differ between just pretending and his Flames, had they?

"...well. Shit."

Alright, so maybe drilling the brat in gun care until he hated them wasn't called for. Explaining how the incident occurred at all to Sonya later would be interesting.

Fuck. What the hell was he supposed to do in this situation?

That little Mist trick was probably going to be damn useful in the brat's later years, equally so as Sonya's multiple bullets from one trick she did for him. Being able to fire a gun that 'everyone knew' was empty was a favored little sleight of hand of his own.

…however, Shamal was six. With any luck, he wouldn't need it for eight or preferably ten more years.

"I think… actually firing might be a method… Here's how we're going to do this. You're going to learn how to tell a gun is loaded or not by feel. That way, you can know they're not going to fire."

Exact counts weren't all that important right now, just enough so that the kid would assume 'unloaded weight' equaled 'will not fire'. Which would… with Shamal's Mist Flames, require numerous exacting demonstrations and a few false-starts alone.

Probably a bit of Mist Flames to be possible at all, given a bullet didn't exactly have much weight to it.

Wouldn't work with all weapons, way too many gun variations to work long-term, but with just his pistols' rather popular type it should for now.

He'd be able to use that trick later on, there would be a 'safety catch' on the ability now, this wouldn't happen again.

Renato, now content he had both the problem and the solution figured out, picked up and sat the brat on the table still holding the clips.

"Now- …Shamal. Pay attention."

"…maybe I shouldn't learn?" The brat asked in a quiet voice, fidgeting with the hem of his shirt.

Right… the kid still needed reassurance. He had kind of forgotten that part. "…your mamma said you should listen to me. She still wants you to learn."

"But I scared her!"

"I scare people firing a gun that's unloaded." Renato drawled out blandly as he picked up the empty clips sitting next to the Mist. "It's a good trick, just not one to use on your own people. Yes, you scared us, but that's how we learn about abilities that can be applied outside of safe environments like this."

Shamal shot him a skeptical look. "'Us'? Even you?"

"I didn't like the thought that I just handed my godchild a loaded gun to shoot his fool head off with." Taking a bullet out of his pocket, he loaded one clip with it and held both out to the kid. "Sonya is,
however, much scarier than you are with a loaded gun. I could tell you were alive, not if she was going to swing an ax at my head for giving you the gun."

The brat still looked faintly miserable and guilty. He also didn’t take the clips.

Renato did not sigh, grind his teeth, or glare. "I can teach you how to not to do it again."

…once she was done with her little Cloud rampage across Moscow, Sonya could probably convince the kid it was in the end fine.

Accidents happened, and Shamal hadn’t rationally tried to scare a decade of life out of them.

Renato really did just pity whichever target Sonya had gone after, but other than that it could’ve be so much worse.

Still not looking convinced at all, the kid took the clips and stared at them unhappily.

Good enough for now. He really had to start paying attention to how Sonya dealt with all this crap.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 15th of June, 1969 continued. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"...what do you mean my little sister is missing?"

"She's off taking a personal evening." Renato Sinclair informed her again, pointedly. Then he physically handed Tatiana her nephew, who was weirdly quiet at the moment. "I have... to go catch up with her. Excuse me."

The Italian turned on a shiny heel and stalked out of the Zolotov clan's headquarters, ignoring the attention he had gained just being there without a particular blonde thief in tow.

Not even a word of when she could expect them to pick up the kid, how rude.

Admittedly not entirely upset in suddenly being the designated babysitter either, the nurse craned her head to the side to see if she could sort out Shamal's expression. "Baby? You got anything to add?"

A forehead impacting her collarbone was her only answer.

"...well, okay then."

This was just weird and smacked of the last time Sinclair managed to upset her little sister. With an armful of kid, work yet to be done, and no idea what was causing this or when it would end she turned to Sonya's office jockeys.

Galina would know, right?

Or she'd know how to know, and there was Scruffy who Shamal got along with pretty well when she poked her head in there earlier this afternoon.

When Tatiana walked into the office with an armful of Mist child, the Lightning's expression was just this side of harassed.

"There." The normally well put together woman snapped at the man glaring at her from across the desk. "The brat, and her sister. Sonya will come back and no, for the last fucking time, I DO NOT
"She's a major asset to this office, and could be preyed on by-

"She can rip you in half with her bare hands!" The Lightning shouted in his face exasperatedly. "What the hell do you think a 'watcher' or two would do that she can't!"

"Scream?" Shamal eventually offered helpfully from under Tatiana's chin.

The Sun was officially worried. The kid should've delivered that in a snarkier tone than the quiet one he used. "Look, whoever you are, get out. You're wasting time."

"I-

"Need a physical sometime and if I'm the one giving it, it'll be painful as fuck." Under a disapproving glower she would shamelessly admit to stealing from Lisa to use on asshole patients, the vor stormed out of the office only to go straight next door and slam it behind himself. "Galina?"

"The Mists have a way to contact her." Admitted the Lightning, now calming down that someone wasn't hounding her for information she didn't know. "Did you come up here when rumor reached you?"

"The brat in my arms isn't enough of a tipoff on how I learned?" Shamal went back to hiding under her jawline, and the nurse finally started to wonder what the kid had to do with her little sister up and disappearing. "Baby? Seriously, what happened? You all were supposed to be doing range practice tonight, right?"

"...I... um, did something stupid." The near-compulsive grip the kid had on her shirt tightening when he admitted that aside, Tatiana couldn't really see what that had to do with anything. He did silly things all the time, and if Sonya still kept mothering him then she didn't find much of an issue- "...I shot an unloaded gun using Mist Flames."

...woo boy, that would do it.

She had chills just thinking about that.

Dragging the brat to arm's length, she looked him over hard even knowing full well Renato was also a Sun and wouldn't have tolerated something of his wandering around injured and in pain if it wasn't required. That had drove Tatiana nuts when Sonya broke her hand and she couldn't get her stupid Sun Flames to heal it up for her.

He was Inverted, maybe the kid shot himself somewhere minor?

But no... no blood or unexplained holes in his clothing. Just a miserable expression.

"Usov!" Galina snapped to the air and pinned the responding preteen Mist with a highly expectant look when he tumbled through the door excitedly.

"Levoberezhny District! Wow... she's pissed with them."
How the hell did Sonya get so far north?

She and tall, dark, and snarky had taken their brat to the closest part of Zolotov territory to downtown Moscow, in the southeast corner of their territory. "Why is my little sister pissed with them?"

The Mist gave her a semi-wild grin. "Valdayskiy Street Gang recently got into... sex trafficking. Kidnapping girls to sell to old perverts. Guess who they went after tonight."

Tatiana let Shamal wind himself back into her side, even if the kid was starting to get really heavy. "...serves them right."

Galina palmed her face in exasperation. "This isn't a good thing, boss lady. If Sonya goes around dismantling syndicates for any reason-

"We have young girls, and some of the young girls of other syndicates. They should've been perfectly aware of what would happen if we ever found out they were preying on them so close to us." More seriously, Sonya had bad experiences with such thing which was only compounded by Cherep's mysterious and possibly abusive past heaped on top. She would've never agreed to ignore it. "A little odd it's the only Cloud we have, but we can sell it as she was checking up on what Ziven has been up to for her when they tried for her. Obvious ending, part of a Cloud just being a Cloud. This time in a positive way instead of a self-sacrificing suicide thing."

"...and that she's not splintering away from the clan and becoming completely rogue?"

"Yep, I need to go talk to Arseniy to sell it this way." Tatiana eyed the back of Shamal's head but didn't put him down.

She had been there once before, the orphaned child scared out of his wits that his being bad would make his foster parents send him back or would decide he was too much trouble.

Which wasn't going to happen. Sonya was a possessive little thing and, her temper control issues aside, what she decided on was pretty much what she was going to do regardless of what was said or done.

She might not know tall, dark, and snarky as well... but he didn't seem the type to give up easily either.

However, no matter what reassurance she could give... she was just the zia. His godparents would have to reassure him it wasn't going to happen before he'd believe it.

"Baby? We're going for a walk, then we'll hole up in your mamma's apartment for the rest of the night. I'll even buy us ice cream for the wait."

Hopefully Sonya wouldn't mind the fact the nurse was going to likely crash out on her couch again, the day before yesterday had just been because of jet-lag and to save a day of funds for other things instead.

She could sleep here, but... eww.

She'd never get to sleep if just anyone could knock on her door and demand some healing.

Equally hopefully Shamal wouldn't make himself sick worrying about all of this and what it would mean for him.
Renato eyed the situation, shot a dark glare at the little Mist lady that led him here when he decided on cutting a few hours out of a search in an unfamiliar city, and decided to try addressing the Storm-Cloud.

It was entirely possible she wouldn't immediately attack him. It had been a couple hours since Shamal fired off a shot unexpectedly.

Most of her undirected rage should've passed, right?

"Sonya?"

'Mirror Lady' Anna immediately melted out of view the moment the thief turned on a heel to narrowly glare at him instead of contemplating the groaning bodies on the ground.

…still purple eye coloring. Either little lady Sonya could hold a grudge or something else was now upsetting her. Smart Mist girl.

"Renato… shouldn't they be better than this?"

"Better at what?" No, seriously. At what?

Lying about in pain?

As far as the hitman could see, the thief came across something not entirely expected and decided to vent her frustrations on these fine gentlemen instead of whatever she had been heading for. One man was coughing blood out in his own little crater in the asphalt, but it looked as if she hadn't intended to kill them and they'd probably survive.

Except crater guy. The Mafioso was somewhat sure his ribs were mostly or all shattered and had a punctured lung.

Actually, on the second look?

She only just managed to find herself a target to go Cloud-mode on.

Sonya shouldered her polearm shaped trick jewelry weaponry made life-sized, idly kicking an arm near her only to look even more frustrated when it cracked. "I do not actually have a great amount of combat experience. No one wants to fight me. Why wasn't this harder?"

"…because you are a tiny thing, Sonya." Actually she was probably just this side of short for an average woman, but Renato was still one side of being six feet tall himself.

Being taller than her let him in on that entirely bewildering disconnect between what she appeared as and what she could do.

The woman didn't look as if she could quite easily tear metal bare handed, it was still something jarring even for the hitman to witness.

A tiny doll of a blonde fearlessly waltzing up to men that had height on her and outweighed her significantly?
At most, they'd be on the lookout for a holdout gun or an accomplice if not completely distracted thinking she was after something raunchy from them.

For her to then suddenly whip out a lethal weapon that couldn't be obviously concealed behind her shorter stature and go to town on them?

Not what most tend to assume *might* happen.

…Sonya didn't have a mark on her. Even by surprise, taking down a good eight men without significant resistance might actually be her issue.

"Surprise, probably." It was her entire thing. "*If we hunt down their little fellows, I'm pretty sure they'd get better at fighting back.*"

She shot him an irritable glare. "*I can't justify that.*"

Justify?

Since when did any Cloud bother with that when they were irritated enough?

Renato shoved up the back of his fedora and scratched as he wracked his mind about how to convince her to do it anyways.

Repression was *very bad* for Clouds. Even half-ones like her.

"*Miss Bazanova,*" interrupted the same Mist lady that led him here, "*your sister's compliments. You are fully cleared to do as you will.*"

They both skeptically eyed the puddle of blood that Anna was using as a mirror.

"*Also, she has taken your and your friend's joint problem to your apartment to sit on.*"

Well, the hitman hadn't expected that. He'd buy the nurse some chocolates or something in thanks. She was probably blowing off her own duties on their behalf to fuss over Shamal.

"…Anna, you wouldn't happen to know where these morons have holed up… would you?"

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*(Monday the 16th of June, 1969. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)*

Kappel sighed heavily.

"No, Nurse Klavdia. I do not particularly care what stress or upset they have caused you, after you gave them painful bone growths in revenge it does not becomes something we can charge them to deal with. Be happy that much is *allowed*, and you are not going to be dismissed for doing it in the first place."

The rose haired Sun Flame nurse narrowed her eyes, elevated her nose in the air and walked off in a snit.

Rubbing at the bridge of his nose, the German doctor flicked his half-moon glasses back into place and tried to yet again to complete his paperwork without the ever-industrious Tatiana available to assist.
He didn't get five minutes until one of his own coworkers stormed into his office next. "Kappel, either pry that Sun out of the morgue or actually draft the bloody Mist!"

"I have no authority over Sergej." He informed the other blandly, placing a long finger over the point he was on and looking up with a perfectly bland expression to match his tone. "Our arrangement with the Zolotov clan about training their Flame users was that they are allowed to choose their own specialties and we are allowed to tempt them to stay. Mortician, as much as you would not like to admit it, is a medical specialty."

"He's a Sun, he should be tending the living not the dead!"

"You are welcome to try and change his mind, but until young Edik says such to me in as many words he will not be reassigned."

Sergej would take exception to anyone bothering the young man he was nearly graphed at the hip to, especially if it involved the job the young Sun was actually both competent in and eager to learn more about. The Mist wouldn't let the other doctor get within shouting range of the young mortician in question if he even suspected it was yet another attempt to change his mind, and if the man retained his sanity for the rest of the day was questionable.

The other man tried to storm out of Kappel's office, only to nearly run into one of the two girl Rains. A glare had the more delicate of the Rain nurses cringing away from the man, and to nearly be assaulted by her more forthright fellow.

"Nurse Stella, please do not impair your peers through injury or Tranquility." He could at least instruct her of that if not the Mist the doctor was on a direct course to run into.

Again, he did not control or had any advisory position over Sergej.

Raisa ducked into the office to physically put the former Nazi doctor between her and the other man. The highly unamused look Kappel pinned his coworker with at least made the rather disgruntled Englishman sulk off.

"Nurse Raisa, did you require something?"

"...the patient information for the Salk vaccine for Polio, doctor. We have a possible request for a major shipment of the vaccine to a syndicate in India. I was asked to assemble the information."

"Pathology is where you should be then, Nurse Raisa." Kappel informed her a bit more gently than the tone he usually took with his nurses.

She, rather than Stella, was the one interested in becoming a professional nurse instead of just learn how to medically apply her Rain Flames for... reasons.

If it was possible, Kappel would switch the Rain girl's temperament with her friend's... or surgically replace their male fellow's personality wholesale. Traiko was just a sour individual all together, and wholly unpleasant to deal with.

Which... it was about the time the day's surgeries were done. He'd have yet another doctor in to complain about that Rain's disruptive behavior and foul temperament.

He gave up on trying to finish his paperwork. It wasn't going to happen until he had Nurse Primakova back to manage her fellows instead of Nurse Avdotya... who was proving to be not as good as the elder Russian woman.
"…Doctor Kappel? Can you escort us there?"

"Since I seem to need to locate my Storm nurse, you and your fellow may accompany me for the time being." Kappel offered politely, wondering just what it was that was detaining Avdotya.

If yet another of the doctors here were trying to poach the girl, even if she didn't have those Sun Flames… he didn't know what he would do, but it would probably involve the Mist using young man who had no influences to moderate his behavior by.
Renato eyed a particularly grisly part of his surroundings since he had little better to do, mostly just along for the ride due to Clouds not entirely being peripherally aware when they went berserk and Shamal would be upset something fierce if his mamma kicked the bucket.

Also, because he was pretty damn intent on at least sorting out their relationship into either 'eternal friend zone' or 'possibly compatible' sometime this century.

…he wasn't even fooling himself with that either. She was a damn good friend of his that had survived a lot his few other now dead friends hadn't, and he was pretty sure they were compatible in at least a short-term way.

The brat hadn't intended to startle her into this, and it seemed no vory had any procedures in place for handling enraged Clouds, so he was playing Sonya's backup.

She was probably the one Cloud with the longest fuse he had ever met, but it obviously did and could run out.

Oddly, the really bloody stuff didn't start until she whipped out a halberd and bisected a man who tried to use chloroform on her. The hitman had been particularly concerned at that point, but aside a few choking coughs of red Flames even the chemical widely known to knock normal humans out still hadn't put more than a dent in the thief's stride.

Her breathing Storm Flames in the face of the man next to the wise-ass idiot that tried drugging a Storm-Cloud was a bit… more… eye opening.

Not something Renato had ever seen happen before, and it shouldn't have been as amusing as he found it. Thus how he fell behind the thief a small bit, taking a moment to laugh his head off at her clever little Storm trick.

That was the woman a little twelve-year-old girl who threw a rock at one of his assaulter's heads had grown up into. The child-thief he had annoyed into being a friend somehow and was now guarding his godchild.

Fuck all those assholes that had looked at him sideways for even talking to Sonya in the first place.

Little Russian dragoness that she was, cruelly intelligent and ruthless with when her ire was roused. Sort of something straight out of those books Shamal kept digging out of his mamma's collection.

What did she hoard, then?

The Mafioso puzzled over that thought idly as the stylized slim warhammer/pick thing that was pinning a corpse to the wall a good foot up off the ground suddenly shrank, snatching the bloodstained miniature out of the wall once the body was left in a heap.

He rolled the tiny weapon no wider than his palm a few times thoughtfully, recognizing it as from the set she had worn as hair sticks to her first Vongola Christmas Ball.

A Bec de Corbin, he was pretty sure that was what they were called.
He had a reason to look up medieval weaponry when he had her mauls being made.

The gemstones once held in the slots on either side had cracked either well before this or just now, so they were unadorned at the moment.

Sonya hoarded books, probably. Information was another possibility. Jewels not so much, for a self-claimed jewel thief she rarely wore ornaments aside her two necklaces or bothered with the flashy things aside her little arsenal. She also gave up her weaponry with little fuss, so it wasn't that.

…Shamal?

The dragoness' hatchling?

What did that make him, a prince or a princess?

He'd rather be the knave, honestly. They had more fun.

Musing on that whimsical tangent, he had to ban Shamal's fairytale book addiction or something before that thought stuck in his head, the hitman followed the typical ruins any Cloud left behind when they stopped being 'polite' in hopes of catching up with Sonya. Craters, odd gunshot holes in the plastered walls, the remnants of something smoldering with tiny flecks of fire and Storm Flames, the more typical pure Cloud Flame weaponry he didn't need to collect for the thief, and the occasional body part littered the hallway he was stalking down.

At least she stopped repressing her ire and was taking the opportunity to loosen up a little. He hadn't much to do here anymore, after she had stopped being very nice about beating people up and switched to rending them limb from limb there weren't any more prisoners to ensure remained down and not plotting behind her back.

Very few were left alive the further in you got, unlike where Sonya had started. Apparently she had eventually concluded these men weren't the kind she wanted her syndicate to absorb or deal with in possibly less lethal ways to continue on with what annoyed her so, or that she increased her violence levels in response to actual near-misses.

She had to be happier with this, right?

A small-scale scuffle with eight men that ended totally in her favor might not have been what she had wanted, and he knew for a fact taking apart a syndicate was harder to ensure in only a few hours.

Mirror Lady Anna was off ensuring no interruptions happened, trading prisoner detail of the few Cloud rampage survivors off with Usov when the kid showed up. She was also guiding the kidnapped girls that were apparently part of the issue that set the Storm-Cloud off on these wretches to their freedom in a way that would prevent them from calling the local police until their little lady boss said otherwise.

Renato had been disgusted when the young Mist woman informed him of why things tipped to the side of irrational hatred on the Storm-Cloud's end but was fully aware it probably still happened in small corners of Italia.

Sonya was… merely cleaning house and sweeping out the trash that had accumulated. He'd love to assist but kill stealing from Clouds was something he was hesitant to do still.

Even ones he knew really well.

Best to let her get it out of her system before pitching in with the mop-up.
The hitman eventually found the thief again, or at least assumed it was her direct handiwork. A man pitching over a railing a floor up in a shower of shattered plaster and paint chips, only to smash into the floorboards at his feet. Judiciously aided in dying by a more realistically proportioned war hammer than the Bec de Corbins slamming into his chest a half-second later.

That had to be some of her work... or the man was that stupidly clumsy and had just been positioned perfectly.

He wouldn't rule it out, as he'd seen stranger things.

Gunfire was actually becoming a more audible, but this was a criminal holdout base. The walls were reinforced to withstand and muffle such assault... although the Storm-Cloud running riot over them all had already proved said reinforced bullet-proof walls were little obstruction to her.

Idiots likely panicking, mused the hitman idly as he scaled the staircase steadily.

In confined corridors, and with her strength and acrobatic abilities to render it all moot, Sonya likely found maneuvering around any effective resistance as easy as she found evading himself last Christmas when she stole his blanket and ran off with it and the brat.

Managing a defense against her was apparently not something Russian mafia men had ever seriously considered before. Likely this was the very first time she had decided to let loose on her home soil, or the rumors of the mile-wide furrow she carved into Mafia Land's headwind forest hadn't yet reached back here with enough supporting evidence.

No longer surprised she had decided taking apart an entire syndicate was a good idea, he didn't know how long she had been repressing her irritation for less violent methods of dealing with it but this was likely going to help a large amount with readdressing that balance, Renato merely wondered if she was calm yet or not.

It had been quite a few hours since Shamal set her off, say one or two to just find a good target and now another one of ripping into them... might be the longest Cloud rampage he had ever personally bore witness to.

Reaching the second-floor landing, the Italian Mafioso eyed first the shattered doorway that opened up into a hallway or the gigantic hole in the wall that led directly into what looked to be a sitting room or a smoking lounge.

Which... the floor covered in gore, bent metal, and glass with yet another hole through the wall opposite of the one he was looking through.

Ah... that's how the man smashed into the landing of the first-floor stairwell got covered in plaster. Knocked through a wall, then over a railing... through a bulletproof wall and with enough force to still knock him backwards without simply shearing the man in half.

Possible Lightning?

He didn't survive much past his activation, if so. Pity.

...Sonya was likely still pissed off, but not as bad as she was downstairs.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 16th of June, 1969 continued. Levoberezhny District, Moscow, Russian Soviet)
Why did no one *ever* look up?

Sure… okay, Sonya had tossed several pounds of Cloud Propagated steel through a wall and caused a cloud of plaster dust to fly up into the air in response to cloud judgement. These morons immediately shot through it with enough bullets to make an unwary person Swiss cheese after the shock of a hammer decapitating a man in front of them wore off… but she was already pass her entrance point and currently sitting pretty on an ugly ass chandelier.

A… not very comfortable one, and it was more a half-crouch with a hand on the ceiling and another clutching the chain to prevent the monstrosity of glass, wire, and brass from jolting from the swing it had before she landed on it.

A momentary **press** upward added with the movement of straightening up had her forcing the heavily reinforced light fixture down at likely lethal speeds, smashing it right into the knot of idiots trying to line up a limited space of a hole in the wall with ten or so guns.

In other words, they were standing shoulder to shoulder directly below her and nearly eighty pounds of metal and electrical hardware and another twenty or so of what became sharp glass shards.

This was the *third time* she had done this chandelier cluster-bomb thing. The ground floor had proven more challenging to work her way through.

…Sonya's boots were ruined, she was not pleased.

Immediately letting go of the chain that had once supported more weight than she amounted to before the sparking wires unraveling from it found her wrists or more metal to conduct through, the thief landed lightly and ignored the crunch of glass under her heels.

Eyeing her handiwork and vowing to both never tell Cherep of this night and somehow terrify her clan into following along with her non-comment on it, the thief wandered back to the hallway.

A shower, bed, and maybe a *unharmed Shamal* were sounding more and more perfect to her as things dragged on, but she wasn't one to half-ass the things she started. There were really only a few rooms left to this place that she hadn't murdered the fuck out of yet, and the mix of disgust and oddly addicting satisfaction had yet to leave her gut.

…she didn't like it.

Didn't like the fuzziness that came with getting as pissed off as she had been, or the near-mindlessness reaction state she had tried to avoid only to fall into it her first near miss with the chloroform guy. Had she less self-control than she had amassed to date, she would've thrown up a few rooms ago when it started to wear off and she could fully appreciate everything she had just done.

She also might still have an intellectual issue with murder, but both instinctively and *emotionally* she didn't. The difference between knowing you did wrong and believing you did it. No guilt from the gory path she carved through this place, which made her guiltier.

A strange disharmony to have with herself, which just made her more determined this night would just end up a particularly grisly skeleton in her closet of them.

"...ho?"
"No offense, Renato. But if I have to murder in my line of work, I'm either doing something wrong or getting sloppy. So, I dislike it."

Had she told him that before?

She toed some guy's separated arm idly as he sauntered over to join her in the middle of the hallway, more to inspect the damage to the sole of her boot than to really see the results of her actions. "How many more, do you think?"

"About… three. I checked for you already. End of the hall, door to your then left." The hitman eyed her thoughtfully as he jerked a thumb down the way he came, not a trace of wariness or disgust to him which she probably appreciated a lot more than was warranted. "I knew what I was getting into with having a Cloud as a friend, little lady Sonya. More faith, please."

"You can never really know until it smacks you in the face." Shrugging the comment off, the she wandered in the direction he pointed out to her. "I'd advise you to leave this place, by the way."

"Ho?"

"I'm going to burn the fuck out of it once I'm done here."

The man hummed lightly, following a long about a half-step behind her. "How about no? I caught up to you for a reason, Sonya. You're a thief, not a hitwoman or an assassin. However much a Cloud you may be, I'm probably better at killing and living with it than you."

"Probably." Agreed said thief without much humor. "Want the last few? I am really only morbidly curious what the reaction will be. It's their equivalent of a leader, right?"

"Not the information on how they started up, or how they were distributing the girls?"

Coming to a stop right outside the doorway he had indicated, Sonya gave him her first smile with real amusement in it of the night. "I'm telling you this for your own use only… but there's a Sun now in Mafia Land's morgue that can Activate the dead. If he can use humans for it yet is questionable, but really only a matter of time. With the Mist assigned to him to help patch things through… if I killed the people that had that information, I'm not too worried."

Renato eyed her skeptically. "You said you were going to burn this place down. Storm Flames are notoriously good for stripping a scene of any details that might catch up to one."

She gestured to the still closed door pointedly.

"…heh." He tipped his hat to her, which did nothing to hide his smirk. "Ladies first."

"How kind of you, good sir." Sonya drawled back sardonically, plucking a hammer made of her Cloud Flames from mid-air and giving it a two-handed swing against the wall just to the side of the doorway… on the side they weren't standing on.

Of course, more shots.

"Predictable."

"I don't even use guns, and I figured that one out without needing to be shot first." She agreed wryly.

The Sun slid a hand into his suit jacket and came out with one of his two usual pistols not bothering with keeping his tone down or with any stealth at all. "No accounting for taste or skill, here."
"…they weren't really required to. They mostly went after civilian girls."

"Right next to a syndicate, yours, which has non-civilian ones." Countered the hitman casually, right before he kicked open the door and shot twice as he entered the room boldly. When the occupants were likely more interested in the hole instead of a locked door. "They are…"

"…horribly ill-prepared for something like me? Most seem to be." The weirdly exhausted Storm-Cloud came to a stop in the doorway once her friend had cleared the space, blinking at what was found there. "…I'm having distinct flashbacks to our conversation about prostitution rings and those that had to pay for it."

Renato merely made a humming sound of absent confirmation, eyeing the sniveling wreck of the man who just witnessed his last two enforcers get shot through the head.

He was good-looking, Sonya supposed… in a completely artificial way under the blubbery he was doing.

His behavior on the other hand?

She hadn't even brought out an ax and he was already debasing himself. It was still pretty faint, the asshole's office was huge and well appointed, but she was pretty sure he was already begging for his life instead of something she would've expected from a vor.

Which probably would've been a hand grenade with the pin already pulled, honestly.

A semi-automatic in hand, at least.

So… not a vor, operating in that in-between grey area buffering larger syndicates. Surrounded with those more skilled than him, but for some reason no true Moscow vor had killed him and taken over his operation for their syndicate. In a building that conformed to typical criminal standards, but without the standard typical criminals within.

This looked somewhat well established, beyond the point of just being set up and before the point of getting entrenched enough to be a nightmare to root out. Way too late for any hostile takeovers.

"…are you thinking what I am?"

This wasn't a criminal thing. It was a civilian import motivated by greed and sex getting reckless.

Might've been aided by another syndicate, but if so then she didn't fucking want to know who would set this shit up. Those assholes before probably hadn't known the girl with tattoos was an official member of the Mafiya at all, and just tried grabbing because she was there and fit some criteria.

"…yes. A bullet, or do you have another idea?"

"Don't waste ammo on the worthless. I'm thinking a pike and just staking his head out as a warning."

Renato released the tension behind the hammer of his gun, tucking it back to the holster he had worked into the suit jackets he wore. "I didn't know you had pikes in that arsenal of yours."

"I don't." Sonya reached behind her and wrenched a good section of the door frame out of the wall, summoning an ax to her other hand to carve away at it. "I'm improvising."

Most of this place was going to go up in flames, or Flames… but more than enough would survive.
Particularly this office, and that little dungeon cell in the basement they kept their 'merchandise'.

Anna or Usov would just have to ensure the fire covered her tracks, she was leaning to her preteen male Mist simply because the last she saw him he was getting a bit too hyper.

She'd still go through his office paperwork, and with Usov's help translating codes or illegible writing was fairly easy. What wasn't needed for any vory to read between the lines of the likely censored news report of this would also go up in smoke, but that was all she was going to do.

If another syndicate could be linked to this shit, well… sucked to be them.

"That's probably not a great idea. Why not take it to your father instead?" Renato suggested quietly, taking possession of the rudely crafted pike for her as she headed to collect one last head.

"...eh, point." Sonya just really wanted a shower and a nap now.

"...really? I'm terribly sorry, miss. I promise I won't do it ever again." Sleazy and spineless slobbered out, which earned him a strange look from the thief.

"You're still talking?" What did he think she just agreed to?

"Sonya, you know the brat's probably trying to wait up for us. It's almost midnight."

As the Mafioso had a point, and the man babbling gratitude at her with a calculating edge to how he looked at her just made her feel more disgusted overall, Sonya swung her ax for the last time.

Sleazy and spineless' head rolled to the hitman's slightly blood speckled Italian leather shoes, and her friend picked it up to shove on her makeshift pike in a way so that when it was planted his slack-jaw expression would be aimed somewhat upward. "Now for the mop up."

The one pane of window that didn't have a bullet lodged into a section rippled with violently indigo Mist Flames as Anna poked her head on through to see Sonya fully. "Miss Bazanova? Your father is outside, he would like to speak with you."

"...you lucky little-"

"I am," she spoke over her friend who was looking decidedly pleased at the interruption anyways, one of which might mean they'd get to go back to her hotel suite in a few more minutes, "going to assume you went with something less insulting to my face than 'bitch'."

"...let's do that."

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 16th of June, 1969 continued. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Mamma?"

"Too early, back to sleep." With that, Sonya yanked him back down and buried her nose in his hair.

Shamal clutched her back as he teared up and sniffed hard, wondering when she returned last night. He and zia Tatiana had stayed up really late, and still she and Mister Renato hadn't returned before he fell asleep.

Given he wasn't still on the couch with his zia, that meant either his mamma came back and moved
him or the nurse did and the Russian he was hugging hadn't minded anyways.

"I'm sorry."

"You said that." She responded absently, pulling away again only just far enough to peer at his face. "It's fine, Shamal. Shit happens. Go to sleep."

He bit his lower lip, trying not to annoy his mamma by repeating things when she wanted to rest.

There was a sigh, and Sonya pushed herself upright which also spilled the Mist into her lap.

Leaning back against her pillows and smoothing down the blonde hair that decided to stick up as if she slept with wet hair, she groggily glowered down at him through red-rimmed eyes. "...should I go get Renato, so he can say the same thing? You're mine. End of story."

Burying his face in her stomach, Shamal tried to stop crying.

It wasn't working.

Another sigh, and he got picked up by the back of yesterday's shirt to clearly see his mamma's very tired and unhappy expression. "Only this once, do you hear me?"

She didn't even wait for him to respond, sliding herself and him by proxy out of her bed. She shifted him to a less dangly position on a hip, not even twitching as she usually did when he shoved his face into her neck.

Shamal spent the trip trying to calm himself down before he annoyed her more but couldn't and soaked her neck and shoulder as he bawled like a little baby.

Sonya kicked open a door, had to because she had both hands supporting him, and the crack as it impacted the wall was startlingly loud. Zia Tatiana yelped from the couch as she bolted upright, wildly looked around for a moment until she spotted them. He jolted out of position too, swinging himself around to see what his mamma was doing.

His godfather looked equally as rumpled and tired as his mamma did, and also just as unhappy as he pushed himself fully upright and dropped the gun to the bedspread. "...Sonya. What are you wearing?"

"I think Tats called it a chemise." The thief hooked her heel behind the edge of the door she had just embedded into the far wall and slammed it shut behind her. "Now, reassure the brat he's not being sent to some stupid orphanage so we can go back to sleep."

Shamal hiccupped embarrassingly loudly in the moment of silence before Renato could say something.

"...ah."

Tearing up again, which was stupid because she was here but he couldn't stop, the Mist tried to wiggle out of her arms before she finished delivering him to the hitman. He failed rather horribly and ended up dumped on the man's stomach.

Then the blankets moved rather sharply under him.

"Sonya. What the hell?"

"I'm tired, deal."
Staring at the woman that had just climbed into his bed for a long moment, Renato glanced back at Shamal skeptically. "…so. Why?"

"…I'm sorry." Shamal couldn't really explain it better than that at the moment.

He knew it was stupid, but the fact his mamma was here after walking out of the firing range last night all Cloudy and not-pleased was still…

He gave a wet, miserable sniff as he dashed the water from his eyes. Only to squawk in surprise when a finger rudely poked him in the side of the head to knock him off the older man and into the space between his godparents.

"It's relief, Sonya. I'm not sure what you expect me to do about it."

"…oh." Mamma rolled over, snagging Shamal again and tucking him under the covers with them. "Well fuck then. Cry, brat. And get it out of your system."

"Really?" Renato drawled skeptically as he carefully laid back down himself. "That's your solution to this?"

"Sometimes it's just better to just cry it out than bite your tongue about it." Sonya set her chin on the crown of his head, blowing out another sigh. "Brat, I'm not going to sleep until you feel better. And I'm sure we're bothering Renato enough he's not going to sleep either."

"…probably not, but not for the reason you think."

"Whatever." She snarked back in a sour tone, snuggling Shamal deeper into the bedding with her and giving him the privacy to do whatever he wanted while she focused on something else.

"I'm not going to be able to sleep because someone decided to kick my door in." Renato shot back from the other side of the bed sarcastically, tugging the blankets higher a little so they'd at least cover their godchild up to the chin. "Now I'm wide awake, thank you very much for that."

"Excuse me, my hands were full."

"Little miss 'I can bench press a train engine', would it have killed you to use one hand to turn a doorknob? You put a hole in the wall."

Shamal gave a watery giggle, pressing his forehead into his mamma's collarbone and stopped trying to do anything but lay there and listen.

Of course they'd pick to argue with a few spare moments.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 16th of June, 1969 continued. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Tatiana cleaned up the remains of her and Shamal's little pity-party ice cream binge from last night while Sonya ordered breakfast from the hotel's catering staff.

Well… more like brunch.

She and Shamal had managed to go back to sleep for a few more hours eventually, but Renato had only lingered as long as it took for the brat to drop off before getting up for the day. The hitman was
still missing but had left notice with the redhead that slept on the couch he'd be back in time for lunch.

"I called Lisa earlier, she said not to worry about missing the day's practice. She heard from Arseniy when he got home this morning." Her sister informed her in a matter of fact tone of voice, something she tended to use when on 'business'. Mostly medical these days, but way back when the same tone was used when in the sisters were in the middle of a heist. "I got nothing about what she heard about, and I really would like an explanation on why I got to babysit my very upset nephew, little sis."

"...I'm enough of a Cloud to be murderously violent sometimes. Shamal accidentally startled me into being less... nice." Sonya admitted bitterly. "I'm honestly not even sure how many people I killed last night, and I don't want to know."

The lassitude and catharsis from her temper tantrum hadn't yet faded, it was both worse and better than the period of time right after trying to murder Fong. As the Chinese Triad Storm had given back as good as he got, it was slightly different than now when she basically bulldozed a gang of men that hadn't known what the fuck to do about her before dying messily.

In short, she was satisfied and sleepy and not a bit disturbed over anything. Also, both guilty and not feeling a lick of guilt for being that way.

The expected nightmares hadn't happened yet either, but if that was from bare four hours of sleep before Shamal woke up or from the napping afterwards being too light for dreaming she couldn't say.

Sonya honestly felt better than she had in the last two years, and even thinking of the things that normally just frustrated the fuck out of her produced a merely vaguely annoying itch instead.

...as soon as the cloying guilt she felt about not feeling guilty faded a bit, it might even be better.

The last time she felt anything remotely like it without violence was the Pabst Theater heist, being supported off the ground by the chandelier she had been dismantling to steal over the heads of a full house and the actors putting on the play. A wrongly timed glance and she would've been busted… but pulling it off made her almost as satisfied.

Only without the guilt, and she was going to cling to that idea with all she had in hopes of avoiding another lethal blow up.

"It should be in the news now. There was no way we were going to be able to hide it all after I set shit on fire."

Tatiana merely gave her an odd look, gripping her left wrist to eye the bruises and small cuts she had from knocking holes in walls. "Okay… one, you have unrealistic expectations. I know a personal goal of yours is to be the world's most agreeable Classical Cloud, but you already are just by being yourself without going way too far in the whole I'm not going to kill everything that irks me' way."

"…what?" Sonya didn't even twitch as Sun Flames encourage the small nicks in her arms.

"We don't exactly live in hippy glory, Nya. Our world is one of murderers and killers. Despite what you may fondly believe of the civilian world above us, they aren't either. Death is as much a part of life as anything else. Even for us 'enlightened' humans." Finished with the left arm, Tatiana picked up her right and applied her Sun Flames to the small collection of cuts there as well. "They were morons. They likely would've kept on doing what they were doing had you not put a permanent stop to it. Just somewhere else, and not where you could easily find them. Do you really feel all that guilty
about shutting it down?"

"...no, not really."

The Sun nodded, seemingly half-expecting that. "And you feel guilty for not feeling that way, right?"

"Yes?"

"Our dork of a brother aside, it's equally as human to be selfish as it is to be selfless. You spared a number of girls a rather horrifying fate you got way too close to yourself and got an itch you've probably been ignoring for years scratched at the same time. I'm happy you're feeling better, and you should be too after a night's work of being someone's savior. Fuck them assholes royally."

"...that would be a little hard. They're kind of in pieces."

Her sister snorted a laugh, licking her lips and trying not to smirk. "You think too much. You used to beat the shit out of those that talked about me or Cherep behind our backs, and you never had these kinds of problems then."

"That may be an issue, yes." She did think a lot, and maybe she hadn't given her 'Cloud instincts' enough benefit of doubt.

Her urges to do violent things might have bled off some of her stress and helped avoid the incident last night had she paid them more attention.

Gedeon's daily beatings aside, because that had helped her stress with the Zolotov clan alone if was her final option to deal with the stubborn Sun.

Sonya was also fully aware she was making herself feel bad, intellectually knowing murder shouldn't be an answer to any problem from twenty years in a life where things were less... criminally inclined.

Unfortunately, in this lifetime entrenched in the trade of violence, it probably was. This time she had been raised with the idea that violence was an answer, and one of the more frequently used ones as well.

Maybe she should start punching people that irked her through walls. She'd feel better more often, they probably wouldn't die from that, and it should be a win all around.

"Why do you have cuts? You were out with another Sun, and we don't like it when our people are running around in pain for no reason."

"Renato's not a healer by nature, and he gets irritated when people immediately assume that because he's a Sun he should heal every little injury that occurs."

The nurse eyed her suspiciously. "Did he offer?"

"...yes? I said you'd probably like-" Sonya was cut off as her sister whacked her upside the back of her head.

"Bad. Bad Storm-Cloud. When tall, dark, and snarky gets back, apologize. And never do that again."

Tatiana was actually frowning seriously now. "It's as much instinct to us as ensuring everything you look after is alright, Nya. Or this obsession you have with your control or your books."
"…ow."

"Don't even- …you didn't hurt your neck or anything, right?" After putting up with the nurse manipulating her head's movements and scrutinizing her face, Sonya pulled away once released. "No? Okay, so cuts? Anything else you've been ignoring?"

The thief made the mistake of glancing down to one of her legs, which she was fairly certain she had over strained the knee of somehow.

Able to punch a hole in steel or not she wasn't really physically imposing nor weighed that much, and the Sun managed to pull her right leg up and her heel set on one shoulder to inspect the limb. Knocking her backwards onto the couch her sister had slept on when her balance was compromised by the nurse manipulating a leg.

Which was of course the very moment Renato came back to the hotel suite.

"Kinky."

"You either have terrific timing or a horrible one." The redhead tossed to the man over a shoulder, poking rude fingers into Sonya's sore knee. "Nya, you have something to say to him too… right?"

"…sorry for the refusing healing thing, apparently." She spoke in a deadpan, then winced as her sister flexed her knee in a way it shouldn't move. "Fuck, Tats. That hurts."

"I've seen you break your foot in complete silence. Hush you." A few more pushes around her knee cap, and she dropped the limb. "Swollen and a bit achy, but not actually damaged enough for me to heal. Ice and stay off it as much as you can."

The thief pulled herself up into a more upright position, more to get her feet underneath her than any other reason. She managed to catch sight of the newspaper tucked under Renato's arm as she did so and wondered if she was morbidly curious enough to see what it had to say about last night. "I ordered brunch from the hotel, and the brat's still asleep in your bed."

The hitman eyed her as he tossed the paper to the coffee table still smeared with some melted creamed sugar. "Sonya, maybe you should go change."

"Why? Everything's covered that needs to be." She looked down to check and had to tug the lacy hem of her really short nightgown thing down in order for her words to be correct. It was kind of like a slip, actually. It fell to mid-thigh, but with the nurse's actions it had ridden up a little to her hips.

Tatiana suddenly gained a wicked smirk, obviously checking out her little sister's form instead of suspiciously eyeing her injuries. "I knew that would look lovely on you."

"…I need to do laundry. So sue me, it was the first thing I found last… err… earlier this morning."

"I absolutely hate that I'm going to say this… but it's not something one wears in polite, mixed company." The Italian gritted out, looking fairly unhappy indeed. "If you ordered in, that means those pimpled faced bellhops will be knocking on the door soon."

"This isn't any worse than the red dress I wore to the Vongola Ball, Renato."

He gave her a flat stare, which dropped down to her bare legs the moment after. "I truly pity your father."
The nurse cackled gleefully. "Oh no, tall, dark, and snarky. It's worse than that."

Renato shot her a skeptical look, which Tatiana merely grinned in the face of and turned on a heel to Sonya's bedroom. Likely to raid it for any fresh clothes that might fit her, even if she had more generous curves and was slightly taller than the thief. "Nya's got no body modesty!"

"I'm still really damn certain I wouldn't be Renato's first naked woman!" She shot at her sister's back, huffing when there wasn't a reply. "He's seen more than this before!"

The hitman looked highly conflicted for a few, long moments. "...Sonya, I don't think either of us would like you to be Shamal's first nude woman."

"There are topless beaches in Europe, if I'm moving to Italy then I'm going to take advantage of that closeness. The brat's likely to come with, and so is Tats depending." She refuted pointedly. "Either me, my sister, or another woman, he's going to see eventually. I didn't think you'd have a problem with that."

A muscle ticked in his jaw, and Renato palmed his face in exasperation. "No... no I have no problem with it. The opposite, really. Especially if I'm invited. Allow me to rephrase my comment. I don't think either of us would like you to be some greasy faced bellhop's first nude woman."

"But I'm not naked!"

After a beat of apparently exasperated silence, the man started laughing. "You are ridiculous. Go get dressed, Sonya. Please."

"...fine." A bit miffed, as 'ridiculous' was a new name she had never been called before, the Storm-Cloud got up to follow her sister. It was something she had been planning on doing after calling for brunch anyways. "I never would've pinned you for a prude, Renato."

"The depressing thing is, neither would I." Marvelled the Italian in a dry tone of voice, taking her spot on the couch in a rather graceful sprawl and covering his face with his hat. "Why is it always at the wrong time?"

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 16th of June, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya flipped idly through a few pages, more curious over what was on her desk than paying attention to the vor from next door who was trying to lecture her on security procedures.

"-are you even listening to me?"

"No." Another few pages of the work Scruffy had done when left to his own devices, and the thief had to admit he was probably a damn good find of hers.

At least somewhat equipped to actually make hard facts out of the research the Dying Will Flame users had compiled from themselves and the stone-matching efforts.

If this was what he could do with just two reference books and nearly unlimited free time, then she should get him more to work with. Peter had detailed and decanted a lot of the random findings they had into short, easily to process terminology and wrote it all out over the course of the last couple months.
There was now a list of all the stones, their preferred Flame type to work with, and speculations on how cut and quality affected things to test next.

…either she had to burn this or steal it from her own temp-office. There was no way in hell she was going to leave the Zolotovs more information than she had to, and technically Scruffy was hers and not the clan's.

"Bazanova! You will-"

He didn't get much farther, Sonya shot to her feet and decked the asshole trying to yell at her in the jaw.

None too gently either, and he had been leaning half over her desk.

"Galina, we require a new door." She announced simply into the ringing silence caused by the ear-splitting crack of her office door giving way under the impact of however many kilograms of Russian male, reseating herself and eyeing the likely broken door jamb the man had flown out of. "Scruffy, how much practice have you had with healing?"

As the Lightning scrambled for the office phone, her Sun gulped a bit desperately. ". . .um. . . a little?"

"You now have a new practice dummy. Shoo."

Shamal, the little brat, snickered as he left the couch and hauled himself up to her lap to see what she was looking at better. "But mamma, McScruffy's my game-partner! What am I going to do if you send him off?"

"I'm fairly sure the Mists are going to teach you to teleport today, you'll need your Flames for that brat." At least, that was what Usov had informed her of when they were watching the people casing the office of that sleazy and spineless asshole last night. Early morning, whatever. She bent lower, so only the Mist would hear her. "Hide this for me?"

He immediately reached out, indigo Flames licking the papers into nothingness. "...why?"

"I'm going to steal it." Shamal looked entirely too happy with being able to help her, clutching nothing and drawing said 'nothing' up under his shirt as if that would help.

Amused, Sonya pressed a kiss to his temple in thanks. Straightening up just in time to catch sight of her father eyeing the man laid out on the ground and Scruffy's first aid attempts outside the broken door dubiously.

"Sonya."

"I've realized I've been doing more damage to myself by refraining from all violent impulses than merely obeying the lesser ones." Announced the Storm-Cloud mildly, perfectly aware this would probably earn her that ever so scary reputation she had now. Strangely, she was alright with it as long as she did deserve the fear. "So, in hopes of avoiding another incident like last night, I will deck people I dislike."

Arseniy glanced downward, as Scruffy poked a spectacularly bruised cheekbone with a glowing yellow finger.

"He decided he had the right to try and lecture me, then tried to shout in my face."

The man who had a large hand in raising her to be what she was now gave a kind of grumbling sigh,
stepping over the trailing legs and giving only a glance to the broken area on the door frame that normally held a latch. "Sonya."

"I am neither a vor nor am I treated like one. I do not have to act like one either." She pointed out just as blandly.

"Try not to cause everything to fall around our ears, girl."

"I make no promises I'm not sure if I can keep."

Grunting his acceptance of that, the vor hooked the chair to pull out that had been pushed aside by the afternoon visitor currently out cold outside her office. He sat in it, flicking a glance down to the brat sitting pretty in her lap.

"Usov." Sonya obediently called out, distracting her little Mist as the preteen walked through the broken door. Said older Mist looked comically surprised for a second to end up in the hallway outside and at a right angle to the office, and he chuckled as he stepped over a pair of legs as well before giving her an attentive look. "Lessons now."

They were running a little late already, giving the mid-morning wake-up today. It shouldn't take this long for him to come by to collect the younger boy.

"No game today?"

Ah, that would be why.

"No, but it's okay." Shamal informed the other brightly, making it way to conspicuous that he was hiding something under his shirt as he climbed out of her lap. Sonya made note of teaching him better ways to smuggle paper if he wanted. "Teleporting?"

"I see the beans have been spilled already." Usov sniffed in mock disapproval, taking the kid's hand and immolating them both through the floor instead of the cracked door.

Sonya actually did wonder how Mists could get from one place to another in the blink of an eye, but privately suspected some enterprising Mist had gotten into science fiction and mutated the 'wormhole' idea. Constructing a portal that when touched sucked them through to another designated Constructed portal.

Entirely too useful, that trick. Especially for ensuring one was noted to be in one place far removed from a scene of a crime only minutes after committing said crime.

Also for cutting hours out of transport time, thank you dearly for the lift Anna.

"About last night," Arseniy started, which killed Sonya's good mood entirely, "do you want to finish that off yourself?"

"...why ask?" She had formally handed things over to her foster father once she and Renato piked the head out on what passed as the lawn, as the vor was better equipped to handle any investigation or cover up he or the clan wanted done.

"Because you are here." He gestured to the office around them to qualify that general term. "And as such, you are part of what it means to be a Flame user of Will Dying."

"Dying Will Flame user, Arseniy." Sonya corrected absently. "I could, Tats said something about needing examples of our type to strive for. However, are you sure that would do any good?"
"You tell me."

The Storm-Cloud puzzled over that for bit.

On one hand, they had precious little actual examples of competent Flame users right now.

Tatiana was the best by reputation, and only for the support role of healer. Even when Dmitriy pried his ass out of prison, he'd be chained behind the same desk she was starting to loathe and known more for his administrative skills than anything Tranquility related.

Mikhail the Storm was off earning the reputation, and frankly she suspected Kazimir the Rain was off doing the same thing to get the rank to actually hinder her for once, but both were years away from being regarded as more than just boys.

If Sonya actually involved herself, she might be able to positively influence that balance. More so than being a rather successful thief who just happened to have Flames.

Still female, but a positive role model that might be emulated.

On the other, she frankly didn't want to get that involved.

Clouds were few and far between as it was, they were the second-to-last type she had precious few details about despite being one. If she involved herself more, would that inspire other syndicates to want their own Cloud and hunt them even more?

"Usov told me we had a visit by the Vindice last night, and Anna convinced it we weren't operating against a syndicate but something that started civilian approaching and infringing on criminal territory. Which excused the 'more than three' Flame users thing against a syndicate that had none, as it wasn't." Why it was that Mists seemed to deal better when confronted with undead former Arcobalenos than just about anyone else was something to wonder. "If I become involved, that is one of the three allowed. Add in a Mist for their crowd-control… maybe Tatiana as medic… the only problem is, Arseniy, that I don’t actually care all that much. You'd be better off pulling a backup Mist for general mind-fucking or a Rain for ensuring peaceful diplomacy."

Her foster father stared at her evenly. Neither surprised nor disappointed, or even mad. "Not even for…?"

A tilt of his head indicated where the two Mists had left the office. "For Shamal? I'm moving to Italy the moment I can, Arseniy."

For Valera, maybe. However, this wasn't an invasion or possible hostile takeover attempt. As far as she knew, anyways.

"Your mother will be most displeased if you never return."

"I plan on it, we do Christmas up here after all."

That pulled a wry smirk from the vor. "And your birthday."

"Presents are nice." Sonya agreed pleasantly.

"Greedy." Rumbled the older Russian approvingly. "The Pahkan would like to speak with your Italian Mafioso before he leaves."

"I'll pass it on, but as the only thing the clan owns that he's made use of is the firing range… I've
paid for most everything else." Technically, the Storm-Cloud had also paid for the school and it's refurbishing out of funds Galina had accumulated from the jewel finding efforts. As that had been expressly for the clan at the time it had been purchased, it was still on Pyotr's books as the clan's territory now. "He is also here on business, not just for pleasure."

Arseniy leaned forward, dropping his voice to a point it wouldn't easily carry. "Another year at most, Sonya. The Pahkan's due to retire soon. Wait until then."

"...I'll suggest that being polite would be appreciated. I did it for him." She amended, wondering how her foster parents knew of her plans before she said anything.

The vor hadn't even blinked when she mentioned moving. Maybe just a really good poker-face?

...no, they knew.

Now then, which of the Mists did Lisa half-own outright?

"As you've declined the offer to help out, I can't actually say much more about last night." Arseniy continued in a more normal tone, getting up from the chair he had monopolized. "Not that I think you really wanted to hear it."

"Just think, Valera can grow up to do the same amount or more damage than I did." Sonya offered instead of comment on the suggestively leading statement.

"...I'm going to teach him how to use a gun."

She stuck her tongue out at her foster father.

Arseniy snorted, then stalked only far enough to stop in her broken office door. Between her and the other vor who Scruffy had been tending to. "You and I are going to have a little talk about how you speak to my girls, Tsitnikov."

...was that shout-happy asshole from next door's name?

Huh... Sonya was never going to remember that.

"Galina?"

"I told them."

"...Lisa is scary sometimes."

"Oh, fuck yes." Sighed the now no-longer petrified Lightning attempting to meld with the office furniture, smoothing down her vest-like jacket for the day nervously as Scruffy squeezed himself back inside as one vor carried another one off down the hall.

"I wonder which of the Mists she already has in a pocket?" Mused the Storm-Cloud thoughtfully, looking back down at her desk before she recalled that Shamal had made away with the report from Peter that was actually interesting.

Damn. She hadn't finished reading that yet.

"A few of them, I think. She is the contact point for civilians looking for more information from your books. Telling them she's your mother gets the more nervous ones through her door and telling them some of the misadventures you all had learning about the ability gets them to open up enough to be sorted."
…and of course, her mother wouldn't let potential resources go without a firm grasp on how to twist them to her will. So… a fair number of Flame users probably knew her mother, and a few semi-embarrassing stories from her childhood.

Lovely.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 16th of June, 1969 continued. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

As Renato was off scouring Moscow for the people in the list Galina and Usov put together for him, or at least the live ones he tentatively decided matched his culprit of whatever it was, Sonya curled up with Scruffy's report to read that said Mist had delivered to her with her dead-tired brat.

Which… actually raised another question.

At most a year, or two if the search for a properly situated and built home took that long, then she would move to Italy and take the brat in full-time. Some of what she had in her hands would be good for Shamal to know and be familiar with, especially the Mist sections.

Sonya idly stroked said brat's hair as he napped with his head cushioned on her thigh.

He was pretty skilled, and frankly she wasn't quite sure who was stronger… Usov or Shamal.

Should she share some of this with Renato or not?

He was the brat's godfather and had more time with the kid than she would in the next few years… but he was uncomfortably close to Vongola. It wasn't safe to say she disliked the Italian Famiglia, but saying she wanted nothing to do with them was valid.

The thief was well aware judging the Ninth Sky of Vongola on the issue of her brother's harm was a bit petty of her, but she was alright with being petty.

She also wasn't a great fan of the Eighth Sky either, with Daniella's calculating gaze paired with the Sky-imbued impulse of 'do impressively' made her automatically defensive and snappish.

Sonya was impressive enough as it was, surviving just short of an age she hadn't in another life with more than enough skill not to die that way again. She had direction, close-knit family, a passion, and a kid. More than what she had in her last one, a lot more.

Something telling her to be even more impressive than that was… irritating.

Anything she shared with the hitman might end up in Vongola's hands, because the Inverted Sun was that impressed by the syndicate on top in his home country and had good relations.

Such lofty friends staying such required upkeep, especially when they were doing you a favor and sheltering a soft spot like 'godchild' in their own territory for you. More so when you didn't have the reputation or syndicate behind you that made them want to keep you happy as well.

Bits and pieces she didn't mind too much, they'd get out anyways. From Shamal telling stories to impress his fellow brats back in the Iron Fort about his summer vacation in Soviet Russia to just rumor and hearsay.

Spinel gemstones were already well-known in the Zolotovs to be what to use if you had Flames until
they shattered under even a gentle touch, then one reported to whichever section leader to get a personal match. Sonya and Galina had a bet on when the wider Moscow syndicates would 'mysteriously' learn that fact too, without the gem testing that had actually cost them a few million in rubles so far.

She had her money on one of the vory not realizing it was information to sit on and speaking of it unwisely, the Lightning bet one of the dissatisfied Flame users they knew of to spill the beans for either money or favors.

Sonya, back when she was still neutral about the criminal superpower, had traded a few of the other stones they only found on accident for her visitations with Shamal. The end results, not the processes on finding them or how to get personalized matches.

Which, frankly, with how much money she only now knew went into finding them she had likely overpaid by a lot each time.

If she shared what was in her hands, that her Scruffy put together and combed through a truly atrocious amount of reports that were hand-written and sometimes hard to read, then just about anyone could figure out what handful of stones to test for which Flame type. Using only a couple thousand in any denomination instead of nearly a million if unlucky with any of the cheaper matches.

Sonya now had categories of jewels for each Flame type, sorted by strength and durability matched with Polarization and uses. Much better than just 'grades' as she got in return from Coyote Nougat. Scruffy had worked out by process of elimination what it was that the gemstones had that let certain Flames use them, and she now had suggestions for testing cut and clarity in order to narrow down the field even more.

The man was also working on recording the true spectrum of personalities within each type, which required a lot more information and even using only what they had she could probably judge pretty accurately what Flame type another would possess. Not just one or two terms for their quirks, everything that showed up repeatedly and couldn't be reasoned away via life experiences.

Frankly, Sonya had forgotten she let the man at the information. She wasn't going to forget ever again, and she was going to ensure she had a Mist keeping a discreet eye on the Sun from now on. More for his protection than anything, he was nearly completely dependent on her and she wasn't going to give him up now that he proved to be competent about something.

A list of Flame abilities they knew of so far, the gemstone charts, a pending professionally done estimation of Flame users of a whole type including Polarized opposites. Most of which wasn't entirely correct according to what Vongola taught Mists from what Usov had coaxed out of Shamal.

…Sonya wouldn't be sharing the gemstone-Flame compatibility matches. Her thief-senses screamed at her even contemplating it. Way too much money to give away to something she disliked, and frankly the brat had no need of it being a Mist. Renato might, but only if he asked and only the Inverted Sun selection.

A list of Mist Flame abilities… maybe not. Those could be taught or at least mentioned before the brat had to go back to Italy for the start of school.

Shamal was a smart kid, he'd figure out how to do it.

A detailed explanation of what 'being a Mist' meant?

Sonya bit her lip and tried to figure that one out.
There wasn’t a whole lot of such descriptions out there. Fully grown Mists were very smart criminals, with their quirks and habits actually defended to prevent someone from trying to take advantage. It seems they did that naturally, from what she had in her hands, so even a late-blooming Mist was not a truthful talker.

However, the Zolotovs had a number of child-Mists and they were a lot less closed-mouthed about it all.

Telling Renato any of what they had would mean the man could likely extrapolate that they had more on other types, and that the thief wasn’t saying anything about them. If she told him something that directly contradicted what Vongola taught?

Would he ask, or leave it?

Furthermore, would he share that without asking her?

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(Tuesday the 17th of June, 1969. Tirana, Kingdom of Albania.)

"So… you weren't kidding about that 'strange' thing, were you?"

"…mou, I said it in the first place. Why would I lie?" Viper sneezed again into the tissue from the sixth box of them vaguely perched on their tightly blanket cocooned knees, dazedly trying to glare in the direction of their best friend.

They had a migraine that had lasted all night and now well into the next day's night even through frequent dozing naps, stuffed up sinuses, and a fever. Their last painful sneeze had also summoned into being a set of dancing polka-dotted frogs in lurid green and blue, hovering over the Mist’s now used tissue.

Cherep’s blurry form carefully batted away the gyrating amphibians, taking a seat on the rented hotel bed and pulling a tray over his lap. After replacing the used tissue for a new one. "Just saying. Making conversation, keeping spirits up? You know, nursing things. Now then… tomato soup or… more tomato. There were slim pickings on who did take-away soups and was still open in the middle of the night."

"I could’ve waited."

"You're sick, Vipes. And you weren't awake enough yesterday to do more than sip water. Food is good for you."

"They probably charged you through the nose for it." They countered a bit more viciously than was warranted.

The stuntman hadn’t had to go out to find them something. It was, in fact, a totally new sensation to be waited on like this. An addicting one, if still embarrassing.

"Probably." The overly cheerful Cloud agreed. "But it smells good."

Viper merely glared in the general direction of the purple blob in their vision, which was thankfully sharpening the more they woke up.

"I have strawberry ice cream for dessert."
"Blackmail." The Mist hissed, fighting a grin. "Oh my… have I corrupted you, Cherep?"

"Totally." Deadpanned their best friend.

They shifted, wondering how to work an arm out of the cocoon of blankets they had woken in. "You should've started with that, mou."

Cherep reached over and foiled any progress they had made by tugging the blankets back into position to keep the Mist warm against the artificial chills and to combat the shivers. "I'll keep that in mind for next time."

Why in hell…? "No."

"Yes."

Viper tried to glare, but frankly felt too wretched to honestly believe they had pulled it off. "Cherep-"

"You sneeze with a spoon in hand and the soup will go flying. I'm pretty certain it's only pure fear of the menagerie you've sneezed into existence that has us keeping this room, because nearly every time I or someone else opens the door some techno-colored and scaled monstrosity tries to escape." The stuntman informed them in a matter of fact tone, waving something spoon shaped and white in the air.

A spork?

"I'd rather not give the cleaning lady real reason to complain. The reptiles are more or less well-behaved, soup splatters on the other hand…"

Embarrassingly, they sneezed again if to prove the other's point.

Cherep stuck the spoon or possible spork in his mouth and pried off the luridly colored snake trying to slither down the back of his shirt and dropped it to the floor. Without allowing the shining silver tipped tail to knock either bowl of soup off the tray he had on his lap and plucking the tissue into the wastebasket set aside the bed in order to make way for the new one.

Miserably, the sick and bedridden Mist slumped as much as their cocoon allowed.

While pondering revenge for the blackmail the stuntman now had on them, their friend carefully blew on a spoonful of supposedly wonderfully scented soup. Their stomach growled faintly, oft ignored when starving or not they were hungry after so long of being well-fed and a day of little.

Sick or not.

"I will do the whole 'baby-airplane' thing if you give me trouble." The shameless Cloud admitted frankly, holding out a cooled bite for the Mist. "Also, just so you know… there's a thought-bubble thing depicting a pair of gears working away over your head. I can see you plotting."

Viper shot the man the ugliest look they could muster up as they bit down on the spoon viciously, but privately suspected it was even more pathetic than the other's drowned kitten pouts.

Cherep had been the one to offer a few comic books from America for them to read once.

"Very. And yes, all my fault. Not sorry."

"…words now?"
Cherep grinned brightly. "Did you try to change it? I think I like this version better."
Chapter 60

(Wednesday the 18th of June, 1969. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

**Snapping** awake, Sonya held herself completely still for the first few seconds.

Just listening to the sounds of near-midnight dockside Moscow and the building settle, as well as little puffs of breathing that was ghosting hot gusts down her sternum.

Shamal had his head on her chest, somehow not waking up even if his *mamma*'s heart was thundering after a rather gruesome nightmare.

Blinking wildly as violent imagery from her dreams were drowned out by this little bit of peace, the thief started to pet his hair lightly with one hand as she reached for the pillow behind her head. Carefully easing herself out from under the kid, she replaced herself with the fluffy bag of feathers in order to get up.

The Mist brat yawned as he rolled over, woken up slightly by her movements but not enough to actually become coherent. He buried his face in her replacement and huffed a bit unhappily, or maybe that was her imagination, but his breathing evened back out to deep and slow sleep patterns in moments.

She waited another few moments just watching him sleep, but eventually dragged herself out of the warm bed to ghost around her own living space.

Renato was probably sleeping too, and if so she didn't want to wake him even if the asshole could sleep deeply after the waking bloody nightmare of not even a day ago. Tiredly rubbing at her eyes, she more or less blindly headed for the kitchenette.

Above her beast of a refrigerator, in the cupboards, was her last bottle of vodka. Sonya actually didn't really do casual drinking on her own, but sometimes just having a glass or a bottle was nice. The last time it had seen any action was the last time Tatiana had visited her, and it got opened up the night of the museum robbery.

…fuck, that was an idea. She should probably drag those greaves and the ruins of the gauntlets back here to fiddle with during the nights she ended up not sleeping. The Storm-Cloud paused while perched on the lip of her counter, having scaled it to give her enough of a boost to reach her booze, and wrenched the cork out of the bottle but didn't yet take a drink.

Not Usov. For all she was sure the kid would respond promptly and all… he wasn't even a teenager yet. The Mist lead really needed full nights of sleep for growing, and after the incident last night was probably catching up on his missed hours.

"…Anna?"

The *tiled floor* beneath her dangling feet rippled with indigo fire, and Sonya peered down at the slightly bedraggled appearance of the Mirror Lady.

"*My apologies, Anna.*"

"…no need, Miss Bazanova. I usually work late nights as it is."
The thief winced, because Anna had also been with her last night and apparently had been catching up on what she had missed tending to the side-results of her temper tantrum. "It really is quite petty, Anna. If you would rather..."

"I am awake now." Demurred the young teen graciously, settling herself in the projected image as if she was leaning up against something. Headboard of a bed, a wall, something more vertical than she herself was. "And if you refrain from speaking on whatever it is, I will wonder and get no more sleep myself."

A guilt trip?

Slightly amused, the Storm-Cloud took a swig of vodka and drew out the pause a bit. They were already awake, and the other had the option of going back to sleep if she wanted even if curiosity was a besetting sin to nearly all thieves.

"...I should also mention that if I fail to learn what it is you might have wanted, Usov is likely to become upset at the implications that you might not trust either him or I to handle your business."

Oooh, emotional blackmail. "Anna, try to recall that I am partially a Cloud."

"It was worth a try." She spoke without shame or embarrassment. "And I would like to believe it worked for petty reasons of my own, boss. Now then, how may this little minion be of service?"

…was this now an appeal to her supposed 'pack' nature?

Sonya eyed the image of the girl in her floor suspiciously, but the damned Mist merely politely gazed back expectantly. "There's a set of greaves and a pair of slightly damaged gauntlets in my office, Anna. I would like them and a sketchbook, since I doubt I will be getting much sleep tonight."

"Pencils? A pen?"

"I have a pen, but pencils would not be amiss."

Anna nodded once. "Of course, one moment."

Her tiled kitchen floor rippled once more with Mist Flames, the teenager who owned the Flames vanishing from sight. Sonya merely took another longer gulp of alcohol, then winced as the lights suddenly turned on.

"...Renato, I was perfectly happy in the dark."

"Pity, I was kind of hoping you had another chemise." The lights switched off, the half-dressed hitman moseying casually across the empty room to join her in the kitchen corner of her hotel suite. "And be that as it may, I would rather be sure you were awake and not sleepwalking and talking. Nightmare?"

Was it weird the most she could see now was his curly sideburns and spiky hair?

She usually had better night-vision than this, although the temporary but sudden flood of light might be the reason she couldn't make out as much detail anymore.

"What was your first clue?" The thief eyed the greyed-out hand that beckoned impatiently a few times, taking another swig of her liquor before handing it over.

Also, what the hell was wrong with what she was wearing?
It was his shirt… maybe that was it?

She had to roll the sleeves up a little to actually use her hands, was he enough of a clothes snob to mock her over that?

"Oh, no. I have no problem with you wearing my shirt, little lady Sonya." He cautiously sniffed the opening of the bottle and winced away from it. "What the hell is this?"

"Nearly pure grain alcohol, the type some people used to clean metal with." She answered dryly. "It's Russian vodka, Renato."

Dark eyes flicked from the clear contents in the clear bottle to her, and back again. She only could tell because the whites of his eyes flicked around with the motion. "Hmm… well, when in Rome and all that."

Sonya was honestly impressed he didn't cough or choke halfway through the drink he took.

Most people did on their first swig of straight, actual vodka. Cherep had spluttered his first drink all over himself, and Tatiana had lasted a few seconds before she choked on it. She herself managed to get it down her first time, but nearly coughed up a lung afterwards.

The face he pulled when he lowered it to stare hard at the liquid, however, was funny. "Sonya… this is awful. It doesn't have a taste."

"You don't drink vodka for the taste, Renato." In that, it was at least better than tequila.

She couldn't stand tequila. "…somehow, I'm not even surprised."

"Generally, you just add it to another drink to raise the alcohol content. My White Russians, for instance, merely tastes like cream when mixed well. Otherwise you drink it straight to get drunk faster." She held out a hand, but instead of giving the bottle back the hitman pointedly took another sip. "…Renato."

"Alcohol will not get you back to sleep anytime soon, and I actually believe they make nightmares worse." He explained just as pointedly, trying to snatch the cork out of her hand. "I've got a nearly foolproof way to get you back to sleep if you'd like, little lady Sonya."

Sonya tightened her grip, catching the man's fingers in her fist. He really should know better than trying to steal from a thief. "I'm not sleeping again tonight. It would be different if I was sleeping alone but I can't do more than one nightmare a night, my reactions get steadily worse. I might harm the brat."

"…ah." Studying her expression for a moment, Renato finally allowed her to take back possession of her liquor and got his fingers back in return. "If that's the case, want some company?"

"You don't have to." Someone should be well rested tomorrow, and he was off getting into trouble while she sat pretty in a well-defended office.

"If I offered, then I want to." Corrected the hitman snootily, snapping his fingers for the bottle. "There are these delightful things called naps, little lady Sonya. I'll be well rested no matter what."

"Lucky you." Snarked back the Storm-Cloud, handing the liquor over and sliding off the counter when Mist Flames snapped into existence on her kitchen table.
The oddly dark indigo Flames flared once then left behind the metal armor she requested, as well as a sketchbook and an assortment of pencils. She picked them up to transfer over to the couch, which had a corner bathed in street-lamp light she could work at.

"Ho? What's all this?"

"Antique whatever century armored greaves and gauntlets. I stole them not too long ago, actually." Pausing and examining the damage to one of the gauntlets, the thief knocked out a bit of the stuffing that had stymied her in shoving her hand in during said heist. "I'm seriously thinking about making myself a more modern set, because shrapnel and such are pretty much the only time I ever get injured being a human wrecking ball."

Renato flatly eyed the armor, then pinned her with a sardonic look as he joined her on the couch. "Any way you could make it out of scale mail?"

She eyed the examples she had to work with. "...the greaves, sure. The forearms for the gauntlets? Maybe. Not sure how to work it around the joints in the fingers, though."

He cracked a too-loud laugh, which made her hush him impatiently as she sorted things out to work on.

For fuck's sake, if he woke the brat she'd... do something. She wasn't sure what yet, maybe make him put the kid back to sleep.

"Shamal can sleep just fine on his own, I have no idea why you let him sleep with you."

"Because he wants to. And I only have two bedrooms in this suite."

"What if I said I wanted to sleep with you then?" The hitman questioned in a lazy drawl, which sounded faintly mocking.

"I really wouldn't mind if you want to. We've done that before in Babylon and it was rather nice."

Seriously, she had climbed into his bed, turnabout was fair. She wasn't sure why he'd want them all in the same bed, but it could be a protection thing. It was easier with them all in the same room.

Wait... was he protective of her?

He had started bitching about what she was dressed in and in what company she wore things around. It was possible if kind of... interesting. Arseniy had been the only other person to date to try sighing over how she dressed herself. Tatiana didn't count, she was more fashion-conscious than disproving.

Sonya was weirdly flattered that he cared that much.

Renato had been halfway through a gulp of her steadily diminishing alcohol as she spoke, and he twitched violently at what she was going to assume was her thoughts as he lowered the bottle and eyed her suspiciously. She couldn't hear anything too worryingly going on besides some distant sirens as some criminal got busted, and there was nothing in her suite he hadn't seen before.

Besides the things she had in her hands that he had seen be brought in by Mist.

"...fuck it, I don't even care anymore. I'll take what I can get."

...what?

"You owe me a story, by the way." Barreled on the Mafioso before she could ask, handing back the
dregs of her vodka as if he hadn't drank half of what she had left before this little midnight thing. 
"Something about a Cartier job?"

"...the winter of nineteen-sixty-three. Not my first jewelry store, but the second one Tats and I hit up. Just before that period of time I was missing from Mafia Land shortly after we first met, and I broke my hand."

"You were twelve?"

"...technically? No. I was eleven when we first met, and this was still a couple months before my birthday."

The hitman opened his mouth but paused to seriously think about that before he spoke. "...Sonya, when were you born?"

"December twenty-eighth, nineteen-fifty."

"You're... jailbait."

Well... "...I'm eighteen. I'll be nineteen this winter."

He palmed his face roughly. "No, you were jailbait back when you started mothering Shamal."

Sonya finished off her vodka as she pondered that. "...yeah. And?"

"You were sixteen when I took you to your first Vongola Ball."

"I turned seventeen shortly afterwards." She pointed out before setting the empty bottle down on her coffee table. "My Mafia Land paperwork is only off by a year. I suppose I should correct it now that it doesn't matter I am a year younger than it claims."

Renato made a sound halfway between a laugh and a groan, sprawled out in a kind of half-depressed mope on his half of the couch. "...we need more alcohol."

Mirror Lady Anna proved she was listening in when a near case of whisky and a few bottles of vodka flashed into existence on the Storm-Cloud's book littered coffee table, next to the lone empty one.

"...which one?"

"Anna."

"Thank you, lady Anna." The hitman cracked open a bottle of whisky and raised it as in salute. "To your health, lovely...way too young ladies."

Sonya narrowly eyed her friend.

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

He had better not be thinking of sniffing around the Mirror Lady's skirts, she was way too young for him.

Renato face-palmed before he even took a swig of the new liquor. "Not even... no, Sonya. Just no."

(ooo000ooo)
Viper shifted restlessly, wondering where Cherep was and what was taking him so long to return.

Finally released from the cocoon of blankets now that they had stopped shivering compulsively, the Mist was in the middle of a terrible bout of cabin fever to make up for the broken temperature one.

There was only so many times one could stare aimlessly at neutrally painted walls or ceilings or count questionable stains on the carpeted floor. Or wonder how much bodily fluid the bed was soaked in.

It was usually worse at the end and bottom corners of such cut-rate motels as this, and as long as the Mist stayed out of the middle of the bed and more to the top it was more or less ignorable. They would be having words with the stuntman about the suitability of such places as this to hole up within, although Viper did owe the other some consideration for suspending whatever he was off to do in order to tend to them.

…they also owed the man because their best friend was a considerate fool and had wrapped them up in order to respect their privacy about their true gender, when it wasn't possible for them to change another's perception of it. Instead of taking advantage of the illness preventing coherent use of Mist Flames to find out.

A stern lecture, maybe. Alas, not a demand for four-stars or better accommodations immediately.

Circus performers did not make a lot of money, especially not communist ones. Viper flatly refused to feel guilty over the amount of money they had tricked, fooled, or otherwise weaseled out of the stuntman. Cherep took it all in stride, treating the incidents like financial lessons instead of just them being a miser and never cracking so much as a frown at their behavior.

The Mist finally picked male for now, he refused to give into the temptation of being female while being cared for by a rather good-looking male friend. Feeling dainty and sensuous was all well and fine, but he drew the line at feeling like a damsel in distress that needed someone.

Fuck that.

Feeling another sneeze coming along, Viper groped for the nearly-out tissue box. If Cherep was delayed… there was any number of reasons for why and some of them were not something the Mist liked to contemplate on.

He had a way to find out easily enough. Hopefully his initial Mist ability would still work, if he finally had his personal illusions back.

Swiping irritably at the literal fruit-bat thing that appeared as well with the use of his Thoughtography, causing the apple-shaped flying red rat with bat wings to flutter off and nearly crash into the curtained window, Viper studied the image forming on the fragile tissue to see where his best friend was.

The door opened before the mucus finished resolving itself into a decent map of the entire motel and the nearby streets.

Cherep merely cocked an eyebrow at the Mist hiding the tissue behind his back, shutting the door behind himself before the apple-bat could escape. "Seriously, Vipes? I can assure you, I've seen grosser things over the last couple days. Or are you sneezing up bits of brain? I told you just laying tissues out on your knees was a bad idea."
"Mou, I am not sneezing up brain tissue."

He got the bag of more tissue boxes and actual solid food set on his lap, before the stuntman made use of rusty and nearly unused thief skills to pluck the fragile paper away from the other man neatly. Without tearing it, taking advantage of his near-reflexive jerk to stabilize the food and tissues before they spilled even if they were positioned perfectly to balance on his knees without issue if he didn't move.

His attempt to hide the thing via Mist Flames merely caused a fleet of snails to suddenly ooze into existence, flecked up and down the stuntman's forearms. They waved multi colored and striped tentacles at the circus performer, as if their behavior would be enough to drive the curious man off what Viper had tried to make transparent.

Said Esper despaired over those few, left to rot thief skills even as he tried to control a flush of embarrassment at getting caught out by them.

Cherep could've been phenomenal hitman or assassin with both an entire thieves' syndicate worth of refined stealth abilities pounded in his head and his near-immortality, if only he wasn't a complete pacifist. He only used those skills now for the occasional card game with friends, or in his training to do life-risking stunts in mid-air.

…and occasionally used them against the more criminally inclined around him like this when the whim hit him.

"Cute." Was the stuntman's only observation of his new decorations, flopping gracelessly to Viper's side still studying the Thoughtography map in his hands. "I've eaten escargots before, you know. Slimy and a bit chewy, but oddly good with enough butter and garlic."

The snails abandoned ship the easiest way they could, which was oozing up to the man's hands to fall to the floor.

"…mou, Cherep-"

"Well… there's no… blood… what." The Mist winced at the Cloud's suddenly flat tone as he realized exactly what he was looking at. "Is this a map?"

He tilted said map so they both could see the nearly transparent mucus outlining the nearby surroundings on clean white tissue. Which was only now getting damp enough for the lines to be clearly seen. The view was occasionally interrupted by various sized mollusks shells making their ponderous way in snail-emergency mode to the man's fingers.

"Maybe."

"Is this how you always know where I am and when is a good time to show up?"

"…maybe."

"This is pretty cool. Do you have a range for this?"

Viper stared at his best friend oddly.

Purple eyes blinked back questioningly, not a trace of wariness or suspicion in them.

"Most people find it a breach of personal privacy, mou."
"Dude, you're a Mist. Privacy to you is nothing like it is to normal people." He snickered, folding up the map and handing it back in order to shake off the last of the snails on his wrists and hands so he could pull out a carton of take away for himself. "If I was all that bothered about you keeping tabs on me, I would've said something when Sonya made mention of how stalker-ish her Mist minion was a year or so ago."

It was sometimes hard to remember that for all Cherep was a civilian now, he still had ties that went deep into the underworld and still kept up with a lot of things Viper wouldn't expect any civilian to know. For all he was a Flame user, the stuntman was charry about using his abilities and turned his nose up at even petty crime.

Absently straightening out his own meal of Thai cuisine and the newly purchased boxes of tissues, which he would have to break into in as little as an hour's time from the look of things, the miser pondered over the situation.

'Overly controlling' had been tossed in his face a few times when his Thoughtography ability came to light to others. 'Creepy', 'invasion of privacy', and quite a few other terms had also been tacked into such accusations from time to time.

Viper had stopped offering the ability for sale, as it was part of the reason he was now on his own even when there was an entire community of Espers around.

Reading minds, sure as long as it was possible to train and block such things. Moving things with a thought was alright, as was foretelling the future.

Being able to divine exactly where someone was at all times, even when in bed with someone they shouldn't be?

Apparently not nearly as acceptable to the greater majority with such things to hide.

It had cost him far too much, but also was damn near priceless in his line of work. Always being able to track down any target earned him a lot of work that otherwise would've gone to less young and green-looking information brokers.

…maybe he should've found more Flame users to associate with instead before he decided he was better off with just money instead of friends. It merely being accepted as just part of what made Viper a Mist was a new experience.

"That serious of an issue, huh? No Vipes, I don't mind you know where I am when you want to. Actually, it's a good thing. I don't have to worry you might pop up in the middle of a show or something and draw all kinds of the wrong attention to you, or how to instantly work it in somehow to make spectators think it's just part of the show."

"Mou… the thought bubble is back, isn't it?"

"Yep." Cherep confirmed with audible amusement, sticking a fork of fried rice and what looked like diced pork meat into his mouth. He chewed for a moment, probably well aware he was annoying the Mist. "About since… I got back."

"…fuck." Reapplying his gender illusions cause it, then.

Viper glared upward, where he could just see an oddly bulbous white cloud showing an image of three grey dots blinking darker then lighter in sequence. Hanging in mid-air right over his head.

The image changed into an animatedly flashing exclamation point just before he popped it viciously
with his spork.

"Not a word, mou."

The stuntman merely grinned back at him. Then winced and picked a Mist snail out of his khao phat mu as it decided the food was as good a landing spot as any.

Served the asshole right for not immediately telling Viper about the little misfired Mist Flame issue he had

(ooo000000)

(Wednesday the 18th of June, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Peter McScruffy was bemused to be handed a sketchbook, but that didn't even touch the confusion as Sonya wordlessly passed him and stretched out on the office couch instead of say anything.

Galina looked as utterly confused as him, but apparently young Shamal had an idea of what to do.

The Mist climbed up onto the couch with her and got snatched into a kind of overly suffocating looking snuggle, which then had the Storm-Cloud rolling to her side to put the kid's back against the back of the couch and presenting her own to the office at large.

Scruffy very slowly backed away to the other side of the office. There were chairs over there by the desk, he'd be fine in one of them for the day.

Since the last week had been downright bizarre to him, he was frankly starting to get immune to the weirdness going on.

His patron had a kid, okay. An Italian Mafioso hitman she called a friend, alright. Apparently murdered a couple handfuls of want-to-be-vory nearly on her own incredibly late the day before yesterday. Not exactly warm and fuzzy thoughts, until one recalled he was left alone in a den of murderers because no one wanted to say otherwise to her face.

Scruffy wasn't alright with it, but he could understand this wasn't remotely like the 'civilian' life he left behind years ago when he became the unwilling guest of a diamond cartel. The more 'scary' or 'deadly' the woman napping on the couch was regarded the less he was bothered at all, and the more he was looked at as a necessary buffer.

He didn't understand this culture, for nearly a handful of months living here in the middle of it all.

Why it was the entire clan knew who did what that resulted in about three kilometers of territory being suddenly added to this syndicate's area of influence. Why it was exciting news and not… horrifying. Or why no one wanted to get within twenty feet of this office, or why the vory next door suddenly decided to move.

Oh… he could guess… but… he'd probably be off or wrong in some way.

Therefore, he wasn't going to judge things by his more 'civilian' sensibilities.

Sonya's sudden willingness to punch people through closed doors had nothing to do with it, really.

Flipping absently through the sketchbook and the few filled pages at least informed him of what he was now to be doing. Getting the Lightning's attention took a prod or three, and he handed the
woman the pad of drawing paper when she glared at him.

Scruffy was an engineer, not a mechanic, blacksmith, or jeweler. He was still pretty certain he could figure something out for the woman who was paying for him to live in relative luxury without demanding much beyond busy work in return.

Those metallurgy books to be bought looked interesting, and the gemology and geology ones had proven to be fascinating reads once he worked out the Cyrillic alphabet.

After who knew how long of never reading a damn word due to the lack of material to read around, that is. He needed a hobby or something.

…the implied stipend he now had to use for his own personal reasons as well as a more generous amount for any research effort he might want to undertake regardless of what was rather motivating in that respect. He now had the money to support a hobby.

Perfectly aware Sonya was purchasing his loyalty, she already kind of had it since he was… well, alive, the Sun actually didn't mind. It was probably the most forthright attempt yet and left up to him if he'd take it or not and not… taken for granted he would be loyal or risk death.

 Apparently, he was upgraded from 'dependent I don't want' to 'somewhat useful' now. Worth it to be tempted instead of just tolerated.

…go him.

Galina sighed, softly. "Well… make a list of anything you might want beyond the basics of life. I'll send someone out to get it with the other items in this after I call Bjoarn up to release the funds."

"Am I getting a bank account?"

"Probably. It's easier. Likely two Swiss accounts, one you will need to detail what every kopeck is spent on and another one you don't have to justify."

He was getting Swiss Bank Accounts. Fancy.

More than that, it was a piece of civilian normalcy he greatly appreciated. Getting paid, balancing a checkbook, actually having a job instead of… existing as some kind of unpaid intern of either a mining/smuggling ring or a professional thief's office assistant. Or the office babysitter.

Peter was thirty, getting a job shouldn't be an event that moved him to tears.

"…how much would gem cutting tools set me back around here?"

" Doesn't matter, get it anyways Galina." Sonya sleepily called over shortly, twisting around only just far enough to see them both clearly. "You don't have to, Scruffy."

"I'd like to. I'd rather not allow them to rule my life through fear." Admittedly he learned to cut glassy stones on diamonds and refined it out of sheer self-preservation, but diamonds were not very good Flame focuses for any but Scruffy.

They were the hardest ones so learning to cut different gemstones would be different enough… he hoped.

If this was what he got in return for just organizing the information, actually supplying something to add into it had to be better.
Eyeing him sternly a few moments, the Storm-Cloud eventually turned back to smothering her baby Mist. "Fine then. Do as you will."

Peter intended to.

Kind of scary and liberating after ten years of being informed of what he'd do or risk excruciating pain, but his new boss had never cared what he did as long as he wasn't useless. A few months of that against a few years of more restrictive living didn't exactly solve anything, but his being able to set the pace himself did.

Noticeably, he had no deadlines mandated by Sonya about anything. Merely funds to experiment with instead now.

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 18th of June, 1969 continued. The Pahkan's Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Pahkan of the Zolotov thieves' clan, I presume?" Renato drawled as he came to a stop in the middle of the room he had been shown to.

It had to be one of the old men behind the desk, either the one sitting in a rather ostentatious 'throne' or the one standing at his elbow. There could be a bit of protective rearranging going on and the seated man wasn't the boss of this syndicate, but Sonya had claimed 'old man Zolotov' looked like a loan shark. If her opinion of a loan shark was the same as his was questionable.

The hitman would very much just like to know why he suddenly was important now when there was no mention of a visit desired last week. Sonya had ducked and dodged Don Vongola for a few days on her own, but that had been more motivated by her attempting to avoid the Iron Fort's staff than just being ignored.

A few days without so much as a word mentioned that the Boss of this syndicate wanted to see him to even lightly grill him about his intentions within it or to one of their members said some… not particularly good things. A snub of one member's contacts, an underestimation of his value, possibly incomprehension although he was doubtful on that end.

He had the sinking suspicion this sudden summons had to do with that incident a few nights ago, which might've been a very belated wake-up call that a Storm-Cloud was still a Cloud.

Sonya was stuck in an office most days, her contemporary Soviet Flame users here were either around her age or younger than her. She was phenomenally well behaved for a territorial Cloud mixed with an obsessed Storm, nearly fanatical over being so.

A fair number of people looked to her for direction, it was likely she was trying to be a role-model when she knew she wasn't really cut out to be one and trying to watch her step anyways.

…and then she blew up and took out some little operation on the fringes of civilized crime, leaving behind a smoldering crater which was still burning two days later according to the news reports.

Said Storm-Cloud was going about her business as if she was going to flatly ignore she did so. Most no one had the balls to try asking her anything about it, so it seemed she'd get away with doing it.

Of those that had been present that night, there were the two young Mists and one Italian Mafioso
Sun. If this 'Pahkan' wanted details…

"Mafioso Sinclair," the seated of the two old men started grouchily after the expected intimidation pause, "I must admit I rather prefer Bazanova to handle her own things and bring them to me once something comes of it… but I also don't have her suddenly deciding to rip a new hole in the city either."

…point. The Italian standing in a Russian criminal's office adjusted his hat to give him time to study the expressions aimed at him. "To be clear, it wasn't me who set her off. Something of an accident, honestly. It just happened near our godchild. She didn't take it… well."

"'Didn't take it well' is what most of my vory like to claim about breaking bad news to another and somehow ending up in the middle of a bar-room brawl." Stated the one he was assuming was 'old man Zolotov' in a flat tone. "Not when we somehow ended up with a scar in our city, although thankfully not in our territory."

"You ironically have her to thank for that, she was the one that decided to get out of it once she lost her temper." Renato pointed out just as blandly, still trying to figure out what this meeting was all about.

He'd give it to the old man, this was a damn good opening gambit. Suggestive and slightly misleading, making it seem like the concern was more for what rather than how, who, or where. Suggesting that maybe Renato was the cause of Sonya's sudden gutting of an operation on their fringes.

A feint to make the foreigner defensive over his presence at all, and more likely to either bargain to no longer be the center of attention or to leave earlier.

Renato was no green hitman, however. Even if this was the official 'boss' of the syndicate… Sonya was nearly a law into herself within it. She didn't report in to him about anything she wasn't prompted to, might actually heed his word but not graciously, and was showing the usual irreverent 'Cloud' signs of not being happy with their nominal 'leader'.

He'd give it a bare week after this man retired before the thief officially blew off her syndicate.

Not violently, she had family here, but enough so whoever was next to lead would know full well she wasn't returning.

As he had wondered how she'd manage her duties to her syndicate and mothering Shamal full time, it explained a lot as to why she was willing to move at all.

"Unfortunately, 'didn't take it well' is also a Cloud euphemism for 'went berserk'." The Mafioso had seen other Clouds decide violence was an answer all of a sudden, although they were normally carefully redirected in either a useful direction or damn near dog-piled by those willing or able to be targets until they calmed down.

With Sonya's peers pretty much limited to 'her' Lightning, Sun, and Mists… a direction was pretty much all that was available.

Any pure human without Dying Will matched up against her wouldn't last very long, as he had personally witnessed two nights ago.

She had tried to prolong it but ended up just murdering them wholesale when it didn't give her the things she was looking for.
"You sound very sure of that." Spoke the man standing behind the Pahkan, almost idly.

"I've seen how other Clouds behave. They seem to be more common in Italia." Renato pointed out unhelpfully.

"You'll excuse me for asking about it then?" The same older man suggested and slightly ordered. "This is the first time my granddaughter decided such a thing was necessary."

The hitman had been all but ready to be as helpful as a rock as he was not motivated to help them… until exactly what the standing Russian man had referred to Sonya as finally hit him.

…she had never mentioned a grandfather.

"I am Pyotr, the Sovintnik." Said supposed relation to his… still slightly too-young fellow godparent introduced himself. "I was the one who raised Elisaveta."

Son of a bitch. Exactly when was Sonya going to mention she was slightly close to the 'heir' position in her syndicate to him?

Did she know?

No, wait. Her mother, her mother's lover, and her siblings would've been closer, if females were allowed to take such positions in Soviet Russia. If not her, then just Arseniy and Cherep… which would be slightly hilarious to see happen.

That would only be if the Pahkan had no children, which wasn't something he knew of or not, and if Russian syndicates followed the 'parent to child' method of passing power.

Renato narrowed his eyes on the older man, now that he had reasoned his way out of that shock tactic. "Exactly why are you asking? Sonya's never said anything about a grandfather to me, and forgive me for pointing this out but… if you cared, then wouldn't she know you?"

"Because she doesn't need one." Pyotr explained simply, in an almost bored tone.

He was calling bullshit. A woman like Sonya delighted in having family, in admittedly a stilted way. She was a Cloud, they were all strange in how they showed their affection.

It was normally boiled down to variations of the word 'tolerant'.

If someone outside a Cloud's family tried something someone within it did to said Cloud, there was usually a new greasy splat on the ground in short order.

No, this wasn't about the new crater in Moscow or surprise relations being pretty damn important within this syndicate. This was about what he might know that would help them in unstated aims.

Given he had figured out Sonya had no intention of staying here for much longer on his own well before this meeting, it was likely that very topic they wanted to pump information out of him for. Either that or for 'managing' other Clouds… like her little brother.

Renato gave Sonya's self-claimed grandfather a sardonic look.

Now that he knew, he could either try to warn the thief about her extended relations and their possible motives or keep quiet about it. Both options had their own pitfalls. If he did either she'd believe him and avoid really interacting with her grandfather, which might cause her mother some grief, or she'd doubt it and his word about something as outlandish as 'your grandfather is plotting
behind your back' deserves.

…or she might find out he knew about it before anything happened and hadn't said anything, which would damage their relationship farther down the line.

And he thought his life was depressingly close to being a soap opera.

Pyotr's expression behind old man Zolotov's back was equally as dryly mocking as the hitman's glare.

Was that aimed at him or his boss?

Either option added an entire web of sticky implications behind it to the problem at hand.

Fuck, could this get any worse?

Renato almost winced at the door behind him banged open, nearly spilling a man into the office despite the attempts of the vory stationed as guards trying to stop the…

…beaten up man.

Sonya was beating the shit out of someone every day, wasn't she?

Don't tell him…

"Ah... Gedeon, nice of you to join us." Old man Zolotov observed dryly. "Son, have you met Mafioso Sinclair? Another Sun user, hitman, and one of Baznova's contacts from outside the Iron Curtain?"

He really had to stop tempting fate.

(Thursday the 19th of June, 1969. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

A bit confused by the contents of this visit, Lisa cocked her head to the side as the hitman casually sauntered up to her front porch with her daughter and their godchild in tow.

Mafioso Sinclair hadn't shown up during the mornings for the last few days they had done this, sans the day no morning lessons had taken place, meaning something had changed.

Sonya looked as indifferent as usual, so nothing she knew or cared about. Shamal kept sneaking skeptical looks at his godfather's back, might be wondering if he had to demonstrate his newly acquired lock picking skills.

Lisa kept her speculations to herself, merely asking the Italian man to wait a moment in the kitchen until she could put the coffee on.

Her daughter did pause, glancing at the hitman once, before leading her godchild down to the basement for their lessons.

She went to wake Arseniy first. He had asked her to do so, and she might be reaching with her speculation that there was something amiss.

Maybe he really just liked her coffee?
Her lover didn't look remotely sold on her reasoning before he yawned and rolled out of bed, or maybe he was just grumpy at yet another earlier than usual morning for him. "Want me to stick around?"

…hmm, tip their hand that they knew something was awry or proceed as if everything was normal?

"I don't think any friend of Sonya's would look to murder us, not without actually saying something to her in order for her to either murder whoever asked or try to change his mind."

"Italian criminals might be a bit different than Russian ones." Was Arseniy's only offer to tip the scales in either direction.

"I think I'll be fine, Sonya's not going to be too far anyways." If it was a hit attempt on either of them, her daughter would be most put out by it.

As it was morning when both her and their joint godchild were present for a specific reason he knew full well about, she slightly doubted it.

Only slightly, because stranger things could and had happened.

Renato had plenty of opportunity if he had wanted before this, she'd get concerned if he tried to linger.

Her lover gave her a steady look, before ambling into the shower to wake himself up as best he could instead of wander down the stairs to simply sprawl out on the living room couch until Valera woke up and could join him for a morning walk. Lisa left him to it.

The older of her daughter's Italians had helped himself to the newspapers they subscribed to, not entirely too far into it so she couldn't say if he had only cracked it open when he heard her coming back down the hallways. She had been retired from the field a bit too long maybe, but frankly three children had damn near run her off her feet and she really had better things to do than steal on whims nowadays.

"So then, Renato. Is this a business visit or just an opportunity to eat something less questionable than my daughter's fair?"

"She didn't burn the bacon today, so you don't have to worry I'm after something edible." Drawled the hitman as he folded up the paper and turned to look at her squarely. "Does Sonya know she has a grandfather?"

"Oh? Is Pyotr finally admitting it?" Damn her crafty father, of course his finally giving in would only occur on his terms instead of hers. "I've been bothering him about that for... years."

"I learned... as a consequence of meeting with him and your Pahkan while they tested me about what I might know of Clouds in general."

…ah. That was... possibly bad.

Lisa paused as she realized the why, the grounds in her hands to add to her French press coffee maker suspended for a moment before carefully being poured in. Adding in hot water from the kettle that normally heated tea water, she stirred it up and thought.

Reassembling the press, she brought it over to the hitman so he could let it steep as long as he wanted before filtering it and pouring himself a cup. "I take it you're bringing this up for a reason?"
"You're her mother, you probably know that…"

"…that?" She may suspect, but unless she had to she wouldn't spill any of her children's plans to a relative unknown. A week of acquaintance did not a contact make.

"…Sonya is intent on moving to Italia, for Shamal." Temporized the hitman after a long pause. Neither giving in and confirming her own observations nor possibly betraying her daughter's trust in him. "And is likely not going to keep any but family ties and a few friends if she doesn't need to."

Leading but not exactly confirmation if Lisa didn't already know the blonde thief's plans.

Arseniy had to recently tell their daughter to be less hostile in general for at least another year, the fact her friend picked up on her disinclination to be helpful even to their own syndicate wasn't very telling of anything important.

Pyotr picking up on that wasn't a stretch to imagine. What was her father after?

He was a very loyal man, but not really a family one. Lisa could… almost…

…ooh. Ooh, her old man was a crafty one, wasn't he?

"And you're bringing this up."

"I do not appreciate the position he tried to maneuver me into." Renato confirmed flatly before she could finish, reaching out a hand to push the plunger down in order to get his coffee fix. "You tell her and figure out what he's up to. If Sonya can't take Shamal for another year or up to four, it won't greatly affect me but will depress the brat. However, she did give her word that she'd finish raising him and you know how stubborn your daughter is."

Pyotr confirmed he would finally give in, gave her warning in a very round-about way, and still was serving his friend as he swore so many years ago. All with a few words to an outsider only peripherally involved.

Lisa smiled wryly. She had a way to go before she got to her father's level, didn't she?

All that, and still tested the Italian Mafioso about how much he respected and would do on Sonya's behalf and had him report such in front of her mother. She would've found that to be a bit of a leap, but there were likely things that happened when the hitman found out about all this that she wasn't privy to.

…so, the Pahkan was now aware and not really accepting that the Storm-Cloud was merely biding her time until he stepped down to abscond with probably the oldest cadre of Flame users to another country altogether. Pyotr would in fact show up for Christmas this year and was at least resigned if not entirely pleased to be forced into the role of 'grandfather'. Renato was really a good friend and not just a would-be suitor taking advantage of the fact his godchild picked out a really pretty godmother from his associates available.

There was enough doubt and suspicion in the hitman's mind he'd likely refuse to believe he was being used to pass on a message, which really was quite mean of her father unless this was part of his testing of the man as a would-be suitor of his granddaughter's.

How to inform her father Sonya had a temporary 'hand-over' plan in the works with the school?

That would probably be the biggest sticking point for him, Sonya possibly yanking the most experienced Flame users out of the clan.
With such a plan it would be more of a general easing of the old with all their tangled grudges out and the new with none in, even if the Zolotovs wouldn't likely be in charge of all of it anymore. They'd still control the jewels, and the matching services, and possibly would for years yet so losing some control over the subjects taught would be no great loss in balance.

It would still spread their influence through the next generation of criminals, establish the thieves' clan as a fixture and not something that could be temporary.

Then there was that smoking crater just north of Zolotov territory. A greater wake-up call that Flame users were here to stay wouldn't be possible, there were no other Clouds to get vexed beyond all reason and demolish something equally as large in warning. No other Storm-Clouds to keep the ruins burning through nearly forty-eight hours either, despite civilian attempts at firefighting.

A fair number of syndicates were now scrambling, either trying to suck up to the once minor thieves' clan or figure out how to get around the sudden weapon of mass destruction they only now realized actually did exist here.

Saying there was one and seeing the results were two different things after all.

"Tell my father, the next time you see him because you'll have another audience with at least him in a more private setting, that he is worried about the wrong aspect of my daughter's nature. Sonya is fully aware of her duties and will always ensure they are carried out even in her absence. Exactly that, if you please."

…why had the hitman not poured himself a cup yet?

Lisa might think fast, but not that fast.

He had plenty of time to fix himself a cup, what was going on that made him pause?

Renato blinked slowly a few times, then pointedly did pour that cup of coffee. "Exactly? Is there a reason for that?"

Hmmm… very suspicious this one.

She approved. It was on Sonya's behalf, after all. "Yes."

He waited even more pointedly, she merely beamed back at him.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 19th of June, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"...your family... is fucked up."

Sonya gave the Italian Sun a sideways look. "There is nothing wrong with my family."

"Yeah!" Shamal chimed in, pouting up at the older man who wasn't even looking at him as he followed along. "Mamma's family is really nice, Mister Renato."

The hitman seethed instead of answering the kid, making the thief wonder what in hell his talk with Lisa had been about. "...I need to go shoot something, excuse me."

She blinked at his back as he peeled off from them and all but stalked down a side road that would
take him pretty far outside of Zolotov territory if he walked for about half an hour. It was the shortest way out from the damn near center of their territory. "...huh. I wonder what that is all about?"

"Maybe he's just moody?"

Sonya gave the brat a considering look as she pondered that. It was possible, Tatiana got into weird moods when she felt pent up so it stood to reason the hitman could have the very same ones on occasion.

Maybe that was why Renato was off to possibly murder a few unwary idiots?

Or find a girl to screw.

Hopefully he'd feel better after this little walk of his.

If when he came back and he was still moody, she'd ask what the hell he had been on about then.

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(Friday the 20th of June, 1969. Levoberezhny District, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"You missed a fair few things while indisposed, Gedeon."

The vor the Zolotov Pahkan was speaking to winced, then popped a finger bone back into position so it would heal straight. Primakova had been as good as her word, she had only ran her fellow Sun through how to Activate his own cellular regeneration once before leaving and not returning.

Gedeon had to figure out how to apply it, and he was still clumsy and slow with it. Yesterday hadn't helped, Sonya had re-broken everything he managed to heal up over the course of two nights since his ‘lecture’. 

Gallingly, he was getting faster with all the practice. He was pretty damn sure he would never get over wincing from the sickening crunch as bone splintered or snapped, but then again few people were as intimately familiar with the sensation of having their bones broken than him now.

"Where are we going?"

...he still sounded like someone crushed his larynx. Likely because someone had, and cartilage didn't heal up as fast as pure bone did. The Sun still hadn't touched his cuts or bruises, his bones had worried him a lot more than scars or how he looked.

There was the fact a Sun could possibly Activate themselves into the grave, but still no one seemed to want to acknowledge that as a possibility or give more than a second's thought that it might happen at all. Gedeon lived in half-fear that he was just about to start breaking down at a cellular level instead of healing and end up looking older than even his own father did.

Milos checked the progress outside the car window, inspecting the street corner they were coming upon. "I would like you to gain a bit of perspective on a little issue."

The badly abused Sun didn't question his father, this was a fairly frequent thing for the outlying operations that ran into small troubles or needed outside interference. Also, partially because talking was fairly painful still.

He hadn't been aware they had any operations so far outside of their territory, though.
"There was a... non-Mafiya set up around here. Human trafficking, kidnapping girls to sell out of country." The Pahkan informed him in a lecturing tone.

Gedeon had heard that tone _way_ too often lately.

"One night... about... three nights ago, they decided to go after this little bit of a blonde woman cutting through here to head up where one of our vory is situated making something of that block of territory in Khimki."

...blonde woman and Ziven. He had a feeling he knew exactly who was blonde and would go visit the man who had only been a _vor_ for about a year.

"...that, Gedeon, is what she did to them in revenge."

He glanced through the window his father was pointing out of, then whipped around fast enough to cause every broken or cracked rib to _twinge_ in sequence with pain.

There was still a thick cloud of smoke billowing off the ruined wreck of a once stately manor home. Most of the initial ground level was nothing more than a burned out skeleton, one tiny corner of the second level had miraculously escaped whatever fire had gotten into the building.

A kind of fence thing was still in place to ward off pedestrians and onlookers from getting too close, but the people who had either been working here to clean up or trying to water down what looked to be lingering embers in _concrete_ had been shooed off.

Just in case seeing it through bullet-proof glass wasn't enough, the car the two of them were in slowed as if they were to stop. Likely why the area was cleared of everyone.

Milos heaved a sigh at the ruins. "Young Miss Bazanova was most displeased, wouldn't you say? It was worse before the walls burned down, you could still see the holes and the splashes of blood where the poor idiots that got in her way were cut down."

"...how... is it... still burning?"

"...I have no idea. No one wants to ask Bazanova. The civilian emergency personnel have ruled it a chemical fire." Admitted the Pahkan flatly, reaching across the seat to knock on the separation between them and the driver. He got a fairly used newspaper in return from the _vor_ designated as their driver. "This is what it looked like two days ago."

Obviously a lot _less_ burned out in the picture, although in black and white it still told its own story. Gedeon merely glanced to the headline only for his eyes to catch there and felt his blood run cold.

139 or More Dead, 17 Kidnapping Victims Recovered!

"We have no more than twenty of those men who were just outside when all this went down." Milos added in helpfully after the silence stretched a bit long. "No one more important than a grunt."

"Or more?" Repeated the Sun weakly.

"Most of who was inside the building were rendered into pieces." The older man admitted dryly, then shrugged absentely as he thumped the driver's seat to get them moving again. "Some of those pieces burned up. The grand total will probably never be known to any but those in the house that night who survived. And there's only four of them who are all refusing to speak about it."

Gedeon paged through the newspaper a bit shakily, grimacing at the piked head he was only reading
about because apparently the image was deemed too obscene to print.

"If I were a lesser man, and not your father, I would tell you that you had better mend your bridges with young Miss Bazanova. However you can."

"...I-

"I highly doubt that's possible." Milos continued in a strictly disappointed tone. "Even if you can somehow convince the stubborn girl that she shouldn't take your head off for so much as speaking in her general direction, she's not stupid. She's also... not... staying."

Ripping the newspaper out of his hands, the Pahkan rolled it up and whacked his son upside the head with it.

"You've pissed off and alienated the best Dying Will Flame expert in all of Russia, Gedeon! If we can't somehow convince her to not join up with some other syndicate we'll have to try and kill her, and that ruin of a place might just be revisited on our own headquarters." Tossing the abused paper to the floor of the car, the much older man sighed heavily and leaned back against the leather seat. "And that has little bearing on what would happen afterwards if we are somehow successful, when vor Arseniy learns or finds out we had his youngest daughter killed. Or her little minions."

"...there's always Mafia Land hitmen." Gedeon gritted out, not really hurt by his father's actions but cringing anyways.

"That man in my office when you decided to finally rejoin us? Is Bazanova's best friend. An Italian hitman who works with her on that island." Milos ruthlessly shot his suggestion down without so much as missing a beat. "You try to post a hit on her ass, he'll find out. Mafia Land might let us take a hit out on one of their employees as long as we're the syndicate they originated from and still heed to, but they're given warning and a grace period of a day to try outrunning it. How much do you want to bet against him taking the contract and then just telling her who posted it?"

"That's against the rules."

"...and you think he'll care? It's a slap on the wrist, at most, so long as the one told can wipe out the originating syndicate in their grace period or die against them. After these past few days I would honestly give her the better odds on pulling it off than you somehow waiting her out."

He was not going to admit he was grasping at straws to keep his idea afloat. After a week of daily beatings, it was nearly the only thought that let him try again and again to heal himself so Sonya would just stop. "So, we take him out first."

The Pahkan palmed his face tiredly. "We can't do that, Gedeon. He's been here a week already, most in the clan knows who his best friend is, and the other godparent of that little brat nipping about her heels. There is no way we could go outside the clan and hire another hitman to take out some smart-ass from Italy without it still backfiring the moment they decide to gather up the trail and hear a bit of the gossip going around. It'll still get out, see the previous example for what will happen then. And again, Mafia Land wouldn't let us take one out on him because he's not ours."

"...well-"

"No, it's not going to work no matter how convoluted you try to get." Snapped the old man irritably. "You can't kill her, or her hitman friend protecting her from getting a hit taken out on her. Not without damn near gutting the clan in two."

"You just said we had to if she decided to join another syndicate!"
"Exactly!" Roared back the old man. "Which isn't feasible without shooting ourselves in the foot! And now, now Gedeon, we have to find some way to temper her disgust with you for patronizing the shit out of the little bitch!"

Said Sun cringed, the yelling not improving anything about how shitty he already felt or his frustrations with the situation in general.

"I have no fucking clue how you came to the conclusion to do that, nor why you keep overlooking her as someone minor. I have no desire to learn what stupidity infected you either. I told you to learn, and you decided to what? Audit her work? That you had no damn clue about?"

…put like that, disregarding a lot of the situation in general, it did sound bad. "She's not even twenty. Not a man. She's admitted herself she's not a good fit-"

"That doesn't make you better!" Milos snapped again, going rather worryingly red in the face. "Ill fit or not, she knew what the hell is going on. Predicted some of the trends so we didn't drown in those Flame users. Kicked a fucking trail through bedrock so those little ankle biters could follow in some kind of order. You promote or reassign those kinds of people in places they do fit, not try to marginalize them!"

Gritting his teeth, the Sun had to admit his old man had a point.

Said old man sighed again, rubbing tiredly at his face one more time. "So, she's pissed with you and likely not going to behave no matter what you try. Fine, all well and good. That's you and her, leaving the rest of her self-proclaimed family and someone else. Primakova's not bad looking, you could do worse for a wife."

…Gedeon was fairly certain that would only be a fast track to being murdered in cold blood. "Father, I do not think there's any way I can pull that off believably."

"The younger, idiot."

The nurse? "…Father…"

"…she hates your guts too, doesn't she?"

Given that cold as fuck look he got when she learned her sister was beating the hell out of him for reasons that weren't even given?

Tatiana was rather bloodthirsty for a healer. Not to mention that little lecture…

"I have reason to believe so, yes."

Milos pinched the bridge of his nose and turned more fully to actually face his son then merely be facing the same direction as they talked. "The expert and the damn to be doctor, perfect. The very green secretary girl, the Lightning Galina?"

"…she rather dislikes me after-"

"Fuck, boy. Can you do anything right when it comes to a woman?"

"Yes, just-"

"Not the ones with spine, apparently." The Pahkan of the Zolotov clan finished for him dryly. "Which leaves that little Rain bitch Zarya, who would only just compound your damn issues."
Well… if he wanted to be transparent about things… "Father, why are you suddenly trying to pair me off?"

"I'm-" Gedeon flinched as a sniper round suddenly punched through the space between the car's window panes, piercing through his father's upper chest and lodging into his own shoulder.

He lunged forward, wracking his mind for the lecture on healing another with a Sun's Activation he got not three days ago as he clamped a hand down on the hole in his father's body and willed the old man not to die on him now.

"DRIVE!" He barked to the vor behind the wheel, who floored it nearly a second before he managed to unglue his tongue from the roof of his mouth.
Chapter 61

(Friday the 20th of June, 1969 continued. Levoberezhny District, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Stop the car."

Gedeon jerked at the flat order, tightening his grip on his father's injury reflexively and nearly yanking his hands back when the older man groaned painfully. "Do not stop the fucking car!"

His father, their Pahkan, was not only shot but half a second from bleeding out and dying. Why the fuck would they-

"Asshole, listen to me. I'm a Mist, I can teleport us." Snarled the young woman with black hair suddenly somehow sitting in the passenger seat next to the vor driving them, he vaguely recognized her after the start of realizing someone that hadn't been there before was now glaring at him. "But I can't teleport a damn half-ton of speeding metal! We'll crash!"

Mist teleporting. Usov did that all the damn-

"Stop the car!"

The man driving hesitated, then slammed on the breaks. Mirror Lady Anna nearly bashed her head into the dashboard as she slid backwards while half-twisted around to see into the back seat, but she gripped the back of the passenger's seat just in time to only hit the hard plastic with a shoulder.

Gedeon himself had a hard time keeping his grip on his father's wound and not tumbling them both off the seat bench when their forward momentum suddenly cut off. Meaning they both slid a fair amount until both he and his father were nearly half-laying and half-crouched on the car's floor space.

The Mist girl slammed a hand into the dashboard she nearly head butted once the car swerved into a harsh rocking stop. Her Dying Will Flames rippled out from her fingers to consume all of them and the car in a near-blinding, gut-wrenching moment.

Then the indigo Flames vanished in the next second as if a strong gust of wind blew them out, and Gedeon only recognized the roof of the Zolotov clan's headquarters by pure chance before the rear passenger driver's side door was ripped off in a horrible screech of tearing metal and the shattering crack of reinforced glass.

Sonya ignored him, and his indignant shout for ripping away half the support he had been using to try and keep his old man's blood in him.

"Propagate his blood, I don't know how much he's lost so far." Ordered the professional Sun Flame nurse right behind her, her fingers already half-lit with glittering yellow Flames. "If you have to, stick a finger in the wound for the touch component you need. It'll work as a kind of pressure bandage for now."

The old vor grunted as after the blonde thief investigated his back to find the entrance wound she did exactly as her sister said. With the entrance would plugged up, and apparently a never-ending supply of blood to bleed out now, the Storm-Cloud carefully extracted their Pahkan with her only free arm under his shoulders.
Apparently to drag him into a less constrained and now glass covered environment for the nurse to validate the cost the clan had put into her picked profession.

"Gedeon." Coughed out the old man with a mouthful of blood, glaring over Primakova's shoulders as she ripped his dress shirt in order to see the exit wound and plant a hand with Sun Flames on top of it. "You and... Pyotr are in charge. Don't... run things into the ground... before I get back."

...his father wasn't going on vacation, he had been shot.

Although... even as he watched the old man's complexion lost the greyed-out tinge for a healthier flush, and his hawkish hazel eyes sharpened the longer things went on. Unlike when he had been merely containing things and the old man had bled even more despite his efforts.

Maybe his father would only be down for a few days instead of a month or two or more.

"Mist girl, I need blood transfusion equipment from the nearest hospital. Steal whoever or whatever you need to in order to get it." Tatiana shot backwards to the Flame user that had ensured the Pahkan had reached medical aid in time, then glanced to her sister over the old man's head. "Nya, I know you're a universal donor. Do you mind donating a pint?"

"If you want." Bazanova responded blandly, looking rather bored rather than alarmed that she personally was part of the reason their syndicate boss had yet to die of blood loss. "I could probably do all of it..."

"No, driver! Go be useful, find me more blood donors. Preferably those with O negative blood types like my sis, but if you can't then AB positives will do as well." Primakova turned back to her work, peering deep into the messy exit wound to ensure the under layers of flesh were knitting together as she wanted. "...and of course, the old man would have to be one of the rarer types..."

Gedeon stiffened up even as the man scrambled after the Mirror Lady's own more pyrotechnic exit a few seconds ago, because if anyone was going to donate blood to keep his father alive it would be him. "I'm AB positive-"

"You're bleeding, dipshit. You're also injured, you don't get to lose any more than you already are." Tatiana snarled at him, her Flames flaring with her temper and causing the Pahkan's suit jacket to start smoldering. "Sit there and wait for your father to get stabilized."

He looked down at himself, having forgotten about the bullet in his shoulder. He was a Sun, and after healing his bones for the last couple days surely a flesh wound wouldn't be that hard.

"DON'T! And Nya, stop Propagating." A pebble bounced off his forehead hard, as the nurse turned from the now sealed bullet hole in the Pahkan's chest to collect the hospital supplies Mirror Lady Anna had flashed into existence at her side. "The bullet is still in your shoulder, you heal it up and I'll have to send you to Mafia Land for surgery to extract it. I should anyways, but as long as I can pull it all out you won't have to."

Gedeon narrowed his eyes at the women. "How the fuck do you know all this? Not the medical shit, what happened?"

"...you really are rather dense, I honestly shouldn't be surprised anymore." Sonya answered instead of the nurse now poking a hole into her arm in order to drain some of her own blood to replace the fake Flame blood she was supplying his father. "The Mirror Lady was assigned to keep an eye on you if you needed anything, like how Usov keeps tabs on me. How else do you think we were assembled on short notice and she reached you all in seconds? She told us."
The woman glanced down to the now dark red tubing stuck in her arm, draining away into a clear plastic bag hooked up to catch it.

"Tats… should it feel hot?"

"You have a higher than normal body temp by simply being a Storm. Even then, your internal body temperature is higher than you are at skin level." Carefully manipulating the filling bag as it slowly pulsed fuller with every beat of the Storm-Cloud's steady heart, Tatiana bit her lip and eyed the amount already splattered all over the man and the car's interior. "…a pint and a half, Nya, if another donor doesn't get out here in time for this to fill. Eat something heavy and sweet after this."

"Sure."

Old man Zolotov coughed again, this time without more blood to add to what was already staining his mouth and ruined shirt. With a sniff, and an equally as bored look as the woman plugging the entrance wound in his back, he eyed the bowed red head of his Sun nurse who was studying the collection of medical equipment she had to work with. "…I think it punctured a lung, Primakova."

"You did, sir. I'll heal it up once Nya's Flames are no longer the reason you're not dead from blood loss."

He craned his head around to lock eyes with the woman keeping him alive. "…my thanks."

"…don't mention it." Deadpanned the Storm-Cloud supporting him in a half-reclined position.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 20th of June, 1969 continued. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya rubbed fingers sticky with drying blood together idly, sitting with her slightly overstrained sister as they idly watched their entire clan turn out like kicked ants to either pull apart the car their Pahkan had been shot in or go hunting for whoever did it.

"-fuck that royally. Nya just gave up a decent percentage of her total blood volume for the Pahkan, and Gedeon needs sugar to combat the fucking shock and his own blood loss. Sugar, meat, liquids, and a lot of it." Tatiana viciously snapped at whichever poor mook was quailing slightly in the face of her impatience. "I don't care where it comes from, get it now."

"…ah, steak? And cake. Some milk, maybe." She tacked on absently, getting a desperately thankful look from the man who had merely asked for what was specifically needed or if what they had in the cantina would suffice. "I want chocolate cake, if you can find it."

The Mirror Lady gestured in the far distance with her Mist Flames making a ring around one clearly marked area, taking herself and a number of vory with her to the spot she had witnessed the shooting go down.

In a very eye-catching blaze of indigo Flames situated in the middle of a street strangely devoid of civilian traffic.

Sonya puzzled over who might be ensuring all the activity wasn't overly obvious to just anyone watching the outside street of the Zolotov clan's headquarters. Usov she knew was off distracting Shamal somewhere else, she specifically told him to the moment Anna sounded a warning.

Likely one of the more senior Mists got dragooned to help, they just weren't as sociable as the other
two tended to be with her.

…or scared shitless of her. That was still a thing too.

She looked down to judge the rate their Pahkan was taking in blood, and if they had to switch yet to last bag of red liquid donated for his survival.

Milos looked incredibly vexed and irritably resigned to what was going on as he laid at her very fancy booted feet, within reach of the Sun nurse if there was any sudden turn to the worse. "...do you have a cigarette, Bazanova?"

"Yes sir." Ignoring her sister's offended squawk, she dug out the pack from her pocket she was steadily working through on the sly and lit it for him with her Storm Flames before handing it down. "Unfortunately, I think Tats will murder us both if I left to find you some alcohol."

"...yes, yes I will. Stop giving my patient things that are unhealthy."

"Vodka's a liquid." Mentioned old man Zolotov idly, inhaling a long pull from the cigarette before the nurse could reach over and snatch it away from him.

"It's a blood-thinner, you don't have enough blood to thin." Snapped the Sun Flame user, then she blinked and gave the burning tube of tobacco in her hand a rather disgusted look. "...sir. And you just had a punctured lung, why are you smoking?"

"Because it's relaxing." Milos countered with the air who had heard the argument way too many times before and was just replying by rote. "...I knew, in my head, having a professional nurse or doctor was a good thing..."

"But it's always slightly different in reality. I know sir." Sonya finished for the man with a commiserating nod, plucking the cigarette out of the air when her sister turned back to what she was doing and flicked it away to discard it.

Holding the smoke behind her back, she waited until yet another vor came around to ask in various tones of pissed off why the Pahkan had yet to be moved to a more secure location to return it to the old man.

He got a couple more puffs before Tatiana noticed and took it away from him again. Pointedly snubbing it out and ripping it into shreds before discarding it again.

"...damn."

"I believe you have better things to be doing than harass the women responsible for our Pahkan's continued survival." Pyotr observed in an utterly disproving tone to the vor looking first pissed off at being ignored and then pale as he realized who was behind him. "Be gone. Girls?"

"Gedeon's more or less stable but report any lightheadedness or dizzy spells the moment they happen. Also watch for illness and any fevers developing, might be symptoms of poison." Tatiana announced to the Sovintnik, jerking a thumb behind the sisters where the Sun in question was sat up against a wall and glowering down at the freshly healed up bullet wound in his shoulder. He had his own package of blood draining into his veins as well, just not a personal attendant for it. "The Pahkan has a few more moments before I'll feel safe in moving him, I want him to at least be on the last bag before we get him inside and risk tearing anything new and fragile in the process."

"...I take it that's why you've not let me wander off yet." Sonya more stated than asked, because she didn't even feel anything from losing a pint and a half of blood.
Unless it was due to the fact she was acting as a living IV stand, but she kind of doubted that.

The Sun shoved a hand through her unraveling braid in order to run rusty blood streaked fingers through the already blood colored strands. "Pretty much, you’re on Cloud nurse standby to Propagate blood again if need be. Speaking of, you ever find another Cloud with the right temperament… I will murder for getting the first opportunity to poach them."

"Noted."

Did Cherep count?

Pyotr gave them both a sharp nod, exchanged meaningful looks with the Pahkan, then left them to it as he focused on something he could contribute. Mostly ensuring there was some kind of order to the seething mass of unhappy Zolotovs boiling over their front yard.

"…thank you."

Sonya frowned, glancing back to the Sun she supposed she wouldn't be getting the opportunity to beat the fuck out of today. "Don't thank me, Gedeon. If he dies, you're the Pahkan. And to be honest, I'd rather not deal with that at all."

He cut her a dark look but dropped it a moment later to study his father's completely bland features. "…that's my father, Bazanova."

His Arseniy. Well, she supposed she could then understand the offer of thanks in that light.

"You're welcome." Tatiana tossed back blandly for the both of them when she didn't respond. "But… you know… this is both what I am training for and what Nya needs to prove to the clan that Flame users are a lot more useful than just as fucking eye candy."

"He's an idiot sometimes." Milos helpfully offered up to the sisters in a desert dry tone. "It'll just be for a few days."

"A week at least." Interrupted the nurse stridently. "…sir. You're really old, and this isn't a sterile operating room. A week of observation and a light workload, if any at all."

The Storm-Cloud eyed the old man warily, absently handing off the nearly drained bag of blood to her sister so it could be switched for the last full one. "…I am still hosting my brat's summer vacation. I'm on vacation with minimal oversight. I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I'm sure." Old man Zolotov observed wryly, then glanced to his nurse. "And isn't that kind of an overreaction, Primakova? I'm fine."

"You were just shot, like hell you're fine!" Tatiana glowered down at the man herself as she finished hooking the new bag into the drip to pass back. "…sir."

She sounded completely sincere with that 'sir' too. Sonya really did wonder how the fuck she managed that one.

Maybe it was a nurse thing.

The next vor that came over to investigate why they had yet to move the Pahkan or his son inside was bullied in short order by Tatiana to fetch or make a stretcher. In still polite tones that also questioned why it wasn't done already and what kind of intelligence the man had at the same time.
...definitely a nurse thing.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 20th of June, 1969 continued. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Renato cocked an eyebrow as Sonya finished recounting why it was he got the brat dumped on him instead of her at the end of his day learning Soviet Mist tricks. "...so?"

"The Pahkan's still alive, well enough to be basically giving orders from a sick bed. He's driving Tats up a wall or three with 'unhealthy' habits in her sick room and not really paying a whole lot of attention to her orders to take it easy." The thief explained, squeezing her hair with a towel in hopes of checking to ensure she had no more blood in it. "He's very intent on running himself into the ground health-wise, according to Tats."

Scratching one's head or moving bangs back out of your face was kind of a disgusting act when you used your fingers to basically plug a hole in a human body. With her pale ash blonde hair, it stood out even worse than blood on Tatiana's fiery red.

This was her second shower of the day, after she got to her hotel room and Shamal curiously asked why she had tomato sauce in her hair. She had blamed a failed cooking lesson with her mother, but at least this time she could use her own damn soaps.

It was depressing how easily the Mist brat had accepted the bullshitted excuse.

"You're also very damn lucky you're not a Mist. Once someone asked if since we required a Mist to get our people out of there in time, would it mean there was possibly another involved?" She continued, checking the light tan fabric for any suspicious red tints. "There was a bit of 'lynch the foreigners' thing going on, which Pyotr basically spiked the wheels of by asking in various tones of pissed off how exactly that could even be possible given we have most of them watched. If it was a Mist, it wasn't one near or in the clan since we know where all of those were."

"...and I stalked off on you."

"And you wandered off without so much as a word, yes." Agreed Sonya flatly. "But then again, Sun or not this apparently took place that when I named what time and at which street you left me at you were pretty much ruled out."

"Ho? Well... the brat isn't?"

She glanced to the kid, who was probably eavesdropping instead of actually read the book open on his lap. "I had Usov with him the entire time, and the only moron to say anything along those lines retracted it very fucking fast when I stabbed him in the leg with an ax."

...alright, Sonya might have sort of amputated instead of just 'stabbed'. Tatiana had not been amused to be called down to reattach a leg after getting their Pahkan finally situated in Pyotr's usual rooms for his recovery.

Renato snickered, tilting the dining chair he was seated upon back on two legs in order to stretch out his longer frame without moving to the couch or getting up like a normal person. "So... ensure my time can be accountable? Easy enough, for the moment. I'm still working through various bars and the gossipy, but I'll keep an ear out for something like this if you'd like."

She repressed the desire to snap one of those legs and see him tumble out.
"If you're feeling bored or restless again I'm sure we could go in another direction and murder some other syndicate, little lady Sonya." Offered the hitman wickedly, leaning back even farther to smirk up at her for once. "Or we could do a bit of hunting ourselves and see if we can catch a sniper."

"I have better things to do." Dismissed the thief, flatly ignoring his chuckle. She discarded the towel on the back of the couch for the moment to see what her brat was trying to hide his eavesdropping behind.

Shamal was delighted to share a book with her. Apparently, it was the hitman's suggestion to learn the difference between imagination and Mist Flames by picturing the events and scenery in his head without making it come to life using his Flames.

Sonya still had to shoo a collection of wolves basking on her floor in order to get to the kid, so slow progress there.

(Saturday the 21st of June, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"I don't care we call them 'soft drinks', BEER is still ALCOHOL and you're NOT giving that to MY patient!"

Galina softly shut the office door, smirking faintly. "Well... she sounds happy."

Sonya snorted, nose buried in a book she had ordered in her sketchbook while seated at her desk.

Activating an entire wing of lizard mounted dog-creatures to start a flanking charge, Scruffy tried his best to not pay attention to the muffled shouting going on by the Sun nurse. Shamal was way too into calculating his next move, dithering a little between his sea kraken 'tank' and some kind of wet-bog monster that was apparently his 'theme's' general piece.

The little 'better than chess' battles were getting more and more intricate the longer they played, and Peter would admit the fact the kid he was playing against had no poker face was a direly needed tool in his arsenal in keeping the win-loss ratio in his favor.

It wasn't that he wasn't good at the game, he'd be a very pathetic adult indeed if that was the case, or that the kid didn't conceal what he was thinking decently enough. It was just Shamal couldn't keep the mischief off his face when he tried non-preplanned cheating.

He'd grin a secretive little smirk of glee when he had an idea to try working around the rules already established before each 'play'. Even with such Scruffy had to stay on his toes to try countering whatever it was before the kid could bat childishly innocent eyes and gloss it all over.

Of course, that still left him open to pre-planned cheating.

Which not even the kid's mamma was very sympathetic about him stumbling on or into.

Scruffy just sighed when the kraken ate half of his lizard mounted kobold riders, because at least the rest of the wing did manage to kill the nasty thing.

Next time, he would be getting the tentacle menaces to play with.

…actually, the kid had a general theme preference for lizards and sea creatures. Almost all of his
armies had some sort of leviathan creature as the tank at least. Maybe he should start plotting for how to take advantage of that.

The office door the Lightning had shut barreled open again with a bang, and Gedeon shut it hastily again in order to plant his back up against it. The vor blinked a few times when he realized which office he ended up in. "...I thought this one was empty?"

"The one next door is empty. As is the one across from us." Sonya announced flatly without so much as looking up to see who it was. "...are you running from my sister?"

"No." Gedeon straightened up jerkily, tugging a vest and dress shirt combo Peter had never seen on him before back into place with overly complicated motions. "I had an inquiry, Bazanova."

The Storm-Cloud blinked slowly at him once she looked up.

Galina coughed after the silence dragged on long enough to make the watchers feel awkward.

"...Gedeon. I'm not a mind reader."

"The Vindice. An attack on my-our Pahkan is an act of war, yes? Would they?"

"Can you prove who did it and they had the expressed permission of the syndicate they belonged to?" Interrupted the blonde thief flatly before he could finish. "Without the sniper to present as proof of such, we're not going to be able to request the Vindice to interfere. Even if I knew how to get in touch with them in the first place."

Gedeon then said a couple things that had Scruffy lunging across the fantasy board full of Constructed villages and castles to clap his hands over a very startled Shamal's ears.

"I swear worse than that, Scruffy. So, does Renato. The brat knows better to repeat it until he's at least twelve."

"Or until I kill someone." Said brat confirmed happily, giving the older Sun a weird look for the actions of trying to preserve his child-ears in a room full of shameless criminals. "Come on, McScruffy! It's your turn."

"I take it we have yet to find the sniper, then." Sonya looked back at the other Sun in the office blandly, inspecting his expression.

Peter went back to poking Mist Flame Constructions around the slightly squished game board, as acts of 'god' were allowed that changed the field as long as they weren't intentionally caused. He did now at least have a very shoddy bridge over a river to guide an entire archer's wing through to assault Shamal's eastern flank of fish people.

Mediterranean or Slavic mermaids?

Hmm... he should figure that one out later.

...also, was it bad he wasn't even surprised the kid across from him probably knew how to swear like a sailor?

"...no." Gedeon confirmed sourly after a long pause. "Unfortunately, the Mirror Lady was too focused on the Pahkan and getting him back here to care much of who shot him. And by the time we got very back out there whoever it was had more than enough time to hoof it."
"We don't actually have more decently trained Mists available for gory things, and frankly I'd really rather not drag Usov into things more than I already have."

Shamal revealed he had been hiding a whale as a lumpy hill of sand, who then flattened Scruffy's entire wing of archers in one move. The Sun scowled as he lost his best positioned units and turned his attention to countering the wave of fish-sticks trying to pincer his hyena-headed barbarians.

…they were fish with sticks for legs, not tasty sticks made up of breaded and fried fish. Though he wouldn't put it past his child-aged opponent to have based those units off the food.

"That was not criticism, Bazanova. I… appreciate you tagged the Mirror Lady to keep tabs on me."

"I? I did nothing in respects to that. You have Anna herself to thank. She's the one that decided to keep some kind of eye on you, since you scorned actually making a contact or two to watch your own back. The Mists were doing it for practice of tailing suspects via Mist Flames. Lucky you."

There wasn't actually any space on the Constructed table to drum fingers, but the underside worked since there was space for child Mist knees. Until various more fragile things, by perspective alone, on top of it started vibrating.

Peter pursed his lips instead, studying the maneuver Shamal was coaxing his fish-sticks into. His kobold barbarians were doing just fine defending themselves, and really they only had to survive for…

"Checkmate." Scruffy announced when his little rat dog scout managed to knife the kid's king figure, a fish man that had scales all over but stood as a man would.

Natural armor or not, the dog did manage to dig the knife in deep enough it triggered the 'endgame' dramatic death of the king.

The Mist kid twitched in outrage, huffing as he realized he had been allowed to draw the more obviously 'beefy' units into a brawl to allow a suicidal ranger unit to make a final attempt to end the game.

"No fair, McScruffy."

"You cheated with that whale thing, it wasn't declared as a unit at the start of the round. If you can't both cheat and win then what's the point?"

"Practice." Announced the brat snottily, waving a hand to rearrange the board again. This time less 'rural village' and more 'industrial-age city' for a map.

Peter stretched out his back, feeling it crack rather disturbingly as a few discs popped back into alignment after so long bent over a table. Blinking as he realized things were rather silent now, he glanced to the head of the Zolotov Flame user's division and the substitute mob boss.

Sonya had the mother of all 'drop dead' looks he had ever seen on her face. Gedeon looked fairly frustrated but then again, he was kind of in a temporary position of power over the woman that had been beating the fuck out of him… and also just recently saved his father's life.

Awkward was pretty much the by-word over there. At least on the vor's side, it didn't seem as if the Storm-Cloud gave much of a fuck about how strange life had become.

Surprisingly, Galina had decided to study the ongoing game between the Mist kid of their underboss and the Sun office gopher guy. She was standing slightly behind Scruffy's shoulders and to the left,
right now eyeing the detail Shamal had put into his cityscape.

She gave him a flatly challenging stare-down, so the Sun merely turned back to his game partner. "No lessons today, Shamal?"

"Mmm… mamma said things were a bit too jumpy for it today. Tomorrow though." The kid seemed entirely unbothered to match his matter of fact tone and looked perfectly content to waste a day playing games against a man probably a quarter of a century older than him.

His goals for this had rather sharply changed over the last few days, but Peter didn't mind keeping up with this little game thing going on even after he had managed to secure a more stable position for himself. Shamal was a smart assed kid who was the joint ward of what seemed to be two highly intelligent people, he had some surprisingly deep insights into said people.

Although not sure when or where he'd ever put those tidbits about 'Mister Renato' to use, the bits about 'mamma' and her nature through the eyes of a six-year-old brat she mothered were probably damn useful.

"Gedeon, do you have anything else to do but stand there like an idiot?"

Tip number one that Shamal had passed to Scruffy in a completely dead serious tone was 'mamma has limited patience with stupid things, you lose it once before she decides to like you and you'll never get it back'.

…or, as he was going to take that to mean, everyone was pretty much on their one and only chance to impress her and if you botched it… well, it sucked to be you.

Tip two was 'it takes anywhere from a few months to a few years for mamma to decide to like someone'.

Scruffy was a bit paranoid over that one, as he was probably in that zone of decision. Did the kid mean a month of time as acquaintances, or a month of time interacting with her total?

He was pretty sure the fact he now had a stipend to live off of said he was at least thought of better than the people the Storm-Cloud reliably failed to recall the names of, but was it enough to ensure his patron thought better of him personally than she only just considered his work?

The office door shut again, which told Peter he either missed the last exchange being worried or nothing had been said and the vor had merely left.

Galina merely left her spot behind him, returning to sort out the day-to-day busywork while Sonya re-buried her nose in her book again.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Peter turned back to the expectantly waiting Shamal. "…spiders for me, I think. Main theme of rogues."

The Mist kid clucked his tongue, then got busy Constructing the next round's players using the requests theme the older man had picked and his own.

Which the little brat had adjusted to take on a group of spider-like humanoids, because of course he would.

Part of the reason Scruffy's win-loss ratio wasn't better, the kid had to supply all the units and could subtly sabotage or make his own a kind of natural predator for what the Sun picked.
Working against that sometimes just didn't work.

Like the round when he had picked a group of mice monks and Shamal gave himself cat ninjas.

Scruffy had been looking over what he was given, for he couldn't ask for adjustment mid-game without tipping his hands about his possible plans, when the door cracked open again.

That was so unusual that everyone in the office looked up to see what it was now.

They rarely had more than one or two visits a day, and it was mostly Sonya's various family members if it wasn't Gedeon or Galina coming or going. Excluding Italian hitmen who attracted more than their fair share of attention by loitering around.

The kid, older than Shamal but much younger than even the blonde Storm-Cloud herself, flinched back and nearly shut the office door again when he realized he was the center of everyone's attention.

"...I have a small errand to run, excuse me Sonya." Announced the Lightning after a moment to process the rare visit by what was possibly one of their Dying Will Flame user trainees. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Alright." Obviously not really understanding of why but willing to follow the other woman's lead, the thief slowly returned her attention to the book explaining various ancient armor sets and how they were made. "Scruffy, start critiquing Shamal's maneuvers and explaining how you countered or how you tried to and how well it all worked overall."

"Sure." The man had to grin at the sudden pout on the kid's face, wracking his mind on how to fulfil that order without 'tainting' their little games with 'education' overtones like Shamal apparently didn't want.

When the Lightning blew out of the office like a well-dressed breeze, the kid who came to visit for whatever reason snuck in before the office door closed. Peter kept half his attention on him, and half directing his multi-limbed spider people into a decently spread out network of office buildings and one centralized café-looking building.

"...Bazanova?"

"Yes." Sonya's book closed, and the woman herself looked up again.

Shamal gave a startled and highly offended yelp that rooted Peter's attention to him, their game board and units winking out of existence in favor of wrapping the newcomer in enough Constructed thick rope the other kid could barely wiggle.

Which left him in a suspended position and an arm raised trying to jab an odd knife into the Storm-Cloud's head. Sonya plucked the knife out of his hand to inspect, eyeing the blue chips embedded in what looked to be a melted glass blade.

Scruffy sucked majorly in keeping an eye on more than one thing at a time.

"...sapphires chips embedded in... recycled glass. That's not... half bad, really. Explosive... but maybe that was the point."

Peter stared at her hard. "Boss lady, shouldn't you be more concerned that someone just tried to kill you?"
"…meh. It wasn't a very good attempt." She glanced up to the now highly miserable and angry kid. "You have to be a Flame user. One of our own if you weren't tailed up here. So explain, now, or this is going to be stuck into your neck."

Said kid started to say something, fumed for a long moment with his mouth open, then tried to use wavering blue Flames to wiggle out of Shamal's grip.

"I can't solve whatever the fuck it is if you do not tell me." Sonya informed the Rain kid shortly.

Said kid muttered something the Sun sitting halfway across the office couldn't hear.

The thief pursed her lips, studying the brat caught in her own brat's Flames. "…Shamal, put him down. And stay with Scruffy until either I get back or Renato comes to pick you up. Scruffy, as far as you know I left with the kid right after Galina."

"Ah… sure?"

"Usov!" Snapped the woman once he agreed, tucking the makeshift Rain knife into a desk drawer and getting to her feet.

The responding Mist wasn't cheerful or as playful seeming as he was usually, a lot more serious than Scruffy was actually comfortable with seeing the preteen."You called, Sonya?"

"I have an example to make of a few morons that thought kidnapping someone's family would motivate my would-be murderer, and I need transport out of here to prevent rumors until I can do something about it. Drop us off outside the Rain bar, please."


(Saturday the 21st of June, 1969 continued. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Again?"

"…I wonder if we should be concerned Sonya decided on staking heads out on pikes is her favorite way to show she's irritated with something." Arseniy mused, instead of panic or shout, or get angry, as it seemed the vor who had decided to break the news to them had expected.

Lisa merely puzzled over it for a moment more herself. "I don't know, it's a great way to point out it was her and not some other person. And now they're not only dealing with the embarrassment that everyone knows they failed miserably moving against her, but also a police investigation since her new calling card was repeated."

Her lover snorted, turning back to eye the younger man who had brought the news to them. "The Kozlov Brotherhood, right? Didn't they also try something earlier this year?"

"They tried to shoot Sonya, I think."

When the Vindice showed up and reminded everyone they were the thing that went bump in the night. She was pretty certain that was the name of the group that already attempted something unwise.

Arseniy merely grunted, turning back to eating his dinner. "It better not happen again."

Lisa gave the young vor who had delivered the message a tight little smirk. "Was there anything
I thought you were horrible at history." Tatiana complained absently, munching on a slice taken from the half a chocolate cake her sister had left over from the 'save the Pahkan' efforts.

"I became interested when I failed to grasp a lot of things only reading textbooks."

Sonya glanced, again, at the door as if it would spill out her Italian stud and her little brat. Then she sighed and sank a little more into the couch in order to whittle away the hours until they were back.

The nurse could understand her sister wasn't happy she was being left behind for the gun range lessons because it wasn't yet a certainty that Shamal wouldn't startle her again, but seriously.

She was here and trying to distract the woman from her woes. The blonde could at least pay her some more attention.

With another heavy sigh, the younger Russian shut her book and set it delicately down on her already overstocked coffee table. "Why ask, Tats?"

…of course her sister would continue the conversation right after she stuck another forkful of sinfully good cake in her mouth. Waving her fork to buy her a moment, the nurse washed down her bite with a sip of milk.

"Staking people's heads out on pikes? That's… old school, sis. Old Testament kind of thing even."

"…Tatiana, are you Christian?"

"Nope, but a lot of the criminals I get as patients are. And we, nurses I mean, have to know the few holy men on Mafia Land for last rites and other such things." A lot of those long-term patients also tended to talk about something as safe as religion, rather than what got them put in the hospital at all or their usually more fascinating lives. "Klavdia, that Sun girl you sent us? She's really into the tortures and punishments spoken of in them. Finding her Russian translations are a bitch and a half."

Sonya pulled a slightly disgusted face. "…I think there might be something very wrong with her head."

"Of course there is, but as long as she can manage herself who cares?" Tatiana waved her fork again, with an added little jab at the end to point at her sister. "But back to topic, is there any reason why you picked 'pike their heads on the lawn' as... huh..."

"I believe you said that we were not nearly as feared because we didn't do just that." Pointed out the younger thief blandly, stealing her sister's fork and a bite of her cake while the nurse adjusted to the thought she had influenced this particular new tick of hers.

The little sneak.

First their father, and now her. The redhead snickered as she slotted the reasons for this development away. "Aww... love you too sis."
"Is that why you're here and not with the Pahkan?" She questioned her dryly, as she and about half the clan already knew the nurse was of the opinion their boss was a stubborn, hard-headed idiot a step or two away from dying from a stroke or a heart attack.

"Clots are a very real side-effect of receiving blood transfusions, especially if someone wasn't what they said they were. I really am only sure your blood was of a type to not cause it and you could only give so much at a time." Given the number of times she and Doctor Kappel had been over the Storm-Cloud's medical record in the last year alone, Tatiana was more than sure her sister was that 'universal donor' type of O negative. "Speaking of… exactly when did you become sure you can Propagate blood?"

"…Cherep's initial ability is Propagating himself when injured." Sonya admitted bitterly, drawing her knees up and hugging them. "It's really how he's survived before we met, and why he's not even remotely bothering with planning for the long-term recovery for a nasty spill. Cherep doesn't remain injured long enough to bother with it. He's functionally immortal."

The Sun nurse stopped dead cold, forkful of tasty cake halfway to her mouth.

"We've taught each other our initial ability, and I've tried his 'Cloud replicated flesh' trick on my own injuries once. It hurts, Tats."

…this had suddenly become as depressing as fuck, and also she was going to whack their brother upside the head for not telling the fucking nurse about his medical issues before their little sister could.

"He's going to be up here in what, a few more days?" Tatiana intended to have this out in the living room of Lisa's place.

Their dorky brother was probably not going to appreciate it, and neither would Sonya probably, but she was pretty sure their parents would like to know and be able to fuss and worry.

…well, more their mother than Arseniy. He'd probably just grunt and hand their brother a commiserating bottle of booze for the argument of why the fuck didn't you tell us and medical checks are not optional no matter what freaky Cloud voodoo you've got.

After getting a hug because that was fucking wretched. The Sun really did just want to wince as she recalled the half-forgotten memory of his first medical checkup with them in Mafia Land, and how pissed the doctor had been over the results.

Enough to go toe to toe with their foster father about it.

Cherep didn't deserve that, he was a dork and theirs, and she would very much like to know which wiseass decided to try murdering their brother for that to be found out.

"Last time he called, Scruffy had to answer as I was out of the office, his friend is better and he's finally rearranging his traveling schedule to visit." Sonya admitted in a less tired or sad tone, completely oblivious to Tatiana's less appreciative thoughts. "He'll be up here in a few more days."

The nurse sucked the chocolate off the tines of her fork for a moment. "…perfect. Tell him I want to talk to him at the parent's house when he gets up here… actually? Where is he going to bunk down?"

She shrugged absently and waved a hand around the suite. "Here? I mean, Shamal and I can deal with another body, or move and invade Renato's, or there's the couch still. Lisa might also not mind putting him up for a week or however long he's taken from the circus. Renato's also leaving at the
Tatiana hummed… then actually processed that comment and what said sleeping arrangements would look like. She ended up gagging on her cake in surprise, spluttering the gooey mess back out onto the plate she was eating it off of. "...w-wait. WHAT?"

Sonya eyed her warily. "...what?"

"You're… no, wait."

Lisa had been disproving for pressuring her little sister into things she didn't want, but there was nothing said about gathering gossip to bring back as proof something was going on.

Satisfied with her reasoning, she looked squarely at her little sister. "You don't… no, again. Urg. Okay… why would you jump in tall, dark, and snarky's bed? Aside the 'making room thing', are you sure you're alright with that?"

Looking highly suspicious of her rather disjointed false start to the question, the blonde frowned first before answering a few seconds later. "...why wouldn't I be? Renato's not as grabby as Shamal, and since the brat's small still it's not as suffocating as when you or Cherep like to smother me."

They would revisit that 'smothering' thing later… but… the only way Sonya could know how 'grabby' her Italian stud was, was if this wasn't merely a suggestion and actually happened once before. Her sister was also alright with sleeping next to Renato.

Tatiana bit her tongue to hold back an entirely childish squeal of approval and glee.

However, brat and Cherep. Shamal was practically a living cock-block just by existing, and she was pretty sure their dork of a brother would not like that suggestion and opt to 'take' that open spot in Sonya's bed if there was any overlap.

Pure logic, he didn't really like criminal things and loved their sister… so he'd probably really not like the prospect of one day calling a hitman 'brother-in-law'.

Still… ouch, poor man. In hindsight, she was really impressed tall, dark, and snarky had suffered through living in close quarters with a woman that had no body modesty and that he was attracted to without doing any 'pressuring' of his own.

Renato really was quite the gentleman, nice to know he did deserve every bit of that reputation in more ways than one.

He also had to be suffering through the biggest case of blue-balls in his life, though. Especially for how often he normally went through women, according to the rumor mill on Mafia Land.

"You know… Cherep and I are probably equally willing to babysit if you and tall, dark, and snarky want to actually do something in the evenings than entertain Shamal." Tatiana suggested, only half so the man could actually do something about this. Not really enough to actually pressure someone as stubborn as her sister into anything, but at least enough privacy to at least talk about it. "Go catch a play or see the ballet. Both of which one doesn't really take young children to since it usually ends well past their bedtimes. Go sightseeing or something."

"...I'll mention something to Renato, about maybe seeing a play or something without the brat, but he is here on business and not just for Shamal."

Hmm… alarming. Who would send business outside of the Iron Curtain?
There really weren't very many Soviet States that were represented in Mafia Land.

"Do you know what he's looking for?"

"...in this part of it, yes. Soviet Clouds, which is interesting enough I gave it to Galina and Usov to see what they could find. I think they're currently hunting down rumors in Siberia, however it is they arranged for that to be handled."

"...like, say, you?"

Sonya shook her head. "Older than me."

"And that doesn't bother you?" Tatiana questioned curiously, derailed off the subject of bed-partners but vowing to somehow go back to that and get the details. Because… damn, why the hell was her sister still a virgin? "That he's hunting Clouds."

"...Renato's a hitman. I will not interfere with his work. He's also mainly looking for those that have left the Soviet Union, so... no. They're not here to help me with anything, so I will not block him from finding any."

…ruthless. Then again, her sister was never really the nicest person on the block.

The nurse double checked the time, ensuring she didn't have to go back to headquarters to check on the Pahkan again. Old man Milos was not a gracious patient, and if she didn't hound the man he'd sneak work to try to keep on top of things that he had shoved Gedeon to manage until his return.

There were also any side effects from the transfusions and the whole being shot thing she was watching for, but the risks decreased the longer things went on and no symptoms became apparent.

Before she could decide if she had the time for a little more heart-to-heart with her little sister, the lock of Sonya's apartment suite turned over and the door opened to spill a happy Shamal inside.

"Mamma! Mister Renato said you can join us now. Hi, zia! Ooh, cake."

Smiling wryly, Tatiana let the little brat abscond with the half of the cake slice she hadn't finished while also climbing into her sister's lap for cuddles.

Sinclair ambled in more sedately, tossing his hat onto a coat rack the nurse was pretty sure she hadn't noticed on her way in. It also was brand new.

…huh.

She needed to brush up on her more crooked skills, and also when did her sister start conforming for the hitman?

"Tatiana." Said Italian stud greeted her neutrally, eyeing Shamal's steady demolishing of cake sternly until the kid slowed down and stopped getting it everywhere.

Sonya absently brushed chocolate cake crumbs off her now crossed legs. "Tats has volunteered to babysit if you'd like to catch a play or go see the ballet with me, Renato."

"Ho?"

"...aww, can't I go too?"

"We can do better things, baby. Like cram you full of sugar and stay up really late." Tatiana ignored
the dual ugly looks she earned for that, grinning at her nephew. "Instead of watch some boring actors prance about a stage or a bunch of people in silly costumes flail all over it."

"...I am suddenly not that interested in seeing what culture Russia has."

"Tatiana is just someone that doesn't greatly appreciate the finer things in life." Sonya dismissed with a sooty sniff after a bland moment of glaring at her sister. "I can assure you that she's grossly underestimating the Russian Ballet and the quality of plays we have."

"Philistine." Tacked on Renato equally as snootily, sprawling out between the sisters and putting both arms behind them on the back of the couch. "What's on tap, so to say?"

"I don't yet know... I should go find out if there's any major production going on." Nibbling on her lower lip, the thief set her chin on Shamal's head as he polished off the nurse's cake. "I should... also probably go arrange a few classes or at least some time on the trapeze at the circus' college."

"...I am fairly certain I misheard you." The hitman spoke slowly, looking fairly confused. "A... circus college?"

"Technically," Tatiana insisted with a faked-snootily air of her own, "it's the Lunacharsky State Institute for Theatre Arts. They just happen to be more famous outside of the city for being the place Russian circuses go to brush up on their skills or teach others."

"There's not even a circus department, Tats." Sonya corrected absently. "It's really just more a place former or current circus performers can go to reserve time on the actual props found within a circus. And recruit or teach other circus performers, but still."

"...I have got to see this." Tall, dark, and snarky made an abortive move for his hat but after a half moment of hesitation he raked a hand through his spiky hair instead. "Theater Arts, hmm?"

"Why not take tomorrow off, Nya?" Suggested the nurse idly, taking the now clean plate from her sister's brat to put away in the sink and start gathering herself up to leave for the night. "I'll tell Galina not to expect you... and also reroute any more assassination attempts."

The Italian hottie shot her a skeptical look, then Sonya one of her own when the thief didn't scoff or snort at the semi-teasing and half-serious quip.

"...they sucked as an assassin." Shamal dismissed instead, making a little adorable 'hmph' sound as he crossed his arms with a faintly chocolate smeared scowl.

"They did. It was more a cry for help, though." Agreed the blonde he was treating as a living seat. "Which, hopefully, will not be repeated once what I did in revenge for trying to take advantage of the Rains makes the rounds."

"I have to go make sure the Pahkan's not doing something silly, like straining himself so soon after a major injury was healed." Announced the nurse before tall, dark, and snarky could ask. "I'll see you all hopefully tomorrow night or something."

"Have a nice night, Tats."

"Bye, zia!"

"...Sonya, what the hell?"
Tatiana shut the hotel suite doors behind her firmly, smirking.

(Sunday the 22nd of June, 1969. Lunacharsky State Institute for Theatre Arts, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Good morning, Jiayi."

The tiny Chinese woman sniffed, glancing backwards to see the Russian that addressed her. "Finally. I was starting to think you forgot about us all."

"Not intentionally, I assure you." Sonya answered the trapeze coordinator calmly, guiding a small brunette child holding her hand to be less in the way in case someone fell off the high wire. "Things just got away from me. I knew I should've came in for at least some practice several times these last few months, I just didn't have the time."

She glanced upward again, to ensure the trapeze artist she had been inspecting were actually practicing their arts and not gossiping like birds. "Excuses, girl. There is an opening in the next routine, go get ready and refresh your skills on the lower wires until it comes up."

"...do you know…?"

"I am a friend of Crina's. It is why I am here this year and not out with the circus." Interrupted the coordinator firmly, not wanting to hear confirmation of what she already knew. Worse, news that it finally had happened when she had to be working in the here and now. "She asked me not to bear witness to her end."

They stared at each other for a long moment.

"Stay with Jiayi, Shamal." The former fortune telling girl instructed her tagalong firmly, before heeding the older woman's orders.

Jiayi blinked hard a few times, already bitterly missing her friend but resigned to things. Another check, a few of the trapeze artist were new and prone to doing dangerous things in a spare second of idleness, and the Chinese woman turned her attention on the child. "You are not Sonya's child."

"I'm mamma's godchild." He insisted firmly, almost glaring at her. A dare to try denying that to his face.

She was not that disrespectful to someone who would honor such bonds when one's parent was unable to fulfill a child's needs. Whoever would try to do so to said child's face required a beating. "Good. Pay attention, your kai ma has put serious effort in learning this art and is beautiful to watch."

'Shamal' looked blindsided for a moment, then he hesitantly scooted closer to her before looking around for his godmother. Jiayi checked he wasn't actually holding onto her, she sometimes needed to dart off and had no desire to harm one of her acrobat's wards even by accident.

Sonya was an infuriatingly absent acrobat, but the Chinese woman was at least sure if there was an emergency that required her aid she would at least seriously consider it. Not that she could even think of any situation that might arise and need the shady girl to aid in.

"...what does 'kai ma' mean?"
"Godmother, in Chinese. Cantonese, my native language." Jiayi glanced down at him once before returning to inspecting the performance overhead. "Has she yet to teach you? She is fluent in a variation."

The child fidgeted with his fingers instead of stare around the room, likely since his godmother was not out in the large gymnasium yet so he didn't have much reason beyond curiosity to look around. "I was learning Russian up until this trip to see her parents, Miss Jiayi."

It would be obvious why Russian was first, maybe they would move on to Mandarin next? "Ask to learn Chinese next, you go far enough south from here and it becomes the most common language spoken."

"I'll maybe mention it." Temporized the child, earning himself a hard look from the trapeze coordinator.

"I'll suggest it myself then." Jiayi countered blandly. "Your kai ma does heed my word, as you saw."

Shamal looked as if he didn't know if he should be insulted, wary, or apprehensive.

She suppressed the desire to smile. Sonya might not actually take the suggestion, but the number of people she had to speak her native language to was depressingly low. More, even infrequent visitors like the child now keeping her company, could only be a good thing.

"There." Jiayi pointed out Sonya's redressed form to her godchild, as the young woman had exchanged her skirt and blouse for the skin-tight leotards stocked for visitors to practice in.

She returned to watching the high-wire acrobats practicing exchanges from bar to bar and the progress of the tightrope walkers as the former circus apprentice got the details of which act she was to aid in from the other acrobats. The coordinator was certain there would be no drama, she had stamped out a lot of the ego and arrogance out of this year's crop of performers.

There was no place in the big tops for grudges or petty arguments, not when they had to rely on one another merely to survive their performances.

That wasn't to say they weren't egotistical at all, they were disgustedly so to those that couldn't or had never tried to walk the high wire. Jiayi just simply had no patience for such and ensured all her acrobats knew it full well.

"...Shamal, are you bothering this lady?"

The Chinese woman stiffened up, whirling around to face the man who had drawled out the question in a tone she did not like.

"No, mister Renato. Mamma told me to wait with her." Professed the child at her hip fearlessly to the newcomer. "She's Miss Jiayi, the... uh..."

"Coordinator of the trapeze acts." She answered for herself, still warily watching the man who had come to a stop only a few feet from her.

This one was dangerous.

The darkly dressed man merely touched the brim of his hat in a kind of greeting, before eyeing the child that was fearlessly half ignoring him. "Then where did Sonya go?"

Shamal pointed out his godmother, now climbing up with the other acrobats to the trapeze set up
more than fifty feet of the ground. "Mamma is right there."

Jiayi found herself dismissed from importance, a not particularly rare occurrence but one she was miffed to be treated to now, as the man named 'Renato' tilted his head back to fully see where the blonde in question was and where she was going.

Trying to decide if she should speak or not, or demand this threat to leave, occupied the coordinator for a long moment.

"I am merely here to watch, Miss Jiayi. Sonya did invite me to do so."

Giving him a pointed look in return, Jiayi huffed quietly to herself.

His comment wasn't really all that reassuring.
For a place Sonya merely knew as the 'circus' college', Renato had been... *highly* interested in their drama department.

Not just simply because it was *fantastically* absurd to think about a professional school type-setting for *circus performers*.

*Was* there a class for 'Clowning 101'?

How about 'Juggling Basics' with a lesson of 'How to Juggle More than One Pie at a Time' offered?

Lion Taming and a practical test of actually sticking your head into the maw of a big cat that can eat humans?

All that did *not* mesh with the kind of mental image the Russians tended to show him to date. Practical, ruthless, and very down to earth kind of people. Yet... the ruthless, practical thief he knew best did actually come here and was seemingly known to be a former circus acrobat and was asked by a name if she would like to join the day's practice on the 'trapeze'.

'Miss de Mort' was a new one, he was pretty sure he had heard it before... but where was questionable.

The hitman had a very well-hidden fondness for the bizarre, and for theater as a whole. He would greatly appreciate finding or inflicting the bizarre on his own terms, but there was a lot of strange and absurd things in the USSR.

*Although that might be part of the reason,* mused the hitman as he now watched Sonya play some kind of follow the leader game high overhead, *why I am so fond of damn woman.*

She was rather absurd herself. Not just physically, as a tiny doll of a woman that could bend a handful of iron rods to her will without effort, but in how she behaved and how she looked at things.

He may have mentioned to Sonya that churches were the place he had went as a green hitman to get himself breathing room, but to be honest going to plays and hiding out in the back of stages had happened just as often. He had to sneak in those more often than pay, but it was easier to lose tails in dark places that were crowded than in brightly lit and sometimes empty cathedrals.

The backstage incidents were generally more entertaining as well. Not to mention the chaos shoving an extra body into the spotlight caused, which ended up even better when the mooks tried to play along in order to not startle a full house of paying customers or irritated the actors they were interrupting even more.

Upon reaching the Lunacharsky State Institute for Theatre Arts, surprisingly *not* an entirely beige eyesore of a building, he had peeled off from Sonya and Shamal as she dealt with the process of signing herself and the brat in as visitors. The thief had merely left him to it without batting an eyelash, taking the kid with her deeper into the building on a rather direct route.

Renato wasn't about to sign his name in some visitor's book, even if there was a valid excuse as to why his or any of his aliases would be in there.
He had still wanted to poke around a little himself but moving as if he was going to leave the thief and their godchild to a day of ridiculous circus things let him find a side entrance and slip in with little issue. Ending up in the dance hall section had not been the plan, but enough wandering with a purpose had him occasionally checking into the desired drama department classes.

A wrong turn somewhere then led him into this gymnasium with the trapeze set up within, where he spotted Shamal standing next to some unknown woman and got a bit concerned he had wandered off on Sonya. The hitman had put his exploring to an early end to figure out why the brat was loitering about sans a thief.

Apparently, the circus lessons and practice rooms were part of the drama department or at least situated nearby.

Shamal gave a near-silent gasp when his mamma released the first swinging bar to start her own trip across more than fifty feet of open-air high overhead. Renato pointedly dug his knee in the kid's back, to remind him they were in public and neither of them would appreciate it if he tried to catch the Russian Storm-Cloud with Mist Flames.

Even if the hitman himself really didn't appreciate the somersault in air done to take up the time between when she released the first bar and when she was in range to be grabbed by the man literally throwing the other acrobats to another to be caught. Taking your eyes off the only thing between you and even a twenty-foot fall to a safety net sounded a bit counter-intuitive to him, no matter who was supposed to catch you.

She had apparently done this professionally. Rationally speaking then, she had done worse than this in front of an audience. If she was going through the trouble of keeping her acrobatic skills trained up after she stopped tailing around that circus she had been with, then likely she had done similar things without the benefit of the net spread out underneath to catch any mistakes.

Renato had full faith Sonya's skills. He might not have seen them before, but she wasn't the heedless or reckless type. If she was up there, then obviously she had the proper experience to judge she could do all of it. The hitman was less so confident in the unknowns she was up there with.

This was a school. She was a returning old hand, they were learning.

Jiayi the coordinator huffed slightly aggressively at his side, reminding him that glaring murderously and silently daring those civilians to miss catching the thief might not be the wisest idea right now. The elderly if spry looking lady was intently keeping an eye on him, suspicious and wary already not moments after being introduced to him.

Hopefully this wasn't a rare civilian friend of Sonya's, given he tipped her off that Renato wasn't quite a safe person himself. If it was, hopefully a distant acquaintance she wouldn't mind he had scared.

The Mist brat whimpered again, causing the hitman to double-check where the thief was. Hanging from her knees upside down as she swung from the far end of the trapeze bars, and then at the top of the next arc she let go. Someone else might have caught her wrists for her return trip back across the four-bar set, but he was pretty damn sure neither him nor the kid appreciated it. Nor the mid-air maneuvers she had to do to catch the next man's wrists instead of let him grip her by the ankles via more practical hand-over.

Was it over yet?

The acrobats were slowly working their way across the far platform from where they started and then
back again this time around, surely that and the solo back-n-forth from before was enough for a practice run.

A vicious little grumble from the side told him the coordinator spotted something she didn't like and running his gaze over the others let him know the man that had snatched Sonya up had a wobble to his trajectory. She was looking up at him instead of looking to the next and final bar she had to get to, in order to get off the oversized swings, for a few back-and-forth arcs as they tried to correct it.

Renato winced, and Shamal gave a shocked little cry, when Sonya missed the next bar because she was tossed a little too far off center. Jiayi erupted into a spitting fury, shouting in near-incomprehensible Chinese up at the acrobat as the Storm-Cloud hit the safety net.

…this reminded him that he had yet to learn that language, a bit tied up in ensuring Shamal had Russian and German down pat first and handling his own business. Vongola Mists were just as ornery and machination-inclined as any other and dealing with them was something you had to take in small doses. He had to find someone to teach him yet or afford the loose cash to bribe a Mist to do it all in one session.

The brat deserved something for not forgetting the safety catch in place and that his mamma would be alright when she was dropped in mid-air. Instead of Constructing something to save her from a rather minor incident all total that would put them under some unwanted scrutiny.

Sonya more or less crawled over to the rope tied to one end of the net to lower herself down, the rest of the trapeze artist filing down whichever way was fastest depending on where they were. She slid down her way fairly quickly and was the first to reach the floor, speaking something of her own to the tiny old woman now puffed up like a highly offended pigeon just waiting for her chicks to get in range for a good pecking.

Shamal left Renato's side, darting over himself to wrap his arms around the thief's… tights covered legs. A lot closer now, the hitman blinked as he realized what she was wearing was both skin-tight and left very little to the imagination.

"Especially up close."

"-was fine, Shamal. This is why we practice." She reassured the brat clinging to her leg a bit awkwardly, patting at his hair as the angle was a bit too awkward for her to comfortably reach his back and not bend over at the same time. "Honestly, that should've worked. I touched the other bar… but didn't quite have the reach to actually grip it. Had I been taller… I might not have fallen."

This was not helping anything.

Silky dark blue and form-fitting was a rather good look on her, and the white tights the brat was clinging to helped highlight her toned legs. The hitman clamped down on the desire to compliment her appearance, for one she'd ignore it and for another flattery of how she looked got him very little when trying to flirt with her.

You could only be brushed off so many times before it became a sticking point.

Why complementing how intimidating she could be instead worked better?

It was probably a Cloud-thing.

"High wire." Barked the little Chinese woman at the thief in her native Russian, before rounding on the other acrobats and giving them similarly short demands for solo things to practice until she reached the slightly cringing man that fumbled the blonde woman. He earned himself a glower and a
pointed finger jabbing at a set of rings suspended from the ceiling. "Let us build up your shoulder strength some more, Pavel. Then your back. Hopefully then you won't toss the next girl relying on you to the net instead."

Sonya smirked wryly. "Why don't you and Renato find a class to sit in on, brat? There's some good drama ones going on today, I think."

"Would they mind?" Renato would have no issues leaving her to some dizzying height practice in order to take a look for himself, so long as he could get out of being noticed.

"Most of them take place in the amphitheaters nearby. They have balcony seating you can remain overlooked within." Confided the thief with a wicked little tilt to her smirk now. A roundabout way to admit she had been stealing lectures on acting here and there? He supposed that explained some of how she got so good at faking certain behavioral patterns to those that didn't know her personally, like the ditzy home-schooled blonde or the professionally caring investigator act.

Her mother obviously held the blame for most of it, especially since he had figured out Lisa had been passing tips to Shamal on the sly about how to argue with him better. Was it wise to be wary of how the brat would behave at the end of his summer vacation here, or gleefully expectant to see him upset some of the things back home in Italia?

Renato really did have to go back to taking hits soon, or at least working more on the information Sonya's people had dug up for him, but the distractions available here… were worth it. He was almost sorry his time loitering about was nearly up.

"Renato." Sonya's slightly exasperated call redirected his attention forcibly to the… not really scantily clad woman but at least a distractingly attired one. "Take the brat. Also… what did you do to Jiayi?"

"Nothing." Drawled the hitman with little concern, plucking the kid in question up by the back of his shirt and removing him from his attempt to re-apply himself like a barnacle to his mamma's leg.

He hadn't really done much of anything, and that was probably the problem. Civilians were just so easily spooked if you didn't pay them enough attention to prevent it. Renato had just been more concerned with the thought Shamal had wandered off on her and ended up somewhere he shouldn't be to care much for anyone he startled.

In hindsight, not the best thing to happen.

"How long do you think this'll be?" Asked the Mafioso instead of admitting any of that, wondering how well Shamal would like drama and plays. He was a Mist, he might be able to put some of it to real good use. His version of it, at least.

"All afternoon, knowing Jiayi." She answered dryly, rolling her eyes when said woman gave her a pointed look for loitering about instead of immediately heading for the ladder again to reach the wire strung between the two supporting poles that also had the net stretched out between them a bit lower. "Say… find me again near dinner time?"
"Sure… little dragon lady."

(OOO000000)

(Sunday the 22nd of June, 1969 continued. The Rain Bar, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Galina delicately followed one young Rain by the name of Tolmacyhov Larion Afanasievich down a set of stairs. These stairs just so happened to lead into the basement of what was fast becoming known as the ‘Rain Bar’ instead of whatever name it had officially.

The boy, the same one that had attempted to murder a Storm-Cloud yesterday, stopped near the landing and looked as if he had no desire to go any farther.

That was alright, the Lightning didn't mind.

Sonya had wanted a Rain for her own reasons, and this one had at least the intelligence to accept her help when he ran out of options. If he would prove to be somewhat interesting or not had yet to be discovered, or if her underboss would even tolerate his presence for any length.

Either way, he was a Rain that was at least predisposed to being neutral instead of semi-hostile.

"Yanovna." Galina half-ordered and half-called, narrowing her eyes on the teenaged Rain girl that scowled when she realized who had come visiting. "A word. Now."

The little bitch had no room to be pulling faces. She was not only overdue to suck it up and grow a damn spine, but she was still sending Irinei in her place whenever she thought she could get away with it.

Obviously, she intended to do nothing beyond the bare bones of what she had to.

Which was not helpful at all.

The Lightning plastered on a tight little smile for the moody teen. "You are hereby relieved of duties. Go sulk on your own time."

"…I… excuse me?"

"You are a pathetic, utterly inexcusable example of a leader." Continued the older brunette ruthlessly in a pleasant tone. "One of your own had a problem, and you had no fucking idea. Because he apparently didn't trust you a damn bit to help him. It's fine, you were forced into this position. Apparently asking you to at least look after your own was too much to ask."

The younger girl spluttered, too offended and insulted to think clearly.

That suited Galina just fine as well. "You will now be reporting to young Larion over here. Who at least has guts, if not a spine."

"…Miss Galina?" Larion asked quietly, as she hadn't told him why he had to escort her to this little meeting and was probably terribly confused.

"You aren't the youngest we ever had, Larion. That still goes to the Mist Usov, who started at seven as the Mist Lead." She reassured the kid in a less bitchy tone, until she turned back to the teenager he was replacing. "Nothing to say? Good. Good day, Yanovna."
Proving that she was the more aggressive 'Inverted' Rain type, she stiffened up and tried to get in the Lightning’s face. Tried, because Galina jabbed her with her green painted nails in the neck and sent a bolt of her Flames through Yanovna's body.

Lightning was the only Dying Will Flame that wouldn't necessarily burn another on contact, but electrocution was the more common result when used like this. Even just visually, Lightning Flames acted much more like electricity than just fire.

They were really wonderful as a touch-based deterrent, her Flames. Shocking the hell out of whatever or whoever she touched was Galina’s first use of her emerald Flames, and dead useful as well.

Especially since she was a woman, and at the time she hadn’t exactly been in a lawful part of town before she ‘popped’.

Tatiana had laughed herself sick when she weaseled the whole story out of her fellow if panicking female before calming them both down and starting her on her little sister’s Flame exercises to learn control. As apparently both sisters had figured out she had Flames before she ‘popped’ and had ensured she’d have the tools ready and waiting for her to master when she did.

Galina wasn’t a robust woman, or really a fantastic thief besides as an extra set of hands or as a lookout. What she excelled at was logistics. Planning a heist, how to move a haul, finding loopholes to exploit. Making or keeping contacts, exploiting or managing them, and ensuring what was needed was at hand before it became a life or death thing.

Getting cornered by two men who refused to take the word 'no' for an answer left her without many options, especially as they had avoided most the damage she tried to do to them in order to escape. Electrocuting the fuck out of them in revenge had been rather… liberating.

Her once attackers were dead now, electrocuted to death, but from then on Galina hadn’t just been a nominally decent thief without a specialty except for the planning of heists. She now had a skill she was damn proud of, the first Zolotov Dying Will Lightning user, and ‘managing’ Sonya was practically a job tailored made for her in and of itself.

That job had some real good perks to it, and her nail polish was one of them from back before she had even started. Made from finely ground bits of the mineral malachite and added to a simple clear nail polish, it usually lasted a few uses before needing to be reapplied.

Eyeing the twitching teenaged girl for a moment, mostly to be sure she wasn't going to choke on her own vomit or something, Galina delicately picked her way over the twitching body and motioned for Larion to follow.

"Listen up, please." She needlessly addressed the rest of the Rains now warily watching her for any crackling emerald Flames that might make an appearance. "Yanovna had been demoted, for reasons that boil down to 'doing less than the bare minimum required and ignoring the rest of her duties'. Larion will be taking over for her as the lead Rain. Again, speak to him about any questions or concerns you may have or any issues that arises."

The poor boy squeaked when he suddenly became the center of attention. After a moment, he hesitantly waved.

"That being said, the next time some moron tries to take your family members hostage in hopes you will murder another of our Flame users, I hope we will hear about it before you actually try something so suicidal."
The new Rain Division leader shrank in on himself even more when he got incredulous looks for that announcements as some people put one and one together and got two.

Galina was pretty damn sure even the farthest flung Flame Division, which would be the Rains, had heard of Sonya’s sudden and out of the blue temper tantrums. Including the staking of heads thing that was fast becoming a kind of half-joke and half-warning tossed about within the clan.

As the Kozlov Brotherhood hadn’t been reduced to shark chum or weren’t in the middle of a turf war with the Zolotovs, it was generally accepted that whatever they did had nothing to do with their clan’s Pakhan getting shot. Within the clan, it was known someone had tried to ineptly assassinate Sonya.

It wasn’t Scruffy’s fault. No one told him not to say anything about it, just that the thief and the kid had left the office. He also rather failed to prevent Shamal from bitching to the Mirror Lady when she stopped by to check up on him.

Galina hadn’t known until she returned to the office, and by then not only did Anna know and had been busy updating the people she thought should know but a few vory had heard and were trying to source where the Storm-Cloud had got to for guarding.

She was pretty sure her boss was going to be equally as unimpressed with that as with the man that tried to lecture her.

"Any questions?" Galina asked the basement room at large, while they were still rather incredulous and off-balance. "No? Good. Try not to have any more issues that require our interference over the head of your section's lead, please."

(Monday the 23rd of June, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya blinked slowly.

Shamal glared from under her elbow, wrapping his arms around her waist as far as he could reach.

Galina clicked her green plated pen a few times as she waited expectantly, Scruffy coughed a bit uncomfortably from his end of the couch.

The so introduced ‘Larion the Rain’, the apparently new lead of the Rain section as of yesterday afternoon, shuffled his feet awkwardly in the middle of her office.

"…this means Irinei is finally freed up, right?" Asked the thief a bit desperately.

Sue her, after Björn she had thought she was more or less immune to soppy, desperately grateful types. Nope, the younger they were the less sure she was on how to deal with them.

Admittedly her Lackey had been an older looking preteen, and this kid was obviously not even in the double digits of age yet.

No offense to him but… actually, he tried to kill her when all that he probably knew about her was that she kicked the fuck out of the Rain leads before Yanovna. That took some guts.

After getting messed around with on all those stupid rumors left over from the dismantling of the
Four Rains, he still somehow found the courage to try assassinating her in hopes of saving his mother.

Thinking about that aspect a bit more… made her less sure she was done terrorizing the Kozlov Brotherhood.

She didn't actually know what, exactly, the threat had been. Just that the Rain boy's mother had been kidnapped and he had been told via letter left with his beaten-up father that if he wanted to see her again, he had to kill the Storm-Cloud herself.

Kind of a win-win situation for them regardless of what happened… up until Sonya decided to not play the game. Had he killed her, it would be one less scary thorn in anyone's side. Had she killed him, it would've rather badly impacted her reputation and the reputation of the Zolotov Flame training efforts. Opting to do it her own way at least prevented anything too bad from being bandied about baselessly.

There would still be shit said, but at least there would be no proof for the more skeptical to dig up.

Recovering the kid's mom with Usov's help so she could go after the vory without having to suffer through some bullshitted hostage situation had proven less than a challenge. Staking their heads out on the street that syndicate claimed as home base took only some of her thief skills, as by that time the Mist had been rather sternly redirected to sending the Rain, his mother, and his father somewhere safer than where they had lived before.

…stealing people should be harder than she had recently found it to be but then again, all her 'targets' had been very willing to be stolen.

"Larion." Sonya tried before Galina could figure out the answer to her question. "Would you like some revenge yourself?"

The kid batted wide hazel eyes up at her. "...I'm not really the type, Bazanova."

Oh dear fuck, he was Classical. Sonya didn't tend to get along well with Classical Rains… or… maybe just Discordant Classical Rains?

Supposedly Irinei was Classical… but she didn't really like him due to previous reasons nearly unrelated to his personality.

She eyed the kid standing in the middle of her office skeptically. "Alright then…"

Looking to the other child had her hesitating. Shamal still did not look remotely appreciative of the older boy and hadn't let her go yet. The Storm-Cloud looked first to Galina, who merely shrugged, and then to Scruffy.

Peter blinked, looked between the boys, then back up at her curiously.

Sonya pinched the bridge of her nose for a long moment.

What the ever-loving fuck was she supposed to do with two boys, one of which had a grudge against the other?

She didn't have these kinds of skills, why the hell were they leaving it up to her?

"Not to be rude or anything, but did you require something else?" She asked resignedly, pressing on Shamal's back lightly to get him to head over to the Sun on the couch for their daily tactical lessons.
Maybe she could get him to leave in a few minutes?

Larion glanced up at the expressionless Galina, but when she gave him nothing to go on he slightly stiffly turned back to her. "Err… I am… nine, Miss Bazanova."

"Usov started at seven, teaching the Mirror Lady Mist skills." Sonya informed him slowly. Only actually slightly sure she was addressing the right topic behind that comment.

"I know, Miss Galina informed me. I mean… I am going to need Irinei." The Rain kid explained, rubbing at an arm awkwardly. "I'm… ah, not imposing."

She blinked a few times slowly.

"Physically, I mean."

"...do you mean in order to terrorize your fellow Rains into behaving, or for other reasons?" She tried to clarify, because if that first one was the case she might as well put Irinei back in charge and just hope he at least wasn't as stupid or hidebound as Fadei or Kazimir.

Larion shifted from foot to foot, obviously thinking over her question, before answering slowly. "I can… I think, handle the other Rains. Yanovna didn't actually really do much for us, so I don't think I can do worse. And I can at least talk to Miss Galina if you would prefer that."

Seating herself in the office chair behind the large desk as she listened, and the thief wondered herself if she didn't like the Rain boy.

Obviously, Galina preferred him to the so far mainly absent teenaged Rain girl. Which she could understand since Yanovna never really had put effort into things since she got shanghaied into a position she didn't want. She had been more or less just a filler, a warm body in a spot so there was at least a name in a slot for anyone looking over their records.

Of which… there was… maybe three people she gave a fuck about, and a whole lot more she'd really rather not deal with.

Irinei had pretty much been filling in the cracks in the previous Rain lead's less-than-absently done work, and if her Lightning had removed her nearly useless ass to put the Storm-Cloud's would-be assassin into her place… and he needed help… the much older Rain was probably the best decision.

Sonya honestly didn't really like the fact the tall Rain man was still a main part of the Rain section, but frankly there was no other good options at this point. Grudgingly, she might have to give the kid before her that point.

Might. No one else had needed to have their hands held, just the Rains. Feeling the lot of them were really useless without a strong leader was her prerogative.

"At the bare minimum," she instructed him blandly, "I expect you to know each Rain we have. Their names, what they are trying to accomplish with their Flames or without them, their living situations and if that needs improvements, and if they have any problems you or they can't solve. I would like you to be able to track their development, but Galina will run you through the process a few times until you can do it in your sleep. For the non-clan Rains, who they report to and what it is they would like to learn about their Flames. Anything you, or Irinei for however long you need him as a crutch, cannot arrange yourselves you can bring to us for additional help."

Larion studied her with a frown. "...I definitely can't do worse than Yanovna."
She was becoming rather fed up with argumentative or disruptive Rains.

Dearly beloved *fuck*, was it something about *her* that made Rains snotty little shits?

…no, more than likely prior history and a reputation she was only now starting to deserve.

Sonya tiredly rubbed at her left eye, leaning back in her seat to scowl down at the kid.

He looked entirely bewildered at her flat look. "*Miss Bazanova?*"

"*If you have a problem with me-*"

"*No! I... am...*" Larion desperately cast about the office for some help.

Galina looked entirely too willing to let him continue to fumble about, Scruffy was more or less highly confused over what was going on, and Shamal was helping not a damn bit if he didn't have to.

The Lightning had set things up, the Sun had probably less than half the details needed to understand, and the Mist brat was being a brat.

"...thank you?" He questioned more than stated hesitantly, barreling on like a goofy and non-hostile Classical Rain after a moment to wince over how he had said that. "*For rescuing my mom, I mean. You didn't really have to, so I appreciate it.*"

"*I didn't do it for you.*" Sonya corrected a bit exasperatedly. "*The only reason why I bothered was because she was kind of in the way of me getting to those vory in order to express my displeasure with them. Thanking me for something I didn't actually plan on doing myself is a bit... awkward.*"

"*Intended or not, my mom's alive.*" Larion insisted, as if that made anything any better. "...which was, actually, more than I was hoping for even if I did kill you. I really figured you'd kill me, and then maybe might investigate why I tried to kill you."

That was depressively pessimistic of the kid. Apparently, he at least was realistic about the effects of his efforts and really couldn't *do* any worse than Yanovna or Kazimir, or Fadei, which was honestly a step forward.

A baby step forward for the Rains, who were lagging so far behind everyone else Sonya honestly wondered if they'd have to import a foreign one to be a role model if this kid didn't work out even halfway decently... or just waste time until the original Zolotov Rain was free again.

…there was... what the fuck was his name?

The Triad Rain man, who was... somewhere. Galina might know, but he also didn't really speak to her much if at all. Not that the thief really wanted Chinese influences in a section that had proven highly troublesome in multiple ways until they shaped up, but *if* they had actually been less of a pain in the ass she would've asked for him about teaching the Rain brats something to 'see if he *could* teach' or some other bullshit.

The Rain boy merely shrugged at her skeptical look. "*Again, I'm nine.*"

…point.

"*I do not murder kids.*" Insisted Sonya blandly, trying to figure out if she was insulted by that or not. "*I'm well aware I don't have the best reputation, but more than most of that is entirely unwarranted.*"
"...so, you didn't pike heads outside various locations like demented lawn ornament?"

"No, that one she fully deserves."

"It's been five days since I started." The thief reminded Galina probably a bit bitchier than was warranted. "I've done a grand total of six heads at two locations. I don't deserve the entire reputation I have right now."

"...yet." The lone Sun in the room corrected helpfully, looking a bit surprised and ducking his head at her glower.

"Shut up, Scruffy." Looking back to the Lightning in the room, the Storm-Cloud decided to dismiss the entire conversation. Either Larion the Rain would be useful or he wouldn't, she'd just have to see how that one resolved itself. "Galina, I need whatever plays are currently showing. Please."

After a moment of being surprised, the woman nodded and reached for the office phone.

Sonya turned back to eye the latest of the way-too-young-but-only-good-option Flame users about to be in charge of damn near fifty bodies. "Larion, you have work to be doing. More than you should, but your section's been a pain in the ass since I got shoved in here to wait out Dmitriy's prison sentence."

"...who?" Asked the kid, a bit bewildered at a name he apparently didn't know.

"Dmitriy. The real head of this office. Inverted Rain, soon-to-be vor, currently serving the tail end of his prison sentence." When that didn't clear the Rain's confusion, the thief merely sighed heavily. "Forget it. Another Rain, an older one who will likely take over for you in as little as a year or so."

"Oh!" After a pause to absorb that, he beamed at her. "That is… wonderful news, actually. I shall… get started then."

Having said so, Larion then nearly skipped out of her office.

Sonya stared after him, wondering if it really was just something about her that made Classical Rains dislike being in her presence until they could leave it.

"...well, that went well." Galina observed with satisfaction, hanging up to dial a number in her search for what the Storm-Cloud wanted to know.

She gifted the other woman with a highly skeptical look of her own. "That was 'well'?"

Her ruthlessly practical Lightning merely shrugged, pulling the rotary dial around as she plugged in the numbers for her next connection. "He's alive, probably will deal with you more than the other little bint, and it seems as if you're not entirely opposed to his presence. I call that a win."

Sonya regarded the brunette dubiously for a long moment.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 23rd of June, 1969 continued. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"According to Galina, there's a few options." Sonya informed Renato over dinner. "From the ballet to a few decent productions and even a couple films that just got a showing on the silver screen."
He had cooked this night, just simply to ensure the fact that her kitchen would cook something to his standards and that her occasional burning or failed dish was solely her own fault. The thief hadn't even bothered getting defensive or upset he was doubting her culinary skills to her face, she had merely asked if she should pick something up for him in a bland tone.

All in all, no. There was nothing overtly wrong with Sonya's kitchen besides it being a bit more than a bit out-of-date, it was just that she was a not particularly skilled cook. The basics, fine. Some occasional favorite she had a decent amount of practice with, sure.

Anything else?

Not with any regularity.

He had to find her a chef, one that would somehow survive cooking for a highly temperamental Cloud and her brat, otherwise Shamal might actually starve himself or get sick off her cooking. One he'd feel safe leaving the Mist brat's dietary health up to, if he was going to try snubbing them to Sonya's face.

Without her getting irked with him, which might be as simple as asking if she wanted him to vet a decent Italian cook who might help her with the housework once he found her a place.

Either way, he'd keep an eye open.

"The ballet then?" The hitman didn't really care what they did.

He was just kind of resignedly looking forward to the moment things went 'click' in her head and she realized they had gone on a few dates without even really stating that they were doing so in so many words.

Now, would that happen before or after she got involved with another man?

"We could… but honestly I was thinking the opera." Waving about the fork as if to wind up time to think her thoughts through, the thief gave a kind of idle shrug. "You really should at least see the Russian Ballet once in your life, but it's fairly typical right now. Back awhile, there was more surrealism apparent in some of the shows… but right now it's all just classical. Nice, but not really…"

…inspiring to someone who could dance, probably.

The Sun flicked his fingers absently to agree to that, smacking Shamal's fingers before he could use them to shove his food onto his utensil. "Use a knife for that, brat. The opera instead then? Anything good?"

"We'll probably go to the State Academic Bolshoi Theatre, there's a showing of The Voyevoda… or we could see about getting in to see Mazeppa." She considered him for a long moment. "…I think you might enjoy the latter more, honestly."

"Ho?"

"It's historic, but also has murder, execution, abduction, and political persecution in it." Explained the thief wryly, leaning back in her chair. "I've seen it before with Cherep, but I don't actually know about The Voyevoda enough to say what it's about or if you'd like it."

Renato pondered his choices, there was still the as of yet unnamed film option if he didn't particularly want to see a Russian opera, and Shamal took advantage to ask a question of his own.
"You sure I can't come, mamma?"

"Well past your bedtime, brat." Sonya reminded the kid, smiling faintly at the disgruntled pout he tried to hide. "You'll have a lot more fun with Tats than you would sitting quietly in a dark theater for a few hours watching actors put on a kind of stuffy historical drama."

The Mist brat didn't answer that but chewed on his ravioli as if it had done him a disservice.

"Besides which, your zio might be here in the morning. Might." She continued when the kid remained stubbornly silent and the hitman wondered if she would dress up for an opera more than a film. "Cherep chose to drive the whole damn way, the idiot, and even factoring in breaks for the night as well as gas and food... he should be nearly close to Moscow by now."

As Shamal did perk up at that, Renato figured out which way he wanted to go with a free night from Shamal. "I think we'll see the Mazeppa opera, Sonya. Do you need a dress?"

"Yes, but I have a few."

"Not a fan?" The most he saw her in outside of a Ball was skirts, knee or longer in length, and even then she seemed to prefer trousers to them if she could.

"I dislike how much they constrain me, in movement." Sonya answered honestly enough with a shrug. "Even if with a decently prepared dress I could hide almost anything within the skirt, I still prefer having actual pockets."

The first time he'd seen her in a dress, she had to use his pockets. He acknowledged the point with a tip of his head. "You pull it off well."

"I was trained to do so, like most other Zolotov girls." Dismissed the thief, without so much as considering why he would notice something like that... or maybe just figuring it was a critique and offering the background, so he could appreciate it more. "All of us, from me to Tats to even Lisa, were given ballet training and had high society manners drilled into us over our childhoods."

Renato pondered the distance between the two of them, and slightly regretted picking the farthest seat from her own even if he could keep a better eye on Shamal's dining etiquette from directly across from her.

If figuring out what Sonya thought of girl-thieves being trained for that kind of social sphere was important enough, he'd bring the subject up later and find out then. Unfortunately, or not depending, the thief had hit upon ways to keep him out of a few aspects of her life and mind.

The obvious was specifically not thinking about something, and another was obliquely changing the subject on him in a somewhat related but not really topic.

If that was deliberate or not, he had yet to find out. She was getting pretty good at not thinking about things.

The good side of that developed tick was that even if he did manage to figure her out sometime in the next few years, he'd still never really be able to predict her. Not that he ever had managed that in the first place, but her settling down into a less random behavioral pattern was possible as she was pretty young yet.

Thus, a forever not boring associate and friend of his.

The fact she hadn't changed much but for physically since he met her was going to be ignored.
The bad was that Renato had belatedly realized he had been depending on that trick a bit too much over the last week. It wouldn't *always* work, Sonya had hit on ways to derail his sketchy mind-reading and that would mean others could do so as well if they knew or suspected what was going on.

His developing range was also probably a bad sign, and if he wanted to keep the ability quiet he really had to get on figuring out something to cover it with.

Which tickled a memory the Sun couldn't really grasp right away.

…before he left Italia the first time, but not quite to the point where he had managed to solve most of his childhood scrapes in favorable ways. Something to do with his once-habit of haunting the back of auditoriums and the back of on-going stage productions.

"…*Renato*?" Blinking, the hitman yanked his gaze down to the Storm-Cloud trying to get his attention. She didn't really look concerned, but a bit curious. "*Are you done? The brat is, I am, and you've not really eaten anything for the last five minutes.*"

"*My apologies, I was trying to remember something.*" He was mostly finished anyways, merely lingering to ensure Shamal didn't backslide into bad habits like smearing his food over a cheek. "*I am, Sonya.*"

As the thief gathered up the dinner dishes to polish off with the pots and pans waiting on her tiny *bit* of a counter, the brat dove off for her couch to whittle away the time until she joined him for their newly accustomed 'reading hour'. The hitman lingered in his chair, partly because watching a pretty lady clean up after him was a new thing and partly to think some more without risking Mist-conjured fantasy creatures as Shamal practiced not Constructing what he imagined.

"…*Sonya, you were part of the entertainment industry for a bit… maybe you can help me.*"

"*Really? With what?*

"I'm trying to remember something I only heard about a decade ago, and when it wasn't what I thought it was I promptly forgot it was a thing." Renato rather hated these little niggling reminders his memory wasn't nearly as sharp as he'd like, but it was part of a one-time incident nearly twelve or thirteen years ago. Writing things down was so much a *bad idea* in his profession, that left memory only no matter how sketchy it might be. "*One of the directors for an acting troupe, he could do something very near to what I could do naturally… just it wasn't. I dismissed it at the time, but… he learned to do that.*"

"…*more detail. Do what?*" Sonya waved a bubble encrusted hand in the air, turning her water off in order to start scrubbing. "*Do you mean.*"

"*Sonya.*"

She had eavesdropping Mists that were shameless about keeping an ear out for her, as well as the little brat not more than ten feet from them. Yes, he meant his mind-reading trick which started out as empathy… but he'd really prefer it to remain only between them for now.

She pointedly gave him a deadpan grey stare over one tattooed shoulder. "*do you mean something he claimed professionally, as in a skill in reading body language, or just said he was naturally a people-person?*

"…*the former.*" He'd apologize later, of *course* she'd recall they weren't really in private in her own hotel suite.
The thief abandoned the dishes for a moment to study him thoughtfully. "...a thespian? I tried to hold one at... well, pick point... but it didn't really work. Master Liam, the head of the circus troupe I used to work for, was one. He said he could just tell I didn't intend to harm him really, so he wasn't worried when I held a very sharp point to his neck with an implied threat of doing more."

Renato cocked an eyebrow at her in a wordless request for more information.

"An old-school word for a method actor, someone who studies body language and behavioral patterns to the point they can mimic it flawlessly... or read it in another." Continued the thief, in a direction he didn't really ask for but wouldn't argue against getting either. He had yet to figure out if that was just habit or a deflection, or if it was something about the incident that she didn't want to speak of. "I think the word's Greek, honestly, with the tragedies they were known for..."

...a thespian. Acting?

Well... they did put on acts when being caught in places they weren't supposed to be, and even she could put on a role that could fool most civilians and probably a good half of the criminal underworld if she wanted.

The hitman hummed slightly, slouching in his chair and turned the word over in his head now that the niggling little itch was solved.

Apparently his mostly successfully hidden interest in theater was going to probably come to light if he used that to cover his knowing of things he shouldn't.

Now then, to only admit to it when asked or be shameless with it?

...Renato wasn't really one for being embarrassed or playing coy. Blatantly shameless it was, and just look.

He even had a convenient target to point blame at for getting him into the subject if anyone asked.

Itching for his fedora, to pull it down and smirk like the probable bastard he was, the Sun using hitman instead smirked at the back of his 'lady friend' as she started in on the tomato stained pots. "So... the opera. Tonight, supposedly?"

"...sure, just let me ring up Tats so she knows to stay with Shamal and change." Sonya responded absently, as if getting tickets to a likely high-society thing last minute like this would be no great trouble. It probably wasn't for her, for all that she acted like she wasn't anything special when it came to the Russian Mafiya... she was no little minnow in these waters. "Lisa might be willing if Tats is too busy."

Renato didn't know what Timoteo would do when informed the Storm-Cloud thief basically ran the equivalent of the USSR's Mafia School and the Iron Fort's Flame users' orphanage. And that she was meshing them together in order to have less of a headache over it all. Or that the Flame focus stones and matching services were available to be sold if you could afford it, but she hadn't mentioned it to the Vongola Sky or Tyr.

Likely due to the troubles that her brother got caught up in.

...or that it seemed she thought very little on Italia's collective view on Flame users and what they were good for and had pointedly used her own Mists to contradict some of what Shamal had already learned.

Pointedly as in using Usov and one of her Storms to show the brat how much a surprise sucker
punch could disorientate someone that *thought* they could disbelieve a Mist's Constructions through sheer willpower. That a Sun *could* play his little Mist game, so long as they were determined enough.

To be a fly on the wall for *that* conversation… oh wait, he'd get a front row seat.

No offence to Nono meant, but he had known Sonya longer and the Sky had fell into the trap of dismissing her as the minor player she portrayed herself as without saying such in any number of words.

It was probably as much just sheer prudence as it was Sonya being just herself, but Renato knew of and had once known less self-disciplined people who would've bragged about holding such a position to anyone trying to pressure or intimidate them.

Renato glanced down at himself, lips twitching as he recalled the Storm-Cloud's first complaint of her very first Vongola Ball. He really only had to go polish up his shoes, and probably pick out a few cufflinks a bit better quality than the cheap pair of dice ones Shamal had scrounged up the money somehow to buy for the hitman's birthday, before he was ready for a night on the town in any circle.

'*You look like you usually do'* had been the thief's words to him once she had seen what he had been wearing.

Sonya had to go… probably take a shower first, then pick out a dress and the accompanying accessories, get dressed, do her hair and makeup, and *then* chivvy the brat into either her sister's or her mother's grips.

He could look forward to a few more bitchy complaints over the differences between a dressed-up woman and a dressed-up man.

Maybe he should tease her about how long it took for women to get ready for a night on the town?

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 23rd of June, 1969 continued. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Cherep let himself into Sonya's hotel rooms with the key that had been pressed into the doorjamb.

It wasn't really anything someone *not* a Cloud could get ahold of, seeing as retrieving it required more muscle than most could afford when being nonchalant and that was only if you knew it was there in the first place.

The body of the key had been dug into the topmost left corner, pressed in via his little sister's strength and really only retrievable if you had just as much yourself, with a tiny tip of the teeth showing over the wood to be gripped or ripped apart if he wasn't careful.

More to the matter at hand, it was something you could only get if you were another Cloud.  

*Maybe a Mist*, amended the stuntman in his head, thinking of Viper's likely reaction to this little 'security' feature.

Two seconds and his best friend would probably have an exact copy to wave under noses and generally be a pain in the ass about how 'flimsy' the trick was… even if most Mists would just opt to ignore something as banal as a locked door to walk through it instead of bothering with a key.
Sonya had not wanted to leave a key out for him, even if he couldn't really say when he'd get into Moscow. Cherep hadn't wanted to risk picking her lock, and maybe getting himself in trouble with anyone watching over her stuff.

Somehow, that resolved into meaning the thief stuck her spare key into a spot it took someone near-inhuman to retrieve.

As they had to play phone tag with Tatiana and the ever-efficient Galina about it over the last few days, the stuntman was just happy his little sister had picked to be considerate instead of stubborn.

Pressing on the last three hours tonight instead of getting a rinky-dink little motel room to crash in and do the last bit in the morning might not have been the best idea… but Viper had a few things to say about the sanitation of those places that he still couldn't get out of his head.

Also… everyone in the family was in Moscow right now, he was a bit late to the party.

He hadn't seen Tatiana since last Christmas, it'd be nice-

"Cherep! How lovely for you to come see us."

...fuck. That tone meant nothing good for him.

The Cloud regarded the Sun lounging on a couch in their little sister's apartment suspiciously for a long moment. "Are you bunking with Sonya too, then?"

"Nope." The nurse gave him a tight little smirk, nudging a blearily blinking Shamal off her lap. The brat basically tipped back over into the warm spot she left behind when she got up to her feet, dragging some knitted purple monstrosity over himself to keep warm. "I got myself a little single a few floors up, I'm just babysitting for the night."

"...mmm not a baby."

"Of course you're not, baby. Nap, I'll wake you when they get back." Tatiana reassured the kid soothingly, brushing the longish strands of wavy brown hair out of their nephew's face. "And now… I've a bone to pick with you, little brother."

"When they get back?" Cherep repeated, instead of asking the obvious question. "Where is Sonya and… uh… what's his name?"

...he really could not remember for the life of him what the guy's name was. He knew who, he'd been a fairly common topic to come up when talking to Sonya about friends or friendly behavior, but aside a letter 'R', being Italian, and a hitman...

The flame-haired Sun nurse gave him the mother of all flat looks. "Nya and tall, dark, and snarky went to go see the opera for the night. I'm giving them the night free of their brat, because the two of them together give me cavities. Now then... exactly why did I have to hear from our adorable if oblivious little sister that you have some Cloud voodoo that might be medical in nature?"

Sighing, the stuntman gestured his older sister to follow him over to the kitchen table. Not that it would give them a lot of privacy, but they might as well be comfortable since the Mist brat was sprawled out over the only other seating available.

It wasn't that he didn't want to tell Tatiana, she was probably the only medical professional he'd trust, but…
"Long, long story short... it has to do with 'before'."

"Before what? Before..." She trailed off as the only 'before' they never discussed with each other occurred to her. "Before you ended up with Lisa and Arseniy."

"Yep." Those weren't good memories.

As the sibling that had the most 'normal' pre-Zolotov childhood, as well as being their older sister, Tatiana had the uncomfortable position of being the 'less damaged' one.

Which, as their older sibling, had to suck some major ass.

The nurse now bit hard on her bottom lip, likely warring between wanting to ask anyways and respecting that 'do not ask' thing that had been in place since they overheard Sonya talking to Arseniy about her situation.

"I only told Sonya what I had to, and most of which she figured out herself..."

She gave him a level stare as she sat across from him. "...but Nya's a vicious little fuck when she gives a damn. I'm not any better, Cherep."

"No, and I can't tell you all of it either." Holding up a finger before she could bite his head off for that, the stuntman could only shrug. "Tats, I don't even know half of what went on. Only what happened near me. Some of which I could only guess the reasons for."

She gave him a look, half sardonic and half already pissed off. "And I still reserve to sic Nya onto whatever detail I can weasel out of you. If not for you, Cherep, then for any other kids who might have come afoul of who you did once they lost you."

...ouch. He hadn't thought of it like that.

Raking a hand through his hair, Cherep gave his older but no less protective sister a slightly frustrated glare. "You're not helping."

She huffed irritably. "I didn't really appreciate hearing about all this from our little sister instead of from you. Nya gets herself checked out every year, she makes her Lackey get a checkup twice a year. That Sun she picked up from fuck knows where has had three since we released him. Realizing you've never had your medical records updated or told me you had it done wasn't a pleasant thing."

"I'm not even twenty yet, Tats!" Wincing, the stuntman lowered his voice to something that wouldn't wake their nephew up from his doze on the couch. "It's not really."

"My father died from a wasting disease at age twenty-two. In front of me." The nurse hissed back viciously. "I will not lose another family member the same way. Suck it up."

Cherep blinked at her, derailed at the sudden history interjection from a side he hadn't expected.

She shrugged faux casually, straightening up in her chair a bit too quickly. "If you're going to tell me some of what happened to you, you can hear of what happened to me. I don't remember my mother, but dad and I were dirt poor and I already half-lived in the orphanage even before he kicked the bucket. His death is my first memory."

...and now he felt like an asshole for his earlier thoughts of her being the 'normal' one.

He could admit he pouted for a moment, being the asshole when not being Skull was a new one for
him that he didn't much like, before slouching in his seat. "My parents basically aided and abetted my kidnapping at… five. I think. Might've been four. I don't remember too well now what age I was. Frankly, if Sonya hadn't happened along to make a fuss over it, I might've forgotten what year I was born on and my own birthday."

"It's going to be one of those nights, isn't it?" Asked the nurse, still painfully fake in how casual her tone was.

"That was also after my Dying Will Flame trick came to light… in that I'm practically immortal."

Tatiana stared at him for a long moment. "...if this was that far back, and you know this for a fact, then you had to have…"

"...died in order to know it?" Cherep finished for her without humor. "Yep. Broke my neck falling down a staircase, got up seconds later perfectly fine."

"...fuck. Fuck, no wonder that doc way back when was so pissed." Running a hand over her face, the Sun Flame nurse shoved herself up to her feet to yank open the kitchen cabinets. "Nya's got alcohol somewhere around here… right? There was that bottle we didn't finish…"

"It gets worse." The stuntman informed her back as she searched through a surprisingly large number of cooking utensils.

...what the hell?

He thought Sonya went to Lisa for cooking lessons. Well… the place wasn't burnt down yet, maybe she had gotten better.

"Of course it will. There's what, four? Five? Years between you being a baby midget and when Nya brought you home."

Cherep gaped at her back, having never really thought of it like that before.

...home, huh?

It was, wasn't it?

One where it didn't matter if he left, there was always a spot open for him if he needed a place to crash for a week or two. Where it didn't matter he was gone most of the year, he was welcomed back as easily as he left it.

In the middle of this conversation, it was probably weird to get sappy over that right now.

"A year or so between when she first found you and dragging you back with her, three or four of nasty shit to get through." Finally finding what she was looking for and giving a whisky bottle a similarly considering look as the vodka one in her hand, she grabbed both bottles and came back to the kitchen table. "Here… more for me if you drink this instead."

"I like to taste what I'm drinking." He sniffed faux-snootily, then actually stopped and wondered what Sonya was doing with a half a bottle of whisky.

She, like their elder sister, rather preferred the tasteless vodka if she wanted to get hammered.

Drinking with a friend, maybe?

Ooh… that friend?
Tatiana dug a nail into the wax seal, then wrenched the cork out of the bottle and took a fortifying gulp of the clear industrial solvent within. She paused, then took another long drink of the liquor.

"...okay, regardless of what you have to say." Holding up her finger for a bid of another moment more, the nurse huffed out a sigh. "Please, please get a checkup. Once a year. I'll do it, there's Nya's physician if you'd rather not let me, any number of docs where I work that have to keep their mouths shut no matter what."

"I'm not really comfortable with the thought of letting just anyone poke and prod me, Tats." Putting the bottle of whisky down unopened, the stuntman set his elbows on the table between them for somewhere to set his chin. "You, maybe. I just... I had a hard enough time sitting still for it way back when, and the flashbacks... Now it's even harder because we only have first aid trained medics, so any major injuries have to be looked at by an ever-revolving cast of docs."

The expression that crossed her face was mostly pained and partially bitter. "...Cherep, I like knowing everyone I care about is healthy and happy. It's about as obsessive a Sun tick for me as Nya is Stormy about her books. If you decide I can't do it for you, can you at least try to let Doctor Kappel have a crack at it? For me?"

"You're very different than the people that... well, explored exactly what I couldn't die from, sis."

When that didn't seem to reassure the nurse much at all, Cherep scrambled for more to say. "And, ah... female! Which wasn't... there were no women involved. Back then. I'm... fairly sure you won't... um..."

Deciding silence was the better option, Tatiana's expression went from pained to pissed to depressed in fast order, the stuntman decided to hell with his little sister's friend. He cracked the bottle of whisky open to occupy his mouth with something that wouldn't upset the redhead.

"...I'm not even sure if I want to hear this anymore." She spoke after a few quiet minutes nursing their respective bottles of booze. "I'm still telling Lisa."

Cherep winced.

"And I want to know the limits you know about."

"...fair enough."

"...Nya's stubbed her toe on a few health-related issues." Tatiana continued after another swallow of vodka, slowly as if she was thinking aloud. "Mostly, she nearly killed herself with her Storm-immunity trick. So don't overthink it or anything, it's worked so far, but I want to know exactly how it works and anything you can think of that might harm or help. I only thought of a Cloud nurse for Propagating blood in emergencies, but I really only have a vague clue what you do. Other than Nya's tried it and decided it 'hurts'."

Pausing in his actions to take another sip of the rather decent whisky, he lowered the bottle instead and gave his older sister a sideways look. "What do you mean 'stubbed her toe'? Actually... screw that, when the hell did Sonya have the opportunity to copy my ability?"

She gave him a weird look. "Nya's possible death via Storm Flames doesn't compare to her faking a fix for an injury?"

"Nya's here and well, the brat wouldn't be snoring away in a bid to wait up for her if she wasn't." He'd see for himself in anywhere from a few hours to in the morning, so that could wait. "She didn't
"Our sister broke her foot in front of me and treated it like a fresh bruise. I asked when she became sure she could Propagate blood, and instead learned of your Cloud voodoo and in her opinion it 'hurts'.' Tatiana jabbed a finger at his chest. "I would very much like to know why pain is more important to you than a possible death."

"...because I die anywhere from a few times a year to... more recently, once a year? Death is kind of... not alarming to me. Personally, anyways." Cherep answered pretty honestly with a shrug. "Also, if Nya can copy the ability... no death through violence for either of us."

"...I am sorely tempted to lob my bottle at your head right now." Sighing, the nurse mournfully regarded the low level of liquid in said bottle before finishing it off and going in search of another one.

"Please don't? You might wake the brat up."

Also, might hurt like a bitch to get vodka into head wounds/eyes. Cherep could probably go a few lifetimes without feeling that sensation.

The look Tatiana leveled at him could've curdled milk.
Chapter 63

(Tuesday the 24th of June, 1969. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"You didn't mention it was a love story."

Sonya stretched out her legs in the room her passenger seat provided, shifting in her not very proper way to an even less respectable position. As in, if Renato wasn't paying more attention to the streets he could probably get a good look down her skimpy red cocktail dress' bodice.

It wasn't deliberate, she just really didn't care if he got a peek because she wasn't focused on what he might be able to see. Getting more comfortable was what she was after, and anything else was just happenstance.

Keeping that in mind was… hard.

"It's a shitty love story. The girl went crazy in the end." The thief spoke absently through a yawn, batting a limp hand to dismiss the facet of the opera they had just watched. "This was nice, though…it's been awhile since I've seen a play."

"I'll take you to some of Italia's once you move and take the brat." The hitman promised her, seriously considering getting her a place near a big city to enable that exact thing.

Half because date nights being a regular thing would be nice, and half because a Mafioso attending the theater because a lady wanted to see it with him was more respectable than a criminal that just liked dramas.

Before this, Renato hadn't figured out if having outside interests in distinctly non-criminal spheres would be damaging or a boost to his reputation. Only the really good managed to survive having quirks that made them slightly predictable or easy to find, especially when they were on their own like him, and he only recently had breathing room to consider taking up a few hobbies as hits became less… challenging overall.

Not to mention if his inclination to frequent the backstage of any production put on struck some other Mafioso as a bit queer, there was the risk they'd try to use that to inconvenience or kill him. To prove a point, or just simply because they didn't find it very respectable for one of their own to be doing.

Criminals could be just as opinionated and as much of an asshole as anyone else. Worse than, sometimes. Renato was no exception, probably was a little worse than the usual... or a lot.

Hiding his 'sudden' interest behind Sonya wouldn't make it magically acceptable for a loose self-made man to be doing on his own, but the fact that there was a girl involved at all would muddy the waters nicely. At least until Renato had enough of a reputation that a weakness or two getting out wouldn't kill him.

Without needing to hide or arm said weaknesses behind a Storm-Cloud's interests.

"I used to go a lot, with Cherep." Said Cloud woman mentioned casually into the amiable silence, shifting again as if she couldn't get comfortable doing more sitting after they just finished near three hours of it in a dark opera house. "Back when... well, before we left home anyways. We'd hit up most everything to kill a few hours, from plays to films and a couple ballets. I think he used to cherish ambitions of becoming an actor... but after that one circus we saw on his birthday with a few motorcycle tricks in it, he decided on stuntman and refused to consider anything else."
"...do the Zolotovs sponsor actors and playing troupes then?" There were any number of things acting skills could be put to, but what in the world did her brother do now?

Renato didn't particularly want to discuss Sonya's brother, but he did have a few absent questions about the man as well as a passing curiosity of what he did aside being another circus performer. As she had mentioned he would be in Moscow either now or later on in the morning, he was sort of resigned to hear about him anyways.

There was also that one lingering question about said purple colored stuntman's Dying Will Flames, which he shared with his little sister. They were both Clouds, somehow.

"No, Cherep's just not a fan of the whole 'criminal' thing." She admitted wryly, pointing another turn out for him.

Apparently, they weren't going back to her hotel right away. Curious as to where she wanted to go, he followed her directions. "Ho? How does that work out then?"

"...surprisingly enough, not as badly as you might think." Sonya took a moment to recall what her brother had once been like compared to how he was more recently. Which meant the hitman got the comparison in more depth than mere words could convey. "I think he got over shying away from that kind of thing for me, really. Which sometimes makes me feel like I don't appreciate him as much as I should. He could've made it a sticking point between us."

That was a thought.

What happened to dual Guardian Prospects when the two entwined Flame users split up for any reason?

Was it like Sky Rejection or becoming Discordant?

Renato frowned as he pondered that, following the next two turns the Storm-Cloud pointed out for him automatically.

Had that 'got over it' been actually just part of her brother's nature to do so, or a Flame instinct kind of thing to adjust for the twinning of his Flames with his sister's?

While thinking on the ramifications of that question, the hitman found himself pulling into a rather understated looking drive set outside a mostly dark building on her directions. "...where are we?"

"Park it here, and don't worry about the keys. Just leave them in the ignition." The thief informed him instead of answer that, snatching up her clutch and already pressing the release for her seatbelt. "After getting dressed up like this, I'm for damn sure going to get the mileage out of it before I take everything off."

"That doesn't... Sonya." Rolling his eyes hard enough to nearly give himself a headache, he followed her directions and also left the car to join her outside of it. "Sonya, that doesn't answer my question."

"Stop asking so many questions then." She huffed at him with a wry little smirk, ensuring she remained far enough out he couldn't pick up any hints from her mind. "After three hours in a theater, and a couple more since dinner, aren't you hungry too?"

Dogging her heels, the fancy silver-plated black leather booted heels she had been wearing since ruining the more practical dark brown leather boots she used to wear until one very bloody night, Renato was all set to question what kind of restaurant set up shop in a building abandoned for the night.
Right on up until he very nearly ran into her back when she turned a corner and stopped sharpish as soon as she was out of his sights.

The ‘bouncer’, another tattooed thug-type that seemed rather inexperienced using her father as a reference, eyed him and then her again. He then reached behind him and unhooked a chain from where it had been barring the way down a flight of steps.

Sonya flounced past him without another look, Renato a bit slower to be sure the man wasn’t about to try stabbing the back of his date for the night.

Down the stairs, and pass another two heavily reinforced doors, led into a smoky lounge-type affair. The Russian that brought him here gave the girl filling in at a podium as the maître d’ a very sharp looking little smirk. "Two, from the Zolotovs."

Wide eyed, the girl blatantly stared for a moment as she almost fumbled for the wine and spirits list set out for the waitresses to give patrons before recovering her nerves and gesturing for the both of them to follow her.

Following suite as the thief did as bid happily enough for her, Renato seriously wondered where the hell they were now. Not civilian in the least, this place.

There were guards posted in full view armed with AK-47s, more than half the visible patrons wouldn’t look out of place in a sleazy bar, and yet it was decked out in fine china and expensive looking décor. Dim and smoky, lit by the candles on the tables and a few muted ceiling lights, a soft jazz-like song played only loud enough to cover the hum of conversations taking place.

Another tick in the box of 'Sonya's a bigger shark in these waters than she acts'. Even as a freelance associate of Nono Vongola’s, he had never warranted an invite to a Mafia hotspot like this. The places where deals and alliances were made or broken over fine wines and whichever hors d'oeuvres were popular at the time, and deliberately kept neutral through hook or by crook.

Renato was rather touched she thought highly enough of him to bring him here. As it was equally possible she just liked the food here, he wasn’t going to let it go to his head.

Not just any mook was allowed in places like these, and Sonya didn’t even have to prove herself to the bouncer outside.

"We have some very good Georgian saperavi, or if you'd like we do have a few bottles of Sovetskoye Shampanskoye in stock."

From the raised eyebrow Sonya gave him as she seated herself, she was apparently leaving the selection of what they were drinking to him. Or possibly questioning if he could drink and then drive safely enough. "A moment, please."

The girl, seemingly expecting that response or highly trained to make it seem like it, bobbed a nod and left the list with them.

"One of us needs to be sober for the drive back, and to be honest I prefer driving at night when all the crazies are off the road."

"I'm fairly sure a glass of something won't kill either of us." Renato informed her patiently, looking over the list curiously and noting which he knew of and which wines he didn't.

This wasn't a dive of a bar, where getting sloshed was the whole point of frequenting it. They, likely, would be eating as well. There was no way in hell a glass or two of wine would knock either of
them for a loop, unless there was a non-listed additive.

Or they dumped a measure of vodka into the wines here.

Sonya shrugged lightly, lighting up a cigarette she pulled from a silver little case of them. She gave him a flat look for it but did eventually hand one over when he motioned for one.

"I've not heard of a few of these, so… a recommendation?"

"...the Sovietskoye Shampanskoye is something once only available to the bourgeoisie, and we have some pride in drinking it in their supposed downfall." Admitted the thief sardonically, around the filter placed between her lips. There was a pause as she lit the palm of her hand with Storm Flames to light it, then she flicked a glance back up to him. "Kind of a sparkling wine, more of a champagne instead."

"Well," turning over the provided ashtray so they could utilize it, the hitman leaned back in his own chair to study his dinner partner as he held a bit of Sun Flames to his own cigarette, "what the hell are we eating then?"

"In this place? Nearly anything you might want." The grin she leveled at him from across the table was wicked. "I'm kind of hoping you'll at least stump the cooks, the last time they did a fantastic Shepard's Pie for me."

"Highly tempting… but how long can your sister babysit the brat for us before becoming… disinclined to repeat it?" He was counting her little moue of disappointed thought as a win, even if lingering around for a few hours to let the cooks try to top some of the things Renato could order sounded interesting. "Mind selecting something for us? I'm not particularly picky right now."

"...the last time Arseniy took us here for dinner, Lisa's birthday before Tats left home, she got the shashlik and let us have a taste." Sonya offered slowly after puzzling over his request for a moment. "Lamb skewers, basically."

Well… that explained a bit of what she thought of this place as. Just merely a mafia only restaurant, not as Renato did. Alas… but… this was still someplace he didn't mind frequenting more with her, so it really didn't matter much.

Twitching her fingers in the air got the waitress girl to come back, and the Storm-Cloud ordered for them both in as few words as she could get away with. The poor waitress looked torn between being scared she had done something to offend her and wary of offering another insult, which conversely made his date more snappish with her.

"I think that man was right…" Renato commented lightly after a sip of the sparkling wine, "you need to get out of your territory more."

"I should, but then people cringe from me."

"They're not going to learn to stop doing it if you don't let them become accustomed to you." He pointed out, still trying for a more casual tone rather than something that would truly irk the woman. "I know it irritates you, little dragon lady, but-

His reward was a flat look and a scoff. "Renato. Would you respect someone that basically quails in place every time they see you?"

…no, no he wouldn't. If they cringed from him, they weren't worth the time to notice what they wanted. "Point."
"It doesn't help I get reinforcement for my 'weaklings are stupid' Cloud habits every damn time I go for a walk nowadays." Sonya continued in an honestly bitter tone. "If not from my own clan, then from outsiders that know what I've done recently. Damn near a decade of work on my self-control, and not a damn dent in that 'terrifying Cloud' reputation I never earned myself."

The hitman studied her thoughtfully for a moment, keenly aware there was about four tables worth of people trying to ineptly eavesdrop on them. "You know... we do get worse as we get older. You're about at that age now."

He was more than damn certain she had yet to actually acknowledge that facet of their abilities or knew to what degree 'worse' got.

Without a Sky to 'stabilize' things, all Flame users eventually started embracing their archetypes to even more ridiculous degrees than what they started with.

Renato had a few Sunny impulses he'd rather do happily without, as healing all of Shamal's childhood scrapes would do the brat no favors down the line when he didn't have a Sun Flame using hitman invested in his health nearby. He caught onto it when he thoughtlessly healed Sonya from that hole in her hand on the island.

Normally personal injuries didn't make him so much as bat an eyelash, but his arguably best thief friend wandering around with a significant divot of flesh missing from one palm had suddenly been unacceptable. He'd seen other Mafia ladies with more grievous injuries before that and since, and while he would heal up the lethal shit if asked that incident with her had been a first for demanding to be allowed.

Right on up until the Mist brat had been five heeding that Sun Flame user's impulse was excusable, but now he kept catching himself trying to make excuses to heal the bruises and minor cuts Shamal earned himself fairly. Excuses weren't something Renato allowed himself, so he didn't fall into that trap, but damn if it didn't make him want to gnash his teeth when the brat wandered around with so much as a skinned knee.

"I've had people do everything from faint in my presence to refusing to deal with me in my face." She admitted slowly, now rubbing at a temple tiredly. "Exactly how will that get worse?"

"You'll probably decide you don't mind having the reputation, and deliberately encourage that to weed out the useless you shouldn't bother with."

"...um..."

Renato couldn't suppress the smirk even if he tried, so he didn't bother.

It had been a guess on his end, the fact he was right was amusing as hell. "You already decided to earn it honestly, haven't you?"

Sonya very pointedly did not look him in the eyes as she busied herself with knocking the ash off her cigarette and taking a long swallow of her wine.

He could not wait for her to hit Mafia Land with that new outlook on things. The hitman leaned back, perfectly content to leave the conversation at that while they waited for their food.

Let those idiots that overheard some of that panic over what it would mean, he was going to enjoy the show.

(ooo000ooo)
"Young lady, do you know what time it is?"

"...actually, no. But apparently it's late enough for you to recklessly rush through the last leg of your trip and end up on my couch." Sonya answered Cherep's mostly rhetorical question bemusedly, eyeing the puppy pile going on half situated on his lap and half on said couch. "I thought you told Scruffy 'in the morning', Cherep."

"Technically, I believe it is morning." The stuntman offered easily, absently petting Shamal's hair and wondering if he should wake the kid up. He wasn't touching the head of red, braided hair on his other thigh, but only because he did have a sense of self-preservation.

Obviously, if Tatiana let the kid sleep out here instead of in one of the two beds their little sister had, then there was some 'wait up for mom' thing going on. Somehow moving to the couch once the heavy parts of their conversation was over with meant the nurse and now his nephew were using his thighs as pillows.

Neatly trapping the Cloud in place for the time being, because he was that much of a softy to let them do this to him.

Cherep then blinked at the distinctly familiar man that suddenly loomed over the tiny blonde woman's shoulder and was peering at the same sight curiously. "Oh... you're still here... whoever you are."

...he really only knew he was her friend because of those weird ass sideburns.

Seriously, why were they curly?

Did the man wax them to stay like that?

His little sister blinked at him blankly, then looked up to the man with the weird sideburns behind her and then back to him curiously. "...seriously, Cherep? I've told you his name several times by now."

"I'm hurt, truly." Not remotely sounding like it, the lightly tanned Italian waltzed into the hotel suite and tossed the hat on his head onto a coat rack which also held the stuntman's leather jacket. "I see you finished off my whisky while we were out."

"...Anna's whisky." Sonya amended for him after another moment of taking in his position, finally shutting the door behind her and going back to inspecting the menagerie her fellow Cloud had spread out over himself.

"Want to join?" Cherep asked half-teasingly, expecting her to turn her nose up at the prospective overly long session of touching only to blink when it seemed as if she was seriously considering it.

For the record, he had been joking. His left leg was starting to fall asleep, adding another woman to the slight nephew-weight cutting off his circulation to his right would do him no favors.

He had hoped Sonya's return would free him somewhat, in order to get some horizontal shuteye himself instead of the half-propped up doze thing he managed when the nurse dropped off and stuck him in place.

Although... he wasn't going to say no if she did want to join.
The thief willing to join a cuddle session on her own terms?

Rare.

He'd suffer a bit of pins and needle sensations in the morning for that.

"…sure, just let me change first." She then glanced from the Italian to her brother, then apparently decided leaving them more or less alone in the same room would be fine for a moment.

To the guy's credit, he didn't say anything too sarcastic until she had entered one of the rooms deeper in the suite.

"I take it you're not a fan of me, then?"

"Not in the least." Cherep studied the man intently, then looked down to the brunette kid in his lap. Likely this one was going to be hanging around his sister for a while, and he was the reason Sonya knew of and eventually adopted his nephew… so he supposed he could at least be polite. "I'm a pacifist, after all. Murderous mercenaries aren't my favorite thing in the world."

"How the hell does that even work?" Asked the man, hands in his pockets as he glowered down at the seated stuntman. "You're a Cloud, you-"

"I am a Cloud in my own way, thank you." He cut him off dryly, having heard everything about what 'Clouds' should be like before Viper got used to his Inverted-ness and general lack of all-around territorial aggression. "Quick question, are you dating my little sister?"

"If I am?" Drawled the Italian with the curly sideburns sardonically, hands stuffed in his pockets and looking highly unimpressed with Cherep's expressed brotherly concern.

"…does she know that?" Depressingly, that really did have to be asked.

"Debatable, but more likely not." Giving a one-shouldered shrug as if he wasn't bothered by that, which was rather… interesting, the Mafioso flicked a glance to where Sonya disappeared before returning his attention to him. "Is this the point where you try to threaten me into treating her right?"

"Nya can take care of herself, so… no. You treat her wrong, and she'll likely break you in half before any of us learn of it." Stretching out both arms on the back of the couch he was pretty much pinned to, the immortal stuntman snorted at the narrow gaze he was being treated to. "Besides, I'm a pacifist. I really don't even like harming animals even if they are tasty, why the hell would you think I'd try to threaten you?"

As an added… bonus, or perk or whatever, this man was the reason Sonya found and basically adopted his adorable little shit of a nephew. While Cherep was not really all that comfortable with the other man's job description, even with as little as he knew from just 'Mafioso', he could more or less overlook it as long as he was half-decent personally.

…eventually.

"…smart of you."

"I have morally bankrupt friends to do it for me instead." The stuntman tacked on with a pleasant little grin. "More specifically, I have a Mist I'm really good friends with that probably wouldn't mind making your life a living hell if I paid enough. And for my little sister, I'll empty my savings if I had to."
That narrow gaze widened for a beat, until the man straightened out his expression to something resembling 'neutrally unimpressed'. "Ho? Using others to do your dirty work?"

"I'm an entertainer by trade. I'm not anywhere near your level, and I don't see a point in trying to bluff it for something you could probably poke full of holes anyways."

Cherep might have a few years ago, until he ended up running errands for Arseniy and learned exactly how to act like he belonged to the Mafiya… but this man was an Italian Mafioso.

Slight bit different from USSR vory.

"So, no. I can't do anything against you personally. Even if I wanted to. But I can get someone that is."

"…your older sister was a lot more effective in her threats. Which also included using others to do her dirty work."

"She's also not nearly as nice as me." He informed the Italian dryly, flashing a smile to Sonya as she came back out with two blankets and in something more comfortable to sleep in than a cocktail dress. Pretty though that red dress might be. "So… although I'm aware I've been told this a few times… seriously, what the hell is his name?"

His little sister sighed, spreading the first blanket likely taken from her bed over the still slumbering nurse. "Cherep, this is Renato Sinclair. And isn't this the third time I've told you?"

"Probably." Odd were that he still wouldn't recall it after a few more days without the man around. "But again, he's not really that important for me to remember."

Sonya gifted him with an unimpressed look, before scooping up her brat and nearly doubling the weight keeping the stuntman pinned down on that side.

"…she does the same damn shit with people she dislikes." Sinclair pointed out repressively. "I know what you're doing with that."

"We do share a Flame type." Cherep reminded the man easily, flexing his legs carefully, as not to wake anyone sleeping on him, to help his circulation start moving again. "Although... I really do have to ask... exactly when did you learn I was a Cloud?"

"Vongola are not green, clueless morons. You might not have said anything, but there are ways to learn what type a Flame user is without outright asking."

The stuntman had to give the man that point and take it at face value that there were such ways aside from just guessing. Sonya had apparently known they knew, so… he was more or less safe?

Didn't really mean he had to like it, but something to watch for and see if he could pick that up somehow. "Well... perfect."

Renato eyed the woman who now had Cherep's nephew in her arms, then him, and then he rolled his eyes and stalked away for one of the actual beds.

…asshole.

"Goodnight to you too." Cherep spoke in the air dryly, giving Sonya a smirk when she glanced up at him skeptically. "So... what's new, sis?"
Sonya gave him another highly unimpressed look, snuggling Shamal deeper in her arms. "The fact I'm sleeping on my couch instead of my bed. And didn't you say it was morning?"

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 24th of June, 1969 continued. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"...I don't think I like this."

"Hush."

"Yeah, zio, shush." Shamal tacked on right after Tatiana's bid to get him to be quiet, earning himself a tolerantly amused look from the stuntman.

He did not appreciate the overly affectionate hair ruffle Cherep did in revenge for the six-year-old's gumption.

The nurse left them too it and the resulting poke-fight, inspecting Renato overseeing Sonya's efforts in cooking them brunch. The thief was bitching that 'half-cooked eggs are disgusting' to the hitman's preference of sunny-side up for his portion, and he was in return insinuating that at least that she shouldn't be able to screw up.

The blonde gave him a look that screamed 'want to bet on that?'

"It's adorable." Tatiana eventually insisted to her brother, who shot her a wry look over their nephew's head as he forced the kid into a tumble into his lap with a quick surprise tug.

"That's the part I don't like." Countered the other Cloud dryly. "I'm all for Nya learning how to cook edible things, because yes she probably desperately needs the help, but him? Who let him into her kitchen?"

"Mister Renato's a very good cook." Shamal insisted loyally, pouting up at the stuntman from his sprawled position across his legs. "Really, zio."

Faced with an adorable nephew that looked rather hurt at his doubting of his godfather, Cherep pulled a face and let his shoulders slump in defeat. "Yeah okay, sure kid. If you insist."

The Sun slid around to sit properly on the couch instead of rather terribly try to spy on the breakfast making efforts behind them.

The only reason she was more or less getting away with it was because neither were all that interested in what she was doing watching them. "Aww... someone's already wrapped around Shamal's little fingers."

"I happen to like Mists." He insisted, snagging the young one up and wrapping his arms around the kid to take him away from the Sun next to him. Then slouching down as if trying to position himself defensively between the Sun and said young Mist. "Besides, Clouds are basically low-lying Mists anyways. We're two peas of the same pod. If anything, Suns are more damaging to the both of us. We reject you and your criticism, so there."

"Yeah!"

"Get your feet off my coffee table!" Sonya snapped at her fellow Cloud loudly, causing said man to guiltily pull his motorcycle boots off of their little sister's book-covered low table.
Cherep pouted as he straightened up, even as Shamal snickered under his arm. "How the hell does she do that? There's no way she can see over the back of the couch."

"It's a girl-thing." Claimed Tatiana wickedly, smirking at the two wide eyed looks she earned. "The same way I know every time she tries to smoke while talking to me over the phone, or how Lisa always knows what's going on behind her when cooking."

"...how does that explain Arseniy's ability to always duck Lisa swinging a pan at his head when he annoys her?"

Shamal had yet to see such a thing, and his eyes almost popped out of his head. "Really?"

"Arseniy has mad skills, he's also lived with her for decades." Tatiana insisted, but actually… that was a very good question.

How did the vor do that?

"Breakfast, go wash up." Announced the thief cooking shortly, giving her Italian stud an irritable look for whatever crack the nurse missed teasing their brother. "Tats, don't you have your own room somewhere else?"

"Yeah… but… free food." She gave her best innocent look to answer her little sister's highly unimpressed glare.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 24th of June, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Shamal found himself given the entire day to simply do things with his uncle. After the morning lock picking practice, in which the older man joined him for.

"I am a pretty good lockpicker." The stuntman informed his nephew cheerfully as they left the neighborhood nonna Lisa lived in. "Nya's been teaching me in exchange of favors since I was about… a little older than you."

"Does she teach a lot of people?"

"Nope. Just me and you so far."

The Mist set his chin on the crown of the man's head, watching absently as they pass through the semi-crowded residential streets.

Zio Cherep was just as strong as his mamma, and just as willing to abuse it in plain view if he wanted it. He had only half-jokingly asked to ride on his shoulders for wherever they were going to go, but his zio was only too willing to play along with any childish suggestion.

Especially if it earned him an eye roll from his godfather. But… Renato hadn't joined them this morning, so maybe the older brother of his mamma just liked being childish sometimes?

"Where are we going?"

"Here or there. If you've only been around our old stomping grounds, you haven't really seen much of Moscow's side streets then yet, right?" He shifted Shamal slightly as they made a random seeming turn down another street, which seemed less house-ish and more like a tiny corner market. "Point out
anything you think is interesting, and we'll go explore. Nya's stuck in an office, and Tats is in the middle of medical things, but at least I can kick around with you randomly. So let's see what there is to see, shall we?"

What he wanted to see?

The six-year-old cast about curiously, but they were still in a heavy housing area and there wasn't yet much to see that wasn't more of the same they already passed. "...um."

The shoulders under him shook lightly as his zio snickered at his failure to articulate anything. "Don't worry about it, it'll take a bit of walking before we get anywhere interesting. So, when you do see something you want to take a look at just say so."

"I can do that."

"You got the height to see everything now, too." Pointed out the stuntman teasingly, making another random turn.

Shamal tugged lightly on the purple strands in his grip, still marveling over how much more he could see at the man's height rather than his own waist height view of the world. "Do you mind?"

"If we minded at all kid, you would've heard about it by now." Cherep informed him cheerfully, pausing a moment to check out a storefront they had almost just passed.

The Mist riding on his shoulders got distracted by their reflection in the windows. Which was likely a common sight when young children were out with adults and the kid got tired but was a pretty new experience for him.

This was not something he'd ever ask of Mister Renato, for one it would crease his godfather's suits and the older Italian hated that happening something fierce... and for another the hitman didn't really do touching. If you surprised him early enough when he wasn't all dressed up for the day it was fine, or if he started it like a bit of roughhousing here or there he'd overlook the damage to his outfit, but other than those rare situations this wouldn't happen even if he begged with a cup of espresso in hand.

Mamma probably wouldn't care much if he asked her, but this wasn't something you were supposed to do with a girl.

Shamal couldn't actually recall if he had once road on his father's shoulders or not. He didn't think so.

"You know..." Zio started thoughtfully from underneath him, turning away from the bank of windows and walking on farther down the sidewalk, "...your mamma is a bitch and a half to shop for."

"What?"

"I have to take what opportunities I have to shop for the family. When I have breaks like this I generally pick up birthday or Christmas presents early. So, the question then becomes 'what the hell do you get a woman that can pretty much get whatever she wants on her own?' As a matter of fact, all the women in this family tend to be really hard to shop for. Lisa's pretty much the same, really. And don't get me started on Tats."

...eep. "When is mamma's birthday?"

The stuntman hummed curiously a moment, only a momentary hitch in his stride at the question. "A
few days before New Year's. Why?"

"...I've never gotten mamma a birthday present." Ever, and he got mad at her for not showing up for his even when she had her presents for him left with the Iron Fort's butlers.

He got Mister Renato one each year since he ended up with the hitman, but he never considered his godmother.

"...mmm, don't think Nya rightfully cares much. Not if she hasn't said anything." Huffing, which nearly tipped Shamal off his perch when he wasn't prepared for the sudden moment, Cherep craned his neck around in order to actually see some of the Mist riding on his shoulders. "With her, though, you can't go wrong with pens."

He pulled a face at the older man even if he wouldn't be able to see. Necks weren't that bendy.

"Pens?"

"She likes to have something to write with at hand. I tend to steal her pens sometimes, and occasionally I forget to give them back, so whenever I do I get her a new one for whichever is closest. Her birthday or Christmas. Usually her birthday, which is right before Christmas. See? Halves my problem with getting something for her."

Now apparently, they had a direction, the stuntman started walking with purpose instead of the ambling wander they had been doing before. "But... pens aren't fun."

"Yeah. Boring adult stuff, I guess. Erm... books?" He sounded a bit more hesitant with that suggestion. "...although, keeping up with what she's read or already has a copy with is hard. So... magazines?"

"Still stuffy, zio." Shamal pouted, crossing his arms on the stuntman's head and glowering down the street. "Why do they both have to be hard?"

The man carrying him around laughed at his sullen question. "Because we care, which makes it a hell of a lot harder to shop for them than just someone random person you don't particularly want to please."

That was true. Shamal tugged on his zio's hair as he spotted something, getting the older man to turn slightly. "What about over there?"

"...a stationary store?"

"If you're getting mamma pens, then I'll get her something to write on with them." Except... Shamal had no pocket money.

Not even examples to make Mist copies from, nor had he thought of it before they left nonna's this morning. Then again, he had a zio who had claimed he was going to be shopping while they wandered around. There had to be a way to get him to pay instead.

At least, until mamma taught him to pick pockets for what money he wanted.

"Solid plan." Cherep turned obediently and, after checking the street for any cars, crossed the road to scope out the Mist's find. "Maybe then she'll stop writing on her own skin."

Shamal hadn't noticed, really. She mostly kept to longer sleeves, to hide her 'jewelry weapons', unless there was a reason why she would need to show her tattoos, or she was in 'safe' territory.
Whenever he saw her, she also tended to not be working at the same time.

Mister Renato was never going to be told of that. He had studied and committed his mamma's tattoos to memory in order to reproduce them on a Construct of her but had overlooked anything on her skin lower than them.

He also needed to actually learn more Cyrillic letters and words, too. Both his godparents could read it, and if the writing on his mamma's wrists and hands changed from something understandable to something illegible Renato would question that. His godfather missed nothing, especially if it meant Shamal wasn't quite as good at something as he should be.

Speaking the language only helped so much, knowing how to read it was important too. "...can we get some books too, zio?"

Then man heaved a sigh, swinging him down to the store's floorboards so they both could look instead of Shamal having to look at only what the older man was near. "You really are your mamma's child, aren't you? Yes, we can get a book or two. I figured I'd be buying one or so anyways."

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 24th of June, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Can't say I have."

"That's not much of a point, boss lady." Galina remarked idly, half her attention still on updating the new information testing Triad members for their Flame focuses into the records the office held. "You wouldn't recall any syndicate's name unless they've recently pissed you off."

"...you should probably ask Arseniy then, Renato." Sonya did have to give her secretary the point. She could barely recall more than three, discounting the Zolotovs. "Although, I really don't think we have any relations with them."

"We don't, actually." Confirmed the Lightning. Then the woman looked up sharply, eyeing the Italian Mafioso standing in the middle of the office. "Exactly why do you want to know?"

"I'd rather not spark off a turf war when Shamal's in one of the syndicate's territory, especially if I have to drop Sonya's name in order to get the information I need." Renato drawled out sardonically, adjusting his fedora as his eyes slid back to Sonya's. "...I'm going to take the next few days to do a bit of long-range hunting, so don't expect me back at night."

"...fine. You had better say goodbye to the brat." Drumming her fingers on the surface of the desk, she really did wonder if she cared much that he was going to use her as a piece of bait.

Actually, it might be a good thing.

She was pretty sure the reason she didn't get visitors from outside the clan was due to the Grekov Gang and what she did to their thug. The incident that happened right afterwards with the idiots getting arrested and the St. Petersburg gang suspecting the Moscow thieves’ clan of backstabbing had likely not helped anything.

If the hitman kept to only promising she'd hear a few vory out, then she'd actually have an invested reason to not blow them off entirely if anyone was asking for an audience with her. "...I don't actually have a reason to tell you to go lightly with that name dropping, actually."
"...ho?"

"You're the equivalent of free advertising for me right now." She informed him dryly, a sly smirk pulling one side of her lips up. "Feel free to use it as often as you want."

Renato snorted, sweeping his hat off and giving her a kind of half-assed bow with it over his chest. "Well... I certainly won't say no. But... if only to not cut my own bargaining powers from underneath me, I'll keep it to one or two from any syndicates I investigate before leaving."

Studying her friend thoughtfully, she absently accepted whatever file Galina wanted her to look over once the conversation was done but merely held it before her instead of actually peruse. "Can you get back across the Iron Curtain on your own?"

"I'll cheat and take the Mafia Land routes out."

"Scared to attempt it alone?" Insinuated the Lightning wickedly, only to earn an entirely droll look from the man.

"Not hardly. Sonya and I have a standing date to cross the worst point sometime in the future, I'd rather not spoil it for myself before we can get around to it." Flicking his coal black eyes back to the seated Storm-Cloud, the Sun replaced his fedora and nodded to both women. "I'll start tonight, Sonya. After dinner."

"...you're not trying to... avoid my brother, are you?" Sonya didn't really think the two of them would get along well, but she had held out the hope they might be able to get along as she and Viper did.

Content to share acquaintances, and maybe a favor or three, but more or less neutral to each other.

The hitman snorted again as he turned to the door, this time with a lot less humor behind it. "No. But you are running out of beds, Sonya."

"...I'd figured either Cherep would share with me and Shamal, or we'd crawl in with you."

Seriously, the beds in her hotel suite were not small ones. Big enough to hold two or three adults, or at least four kids. Two adults and a child wouldn't even start cramping anyone's personal space.

"Or someone would pick the couch, but it's not nearly as comfortable as the beds."

Galina was staring at her in surprise, which made Sonya slightly confused.

"What?"

The surprise was tucked away, leaving something depressed and slightly amused behind on the other woman's expression. "...nothing. Just... nothing."

"If you're going to climb into my bed, little dragon lady, you had better leave the brat out of it." Renato tossed over his shoulder after a few long seconds of complete silence, actually working on the whole 'leave the office' thing. "...but I've put things off too long as it is. As tempting as you are, I'm badly behind."

...did Renato not like sharing sleeping space with Shamal?

Eh... she was pretty sure that wasn't the case, he'd be a lot more scornful about her letting the kid sleep with her if that was true. He did question it, but she was at least half sure he had allowed it
back when the brat was three.

Excuse her, three and a half.

Shamal wouldn't have ended up bawling into her stomach that morning in Mafia Land had the hitman been entirely against the brat infringing on his privacy or personal space like that.

Sonya tapped her pen on the desk a few times, belatedly recalling that Galina had given her something to look over when the paper got in the way of her playing with the writing utensil. "… what is this?"

"The missing Rain information young Larion finally got us." Hesitating, the Lightning looked from the doorway an Italian hitman had wandered through then to her questioningly. "Sonya… I have to ask, do you know what you're doing with that man?"

Sighing heavily, the thief tossed her a slightly disgruntled look. "Yes, Galina, I do know. Thank you."

She did and could make friends. Even keep them with some reliability. Cherep was an example of how well she could do it if she was invested enough. Renato had been a friend for damn near a decade now.

Really, Sonya wasn't that dense.

"…if you're sure, boss lady."

(ooo000000)

(Tuesday the 24th of June, 1969 continued. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"…so, he's gone. Right?"

"Yes, Cherep, Renato left to get on with his work." Sonya repeated for the third time that night, dropping the book held in one hand down because she highly doubted she'd get any reading done tonight.

As if it wasn't obvious by the fact the two of them agreed to meet back up in Vongola's Iron Fort on a specific Sunday to drop the brat off for school before he left with his suitcase after dinner, or that said brat was now moping with them lacking a hitman lounging on the other end of the couch.

It was also the only reason she got out of cooking this night too, the asshole she called a friend was a fucking taskmaster when it came to 'giving tips'. Actual lessons would've been less irritating than him looming over a shoulder while she tried to figure out how to not screw up her next dish.

Sonya had been seriously tempted to punch or flick the man in revenge, but she was still highly wary of actually harming someone she didn't intend to still. Maybe not yet, and pending a test or two against her brother, who was fast becoming annoying about his aversion to Renato.

She could understand Cherep didn't like murder as a matter of course, but… Viper probably wasn't much safer or as polite about things. The thief even managed to get along with the damn Mist, the very least he could pretend to return the favor.

For fuck's sake neither she nor Tatiana, or for that matter Arseniy, were particularly innocent criminals that stuck to the lighter fare. Then there was that little incident late last week that she still...
didn't want to tell her brother about…

Shamal tightened his hold around her waist, burrowing deeper into the knitted blanket and her stomach. Either because he was that depressed that his godfather had to go back to work or just for the extra warmth.

Shooting her brother a stern look got the man to change the subject in a fast hurry.

"So… you didn't really miss much with the classes you cut out on back in West Germany."

Much better topic, in Sonya's opinion. "Did you have any trouble with the instructors after I left?"

"Naw, told them it was a family emergency and you were fully aware you wouldn't be getting the class fees back."

She sniffed in disgust. Money really did make the world go around, didn't it?

Shamal dug his pointed chin into the bottom of her sternum, peering up at her through the hem of the blanket. "What classes?"

"…classes to drive those really big shipping trucks on the roads." Sonya admitted easily enough, hoping this might distract the kid from his mope. "Cherep and I took them not too long ago, after the second time I had to drive one around in my work."

"You can drive one?"

"I'm thinking about getting one, and the trailer attachment, myself." Offered the stuntman, draping himself over the back of the couch she and the kid were sprawled out on like an oversized and purple cat. "And… I'm the only one that finished the course and got my license to drive a Class C lorry in Europe."

Sonya placed a hand on Shamal's terribly messy hair to let her speak before the kid demanded another answer. "As in…?"

"As in I want to build a living apartment in the trailer and simply live out of that." Cherep clarified for her, grinning as the Mist brat finally peeled himself out of the blanket and his sulk just to give him a weird look. "I live on the road kid, this way…? I can live in style on the road instead of out of hotels and shit."

"Can you afford that? The insurance alone…"

"Eh… yeah, that…" Scratching a hand through his messy purple hair, the stuntman pointedly did not look at his fellow Cloud. "…probably won't bother, honestly. Not until I have more operating funds. I barely can afford another semi-decent bike right now, and after this next year…"

"…what's happening this next year?"

There was a pause.

"…before you say anything, I did check this out… and mentioned it to Vipes so if anything is rotten they'll probably tell me before it kicks off." With that entirely not reassuring statement out of the way, her brother flashed her a brightly cheerful grin that was a touch wary. "I was invited to do a world tour, as Skull de Mort the stuntman. So… I'm taking a break from the circus for a year. Master Liam said it was okay, and I still have a spot with them the year after."
"No, I just have criminally inclined friends and family that I knew would ask if I checked it and didn't feel like suffering through a lecture about being too trusting times five or six times. The guy's on the up, no criminal records and no criminal connections that I could find." Cherep grinned with good humor, so she supposed he wasn't that annoyed with the likely reaction they would've had if he had just went along with someone else’s suggestions without so much as a suspicious thought of 'why' asked. "I'm going to be part of a group on a less European tour than my usual, sort of a variety show kind of thing. But... it's a break into going solo. This is a good thing, sis."

Sonya frowned, but frankly she had little but the vaguest idea how the world of show business operated. If it wasn't criminally inclined, she had less than a firm idea how any other lifestyle went. "...I'll take your word for it. Viper knows?"

"Yes, Viper knows." Confirmed the stuntman wryly. "Frankly, they asked for more detail that you have so far."

"...do me a favor." She asked instead of comment on all the sudden suspicions she had over his 'lucky break'. One had to hope Cherep knew what he was doing, and if it was a good thing or not. She wasn't going to be trying to argue.

This was the point of him going into the entertainment industry, getting well-known or at least popular enough no syndicate would want to risk murder or kidnapping him due to all the civilian and law enforcement attention it would draw. In that light, this was a step forward.

He gave her a steady look for a long moment, but eventually nodded. "Sure?"

"Take Viper with you to read over whatever contract you're to sign. You're a communist stuntman, I don't think you know what you should be paid in capitalist countries and since this is a world tour... I sure as hell don't, but Viper would know."

"...that's... actually... a... very good idea." Cherep admitted after blinking at her a few times, setting his chin on his crossed arms propped on the back of the couch. "...but I don't think I should charge that much. The man's kind of doing me a favor-"

"Cherep." She interrupted exasperatedly, loosening a hand from where it was pinned between the pages of the book she really wasn't reading to point in his face. "Take it from the professional thief. Part of what makes things special or desirable is how much is charged in order to see or own it. Some of the crap I steal is as ugly as sin, but since it's rare or expensive idiots want them. Do your homework, and maybe ensure Viper doesn't go overboard, but for fuck's sake... don't settle for the lowest example you have to work with."

"But I don't need that much." Argued the stuntman, pulling himself upright fully in order to wave around his hands in protest. "I do my own mechanic work, buy my own bikes, I do my own choreography, there's even the whole..."

Both siblings then looked down at Shamal, who curiously looked up and tried to stealthily redo the two buttons of the thief's shirt he had loosened out of what was probably boredom.

"...what?"

"Family secret." Cherep informed him brightly, holding a finger to his lips as he bent over the back
of the couch again. "This part you can't tell your fellow Italians, kid. You can brag about everything else, pretty sure your mamma won't care, just not this part."

"What part?" Asked the Mist curiously, frowning slightly as he dug his knees into Sonya's thighs in order to sit up and look fully at the older man. "And I can still tell Mister Renato, right?"

It also dragged the blanket down to around her knees, which… fuck. Her apartment got cold at night. It was the whole reason she made off with the damn blanket in the first place.

"Honestly? I'd rather you didn't. If you don't think you can do that, we can pick this up later."

Shamal gave a wide-eyed look to her, and the Storm-Cloud sighed. "It's his secret, kid. What he says goes about this one."

The brat drew himself up with an almost-insulted air about him but sighed and furrowed his brows in the next second when neither of them so much as blinked at him strangely. Cherep looked at her, but all the thief could do was shrug.

He'd know if he was willing to go along with that or not. Renato learning through Shamal's stray thoughts was a concern, because if anyone would take that undying Cloud skill as a challenge it was a hitman or an assassin… but she was also half-convinced the Mafioso would keep it to himself now.

Hopefully. She was still keeping Renato's secrets, and she couldn't tell her brother them for the reason why the brat shouldn't be told. Maybe she should make a point of mentioning the kid got something family related while the hitman was gone… and that she would greatly appreciate it if it would remain between family only.

The Italian had no great like for her brother, but her…?

Again, hopefully. Especially if she made mention that his hidden skill was the whole reason why he'd be learning about her fellow Cloud's since she couldn't warn either about it as a reason why not to share Cherep's.

"...I won't tell anyone, zio." Shamal decided firmly, a flicker of something indigo passing through his normally brown eyes as he all but glared up at the older man. "You're family."

He earned himself both a wryly amused grin, likely for the near-pout on his face, and a hair-ruffle that made the thief sigh in despair over his already unruly hair getting worse. They would have to brush it out before bed tonight at this rate.

"Good to hear, kid. So... the great big secret is..."

Leaning forward curiously in the first moment, the Mist picked up on him getting teased pretty quick when the silence stretched longer than any unintentional dramatic pause would. "...is?"

Cherep practically bent in half to bring the two of them nearly nose to nose. "...is..."

Another too-long pause occurred, earning him a flat look from the kid balanced on her thighs.

Sonya manifested an ax in her hand, pointing it in her brother's face. "I swear to hell, you rile him up you can sleep with the brat tonight."

Snickering at her mostly fang-less threat, the stuntman shrugged at her and looked back to the Mist. "...is, that I'm immortal."
Shamal blinked blankly at him, then shot her a highly skeptical look. The Storm-Cloud just sighed yet again.

Why were the two of them so damn dramatic?

"...wait, really?" Whipping back around to the immortal in question, the kid narrowed his eyes. "...you're pulling my leg, right?"

"...unfortunately, no." Sonya answered for her brother wryly, who just kept grinning. "I've actually seen it happen, Shamal. Cherep can't die from any physical injury."

"And from ingesting poisonous substances, don't ask how that was found out." The Cloud tacked on for himself, something wry and bitter touching his expression. "Or the whole 'immune to physical damage' thing. Just know... even if something happens to everyone else in this family... I'll always be here, kid."

As the young boy looked completely poleaxed and not up to further conversation, the older man looked back at her. "Continuing, I'm not going to need health insurance either. Or life insurance. I have less costs overall, shouldn't I then charge less?"

"If you don't charge as much or around what other stuntmen would charge, it looks suspicious. Like you're cutting corners to be that cheap, or that something's shady." She countered irritably, tugging Shamal back down. The kid went without protest, which also let her tug the blanket back up over them both to help cover her chilly belly. "In that eventuality, then use the extra you don't really need to build up a fund for your next bike. Which is part of what insurance is for, replacing things lost in accidents. Like your bikes."

Cherep mulled that over for a few seconds, adopting a 'thinking pose' to dig the conversation out of the heavy atmosphere. "...I could, but... the guy might think I am cheaper because I'm a Soviet citizen. So... I think a compromise. Not nearly as much as other stuntmen, at least this time around, but not enough to be 'cheap'."

"You need that money to continue touring around on your own where you want to go... and for that lorry and trailer you want." Sonya pointed out ruthlessly, smirking at the flat look she was gifted with. "Be nice later, when you can afford it. Right now, I still vote for you to borrow Viper for a day as your agent."

"...an agent isn't a bad idea. But Vipes? That's just cruel, Nya."

"While there's still a risk of mafia involvement, I'd rather you be safer than sorry." Shamal tugged at her shirt, making her glance down at him. "What's up, brat?"

"...if zio can't be killed... then why be so careful?"

"I can still be taken hostage or imprisoned, kid." Cherep answered for himself, with another of his faintly bitter smirks. "Part of the reason why I know how to pick locks now."

"Never believe it when someone tries to tell you he's dead." Sonya tacked on, tugging a hank of his wavy brown hair absently. "It will never be true. So far as we know."

"Speaking of, Tats said you tried it."

"...I am fairly certain I failed." She admitted slowly after recalling the incident in question. "I mean to copy Cherep's Cloud ability, Shamal. It was... extremely painful. Like taking sandpaper to the injury."
The stuntman scratched at his barely-there stubble sheepishly. "...actually, that sounds about right. Hurts like a bitch, but that way you remember you are injured. Keep it up until it fades, and then... maybe a week or two more? That's a sign at least the flesh around the injury was finally replaced with natural cells."

"I forgot about it, then I bled all over things." Sonya protested, feeling the palm of her right hand itch as she recalled the sensation only now dulled with time. "I couldn't keep it up."

"Neither could I, in the beginning." Admitted her fellow Cloud bluntly, rolling his left shoulder almost gingerly. "It just... takes a bit more stubbornness to not be injured, little sister."

Shamal turned wide brown eyes up at her, and the thief managed a sickly feeling smile. "If I learn it, kid... then you won't have to fear you'll lose me too."

...but she was not happy to hear she had been on the right track. How high was Cherep's pain tolerance, to even so much as consider a career that had as much chance for crippling or deadly injuries as stuntman?

To re-experience that kind of pain and then dismiss it as inconsequential?

"Cherep, idle question."

"What?"

"...how did you get up here? You crashed your bike so I'm certain you didn't drive up here..."

Her fellow Cloud beamed at her. "I hitchhiked."

Sonya tossed one of her throw pillows in his face irritably. "The fuck, Cherep? That's not safe-"

"I'm still alive and with everything still safely with me, obviously it is." The idiot then handed over the little cushion thoughtlessly, which just meant the thief had something else soft and possibly not-lethal to throw at him.

(Wednesday the 25th of June, 1969. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"You again? I'm not-"

Renato shot the man through the kneecap without so much as a word of greeting, stepping over to the lamed vor lightly as the other patrons of this little dive-bar suddenly decided they wanted to drink elsewhere. "I'm no longer a guest of the Zolotovs, so I no longer care what you will or won't help them with."

Placing the barrel of his gun against the pale bartender's forehead, the hitman shot him a dark smirk. "Now... now I'm asking as a hitman looking for my target. You know what question I want answered. Either talk or die."

Bloodless lips peeled back from stained yellow teeth as the lamed man sneered back defiantly. "Fuck you."

"Now, now... that's very rude." Drawled the Sun sardonically, pressing the gun harder into clammy skin. "I'm one of two Sun Flame users that could possibly fix that knee in Russia right now. And I
leave in a few days. Tatiana is the sister of a dear friend, and she'll be less than cooperative if you try asking her."

The man froze.

Renato let him think.

He was well aware vory would just be as pessimistic over physical injuries as any other criminal but being able to fix the damage he did opened up a very interesting method of interrogation for any decent Sun Flame user. Torture against hardened criminals would get him nowhere fast, taking away and then giving back one's ability to walk or use their hands was a different situation entirely.

He had six names to check out before he left Moscow, six of the most likely culprits he was to hunt down for the Cerrito Crime Family as well as for Nono Vongola. If none of them checked out, he'd move on to the less likely names.

All fifteen of them, which he had either confirmed as still alive or hadn't been able to rule out as safely deceased being 'gentle'. In the three days he was giving himself, before going back to Mafia Land to take a few hits to keep in good standing and keep his apartment on the island.

Putting it shortly, Renato had little time and a lot of information to go through. Being gentle now that he wasn't a guest of a local target would either get him more of the same or less information than merely asking had gotten him this past week.

If this didn't pan out, he'd start in on the other end. Combing through airline records in hopes it wasn't a Mafia Land operation. Security feeds, hotel guest books, and the old-fashioned leg-work he had been hoping to cut out via Sonya's connections after that.

Renato grabbed the barstool the vor tried to stealthily grip in order to fight with his offhand, putting a bullet between the unhelpful bartender's head since his answer was an unsurprising 'no'. Easing the hammer down again and putting the gun away, he ensured there was enough Sun Flames in the hand holding the metal barstool to melt off anything he didn't want to leave behind before tossing it away.

He did take the time to select a few bottles of liquor from the bar shelf, including a bottle of vodka with a label he was pretty sure Sonya rather liked. Some whisky for himself, and an interestingly dusty bottle of brandy for Timoteo Vongola that sat higher than the rest of the more 'popular' seeming bottles.

Then, since he could already hear the sirens as the police were belatedly alerted to the murder, waltzed out the back door of the bar for his next target and put the liquor into his suitcase to free up his offhand arm again.

Hopefully Sonya wouldn't mind he was off possibly killing a few semi-aligned freelancers. He'd be actually putting effort into the syndicate aligned ones, but the small-fry being irritably uncooperative was just... annoying.

Hmm... should he bother getting any more souvenirs?

The hitman was fairly sure that only a handful of non-Soviet criminals tried to work or visit the USSR, and having proof was all sorts of fun to have on hand when doubt was expressed.

The brandy was a consolation prize, mostly. For when he dropped what information Renato would be willing to tell the Ninth Sky of Vongola about his surprisingly 'not-small-fry' Russian contact he pissed off.
…damn, should he go straight back to Italia first?

Or leave it for when the brat was back and could confirm a few things in his own Misty ways?
Arseniy gave her a blearily kind of glare over his morning paper. "Someone just took out that informant jackass on Konstantina Tsareva."

"...that's nice?" Sonya answered warily, wondering what the vor was doing up at this hour and what that subject had to do with her.

Other than actually seeing Cherep this morning instead of sleeping through the early morning lock picking practice. Her foster father had been up for the morning hours more this last month than she recalled him doing way back when she and her siblings had been all living in the same house together.

"Likely," Lisa offered when it became apparent the blonde woman had no blessed clue what the issue was, "its Sinclair doing it. We have enough information to at least tentatively confirm he was in the same area at the time. Isn't he still holed up with you and Shamal?"

"No? Renato's here for business too, he left yesterday to get on it without dragging the clan into his work." Shamal looked rather grouchy at the reminder, and Cherep ruffling his hair only earned him a dirty look. "We… might see him at the end of the week, on Sunday. But I'm not counting on that. Moscow's a big city, and it's possible the person he's looking for didn't come from here but another of the USSR's cities."

"...so, he's freelance now?" Her foster mother checked in surprise, looking thoughtful when she nodded confirmation. "We had wondered if you sent him off to do that."

"Why?" Frankly, Sonya couldn't really recall who the informant guy on Konstantina Tsareva was, or even what he looked like. Even what it was he traded information for. Way too far south for her to have bothered. "Renato's a hitman, and friend or not I have no desire to get in his way. Unless it's another Zolotov he's after, but..."

"We'd take care of that." Arseniy grumped, folding the paper with a quiet rustle as his lover started transferring full plates of breakfast to the kitchen table. "Otherwise there's the hope he wouldn't act against your syndicate, right?"

She was aided by the visiting stuntman, who pulled an unseen face behind their foster father for the 'shop talk' going on. Cherep slid a plate before both Sonya and Shamal, before snatching up his own and Lisa's while she was still fussing with Valera's plate of bite-sized pieces.

"Pretty much, Arseniy… ever think of becoming a barista, Cherep?"

"Oh ha, ha. No." Scoffed her fellow Cloud, stealing the syrup from under Arseniy's hands to first pour over Shamal's pancakes then his own. "I like people, true… but if I wasn't allowed to be an asshole back when I want to..."

"Children, plans?" Lisa asked of them lightly, nudging a mug of milk closer to her son's reach and earning herself an exasperated look from the youngest Cloud in the room. "I know most of what Nya's up to, or what she should be up to, but you Cherep?"
"...it's my vacation. A whole lot of nothing but lazing around and twiddling my thumbs. Probably going to hit up the circus and do a little research into... uh, the information they might have if I'm bored enough." Claimed the stuntman airily, waving a fork as if to make a point. "That is, if Sonya is going to be mean and keep Shamal all to herself for what time I have free."

Sonya quickly stole her godson out of his seat, shifting his plate closer so he could still eat off it even relocated half a foot over. The Mist blinked at the abrupt change in seating, but basically shrugged and kept stuffing his face with strawberry syrup covered pancakes.

"Mine."

Valera growled irritably, sourly eyeing the interloper who decided to flatly ignore him in return.

"...but... but Nya! Please?" Batting suspiciously shiny purple eyes at her, Cherep tried to sneak a hand to Shamal's shirt in order to steal him back to either his original seat or to his own lap.

He retracted his hand pretty damn fast when Sonya nearly stabbed his hand with her own fork. Slowly so he could avoid the pain, but still speedily enough he almost overbalanced backwards and nearly fell out of his chair.

"Children. Behave." Instructed their mother sternly, eyeing them both severely until the thief reclaimed her utensil from the wood of the table. "Shouldn't Shamal decide who to spend time with?"

Said Mist brat looked startled to be dragged into the discussion, giving first Lisa then Sonya a wide-eyed stare. Then he overstuffed his mouth in order to make no such decisions that would force him to verbalize a pick between the Cloud siblings.

Cherep cracked up, nearly face-planting into his scrambled eggs with the force of his laugh.

Sighing, the thief poked a ballooning cheek absently. "Small bites, and chew your food, Shamal. I believe Renato told you not to do that anymore. And I mostly have to get back to actually working instead of just absent overseeing, so a few times a week I'd appreciate it if you went with your zio or zia for the day instead of spending it with me or the Mists. Or Scruffy."

"...Scruffy?" Questioned the stuntman curiously. "I... don't think I met someone by that name."

"I picked him up this year, you had already long left with the circus by then." Admitted his fellow Cloud slowly. "Tats has met him, if you come into the office real quick for a few things I need your help with you can meet him before you leave."

"Huh..."

"I don't have to pick, right?" Shamal questioned from her lap, having finally swallowed his oversized bite with a generous sip of milk to help.

"No... we were just teasing, kid."

Sonya huffed into the Mist's already disordered hair. "Cherep's right, brat. It would help if you wanted to spend time with your zio or zia this week, but I won't say no if you pick a quiet day and spend it with me in my office. Just be aware, this week I have several boring-ass meetings to attend and a whole slew of people to talk to. Comparatively for my usual work week, anyways."

That way, she could hopefully avoid another 'I don't want to' fit without Renato nearby. She wasn't entirely certain how well she might be able to handle it, so avoiding the triggers was her plan.
Not even she could dedicate weeks on end to the same study, so expecting Shamal to do so would be hypocritical of her.

"You put things off for nearly two months, you shouldn't be that surprised." Lisa chimed in peaceably while neatly nibbling on her cheese coated toast, the same she had served her daughter instead of the sweeter pastries she whipped up for the menfolk. "Things do build up when you don't pay attention to them."

"Things build up even when I stare at it dead in the face, Lisa." She countered, not huffily but at least with a measure of exasperation.

Cherep waved a fork at her until he managed to swallow his latest mouthful. "That's also life, little sis."

"Eat, Nya." Lisa instructed firmly, as while they might have the lightest breakfast options the thief was still behind the older Russian woman in clearing her plate. "Your worries will still be there afterwards, but at least then you'll have a meal under your belt before having to try to manage them."

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 26th of June, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"So... you're Scruffy?"

Said nicknamed Sun looked up skeptically after a moment taken to be sure he didn't know the voice addressing him, taking in the violently purple colored younger man dressed in jeans and a plain black tee shirt standing as bold as brass in his underboss' office for a quiet moment.

"...yes?"

"Is that really your name?" The man questioned uncertainty, looking slightly awkward. Hands stuffed in his jeans' pockets and actually looking at him instead of Sonya or glaring made this newcomer a step above the usual interactions Peter got with other Zolotovs. "I mean... if that's what you want to be called I'm all for using it... but that's a weird name."

"You have no room to say such a thing." His usually bland boss snapped at the guy, impatiently rounding the other and leaving Shamal on his own next to him without so much as a second look back in spite of her tone.

...so, obviously someone he had yet to be introduced to but that she honestly trusted more than even the other Zolotov thieves or vory of the clan. Maybe even more than Galina.

Sonya wasn't nearly as disinterested in what he was up to as the Lightning woman's actions. Not even as stubbornly neutral as even Usov still got, near about the same level of pure passive curiosity as Shamal earned just by existing.

"...I picked Peter. Sonya decided on Scruffy as a nickname before that, though. Nurse Tatiana picked McScruffy and that ended up my surname somehow." Absently rolling his battered but still his pen through his fingers, and dimly resigning himself somehow to the fact he was still the oldest person in the room, Peter shot the tiny blonde woman a questioning look. "Can I ask who this is?"

"...oh, right." The icy blonde waved a hand at the interloper easily enough, without any hint of
irritation or aggression or badly hidden impatience for either his asking or the other's lingering presence. "Scruffy, my brother Cherep. Cherep, this is Peter McScruffy… he's a Sun user."

Shooting this new man a quick glance again, said Sun frowned and wondered where he fit into this syndicate. One sister was a criminal medic, the younger was a thief of a researcher, but what did the brother do?

"…hello?"

He got a blindingly bright grin back from the apparently very affable and cheerful man, one hand slipping loose of his pockets to shake his own briskly. "Why hello yourself. How'd you end up here?"

"He protested me saving his life, by not appreciating the fact I wouldn't let him run out in front of a firing squad."

"Boss lady, it was a fair bit more involved than just that." Peter protested tiredly, scrubbing a hand through silver-touched blond curls as the Mist brat crawled up on the couch next to him for their semi-usual game hour. "I protested the fact you only saved me, and then were about to leave me there."

Sonya batted a limp wrist dismissively as she started to look over the pile of work that had built up over the last month, but the correction earned him more curious attention from the new man.

"She did? That's... awesome." 'Cherep' gave his sister a proud look. "Really, Nya?"

"...we were held in the same Sierra Leone jail cell. It was just a matter of convenience… and a bit about a diamond he can use."

"And let about twenty locals test their own luck against said firing squad." The Sun added dryly, but not nearly as sarcastically as he might have a few months ago.

He'd gotten over it after several nightmares and a cringe-inducing sensation of guilt arising every time he thought of it, and she frankly didn't care about it so bringing it up netted him nothing but the possibility of irritating her.

"Why do you keep dismissing that part?"

"I have no care for it. Said locals left us behind." She snapped back quickly, sorting her work into three piles neatly and starting in on the biggest one by picking up the topmost page and eyeing the words printed on suspiciously. "If they did not wish to be cautious, then they fully deserve what they found once they took advantage of the hole you started and I finished."

Flicking purple eyes between her and him, his boss' brother scratched idly at his clean-shaven jawline. "Frankly, the fact she rescued you at all is pretty damn impressive. For... someone like... well, us. I mean I'm one too, but I'm Inverted so what I would've done and what a Classical Cloud would've done is pretty damn far apart. Seriously speaking, you are here which is probably better than you would've gotten with just about anyone else like her."

"I made her. By basically yelling at her that she couldn't leave me in a foreign city and country after busting us both out of jail." Admitted Peter sourly, wondering if he had just asked... would she have done the same for the others before they ran out to be mowed down by gunfire? "It wasn't entirely her idea."

"Do you really think you can make Nya do anything she doesn't want to do?" Countered Cherep
with a smirk, gesturing to both himself and the office in general with a broad sweep of a hand. "You're standing here, I'm still going to take that as a good thing regardless whatever else happened."

Scruffy almost, almost made the mistake of asking what he thought of his sister's latest activities… but the glare he got behind Cherep's back had him holding his tongue.

"...I have a good twenty more stones I need you to check," Sonya forcibly changed the subject with, scooping out a tiny list of things compared to what she had waiting for her from one desk drawer, "see if these really are Cloud stones and not just Storm-Cloud compatible."

"Will do." His boss' brother examined his to-do list for only a few seconds before folding it up and tucking it away in one of his leather jacket's pockets. "Galina still working as the gatekeeper for them?"

"I can get you in there, if you don't mind waiting a few hours." She gestured to the pending stacks of her own work. "I've got a meeting with the Pahkan and a few other things to deal with."

"...Nya, did you blow him off?"

"...maybe." Admitted the thief after a very long moment of silence. "Only for the last few days or so..."

Shamal snickered into a hand next to him, reminding Scruffy after a guilty start that the kid was still rather patiently waiting for him to get with the program and pay attention so they could have their game today.

Cherep, who was apparently another 'Cloud' type, cocked his head to the side. Sonya merely gave a listless kind of shrug, not a dismissive or an irritable one but not remotely as absent-minded as she tended to be when not against a particular activity going on around or near her.

As far as he knew it… she really only came in 'not interested', 'could care less', 'annoyed', 'irritable', 'argumentative', 'pissed off', and now 'spoiling her baby' modes.

Simple, but dangerous and full of pitfalls to trip the unwary.

The purple man rocked back on his heels thoughtfully. "Huh."

"A year. Arseniy asked for that much." She sighed heavily through her nose, then dropped the pages she really wasn't reading just yet. "Then... it'll just be the parents, Tats, and Valera here. I'm moving somewhere in Italy. Preferably northern Italy, if I can swing that."

Scruffy blinked, then blinked again.

She was leaving?

That was... news to him.

What did that mean for him?

He... honestly, did not want to change 'overseers' if he didn't have to. The Sun had only just recently found something to do, something productive and entirely on his own. Uprooting all that would... be an entirely bitter step backwards into aimlessness.

...he was getting paid by her for both his work and living expenses, it was possible that he was
going to be going with her and not be left behind.

Peter honestly wouldn't mind leaving the USSR for someplace warmer. Both environmentally and socially. Possibly somewhere less controlled as well. While the vory and others that hailed to this clan were… not dismissive but pessimistic was a good term, pessimistic to the fact they were under a lot of scrutiny from the KGB he had no such outlook to the same scrutiny.

He couldn't-

"McScruffy… pay attention already." Shamal poked him rather rudely in the thigh, their game-table already Constructed, and the young Mist seemed to be getting a bit impatient with his absent wool gathering moments.

"Yeah… that is a question." Cherep jerked a thumb at him, looking to his sister. "What's going to happen to him if you bolt? I mean… he's not Russian. Kind of sticks out like a sore thumb here."

"Obviously, Scruffy is going where I am. I refuse to leave him, or anything I don't have to, here." Sonya answered with a measure of exasperation, not even looking up from glancing over her pending work.

"…did you tell him that? Or you know… even ask if he'd like to?"

The icy little blonde woman gifted her brother with a flat look, then flicked those grey eyes to him. She then turned fully to face him, giving him frankly more attention from her than he wanted to be on the receiving end of if he wasn't building up more goodwill with her. "…Scruffy, would you like to-"

"Oh, hell yes. Any way it can be sooner?" Italy, not Russia.

Mediterranean weather compared to this?

This entirely too tepid summer thing going on?

Peter had been around other sub-tundra areas before ending up in Africa, he knew the signs of impending and truly terrible winters to suffer through.

…speaking of, he might want to start stocking up on warmer clothing. He could always donate or sell what he didn't need to take with him to another country, but in order to not lose fingers or toes to frostbite in as little as another few months he really should locate better quality socks and gloves. Maybe a furry hat or two.

Smirking slightly, the thief turned back to her fellow Cloud to see if he had anything else to add.

He wagged a finger in her face, seemingly more amused than exasperated. "Asking is a thing. A polite thing. Some-"

"Cherep, I found an aikido master. If it works out, the arrangement and meeting thing I've yet to do because it'll take place this fall, would you at least consent to meeting the instructor and possibly learning this winter?"

Cherep, having been interrupted mid-word, let his hand drop and ran the other one through short purple strands before scratching the back of his head sheepishly. "…stop poking holes in my arguments, Nya. Not fair."
"I live to please."

"To do as you please, or just to please?" He countered quickly, absently patting the list tucked away in a pocket before continuing in a more serious tone. "I've got to go steal Tats, we're going to have a fairly involved conversation with the parents. You know what it's about already, just show up around dinnertime for the end of it. Please?"

"...sure?" Scruffy's boss confirmed warily, seemingly a bit thrown by the subject change but seeing no reason to refuse. "I've... really got to go talk to Gedeon as he's standing in as the Pahkan, so I can come with you at least until you run into Tats."

"Mamma?"

"You can stay in here with Scruffy, if you'd like." Sonya answered the Misty kid evenly, sorting together a stack of paper to take with her for the proposed wander with her brother. "Just... call for Usov to confirm anything anyone tells you about what I might've said you're to do or not. If he doesn't know, bunker down with him and Scruffy until I come and fetch you."

Shamal huffed lightly with a half-scowl on his face, as apparently that wasn't what he wanted to know. "Do I have classes with the Mists too today?"

"You don't have to. I'm pretty satisfied with what you know, and you've got things to work on now at least."

"...oh. Well... that was easy." Said brat marveled to himself, before turning a speculative eye to Peter himself. "...are we going to play anytime today, McScruffy?"

The Sun sighed, mentally waving goodbye to afternoon research time for however long the little brat would be staying here.

Well... he had impending supplies still being picked up and gathered together. Peter wasn't going to be wondering too hard about how he might be getting those gem cutting tools, this was a thieves' clan, but a few days of purely playing games with the kid might not be a bad idea for a mini-break.

"Sure, Shamal. Ah... start me off with a centaur race, with a theme of shamans."

Cherep looked curious over what Shamal then Constructed into being on the similarly Mist Flame built tabletop game map, but Sonya easily maneuvered her fellow Cloud out of the office with a few sharp jabs to the ribs.

"But! But Nya, it looks cool."

"Gape later. Work now."

(ooo000000)

(Thursday the 26th of June, 1969 continued. The Pahkan's Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"How soon until there's anyone of age to be useful?"

"Obviously, there already are those of age to be useful."

Gedeon tried not to wince, or sigh, at Sonya's completely flat tone of voice when delivering her answer.
At least his father wasn't in the room to interrupt or bitch, but Pyotr would likely carry tales to him the moment he had a free minute.

Rubbing a hand over his face, the Sun using vor slumped back into his father's chair and leveled a glare at the woman loitering in the Pahkan's office. Of course, unlike the majority of Zolotovs that he had seen in the last couple of days she was neither testing him in her own way to see if he was someone she would accept orders from or fawning in some sycophant way.

Sonya might have to be here, but there was no sign she would be willing to get over herself or put aside their issues to work with him. Gedeon honestly half-expected that, but to the degree she was being difficult…

"...I didn't mean it like that-"

"Didn't you?" The Storm-Cloud cut him off derisively, leaning most of her weight onto her left leg and crossing her arms under her modest chest. Cocking her head to the side, she eyed him as equally as scornfully as her interruption had sounded. "You meant to ask how long until we have vory that are Flame users, right? You would've been one… had you not proven to be entirely unsuited to the mentality needed."

"I-"

"So that means you'll have to wait for Dmitriy… but he's going to be needed to replace me so there's that." Sonya smoothed a finger along her lower lip in a mocking parody of a thoughtful pose, and if he hadn't known exactly how easily she could shatter bone with just a finger… "Which means Kazimir the Rain or Mikhail of Storm. Easily five or so more years if they have to be vory."

"...are you done?"

"I have no idea. Are you done being moronic?" She drawled back venomously, with an added sneer on top just in case he missed how little she thought of him. "Yes, let's pin all our Flame users as 'must be vory to be of use' when there's no way to get any in time to be of use. There's four women that already are perfectly capable… but oh no, wait… they're not men. Your poor, delicate sensibilities..."

Sonya, Tatiana, Galina, and Anna the Mirror Lady. He was fully aware of that given Anna saved his father's life, Tatiana had healed his father of the flesh wounds in seconds, and Sonya first went off and destroyed an entire block in some fit of rage.

Gedeon grit his teeth and flatly glared back. "Outside of this clan, no one is going to fear-"

"Apparently, they fear me just fine."

What was galling the most… was that she was right in that claim.

The lingering handful of Triad members coming and going for various reasons were all very respectfully admiring over her self-control. For her clearing out of Zolotov territory before making a crater in Moscow's streets and leaving it to burn for all to see in a macabre warning.

Gedeon had been treated to a few gossiping-type stories of other Clouds deciding to be difficult and what kind of damaging event that ended up being for the syndicate that tried to control them.

That didn't include the three Moscow Mafiya brotherhoods that had hastily put in for some kind of non-hostile arrangements in the last few days. With four more minor gangs that were after full mutual protection clauses that had appeared in short order not twenty-four hours after she got done
murdering a lot of people for some kind of demented Cloud therapy session.

"And since you're going to be enough of a bitch and clear out, that's not going to remain pertinent now... is it?" Gedeon finally managed to get out something fully, and of course it was the very moment his patience with the bloody Storm-Cloud snapped.

"Oh dear, you mean that will force you to be proactive about making some kind of use over the ability I taught you?" Sonya even went the extra yard to badly act comically surprised over the very idea, just to rub it in that bit more. "How scary..."

"You BITCH-" "SHUT THE HELL UP."

It was pure shock that made him snap his mouth closed.

"I not only set you up to learn something three or four times, but you had access to the office and the information we have stored there." This was not sarcastic or derisive, her tone was soft and silky with the edge of something truly ugly if he even dared to try anything more. It looked as if she would gleefully pounce if he tried. "YOU were the one to squander the opportunities afforded you by virtue of whose son you are. YOU were the one that unilaterally decided to do your own thing. YOU were the one to decide if you were a Sun, then obviously the only ones you would benefit from just OBSERVING were other Suns."

Pyotr was blessedly pretending he was blind, deaf, and dumb. Gedeon flicked his attention back to the truly pissed off Cloud standing smack dab in his father's office and tried not to swallow hard.

"But that wasn't good enough for you now, was it? So, you know what? I don't care. I'll ensure the trainees are on track, I'll even ensure the clan has every scrap of information they need for the Flame focus matching. But that's it." Sonya's tone changed from silky and smooth to downright liquid, with a purr of something else promising violence touching the edge, as she bared her teeth in a mockery of a smile. "I'm done with you. With the Zolotovs. With this fucked up branch of the mafia. I have other things to do, so I'm going to go do them. Live with it."

"You're not going to stick around locally, then?" Asked the Sovintnik evenly, sounding just enough bored and faintly curious to be dismissed as an entirely uninterested inclusion in their mockery of a conversation.

She slid faintly purple-grey eyes to him, for the few seconds it took for the glow of Cloud Flames to fade from them. Then she sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of her nose. "...no."

Suddenly straightening up and giving him one last pointedly disgusted look, the damn woman turned on a heel and stalked out of the office. Without waiting for a dismissal or another question. Obviously feeling that their meeting was over.

Gedeon unclenched his jaw, glowering at the door. "...how many assassination attempts have we foiled on her behalf so far?"

"...nine."

"I want us to stop doing it." The vor headed off any protest from the woman's 'grandfather' with a sharp look of his own. "If she's not aware we do that for her, then she might really think she'll make it on her own. Let her have a taste of what she's really asking for."
"...and if she's fully aware of that?" Pyotr asked blankly, which didn't fool the man who had spent years in this office listening to him dissect and postulate with his father about all sorts of things. "Worse yet, if she realizes what you're doing and survives it?"

"I'm not doing anything. I'm letting her go like she wants me to." The Sun countered a bit nastily.

It would piss Arseniy off something fierce, and it really would only be good for one attempt before he'd get bitched out either by the other *vor* or his father, but the shock of it might set the bitch back a bit.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 26th of June, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

The Mirror Lady flashed through the reflective surfaces of the usual haunts quickly.

Not the office, although Shamal was there with Scruffy so she stuck a cordon of Mist Flames around the room to inform her if anyone tried to enter it. Not her childhood home, but she left a Mist Flame letter for Lisa about the conversation she overheard in the Zolotov *Pahkan*'s office.

The fact her father, brother, and sister were also in the same room as where she Constructed the letter to be was just coincidence.

Anna found Usov before she found Sonya, so a copy of herself explained the situation to him as she kept looking.

Both Mist users found the Storm-Cloud at the same time, walking through Zolotov territory in order to find the house of one of their newest Lightning users. The Lightning's parents had concerns, and someone 'older' had to go reassure them that Dying Will Flame use wasn't harmful or unholy as long as they were properly trained and grounded in the use of their Flames.

Obviously, with Galina off interviewing teachers for the last few positions still open in the Flame School's teaching staff someone else had to do it.

Blessedly used to Mist Flame users and their habits the moment Sonya realized they were tailing her she ducked into a side alley, so they could confront her without civilian witnesses.

Usov utilized a tall wooden fence as a portal, while Anna herself crawled out of the reflection of a metal door.

Too out of breath to manage to deliver the warning, the older Mist Constructed a bracelet of woven silk and fastened it to her left wrist. Bemusedly listening to the younger Mist explain why they had come after her, the older Russian let her do it without blinking.

"...hmm... that's worrying." Sonya spoke the words but didn't remotely look or sound like it once she knew what Gedeon had ordered. "*Usov, Anna, ensure each division knows to start putting security measures in place. And start planning on how to defend their usual areas from assaults if need be.*"

"*Boss lady-*"

"-*Sonya!*"

"No. Look, I live within the middle of our territory. If someone can catch me here to try and kill me,
then that doesn't really speak well of the Zolotov clan's internal security. If Gedeon wants to shoot himself in the foot like this, let him." She eyed the new bracelet, then gave the older Mist user a level stare. "I'm better with necklaces than I am with bracelets, Anna. Maybe a more permanent pendant? I'm not going to wear it all the time, but while in Russia I will."

Exchanging a look between themselves revealed they both didn't particularly like that idea.

Not the pendant thing, the Mirror Lady had plans already for that tidbit.

Sonya sighed through her nose, absentely digging a pack of cigarettes out of her purse. "Again, I'm enough of a Cloud that periodic assassination attempts sound nice, actually. Someone I can brutalize and not feel bad about? I like that idea."

Squishing the desire to laugh like a lunatic, she was the levelheaded one between her and Usov, Anna shoved a hand through her slightly untidy black hair in frustration. "Boss lady, please be more concerned. Assassins don't come at you from the front, or let you surprise them out of the blue."

"Gedeon's not going to get away with this for very long." The leader they were speaking with remarked idly, tapping the filter of her smoke against her lips thoughtfully. "I'm afraid I might need to strip him of your presence for a few days, Mirror Lady. Tag Shamal, Usov? My siblings, please."

"...I can tag all of them, Sonya." Usov insisted firmly. "Have Anna at least with you until this is over. They might attack in plain sight in hopes that you won't be able to retaliate."

The Storm-Cloud shrugged, and at least she was taking that with the implication that as long as he felt as if he could do that they could do whatever they wanted. "Did anyone warn Galina?"

"She's still in meetings with a few civilian teachers, boss lady." Anna muttered regretfully, knowing in a Misty way that she couldn't yet risk passing a warning onto the Lightning woman just yet. "She has her own Mist tagalong at the moment, so that's covered."

"Scruffy still has his own, right?"

"Yes, Sonya." Usov agreed quickly. "What... what are we to do if we catch anything assassin-y near you?"

"...warn me, but that's it." She was already shaking her head before either Mist could protest. "No, paradoxically, Gedeon is right. Assassination attempts aren't something I really know or have had to deal with. Some experience in what to expect before I formally split from the clan would be nice."

Frowning, and an abortive glance to her new Mist Flame bracelet as if it was a watch, the Storm-Cloud turned to continue on her way. "Ensure no one else gets caught up in this, but that's the limit I want you two to be involved. Shoo now, I've work to do."

Anna placed a hand against Usov's bicep, keeping the younger Mist from moving as the older woman walked away as if she didn't need to worry about someone coming to kill her. "...I told Lisa."

"Sneaky."

"And coincidentally her father and siblings."

Usov brightened perceivably, a grin curling up his mouth. "Oh? So... yes. Yes, that's good. I wonder if we can find her Sunny friend and mention something to him?"
No, Sonya was not going to start hunting through Zolotov territory to find her would-be assassins.

For the first reason why not, it had only been a few hours. It would take longer than that for someone to realize there was a hole made in any patrols or security arrangements the clan had. For the second, she still had clan watchers.

Even if she fairly itched to do so, hunting them down before she could even learn from another source would just tip the Mirror Lady's hand. Although she did want to arrange an 'obvious' reason she knew before any attempts might alarm Shamal, target her siblings or the foster parents, or bother any of the trainees.

Assassins, though.

She hadn't actually thought of them possibly coming after her, even knowing full well even Renato had assassins after him and fairly walking into the aftermath of an assassination attempt on him.

Twice even, but the second time had been a little… weird. Admittedly, it was a female would-be assassin so the womanizing gentleman she was friends with would screw his would-be killer.

Entirely within Renato's typical behaviors, that.

What to do about her own assassins?

Killing them was… cheap.

Perverse of her, sure. If they tried to kill her, then killing them back was perfectly valid.

Cherep wouldn't even be able to argue that… right?

Sonya was actually leaning more to robbing them blind of even the very shirt off their backs and call that good.

Killing her assassins, so long as they didn't try to target anyone she was with, would just make her more of a 'threat'. Making it embarrassing to come after her and fail was highly tempting.

It would also counter the one lingering 'good' spot this new upset might have for Gedeon, as if Sonya really did murder anyone trying to kill her then it would reinforce the idea the Zolotovs had good internal security and any attempts along that line would be countered with extreme prejudice.

As long as they behaved, she wouldn't be murdering anyone.

She was not going to make this easy on Gedeon. Let him feel the frustration she held with him. Served the idiot Sun right.

Happy with her tentative plans, which she had to see if they would last past an assassination attempt or two but that was for later, Sonya wandered to her old childhood home to find out what her brother had wanted of her.

Lisa sharply opening the door before she could even touch the knob was not a good sign. Neither was her foster mother's stern expression, which just got more narrowly angry the moment the older
woman took in her own expression. "Inside, now."

She obeyed without asking why.

"Arseniy went to go pick up Shamal." She informed her foster daughter sharply, pointing a hand to the basement door imperiously. "Shoo, now. Your siblings are down there already. The moment your father gets back… we're going to have a little family meeting."

Sonya went downstairs wordlessly.

Tatiana, Cherep, and Valera were already there, the baby Cloud pointedly investigating the training room and ignoring his siblings while the Sun and other older Cloud had their heads bent over a piece of…

Mist Flames?

Constructed paper?

…a letter?

"Little sis, what's this about assassination attempts?"

"...Gedeon thinks if some make it pass our territory to try themselves against me, I'll either die or change my mind?" She shrugged in an absent way, taking the few steps between the base of the stairs and the nearest seat. Which just so happened to be the table where lock picks were stored, where Valera was investigating the desk lamp clamped to it. "My Mists already got me word, I'm not too worried."

Cherep peered over the Mist letter, which Sonya could probably guess the contents of reliably given the topic of discussion, and gave her a similarly worried look. "Seriously? Isn't this part of why you're a part of the Zolотовs? Preventing assassinations or just random murders among the members? Pretty sure you should be more concerned, Nya."

"Obviously, this was going to happen at some point. I'm leaving, Cherep. Getting out of Russia. Someone was bound to try to change my mind, and this is a valid tactic to try with."

Who left the letter?

She could tell they were Mist Flames, but not whose they were. Anna or Usov?

"This is a fucked up method to try by." Muttered Tatiana venomously. Shooting her a glare to keep silent as apparently, she wasn't done at just that. "No, seriously. You're not exactly unaffiliated outside of your own Zolотов connection. There's the parents, me, and whoever you have among the Flame kids. He's about to piss all of us off."

"We can't admit to knowing about his orders, unless Arseniy can get independent confirmation on his own. Or Lisa can, somehow." Sonya snatched the letter, glancing over it told her nothing more than whoever 'wrote' it had copied standard typewriter letters to make up the words, and lit it up with her Storm Flames. "I'm pretty sure what good-will the Mirror Lady earned this past week will dry up if she has to admit she eavesdrops on the Pahkan's office regularly. Regardless for why she would do so, I can guess neither Gedeon nor old man Zolотов would be pleased to realize that."

"...why is it always 'the Mirror Lady'? I don't even think I know her name..." Questioned Cherep curiously, before shaking his head and redirecting his attention back to her. "Nya, assassins are not a good thing."
"Actually... they might be." Shrugging to the wide-eyed look he gave her, she raked a hand through her jaw-length blonde hair. "Cherep... I'm not going to remain small-time. It's boring. Like how you'd never be really happy just as a mechanic, I would... like to do something more impressive. Obviously, that's going to piss some people off eventually."

Pointing a finger in her face again, he jerked it back when she tried to grab it at least, the stuntman heaved a heavy sigh at her. "That is not a great comparison, little sis. I make people happy or inspire them with my stunts, you rob them."

"I also have a friend in high places in certain countries, attend some high-criminal society functions, and am about to actually get a permanent residence. Two of them, actually. One in Mafia Land, and one in Italy. Rooting down in one place will make things even harder, especially since I don't intend to join up with any other syndicate." Giving a one-shoulder shrug that time, she waved a hand absently as she leaned back in her stiff and uncomfortable chair. "I was always a target, Cherep. Especially since I dug into this Flame user mess to make sense of it. So are you, Tatiana, and just about any other Flame user on your own merits. But we move, had a syndicate to shelter us when we gathered here, so cornering us like how Fong tried to corner me in Shanghai isn't usually possible. There are any number of people that will try to attack us in order to swoop in like a savior in order to get more Flame users for their own purposes, and more that will try to murder us to prevent that very thing from happening. It's just... I'd rather have the experience to deal with it, then ignore its possible and get surprised later on."

"Why do you always have to be so damn rational?" Tatiana all but whined to the beams that held up the ground floor above their heads, tugging at her 'off-duty nurse' braid viciously before looking back at her little sister with a stamp of her boot. "Nya. I do not appreciate this. You've got Shamal to think of too."

"I reassigned the Mirror Lady to him. She's already foiled an assassination attempt."

Hesitating, and blinking a few times as she processed the ramifications of that, the Sun snorted. "...fuck Gedeon anyways."

"I'd rather you didn't, although I am aware your taste in men sucks." Sonya responded to that non-question statement absently. "But if you must, can I ask you kick him from your bed quickly?"

Her older brother snorted, then cracked a few rather painful sounding laughs.

Tatiana wrinkled her nose in disgust after taking a moment in shock. "Nya, it's... a... I didn't mean... shut up, Cherep."

Keeling over sideways, her fellow Cloud nearly crawled to the Storm-Cloud's low-heeled boots to grip her ankle desperately. "Oh! Ha... ow. Oi, Nya, she didn't... ha, mean it like that. It was... derogatory, not admiring."

"...but her taste in men really does suck." Defended the thief, disgruntled she guessed wrong and likely ended up embarrassing her sister when she didn't mean to.

"Oh, like yours is any better!" Snapped the Sun user, a flush high on her cheekbones meaning she was either really pissed off or really embarrassed. "Wait, that's right... you don't have one!"

"...maybe I like women?" Sonya hazarded cautiously after taking a moment to realize how true that statement was, actually starting to wonder about it for once.

She was eighteen, surely she would've had a fit of hormones by now and got infatuated with
someone again if men were what she was interested in. However, she really couldn't recall the last
time she took a moment to admire the eye candy around her.

…or if she ever had.

Renato was eye candy, even if he was occasionally an asshole. Well-dressed, carefully groomed,
very fit.

Fong was too, even if the man was aggravating when he wanted something. He was also very fit,
equally as well-groomed, did his exercising without a shirt, and sometimes was peacefully cheerful if
you caught him at the right time.

Her sister did appreciate the view whenever she caught sight of either, so she was pretty damn sure
of that fact.

Rachel had been heterosexual, so… she was also pretty sure she knew what it was all supposed to
feel like. Unless she hadn't really been straight but had only gone along with dating men due to any
number of cultural or opportunity related reasons. If so… Sonya might actually be a bit screwed up
and a little off.

Unless there was a biological reason for it.

"…wait, really?"

She looked down to where purple eyes were peering up at her curiously, biting her lower lip for a
moment before rubbing at her forehead in confusion. "I have no idea, I've never actually looked at
another woman in that way before. Then again, I've also not had some male catch my eye either.
Maybe there's just something-"

Tatiana suddenly gripped her chin and redirected her attention firmly, pointedly looking her little
sister straight on. "There is nothing wrong with you. I've been over your medical records enough
time to have caught anything by now. You're perfectly human, working correctly as anyone your age
and gender does. If it's women that will do it for you, well then no wonder why you didn't like any of
my picks."

"Bisexual?" Their brother suggested calmly, jerking a thumb to the ceiling even if that was slightly
awkward to do while lying on his side on the floor. "Arseniy's not exactly a girl."

Frowning, the nurse released the weirdly reassured thief and gave a contemplating look of her own
in the same direction. "…huh. Can you imagine him in drag?"

There was a moment of complete silence as they tried.

Cherep started it with snickers first, evolving into a full on belly laugh when Tatiana suddenly
snorted and grinned. Pressing a hand against her face, the nurse giggled along with him which made
Sonya smirk even if she failed to actually picture their foster father in a skimpy sundress.

When Valera tottered over, annoyed he had been excluded from whatever was so funny, she gave in
a snickered a few times too.

As the fully-grown male Cloud was the closest, he got sat on by said annoyed baby Cloud. When
that didn't stop the hilarity, Valera graduated to yanking purple strands in a fit of frustration until the
older man rolled them around to loosen his grip.

Lightly toeing the nurse's calf, her little sister managed a slightly still amused but wry grin while their
brothers were distracted. "Sorry, I just… I'm fairly sure you're too good for Gedeon, but if that was what you wanted…"

"Arseniy in drag makes up for it, Nya." Cocking a smile for her, in which she couldn't see any of the aggravation or the upset that had made her snap back, Tatiana took the opportunity to ruffle Sonya's hair fondly. "And I know you're socially incompetent, I won't take offense for long sis. I promise."

Gritting her teeth against the near-automatic protest that she wasn't, other people were just confusing, the thief huffed sourly and let the comment slide this time. She had upset the older woman, it was really the least she could do.

This once. She wasn't going to let it happen again.

The door opening had all four of them looking up the staircase to Lisa's confused expression. "What in the world is so funny?"

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 26th of June, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Pyotr followed Arseniy down into his basement, which was set up to hold and display various practice tools needed by any good thief to keep their skills sharp. The four that were down there already with Lisa suddenly quieted when they noticed the Sovintnik behind their foster father.

Said vor dropped his… first great-grandchild to the floor so the young Italian could scamper over to his adoptive mother.

The suspicious edge to the ringing silence told him they already knew, even as Sonya situated young Shamal on her lap and whispered a few words to him. Curious.

…the little black-haired Mist lady then. Likely, she had not stopped following Gedeon. As the young, reckless hothead had been previously informed of and had promptly forgotten or underestimated what kind of consequences that might've held.

"Children, my father." Lisa announced bluntly, grinning in a way that told anyone interested to know that she was greatly enjoying introducing the elderly man as such. "I'm fairly sure half of you already know him, but you Cherep probably don't."

"Pyotr, the clan's Sovintnik." Sonya flatly identified, eyeing him doubtfully and with no little amount of wariness. "…why are you here? Now?"

His foster daughter leveled a look upon her own daughter, but only got an equally bland look back for her troubles.

Sonya would not be easily won over, then. Expected, and unfortunate, but not surprising.

Hopefully they could come to some arrangement to prevent Elisaveta any distress or meddling.

Pyotr glanced to the other 'grandchildren' he had before him. The eldest Tatiana was mildly confused, likely due to his rather late and truly unfortunate timing in only appearing now, but accepting of what her mother claimed…

However, the oldest boy wasn't either from the perfectly neutral gaze he received in return.
Cherep had more than enough skill to fake everything if he wanted, from the look of things.

Knowing of his foster daughter's skills in acting, he was likely the one inheriting the tricks the much older vor in the room had pressed on his own foster child. He would not be getting any hints from that quarter either, it was about as equally unhelpful as the blank one his younger sister was wearing.

The youngest was… way too young to care just yet.

His great-grandchild looked mainly faintly bewildered and uncertain, but also unwilling to leave his mother's side.

"Your mother," Pyotr started honestly enough, "will be very upset if certain plans actually go through. I am here, because what she deems important is still of some concern of mine."

He received two unimpressed looks, a wary sort of shrug, a confused stare, and an uncomprehending glare. Valerian was not paying him any real attention once he was deemed 'boring' or 'uninteresting', which was not much of an issue given his young age.

Tatiana then looked at the seated, blank-looking blonde woman. "Well… then-"

"No." Sonya denied her sister firmly, leaning back in her perch with a thoughtful frown. "Not even now. Compromising… our sources of information in order to head off a minor incident is unwise. Especially if there might be more in the future from this quarter. I'll survive, Tats. I'm even kind of looking forward to it."

Obviously, they were continuing a previous conversation despite the light-hearted air that had been prevalent before his arrival. The grandchildren had then known for a while now, meaning Mist guards could get word to other interested parties fairly quickly… even if said parties were not in known haunts or easily tracked down.

Shamal leaned back against her chest, tugging a little fretfully on her shirt sleeve. "Mamma?"

"...don't worry about it. It's a fairly minor thing, all in all." Sharp grey eyes flicked up to pin Pyotr in place, then the Storm-Cloud narrowed her gaze at him. "...if they behave and only go after the proposed target, it might even be amusing."

…interesting.

"Sonya."

"I'll happen regardless. Eventually." She answered her foster father's one-word demand for reasonableness carefully, taking one hand from her child's side to rake through already disordered blonde locks. "Actually… it should've already been attempted."

"Nine times before this that I know of, actually." Pyotr clarified helpfully, clasping his hands behind himself. "Once shortly after young Dmitriy's little early difficulties several years ago, although that one was more 'any Flame user' than specifically yourself. Latest was just last week, three of them in short order."

"...that makes sense." Accepted the young thief evenly, glancing from the vor to her mother and then to her siblings.

Only one of which looked accepting of her decision.

"Nya. Assassins are bad." Cherep insisted firmly, rolling up to his knees and setting young Valerian
on his feet in order to stare up beseechingly at his younger sister. "Do you hav-

"I will not be chained." Interrupted Sonya equally as forcefully, but also gently enough for her. Her eyes, however, took on a particularly concerning lavender shade. "I don’t have to put up with it, not anymore. You’re safely on your way, Tats has her own security in being too useful to be done away with, Lisa and Arseniy are fine with being here… but… I’m not."

Apparently, the eye color changing was less alarming to other Flame users to some degree which would explain her comment to Cherep if he was one as well. For none of the younger members present recoiled from the possible threat of violence offered by that warning light. Conversely to what he tentatively knew of their type, his great-grandchild pressed closer to her and the youngest grandchild gripped her knee.

…maybe it wasn't always a warning of violence?

Gedeon was not 'acceptable', apparently. One only had to recall her fairly vitriolic diatribe against the vor that started all this to know that. It was possible Sonya merely found him too irritating to feel comfortable with him the same way she seemed to be with her siblings.

If that was his own fault, or one of those fairly confusing 'type' issues was… likely not the reason. 'Suns' and 'Clouds' were supposed to be compatible.

Maybe her Italian hitman friend, who was also a Sun, had gotten there first?

How many Suns did any one Cloud tolerate?

A fairly informative meeting, all around. Pyotr was satisfied with what he had learned so far, even if the timing of things now was… undesirable.

"As you are aware of the issues, I will return to the clan to prevent interest from occurring on my quarter. Elisaveta, good luck." He glanced at the next 'generation' of their so-called family then nodded to them as well. "Girls, Cherep, Valerian…. Shamal, do take care."

"Bye Gramps." Tatiana gave him a toothy, but not entirely too aggressive, grin in return.

Sonya and Cherep exchanged a look over Shamal's head but refrained from actually acknowledging the well-wishing with their own. Not too unusual for her, and he wasn't familiar enough with the middle boy-child enough to say what was or wasn't usual for him.

Valerian merely glared, which seemed to be his developing default setting.

Shamal, on the other hand… he rather willingly waved a hand in farewell, with a genuine smile. "Have a good day, bisnonno."

Arseniy heaved an aggravated sigh from his corner, earning himself a wicked smirk from Lisa.

...there was a story there, but he'd get it later.

---

(Friday the 27th of June, 1969. Mafia Land.)

The packet of information Bjørn had requested almost reached the same height of the table lamp set out at this workstation.
Sighing, the Lightning-Storm tiredly rubbed at his eyes and leaned back in his office chair. It wasn't quite late yet, but this would mean he was going to have another near-midnight bedtime again.

He really did need to turn part of his apartment's living room into an office-type thing, just so he wouldn't have to spend long hours researching his investment opportunities in the Mafia Land's offices for info brokers and the ballsy Swiss bankers that worked here.

However, his patron was a round or two of heists away from earning them a larger shared apartment. As it was likely she would allow him to spend more for furnishing or replacing some of the second-hand items he had already then... the Lackey would make due until it happened.

"Here." Bjørn teased a few files out of the lump and set them before Verde the Lightning. "Review theses, and ensure the prices match up to the investment asked for."

At the very least, he could use a few extra minutes to try solidifying the plans he had some hand in supplying the laundered money for.

The very green colored scientist picked through the first few pages of the file on top, cocking an eyebrow at the information within. "This is what you do all day?"

"No, it's just what I do most of the day." Money laundering, creating a 'clean' source of revenue, and ensuring there was more than enough to buy a decent house of size they might need in Italy.

A few extra moments of thinking time was more than appreciated, so he didn't mind the obvious 'babysit my dependent' thing Adrik stuck him with while he was off investigating French syndicate members in hopes of narrowing down the scope the two of them would need to settle the pure Lightning user into his own niche.

Bjørn was almost certain he had more than enough, but extra on top might be needed.

Over the last few years there had been him, Shamal, and now Scruffy added to her possible 'household'. There was for sure her brother, possibly the hitman who was her fellow godparent to the young Mist boy, and then an extra room or two for visitors like her sister or possibly her parents...

Well, the eight rooms he knew for sure they would need in one house would make it a small mansion. Adding in another two or three for whomever might come along later and then the guest rooms, and they might as well find an estate home for sale and also purchase the land around it.

Which would also need upkeep for repairs or refurbishing, a gardener, a maid, possibly a butler, and a housekeeper at minimum. Unless the Lightning-Storm Lackey put in the effort to be the butler, but he wasn't sure if he could do that on top of what he already had been tasked to in the coming years. Possibly a cook and, depending on what additional buildings were on the property Sonya settled upon, maybe even a stable hand or two.

That would be an additional five or six more rooms for just needed additional personnel, seven or eight if the few that would elect to live at their work had children or dependents on top of that.

Bjørn jerked his head up from his calculations, looking over at the human calculator that was supplying him some few hours of mental labor out of sheer boredom. "Do you foresee yourself visiting Dama a lot in the coming years?"

"She is my primary investor. Regular reports and the opportunity to share information will occur at the very least." Verde answered promptly, scribbling a series of numbers on the cover of one folder before discarding that one to check into the next. "It is entirely likely that, within a number of years, we might collaborate on future issues if there is something she identifies that requires more thought.
power or attention than she can spare at whatever time."

Verde, Viper, and... the Chinese Triad man. Who seemed very keen on inserting himself into his Lady's regard somehow. Three more rooms, likely preferably far from the master's suite so his patron wouldn't have to interact with them if she was disinclined.

That was... twenty-two rooms at most, nineteen at least. Twenty-five if one included guest rooms for future guests that wouldn't be semi-permanent. Added in at least five or so bathrooms at the very least, although more likely at least ten to fifteen, a large kitchen and a dining hall, a 'central' library and another for his Lady's less legal books, possibly two or three rooms for various offices, a smoking lounge, a rec room for any other pastime that might be needed, maybe a ballroom if a household-wide announcement needed to be made to all residents at once…

...now Bjørn was wondering if there was an Italian castle they could purchase or not for sale.

Guards?

A few footmen at least, add in another two or three maids to cut down on the sheer labor of keeping it all clean and tidy. Adding a few more rooms, and maybe another cook and someone to be a general handyman for any minor issues.

That was... total, fifteen at the lowest or nineteen at the most additional people to help with upkeep or daily labor.

The Lightning-Storm sighed heavily. Sonya would not be pleased.

...he forgot about Galina. Adding her and her own office... and Scruffy had been mentioned to be rather more industrious than previously thought so a work room or two more for him and possibly Verde depending on how often the Lightning visited... were there any more Russians that would be immigrating?

Bjørn mournfully stared at the complete mess of his calculations scrawled out on a formerly neat sheet of paper.

...maybe they could build something with less of a headache?

No, Sonya liked history. Possibly a historic castle somewhere, instead.
Chapter 65

(Friday the 27th of June, 1969 continued. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Larion the Rain cautiously lingered in the hallway until the brunette woman he was looking for left the very intimidating Flame user's office. "Miss Galina!"

Pausing at her name, the Lightning glanced backwards but instead of turning and seeing what he had come in for she crooked a finger for him to follow her.

The light glinted off her viridian nails as she approached him without stopping or slowing. "Walk and talk, Larion. Did you require something?"

"…err… there's these… rather… weird rumors?" Not so much weird as… perplexing, really.

"So, it finally hit the Rains." Galina mused aloud, instead of asking for what rumors he had come to verify. "Yes, there will be assassins. Figure it out, or admit you can't think of something, to ensure you don't lose anyone going to or from the bar. You should know how to avoid them getting cornered in their homes by now. I'm fairly sure when you Rains meet up you'll be fine, if I recall why you had to set up there in the first place right."

"Then… the Zolotov clan isn't going to be preventing any more attempts in her direction?" Larion questioned the older woman dubiously, trying to figure out why this was happening. "And shouldn't we… I don't know, be more… secretive about this?"

They weren't even ducking into one of the few empty offices on this side of the building. At the moment, they were being eavesdropped on by at least three vory and a few of the runners lingering in nooks in case someone wanted something run to another office but didn't want to do it themselves.

Coming to a quick and sudden stop, which nearly made him run into the Lightning's back, she turned and pinned him with a slightly aggravated expression. "Sonya doesn't care. For Clouds like her, it's hard to get them to in the first place… but… the major problem at this point is that she and Gedeon in the same room is pretty damn toxic… no matter what 'such-and-such tolerates so-and-so' says. So, she can't stay here and he's fully justified in pulling clan support from her in return."

"That can happen?" He… hadn't heard of that happening before.

Either the clan thing or the Flame user thing.

"Yes." Galina shrugged, waving a dainty hand to dismiss his surprise. "We've been insanely lucky before this, none of the major personality clashes that were warned of in several sources had popped up between anyone for several years. Now Sonya, who was one of the very first, is too old and still without a Sky to stabilize herself. She's starting to get worse in her behavioral patterns, which means the minor irritants or frustrations she used to be able to ignore are becoming major problems. Between Gedeon, who started late and jumped straight into the obstinate Sun behavioral patterns on some wrong information, and Sonya, who is probably one of the if not the strongest then major Clouds in the region… trying to force them in the same room together or get them to associate freely will not work."

"…but! But… how…" Was this sort of what happened with the Four Rains?
Kazimir and Zarya both refused to say much about what had gone on between them and Sonya, and Irinei would only say it was mainly Fadei's fault. No details, no who started what, and the tall Rain man would glare his fellow former group members into silence if they tried to expound to the younger Rains.

That didn't mean bits and pieces didn't make it through. However, those were fragmented and relied on hearsay in order to be passed along.

What was claimed and what Sonya was like the few times she had gone to the Rain Bar or even like how she was after he tried to ineptly murder her was very different. Likely, less than half of it was completely and shamelessly wrong.

"…what... am I going to end up like?"

Galina raised an eyebrow at him but sighed and corralled a few loose strands to tuck back into her neat bun. "Rains are… either one of two types. Since you're Classical, there's very little you're known to not get along with. We currently think it depends on what connections you make right now, rather than a tendency which the others can guesstimated by."

"Oh."

"...Sonya thinks you dislike her." She continued after he was silent for maybe a touch too long, straightening the lay of her suit jacket over the pinstripe skirt that made up her ensemble today. "Which, if you find you can't spend more than a few minutes in her presence without becoming scared or defensive, is entirely possible."

Larion didn't actually mind the woman.

She was… very professional, even after he tried to hurt her. The knife he tried to use to assassinate her even earned him a 'creative' compliment from her.

He did think well of the Storm-Cloud, but mostly due to the fact she did liberate his mother from the vory that kidnapped her to force him into something he didn't want. "I don't know if I do or not."

Personally speaking, anyways. Professionally he rather liked her and would at least make a damn good crack at following any orders she gave.

First of all, he had focused getting the information they wanted from the Rain section. Getting that finished off had been his current goal, because from the sounds of it they were behind everyone else in that aspect.

Then Larion would have the space and time to figure out where he fell in the collection of other 'leads', and indeed what he thought of the woman currently dictating orders for them all to follow.

Looking up at the Lightning again, the Rain was slightly surprised by the wry smirk on her lips.

"It was very mean of us to shove you into that, honestly. You have very little time to be of use, much less make up your mind which way to go, before things shift in a very permanent and final way. Make up your mind quickly, Larion." Galina flicked a wrist in farewell, clicking off in her fast-paced walk to continue whatever he interrupted her in. "You have less than a year to decide."

"...decide what?" He asked of her back in bewilderment, getting no answer from the older Flame user leaving him behind.

Maybe he should spend some effort getting to know another section leader. If Galina of Lightning
wasn't going to tell him anymore, and he did get a few things from her that were worth thinking on at least, then maybe one of the others would fill in the blanks.

Storms, Suns, or Mists?

He had no idea where Usov was during the day, and he wasn't really very fond of Storms honestly. Mikhail, their previous lead, had never given him the time of day before and started it but he was still wary of Storms after seeing how he treated his own section working on the 'can a Rain Tranquilize another Flame user' experiment.

Suns. Andrei of Suns was a fairly cheerful young man not that much older than him.

Hopefully he wouldn't mind giving a few pointers at the same time he heard out the younger Rain's confusion over the recent happenings around headquarters.

(Saturday the 28th of June, 1969. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"What did you want me for?" Arseniy asked curiously, leaning over the back of the couch to see Sonya fully.

She had both Valera and Shamal in a puppy pile again, ignoring their sharp elbows as they fought a near-silent war for who got the space closest to her for nap-time. If they kept it up, she was going to roll over and leave them to scuffle at her back instead of risk another punch to the chest. "A day of Cloud socializing."

Cherep perked up, folding down one of the newspapers Lisa subscribed to in order to see them all over it. "Really? That kid up north?"

"Right. Ziven said he can dodge now, so I'm going to go see how much better he is and if he's made any success finding another Cloud touching his territory." She finally did roll onto her back, leaving the younger Flame users more room to play-fight as a flailing knee almost dug into her still overly-sensitive-to-touch stomach. "Then there's one more to the south of us, the Wolfpack gang has a Cloud they're being very circumspect about only keeping an eye on. I've got to go see if I can sort that one out today too."

"We're all going to visit both?" Questioned the stuntman warily. "I don't know, Nya. We've never actually seen another Cloud that wasn't bonded to a Sky before…"

"And they both are really young. Older than Valera, but probably around Usov's age." She looked back up at her foster father, who was squinty-eyed and suspicious. "Arseniy, most Clouds get murdered before they're even locally known. I'm hoping these 'leave alone then contact when old/strong enough' situations might improve that. You are a Cloud, inactive but still, and Valera's father. You and he do need to know who is north and south of you."

"…and how much do you think I'll help?"

"Little, actually. You're just there to give it more 'official' tones." Sonya smirked up at him, snickering at his eye roll. "Ziven's been trying to work out if the clan can steal into Timur's territory up north or if the brat will implode everything tried, and the Wolfpack Cloud already has a syndicate… but they're both feral. Before me and Cherep, you were the dominant Cloud of the area."
"I want to see what they make of you, to see if my theory of 'only the strongest in one territory pop' holds water or not."

Their father sighed heavily. "…fine. Whatever. In an hour or so?"

The Storm-Cloud caught the next flailing limb before it could connect with her ribs, giving the Cloud and Mist pair a dry look for the near-miss.

Valera was entirely unrepentant and slunk closer to her arm, but Shamal huffed in a slightly guilty way and decided to sprawl out on her legs for the mandatory 'Cloud naptime'.

"Please."

"That," Cherep announced as the vor shuffled away for his breakfast and what had been their lunch, "is adorable. Has Lisa gotten pictures yet?"

"Yes." She deadpanned back. Pinning their little brother using her right arm, she then scooped up Shamal with her left and rolled back over so this time the Mist ended up sprawled on top of her little brother. "And you two… mine. So there."

Valera blinked at her owlishly through Shamal's now wildly disordered brown hair, apparently he hadn't thought of that for a reason why she was being so insistent that the other boy was allowed to infringe on his time with her. Her brat merely shot her a half-dirty and half-exasperated look, trying to wiggle off the baby Cloud without leaving him the spot right next to her in order to do so.

Of course, her little brother wasn't having that even if he was being distracted thinking through her actions and the actual reasons behind them.

Sonya huffed tiredly, tightening her grip on both and refusing to let them unwind from each other or her.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 28th of June, 1969 continued. Khimki, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Kid, seriously. I don’t know when she's getting here." Ziven informed Dorokhov for the third time, rubbing at the bridge of his nose in exasperation. "Just… patience. Please."

Said Cloud was damn near itching for his rematch with Sonya, even if it was blatantly obvious to the both of them that he wouldn't do much better against her this time around than the last time.

No, the vor didn't know all of what the Zolotov Storm-Cloud was capable of now. He did know what kind of skill she had and had previewed some of her abilities with the trick weaponry back when she was still developing it.

He also had a very good grasp on what kind of skills Timur had, both in terms of his Cloud Flames and combat-capabilities.

It still did not compute, how his brattling Cloud could be excited for an impending beat-down from an older one.

Maybe it was just a Cloud thing he was never going to understand. Like the freaky, near-overwhelming charisma they somehow had even when the entire type could be described as 'of a few words but lots of violence'. 
Galina could scoff at it all she wanted, she was getting pretty fanatical about Sonya to Ziven's expert eye. He had watched the same damn shit happen with the Khimki Cloud and his near-gang of gutter brats, and he knew the Lightning had all the signs of an impending Cloud obsession.

Perversely, he was pretty damn happy he had gotten stuck out here.

No offense to the girl intended, but if he was going to follow a woman it would be Tatiana. He had tried to get to know the little sister back when they had been kids, and although he was allowed closer than most that ever tried talking to her... the girl had still been rather off-putting.

She was fine now... sort of, but he still couldn't reconcile the quiet and bookish thief girl with the monstrously strong woman with a hair-fine temper of today.

Sonya was also... majorly emasculating to be around. He was man enough to admit it.

Speaking of, Ziven eyed the car pulling into the dockside. He was pretty sure that was one of the Zolotov clan cars... but he wasn't positive. Unfortunately, Dorokhov was already keyed up and noticed even the tiniest of twitches the vor gave so he was already obsessively watching the dark painted automobile before he could confirm that.

Sighing heavily, the Zolotov vor decided to try to at least pretend like this wasn't a scheduled beating said target for the beating was eager for and started walking to greet whoever Sonya had decided to bring with.

Her... brother?

Okay, she might need a driver so that was only interesting. Her father, intimidating and not entirely out of the question. He was out here on the clan's time, obviously he would have to report sometime when they stopped hiding Timur's presence.

However, two brats?

Sonya cast him a look, helping the younger of the two out of the car's backseat. "Ziven, bring the Khimki Cloud over here."

The heavily tanned vor scratched at the back of his head when that was all she gave, and a glance to the older vor netted him nothing else. Another sigh, which was a fairly typical action of his around Clouds entirely, Ziven waved Timur over as if the kid wasn't more than halfway across the empty stretch of dockside already.

"Dorokhov, Primakov Valerian Arsenevich. He will be inheriting my territory in as little as a year." Announced the Storm-Cloud neutrally, presenting the same tiny brat of a kid to the young teenager.

...as if that wasn't the son of her foster father's taken outside of Zolotov territory.

Surprised, said teenaged Cloud raked a hand through bluish-green hair in a rare expression of bewilderment as he arrested his forward momentum. He locked eyes with the tetchy baby who was possibly another 'Cloud', and therein commenced the second most intensive glaring match Ziven ever personally witnessed.

"...how long is this-?" Cherep started to ask as he shifted the other young kid present on his shoulders, only to cut himself off when Sonya shot him a flat look.

Arseniy grunted in an attention-grabbing manner, attracting both baby Clouds to switch targets to him. The older man bared his teeth in a too-sharp snarl as he stared down the teenager whose
territory they were visiting.

The younger vor had never seen Timur back down so quickly before.

Valerian huffed in a satisfied manner, toddling over to the man and taking a good fist-full of the material making up one pant leg.

"...right, with that sorted out..." Sonya tilted grey eyes over to the Khimki Cloud and let a smirk curl up on side of her lips. "...I believe Ziven said you would like a rematch?"

Dorokhov twitched, almost with the manner of a dog shaking off water, before narrowing his brown eyes right back at her. "You went and beat up some foreign man for the attention. Scared to face me again?"

"Please. As if you can last nearly as long as the last time we did this. I'm not holding back anymore, boy." Sonya stripped off her light jacket, handing it up to the kid on her brother's shoulders to hold onto. "I hope you can dodge like Ziven said."

Well fuck... if he had known she was going to kill him-

A clap of the younger Cloud's hand caused a shockwave of air pressure to balloon out with a flick of his own Flames, but she hurled a hammer right into the near-visible pressure wash to break it up before it could even ruffle the apparent family of Clouds. The sonic boom was still ear-ringing, which made everyone else in the area cringe.

The Storm-Cloud then manifested a freaking halberd to hand and swung it, forcing Timur to dodge wildly backwards or risk being bisected.

"...holy fuck." Ziven almost staggered anyways when the two of them darted away to start going at it, he hadn't been behind Sonya before she defended the group still near the car they had taken in.

The very familiar ache of rapid compression in his chest was not appreciated, he was supposed to be spared that feeling this week since his bratty Cloud had a different target to practice against.

"That was pretty loud." Cherep offered mildly, returning a hand to the older kid's ankle to keep the child there. "By the by, were you aware Clouds can do a kind of shield?"

"...wait, really?"

"Pretty sure... because I'm fairly certain a hammer no matter how large shouldn't be able to bounce a wave of air pressure away from anything bigger than a postage stamp. That answers a couple of lingering Cloud-questions Tats and I have wondered about." The brother of one Cloud bounced on his toes lightly, aiming a grin upwards in the general direction of his passenger. "Take that lesson to heart, Shamal. Even if you're not sure you can do something, you can if you're stubborn enough about it."

A few hanks of purple hair were tugged sharply. "I'm pretty sure mamma would rather I know I can do something rather than guess, zio."

...that was... not Russian. Nor German, French, or Chinese. "...what did he call you?"

Cherep shot him a smirk. "Uncle. It's Italian."

Ziven didn't like where this was going. "...and... what did he call Sonya?"
"Mamma, are you slow?" Said brat answered for himself, huffing and bundling the woman's jacket on top of the older man's head to slouch into.

That was what he thought. "How old are you?"


…well, that would make more sense. The kid didn't share any structural similarities with Sonya, nor did he have her coloring. Obviously not really related.

"So… this is what you've been doing since… uh… Man, I haven't seen you in years." Cherep mused idly, glancing over at him curiously. "What have you been up to?"

"Trying to beat the concept of limits into a teenaged Cloud user." Ziven commented sourly, rubbing a hand against his chest and coughing once to loosen up his diaphragm.

A glance to the two Clouds currently trying to kill one another… and while Timur's hard-earned dodge skills were doing him good, he wasn't quite up to adapting it to someone that changed from polearms to hand weapons in the blink of an eye.

"And… that's pretty much it, really. Recently tangled with the Kurkino District's brotherhood, But the Mashintseva Brotherhood withdrew pretty damn suddenly a few days ago."

Like about when a sudden crater was torn into Moscow that a particular blonde woman was rumored to have done out of a fit of pique. The younger vor was pretty damn certain they had known of the Khimki Cloud and had been trying to either verify the rumors or catch him so from his perspective Sonya's temper tantrum, if that had been what it was, had come at the most perfect time.

The older vor grunted again, most of his attention on his foster daughter basically playing a violent game of keep-away with the other teenager's head. Ziven did earn a sideways look after a moment. "How is this territory shaping up?"

"…pretty sure Timur will object if we tried to assume a direct control over him." Another glance of his own, yeah Sonya was still emasculating to watch and his own Cloud foundling was still a scrappy bit of a kid still figuring out how to survive, and the tanned Russian turned back to the older man. "But that doesn't mean taking him on as a kind of extended branch is impossible. He'll object to any attempts to uproot him, or interfere with his little gang, but give him work to do and rewards for doing it..."

Arseniy gave a semi-disinterested huff, snagging the back of his kid's own jacket to haul him up since it seemed he wanted to watch his sister beat the shit out of another kid.

"Beat the shit out of" was pretty apt, given Dorokhov was already bleeding and battered. Sonya wasn't entirely mark free herself, she had blood leaking from her mouth indicative of internal injury Ziven knew pretty damn well from suffering through himself several times a month. On scale, however, the Khimki Cloud was doing worse.

Even as they watched, the female Cloud dropped her latest maul in order to catch a fist trying to punch her lights out and returned the favor with a heavy fist of her own. Timur was a scrappy bit of a kid, but still not up to surviving a point-blank punch in the jaw from someone significantly stronger than his advisor vor could manage.

The aqua-haired teen hit the ground hard and didn't get up.

Sonya stepped away from him, absentely wiping the blood trickling from her lip with the back of a
hand. "…well, that was fun. Now… the other direction."

Young Valerian reached a baby-fat pudgy hand over to pat the woman's knee when she got within range, earning himself a rather vicious if coppery-red stained smirk in return. Grabby hand motions also had her picking him up to balance on a hip before the tiny blonde woman looked over at him again.

"Decent, but not really much of a threat. Have you not been bothered lately, or what?"

"Not in so many words, no. Mostly it's been others testing to see what's still in here, and these few idiots that tried to set up shop up nearby. They've all be dealt with easily enough, and what wasn't easy ran off when you blew your top a few days ago."

Ziven was wondering if he should leave the prickly teen on the ground to recover or drag him back to their makeshift safe-bunker, so he only caught the very tail end of the ugly look Sonya shot him when he turned back to her.

"Wait… what's this now?" Cherep asked, giving his little sister a sideways look. "What did you do, Nya?"

"Not here." Arseniy decided for all of them, pushing off the car with a sharp motion and flicking a glance of his own to his son. "Ziven, good work. When you're satisfied here… apparently there's another I want you to work on."

…he was going to go from managing a teenaged Clout brat to a baby Cloud brat?

Fantastic. The younger vor scuffed a hand through his short dark hair in exasperation but had to admit the older man had a point. He knew how to do it, and how to avoid their bastardized charisma that instilled fanaticism in their followers.

Sonya and Timur both had that in spades, even if they ignored the pull their particular type of self-assured confidence inspired in the less centered or uprooted and aimless around them.

Little Valerian was going to grow up to be a bullheaded and vicious vor, though. Added in with a following of the type his elder sister and fellow Cloud had managed to put together…?

"Seriously," Cherep tried to whisper covertly to Sonya, ignoring the fact they were in a wide-open space and the acoustics were pretty damn good to make even the slightest of sounds carry far, "what did you do?"

"They were sex traffickers." She informed him shortly. "And they tried to 'acquire' me. I also liberated seventeen other girls at the same time as I put them out of their misery."

Ziven winced and tried not to think about what she likely did in response. Seeing reports of the aftermath was bad enough for him, he didn't want to know the details.

Her older brother paused, both eyebrows raised up high. "Oh… never mind then."

Arseniy gave his foster children, his son, and apparently his grandkid a sharp jerk to get them back into the car they took out here. "Let's go, then."

"Ziven." Sonya nodded to him, retracing her steps to get back into the car with the two younger members without so much as a backwards look for the kid she laid out cold.

Cherep clapped him on the shoulder, drawing the car keys out of his pocket and letting his nephew
down to drive them wherever else they were going. "Have fun."

"Oh yeah, fun."

Now then, what did you do with a Cloud that just got their ass kicked?

Would he be happy about it, pissy, or eager for yet another fight?

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 28th of June, 1969 continued. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Gently, Milos. You strain something, I'll set you back another few days in recovery." Tatiana instructed sternly, eyeing the Pahkan's progress with the dumbbell and the motion of muscles under the skin as he did horizontal abductions. "Five more reps."

"Slave driver." Grunted the elderly man, flexing the muscles that had been torn open only mere days ago in smooth motions.

There was an only slightly off-colored patch of skin, a coin-sized dot that once was a bullet hole in his chest. The only way one could realize they were looking at a gunshot wound was by catching sight of the entry scar in his back.

Physically the Zolotov Pahkan was healed up, as fine as any man nearly seventy-two might be in their dirty careers. Convincing his body of that when it recalled the searing pain and breathlessness that came with a punctured lung and a sucking chest wound…

No amount of Sun Flames could smooth that over, merely experience and gently increasing physical exercise. Flame users were queerly more accepting of Sun Flame healing and could be in and out of a Sun user's grasp in minutes going from a bloody wreck to perfectly fine, non-users tended to take longer.

Huffing herself at the insult, which she knew wasn't really intended as sardonically as the old man said it but she couldn't ignore it coming from him as easily as she usually could from other mafia men back in Mafia Land, the nurse held up a few fingers glittering with yellow Flames. "Well... you could always go without a massage to loosen up anything that tightened up over the session if you really feel that way, sir."

"Now, let's not be hasty." Completing the reps she asked for, Milos dropped the barbell the moment he could get away with it and held his hand over his healed gunshot wound with a grimace. "I'll make it an order if I have to."

"Anything for the stress relief, right?" Tatiana dug her Sun Flame warmed fingers into the old man's back, prodding the abused flesh. Not to heal, anymore and she'd just make things worse with cysts and tumors, but to encourage and Activate a greater degree of oxygen absorption. "Any chest pains, upper body pangs in particular, or deeper aches in your upper body?"

"Not that I've noticed." The elderly Pahkan of the Zolotov clan spoke without inflection, which didn't help the Sun user figure out if he was lying through his teeth or not.

With nothing to go on, because he was more than self-possessed enough to prevent any overt signs of complications and to stop any news of such from reaching her, the nurse merely sighed. "Alright then, I think I'm going to clear you to leave for home finally. Another day or two please, then you can dig into whatever you'd like."
"Good. Pyotr, what has my idiot son done to tick you off now?"

Tatiana blinked, looking over a shoulder to the man who actually owned the suite of rooms she had pretty much commandeered from.

Grandfather… huh?

She wasn't that stupid. Obviously at part of it was the fact Sonya wasn't really behaving herself anymore, no matter what other lingering threads that might prompt his sudden admittance of familiar connections.

"Hey, gramps. Business or pleasure?"

Milos cocked an eyebrow at her but turned back to his old friend.

"Gedeon's decided to allow assassination attempts on Sonya through the clan's security." The Sovintnik walked around the room so his boss could see him clearly without moving too much more, then gave a one-shoulder shrug.

The Pahkan froze, then flicked a glance to the entirely unimpressed nurse. "We know, Nya finds the idea amusing."

"…fucking small blessings." Grunted their boss, pushing himself into an upright position on the bed instead of letting his left shoulder and side hang off it to give him the range of motion he had needed. "Pyotr, why?"

"They hate each other." The equally as elderly man mentioned blandly, flicking a glance to the redhead to inform her he knew it was a cover story and not the entire situation but that it was likely good enough he'd help spread it. "Apparently, a Cloud only really likes one Sun… and Gedeon's not the Sun Sonya can deal with."

…how, exactly, did that explain her?

Apparently thinking the same thing, Milos glanced to her.

Tatiana thought fast. "I'm family, not a friend."

"What about the other kid, the Sun one that Gedeon replaced?"

"He didn't replace anyone. But Andrei is the Sun lead." Admitted the nurse cheerfully, picking up the five-pound hand weight in preparation to leave. "As far as the other Suns know, Andrei is the one to go with for Flame issues… I'm the one to go to for healing interests… and that's pretty much it."

Milos palmed his face exasperatedly. "Well… no wonder she hates him. Even I know everyone in that office pulls their own damn weight. What the hell did he do, fuck about for the last couple of months?"

"Pretty much." She twisted that knife in with a pretty smile. "He set himself up like he was the power behind the throne, but everyone already knew where to go for answers and who to speak to about issues. But Sonya's not the one they go with for issues, it's Galina."

A beat of silence, and the Pahkan sighed heavily. "There's no way to fix that, is there?"

"Nya hates Gedeon because he obsesses over the wrong things, in her opinion. It's part of his Sun nature, and Clouds are selectively tolerant. Gedeon obsesses over presenting the right image, which
we can't do right now because there's no one of his 'right image' to supply. Which pisses Nya off because what she's gotten to work in a pinch is being ignored because it's not 'right'. You started way too late for the both of them to coexist."

She got a fair amount of attention from both old men. "Is that what's going on with them?"

Pyotr also looked fairly interested in that answer, although he was probably aware it wasn't the entire issue.

Tatiana sighed, absently playing with the physical therapy weight she had one of her little sister's Mist minions to liberate for her. "At the base level, it's pretty correct. There's more to it, nothing is ever that pretty, but... Nya's the eldest Flame user we have. Personality clashes is known to be... possible. And... violent."

Likely because people that could set themselves on techno-colored fire getting into clashes with others of different techno-colored fire was eye catching, and the news tended to spread. Parallels would then be drawn, assumptions made, and that resulted into the 'but so-and-so hates such-and-such'.

It was convenient to hide things behind, and the Sun user wondered how many other Flame users made use of that 'dis-information' to their own benefits before.

"If Gedeon's already obstinately stubborn as most Suns tend to be when 'fully mature', then Dmitriy's likely the next to come down with a case of 'Flame maturity'. Then me, I guess."

Hopefully she could either come down with a serious case of 'obstinate Sun syndrome' about or focusing on the Mafia Land hospital, although she really didn't mind the idea of semi-annual returns to Zolotov territory for medical reasons.

Not everything in the family had to be as eye-catching or as dramatic as her younger siblings.

"...Bazanova doesn't mind?" Milos questioned dubiously, swinging his sweatpants clad legs off the bed and stretching his shoulders out slowly.

"She has 'plans' for them." Tatiana confirmed wryly, eyeing his progress sharply.

Still no hesitation or tentative movements. Likely he was healed up fully, even if he was rather old to being with.

"Not in the clan's territory, if she gets out of it." The Pahkan decided firmly, the expression on his face distinctly unhappy but not quite to the point of being called 'pissed off' either. "Mafia Land, mainly. The greater Moscow districts if and when she gets that far."

"If she's on clan business?"

Milos heaved a heavy and exasperated sigh as he dropped his head into his hands. "Do I or do I not undercut my son's authority on behalf of the woman intending to be 'temporary'?"

"I cannot answer that for you." Answered the Sovintnik evenly, hands clasped behind his back and merely waiting for the other man's decisions.

"I'll let Nya know she's safe enough at home, she was rather more concerned with my own and her brat's security than herself." Offered the Sun user, gathering up her things and the physical therapy detritus they had made use of over the last few times.
"I'd almost say that's arrogant of her… but I've seen what happens when she gets pissed off."

The nurse merely smiled politely, getting up from the chair she had repurposed to have a comfortable place to observe in order to clear out of the room. "You can have your bedroom back, gramps. The Pahkan can and is cleared to leave for home."

Pyotr inclined his head to her. "Thank you, Tatiana."

"Is that all?" Milos inquired slowly, rolling both shoulders. "That was… quick."

"Sun Flame healers are valuable for a reason, sir." She grinned at them both, shifting the various weights to a better position to support them. "Daily physical therapy is something I'm going to highly recommend, but… I'll leave that up to you. You're good enough for now, report any sudden pains or aches please."

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 28th of June, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"This one is a bit more… dubious. I've never actually met this one." Sonya ran her fingers through Shamal's hair, leaning back against the warm engine block for the help in keeping warm.

He decided to pretty much blanket her legs in return, perfectly content in hugging a thigh to his chest.

If he was cold or not too was debatable, it could just be because he was annoyed Valera got the middle of the car's back seat. Which meant the baby Cloud had the spot between them and was very smug about it the entire few hours it took to get from Khimki's docksides to the Wolfpack's proposed meeting point.

Late summer afternoon it might be, but there was a rather unseasonable bite to the air today. Probably rain threatening, but that meant the water in the air made everything seem cooler. She wished she picked out a thicker jacket for today, but frankly they had spent most of their outing within a car.

"So… what, we're just set up in his usual patrol patterns and are going to wait for him to wander by?"

"Pretty much… but, I don't actually know if this one is male or female, Cherep."

"My money's on male." Observed the stuntman dryly, hitching the terminally bored Valera higher in his arms. "Just because I highly doubt until you dealt with those that shall not be named… no one thought a girl-Cloud was really worth anything."

"Probably." Sonya had to agree, although sourly.

A sigh, and Arseniy turned to eye the street they were parked at pointedly. "Is there any reason why we're waiting for this kid near a fucking park?"

"He's a kid, apparently younger than the Khimki one. Still surprisingly scrappy, though." She explained with a sigh of her own.

The Wolfpack Gang hadn't exactly informed her of much, just that they had a young Cloud they wanted her to talk to. While she didn't really mind the request since the opportunity to gather another's basic starting mentality, the lack of details of who it was she was here to see and what he
was like was kind of suspicious.

What little she did know was this baby Cloud was about at the point she had been at when nine or ten. Able to do something a bit inhuman and within the range of Propagation, a tendency for something like a Cloud's patrolling, and was a bit of a little prick in personality.

…so only probably a baby Cloud.

It could also be a very anal-attentive Sun, a Lightning with no life, or an easily irritated Storm.

"What does this kid look like, anyways?"

Sonya coughed into her hand once, checking to see if there was any more blood in her throat or not, before she thought back to the bare-bones description she got. "Preteen, orange hair, green eyes, and an abundance of freckles. Will investigate anyone just loitering around, kind of nosy about it really. So…"

"That kid?" Asked her brother, jerking a thumb to a similarly looking child warily watching them from the small park's forest line.

She looked in the same direction, even as Arseniy ensured there was none too interested in them from behind her, and crooked a finger at the kid to get him to approach. "Probably."

Cherep hummed, stepping around their foster father to give her the illusion of 'privacy' for the next conversation. "Going to beat him up too?"

"Only if he asks for it." It earned her a laugh, and the stuntman wandered off with their little brother to investigate the playground equipment.

The vor wouldn't be leaving, he was there for the 'official' tone, but Shamal didn't have to be.

The thief looked down, but only earned a fairly stubborn look in return as the Mist brat hugged her thigh harder.

Apparently neither would her brat be leaving. Even if he did look slightly envious of her brothers heading off to play.

"Ten or so minutes, then we'll head over." She informed him idly, flicking her gaze back up to the Wolfpack Gang's foundling. "First off… who the hell are you, and do you know why I'm here?"

In return for the blunt questions, there was a dubious eyeing of her person and a hunched up shoulder in a badly half-assed shrug. "Vasilyev Ravil Olegovich, and no."

In return for the blunt questions, there was a dubious eyeing of her person and a hunched up shoulder in a badly half-assed shrug. "Vasilyev Ravil Olegovich, and no."

的年轻人Vasilyev Flatly at her glowing purple finger, then examined his own hands curiously. He glanced to Shamal, who heaved a very put-upon sigh and cupped a hand to shield his own indigo Flames from casual view.

His reaction, which was a mix between surprise and wariness that was badly hid behind hastily faked suspicion, confirmed he did at least have Cloud Flames. If her own was merely equally badly hidden relief/wariness and Shamal's Mist Flames earned him surprise… then likely he didn't know it came in
different colors.

Sonya pelted him in the forehead with a chunk of emerald cut white sapphire taken out of her jacket pocket, digging a copy of the hippy-book Galina had disguised their initial Flame-type sortings into out from her purse. "Since you are one of us, there are a few things I have to pass on. First and foremost, there is something that polices us... and you piss them off you're on your own."

The gem earned a dirty look, she got another one for throwing it at him, and the preteen accepted the book with a dubious sneer. "Explain."

She cocked an eyebrow at the demand, keeping silent out of what was probably pure pettiness.

Arseniy heaved an explosive sigh, reaching into his own pocket for a clipping of a newspaper to throw in the kid's face. "Listen boy, she's the one that did this."

...probably the article about said sex traffickers and exactly what Sonya did to them in revenge, which she still had yet to read.

She didn't care to actually see what the civilians thought of her handiwork either, or the police. Their world wasn't a nice one, any outsider would judge it harshly out of either ignorance or different cultural standards.

"The Vindice." Shamal informed him flatly, apparently not a fan for his attitude towards her. Brown eyes flicked dark blue as her brat glared at the older one, sniffing in offense and then giving him a cold shoulder. "Everyone knows that."

"Not everyone, not up here brat." In that light, she should probably give the preteen some slack. "No one knows who they are, or where they take those they declare have broken Omertà, and I don't think anyone really wants to find out. They will interfere if you break their few commandments, and those are what I am required to pass on."

Frankly, Sonya could go another two decades without so much as catching sight of another one quite happily. Somehow, she didn't think she'd have that kind of luck.

"...I'm listening."

...but probably would make up his own damn mind if he'd follow them or not. That wasn't her problem, he could risk it if he wanted.

Closing her eyes, the thief thought back along that line and concluded Classical Clouds really weren't predisposed to co-exist well at all. It was either all confrontational or aggressive, and this was the second 'feral' Cloud she had to gather details from.

She really was lucky Cherep was Inverted.

Interestingly, the prickly preteen hadn't bitched or did his selectively arrogant but silently doubting thing in Arseniy's face yet. What had been offered, equally as rudely as her own bits, had just been accepted at face-value.

Obviously, there was something about her foster father that made Clouds pay attention to him when he decided to speak.

"We can't hold government office, can't join the military, and cannot tell anyone outside the Mafiya about these pyrotechnic skills of ours. Not without dragging them in with us." She wasn't looking, so if he had told someone like a family member or a friend she wouldn't know nor judge him for it in a
bitchy way. "They're called Dying Will Flames of the Sky, our type in particular is Cloud. In that book, they're referred to as 'violet Soulfire', but you can safely ignore the free-love hippie crap. It's just the way we hid it for those that have no criminal connections."

There was a grunt from somewhere in front of her. "...why aren't you looking at me?"

Ooh… snarly. Scary… not. "We have a predisposition to hate each other by instinct. I'm trying not to give into it. You're too young for me to feel alright with beating the shit out of you."

Apparently Vasilyev had nothing to say to that or was trying to see if that was correct on his own end.

"Last bit. If you do join the Yasenevo District syndicate, the Wolfpack Gang, you are limited in going after either those that have no Flame users or up to ten. If they have ten before you decide to pick a fight with someone else, then anywhere from three to twenty. So on. Violate that, and you can look forward to visiting wherever it is the Vindice take their prisoners."

"...look at me... please."

Sonya cracked an eye open in sheer curiosity, earning a fairly impressively flat look in return.

"What do you mean we have a predisposition?"

She sighed through her nose, blinking both eyes open and studying the kid in an honestly thoughtful manner instead of sardonically or derisively. "We're the most territorial of all the types, another of the same nearby sets us on edge. We're in your territory, it's probably worse for you... but I'm older, and it's more grating for me."

There were a few thoughts to that the copper-haired kid almost responded with, as in he opened his mouth to say them but rethought it at the last second and shut said mouth.

After wrestling with himself about something, Vasilyev carefully gritted out his next question in a forcibly neutral tone. "Why are you trying, then?"

"I refuse to be put in a box when it comes to my behavior."

Really, wasn't that all it was?

Sonya rejected the idea she had to be like any other Classical Cloud, instead she would be so in her own damn way. Stubborn of her, and probably hard-headed for little real reason, but she was both a Cloud and a Storm.

"Additionally, for all the Storms, Rains, Lightnings, Mists, and Suns I know of... only Sky Flames are rarer than Clouds. If I am unable to speak rationally with other Clouds, then I will only be able to research my own nature. I also refuse to do a half-assed job of it."

The preteen stared at her flatly for a few long seconds, then took a deep breath and tried to relax somewhat. He failed pretty badly at it, but he was trying and she rather appreciated that. "What's the rock for?"

"They're called Dying Will Flames. Willpower is what it burns, that rock can focus it for you until you learn to manifest it on your own."

"Why Dying?"
"Most reach for it in those moments of impending near-death experiences." The Storm-Cloud drew a breath of her own, but Arseniy shifted rather suddenly and attracted their rather terribly frayed attentions.

"We're being watched. Hurry it up."

Sonya bit her lip sharply, then turned back to the kid pointedly. "There's another to the north of me. Between him and you, I have about twenty-five kilometers of territory. From this point, which is the edge of where you brush up against my area, and in any direction but north or northwest you'll probably find another of us after a few more kilometers. I ask, in return for my aid, you find another and tell them the same basics I am telling you."

Vasilyev gave a sharp nod in recognition, shiftyly eyeing the vor's back and the area he was looking in rather than her.

"The kid with the purple colored man over there will be inheriting my territory in as little as a year. Don't ask how I can do that, you likely can't do it and wouldn't want to move anyways." That earned her a sharp look, which the thief admitted maybe was a bit too arrogant of her. "Again, wouldn't want to. If you break that, and it's likely in the early stages, it's a white sapphire. Ask the Wolfpack Gang for a vor advisor if you want more help. Read the book, keep an eye cracked for more of us, and pass on the same rules. That's all you're required to do."

That was it, right?

She forgot to tell Dorokhov some of that, but Ziven could always be passed on the bits she forgot later.

Sonya was almost, almost giddy. They might be able to stand one another, if Vasilyev was really going to try to copy her in ignoring the irrational ticks.

…fuck, she should probably pass on that 'don't ignore all violent impulses' tidbit. Possibly the vor that would come around from the Wolfpack Gang wouldn't mind doing it for her, when they paid off the Sovintnik for her doing this little 'house-call'.

The Khimki Cloud didn't need that bit, he was pretty violent already and was perfectly happy with being so.

"That's all on my end. Any questions you can't wait for to be answered?"

He glanced to the book in his hand first, before looking back up at her with a look that questioned if she was rational.

She tried really hard not to take offense. Obviously he'd have a few after reading it, but she meant right now and any Cloud-centric ones.

Arseniy decided to cut anything more they might have said short, glancing back to the preteen sharply. "Beat it."

Sonya threaded her fingers through Shamal's hair, only belatedly realizing the kid had a pretty tight grip on her. "Shamal?"

"…I don't like him." Her brat muttered sullenly, more into the fabric of her slacks than really to her.

"Well… brat, that's it for personal visits this month. Or for the next one, as a matter of fact. Hopefully we can do the rest by word of mouth or by letter."
"Grab your brothers and head back." Arseniy instructed her, pushing off the boot of the car to head his own way. "I don't think they were Wolfpack vory, so I'm going to go give them a head's up if they don't have a watch on the brat."

"Will do… um."

Wait, Sonya had assassins. Supposedly.

Maybe it wasn't on behalf of the Yasenevo District Cloud, but hers?

Her foster father apparently had that thought before her, so the look he shot her over a shoulder was slightly amused. "Head home, girl. Tell Lisa I went for a walk."

Well… if he wanted the first round of possible-assassins, she really had nothing to argue against it. "Alright."

(Sunday the 29th of June, 1969. St Louis des Francais Catholic Church, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Why does it have to be the bloody morning?" Sonya asked of the world sourly, under her breath so it was likely she didn't intend for it to be overheard.

"To annoy you specifically." Renato returned wickedly, sliding out of the shadow of a rather ornate bulwark that clad the church Lisa had found for Russian Catholic Christians. "Of course dawn mass is held just to annoy you, little dragon lady. Why else would anyone do anything?"

"Obviously," the thief managed over Shamal's excited cheer that the hitman had shown up before he was scheduled to fly out of Soviet Russia entirely, "I am fully aware the world does not revolve around me, Renato. I know there's a reason, but right now I'm not entirely sure I care other than to be irritated at the result dragging me out of bed to do this."

Said brat paused deliberately, then carefully hugged Renato's leg with a flicker of indigo Mist Flames to prevent any creasing of his clothing that he could object to.

Crafty little snot, now he had to think up another reason to avoid overly touchy child demands for affection.

Obviously Sonya had let him practice against her first, because there wasn't even a kink in the line of his slacks when the bratty Mist let go.

He decided to give the kid this one, it was creative and outside the box. More so a thing a Lightning would've figured out… maybe even that brunette Lightning the thief had working for her.

With a snort, the older Italian slotted the Storm-Cloud with a droll look. "What, I don't get a hug from you too? Aren't you happy to see me, Sonya?"

"…did you want one?" Sonya actually paused to ask, in perfectly honest surprise.

Caught a bit flat-footed by the complete lack of protest or snarly Cloud irritation over the fundamental human need of 'touch', Renato took off his hat to scratch at the back of his head out of sheer confusion. "Yes, I would like a hug."
If she gave him one did, great. If she didn't, well… she'd say something, and he'd know her weird
Cloud tendencies didn't stretch to personal space.

"…oh. Okay." Taking a second to remind herself of the logistics to the act of giving a hug was just
sad, but Sonya did have to think of how her brother gave her one and then tried to translate it to how
to give the hitman one that she wouldn't mind getting.

…because of course she would be considerate like that if she was going to do something similar to
another.

Informative, slightly depressing, and entirely ridiculous. Renato rolled his eyes and held an arm out
instead of waiting for her to think it through entirely, and received a glancing side-hug that was over
way too quick.

…but she gave it of her own free-will. Progress.

"That's not how you hug someone, mamma." Shamal informed her dubiously, holding both arms out
in demonstration. "You're supposed to use both arms."

"I don't like that one, I'd rather have a hand free or two." The utterly paranoid and practical woman
responded frankly. "Aren't we here to attend mass? Shouldn't we go inside?"

The Mist stubbornly planted his feet in front of them, giving his godmother a look of his own.
Brat had gotten surprisingly bold over the last couple of weeks, especially with Sonya reinforcing his
behavior because she didn’t care how he treated others as long as he had fun with it.

"But you give me full hugs."

"You're small."

"Then put your arms around Mister Renato's waist, they'll be free then."

…the Sun would be buying the kid the damn puppy he wanted if this really wor-

Renato was both surprised and terribly not surprised that Sonya took a liberty with his personal space
to try out the brat’s suggestion. He had asked for one, so following her weird Storm-Cloud logic he
was ‘acceptable’ to test variations of ‘hugs’ on.

"Huh… this is better."

He couldn't even get annoyed she was likely creasing his suit jacket, while she figured out what to
do with her hands and elected to finally cross them behind his back. The hitman patted the woman
on the back absently, keeping his own arms around shoulder level since it seemed she disliked
having her arms constrained, and let go quickly when she stepped back.

"Thanks, Shamal."

Brat of a Mist looked delighted he helped in some way. Then he really thought through the logistics
of his suggestion/demand and put the older Italian together with that and flicked a slightly wary
glance up at him.

As the feel of Sonya pressed up against his chest would take a whole lot of time to fade, Renato
wasn’t particularly upset with the brat.

He rolled his eyes again and dropped a hand so the kid could get his not-really-hidden desire for a
full family unit thing out of his system. "Come on, we're going to be late."

"Ooh shit. Erm... I mean. Uh... damn?" Looking around at the rapidly emptying courtyard, and only absently giving the Mist her hand as well when he tugged her skirt for it, the thief tried to think of a way to swear without offending the priests inside. "Well... ah fuck. Whatever."

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 29th of June, 1969 continued. Moscow School # 3054, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Chikatilo Andrei Romanovich?" Called the pretty brunette woman, checking off the list of teacher candidates she had yet to get through.

When the man across from Artemiy got up, she beckoned him down the hallway to the classroom she had appropriated for this round of screening.

"Down here."

The hopeful literature teacher fussed with his hat, thinking through what he would have to do if this didn't pan out. He had a factory job already... but frankly he would much rather teach.

"Dyrbov Artemiy Nikolayevich!" Startling to his feet, the unhealthily thin looking man with short greying blond curls betokened him down the hall to his own repurposed classroom to hold interviews in. "Come with me, please."

That was... a strange accent. Maybe a language teacher?

This was not particularly a school he had any experience with, private schools were thin on the ground in the city, but it was also possibly part of the reason they had to take out advertisement in a local paper in order to gather up more teachers. It was entirely possible they were going to teach more than just Chinese or another of the Slavic languages to their students.

Realizing he had maybe hesitated too long, his mother always did complain he had his head in the clouds a bit too often, Artemiy hastened to the thin man's side. "Ah... Dybov is me. I, I mean."

He shut his mouth before it could run away with him, but his possible future co-worker merely looked tiredly amused. "I'm sure. I am Bordrov Jaroslav, but call me Scruffy."

"...uh... Scruffy?"

"Long story. And if Bazanova tells you it has anything to do about jail cells or firing lines in Africa, she's kidding. Hard to tell with her, but..." The man shrugged casually as he entered the room first, as if that wasn't nearly incomprehensible despite his careful pronunciation of his words. "I'm the science teacher, emphasis on engineering and earth sciences. Possibly the English teacher if we're allowed. Bazanova's our librarian, one of the substitutes for literature and an elective in non-typical sciences... and currently filling in as our principal."

Were they that pressed for personnel some of the teachers had doubled down on the classes they were willing to teach?

"I can teach music."

It earned him a curious look, as the thin man folded himself into the chair behind the lone full-sized desk at the front of the classroom and gestured to a more comfortable seat than the student desks and
chairs laid out in rows before him. "Oh? Interesting. Beginner, intermediate, or advanced?"

"Beginner." Artemiy hadn't picked up an instrument in a couple years, but he could read and teach students to read music sheets and how to tune various wood and string instruments.

He was not qualified to teach a chorus, but he could learn in a fast hurry if need be. Which would be more than enough time to re-discover if his skills in the violin had lasted through his stint as a factory worker.

"Violin and piano, but I'll branch out to other string instruments if you'd like."

He'd do probably a lot of things to land this job, picking up an old interest and passion of his would be no great hardship.

"I don't make the final calls, unfortunately. Otherwise I would say yes, we don't currently have a music teacher." Bordrov, Scruffy, raked a hand through his close shorn silvering curls, which seemed to be early and stress induced, not because the man was really that old. "But I'll note it down, and it'll probably earn you a harder look in the end."

"Quick question?" Artemiy waited for a nod before asking, because this was a bit off and while he normally wouldn't approach anything this shady he was pretty desperate for something that wasn't grinding out parts to automobiles in shifts. "Isn't this a school for the advancement of science?"

"Well of course, but not everything we do has to be rooted in logic and reason. That's why we're also teaching art, music, and languages." It sounded rehearsed, so apparently he hadn't been the only one to wonder. However, the other man had a point. "It'll be an elective, just to warn you, if it does go through."

"I am fine with that."

"Perfect." Scruffy claimed, noting it down on the page of references and prior teaching experience they had asked him to supply when he applied in their advert. "Now then. To the more boring parts of this..."
"Alright then, who all do we have?"

"Four possible Literature and Grammar teachers, a promising basic Arithmetic instructor and possible Geometry, Trigonometry, and a Calculus coaches. Two history teachers you might want to look at, a chemist interested in teaching if we would like to arrange his instructor's license, and a biology major from a local Professional Technical School who's interested in the same." Galina ticked off, then lifted her eyes from the file in her hands to look up at the Storm-Cloud that had asked. "Beyond the possible outside hires; Lisa, Scruffy, you, I, and the Triad member Yanlin have all completed our teaching certificates. Irinei is testing for his this week, Tatiana and Avdotya have arranged a schedule to trade off time as a Mafia Land nurse and the nurse in residence at the school."

The Lightning took a deep breath, then continued.

"The school is entirely outfitted with everything we need, the library is stocked, there's half of the textbooks we might need and we can't order the rest until you confirm the new hires, we did forget to hire janitors or cooks for the cafeteria, but the basement and the 'elective' classes are also about half-stocked with the supplies they're going to need."

Sonya rubbed her temple tiredly. "I thought the clan would be supplying the other personnel? The staff needed to keep the place running?"

"...might be best to seek our own people for that." Suggested the brunette after a long moment of contemplation. "While I'm sure old man Zolotov wouldn't mind given what we've supplied for the clan, you know Gedeon would cut us off the very moment he's in complete control. Even if it would be cutting off his nose to spite his face. Or he might actually have a decent sense of business acumen and will hold it over the school somehow just for leverage."

"And how much more is that going to cost us? I take it this is part of the 'supplies' we still need?"

Her assistant gave her an entirely plastic-looking bright grin. "It would help... if you went on another spree. Another big one. Frankly, we sold too many of the stones if we're opening up the Flame focus matching as an actual service as well as for our projected first year of students."

"...son of a bit-

"Also!" Ruthlessly continued the Lightning over her underboss, ignoring any dirty looks shot her way with admirable aplomb. "I can at least supply a shopping list this time. Spinal is pretty much what we need in the greatest quantities, but the pricier stuff to hawk for the cold cash to pay the first round of paychecks and the school's fees, utilities, and taxes is also very useful at this point."

The thief that would be stealing all this shit flatly glared at the slightly older woman, until a prepared 'shopping list' was handed over with a bit more awkward-looking plastic smile.

"Really Sonya, I'm sorry I have to ask again. But... we're running through the supplies faster than I had thought."
"...erm... can I...?"

"Ask, Scruffy." Sonya prompted the man, not really patient enough in the face of this news to wait for him to figure out how to 'delicately' phrase what he wanted.

"Aren't... most of the 'pricier stuff' basically... useless? There's also the metal and finished pieces, right?" Fidgeting, the Sun gestured to the information spread out all over his thighs to either make a point or draw attention to it. "I mean... aside the sapphires. Sometimes."

"I sell all of that off to buy the semi-precious stones in bulk." Answered the Lightning promptly, tossing her head in a non-shoulder involved shrug since her arms were full of things she was trying to look through. "The extra money is also how we afforded the school's property in the first place, and how we got it furnished legally for visibility and transparency reasons."

"Is there anything you want in particular?" Tacked on the Storm-Cloud curiously, as he had put in an order for gem cutting tools.

Those were a bit more specialized and high profile than most other tools the clan had ever needed to get, so their acquisition was being handled through Mafia Land and Björn.

Her poor Lackey, while he had been perfectly aware and comfortable with how to accept a contract for a heist... placing a contract for an 'acquisition' on her behalf had flustered him something fierce.

The expression that crossed Scruffy's face was an interesting study into what happened when a semi-forthright person's practicality warred with his morals.

"If you want the raw gems to practice on without worrying about how much they're going to cost you, speak now."

Apparently, her words hadn't helped much.

Peter glanced to his work, to her, then to the cuffs of a rather newer looking coat he was wearing. Then he planted his face into his hands for a long moment. "I suppose it would be highly hypocritical of me to ask it be purchased legally if possible?"

"The money will be obtained illegally." Sonya answered slowly, because this seemed to be a fairly serious issue that she recalled her brother having fits with before, curiously looking over at her Sun foundling. "I do have a legal source of income, actually. So, while I could arrange that... it's more trouble than it's worth at this point."

"...you do?"

"Investments. Which were bought with illegal money, again." Shrugging, the thief paired Galina's shopping list with the general paperwork she had to look over and decide on the final hires for their school effort through. "And again, I can do it. I won't appreciate that limitation, and will eventually get fed up with it, but if you need more time..."

"No." Scruffy decided firmly, dropping his hands and giving her a semi-resigned huff. "I'll live with my eroded moral code."

"Scruffy, Peter. I can't actually let you go since you made yourself useful, but if you'd like a quiet little house in the middle of nowhere..."

"Again, Sonya, I'll live with it." The Sun dismissed stoutly, returning his attention pointedly to his own work after taking in a bracing breath to prepare himself. "Hiding from myself will do no one any
favors, and I'd rather be aware of what kind of risk I'm involved with than ignore it and be surprised when it blows up in my face."

A not particularly objectionable outlook, all in all.

If she didn't have Cherep, it was likely she'd be less patient with Scruffy's quibbling about moral and immoral income. Thankfully it seemed as if Peter would compromise his integrity if need be, although she wasn't sure about her own feelings on the matter.

She wasn't upset she was forcing that in him, because no matter how he wanted to handle it he was now officially part of the mafia and this life was a kind that wouldn't let go unless you went to extreme lengths to leave it behind. Sonya was still kind of sorry it was her and not just life events forcing it, but not to the degree she was sure she should be.

….or thought she should be.

Another few moments of thought, and the Storm-Cloud wrote it off as a bad job all around.

It wasn't Scruffy's fault he made himself useful using information they were restricting to the Flame user's office, nor was it his fault he survived however many years of imprisonment and likely slave labor on the virtue of his Sun Flames.

Bad timing, bad situations, and just one man trying to make the best of it with good intentions but resulting in things she couldn't justify cutting loose from her security even for his own comfort.

Now then, who would she be hiring with that yet-to-be acquired illegal money?

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 30th of June, 1969 continued. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya puzzled over the contents of her fridge but shut it instead of pull something out of it.

The stock of food she had bought with Renato had been decimated over the last two weeks to the point she had just odds and ends left. Which wasn't necessarily a bad thing, most of what was left had longer shelf lives than the milk and produce, but it didn't really suggest anything for dinner to her.

Additionally, she might need to go grocery shopping.

Possibly.

If she could think of nothing that would use a container of yogurt, a block of hard cheese, the three lone carrots, and the half-full jug of juice she still had.

…but she was frankly tired of, and sometimes failing at, cooking.

She turned to address the only other adult in the suite now, running the list of restaurants in the area that did take-away through her mind to figure out what she wanted to eat. "Hey, Cherep? Do you-"

Cutting herself off, the Storm-Cloud stared blankly at what had resulted the last hour when she had been occupied reading resumes and the annotations Galina and Scruffy had added over the course of the interviews they'd done for her.
Her brother was sprawled out on her couch, a leg thrown over the back of the couch while the other was set on the arm rest. His head was hanging fully off the cushions, his purple hair brushing the floorboards, and one arm was propped up on the books laid out on her coffee table.

Not entirely new for him, as she recalled him doing it in both Germany and when she caught him napping in the circus.

The new bit was that Shamal had ended up face-down and dead asleep on his chest.

He had a session with the Mists earlier today, broadening his grasp on teleporting with Mist Flames to the point he could support going from one side of the room to another without ending up in weird or odd positions instead of where he picked.

Apparently just to get comfortable with the idea of it, and with the mechanics of how it would work out for him. Repeated teleports, or far ones, were generally known to be draining according to Anna.

It wasn't unusual that her brat had tired himself under Usov's eye, but it was unusual he'd curl up with anyone but her or Renato if he was tired.

When it was the hitman, it was more usual for him to curl up nearby instead of actually on the man. This was… actually a new sight for her.

Kind of adorable actually, for her prickly little brat who was not only good at hiding his wariness but also who generally kept new people at arm's length for a long time before trusting that they wouldn't leave him alone suddenly. Shamal didn't really like a lot of new people, he wasn't evenly cautiously hopeful Galina and Scruffy would be lingering around him for long.

Which… they wouldn't.

They'd only move to Italy when she did, but she did catch that he was being very chary about agreeing to have more games with her foundling Sun user when they met up again in a year or so. Which was a year or so away, practically forever for the poor kid.

Even Galina only got respect and his attention rather than affection, even if the Lightning had gone out of her way to be just as useful to her brat as she was to Sonya herself by suggesting fixes to the few problems he wondered about.

Pessimistic of him, but his father had died on him in a likely messy or scarring manner and neither she nor Renato could spare a lot of free time for him right now.

Rather, they couldn't spare more than they could manage in week or two stretches here or there… and often it was them putting aside the work they did for a living in his favor when they could afford it. They were still in the middle of putting more things in place, so he wasn't always living with strangers in their homes two and a half years after he ended up with the hitman instead of somewhere stable and permanent with either of them.

Her family seemed to earn themselves a pass if only because they came attached to her, she didn't miss that Shamal wouldn't interact with her family unless someone else started it. Usually Valera starting a little tiff or Lisa asked what he'd like to eat would get him involved, but he even waited for Tatiana to ruffle his hair first or for Cherep to bend down to his level before really talking to them.

It'd be better in as little as a year and maybe at most two, which might make the Mist brat relax that edge of wariness to him when it came to new people and stop holding so hard to the few he already had, but for now…
fuck, Sonya didn't have a camera. "...Anna? Or is Usov the one here now?"

"No, Miss Bazanova. Usov has occupied himself with visiting his parents this night." Announced the Mirror Lady from the tiny window that let in either sunlight or the ambient street lighting from outside. "I take it you wanted something?"

"...go ask Lisa for her camera. Please." She'd invest in her own tomorrow or send Galina out to purchase one.

The young woman in the reflection scanned the room to see why, spotted her menfolk in their puppy pile, then winked out of view but the window giggled for a few moments afterwards even if the Mist was out of sight.

Trippy.

"...I heard that."

"Don't move." Sonya demanded, approaching the twosome to ensure Shamal wasn't going to wake up with a crick in his neck. "I want a picture, and I'm badly underprepared for things like this."

Cherep cracked open an eye, peering up at her in amusement. "Tsk tsk, sis. Behind in your mom-duties?"

"...are there regulations for this?"

Snorting, her brother readjusted his head so it was no longer hanging down. He also shifted himself more on the couch, but at least that didn't wake Shamal so she didn't kick him for it.

"There's a couple modes you can go with. You could be that mom that obsesses over everything your brat does, and has to shove it into other people's faces. Or the mom that's embarrassingly overly affectionate in public."

"...yeah, no."

"I think, personally, you're an awesomely groovy mom." He continued cheerfully, even as Anna rose out of the kitchen tiles holding their foster mother's camera. "You know, the type that lets her kids fuck up but will bail them out in the end?"

"...so, like Lisa? Well..." It was who she was taking cues from in how to raise the brat. Sonya couldn't really recall much of Rachel's early years much anymore, so Lisa was the mom she knew best right now. "...thanks? I'm still taking a picture and giving her one to torture you with."

"That would only be possible if I was embarrassed about this at all." Cherep corrected snootily, then rubbed the Mist brat's back to wake him up a little before she could capture them both when one was still asleep. "Hey... Shamal? Say cheese."

"...what?" The kid pulled his head up just in time to get flash-blinded.

"Continuing," Sonya returned the camera to the Mist that brought it, so Anna could take it back to their foster mother, which she did with another bell-like giggle that echoed back from her kitchenette's floor, "what do you two want for dinner?"

Shamal pulled a disgruntled little pout, rubbing his eyes irritably. "Mamma... what was that for?"

"...to torture you with when you grow up."
Cherep snickered, grunting when the grumpy Mist thumped him on the chest in revenge. "I've got no real opinion."

"Lasagna?"

Sighing, the thief wondered how late the black-market spice trade was open. "I can do that, if your zio agrees to watch you for an hour or so."

"...wait, can we really make that here?"

Sonya eyed her brother warily for a moment. "There is a thing called the underground spice trade. I need more olive oil, and probably some tomatoes, ground beef, and garlic cloves I don't have to buy illegally, but the sheet pasta and the right kind of cheese... I'll only be able to find that there and I'm fresh out."

"The... what?" Huffing when a Mist knee dug into his stomach when Shamal climbed off him groggily, the stuntman pushed himself up into a half-reclined position just to give her a dubious look. "People steal spices?"

"Of course we do. Do you know how much cardamom and saffron sells for? By the fraction of an ounce?"

Cherep pulled a face at her, swinging his legs off the couch and employing a bit of muscle control to not knock her brat in the head with his motorcycle boots. "That's freaking weird."

"Also... cheese wheels, liquor, and caviar are also frequently targeted from what I've seen of Mafia Land contracts."

Her fellow Cloud blurted out a laugh. "Really?"

"I've seen them, never took one. Well... there was a recipe for an alcoholic drink, but it's as close as I've ever gotten to enabling the illegal spice trade."

"...no, I've got to see this." Cherep decided, slouching against her couch now. "That sounds hilarious."

"I swear to whatever god you hold dear, if you just want to come along to eat something questionable in front of me..." Sonya kind of wondered if she kept talking, would her brother end up upside down again? "But it's still a black market, Cherep."

"Mmm... I think you're scary enough I'll bet on you instead of anyone interested in picking a fight with you."

"Are we going for a walk then?" Shamal perked up, stumbling to his feet instead of remained sprawled out leaning up against the couch next to her brother's legs. "Please?"

She sighed heavily. "I can get Anna to watch you-

"Please?" Her brat interrupted her, peering up hopefully.

Sonya flatly stared back, until he got the message she didn't appreciate his rudeness in cutting her off.

"...sorry. But... please?"

"You're going to crash early if you come with, Shamal. We won't get to reading tonight if you really want to come along," Between Mist teleporting instruction and an hour or so of walking tonight,
even if he asked Cherep for a lift for some of it, she didn't expect him to last much beyond dinner. "Tats might be free for a night, if I call."

Even the temptation of hanging out with the nurse for an hour or so it would take them to find the ingredients for dinner didn't dent the hopeful look he had aimed up at her.

"Fuck, fine. Find your jacket and put your shoes on."

Brat was going to be grumpy and tired for the rest of the night, and likely stubborn to stay awake as long as he could possibly stand it even if he was miserable to prove he could do as he claimed.

Sonya wondered if she was a soft touch for allowing it even if she knew it wouldn't be good for him, and for letting it happen even knowing he'd be unhappy and grumpy for the rest of the night afterwards. Shamal should learn his physical limits, so while she was well aware he'd be miserable it was his mistake to make.

She'd just… ensure he didn't end up passed out on a park bench somewhere instead of tucked in bed. Or with blood blisters on his feet.

…was there any iodine in her first-aid kit under the bathroom sink?

She was… pretty certain there was a bottle of the stuff in there. If not, Tatiana would likely have some stashed away if she asked.

"…three to one odds, one of us will be carrying him more than half the time."

"No bet." She dismissed flatly, heading to pick up her own jacket and purse.

After a nap Shamal probably really did think he was good for an easy hour of walking around, but he wasn't quite to the age where he had the physical reserves where that was actually true.

Cherep, since he was a weirdo and was perfectly comfortable sleeping with his boots on and in an inflexible, non-breathing leather jacket, merely pushed up off the couch and was ready to go.

Sonya had to stamp her boots back on, lace them up, and fetch her purse then check she had everything, and pick out the thicker of her two light jackets in case the temperature fell lower than usual around sunset. It took her a tiny bit longer, if only because she only put her purse and her jackets in the same spot when she lived here.

Even still, Shamal spilled out of the bedroom he was sharing with her with his blue sweater and shoes in hand the moment after she had pulled herself together. The brat plopped down next to her legs to pull his shoes on, and the Cloud siblings exchanged a look over his head while he struggled to tug the thick garment down over his head at the same time as he had to tie his laces.

"Do you need to buy a fixer-up motorcycle while you're up here, Cherep?" Asked the thief, just to buy up some of the time they were waiting for the kid to finish getting ready.

"It's an idea. Something suitably clunky wouldn't set me back much and will give me something to do if I can't think of anything else." Admitted the stuntman thoughtfully, scratching at his jawline and the shadow of purple stubble that said he hadn't shaved today. "But I guess that's also your way of asking if I will actually get my own transportation rather than hitchhike back to the circus?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Mmmhmm."
"Ready!" Shamal announced cheerfully, bouncing next to the door leading to the greater hotel area for them to get with the program.

His sweater was on backwards, and she was fairly sure the knot he used on his shoes was the 'difficult to untie' type Renato had drilled into his head if he ever had to escape through a window using blankets or sheets in lieu of rope or suitable string-like substances.

…were his shoes on the wrong feet too?

"Right…"

Her entirely unhelpful brother snickered as he led the way out.

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(Tuesday the 1st of July, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Ow… ow, ow. Ow."

"Something wrong, Shamal?" The child was walking a little funny, so Scruffy reached out and hauled the kid to the couch instead of letting him do it on his own.

It earned him an entirely ugly glare, but noticeably the Mist didn't fuss or protest the manhandling when he didn't tend to appreciate it if it didn't come from his godparents or Sonya's siblings.

"Shamal just had a very important lesson in being prepared and his own limitations." Said Storm-Cloud answered for him, tossing heavily annotated files to her desk and pulling the phone closer as she sat down in the chair behind the desk. Likely to start calling their teacher-candidates to inform them they were hired. "As well as why it's generally a good idea to put the correct shoe on the right foot, and why we use easily pulled apart knots for shoelaces."

Shamal hunched his shoulders, looking rather irritated and annoyed with the world in general.

His clothing this day was very correct in that respect, but the Sun couldn't figure out if that was intentional or just usual. He hadn't paid that much attention to how the kid was dressed, not figuring it to be important or something to watch.

"...why didn't you stop him?" A second after he spoke, it occurred to Peter that his boss might not appreciate his questioning of her parenting skills.

"The brat was convinced he could do it." It was spoken absently as she pulled the rotating dial in the order on the papers in front of her, so apparently she didn't mind or care if he thought her an unfit mother. "I suggested a babysitter, but…"

Oh. So, this was a 'child was stubborn' situation and not an 'absently-minded caretaker' one.

Scruffy had to mind his mouth better. Eventually, he might hit on something she didn't appreciate being questioned on. The fact he hadn't yet… was… actually slightly out-of-character for her… right?

Why did she let him question her?

Or pick his way around her morals in his 'near-civilian' way even if he wasn't really one anymore via
dubious criminal reasoning based on flashy fire skills?

Was Galina allowed to do so about personal and not professional issues?

"Good morning. Is this the Dyrbov household?" Sonya suddenly asked of the receiver placed between a shoulder and her ear, listening for a moment to whoever it was on the other end. "Ah, can you take a message to one Artemiy Nikolayevich then?"

The…?

Scruffy had done that interview. The literature teacher with a side interest in music.

Her Lightning assistant had liked the man she had interviewed at the same time, so why was she going with his preference?

"Yes. If he's still interested in a teaching position, we would like him to visit the Moscow School number three-zero-five-four's main office anytime between the hours of five and nine in the evening to finish the paperwork required and his proposed duties." A pause while the thief listened to whatever was said, the woman digging through her purse for her cigarettes and return the rather large bag to the floor next to her. "No, this scholastic year. As several of the teachers require to update or obtain teaching permits, sometimes in more subject than one, we need to know ahead of time if he would like assistance in obtaining his up-to-date permit in teaching literature for secondary school students or a few classes for teaching basic music lessons for this or the next school year."

Shamal irritably poked him in the thigh, for eavesdropping on his mother's conversation over the phone instead of paying attention to their now customary Mist-Constructed game.

"...yes, I can hold."

Peter turned back to him, still wondering what several things meant for him and if it was even worth it to ponder about it.

"Don't smirk, Scruffy. You're taking first shift in dealing with the school's office paperwork. I have enough as it is, and Galina does most of it." Sonya informed him blandly, still listening even as she lit her cigarette with a flick of red Flames. "Five to nine, you have to be there the full four hours tonight."

"Ah… any reason it's him in particular?"

And not, say… Galina's pick?

"He's actually got prior experience and up-to-date permits." She deadpanned dryly, blowing out a lungful of smoke in a sigh as she tapped her shouldering cylinder of paper and tobacco on an ashtray to knock off the loose ash. "Yes, hello Artemiy Nikolayevich? Yes, no… yes. My name is Bazanova Sonya Arsenevna. The… yes, the acting principal… yes, you do have the job if you are still interested."

"Let me see your feet first, kid. Maybe I can lessen the soreness enough you can walk in a straight line."

The thief pressed a hand over the mouth of the receiver to keep her next words confined to the office itself rather than let the man she was talking to overhear. "Tatiana healed up the worst of them this morning, it's more feeling off than feeling painful right now. I put iodine on the blisters last night to toughen them up into calluses faster as well."
"I'm fine." Shamal insisted mulishly, keeping his feet well away from the other Sun user he tended to hang around with if not with his godfather or the nurse. "Can we play already?"

A stubborn, smart-assed kid. Even if he could probably hasten the callus forming for him decently well.

Alright then.

"Cats, hunters and archers." Peter then suggested blandly, fighting a genuinely fond smirk for the little brat.

He'd almost claim the stubborn ones were the cutest… but that then suggested his icy and intimidating boss was something he wasn't touching with a ten-foot-pole.

So, the really young and stubborn were pretty damn adorable.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 1st of July, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

The second round of teachers, the temporary part-timers they might have to hire for various criminal-flavored or not reasons, were giving Sonya more trouble than filling in the permanent ones they needed to qualify for a 'school' label from the government.

She didn't want to overcommit the school's funds, half of which she already had to resupply along with the jewels for matching the 'graduates' of the Flame courses. Until the place ran for a few years consecutively, they wouldn't know how much it needed per year and the buffer it might flex from one scholastic term to another.

However, hiring too few teachers for at least the core classes and the 'cover' for the Flame ones would just be as bad as hiring too many and having one of the civilian teachers stumble on something they shouldn't in their free time.

The problem would even out the moment they got more criminal teachers like Lisa in or the other syndicates hopped on the bandwagon to have a less obviously Zolotov controlled way to train up their handful of Dying Will users… but that didn't exactly help them in the here and now.

They… probably should do another full-time literature teacher. Sonya was going to be often absent, and more focused with the library or principal duties herself when she had the time.

Randomly helpful was going to be her substitute teaching life in a nutshell.

There was Galina's pick, the guy that suggested he could help coach sports that they really didn't require more of… or she could dig through it again in hopes there was someone else with actual prior experience.

…starting off, their class sizes would be on the smaller side of average. All the Zolotov trainees, Dying Will enabled or not, and a few handfuls of Triad children would join a couple more handful of actual civilian students for the cover and another two or three from surrounding syndicates to 'test the waters'.

Meaning a range of ages, a range of education levels, and an entirely eclectic student body as a whole. Next year she might have to hire more hands, but as of right now they could probably get away with the bare minimum if she wanted to invest in a few select cases to pay off later.
Rearranging her files to put Chikatilo's on top for her next round of calls, the thief paused and cocked her head as voices started carrying down the hallway outside the office.

Scruffy and Shamal were a bit absorbed in their latest round, which had a distinctively steampunk flair to the 'game board' this time around, so it wasn't them. Her Mists were more apt to just phase into the office or the window behind her if they wanted something, so it wasn't Usov or Anna. Galina was off instructing her Lightnings at this hour and wasn't expected back for another two.

Tatiana?

But… she was back to being elbow deep in bullshitted medical files and collecting the information to know how many of what immunizations to ship to the clan when she returned to Mafia Land. A visit wasn't out of the question, especially not if she had paperwork to do as well, but unlikely until she got on top of that again.

Cherep might be visiting, but she only really expected him after he had stopped junkyard diving in hopes of finding a beat-up but still serviceable motorcycle. Barring that, the parts to make a serviceable motorcycle.

…depressingly, Sonya didn't tend to get much traffic that wasn't personal in nature. Her minions were all very circumspect about tending to their own flocks so they wouldn't annoy her, but that did mean she couldn't break up the tedious or dry parts of her own work with something new to nibble on.

"…no, mom! I swear, it's all 'eventually'! We don't have to bother miss Bazanova, I swear I'm fine!"

A baby Flame user and a worried/concerned parent?

New.

She also recognized that voice, for all she had only started hearing it recently.

The Storm-Cloud might have expected it, but Scruffy and Shamal were startled when Larion's mother and the Rain kid himself all but barged into the office.

Slightly taller than the thief, the green-haired woman she rescued from a handful of asshole vory that kidnapped her last week swept into the Zolotov Flame user's office with a highly upset expression.

…fuck, Galina wasn't here to handle this. Sonya would have to try her hand at being 'reassuring', which… she was fairly positive she was going to fuck up somehow.

Maybe if she thought of her as… kind of like Lisa?

Just… less understanding and centered?

Sonya's brain promptly broke trying to imagine that, so instead she rather woodenly turned to the other occupants of the office. "Brat, go teach Usov your game. Make it an involved lesson, please. Cheat all you want, he should be able to counter it. Scruffy, firstly call the man on top of this stack to offer a job too and then look through the rest for not-quite qualified but possible part-time teachers until we have the students that will need them to be full time."

Shamal, after a start of surprised hesitation, scrambled off the couch a bit awkwardly and jumped through a Mist Flame imbued spot on the floor to get to wherever the Mists had set up to handle their business. Hopefully he'd get there alright, or if not Anna would ensure he did reach where he was trying to get to.
Peter plucked the files she had been fussing with off her desk, giving Larion and his mother a brisk nod of either greeting or farewell before ducking out to make use of the phone in the office next to them.

The game board they had been playing on went up in so much indigo Flames a beat after the two of them had cleared out.

Lacing her fingers together and setting them on the desk, the Storm-Cloud tried for a polite smile. She had no idea how well she managed it, still distracted by wondering about Lisa's self-possessed confidence and what it would've been like growing up under her if she didn't have that. "Mrs… Tolmachyova? Larion. Good evening?"

The Rain's mother managed a nod back, still looking both upset and worried but now with an added edge of awkwardness. "I… um… perhaps should've called and made an appointment…"

"If it's that serious, I can always make the time." Promised the thief, with an honest edge that kind of both surprised her and didn't. For if it was her and Shamal in the worried mother's shoes, then she'd really want whoever it was that had the answers for her to make the time for whatever questions. "It's why I'm sitting in an office and not doing my work in my own place, even if I really could. To be accessible for questions or concerns that arise."

With a more settled nod, the green haired woman made a slightly self-conscious show of selecting the blue armchair set before the desk to utilize, her Rain son looking much more settled now that Sonya hadn't taken offense at the sudden interruption and gingerly perching on the green one.

…why didn't mother and son share a hair-color?

Admittedly, until Cherep popped up in urban Moscow with bright-ass purple hair she hadn't seen a whole lot of 'weird' hair or eye colorings… but she might not have been paying much attention to her fellow pedestrians that far back. However, she was pretty sure the colors she was positive hadn't been natural in Rachel's lifetime were dominant in terms of genetics.

As in, if her brother ever had a kid they'd likely inherit his natural 'Cloud' coloring despite what the other genetic contributor had unless it was an equally 'wildly' colored individual.

Larion had normal, common, brown hair. Not his mother's vibrant, dark green.

Interestingly, Verde's green was more 'acidic' than this woman's 'earthly'. This lady had Larion's blue eyes, but her hair was still rather a uniquely dark green you'd find more in healthy plant leaves than in human hair coloring.

Why was Sonya puzzling over hair color and genetics rather than listening to the worried mom?

Said worried mom had yet to say anything else but try to mentally pull herself together, so while she gathered herself mentally the thief would continue to muse on her hair's appearance instead of wonder why she was here.

"…Larya has informed me of something called 'Flame maturity'. That might significantly alter his personality." The woman finally settled on announcing aloud firmly, attracting the absent-minded thief's attention sharply in response. "I… would like to know what to expect."

"Honestly speaking, we don't know yet." Sonya answered bluntly, mostly to rip off the bandage on the painful topic of their ignorance instead of try picking around the topic gently. "Larion's not the eldest of the Rains we know of, though. There's an Inverted Rain by the name of Dmitriy, and three Classical Rains around the same age range, that will hit that before him. So while I cannot answer
that now, it will likely be more known in a Rain's scope before he hits the same period in his life."

She was probably trying to very carefully not pull a face for that admittance of ignorance, but she
was civilian and Sonya had been taught by Lisa to pick that kind of thing up. Thankfully, the
emotion behind it seemed more 'depressive' and 'scared' than 'scornful'.

The very limit of what the Storm-Cloud could figure out for herself, but generally good enough to
prevent her from trying to reassure those that didn't need it.

"As a whole, though... Flame maturity isn't the problem. It's a symptom." Continued the thief
patiently, tightening her grip on her own fingers to prevent fidgeting or smoking. It wasn't
professional nor confidence-inspiring, both being faux pas when it came to serious conversations. At
least according to her mother, anyways. "The real problem is that Flame user are all just parts to the
same whole... and without the keystone center to 'stabilize' a user as is, we start acting more in line
to certain 'archetypes' to attract said keystone Flame type."

"What do you mean 'symptom'? What's the problem? How do we fix that?"

"There's nothing to fix, it's just how things are. Out of the seven types of Dying Will Flames... Sky
Flame users are the rarest. Since a Sky has an ability of 'Harmony', they stabilize their picked
'Guardians' of the other types. Without a Sky, Flame users are... for the lack of a better term,
instinctively acting out in hopes of attracting one. The longer a lack of Harmony goes on, the more
we act out."

Larion's mother looked utterly frustrated to hear that, and the Rain kid himself kept giving her
sideways and concern-laced glances.

Not surprised, worried, nor concerned to hear that. He was informed of basic information at least,
there was a plus side to this. The Rains weren't that far behind everyone else even if they had a less
than competent lead for a few months to a year or so.

"...however." Sonya was forced to admit, thinking back along her behavior and the drive to be 'not-
labeled-a-psychopath' tick of hers. "We're still all human, and children naturally tend to change
slightly in personality as they grow older. Parts that Larion grows out of and into in the coming
years might not all be Flame-centric. We also still don't know if our original personalities are what
dictate what Flame we have, if it's something simply genetically influenced, or if it's a product of
circumstance or expectations. We do know an aspect of our Flames generally can dictate some of
what we are, but not to what degree that's true and what is natural just because we are... ourselves.
As much as it seems unnerving to you, it's equally so for us when we run headlong into a new facet."

She might be lying through her teeth a little, but as there was no hard data on 'why' they ended up
with which Flames was published or documented... she could claim such.

Genetics did have some weight into what Flame type one had, one only had to look at the Sky
lineage families to see that much. Arseniy and Valera were another example.

To what degree was iffier, and the situation-by-situation example where one might've reach for a
slightly different Flame than what was more 'obviously' their main type if just a few things had been
different from their initial incidents.

She'd thought Bjørn would be a Rain, after all. He still had a slightly Rainy tendency to be
unflappable from time to time, generally when he felt secured enough to be so, but if that was
because he only defied death twice before she encouraged his Flames to the fore or if that was
because a Lightning-Storm just was that way naturally was debatable.
Admittedly, the thief might be a more 'social' Cloud because of her slight Sun potential was influencing her to be so. Just hampered in by her more 'main' types of Cloud and Storm, so it wasn't recognizably a 'Sunny' trait.

It was all uncertain, and not entirely understandable. Thus, Sonya wasn't going to worry about it.

She was what she was, Larion would become who he was, and while she'll make an effort to explain it to a worried mother she wouldn't be obsessing over trying.

"...can you turn it off? This Flame thing? "

"Mom!"

"Larion... it's a legitimate question." A glance had the kid subsiding, and the Storm-Cloud seriously thought about it. "...as far as we're capable of here and now, no. There's no way we can do that. There is rumor of a possible way... but it's... I think... a punishment. Basically, via one of those incredibly rare Skies, a Dying Will user's Flames can be 'Sealed'. Which... also... pretty much lobotomizes said Flame user. Parts of said Flames is tied into our behavior and personalities, removing or suppressing that..."

Out of everything she did or didn't recall about a particular magna comic of Rachel's timeline, that bit stuck hard.

The Tenth Generations Sky's general overall issues before Reborn got there, and her suspicion it resulting from his Sky nature being Sealed by the Ninth. There was precious little mentioned about it anywhere in this life, or written down, but that one journal Lisa had just handed her made a mention of someone the Storm Arcobaleno had said was 'Sealed'.

In mostly pitying and derisive tones, to the feel of 'idiot deserved it but ouch that has to hurt' in the second-hand account.

Pulling together her suspicions on the act wasn't hard, but it was still mainly speculation on her end. Hard proof would be something to find, hopefully. Additionally, how someone would go about fixing the problems being Sealed and then having that Sky Flame seal broken would cause.

Sawada Tsunayoshi would be the one to break the Arcobaleno Curse, and for Renato and Cherep alone she owed the yet-to-be-born little snot a massive favor for that.

One she didn't mind owing, despite her dislike of actually using favors to bargain with outside her or her brother's social circle. Strange, but she could and would live with it comfortably.

The woman that had barged into the office blanched and shook her head rapidly with a splay of green strands of loose hair to show she didn't like that idea. "No, I'm.... I didn't mean it like that. Is there... any way outside of these 'Skies' to temper or minimize the risks Larya will end up... different?"

Sonya puzzled over that question. "Personally speaking, I'm the latest to hit 'Flame maturity', and from what I know... it wasn't a sudden or unforeseen thing, Mrs. Tolmachyova. We knew it was coming, had the warnings in nearly all sources we could get our hands on, but ignored the bulk of it anyways out of sheer incomprehension of the scope. I tried to deny it and remain in a less 'mature Cloud' mindset, which is why I was so very... explosive earlier last week. We can affect it to a degree... but it seems to be an unhealthy option we were just lucky worked out alright in the end."

She scribbled down an address for her instead and handed it to the distraught mother.
"This is my mother's home address. She's raised three of us so far and is currently raising a fourth. Lisa might be able to give you a better perspective than I can about the process from the outside that you seem to require."

Given the woman then clutched the scrap of paper like a lifeline, Sonya figured she had done badly at this 'reassuring' thing.

"Lastly, if I may… as an admittedly adoptive mother of another Dying Will Flame user myself, it's really all an 'additive' to the usual process of growing up. We're just known to take more of the traits our Flames lean to on than anything else." She tried cautiously, as a last ditch-effort not to suck badly at this as it seems she had. "My brat, a Mist which tend to be the more 'insane' and hard to pin down of the types, is still my brat even after three years of Flame use. He's just more mischievous, and conniving, than he was three years ago. Which also could just as much be from the difference between age three… and a half, to the age of six as being a Mist Flame user. He's smarter, he's craftier, has a very inventive sense of humor now, but he's still a brat and entirely mine."

Her visitor managed a weak, barely-there smile. "Thank you, then… I'm so rude. My name is Ruslana Leontevna."

"Bazanova Sonya Arsenevna, Mrs. Tolmachyova, but you can just call me Sonya." Responded the Storm-Cloud politely, rising from her chair to shake the woman's offered hand. "Storm-Cloud Flame user, the current so-called 'Expert' on Dying Will Flames, and temporary head of this office. While I will be returning to other things in a year's time when the actual head of this office is released from jail, my mother will know how to get into contact with me if you have any additional questions you'd like to ask. Hopefully ones I can answer positively for you."

"Given what you said would be the results of being 'Sealed', that's probably not a bad thing."

Ruslana returned in a markedly more even tone, seemingly now somehow more reassured than everything Sonya had informed her of up until the farewells. "Thank you, for this… and for my rescue, since I failed to actually thank you for that before."

A Rain tendency through the mother's line?

Or was the Rain's mother just good at pulling herself together after being allowed to panic for a time?

Was she reassured now or not?

"...you're welcome."

...and more importantly, did Sonya actually succeed or not in being 'reassuring'?

The so-far silent Larion looked hesitant as he also got to his feet, worriedly fidgeting in place at his mother's elbow while she collected her purse. "Mom?"

Sighing, the green haired woman checked to ensure she still had Lisa's home address in hand then looked squarely at her son. "I am… less nervous. You don't have to hover anymore. I don't know why you didn't want to bother Sonya so, Larya. She's very nice."

"She saved your life, of course she's nice." The Rain pointed out in return, as if that should be obvious and not… entirely untrue of the Storm-Cloud's general personality in question. "We had a reason, most of which I told you and dad but… like I said, I'm fine."

Sonya snorted, then coughed unconvincingly in a badly mistimed attempt to cover it up when mother and son looked at her in question. "...I heard the same damn line from my brat all morning about the blisters on his feet. Even when I could hear him say 'ow' under his breath with every step."
The older woman straight out laughed at that, ignoring the disgruntled expression that crossed Larion's face.

Sheepishly, the thief rubbed awkwardly at her left elbow and plastered an innocent expression across her own face. "He did."

Boldly rolling his eyes at her, the Classical Rain very firmly took his mother's elbow that he had been hovering at to lead her out of the office. "...and this was why I didn't want this meeting to happen, mom. I work for her right now."

Ruslana sniffed in mock-offense as they cleared the office door. "You are never too old for me to embarrass, Larya. It's my right as your mother."

His shoulders hunched in an expression of something that Sonya didn't get to see as they left her sight right afterwards. "...I'm fully aware of that, mom."

Dropping back to her seat in slightly amused confusion, she wondered if she had managed to fulfill what the office had been put into place or not on her own.

If so… hooray. If not… Lisa could probably catch what she missed and give her tips for what to do or not do the next time around.

Sonya glanced down at her borrowed office desk, then glanced around the empty and silent office, and then directed her gaze to the open and empty office doorway.

Great, she sent Scruffy off with her busywork. A couple of hours of free time now loomed, given the other Flame users that were regularly occupying the office had either been or had gone off to do other things.

...now what should she work on?

In the desk drawers, which she started pawing through out of bored curiosity five minutes into having little to do in front of her, and the thief pulled out a slightly mold-tainted carved naked lady from the bottom one that still had random packets of gemstones hidden within.

Maybe she should finally figure out what the hell this thing was supposed to be?

Pierre-Antoine Carpentier had to have kept it for a reason, and there was the German section of his letter/memoir to work through.

...if the naked lady turned out to be pornographic in use, she was going to give it to Renato.

He'd probably find something to do with it.

Now that she thought about it with something to do before her, there was the file updating Galina normally handled to do also. However, she was much more interested in the things of a long-dead Arcobaleno of the Storm than she was in mindless busywork.

"...Nya, why are you holding a statuette of a naked lady?"

"I'm going to figure out what it is. Somehow."

Tatiana dropped a large stack of files she had brought with her onto the couch lacking the usual Sun and Mist occupants, padding over to the desk to take a look of her own. "Oh... I know what that is."

"...you do?"
"Yeah, one of the docs in Mafia Land has one." The nurse reached out for it and accepted the slightly cool soapstone carving to examine it more closely. "They are mostly used by male physicians that visit or deal with underdeveloped countries and have female patients, especially way back in the day. Usually, culturally, the girls can't gesture or point out what hurts or is wrong on their own bodies because it was considered 'vulgar' or 'rude' to draw attention of a man not their husbands to those parts or to their body in general. So... a statue of a naked woman is used instead. This lady here, for example."

She wiggled said lady, before giving it another look over and putting it down to go start in on her own stack of work in the general quiet of the Flame user's office.

…why did a Storm mason have a bit of medical equipment?

Had Yang XiaoJing been a physician, or sick a lot?

Or one of his fellow Arcobaleno if not the Rain Arcobaleno of his time?

More questions for only one answered.

Sonya dropped the statuette back into the drawer it had come out of, now searching for the half-completed Arcobaleno letter/memoir to finish off and see if she could find another name hopefully in a less 'hot' country.

Also, she needed to note down a reminder to ask Fong if it would be possible to search out who Yang the Rain had been in his home country.

At this rate, Cherep would be Cursed before she found anything concrete to use to help him.

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(Wednesday the 2nd of July, 1969. Shkodër, Kingdom of Albania.)

A hard knock to Liam's tent was both expected and dreaded.

The master of the Russian Traveling Circus called the Großes Volksfest smoothed a hand down his mustache thoughtfully, thinking of everything that might go wrong and the things that had yet to even as he set his accounting books to the side. "Enter! Don't be shy~"

As it could be anything from one of the carnival rides exploding under stress, a rash of food poisoning from something off with the concession fair, or even another performance gone wrong, he thought he was well prepared for whatever news would come through his door.

Such as it was.

Peizhi ducked under the flap of the heavy canvas, an entirely flat expression on his already normally severe face. "Master Liam... Mistress Crina will not wake."

…instead it was the long-dreaded disaster looming this time, and not one of the mostly fleeting but costly upsets. The end of a dear friend and a much needed dry wit that had been a part of his troupe for years.

"...did she at least go in her sleep? No," he held up a hand before what was expressed with tiny tight movements in the other man's expression actually resolved into an explanation for how the Romanian native actually expired, "don't tell me. Allow me the falsehood of pretending it happened
as she wished."

The Chinese man hesitated. "...I'll remove the bottles before a coroner can arrive."

An entirely out of place smile threatened to twitch Liam's mouth up at the corners.

That... was actually a better end, if he was pressed to be honest. Done in by the very vice that had threatened to kill her. Crina might have actually liked that irony, and now she was out of the crippling pain that had plagued her so for the last year and a half she might've been able to spare the attention to be amused.

Ah... there was the grief he had been steeling himself against for months now. "I, and several others, will thank you for actions that have yet or not be done then."

Little Sister Sonya and Jaq the Strongman had kept supplying their fortuneteller with liquor, one by mail and the other by spending his own allowances on it, even as Crina's body rapidly broke down under the continued life-long poisoning of her liver. Which was responsible for the elderly lady's final end could remain unknown, and frankly even if he found out which he'd probably thank them instead of chastising.

"...thank you, Peizhi. I am," he continued pointedly when the other tried to say something, "completely aware this isn't entirely altruistic of you. No matter what Little Sister Sonya promised in return, you personally did not have to remain with us until Crina's death but could have appointed another. She wouldn't have found out until too late to take it back. I know that much of your world. The fact you did anyways, regardless of what was promised you... I tip my cap to you, young man. If I was wearing one, anyways."

Confused, slightly suspicious, and not entirely prepared to discuss what the native-born German meant by his words, the Chinese native gave an abrupt bow of acknowledgement before sweeping out of the tent.

With a smile, for that was not the first nor the last time he would use that tactic against the highly suspicious and caustic criminal flavors that tended to pass through, he turned to his makeshift writing desk.

The circus master carefully transferred the account books and his carefully amassed notations on costs and earnings for this stop to one side, uncovering the large and completely iron strong box he held the important bits his troupe asked to be kept safe for them.

Mainly deeds to various machinery or vehicles, important paperwork like birth certificates or documentation to prove they were a traveling performance actor, sometimes the odd trinket, and most importantly... wills.

For an operation that spanned multiple countries over the course of a year, they had dealt with any number of deaths both within and without the troupe while on the road. Liam personally preferred the pregnancies, births, and marriages that happened almost as often, even if they normally meant he lost another of his friends and family to a more sedentary lifestyle.

He held about half of his troupe's wills in his strong-box. There were a number of elderly performers just being prepared in case of the worst happening, and a few from the equally so among the younger members that risked death-defying on nearly a weekly basis no matter how he tried to stretch such things out.

Meaning, he dipped into this box a terrible amount before and probably too often afterwards as well.
Crina's last will and testament, updated every year on the dot until the will and patience to do so had been sapped from her, was a simple one.

A request for what would happen with her body that he could honor as he did have the extra funds, a few letters to be posted to her friends and old contacts to inform them of her passing, and a few items that she would like passed on to others instead of liquidated or kept in a dreary and rarely used surplus cache.

The Romanian gypsy woman had been a simple creature in life, and the representation of her desires for what had been left behind being just as much as the woman that wrote it fit in a wretched way.

Liam broke the waxed seal on the plain paper package, catching several prepared letters to equally elderly colleges across the globe that were to be mailed before they scattered about his dirt floor. A handful of names stood out to him in his check of availability of the addressees, as both Jiayi and their previous circus master the two women had traveled with before him were well known but not with any circus right now. These would be held onto until he was in range to deliver them personally.

Horatiu, her cordwainer. He could actually shift things to be in range to deliver this one personally as well and would do so. Maybe now the equally as cryptic Romanian would actually speak of what the two of them survived together, and he could finally lay his curiosity to rest with his old friend.

Viper?

Odd. The… man or woman that had been her apprentice for a few short weeks had not lingered around the circus as much as… they had for Crina's sake. Likely it was something to do with her effects, as removed as Liam had been from the situation he was one of those that had a chuckle over how bossy the then woman had been as her apprentice.

He wasn't too sure where to post it too, however. Likely the 'Immortal Stuntman' would know or would agree to hold onto it until Viper made their customary visit to bother the man more.

A letter for Sonya was merely expected, really. Thick as well, which was unusually loquacious for the now deceased Romanian.

One for himself?

Liam opened this one, setting aside the others that still needed to be sorted through. Reading the few short lines left for him quickly, the circus master stroked a hand down his mustache thoughtfully.

Crina would greatly appreciate it if he burned the rest of her things which were not specifically mentioned to be handed down to others, hm?

He had been well aware his old friend had not liked the perversion of her native people into soothsayers or mystic hacks for the amusement of others, but… ah.

Likely that was what the message to Viper was all about. A last jab, so to say.

Revenge or just a poke in the other's sensibilities?

From safely beyond the grave, and forever more the one to get the last word in.

Typical of Crina.

"...you will be dearly missed, my valiant friend. Fare thee well, until we meet again in the
hereafter."
Chapter 67

(Wednesday the 2nd of July, 1969. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"So-"

"No." Sonya cut Cherep off without looking or even glancing over from what she was doing at the sink to see his 'hopeful' face, which was really rather rude of his little sister.

"…you didn't even-"

"You want to borrow my living room to assemble parts for another motorcycle." Postulated the thief, rather accurately, in complete deadpan. "Based on the fact you're already using it to store a few of the 'really awesome finds' you picked up in a couple of junkyards, you also want to work on it here. Hell no."

He glanced to the few boxes already stuck near her front door, which… well, yeah. Probably was a bit obvious.

"But-!"

"Cherep. There is a six-year-old living here. While normally I wouldn't care much... where Shamal can get into it?"

"I'll teach him a bit about mechanics and how an internal combustion engine works." Promised the stuntman, waving a hand at the kid in question who was only blearily watching the argument from his seat at the kitchen table. Since she still wasn't looking at him, it was a rather useless gesture. "Skills he might need for later on when he gets his own... or you know, breaks down when... um... borrowing one."

Poor brat in question was almost drowning in his porridge but really, they hadn't stayed up too late last night... much.

Well, Cherep had been really interested in Shamal's little Mist game. Learning the ropes to play, as well as a few rounds to get used to it and then a few more to adjust to a little cheat of a 'dungeon master' had taken a few hours. Then... they might've gotten a bit caught up until Sonya came back out to the 'main room' in order to kick them both to bed.

"...Shamal? Would you like to learn a little about cars and such at your zio's behalf?"

Said brat blinked a couple times rapidly, then scrutinized the older man warily. He stuck a spoonful of milky oats into his mouth instead of actually answer right away, letting him know nonverbally that he was not a fan of the idea.

"It'll be fun?"

Shamal's expression of extreme dubiousness didn't change a whit.

The older Cloud in the room scratched the back of his head sheepishly, wracking his mind for a reason a kid who was probably already a bit swamped in keeping up with his mother's expectations for his visit. There were the Mist Flame lessons, the... thing he was doing with the books every night, and the man named Scruffy's critiques of his games.
Not to mention the lock picking, learning to read Cyrillic words, and the pending turn from lock picking lessons to pick pocketing ones Sonya promised in another week of work on it.

"I'll..." Thinking about it for another few seconds, the apparently only civilian Flame user in the room heaved a slightly wry sigh. "Oh fine, I'll teach you to hotwire a car."

" Sold. Alright, please mamma?"

From the expression on 'mamma's' face as she finally turned to see the two of them, she didn't really appreciate that idea. "If you're doing that, also teach him the basics of how to drive. Shamal, you had better not try driving without either Cherep or Renato both aware of it and at hand until you're fourteen at the least. I don't care what any other Italian kids are allowed to do."

"Sure!" He agreed hastily, before his now very disgruntled nephew could retract his own agreement.

Cherep would make it up to the kid later.

Sonya eyed her brat's expression warily a few moments longer, much like her brother had when Shamal was the lynchpin to get a decently comfortable place to work on his to-be-assembled junkyard bike. "Do you want to kick around with him today? I think he said he was going to go junkyard diving, and I'll give you a bit of money if you find anything you like. I've got... a... thought to investigate, as well as a bit of legwork of my own."

"That'll be fun. Half the point of visiting junkyards is to find things, and I can pretty much fix up anything you'd be able to unearth."

With a heavy sigh from such a small child, the Mist shrugged as he toyed with the minute amount of food left in his bowl. "Sure, mamma. If that'll help you, I don't mind."

She winced herself, turning back to scowl at her dishwater. "We'll blow off tomorrow to do our own thing, I just need to get this one bit started and maybe do a bit of poking around. I'll show you a few of the places I've broken into, or we could just be lazy for a day."

A promise of a whole day of 'mom-time' had the kid perking up a bit, at least. Shamal bolted a few last bites and abandoned the table, darting off to get himself dressed and ready for the morning practice in Lisa's basement.

Running a hand through his short hair, Cherep glanced from where the kid had run off to his little sister's back as she finished scrubbing the pots used to make breakfast. "Any limitations you want me to enforce? You can find a lot of weird things in junkyards."

"If he finds it, he can have it. Just use your judgement if you're going to fix it or not."

Leaving the porridge pot to soak, she had burned the bottom of it when distracted making omelets but at least the top layer had been palatable enough, Sonya turned to pick up her brat's abandoned dishes. "...if he does find something, and you two overspend to both get it and fix it up... I'll front the money you'll need for second-hand parts."

Pausing to recall how much he had on him, and how much it would be if he got most or all of it changed over to Soviet Russian rubles, the stuntman shrugged. "I should have just enough for that all on my own, but the offer's still appreciated sis."

"How much are you carrying around?" Demanded the thief suspiciously, one wet hand on a hip and her other balancing the last of the breakfast dishes. "Seriously, Cherep?"

"I've not only successfully hid it all from a miser of a Mist, but also it's not all in the same domination..."
nor in the same hiding spots." He informed her with a faked-superior lecturing tone, wagging a finger in her face. "While someone professional might be able to find it… just any one person wouldn't be able to find more than maybe one or two. You also didn't notice before I told you."

"I don't case my own siblings to see how easily it would be to steal something from you." Sonya deadpanned flatly, rolling her eyes as she turned to finish off the breakfast cleanup. "Although… if you're going to do shit like this, I will certainly start doing so."

"…no thanks. Getting things pass Vipes is hard enough."

"Speaking of," the Storm-Cloud spoke absently, quickly getting through Shamal's dishes in order to apply more elbow grease to the slightly glue-like mass left in the bottom of her new medium-sized copper pot, "have you explained Viper to Lisa yet? I want to be there when you do."

"Oh ha, ha." Cherep spoke flatly, kicking out an ankle to pull out a kitchen chair to wait for the other two to finish getting ready for their trip to their foster mother's. "I'm not going to. Leave it up to Vipes if they're going to stick with a single gender or switch it up. I don't really care either way, but they might."

Sonya pulled the plug in the bottom of her sink, flicking off the last of the suds and turning around once again to lean up against the counter in order to look at him thoughtfully. "Is there… any specific reason why you like Viper?"

Blinking at the slightly odd question, her fellow Cloud seriously gave her question some thought.

Who knew why she was asking, but this seemed serious enough he highly doubted it was her 'joking' around. "…I don't know? Never really thought about why, to be honest. I just do. Why do you ask?"

"…there's a lot of clamor about Flame users finding and Harmonizing to a Sky, but frankly… with the disparity of numbers between Skies and the other Flame types… it's not really likely for most of us. So… are Skies the only ones we can 'bond' to, or can we sort of 'make due' with other Flame users? There's us, after all."

Cherep huffed softly, now following her wonder. "Is this part of what you wanted to 'investigate'?"

"More or less. There were the Four Rains, three now but supposedly before Fadei went 'Sky-crazed' they were pretty damn good together. You and I, where I'm absolutely baffling in Cloud-terms probably because we're 'Dual Guardian Prospects'." She waved a hand absently as she expounded on what had started this wonder for her, reaching behind her to turn on the cold water tap when her drain was done emptying the soapy dishwater in the sink. "Then there's the 'such-and-such tend to like so-and-so', is that actually lesser bonds and not just 'two unattached Flame users'? I have a Lightning-Storm, a Lightning, three Suns, three Mists, and two Clouds I can deal with. Might add another Storm in a few months. Do we really need a Sky, or is it just hype?"

"Have you met any? Skies, I mean."

"We have, yes. Timoteo of Vongola, his mother Daniella, and then Tyr the Sword Emperor."

He sighed heavily, rubbing a hand across his eyes. "I meant other than the Italian fair, who we both probably won't agree on or like much."

"…I don't like Nono Vongola or Ottavia, really. I might like Tyr, but… I'm aware you won't so…" She replaced her plug for rinsing the dishes one last time, turning around to finish them and her chores for the morning. "So… there's supposedly two in Moscow. One Dmitry found, who's got a few brats that may or may not share that, and there's one more I think is present. The numbers of us
spiked, after all."

Cherep thought about that for a few seconds, glancing down the hallway when there was a soft 'thump' likely caused by Shamal doing something. "If we didn't require a Sky, why would our numbers spike if one was present?"

"Outside of the pattern already established for Flame users popping up. It was an aggressive spike. So not usual, meaning Skies are more a catalyst than a cause." Sonya started racking up the few dishes they had generated pretty quick, examining a spot here or there to ensure she hadn't missed anything in the scrub-down. "So, based on that... without a Sky, we should be more or less 'stable'. Right?"

"...if never exposed to any, I suppose." Allowed the stuntman thoughtfully. "Which... rules the both of us out."

"There's no established Soviet Sky, yet. That leaves most if not all of the trainees or other Russian Flame users."

"...unless your 'theoretical' Sky is among them. You don't know where this 'possible' one is yet, do you?"

He ducked a dishtowel that was tossed at his head. "Stop poking holes in my theories."

Shamal, coming down the hallway a bit hasty than probably safe, tripped and rolled his way into the kitchenette corner of the hotel suite. Coming to a staggered halt, shoes in hand, the Mist kid climbed back up to his chair he had eaten breakfast at. "Are you ready, mamma?"

Sonya glanced over her shoulder, slotting the utensils into the drying rack cubby for them before pulling the plug in her sink for the last time. "Yes, just let me grab my jacket and purse. Cherep?"

Pulling the cloth off his shoulder, he handed the rag back to her. "Now you know how I feel when you poke holes in my arguments, but yes. I'm ready to go."

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 2nd of July, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

A quick glance-through of the translated parts, and Sonya had to admit Galina's first estimation of Pierre-Antoine Carpentier's last letter being either a rambling discourse on the women in the ancient Storm Arcobaleno's life or about one in particular.

At least the French section, anyways.

Parts of the account were too damaged, even with Usov's Flames helping with picking up faint or nearly destroyed ink traces great sections had either crumbled with age or had moldered away long ago. Some of it they would never figure out what it said about a more interesting passage before it, and those gaps made for some frustrating reading.

There were a couple mentions of happenings throughout the French mason's lifetime that were suggestive, but... the man had been sound of mind enough to obey Omertà whenever it was written. Nothing concrete, even if there was a passage alluding to 'the physical toll being not what we expected...'

If the middle German parts didn't render anything interesting, then this was a dead end. Interesting,
but not really all that important.

"...Sonya?"

"Mhmm?"

There were a few... odd markings. Either the ink had slid around and made blotches where Usov's Mist Flames picked them up a few centuries later, or those were deliberate. Sonya would be the first to admit she couldn't make much sense of middle French in the original contexts it was written in, but surely one didn't need that many accents.

Translate the German as best she could, or try and see if the weird markings held any importance?

There wasn't any way to be sure if one way or the other will pay off, frankly both might just be equally as useless when it came to her search for concrete facts to use to support whatever arguments about becoming a part of the Arcobaleno.

"Boss lady." Galina called again, this time with a slightly exasperated edge to her tone.

Sonya glanced up to her, then over to their guest. After another moment, she returned to the patchy translation she was trying to make sense of. "...I see him. I don't particularly care much, though."

"...I'd say I'm sorry about this, but she's normally like that when it comes to new people." The Lightning informed the office's guest dryly, if she was making any gestures with that the Storm-Cloud wouldn't know.

Frankly, the newcomer was neither Chinese nor one of her trainees. Therefore, she gave no fucks.

"...is that typical of her... 'type'?"

"Very much so." Agreed the thief's secretary.

Sonya glanced back up at that, eyeing the man suspiciously. "If you're here about a baby-Cloud sighting... leave a message to where I can find them and leave whoever the fuck it is alone. They'll likely join up with the local syndicate for their own reasons, hunting after us is doing no one any favors."

...then probably do a forceful takeover, but if a syndicate wanted a Cloud that desperately... sucked to be them.

"I am not here for that, either. But I'll pass that on."

Glancing down to her work, then back at him, and finally at Galina's expression, the thief sighed heavily and put the translation down on the desk. "...what do you want?"

"I am only here to extend an invitation." The vor in a slightly ill-fitting suit informed her pleasantly, taking a glance of his own to a wristwatch then back to her squarely. "A... it was supposed to be for lunch, but-"

"I am busy. Also, inexcusably busy tomorrow." The thief informed him flatly, twitching a few of the pages Galina had already finished to the side to leave the German section for her to work on as soon as this man stopped talking. "Very sorry."

Given the fact she was both slightly annoyed at this interruption and impatient to get back to work, it sounded painfully insincere.
"Before you can ask, also for most of the rest of the damn month. Next one after I have a slight trip, business and personal, the month after that I might be required for a Mafia Land contract an associate has asked me to do." Continued the Storm-Cloud strongly when that didn't seem to deter this man. "Sometime within there, I also have a few more jewelry stores to rob… and maybe a bank or two. I am busy, what the fuck do you want?"

Apparently he was rarely ever refused, which finally did make her wonder exactly who he reported to and why it was that was so. It finally occurred to her that it might be one of the non-Zolotov trainee's syndicates asking for her time, which had her sighing heavily again before he could speak the argument almost plastered across his face.

"Galina, would you mind…?"

"I'll see what they want, sure." Her Lightning was only too happy to agree.

…probably one of those 'wine and dine' things she likely had no patience for anyways.

Sonya eyed the man again, late-thirties and impeccably put together if you ignored the fact he really should go visit a tailor to get his seams taken in… but no syndicate immediately jumped out at her to say which he belonged to.

The best she could do was say he was a vor, and that was more to do with the amateur-done tattoos she could see curling around his wrists and creeping up his neck under his starched white shirt. Not professional, so likely prison tats. Likely he had either just or not too long ago finished some jail time…

…which meant his care in not pissing her off was interesting.

Most vor, confronted by a female that wasn't particularly careful in dismissing him, wouldn't care for it much and have little reason not to show that. He was… still, polite if insistent after getting blown off entirely as well as preempted in conversation.

"Name and syndicate." Sonya demanded, raising one hand to prevent her secretary from heading out with him. "She doesn't come back within a few hours, and even if you don't answer I'll still rip your head off and pike it on your boss' desk."

She was perfectly aware her eyes had gone from grey to purple, Scruffy's shuffling papers defensively from his corner was entirely unneeded.

"Kurdin Isak Grigorievich, Kostikova Brotherhood."

Blinking, the Storm-Cloud tried to place that syndicate in her very patchy mental map of which group were in power where. Since she had actually heard that one before, it wasn't one of the farther-flung gangs also edging around Moscow's urban reaches.

More central, probably within the second ring-road of the city or closer to dead middle. She did at least know he and his weren't local to the Zolotov.

Fuck, now what?

"…no one's going to die if I send her instead, right?" Depressingly she didn't rightly care if that was so, but since that was part of why she was stuck in an office right now she should at least ask.

"Not as far as I am aware."
"Fine, Galina go." Sonya put the not-quite-as-interesting translation of a dead Storm's last letter into a desk drawer, snatching up her own things to also leave the office. "You do have watch-duties this evening, so try not to stay out too late."

Her Lightning gave an utterly pleasant little smirk to the vor who wasn't quite getting what he wanted. Interestingly, he was entirely willing to be foisted off on her aide instead of getting her personally.

She caught sight of Scruffy shooting a highly distrustful glare at the man's back. "...Peter, do you realize she can and has electrocuted people to death with her Flames for unduly bothering her, right?"

The Sun startled, glancing out of the corner of his eyes at her then fidgeting more with his papers. "...oh."

As the woman being spoken of and her possible-but-not-likely next victim had yet to clear the office's doorway, they both caught her comment.

Galina preened, throwing a smirk back to her co-workers. "I didn't know Tatiana told you that story, Sonya."

"I was compiling a comparison of what made us all pop, right on up until we got too many numbers to keep up with it." That half-finished study was also probably regulated to a desk drawer, she had to clear it all out before Dmitriy got back or he'd find a lot of random ass shit in when looking either for the extra gems or to put his own work aside temporarily. "There's an idea, Scruffy? Want to finish it for me? You can work on that without us in here for the security aspect."

"Ah..." Peter dropped a look to his work already in his hands, which since the women were leaving early for the day meant he wasn't getting much more work done on it. "Sure. Where is it?"

"Fuck if I know." Tossing her purse on the desk, the Storm-Cloud began to rummage around in the odd bits of paperwork she found interesting in some way or random items that ended up stuck in with them.

Like the naked lady statue that Tatiana claimed was medical in nature. That would be somewhat surprising for a Rain to come across out of the blue a few more months down the line.

"...I'll see you later, Sonya."

"Have fun, Galina." The thief answered absently, only peripherally aware that the Lightning finally managed to shoo the hesitating vor out of the door.

She unearthed the absent collection of initial Dying Will Flame usage stories from under the ideas she had for her 'second hippy-ish' book, one detailing the actual bonds a Flame user might form without a Sky fit for civilian eyes.

Which would also include the inevitable corrections to some of the details Galina had to put in the first one.

"Lock up when you leave."

"...err... sorry? Come again?"

Wildly taking in the empty office first, Scruffy turned wide eyes on her as he clutched several sheets of paper to his thin chest. "You're leaving me in here alone?"

"You have a Mist tail, and frankly in a building full to the brim with thieves a lock isn't really much of an obstacle. We don't keep out any important information, most of it is encoded by Galina, and frankly even if you took a crowbar to the desk I highly doubt you'd find anything too shocking to make away with." With such reasoning given, she finally reached the doorway herself. "Make a judgement call if anyone requires more aid than you're comfortable giving, otherwise tell anyone that asks Galina is off on business and I am off on a Flame-related query."

Another glance around the office that she only caught because she had turned to head down the hallway outside of it, and Scruffy absently gave a hesitant wave. "...have a good afternoon, then?"

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 2nd of July, 1969 continued. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Poor Scruffy."

As that was not a greeting Sonya had expected the moment she got through her front door, she glanced up from her boots skeptically at her brother. "Why is Scruffy 'poor'? Other than the fact I'm his only income, and I just paid the damn man so he shouldn't be just yet."

Taking off the first of the 'dressy' black boots she still had from Crina's cordwainer was a bit of a chore. Since she had ruined the 'functional' calf-length ones that she had spent a few years in, the thigh-high black boots with the slight heels were the last of her shoes that she was fully willing to wear for hours at a time.

Either she was stuck in them all day, as was the case when she wore pants over them, or it required hiking a skirt's hem up far enough to reach the top of her thighs to unlace them.

Sonya would go very fucking far for her personal comfort. Even if it was slightly ridiculous how far that was.

"Because we ducked into your office," her fellow Cloud patiently explained airily, "Shamal wanted to show you what he found. Except... we found him instead. Highly nervous, and a bit jumpy, to be the only one in there alone."

Finally getting one of her overly-long boots off, the thief planted her just freed foot on the floor to balance on while she got the other one off. "Poor my ass. He's been here for a few months now, he needs to break out of his little 'safety zone' otherwise he'll molder in that office and the few other places I've put him."

"He can't be comfortable here." Cherep pointed out, tossing a wrench he had been absently toying with into a box of other second-hand and slightly battered tools he probably picked up locally. "Aside that African accent, which I highly doubt is his natural one, I'd almost say he's English. Or something."

Sonya paused, half the laces of her left foot in one hand. "He's not English. I've heard him speak English, and aside that African slur to his tone he doesn't have the slang or accents an Englishman, or Londoner, would have."

"Voice coaches. We, especially, learned to talk differently in our own childhoods." He countered on
the heels of her argument. "Besides, any English-speaking country would likely be capitalist. He's a capitalist boy in firmly communist country. You of all people should be fully aware how Russians are viewed outside the Iron Curtain, sis. He's got to be slightly terrified, especially since I don't think you bothered to get him a visa or any legal papers to have if ever investigated."

She scowled at him. "Usov, are we clear of listening bugs?"

"Yes, ma'am. Cleared them when he started talking about the office."

Hesitating, and looking over his shoulder to where the voice of her Mist lead had echoed out from, the stuntman sighed and scratched the back of his head sheepishly. "...I'll never get used to that. Sorry, Nya. Didn't think of it when we came back."

"I'm not exactly 'legal' myself, Cherep. Not everywhere I am is 'secure' enough to speak of such things."

Frankly, while it would've been annoying to defy the KGB about Scruffy's presence in the city illegally, she wasn't all that upset her brother almost spilled those beans. It was a lot better than speaking about Dying Will Flames thoughtlessly, so on the whole... she preferred risking that instead.

"And I did ask him, Peter I mean, if he'd like a little house in the middle of nowhere instead of hanging about. He declined."

Technically, Scruffy the Sun did have legal paperwork. They were filed under 'Bordrov Jaroslav' and held both a birth certificate supposedly within the Byelorussian SSR and a few other licenses for teaching the basics of several branches of science to middle school students.

Admittedly his paper-trail was laughably flimsy, she had yet to go insert the 'hospital copy' into the city picked as his 'birthplace'.

She'd only get the time to do so after Shamal's visit was over. Which... was in another month.

Sonya probably should get him copies to stave off general surface checks.

Maybe the fact he was so hesitant to impose was because he didn't feel secure enough yet?

Scruffy dithered a lot over what he should or should not be doing and what he could or not ask.

She'd fix that... not tomorrow, but Friday.

Speaking of...?

"Where's Shamal?"

"In with his lizard." Jerking a thumb down the hallway, which was both an indication of where the named and not Mists had been lingering the last few minutes and where Luigi's cage was, Cherep incorporated the motion into a stretch to straighten out his back. "He found a few interesting things, and I cleaned them up for him before he went to play with them in your room."

...huh. She had wondered how much amusement her brat could have with a pet lizard, as it wasn't exactly what one thought of hearing the word 'pet'. "What did he get?"

"A... weird-ass doorknob, a few glass bottles, an ornate mirror in a stand, and a pot-thing I think he intends to give you." Her fellow Cloud raked a hand through his hair while listing things, giving her
an amused smirk after a moment. "Seriously, weird doorknob probably takes the cake. It's shaped like an extended bird's claw, so you have to shake it in order to turn it. I scrubbed it all with a mix of bleach and soap, but it should all be more or less clean."

What, did the kid make an obstacle course for his lizard?

"...thank you, Cherep." She hadn't asked for him to ensure it was all safe to play with, in hindsight.

The fact he did anyways was very thoughtful of her brother. Who knew how long those things had been rotting in open air, or what had crawled into them for the dubious shelter from the elements.

"Sure."

Finally prying her left boot off, Sonya sighed heavily as the slightly 'off' vertigo feeling from wearing heels too long got worse now that she was equally an inch shorter on both feet. It felt like she was falling backwards a little, but also that there was a dip behind her heels even if she could tell she was on a flat surface.

"Can you run out and get us something for dinner? Or you could take a crack at cooking."

"Foisting off your mom-duties already?" Cherep still rose from his spot on her couch, snatching up the leather motorcycle jacket from where it had been tossed over the armrest. "So long as you're paying. Any particular requests?"

"Not really, just no mushrooms." For that matter, she didn't know if there were things Shamal didn't like to eat. The brat ate practically anything put in front of him, occasionally leaving little bites left when he was full. "I also don't know what Shamal's allergic to, if he is allergic to anything."

"...so... most of what you've already eaten over the last few weeks? I can do that." Shooting a look to her tiny corner of a kitchenette, he ran a few fingers through his three-days-of-no-shaving scraggly stubble in thought before shrugging and moving to pass her to leave. "I'll find us something, give me half an hour or so."

Sonya dug a few of the reddish-pink bills that represented ten rubles out of an internal pocket in her purse, handing Cherep three of them. "Can you grab milk on your way back too?"

The stuntman stopped dead to stare at her for a moment. The thief sighed, and he smirked, pulling out another few blue five-ruble bills to add to the money she was handing him.

"You know, Nya, between the two of us? We're always going to be running out of milk."

She rolled her eyes, and sharply shoved him out the door when he unwisely passed her while still annoyed with him.

Cherep laughed, even if he almost impacted the opposite door across from her own.

(Friday the 4th of July, 1969. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

**Galina** might not murder her, but the Lightning was going to be very damn huffy in her own little way.

Frankly, after blowing off all of yesterday to merely sight-see and laze about with Shamal, Sonya
had little to no patience for listening to reports or more office work.

There was literally nothing for her to do that wasn't already being handled, and if she conducted another audit of the Flame using groups again so soon after the last one someone might get bitchy about her standing at their elbows.

What little busy-work she had was either highly suspect in a future possibly-useful way or not possible in a local sense.

There were her gauntlet and greaves designs, but she needed an actual engineer to see if her sketched framework would actually move as required. Maybe Scruffy, as soon as he finished the other piece she gave him to work on. Getting her boots repaired or replaced would require leaving Moscow entirely, she did what little she could stand doing for her fellow Clouds, she couldn't go visit the Storm section because the guy in question was losing his grip on the faction to another of the little Storm trainees that wasn't as sexist to half of the group.

What little she was left with was more translating work, working on her 'next' books, or casing places to steal from.

Three guesses as to which she decided to go with.

Sonya skirted around an elderly lady also wandering down a sidewalk, just headed in the opposite direction. It was finally reasonably warm enough, for her anyways, to go around without a jacket or some other kind of light sweater.

This little 'walk' of hers also had two happy side-benefits.

For one, she might get to find an assassination attempt to try her hand at since she wasn't in Zolotov territory. The other was that she was headed in a direction she didn't have a shared border with another Cloud.

Given exactly where a few of the older Dying Will Flame trainees popped up, and where it had spread from there, she could likely not only guess who the Moscow Sky was but where he lived.

What she had was near 'thirty' years of age, had two kids one of which was old enough to pull on his Flames but not really 'teen' yet, someone public, and likely either locally or otherwise famous. Said person also had to be recently within a limited 'zone' where the bulk of Flame users were crawling out of, generally around Usov's childhood neighborhood.

She was going to do nothing about who she thought it was, though. What happened to Fadei was still a factor, as well as the fact if she did get pulled to a Sky she couldn't do anything about it without Cherep at hand.

Either way, Sonya was heading east in hopes of running into whichever Cloud it was out here.

Closer than her neighborhood to the suspected Sky's home, but also between the Khimki Cloud and the Wolfpack's greater 'suspected' territory ranges. As it was equally likely that someone tried 'recruiting' said baby Cloud and got burned for the effort via a suicide as her finding a new Cloud, her other main goal was scoping out the local banks and jewelry stores.

The Storm-Cloud herself had no issues sharing living space with Shamal and Cherep, but frankly time to just think aimlessly was damn near priceless.

Hence her ruminations on the Moscow Sky, random aims, and what her assistant was likely to do to her in revenge of ducking out of the office the second day in a row.
She had to find *something* that would block Renato's little mind-reading trick, she was getting pretty tired of not thinking or just thinking specific things when around him. Sonya was insanely lucky she hadn't stuck her foot in her mouth just yet with the man, equally so that she hadn't spilled that Cherep wasn't the only one with an odd relationship with death.

Knowing her luck, she was only a step or two away from pissing him off for once.

Maybe something about whatever the fuck it was he was hinting around at, but since she refused to speculate about things in his presence she missed quite a few context clues that might've helped her understand at the time.

Yeah, she *seriously* needed to see if there was anything she could do for that… or have one of the Mists she was with dream up a counter. Said nosy-assed hitman might not entirely appreciate it, but the Storm-Cloud was fairly certain she was justified given she was holding her silence on his behalf.

Letting just anyone read her mind, since they knew mind-reading was a trick that was possible, was not a smart thing to do.

…could Sonya use her Storm Flames for that?

What limit did 'Disintegration' have, anyways?

Was that only physical things, or transmuting energy from one force to another for that matter, or could she affect less 'direct' things with them?

Better question, how did one go about trying to Disintegrate an 'idea'?

Sonya came to a halt in the middle of a sidewalk, aimlessly inspecting the buildings nearby as she tucked that mental wondering under the 'what happens when you try to Disintegrate water' idea she had back in the circus.

Just *thinking* about it made her fairly sure she'd be risking brain-damage or fairly serious memory lost if she fucked that up.

 Entirely possible water-explosive idea aside, she already knew it was likely possible to dictate to Storm Flames about burning one thing and not another. She managed that before, with the chloroform guy from her blow up.

Although the question of 'is my own spit still 'mine'' did need to be answered before she could say if she Disintegrated her saliva or the chemical residue in her airways for the 'breathing fire' thing to be repeatable. Even if she couldn't burn away her own spit, Sonya still smoked every now and again. Disintegrating her cigarette smoke was just as good as the lingering traces of chloroform if that was the case.

Unfortunately, playing with Storm Flames in the middle of the Zolotov clan's headquarters might not be the best idea. Neither was Propagating things with Cloud Flames. It might not have been before, but now that she actually was starting to get non-Zolotov traffic that was just asking to unnerve someone she really should be reassuring.

Sonya blinked, eyes catching on a uniformed man giving her a fairly serious stare down.

He wasn't even halfway down the street from her, but apparently her very presence was noteworthy.

The reasoning for that could be nearly anything. She *did* stop like a little idiot to stare absently at
nothing, he might be one of those 'neighborhood watchers' and he marked her out as not belonging, or he wasn't 'military' as his uniform stated but 'KGB'.

She wandered up to him. "You wouldn't happen to know where the local jewelry store is, would you?"

He had narrowed his eyes as she got closer, but they widened back up enough for her to see his eye coloring clearly once she posed the question. A kind of hazel green. "Maybe."

"...can you help me find it?"

"Why?"

Either not enough of a Cloud to be aggressively against her presence but still enough to be wary of her even if she didn't look particularly threatening, or he was a bit better informed than any military boy should be.

Or partially a Mist, a Classic Lightning, or any other of those 'known' to not work with Classical Clouds or Inverted Storms well.

"Because this is far enough away from my neighborhood that my sister likely hasn't checked it out yet... but I'm lost."

An almost true reason given, because Tatiana's birthday was the next one up near the end of July, made the man unbend enough to give short but concise directions. Either in aims of getting rid of her quickly or to know exactly where she was heading.

Sonya got lost reliably enough when not following landmarks or natural features like a river that she was pretty damn certain even if she followed his directions to the letter she'd still end up not where he was expecting her to go.

That worked for her. She'd just call a taxi to get back when she was done wandering around.

With a nod of both appreciation and farewell once he was done speaking, the thief discreetly slid his wallet back into his pocket and walked off with more than half his cash to facilitate her return home after following his directions.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 4th of July, 1969 continued. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Galina glared a hole in the back of her boss lady's brother, gritting her teeth as she waited a bit impatiently.

"...do I have to-"

"Shut up, Scruffy." She really needed to do something nice for the man, he was putting up with her dragging him about today rather nicely and all. Just... when she was less irritated.

"You know, if you do this, she's going to think it's alright to blow off here and there because you'll bring what she needs to sign off on to her when it's needed." Cherep pointed out cheerfully, finishing up with making a pitcher of lemonade and pouring a few glasses.

He stuck the pitcher into the fridge but brought another two glasses with the one he made up for
himself over to the couch to hand out like some skewed version of a homemaker.

In a black leather jacket and still in motorcycle boots.

"That wouldn't be a damn problem if she hadn't also told her Mist tails to clear off for the afternoon." She snapped back at him, setting the glass handed to her a bit hard on the book-lined coffee table moved off a bit to make way for whatever it was he was working on.

That wasn't quite true, but near enough to what happened. Usov was detailing more things to Shamal about the properties and use of Mist Flames, and Anna was tailing Tatiana around headquarters and otherwise being an extra set of hands for the nurse.

It would've been so simple had the other woman not distracted her usual tails, all she would have to do was then just hand the files that needed Sonya's signature off to one of her two Misty minions and get them back nearly the same minute when the ink was still wet.

As the Storm-Cloud was now outside of Zolotov territory she was without clan tails as well, meaning no one had any idea where she was.

However, Galina needed the hiring paperwork for the civilian teachers signed now so she could go start in on getting them processed at the bank before they closed for the day. It would take an entire business day to get everything sorted out, the last business day of the week was tomorrow.

Sonya deciding to take another 'personal' day right on the heels of her last one was not appreciated. Once or twice a week, sure fine. The Lightning could hold down the fort and in fact rather liked that she was trusted and allowed to do so. In a row was not a working situation, preferably personal days should be spread out a bit more.

Galina was also a creature of schedules, timetables, and punctuality. She abhorred being late, not having the information needed, or just general disorganized messes.

The deadline for having the school staffed and equipped enough to formally open for the scholastic year was looming, the moment it hit August and they wouldn't be able to 'transfer' some of the farther flung Flame using trainees this year.

"Do you normally have green eyes?"

"Yes." The brunette snapped again, judiciously using her emerald Flames to ensure her grip wasn't creasing or otherwise marring the paperwork in her hands.

If the damn blonde didn't show up soon, she was going to bribe or threaten Usov into kidnapping her for all of five minutes. Galina wasn't entirely sure exactly how long a 'Mist Flame lesson' went on for, but she did know the kid being taught was young enough to only have so much energy to waste per day.

This was likely where Shamal would be dropped off at once done for the day, therefore the best place to wait in order to contact the Mist in charge of teaching him things to alert the kid's mother that there was something fairly urgent needed taking care of.

"...um... what's the make and model of this then?" Scruffy asked of their temporary host, who just looked amused all over for both their barging in and lack of niceties while waiting.

"The chassis is an M-seventy-two, which looks to be a decommissioned World War Two messenger's bike. There's a few rounded holes that I think are bullet holes anyways." Explained the other younger man easily enough. "I still need an engine for this, as well as shocks and maybe a newer
braking system then what didn't rot away into dirt between then and now, but frankly… for a junkyard build?"

"It cleaned up well." Peter allowed, looking over the fender-less hunk of metal struts set in front of Sonya's couch.

Galina couldn't tell if it was a shake away from being so much rusted metal in a heap or if it was near-new, but as the man did identify himself as an 'engineer' he would likely know better than she did.

Cherep brightened up at the comment, starting to jabber away at a fairly rapid pace that the lone woman in the room didn't have the education to understand half of.

…the most Galina knew was 'drivetrain', 'transmission', and 'oil check'.

The lack of which in the conversation was doing her no aid. Most of which she learned from a few years of listening to Adrik blabber on about what was holding them up in stealing a getaway car in a few tense spots.

Her own eclectic education over the last few years leaned more to transistors, capacitors, and the occasional electrician's term. Cars and automobiles were still very much a mystery to her.

Scruffy could understand, however. His return jabber made a certain amount of sense, but where 'structural shear points' came into play in a discussion of rust prevention of several parts that made up an internal combustion engine confused her.

Usov saved her from being forced to admit any of that, raising a practical bonfire of Mist Flames out of the floor near Cherep's boots to dump one tired Mist brat off. Galina, as quickly as the weather phenomena her Flames were named after, snatched up his elbow before he could finish sinking back into the floor once the elder of the two Mists saw Sonya wasn't present to be fawned over.

"Usov. Fetch Sonya."

The preteen gave her a semi-serious look, only marred by the near-habitual grin he normally always had plastered across his face. "Is it really that serious? She left Anna's bracelet behind, finding her will take some time."

"It's for the school." Clarified the Lightning, in a tone she had developed to be both 'professional' and 'terrifying' under Dmitriy. At the very least, it worked half the time to get the irritating Inverted Rain to finally crack down on his own occasional paperwork. "I need this now, not next week. That might be too late."

"You dropped your papers." Cherep pointed out blandly, also physically pointing to the snow-white sheets about to leach some of the rust and dirt now coating the floor around his work area.

Galina swore and bent to snatch them up, a distraction which the preteen Mist used to vanish before she got a firm 'yes' for finding their Storm-Cloud boss.

Uttering another nasty epithet under her breath, she rounded on the only Cloud she wasn't half-terrified of pissing off.

He was utterly unmoved at her ugly look, merely hauling his delivery of exhausted Mist brat up to the couch so he could at least get comfortable. "Did you have fun today, Shamal?"

The kid groaned into his thigh, wiggling around to get comfortable for what seemed to be becoming
"Well... Mists. You all get a bit funny when it comes to things like that." Cherep fished a spanner wrench out from under his nephew, earning himself a huff for either the effort or the comment. "Let me guess. You tried to let him win so he'd leave you alone about it, but he caught you out, right?"

Shamal grumbled something indistinct, picking to instead drag some lumpy blanket off the back of the couch to curl up under rather that answer distinctly.

"If you find a way to derail a highly offended Mist, share please." Continued the stuntman, reaching for his glass of lemonade for a sip. Once done, he turned purple eyes on her thoughtfully. "Hey, Galina? Why don't you wait... oh, about another minute or two?"

"Why?" Her only chance to catch a Mist to find Sonya immediately had passed, the next closest she knew of and that might listen to her was Anna. Who was following Tatiana around.

The nurse wouldn't be back to her hotel room just yet, more than likely she was still holed up in headquarters.

"Nya said she'd be back around the time Shamal's done for the day, that's why."

With a semi-violent twitch, the Lightning turned back to the man stiffly. "...why didn't you say that before?"

"Because you were all set on catching Usov, rather than listen to what I might've had to say." Cherep pointed out pleasantly. "Now that you're open to suggestions, she really shouldn't be too far away now."

"Err... should we be here?" Scruffy asked hesitantly into the slightly stiff silence, fidgeting with the rag and the lime-salt solution the other man had been using to clean various metal parts of dirt and rust. "This is Sonya's home space, right?"

With a slightly fond smirk for him, the younger man stole back his cleaning supplies to go back to what he was working on. "Well, yes... but I can safely say you two are allowed here."

"And how can you tell that?" Galina demanded a bit shortly.

"Because she's already claimed you both." Explained the stuntman airily, digging a salt-n-lime coated rag into the crevices of his mechanical part to scrub off another layer of the rust caking it. "If you ever stop to hear her talk about you all, it's always 'my Lightning', 'my Sun', or 'my Mists'. I hope you had no plans to leave, she won't take it very well if you try."

The Lightning in question blinked in surprise, the frowned at him. "She leaves us behind all the time."

"Nya's an odd Cloud. But while she doesn't have 'territory', per say, she does have 'people'. As much as a people person as you can be without actually having the skills for it." A rusty, slightly white crusted finger was waggled in her direction. "Even if she refuses to actually admit she does. You can get away with working on something well outside her view, even going a few solid months without bothering to check in. But once she gets curious over what you're up to... you'd better answer or she'll hunt you down."

Galina gave him a hard stare. "Are you sure about that?"
"You can doubt me all you want. But," Cherep dutifully cleaned his right hand off on his rag to pat his nephew's head, "the last one before you all to earn the title of 'mine' from Nya is this kid here. Guess who she's blowing a lot of Russian vory off for, as well as temporarily living in a country we don't really like the dominant criminal power of?"

Shamal hadn't entirely been asleep, and the Mist peered up at his uncle dubiously when the man removed his hand. "...really?"

"Nya checks in with Galina fairly regularly when she's off doing other things. I know this for a fact. Scruffy over there is the latest to earn himself a 'mine', once he decided to be too useful to be foisted off."

"...not entirely objectionable, I suppose." The Sun muttered mostly to himself, sheepishly giving an awkward grin when all of them looked at him for that comment. "Ah... so, Galina?"

"Right..." Drawled out the stuntman with audible amusement, raking a clean hand through short purple strands. "Galina. The only other people Nya bothers with keeping up with are the parents, myself and Tats, and little Valera. Yet she'd call the lovely lady Lightning if only to check there's nothing she needs help with, otherwise Nya leaves her to handle things for her."

Said lady Lightning gave the Inverted Cloud a quick look over, then decided to accept the flattery as just a compliment rather than a flirtation. That was not grounds she wanted to cross, even if the man was rather nicely put together and had a personality that wasn't entirely objectionable.

Quite a few years ago, she had tried to beat him up. His little sister took offense and beat her up instead. She didn't want to know if the woman recalled their first meeting or not, much less what she'd do if she tried anything she might find 'shifty' to said brother.

If Sonya wasn't going to leave the Lightning behind, then that was good. Galina would get out of the USSR as she wanted, even keep up with a seriously skilled thief and see more of the world than she had in her run with Tatiana and the rest of the gang.

However, it was kind of like climbing down a ladder but missing a rung and instead hitting the ground when you thought you were only half-way down it.

It hadn't been easy by any means, just... why did Scruffy find it so easy?

...probably because he had a more selective skill set that was proving to be interesting.

The brunette rubbed a forehead, as slightly stressed was not the perfect mindset to fully appreciate the news.

"I do not have people-territory." Sonya announced flatly from the doorway irritably, tossing her purse onto the floor next to a fairly new looking coat rack. "I do not own them."

"Of course you don't, Nya." Cherep countered cheerfully. "You just have 'people'. Of whom you'd probably brutalize anyone trying to take advantage or to poach them from you. Seriously, think about it possibly happening and what you'd feel if it did."

The thief paused, tossing her keys absently to where her purse was and getting them to fall inside of the oversized bag without even looking. Then she scowled.

Galina could tell the moment she admitted at least to herself she wouldn't like that suggested scenario happening, the Storm-Cloud's eyes bled first red and then purple.
"...oh fuck no. Not happening."

"Boss lady." The Lightning called out, a lot less hesitantly than she would've had Scruffy not pointed out they were sort of 'infringing' on Sonya's home space and then Cherep explained why that wasn't possible. "I need a few signatures, so I can run and get this processed at the bank."

"...what is 'a few signatures'?" Asked the younger woman, more or less drifting over to see both what her brother was occupied with and what her brat was doing.

"Payroll and licensing fee payouts." For their six civilian teachers and the whole slew of service personnel the school needed. They would be borrowing some cash from Pyotr until Sonya could generate the funds herself for a month or two, but after one decent jewelry store that wouldn't be much of a concern anymore. "Three of them have classes the week after next, if we want them to be accredited and perfectly legal..."

"Fine." The thief didn't really even give the paperwork a hard once-over herself, she merely pulled a pen out of a pocket to scribble her signature on the dotted lines. "There, anything else? I found a few good local spots likely to pay off well, if you or Tats, or Cherep for that matter, wouldn't mind babysitting-

"I'll do it." Said stuntman answered absently, giving her a sly sideways look. "At least this is a better cause than what Tats babysat for."

Sonya gave him a weird look, slid another one to Scruffy, then almost physically shrugged the whole conversation off. "Whatever. Brat and I are going for a nap, call in for room service around dinnertime. Peter, are you staying?"

The Sun darted a few hesitant looks about, but apparently the allure of talking shop with a like-minded individual outweighed the possibility it might irk the woman when she didn't even bat an eyelash over his being present at all. "...ah, sure?"

"Make sure to tell Cherep what you're allergic to or don't want to eat. Though, knowing him, he'd eat it anyways."

With that the Storm-Cloud basically kidnapped her Mist brat, blanket and all, and left them in the living room of her hotel suite without looking back.

Cherep held up a finger. "...case in point, may I add."

"I heard that!"

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 4th of July, 1969 continued. Cerrito Crime Family's Headquarters, San Jose, California, United States of America.)

Renato let a respectable stack of files hit the desk in front of the Don he was sort of working for. "Since you asked so nicely, this is what I'm currently trying to work through for you."

Joseph Cerrito merely flicked a glance downwards once. "That tells me nothing, Sinclair."

"Do you know how hard it is to get anything out of Soviet Russians about their fellows? I have a fairly good contact within that group, and yet I still got the run around from most if not everyone I talked to. The few exceptions were those working for my contact, and even still one needle in this haystack is proving... elusive."
Not entirely the whole situation, but enough of what was taking so long. The Soft Flame Sun irritably flicked through a few of the files, shoving the likely suspects he had tentatively decided upon across the desk for the Don's perusal.

"Even still, a fair number of these are dead. Rumored to be dead," another few files got passed along, "or just missing in action from their syndicates. These men I spent the last month acquiring information on now need to be matched with security feeds from that night around town, one face or disguising scar from a frame to one of many mugshots I managed to acquire."

"We can do that." Cerrito asserted firmly.

"I was hoping you'd say that." Renato drawled back sardonically. "That leaves me with combing the area for more clues and checking up on a comment from said contact about things. Do let me know if you find anything, so I can at least inform Don Vongola that I've finished."

The hitman would still do it himself, after the bulk of it got checked a nothing obvious stuck out to any green mook.

Gritting his teeth as some of the Fourth of July celebration echoed off the walls of this villa and made him want to twitch for his gun, Renato allowed himself the action of sweeping off his hat and raking a hand through his spiky hair. Fireworks were easily used to disguise gunshots, but the volume of them going off when it wasn't yet past noon was putting him on edge.

Also, he left Sonya and Shamal and the Storm-Cloud's cozy little nook in Russia for hit contracts. Not pandering to a syndicate boss who was so sloppy he lost his first ever Dying Will Flame user to someone that decided he was an asshole and didn't deserve to keep them.

A 'bad mood' probably didn't even touch on his current state of mind.

At the very least, since he was here, he could go see if Sonya's cards were correct. Killing via Dying Will Flame use left some distinctive marks. If he missed them the first time through, then it was either highly controlled use or not exactly in the 'area' they were overtly used.

If those cards were correct… well, it was interesting. More so if the thief could replicate this little feat, more than just with Shamal's fairly obvious motivations or plans.

Renato would still take them with a very large dose of salt until irrefutably proven otherwise.

"I will certainly inform you when I do have something to report." The Sun using hitman informed the other politely, which was the only positive thing that could be said about his tone. "Until then, hounding me or the men that facilitated my loan will do you nothing but irritate them. Now then, I do have work to be doing."

"You seem to forget where you are, boy." The Don gritted out irritably, tossing the files to his desk and ignoring the man gathering them up to be picked through by whoever would be drawing the short straw to act as a data analyst.

"You seem to forget just what I am and who I work for." Renato shot back, turning on a heel to stalk out. Glaring down the wet-behind-the-ears kid to get him to step away from the office door. "I assure you, if you tried anything… well, you wouldn't be the first syndicate I've taken apart."

Technically, they'd be his third if that happened. Once on his lonesome, twice with Sonya even if that really wasn't up to Mafia standards. Not so much a difficult thing as it was an involved one.

Frankly, the hitman didn't really want to be bothered with it.
(Saturday the 5th of July, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"-well, I didn't order it."

"If you didn't, and I didn't, and I don't think Peter knows the number to order from the cantina..."

"I ordered it." Milos interrupted the women dubiously inspecting a tray with coffee set out on the office's desk, fully entering the room and leaving his bodyguards at the doorway.

Since the woman in charge within it was part of the reason he was alive, it was highly unlikely she'd try to murder him now.

"I need a word, Bazanova. A fairly involved one, for that matter."

The young blonde woman glanced up at him but did at least greet him somewhat pleasantly. "Good afternoon, old man Zolotov. It's... surprisingly good to see you on your feet again. Since it's here... coffee?"

"Please." The old, and he was really feeling his years especially in an office staffed with those not even yet thirty, vor glanced at the ever-efficient Galina and the unhealthily thin foundling Sun as he seated himself in the chairs available for guests. "Clear off."

With a sharp nod, the brunette corralled the salt-n-pepper blond man and shoved him in the direction of the office's doorway. "Come on, Scuffy. I think I owe you a drink or something for yesterday."

The man she was manhandling had no chance to question or protest, efficiently bundled off and out the door in short order. One of the two younger vory firmly shut the door behind her.

Milos turned back to the young woman left alone with him in the office. "Your little wispy minions as well, Bazanova."

"Usov," called out the thief obediently, also pouring herself a mug of coffee before setting the pot down, "go stalk my brother."

"The Mirror Lady?"

"With my sister. She would've been tailing around Gedeon as normal... but he... doesn't seem to recall she will do so on his own. When things... happened, I reassigned her to avoid conflicts of interests from occurring."

...so, it likely wasn't Pyotr who informed them.

The Pahkan absently picked up the first mug poured while the Storm-Cloud across from him doctored her own beverage, taking a careful sip of the boiling hot black coffee while he reassessed a few things.

Thankfully it seemed as if Gedeon had expected word to get out fairly quickly, so he wasn't nearly as caustic to the Sovintnik who he believed alerted the group of his aims.

Unsurprisingly, it was a female Flame user his thickheaded son had overlooked. Milos had detected
a pattern he wasn't entirely happy with in his heir's behavior.

'Sexism' the newer generation was calling it. Pure bullshit in his mind, but then again he was an old man. Women just weren't fit for some things, it wasn't so much a question of ability but practicality.

In respects to physical strength they weren't nearly as strong as another of their general size, sometimes had fainting fits, and generally didn't like the dirtier aspects of crime. It was just nature.

They were then better at more delicate things then men, in the work that required fine touches or talking their ways in or out of secured areas. Why it was that was no longer acceptable to point out was beyond him.

Then again, the exceptions to that norm he had learned over his lifetime were becoming more and more common. Case in point, the woman who was patiently waiting for him to say what he had come here to tell her.

Times were changing ever faster than it had when he was around their ages, it seemed like one of the core tenants of life mutated every damn time he turned around these days.

"So, you know what he did, but don't seem too put out by it." Milos started with the biggest issue, best to get it out of the way.

It would set the tone for the rest of this conversation, and he'd know what he could walk away with from it.

"...define 'put out'." She countered flatly in return, leveling a neutral stare at him over the rim of her mug as she leaned back in her office chair. "The changes I assume you put in made it more of an opportunity than something to quibble with, but that's always an option depending on what happens in the long run."

If she had decided to make it a sticking point and get her foster father to see it the same way as she might've, the Pahkan might have returned to a miniature civil war going on within the clan.

The limited amount he was 'allowed' to do from his 'light duty' was pitiable, he had spent the last few days just catching up with what all had gone on in his absence.

As this part hadn't immediately blown up when it happened, leaving it for later didn't seem to have damaged her tolerance of him. Small blessings.

No matter how you tried to spin or explain it away, his heir did just violate the unspoken agreement between the Zolotov clan and the vory, said vory's dependents, and other personnel that looked to them. Specifically, in the agreement to provide protection to the individuals for tithing the clan part of their proceeds from criminal activities.

She was still paying, was pre-paid actually, and yet the clan's protection had very nearly been ripped from her on a whim.

"I can't countermand his order. Not without... undesirable side effects."

"I'm not asking you to." Bazanova refuted evenly, dropping her gaze to the light brown liquid she was nursing and inspecting it thoughtfully. "I weigh little next to establishing Gedeon's control over the clan in the near future, I can take that slight whereas he might not be able to recover from it if the vory take this situation to mean he might go after their own women in a fit of temper."

…it might not have been Galina who thought up the twist the Flame users were telling whoever
asked about their difficulties with his son. Milos swallowed that down with another sip of coffee, not particularly happy to hear it.

Smart as a whip, this girl. He was starting to share Pyotr's regret that she was born female, had she been male and things had worked out differently... she might've been her 'grandfather's' own heir. Could've been even if she was female, if not for his own son's mishandling of her.

The downside of being a successful thief was that you started coveting things that weren't entirely possible in traditional senses. Milos, in his heyday, could've stolen or had thing stolen that would've been called the 'heist of the century' with only an additional hand or two needed depending on what was being stolen or how steep the security. That just meant materialistic things started to mean little to him.

Stealing people had been an interesting diversion that lasted a few decades, and by the time he got that particular vice out of his system he'd already been established as a Pahkan and ruled over his own little niche of Moscow.

Milos waited a few more seconds, but she seemed to have nothing else to add. "No blackmail, or demands in return for putting up with it? I'm very aware you could end up doing a lot of damage to the clan with the things Gedeon's practically dropped into your lap."

"Personally speaking, I find nothing wrong with the Zolotov clan. I have no grudges against you or yours, nor do I wish to destroy it. I am in fact fond of the clan, for bringing my family together." His best solo-thief of her generation admitted honestly, as bluntly as he had come to expect from her. "My aims and the clan's might not match up now, but that has nothing to do with the people that make it up or the responsibilities you as a whole have. My interests have moved countries, the clan simply cannot come with me. Your son, on the other hand... I do hold a grudge with."

Bazanova would hold her silence and allow Gedeon his way in exchange for being allowed free when the time came. Mostly as expected, really. She had only been transparently angling for that for a few weeks now.

"Your siblings? Your parents?"

"Are their own people and will make their own decisions." She insisted blandly, as if by a couple words she couldn't strip away the best trained Sun Flame using nurse they had nor incite her father into something that was uncomfortably damn near close to outright rebellion. "Arseniy's not best pleased, and neither is my mother for that matter, but they have adopted a 'wait and see' approach since I've elected to not be unduly bothered."

Small wonder why vor Bazanov was 'displeased'. The man was very fond of 'his girls', even if he had been more or less indifferent to their arrivals at the time they appeared. Between one of them likely being his greatest protégé when it came to criminal arts and the other performing damn near miracles when it came to his lover's medical difficulties...

That would be a whole different kettle of fish as well as another slightly galling conversation to have, but distinctly different so long as one of said 'girls' was truly indifferent to the issue.

Thankfully, it seemed she really was that unconcerned to what amounted as an attempted murder via the next Pahkan.

Milos sometimes did not understand women, but he didn't have to in order to take advantage if he could.
"This all is not to say I do not want anything in return for 'allowing' Gedeon to drive me off." Finally getting around to her own motivation for not raising unholy hell for what had happened, the thief across from him curled her legs up with her in the office chair. She was small enough in stature to do so, and after tucking her booted feet under her left thigh she leveled a rather nasty smirk across the desk between them. "Even if that rather nicely suits my purposes, despite the risks involved."

A twisted mockery of a young girl sitting in her father's office chair was now across from him. Milos wasn't fooled by the adopted image suggesting vulnerability or foolishness, she was nowhere near as innocent or childish as the posture suggested.

"Of course not. Speak then, I'll see what I can do." The problem with running an entire enterprise comprised of thieves, they were all greedy little fucks and perfectly willing to occasionally stab each other in the back as long as it suited them.

Worse yet, she was nearly completely safe in this backstab.

She didn't start it, after all. It would all fall on Gedeon's head as he was the one who made the first move that violated clan tenets.

Sonya Bazanova smiled prettily at him, utterly fake and not the least bit ashamed of that falseness. "I'm taking Galina, as well as the Mirror Lady. I refuse to leave them here under your son. For… obvious reasons. Likewise, you probably don't want them. My Lightning can and has electrocuted people to death, and if I am forced to leave her behind for any amount of time since… well… I will leave orders for her to defend herself and Anna with all prejudice available to her."

…not entirely unexpected, if he was pressed to be honest.

The tidbit he was going to be taking away was that 'Lightning' Flame users might just make the very best untraceable assassins if he wanted was… something to think about later. Gedeon had already failed to keep the younger Mist girl in mind when making decisions, removing her from being able to spike any more of his son's future plans might be something to look into on his own if she hadn't said anything.

"Three years, after I step down, you will still pay your dues. I'll handle my son, but you can't jump ship immediately after I retire."

"One, for both me and my Lackey still in Mafia Land. And I will ensure both the Lightning and Mist have 'proper' male replacements as soon as possible."

Nothing about Anna the Mirror Lady's or Galina's dues, but her little foundling boy had bigger dues than both women from being classified as her assistant. The Mist and Lightning were paying theirs off via labor hours, not cold hard cash as she did for herself and her 'official' minion. He'd take that in trade instead easily enough.

Milos then eyed the girl strangely. "What of Usov?"

He didn't know anyone that missed how… fond, the young boy was of her.

"What of him? He's also Mist. Fanatically obsessed with me and likely has his own plans in place for whatever he wants to do." Spoke the Storm-Cloud wryly, curling up more around her mug of coffee with another nasty smirk. "I will not foil his fun by removing any motivation he has for mischief, Gedeon can deal with that himself. Although… I will ensure he 'withdraws' from the clan in an orderly manner."

The Pahkan sighed heavily into his coffee. Noticeably lacking from that comment was 'and in a
composed fashion'.

Pyrotechnic illusion master deciding to finally bail might be even more eye-catching than Bazanova deciding to try her hand at inter-clan homicide.

"Two, and I'll extend the same courtesy to whoever else wants to follow you for the day before I retire."

She eyed him suspiciously instead of immediately taking the offer. "Even if that number includes my sister?"

"I'm not stupid, Bazanova. If Nurse Primokova wishes to leave, but Gedeon is in the way... there's any number of ways she could 'remove' him from being an obstacle to her. More than most medical ways we wouldn't be able to pin on her for years yet. And by that point it'd be a moot issue."

Milos was going to ensure he at least mended whatever bridge might've been charred between himself and the Sun nurse on his son's behalf, he had not invested that much money into the girl for her to just walk off with her doctor's license without so much as a backwards glance.

Gedeon on the other hand... he had to think of something before he pissed her off as well and finally lost them a sizable chunk of the clan.

To think, he had invested in the elder sister because her little sister had proven to be a damnably fine thief on her lonesome with the aid of her own Flames.

Bazanova was strong enough to do the work of two or three thieves on her own, escaping scrutiny for most were looking for physically strong groups of shifty people not a damn woman that looked like a dancing-girl, and if she was the initial example of what a 'user of Dying Will Flames of the Sky' could accomplish alone... risking a bit on the 'known' information of Suns being the best healers had been merely a calculated risk.

Now that it was about a step or three from paying off, Gedeon screwing around with the women that represented the eldest of the Flame users was not really all that appreciated. His son didn't see what he did, half-caught between the old guard's view on it as being 'parlor tricks' and the new generation's view of it being 'fucking useful'.

Slightly-built 'Clouds' that could move tons and escape scrutiny for it. Nondescript 'Rains' that were their own best friends when it came to being stealthy by putting the guards and any potential witnesses asleep. 'Mists' that could control what another saw down to the very feeling said images gave off. 'Lightnings' that could short out every security system they touched. Equipment-less 'Storms' that could break in and out of everything without it backfiring or malfunctioning on them. Topping it all off were 'Suns' that could heal major injuries without requiring to consign the injured to a hospital and risk discovery.

Milos had very much wanted such things in his clan, people that could pull off the impossible as easy as breathing. 'Skies' were unknown yet, but so rare he wasn't unduly bothered if they turned out to be less useful than the other 'Elements'.

Tasking his heir with learning a bit of the skill had done nothing, forcing him to interact with the 'first generation' had merely pissed most of the women off. A whole lot had gone wrong in a short amount of time, and his son's newly discovered 'stubborn streak' was not particularly helpful.

"I'll accept that. Two years, and whoever wishes to leave with me." Bazanova interrupted his thought process absently, seemingly having used the time he was speculating on why he allowed this 'office'
to exist at all and what was happening within it to come to her own decisions. "Although... it
deserves to be pointed out that even if I say nothing... others may draw their own conclusions."

"Not hardly, little bitch Milos thought a bit sourly. "This is on the condition that you and those you
claim will at least pretend to be neutral about the whole issue if and when anyone asks."

"No one with sense will believe that." Bazanova refuted pleasantly, pausing to take a sip of her
cooling coffee. "No, instead I'll ensure Galina spreads word about the more positive sides I can take
from this if they happen. Her tone will be her own, and I will not dictate how she should feel for her.
Anna rarely interacts with others, but I will have some words with her about how far certain things
should be allowed to spread."

"Usov, your sister?"

"Are not part of this deal so far, did you want them to be?"

Smart people could be very irritating just as much as they could be insanely helpful. Rubbing a
coffee-hot hand across his already tired eyes, the Pahkan sighed and resigned himself to another
round of haggling.

She already had what she wanted, was apparently unconcerned with easing the way for one of her
people, so insuring she would corral his behavior and at least be a neutral influence on her sister
would cost him whatever 'fringe' benefits she wanted.

Likely for visiting her family, or something on her little brother's behalf. Things he would then have
to account for or try to slide by vor Bazanov when discussing things with him right after this.

Had Milos been a tiny fraction older, or not been healed by a Sun Flame user in days and not months
from his narrowly defeated assassination attempt, he might have been highly tempted to just let this
happen without trying to moderate the fallout.

This wouldn't be the biggest threat Gedeon would have to deal with when he became Pahkan, but he
didn't want his son to have an immediate crisis concerning his leadership right off the mark.
Hopefully, so long as there was a definite 'end point', she'd be less of a pain in the ass and might be
able to actually go back to holding full conversations with his successor.

Just... smooth this one over, Gedeon could deal with the fallout from pissing off another woman
with influence behind her.

Preferably, he'd smooth this one over without Bazanova gutting them for anything of worth. A tie or
two in order to ensure she had no reason nor desire to physically try gutting them later on was a plan.

"Replacements Gedeon won't be able to argue with." Milos demanded from her, as if that wasn't
accomplished then they'd have the same damn problem all over again with only the possibly of a
slightly different result next time. "I am not budging from that."

"Then you'll have to make due with whomever that may be, even if they're not the 'best' I can
manage." She countered in a markedly less polite tone. "If that is so, I will not be appointing them to
the school as well. Then the Flame training will split, between 'the clan's' and 'everyone else's'. I see
no way to avoid or prevent it from happening."

Take a dip in quality to ensure things will continue in a positive aim, or not and hope the next round
would be less smart about their 'defeat' when Gedeon was fully in charge and possibly not taking
advice from his old man.
"It doesn't sound like you're doing anything to stop it." He pointed out, eyeing her expression.

Still utterly neutral, as a matter of fact there was a bitter twist to her lips now. Not a self-bitter, nor directed to him, but a disappointed bitter.

"I was never going to be able to hold onto it for the Zolotovs. There's no way to do so and keep to the letter of the law the Vindice passed down." The thief pointed out honestly enough. "All 'meetings or gatherings with the intent to trade Flame related information to non-aligned syndicates' is policed by them, the very moment we require something from the trainees or tried to demand something of them in return for their training... and someone refuses..."

...that would not end well, no.

With criminals, that was an 'eventually' and not a 'possibility' if someone wised up. Depending on the circumstances of what would tip that off, they could end up being the one 'picking a fight' with a syndicate that didn't have a ratio they were 'allowed' to deal unfavorably with.

That would be a very big, very stupid risk to leave themselves open to, moving it all off-site to a neutral location before anyone started bitching about the Zolotovs was just common sense.

Milos wasn't that stupid though, it was early yes... a bit too early to be setting it up.

Getting the land and the building was all well and fine, but staffing it and transferring all training to the location before anyone dreamt up the complaint to level at them?

Before someone tried to crack the Zolotov stranglehold on Flame users' training via an impartial force's directives for their behavior?

"...so, that was your plan."

"Yes." Admitted Bazanova easily, taking another longer draw of her coffee and setting the empty mug down on the try balanced on her desk between them. "Lisa will still become the principal in the end, and as they come available we'll replace ourselves with actually competent teachers in the various subjects as they occur... but this way it both prevents an unwise situation as well as provides a way 'out' that can't be touched."

If they didn't have a syndicate, they couldn't be viewed as 'trading information with non-aligned syndicates' when discipline or other violent incidents happened. It would be individuals versus those 'non-aligned syndicates', who would have their own alignments and preferences to be dealt with on case-by-case basis. Supposedly, if they required more than what one person could do, trading favors for other syndicates or banding together temporarily would then work for them.

Who wouldn't want the good-will of a Flame using trainer?

Who could then point them to what or who they needed for whichever reason they'd use that favor for?

With a sigh, the Pahkan saluted her before draining his mug fully.

Had he not learned of it before it could happen... he would've been pissed off, but likely would've let it happen if they kept a lid on it long enough for cutting them loose to be something direly needed for the clan's security.

Devious. A gambit worthy of Pyotr's granddaughter. Multi-faceted, too entrenched to be dealt with easily or firmly derailed, based on the blatantly obvious to ensure it was pushed through anyways.
"Another cup, Pahkan?"

"Please. I think I'm going to need it." Two down, two left. Then he had to speak with the damn girl's father to ensure nothing was smoldering on the vor's end. "Give me one of your cigarettes as well, Bazanova."

He received another of those fake, pretty smiles with the tobacco. The woman even lighting a finger with wispy purple Flames to provide fire without a lighter, allowing him to make use of her ability first politely.

Fuck, who was he forgetting?

(Sunday the 6th of July, 1969. St Louis des Francais Catholic Church, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Cherep eyed the rather pillar-festooned façade in beige over her shoulder. "...Nya, it's a church."

"Yes." Sonya neatened up Shamal's hair the best she could with merely her fingers, sighing when the disordered brunette strands remained stubbornly all over the place. "Yes, it is. Well spotted, brother."

She needed to start carrying around a comb or something, the kid had the genetics for naturally kinked hair which helped nothing in keeping him well-groomed. It seemed as if he so much as twitched his hair was all over the place.

Her brat snickered into a fist, tugging his tiny blazer jacket down again when it rose up a little. Apparently, he needed a whole new wardrobe soon... but he was a growing boy.

Peering around her and up to his uncle, the Mist gave him his best innocent grin. "It's Sunday, zio. Mister Renato and I attend Mass when we can."

That expression of innocence was not believable, especially since he gave an exact copy to Cherep last night in order to finesse a bit of cheating in his Mist game past the older man.

"It's the only Catholic church Lisa said was more or less 'stable'. Meaning it's not at risk of losing their parishioners to government pressure or general apathy." Sonya explained a bit tiredly, as she was not fond of even the idea of 'dawn Mass'.

She was more a nocturnal creature. Early mornings were evil if she wasn't adequately prepared to deal with them.

"I am delighted to hear that." A voice that wasn't either of the Cloud siblings' nor the brat's had all three of them turning around to face the new speaker.

In the lawn with the other 'early birds' mingling before the church's doors opened for them to attend their religious worship, stood a black-clad man with a pleasant smile on his face as he beamed at them. "I thought I saw you a couple times before, a new face in the flock is always a pleasant surprise. I am Father Luka."

Shamal, politely and cheerfully, greeted the priest and provided his name while the siblings exchanged a more hesitant look over his head while they decided how to deal with the interruption.

"...Sonya de Mort." The thief claimed for herself, ignoring Cherep's slightly startled little jerk. "To
be perfectly clear… Father, I am only here because Shamal’s father was Catholic and I do not feel right letting him attend a religious service so far from home on his own."

The priest wasn’t put out by her admittance, still genuinely pleased to meet them in a now slightly disturbing way.

Of course, that meant her dork of a brother took the opportunity to be as equally overwhelmingly cheerful as he extended a hand to shake. "Skull de Mort. Her brother, the kid’s adoptive uncle, and just along for the ride. Sorry Father."

"I find that you are putting effort to ensure young Shamal’s religious needs are met even if you do not see it the same way inspiring nonetheless." Father Luka shrugged that off as if it really wasn’t an admittance of general disinterest in his life’s work, still clapping hands with the stuntman and beaming down at the kid that was the only reason for their presence. "So, even so, I welcome you both to St Louis des Francais Church. Is there anything I can do or explain for you two? Since you are more or less the ‘outsiders looking in’, and I do not want you both to feel that way while you tend to young Shamal’s spiritual needs."

Sonya glanced down herself at the kid standing before her, then back up at the priest. This was likely going to be embarrassing… but… "...you don’t… really advocate the cannibalism of your religious icon, right?"

The priest stared at her for a long moment, caught by surprise enough to lose his expression, before thin lips twitched in a smile. "That... is an... interesting interpretation of Communion."

"I know it’s not likely right... but..."

"The wording confuses you into thinking so?" He asked politely, an actual smile twitching his mouth up at the corners when she nodded. "I can safely assure you that no, we do not advocate the cannibalism of our Lord and Savior. Communion is an instruction Jesus Christ gave his followers to do after his death, to share wine and bread in his memory. Of the stories that were passed down and became part of the Holy Writ, two phrases are taken when performing communion is likely where you became confused Mrs. de Mort. Taken from Luke twenty-two, verses nineteen through twenty: "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" and "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood". As the Last Supper, part of which those words were taken from, was held the day before Jesus Christ was betrayed and yet he broke bread with his own betrayer..."

Well, now she felt slightly embarrassed for her initial assumption. She was dealing with an old translation effort, of course the lexicon and word usage shifted over centuries. What sounded perfectly fine then didn't always mean it made logical sense now.

Fuck Renato, he could've at least attempted to explain it instead of letting her bumble her question to the priest.

Sonya didn’t palm her face, she was wearing a slight amount of makeup since 'getting dressed up' was a thing for Catholic Mass, but did sharply bite her lower lip for a moment. "I... see."

"I'm going to remember that for a long while." Father Luka informed them all with a fond smile. "Not to be mean, but... still an interesting outside view to take into account when receiving visitors to Mass. You might be interested to know there is a Eucharistic miracle along the similar lines."

Anything to get the conversation off her little question, even if it was more… religious speak. "Ho?"
"The Miracle of Lanciano." Confirmed the priest with another full smile. "In the eighth century, a monk had doubts about the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. However, when he said the words of consecration in Mass the host, the bread and wine for communion, changed into flesh and blood."

"That's creepy." Cherep pointed out for the both of them flatly.

"I have to assume the monk was very surprised as well at the time."

Shamal tugged on Sonya's skirts, wide eyed and entirely enthusiastic. Not surprising when one took the topic under discussion and his age in consideration.

"Can we go there, mamma? To Lanciano? Please? I want to see."

"If this took place in the eighth century, brat, it's long gone by now."

"It was preserved." Father Luka refuted her kindly, a shrug for her skeptical look shot at him in turn. "As far as I know of it, shortly after it was confirmed to be a genuine miracle it was encased in a silver Ostensorium."

A glance to her brother's face informed her he was equally as confused as to why anyone would want to preserve 'mysteriously appearing' blood and flesh. It sounded like a really nasty joke, to her.

"...I... see...?"

"I hope I haven't scared you off." The priest sheepishly rubbed a wrist with his off-hand. "But, well... it was somewhat related to what you wished to know."

As that was true enough, and Shamal looked excited to hear it anyways, the thief merely inclined her head to the man. "Fair enough."

"One last question, if I may. Are... you aware of the procedures for one's First Communion? If I'm not mistaken, your young man here is almost at that age."

Shamal beamed up at the priest while his godmother mentally floundered a moment in sheer confusion.

"...for... what? No, he's merely visiting my hometown for the summer. I assume his godfather has that arranged as they share a religious view, if that is a thing that is needed."

What the hell was one's First Communion supposed to be, anyways?

Supposedly more impressive than usual Mass, one would assume.

"Can I ask...?"

"I think I should urge you to speak with your fellow godparent first. But if you do still have questions, and he doesn't take you to his priest to have them resolved, I will always make time for concern or questions if you need."

Renato damn well had a few things to explain to her the very moment she got to grips with him.

Sonya huffed irritably, shoving her sour thoughts about the hitman's vagueness over Catholic norms to the side.

Likely, his non-comment over his and supposedly Shamal's religious views might very well be an attempt to get her to investigate his church and meet a mafia priest herself. She just really did not
appreciate feeling less than prepared to deal with the brat's needs, and intended to *express that in spades* to the Sun.

A bell set in somewhere within the church rang out, mobilizing the milling crowd waiting for that very signal. Father Luka quirked a wry smile. "*It seems we no longer have the time, anyways. Come, it is time for Mass.*"

Shamal pulled Sonya along by his grip on her skirts, and she snagged the stuntman's jacket in a hand to ensure she wasn't the only one suffering through a religious service she didn't believe in.

She *loved* her brother, sharing her misery was just her being sisterly. A sharp look backwards to ensure he didn't wiggle out of his much loved leather jacket merely earned her a fond roll of purple eyes as he took her arm in his own instead of suffer a fist in his jacket.

"*You don't have to yank, sis.*" Cherep informed her in a low tone, following her as she guided the brat to stop near a middle-end pew in order to stay out of the way but also have a decent view of the procedures they were here for Shamal to observe. "*I'm right behind you.*"

"*Sucks to be you.*" Sonya informed him flatly, seating Shamal between them.

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*(Monday the 7th of July, 1969. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)*

"*I will see you this fall, right kid?*" Tatiana asked of Shamal, earning herself a wide-eyed look.

"*…you're leaving, zia?*" Asked the kid, darting glances between herself and her siblings.

Flat out abandoning his little grudge match with Valera about the usage of his coloring books, earning himself a strange look by the kid's 'youngest' uncle that went unseen by the recipient.

Apparently, he hadn't wondered why there wasn't 'lessons' in the basement today nor why they were all present that morning for breakfast at Lisa's.

"*I'm a nurse, baby. A few weeks of leave was pressing my luck even if it was 'technically' clan business I'm here on.*" The redhead knelt down to be on her nephew's level to give him a hug. "*I'll have more control over my schedule once I'm a doctor, but I got a couple years of resident work to get through first.*"

Sonya sighed a bit guiltily behind her, but the nurse duties she would be sharing with Avdotya would actually count somewhat to her total of years as a nurse in residence.

Not nearly as much as full-time work at St. Julian's, or any other of the sister hospitals set up around the world for criminal use, but still not nearly as much a setback as the thief seemed to think.

Instead of explaining that, again for the third time, Tatiana merely gave Shamal another firm squeeze. "*I'll see you again sooner than you think, baby. The time will pass like nothing, and I might be able to take that day off after your checkup so we can spend more time together. Mention that to tall, dark, and snarky for me so it might happen.*"

"*…kay.*" Was the entirely unconvinced reply from the baby Mist, clinging a bit until the redhead regretfully pried his arms off her. "*Be safe, zia.*"
Tatiana really did have to get the whole story of how Shamal ended up Sonya's godchild one of these days. That was very much a mafia farewell, coming from a six-year-old's mouth.

'I'll see you later' wasn't nearly used as often, for sometimes that 'later' was years or never in their lives. As a matter of fact, most mafia men and woman the Sun had seen in Mafia Land didn't tend to use farewells unless forced to by another party.

For that matter, Sonya never really liked farewells either long before she noticed that.

She gave the kid a smile, but the Mist child decided to mope now and slid off to climb up on the couch.

The nurse was distracted from the kids when Cherep practically lifted her off her feet in a bear-hug. "I'm with him, Tats. Be careful, stay safe, and all that jazz."

"I will certainly try." Tatiana promised with a laugh, clutching at the arms around her because no matter how strong her siblings were it still felt weird for them to use it on her when everything else said they shouldn't be able to pick her up so easily.

Cherep wasn't bulky. He was a wiry-thin kind of guy, it looked like he was built more for speed than strength.

The fact he could pick her up with one arm and likely bench press her to boot?

She might be the eldest, but she was only beat out for title of the heaviest due to Cherep having a few more inches of height to work with than her. Getting picked up by him was weird.

Sonya in turn eyed her elder sister warily when their brother released her, firmly keeping herself on the other side of the room instead of moving to physically embrace the older woman. "I'll see you very soon myself, Tats. We might as well go through Mafia Land to get the brat home again."

The distance didn't save the blonde, when the stuntman did a bit of shifting around as she distracted her with being an approaching threat. Cherep hemmed in Sonya's escape route and let Tatiana catch their standoffish younger sister in a hug of her own.

"You know," Lisa commented absently from behind the couch to Shamal, "they do this every damn time they leave someplace. I miss the days leave-taking was a dignified kind of thing, around the time of Valera's birth they'd always get into some kind of scuffle when it came time to split up again."

"Not always!" Protested their only brother that would willingly speak full sentences, spinning around to face their foster mother which allowed Sonya to duck around him and nearly escape until he wrapped arms around her much to the thief's disgruntlement. "Just... occasionally."

"Besides, Lisa," added the nurse, chipping in with the 'squeeze the Storm-Cloud' efforts gleefully by smashing herself into the hug so their younger sister was sandwiched between them, "Nya needs love too. Even if she is grumpy about getting it."

'Nya' put up with it for only a moment before she growled, jabbing a sharp elbow into her side and driving another likely boney appendage into their brother's to get them to let go of her. Once freed, their younger sister bolted and dove behind their foster mother.

"Enough." Lisa declared, not moving from where she was shielding the youngest woman in the room, even if the younger members of the family were grinning broadly at their antics. "I think you've exceeded what limits she has for such fooling around. Tatiana... do have fun, dear."
Shamal deflated a bit, having forgotten the nurse was leaving in watching the teasing they were
doing to his godmother.

Sonya eyed her kid's back and heaved a sigh. "If you get ready really quickly, brat, we can go with
her to the airport."
The Mist blinked up at her in surprise for a second, then promptly copied her in bolting off to get
ready.

Bouncing on his toes lightly once, Cherep dropped heavily back down to his heels and shot a
questioning look to Sonya. She sighed again, shrugging once and giving a wave with a roll of her
right wrist.

"And now, for those of us who has less time to develop a nonverbal way to communicate?"
Demanded Tatiana, planting a hand on her hip as they started drifting to the front door.

"…Cherep might've gotten an extension on his mid-year vacation week… but… it wasn't extended by
much. Also, nursing a sick Mist back to health took up a good half a week." Sonya confided to her as
her brat scrambled back to the living room they all just left to grab his abandoned jacket. "By the end
of this week, he has to return to the circus."

Ah… ouch. After her, and Cherep, left… that also meant… poor kid.

He only had about two and a half or three more weeks of summer vacation, depending if one
considered the days required to get him back to his home country and ready for his next year of
schooling.

If her taking her leave surprised him, suddenly being left with only Sonya at the end of the week
might just be painful.

"Good luck with that." Tatiana informed her sister cheerfully.

She huffed, rolling her eyes. "You are such a doll, Tats. I have no idea what I would ever do without
your sparkling wit and invaluable advice."

"I know, I marvel that you can even get along without me some days." The nurse announced, almost
throwing an arm over Sonya's shoulders if she hadn't ducked at the very last second. "Stop flinching
away from me."

"I'll flinch if I want to."

"Ladies. Your chariot awaits." Cherep interrupted grandly, throwing the front doors open when
Shamal slid up next to his knee fully put together. "As your chauffeur, I must insist certain
individuals be on their best behavior at all times or small accidents such as leaving you behind or
incredibly bumpy roads might be found."

"…I would like to remind you, brother dearest, you aren't safe from attempting that 'greatest human
cannonball distance without the cannon' record. I have no issues helping you." Sonya snarked at his
back, shoving her hands into her jacket's pockets as they followed him to the car pulled from the
clan's motor pool to take the nurse to the airport. "I am such a loving little sister, right?"
The stuntman paused mid-step, flicking purple eyes back at them over a shoulder, then snagged his
nephew and bolted for it.
The thief he was stealing from huffed in outrage, hot on his heels in aims of getting her baby Mist
brat back.

Tatiana laughed as her siblings ringed the car, a wide-eyed nephew torn between glee and uncertainty bouncing on Cherep's shoulders as they ran from a very vexed and showing it Sonya.

(Tuesday the 8th of July, 1969. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Shamal was a little confused when his mamma stopped walking mid-way to nonna Lisa's house, picking a bus stop bench to take a seat on and patting the spot next to her in invitation.

"Come here, brat."

"…what are we doing?" They were going to be late, and nonna didn't seem like the kind of woman that appreciated being put off.

"I said if you learned what I had to teach you quickly enough, I'd then teach you something a bit different, didn't I?" His Russian godmother clarified, helping him into the spot she wanted him to sit and lowering her voice so it would only carry so far. "Now then… pickpocketing. I'm rather good at this part, and I'll teach you my tricks."

Peering up at her suspiciously, because she hadn't exactly said anything about his being good enough Saturday when they had their last lesson, he tried to recall how well he had picked locks that morning. "…are you sure, mamma? I didn't think I was very good…"

"Lock picking is very much an art that requires constant practice. Along with safe cracking, making counterfeits, lying, acting, and basically any other skill in life." Sonya admitted frankly, flicking glances from person to person as they wandered across their field of vision. "You've got the basics down decently enough, and you'll only get better the more time you pour into it. That just needs to be done on your own time with lock mechanics I'll send you via mail, so I can start teaching you this while Lisa sources a set of picks for you to own."

He turned to look out at the pedestrians running about in the early morning hours, turning that over in his head. Did that mean she expected him to keep up with those skills on his own, or would she just leave it up to him if he was going to keep them?

"Ready, brat?"

"…ready, mamma."

"Alright… there's three main methods to picking pockets. Violence, the distraction, and the crowd. Violence is basically mugging someone, quick and dirty and something even the most inept of thieves can accomplish as long as they're careful about it. You threaten someone, they give you money for not hurting them and going away, then hopefully you both walk away alive."

"But," Shamal shot a skeptical look upwards, half to check interruptions were allowed and half to see her expression, "then they'd know your face."

"It's why I don't like that method. It's… sloppy. If you need the cash that bad to the point mugging someone is the best option… then maybe you shouldn't be a thief." Threading her fingers through his hair, she tugged a few strands until he caught sight of a lady down the street practically assaulting another guy. "Version two, the distraction. Generally working in pairs, one thief does something startling or attention grabbing while another does the lifting. While not bad in terms of procedure,
and entirely possible within your and even my skill range alone, it again opens the risk for identification although the second set of hands generally helps avoid complications."

While the first lady was enthusiastically kissing the guy, another man swept by and only the position they were sitting on let them see the second man pull a slim black case from the first man's back pocket. A tap to the first thief's shoulder had the lady pulling back with a sheepish grin, informing the man of something that had his surprise fade into something pleased and flattered. Then she waltzed off, after the second thief that now had the first guy's wallet.

That was… kind of… eww.

Shamal didn't want to kiss anyone, girls had cooties. "Do you have to…?"

"Hmm? Oh, no silly. Any distraction will work, that… just so happened to be the closest example I could point out." He got a slight hug, from the arm she wrapped around him to give them even more privacy. The next words were nearly muttered into his hair, but he could still hear the smirk in her voice as she continued. "Use your rather talented imagination, Shamal. A 'distraction' just has to be eye catching, if it's something you're not comfortable with then why the hell would you try it?"

Startling or surprising people might be fun, although if he was 'picking pockets' on civilian targets than he would have to be really careful about using his Mist Flames.

Shamal looked up to her to hear the last one.

"Finally… the crowd. Taking advantage of the fact sometimes you end up very close to another when there's a lot of other people about…" She extended an arm as if stretching it out, a smooth slide up and down and she had lifted the wallet out of another lady's purse before said lady left them at the bus stop to get on the large transport that slid to a stop in front of them. "This one takes more skill, and is what I specialized in. Although… I generally return the wallet if I have no need of their ID cards."

The young woman his mamma had just stolen from pushed a token into a slot on the bus to pay her fair, sliding farther down but taking the second bench seat. She pulled her purse open, likely noticed her lacking wallet, and started to search for it through the bag.

She only looked up just before the bus pulled away from the curb, but her eyes slid right past his mamma who was inspecting her wristwatch at that same moment.

"Not exactly pretty, is it?" Asked the Storm-Cloud lightly, pulling her left hand back from behind the bus stop bench's back and flicking it open to remove all the money kept inside.

She snapped it closed again, discreetly leaving it behind on the bench as she encouraged him to get up onto another bus pulling in for new passengers.

Once they were seated within the bus, paying with the stolen money and the remainder given to him to have, Sonya wrapped her arms around him so she could continue to lecture him on stealing.

"You can make a living picking pockets, but frankly it's really just better for generating a bit of cash in a pinch or two. Too many lightened wallets in one area makes law enforcement suspicious, which cranks up the pressure the local thieves are under. We're far enough out of our neighborhood this is considered 'free' territory as long as you don't lead any chase back. Now, to start with… we're people watching. Point someone out and estimate how easy or hard it would be to take their wallets."

"Is that all we're doing?"
"For now. Actually lifting things smoothly will be practiced back in Lisa's basement, we've got things
to help with that, but now every Tuesday and Wednesday we will be sharpening your ability to pick
out a mark."

Shamal turned his attention to the other passengers on the bus, but he kept thinking back to the lady
on the other one that had looked so dismayed to realize she was missing something. He gripped his
mamma's forearms a bit tightly, wondering if he liked this art.

"Him?" Asked the Mist, pointing to a man rather involved with a newspaper instead of paying
attention.

Watching the thief-lady steal from the man hadn't raised the same feeling as the second one, so
maybe he'd just stick with tricking men out of their money.

Mister Renato kept telling him ladies were to be respected, and that a young gentleman didn't make
young ladies uncomfortable unless they started it. Going so against his godfather's teachings
seemed… unwise. Even if it was on his godmother's behalf.

"…mmm, already distracted and supposedly a nice mark… but… look a bit closer, brat."

Shamal peered around the paper, only to suddenly lock eyes with the man. He earned a slight smirk,
but the man folded up his paper and moved down the bus when it came to a halt to let people off.

"We're in a heavily thief-occupied part of the city, Shamal." Mamma informed him wryly. "You do
kind of have to be careful around here, otherwise you'll end up trying to pick another thief's pocket."

…yeah, he didn't want to do that. "How do we avoid that?"

"We're headed to see if one of my old haunts is more or less thief-free, then we'll… basically people
watch until you find me a mark to steal from. If I get arrested, which isn't likely but still should be
said, get in touch with Usov, alright?"

"…alright, mamma."

She set her chin on the crown of his head. "You can keep the cash we get today, and I'll keep what
you pick out tomorrow. On Saturday, we'll pick something to do with the money. Like attend a
theater production, go see a Russian Circus, or just buy you a lot of candy. Okay?"

"Okay."

(Wednesday the 9th of July, 1969. Wo Hop To Triad Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong
Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Fong politely responded to the various greetings tossed his way, making his path too deliberate to be
waylaid by his fellow Triad members.

Even after nearly a year of being more or less exiled from Hong Kong, he was a known martial artist
and thus drew more than his own fair share of law enforcement attention when the crackdown on
'traditional arts' started, he still knew the path to the Mountain Master's quarters almost by heart.

Normally a Triad member wouldn't, they would be more familiar with the way to a 'Straw Sandal'
liaison if they required some assistance, but Fong had found several unexpected obstacles in his way
that dictated his strange path.

Storm Flames were only the tip of that issue, his prowess in martial arts attracting attention when it came to gambling rings and his… family issues, also required some intervention by the head of their Triad.

Finally being recalled back to the heart of their organization, even if only temporarily, was a mixed blessing. He no longer had to sneak around his own home country to visit those he shouldn't neglect, but it bought back the scrutiny that made every step slightly perilous for him.

Fong was used to walking alone along a razor edge, being both a touch too risky to associate with him regularly as well as being impossible to be ignored due to the 36 Oaths made him an outsider even within his own Triad.

His 'best' use was in enforcement, finding himself the one everyone turned to for additional muscle when things became dicey both put him on a pedestal and isolated him from the usual groups that made up any one triad.

Rapping his knuckles on the doorway of his Mountain Master's office, Fong waited with his arms folded within his sleeves for an attendant to slide open the rice paper door. When the door was opened, and greetings passed around, the martial artist found himself eventually seated before the head of the Triad he belonged to.

"Master Zhōng Duyi." Bowing while kneeling made his braid fall forward over a shoulder, but the martial artist pushed the length of braided hair to the side.

"Sōng Fong. Welcome back." A crocodile's grin was aimed in his general direction, the Storm Flame user didn't even have to look up to know it. "It seems your hiatus in Mafia Land did you no harm."

"It could even be described as interesting." Fong agreed neutrally, sitting up when the hands still in his view gestured for him to do so impatiently.

The Mountain Master of the Wo Hop To Triad wasn't a young man by any stretch, but he was easily his elder by at least a decade or more. Still in possession of a head of dark hair without even one odd streak of grey, sharp black eyes, and a scar that cut through the lower left side of his face, Zhōng sharply inspected what was really a living weapon before giving him an equally sharp nod.

"They've put out the regulations for the tournament. I hope you are prepared for it."

"Speaking along those lines… she did agree."

"The Mafia Land Cloud agreed to return to China."

"Storm-Cloud." He corrected the statement with a small smile. "And yes. I have her word she will consent to a contract that would remand her to Hong Kong for a specific amount of time. That being so, she also agreed to be my hostage against… misbehavior, for the duration of the tournament."

"Good. Very good. Not that I mind, mind you, but… earning a more localized expert in these jewel things your Flame users seem to like would be… desirable." Threading thick fingers through the short beard, the Mountain Master directed his gaze upwards to the delicately worked dragon inlaid into the ceiling. "Even if it is a foreign thief."

Fong folded his hands into his red sleeves, touching the bit of Red Imperial Topaz he had hidden away for in-between moments of Flame control exercises, before deciding how to pick his way through that comment. "If getting her attention took me most of a year, nothing will happen quickly
with her. It may take more years to see any progress in any direction."

Not that he was entirely sure he wanted to try helping his Triad hook into the Russian woman, or even if that was remotely possible. However, trying and failing would do no harm… so long as the proper precautions were taken.

"Sōng, I heard what happened between the two of you in the island's headwind forest. If she is not only alive but also willing to converse with you at length and will indeed arrange some services you request from her own syndicate, then I expect she is as battle hungry as you are." Observed the head of the Wo Hop To Triad, those sharp eyes drifting back down to him. "Time is also something you seem to have a fair amount before we can fully pull you back again."

It was something, or someone, to work on while he was at… loose ends. Fong dipped into a shallow bow, because it was true and entirely something he didn't mind doing.

Again, if it happened that was all well and good. If not, it was likely she was half-expecting more 'recruitment' offers and would at least directly refuse them instead of lead on any attempts for perks or costly bait.

He lost nothing by merely attempting, so long as he was allowed to do it in a way the surprisingly blunt woman would not take offense to.

More spars would be fun.

"I believe you have only just returned, so go and rest yourself." Zhōng commanded, even if the martial artist had ensured he did not appear travel-worn before his arrival. "The Mother is done with lessons at this hour."

Seizing control over himself in an iron grip, Fong merely bowed again before departing the Mountain Master's office in an unhurried pace.

The back of the Wo Hop To compound had buildings connected to the Spring Gardens, the red-light district of northern Hong Kong. It was also where a lot of the girls were trained to become courtesans, or companions, and the occasional concubine.

Fong's little sister generally spent her time there, as he couldn't afford to take her with him to an island as entrenched into violence as Mafia Land nor did he earn enough with this 'hiatus' to afford another living arrangement. He was… not happy this was the best he could do for her, but… she insisted she did not mind even when it was fairly obvious they both disliked it.

As all hands were kept busy, that meant his little sister was being trained in the arts of a courtesan while he couldn't provide another place to live.

He slipped through the mostly empty halls, unfortunately startling the woman on laundry duty but hopefully since he passed quickly she recovered equally so.

Third floor, eighth from the stairwell, on the left-hand side.

Rapping his knuckles against the wood of this door lighter than he had with the Mountain Master's office door, Fong managed a genuine smile for the wary wine-red eyes that peered at him from a cracked open doorway.

Sōng Mingxia opened her tiny room's door fully, giving her elder brother a sweet smile of her own. "Big brother, it is so good to see you again."
"It is only for a few short months this time, I'm afraid." Fong cautioned, merely earning himself a wry little laugh from his baby sister. "Then I will be leaving again."

"Anything is better than nothing." The little Rain insisted firmly in a fond tone, drawing him into her room with a suspicious look tossed down the hallway. "Can I know why you are back, or should I not ask?"

"It is not a secret, there is to be a martial arts tournament in October." Since Fong was the Wo Hop To Triad's best martial artist, of course he would be immediately volunteered for such a thing. The gambling money that could be made off him alone would've seen to that, if it wasn't for the draw of what reputation he would then earn if he won it. "I have… found something I think you might be interested in, though."

There was little personal in the room. A tiny dresser and clothing chest took up most of it, the folded futon serving as a seat for the low writing desk for now.

The Storm knelt down on the floor under the window and left her the bedding, settling in for what time he could spare before long-distance travel fatigue set in.

"This isn't like the Philippines lady knife-fighter that was more interested in you personally, is it?" Mingxia asked worriedly, quick little hands making short work of setting up a brazier to boil water for tea in the sand pit to contain embers set into the middle of her tiny room. "Big brother, I may not be entirely at ease here… but it's safe."

In a brothel, which Fong was not happy being the only decent housing he could provide her.

The martial artist sighed, feeling slightly embarrassed all over again for how that ended up resolving itself. "I can assure you, this one is so disinterested in me she even offered to trade me to her sister as she found me 'annoying'."

His own loving little sister brought up a sleeved hand to hide her amused smile for a moment. "That is good… I think."

"She also very nearly managed to kill me." Actually, they very nearly managed to kill each other.

Fong went too easy on her in the beginning, and she had been mindlessly enraged for too much of it, for a clear and decisive winner to be figured out. There was also that maneuver of being very, very valuable at the time he finally managed to get her to agree to a meeting… around the time the Wo Hop To would've been allowed to strike back at her for reporting them.

By design or accident, that had still been… startling. "I think, as she will be coming here so you can see for yourself, she may be what you were looking for."

"If she's not interested in you, big brother, she may not be interested in me." The eleven-year-old worried with the edges of her own sleeves for a moment, flicking out a small hand with blue Flames to smother the smoldering embers that had boiled the tea water. "Does she even want an assistant or attendant?"

"…I have no idea. She does have a Lackey, so she is not against it. It will entirely be between the two of you, though. Whatever happens."

Mingxia added tea leaves to the water in her small teapot, shutting the lid firmly to let it brew, before looking back up at him hesitantly. "Madam Huizhong offered for me. A fair amount, and for entertainment only. Or servant's work, if I must insist on staying away from that side of her… business."
Fong didn't pull a face at her, merely forcing himself to only listen as she explained the supposed duties she would then have. Even if he wanted to, or argue, or forbid it.

He wasn't here for her to rely on, if she felt the need to make additional arrangements then… he'd help. Even if he was more than sure why Huizhong had made an offer to take in the younger sister of a fairly well-known Triad member.

He did specialize in protection and enforcement, gaining him as a protector because his little sister frequented the madam's brothels for 'work'…

"I will wait and see this new lady of yours, big brother." Promised the young Rain, pouring them tea to drink in the elegant way she had been taught over the last year. "But if she is not amenable or willing to allow me my freedom, I may have to in order to avoid things I would really rather not do."

"Fair enough." The Storm collected his mug of tea, giving his little sister a salute with it. "It is still good to see you, baby sister."

"Likewise, big brother."
Chapter 69

(Thursday the 10th of July, 1969. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Shamal?" Sonya padded over to the bed they were sharing, curious over what had made the kid retreat into the bedroom with his lizard instead of sitting out with her and her brother in the main part of her hotel suite.

There wasn't really much dictated to do at this hour, most everything was already worked on or done and besides an hour of imagination practice after dinner the kid was entirely allowed to just aimlessly wander about if he wanted.

Cherep had just been a bit surprised to be completely and sort of abruptly blown off for a pre-dinner Mist game session, but he wouldn't take offense anyways and had left to fetch them food while she investigated what had the brat so moody. The fact the kid immediately put space between himself and his uncle was a bit alarming, and outside the general behavioral patterns he had been following to date.

Obviously... something was wrong.

Curling up in a little nest made out of the bedding, the Mist was absently alternating between petting Luigi and letting the lizard amble about his hands and a tiny section of the bedspread.

He rolled over on his back to smile up at her but isn't nearly as cheerful or mischievous as she had come to expect. "Hi, mamma."

Inspecting him closely, the thief eventually was forced to conclude that there was nothing physically wrong. Which was... good. Leaving an emotional reasoning for why an orphaned kid decided to get himself some alone time to think about things.

"What happened?"

"...Mister Usov and I were talking to Miss Anna about Constructing facades of other people for distractions, and about how to prepare stock images to keep in mind and how they should either be of dead people or completely fake ones unless you want to make trouble for them." Her brat started willingly enough, dropping his gaze to Luigi when the chameleon licked his finger with a sticky tongue. "I... um... tried to make a copy of my papà but couldn't."

Sonya sighed through her nose and crawled up next to him. Stretching out to lie on her own back, hands folded behind her head.

Thankfully, he was at least more composed about this incident than he had the last time around.

"You've forgotten what he looks like?"

There was no bawling, that was a plus. Unfortunately, the kid was probably old enough now to swallow that down and just make himself miserable with it.

Luigi didn't like her much more than he had the first time they met, pointedly turning away from her direction and leaving his relatively stable perch on a palm in order to investigate the Mist kid's shirt buttons instead.
Shamal, despite the fact he had howled when he realized he forgot his own last name he shared with said dead man, only frowned at the ceiling they were staring mostly at. "...and I'm not all that bothered, mamma. I loved him, he's still my papà, but... I'm not... I'm still sad, but not... sorry I'm forgetting."

"You were very young when he passed, brat. Human memory actually isn't all that accurate unless you have an eidetic one. It would stand to reason you'd forget the smaller details over time without something to reinforce your memory." Sonya actually couldn't really recall a whole lot of Rachel's parents anymore either, and while she was sorry she could no longer put a face to the sensation the word 'mom' gave her... she could with the term 'foster mother' or just 'mother' and that was Lisa.

"...but he was my papà."

"Renato probably can get you a picture if it's that much of an issue." Honestly, even knowing her biological father confused her adult face with her biological mother's... she really couldn't put an image of the woman to the name Nyura. She couldn't even recall what Rachel had once looked like either. "...I don't remember my mother anymore, and I last saw her when I was five."

Honestly, part of the problem might be the kid now had more than just a 'father'. He wasn't left alone in the world anymore, he had a pair of godparents and her siblings as an aunt and uncles that picked up the dead man's son.

Losing what was his only 'adult' support suddenly probably had reinforced how scary it was to be alone... until a certain hitman recalled he was missing and went to pick him up.

The only difference between now and when Shamal realized he forgot his surname was time. Time between losing his father and then apparently didn't compare to time and her family getting included in his makeshift family.

The brat heaved a sigh, curling up around his lizard and shoving his face into her stomach. "I don't think... even if I could make a Construction of him, that I want to use him as merely a distraction."

"So don't. Once you find it again, use your papà's image for other things. Like... if you need a parent or guardian for something. He was your father. Or if you need an adult image to be taken seriously in a few years. As far as I know it, Usov's parents are alive to give that kind of permission to be used in less 'upstanding' ways... and if I'm recalling it right... Anna's a runaway. She might have an idea for what to reserve your papà's image for if you didn't like Usov's suggestions."

"...I use you sometimes." Shamal admitted slowly, placing Luigi on her stomach next to his face.

Sonya gritted her teeth against the feeling of scaly forepaws scrabbling against her skin, a few involuntarily twitches of her belly scaring the chameleon off her skin again to scramble back into the Mist's hair for the safety. "And I don't really care much, brat. You can use my image how you want, I'll deal with anything that happens from it easily enough. The only one I ask you don't use is your zio's. I wouldn't mind seeing what your papa looked like myself, actually. Just so I know what you might grow up to look like."

Humming a little tune to himself, the kid recollected his lizard out of his hair to clutch between two hands instead. "I don't... really feel like doing anything tonight, mamma."

"We've got nothing that is important to work on, but more 'practice' things you can do at any time." She was going to have to go grab a book or something, she wasn't much for simply doing nothing.

Even in the middle of a heist, when she had nothing else to do but wait, she liked to still occupy her
mind in some way. That could've been a result of damn near anything really, from straining herself to learn and document the Dying Will Flames of the Sky phenomena while she developed the skill... to trying to occupy herself with something right after ending up under Lisa and Arseniy so she wouldn't have to think of how she ended up there.

"...can we... go nap on zio?"

Even if the kid wouldn't be able to see it, the thief raised an eyebrow at the question. "Entirely possible. After dinner, I'd like you to eat something tonight first even if you might not feel like it. You're growing, Shamal. You need the energy."

That was an interesting request. A little befuddled on how the kid dreamt that one up, she pushed herself in a semi-upright position in order to see him clearly.

"...why do you want to nap on him, anyways?"

"Cloud naps." The Mist informed her faux-brightly, with an echo of something mischievous back in his tone. "When you have a problem, mamma, you nap on them."

"I do." ...yeah, yeah, she did.

She started that with him and Valera.

Sonya huffed, feeling a bit embarrassed and a little bit sheepish at more or less getting called out on it by her own brat, as she shoved a hand through her jaw-length blonde hair. "...point."

The kid had also fallen asleep on Tatiana, the night of her massacre, woke up on Cherep and both sisters the morning after she and Renato went to see an opera.

It was entirely possible he had assumed napping on issues was just something her family did... and there were three Clouds that all hailed from her family. One lonesome Sun, but... supposedly more a Cloud-trait than a Sun one since his Mister Renato didn't do it too.

...actually, the hitman napped to skip boring hours when traveling. It wasn't entirely her fault, then.

Everything did seem less devastating or nasty after a good night's sleep anyways.

"Right, your zio is off getting us food. Afterwards, he's likely to go back to working on that infernal machine of his. Climb up on him once he sits down, I'll take whichever side you don't want."

Shamal snickered, firmly holding Luigi as he rolled off the bed and carefully set ajar the lizard's cage to return him to his terrarium. "Thanks, mamma."

"He's going to bitch, you realize."

Cherep would squawk and huff and complain voraciously, but he'd also likely let them get away with pinning him in place for another entire night. As long as she took the brat back to bed once night really fell and he was solidly asleep, it was possible he'd not even do more than put forth a token protest if the brat wanted to do it again before the stuntman left.

"A lot."

"But zio's nice and will let me anyways. If you join in, he won't wiggle out." Countered the brat wickedly.

Since it was markedly better than him pouting or stewing in the issue of his long-dead father and his
own forgetfulness until Renato could find him a picture, Sonya only sighed and slipped off the bed as well. "…true."

Her dork of a brother really was too nice to her sometimes, and that habit had spread to her godchild. Well… sucked to be him then.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 10th of July, 1969 continued. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Does he know I'm leaving tomorrow?"

"It might have contributed to your brushoff earlier, but I highly doubt it." Sonya answered, shutting the bedroom door behind her and wandering over to where Cherep had his almost finished junkyard-built bike in the middle of her living room. "More likely, he's just not that used to you yet to lean on when he's upset."

Scrubbing a hand through recently trimmed purple strands, the stuntman inspected his slapdash motorcycle closely for something before glancing at her distractedly. "Yeah… have fun with that."

"Is that thing even road-safe?"

"…I'll find out tomorrow?" Her dork of a brother ducked the slap she aimed to land upside his head, grinning as he scrambled off the couch to put space between them. "I'd know for sure if certain some ones hadn't decided to take a nap on me. What the hell was that even supposed to be?"

"Cloud naps." The thief admitted wryly, sighing and pressing a hand over her eyes. "Shamal's likely got it into his head that I nap on all my problems."

Cherep blinked at her blankly for a few seconds, then blurted out a snicker. Slapping a hand over his mouth helped nothing, she could still hear it perfectly well. He tried to keep quiet about it if it was blatantly obvious she knew he was laughing at her, but eventually he ended up on the floor muffling his mirth into a forearm. "Can you-ha! Can you imagine making everyone do that? Just… hate each other? Naptime! Fighting a war? Pillow-fight!"

That was… frankly absurd. There wouldn't be a bird left with feathers if that ever happened.

Sonya smirked wryly, also in a bit of confusion to why he was so amused by it, but his hilarity was kind of infectious even if it was at her expense. "Brother, you are a dork."

"But you love me." Protested the immortal stuntman with good humor, making a kind of back-flip thing off the ground she was fairly certain started as a martial arts move but somehow eventually infected the acrobatic troupe of the Großes Volksfest. Proof that even without her he was still sort of absently going along with keeping himself flexible by sometimes practicing with the acrobats. "I'm your dork."

"Very true."

Pausing a moment in exaggeratedly obvious thought, her fellow Cloud ambled over to the kitchen table while she sorted out what she wanted as a snack to eat while reading a few more chapters of the fantasy book she was in the middle of. "I don't think you're supposed to do that. When something's yours, and you love it beyond all reason, you're supposed to defend it. Not call it, them, or said
"I," Sonya insisted as she pulled out the leftover meat pie thing that was yesterday's dinner to heat up, "call it like I see it. If you're a dork, then I'm calling you a dork even if you are mine. If anyone that isn't mine calls you a dork it's another thing entirely, but different than in this case."

"...you're one of those people, aren't you?" Cherep asked, collecting the dishes to serve the leftovers on. "Double standards, little sister. And completely shameless about it too. For shame."

"Your point? Also, if I'm shameless... does trying to shame me do anything about the topic under discussion?"

Since he gave her two plates instead of one, she was pretty sure that meant he wanted to be fed more too. More mouths to eat the leftovers she had was not particularly objectionable, so she served him up a slice too.

Unfortunately, microwave ovens were very much only an American thing so far. In order to heat up leftovers, she had to use her oven. Meaning it was at least fifteen minutes of cooking time, thirty if she was really unlucky, and it tended to dry out or slightly burn whatever it was she wanted to eat.

...so, hitman cooking hack for the win.

If you added a pan of water to keep meat from drying out while baking it, then supposedly if you added a pan of water it might keep already cooked foods you were reheating from also drying out. That was the plan, anyways.

If she fucked this up, the stuntman was never going to let her forget it.

"Probably not," allowed her brother thoughtfully, "although in a slightly related but not topic... I'm under orders from our beloved, wonderful, terrific older sister to ask about 'smothering'."

"How is that 'related but not' to our discussion?"

"Naptime with me and the brat is okay, but you can't stand getting a spontaneous hug?"

Sonya eyed him sourly as she cranked up the heat in her oven. "Being able to keep my arms free or move away when I'm uncomfortable, or getting the very air in my lungs squeezed out by one or more people? Yes, very similar."

"We wouldn't be that bad if you didn't always run whenever we tried to give you a hug." Cherep offered after another bit of thought on the subject, wagging a finger in her direction. "Although I will give you that point."

"I can do touch... mostly. I can touch others, hug a couple people, and do normal friend-things." If she repeated it enough times, maybe she'd even believe that. "But whenever you smother me, I can't tell what too much pressure is or how much is too much force. People are fragile, Cherep. Especially for me and my Cloud-strength bullshit. I'm not always consciously aware of how much force I'm Propagating at any one time."

The stuntman stared at her levelly for a long moment, then he whistled lowly and raked a hand through his hair. "You're using the strength other people exert to know what you can and can't do?"

She sighed heavily. "If I punched you casually like I did back when we were kids before I got to grips with this Cloud Flame stuff, it's likely I'd break your arm. I use a lot of force normally, as most of my interactions are not... exactly... nice ones nowadays. Mostly, it's me shoving a couple pounds
of Propagated steel through stone, wood, glass, or people. I'd rather not break those I like, Cherep."

"...you've forgotten what's 'normal.'" He offered in short instead, sounding a lot more thoughtful about the subject.

"When Shamal approaches me he starts everything, so I know exactly how much force to use when hugging him. I can sort of do a 'light casual' thing from the Balls I've attended, but that's... not typical and mainly just letting whoever has hold of me do the pulling." Sonya clarified, accepting that summarization of her difficulty with a shrug. "When you or Tatiana hug me, you both usually are going overboard and trying to keep me contained in order to keep me there to hug. Which I'm not used to nor do I like very much. I can tell that's too much, but not what level of force I should use if I only want to escape and not... break both your arms and maybe a few ribs."

"You need more hugs." Cherep held up both hands before she snapped at him that she got more than she was comfortable with as it was. "I mean in a 'familiarizing yourself to what's normal' way and not 'more hugs make everything better'. Even if they do."

She eyed him severely. "I don't have very many I can stand to have that close to me, Cherep. My sample size to get used to 'normal human' levels is tiny."

"Yeah... that's depressing." He wrapped an arm over her shoulders, ignoring it when she shifted irritably under him. "I'll tell Tats, and we'll dial it down a bit. Or at least give you first a normal hug and then one as hard as we can so you know the range when we see you. We'll repeat that as many times as you need, little sister."

"...hooray..."

(Friday the 11th of July, 1969. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Cherep pulled a face, crossing his arms over his chest and sticking his nose in the air. "It worked! I'm here, all in one piece, and nothing exploded. I'm saying it's a success."

"When you started it up the blasted thing backfired so hard it had the hotel's concierge and valet diving for cover." Sonya countered in a deadpan, a hand on her hip and an utterly unimpressed look plastered across her normally neutral features. "The fact you got here on that thing is a minor miracle. Also, you don't have a helmet!"

"...so, I need better shock absorbers. And a better muffler. But most of that was just it clearing out the solvents I used to clean the engine, and it runs! And you suggested this!"

"I'm not arguing that. I'm saying it's likely going to shake apart on you in five minutes. Where will you be with a motorcycle that fell to pieces and no helmet? Not where you need to be and likely in a lot of pain. And if that happens in the middle of the fucking road, Cherep-"

Lisa shut the front door quietly, now knowing exactly why Shamal had wandered in alone and unescorted claiming that 'mamma and zio are a bit distracted, they'll be a moment'.

The child was puzzlingly alright with his mother-figure arguing with others in various tones of pissy, when as far as she knew most children saw that as an upsetting occurrence.

Well... it was Sonya. She'd argue with a rock about which was more hard-headed if she could.
Obviously Shamal was more than familiar with that little habit of her youngest foster child, even if she hadn't heard a lot of verbal arguments out of her and her young hitman friend when they visited.

Arseniy, likely alerted to their visitors by Cherep's favored but overly-loud method of transportation, blearily stumbled down the staircase to first peer in her direction then to dubiously glare in the direction of where his son and their grandchild were… 'discussing' the proper distribution of space on the couch. More effort on the young Mist's side with uncommunicative grunts on their son's.

She did wonder if Sonya's habits would rub off on her child, and it seemed so. Shamal was not really a quiet child, but he wasn't very argumentative to any but Valera so far. Her first grandchild had only had another fight she personally heard of, and that had been to his godfather about what he wanted to do one day.

Even after that argument, the child hadn't needed reassurance that he was still cared for like most others would.

Both Cherep and Tatiana had required some kind of reassurance they weren't going to be kicked out of the house just because they had a difference of opinion with her or Arseniy. The stuntman a lot due to the moral differences of this life and what he was used to before ending up with them, the nurse only when she messed up badly enough the vor had to step in so her childhood foolishness wouldn't haunt her steps as an adult.

Sonya was never one that needed it, but that might have been due to the fact she had rigidly kept herself from testing boundaries or leaving entirely until she no longer felt stifled by them.

Did the two of them already brush up and deal with that subject already, or was it still pending?

Also, did she bring it up and hope the young woman would take any advice about what to do when it occurred when she didn't experience it for herself and might not understand where that would stem from?

All Lisa really could do was ask or provide some anecdotes.

First, though, she should start up breakfast. Not only would Cherep likely appreciate something hot to eat before hitting the road, but Arseniy was awake before he was good and ready and that meant he needed coffee.

Before even that, though, one young man needed to get his own set of lock picks.

Lisa went into the living room the children had gravitated to simply due to the fact the new set of picks had been stashed there, coming to an entirely unexpected halt before crossing the threshold to take in the view.

Her lover apparently decided to go back to sleep … but he also decided to 'share the wealth', taking a leaf out of their foster daughter's book, with the children. Arseniy was flat out on his back on the so-contested couch, Valera making himself rather comfortable across the vor's chest, and Shamal was…

…spooked-looking was a good word.

The young Mist was uncomfortably wedged a bit under Valera and against the back of the couch, trying really hard not to disturb 'nonno'. Which didn't really work well when you were half-on the man in question.

Arseniy wasn't exactly a touchy-feely man… well, no. That was a bald face lie. The vor she lived and made a home with was very much not a people-person. Even if she got a hug out of the blue,
Lisa would first wonder what the ever-loving hell had gone wrong that earned her such comfort before wondering if he just wanted contact with her.

Casual contact was mostly limited to rough housing around with his equally blooded vory friends, behind closed doors with her, and rough if still affectionate ruffles of their various foster children's heads.

Sonya started getting hugs due to finding and sourcing them the Sun Flame healing that allowed Valera's conception at all, Tatiana was treated to the same due to her forging ahead with learning the same to bring back with her to the clan, as far as she knew it Cherep got semi-hard slaps to the back for picking and sticking with his morals in his life choices.

Valera got a slight bit more, but only due to the fact he was a toddler and was tired out easily at this age. Their various foster children were all too old when they got them to get affectionate pats… but apparently Shamal earned some kind of edge for how much their youngest foster child doted on him.

Well… there was that one incident that happened when a child aged Sonya got deliriously sick on them, but the young thief never mentioned it afterwards and she actually highly doubted she recalled any of it.

The slight 'click' made Lisa shut her eyes just in time to avoid the flash, turning to regard said Storm-Cloud in amusement as she accepted her camera back. "…we're keeping him, right?"

Sonya gave a little pleased smirk at her, retracing her steps out of the living room without so much as a backwards glance to her poor brat's situation despite hesitant flailing to attract attention. "Stolen fair and square, Lisa."

Cherep ambled in after her, apparently their argument was dealt with and either her younger foster child was ignoring that happened or it had been resolved to her satisfaction so nothing more needed to be said about it. "…heh. Cloud naps."

"What?"

"Shamal is of the opinion the Clouds of this family nap on their issues." He explained for her cheerfully, ducking a wispy blue something that nearly impacted his head and bounced off down the hallway.

It broke something else down near the front door, because of course it did.

Nothing glass or fragile from the solid-sounding crunch, but likely the same end-table Tatiana broke hurrying in and out of the house in her early teenage years. Nothing important was kept there, at least.

"NO CONSTRUCTIONS IN THE HOUSE, SHAMAL."

"…sorry, mamma. Sorry, nonna Lisa."

Lisa folded down the bellows of her Moskva camera in order to shut the lens away from being easily broken and smiled at the young boy. "You are forgiven, just try harder to keep it in mind."

She then silted an amused look to the middle foster child.

"Now then... Cloud naps?"

"Sonya's done it to him and Valera. He's done it to me with Tats one night and she joined in. They
"did the same damn thing to me last night too." He scuffed a hand up through his hair from the back, scratching the back of his head. "That was… introducing a baby Cloud to a slightly older Mist, waiting up after some kind of twisted date-night thing, and then something he got upset about. So… Cloud naps."

Well… okay then. She was not going to pretend to know what went on in her children's heads when it came to their Flame business, but… it was very cute.

Now she also had proof. "If you insist, Cherep."

"Not my term!" The… third? Cloud in the room exclaimed cheerfully, striding over to sprawl out next to the couch on the floor. Apparently to join in on the so-called 'Cloud naps'. "Blame Nya."

Arseniy, who hadn't been entirely ignoring the conversation, cracked one eye open just to roll it.

Speaking of the last and final Cloud of the family… Lisa left the men to their little social naptime to figure out where her daughter went. It wasn't really all that hard to find her.

"Nya… what are you doing?"

The named thief stood up straight, hiding the broken leg of the end table and her other hand with the flickering lavender Flames behind her back. As if her mother couldn't clearly see the rest of the shattered wood right next to her silver-plated boots. "Nothing."

She eyed the younger woman sternly. "Do not burn the house down."

"…I didn't when I was growing up." Sonya muttered as she turned back to the furniture her godchild had broken, likely intending it to be under her breath but Lisa was an ex-thief herself and still had very good hearing… when Cherep wasn't trying to deafen the lot of them with whatever mechanical thing he had gotten his hands on or Tatiana wasn't gleeful over gaining another illegal rock'n'roll record to play.

"Try to keep it that way. I'm fond of this house." Lisa shot behind her as she entered the kitchen.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 11th of July, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"…so, zio and zia are both gone."

"What, am I not good enough anymore?"

Shamal gave his mother a severe glare, which had the icy woman rolling her eyes at him and burrowing her nose back into the reports Galina gave her to review.

Scruffy gave a slight cough to retain young Mist attention. "And what of Galina and I? Swiss cheese?"

The Lightning mentioned tossed her head in a haughty manner. "Apparently so. I feel so unloved…"

Sonya glanced back up just to gift her secretary with a strange look.

The kid being talked to heaved a melodramatic sigh, rolling not only his eyes but his entire body over to a sprawled-out kind of position on the couch. Then he moped there, on a plush leather couch in
the middle of a Soviet Union country... there was something wrong with that picture...

When his mom seriously started inspecting the paperwork in her hands as if she was considering tossing it over a shoulder to ignore for yet another day, the brunette woman shot him a glare.

Exactly when did keeping their boss on track fall to him to do?

Oh... right, when he was the one entertaining the kid to keep him from pulling said boss away from her work to do it instead.

"I'm not very imposing, but if we tag one of your fellow spooky Mists we could go exploring? Within the building, I mean."

Shamal perked right up. "Mamma? Is there anything here you stole?"

From the look on Galina's face, it was going to be a resounding n-

"Yes. Second floor, the back-office meeting room affair. I stole the contents now on display in the cabinet next to the bay windows. They've yet to be moved since the syndicate that originally wanted them but backed out of the deal only just came by and got a oh-so-coincidental look at it all, you can likely go take a gander yourself before it's moved to storage to wait out the 'hot' item price dip."

...Peter was now interested to know what she had stolen that an entire clan of thieves displayed in a 'thumb their nose' gesture to another. The boy didn't even have to chivy the Sun out of his seat, he was already on his feet trying to recall his very pathetic metal map of the place.

"I wonder what else we can find?" Shamal wondered, wandering in a beeline out of the office and not catching the very deadly look his mother was aiming at his supposed 'escort'.

He was very likely taking his own life in his hands with this, but... well... he was interested too. Alone, he'd likely get an arm broken as some of the men here had indicated rather aggressively they had no issue doing if he looked at them wrong.

 Escorting the kid of a woman that was known for murdering a whole lot of people over the course of one night, currently embroiled in the middle of the mystical and highly volatile 'Flame' thing? For getting into altercations with vory-hopefuls and beating the shit out of them three at a time?

Peter would take those odds over the one on his lonesome, thank you very much.

Speaking of said kid, Shamal was rapidly leaving him behind. Hastening his steps, trying to ignore both Sonya's glare boring a hole into his back and Galina's brisk nod of thanks in various levels of success, the Sun got more than halfway down the hallway after the young Mist before his nerves racked up.

No matter how you looked at it, this building was full of criminals. Of various flavors, in Sonya's pure business type to Galina's small detailed concerns to those worse and better than them in person.

Peter hadn't really mingled around here, at all. Mostly due to the fact he was... more obviously not Russian.

Half the time he had been in the USSR, he couldn't speak the native language. Once he did, he was firmly ensconced in the Flame user's various groups. Mainly the 'Sun section', and the 'office group'.

Being automatically part of a solely inclusive subsection meant he knew nearly no one outside of
them and no one outside of them had a reason to know him. What little anyone would have to
discuss with him would be either things he didn't know of before, mostly the Flame user details he
had been absently clarifying that earned him actual support instead of just absent one sided
dependency, or criminal things he had only a few months of exposure of.

There was one path in and out Scruffy walked in this building, generally with enough haste he
wouldn't get waylaid by either someone who he couldn't understand and therefore would likely piss
off or someone who's issues he couldn't understand and help with.

Shamal hit the staircase a few feet ahead of him, causing the Sun to jog a bit to finally catch up with
the child. "After the second-floor office, then where do you want to go?"

"Um… nonna said the cantina had some interesting things." Finally pausing a bit so he could draw
up next to him instead of lingering behind, Shamal glanced up at him. "Hey, McScruffy… is there
anything you like here?"

"…I haven't exactly seen a lot of it so far."

"That's stupid. You live here."

Out of the mouth of babes.

Scruffy sighed heavily, matching steps with the kid as they descended to the second floor. "Yeah…
but I couldn't speak Russian for a bit. Usov helped me learn in a short few moments with his Flames
but being unable to speak the language is a bit… isolating. So, I didn't get out much."

Surprisingly, the young Mist nodded his head a few times as they reached the second-floor landing.
"Yeah, Mister Renato traded a few favors, so I wouldn't be unable to talk to anyone but mamma
here."

"It's fairly multicultural in regard to speaking languages." Peter detailed in protest, of what confused
him but there were a few people that had English as a language and had been willing to speak with
him so he wasn't entirely the 'gibberish-speaking outcast'. Galina had a rough, barely understandable
grasp on English, most of which her skill was his influence on her, which he really appreciated her
obtaining. "Likely your mamma wouldn't allow you to be the only one speaking Italian if that had
happened."

Sonya had spoken English for him back when Usov had yet to work out his language therapy, not
often to prevent impacting his immersion in Russian but more than enough so he wasn't entirely
isolated in that respect. Equally or more, she would've spoken Shamal's native language for him had
he needed it.

That consideration on his behalf from criminals was a little strange, but… likely, half the reason why
he was alive. Peter was not objecting, he was rather grateful for it.

A black-haired young woman was waiting politely for them both a bit farther down the hallways,
which honestly the Sun only knew by name mostly.

"Anna!" Shamal delightedly exclaimed. "Do you know where mamma's stuff is?"

"I even was told the story to share with you." Confirmed the Mirror Lady, ignoring the hesitance and
suspicion her very presence inflicted on the others using the hallways. The young woman laced her
fingers together in front of her, flicking dark brown eyes up at him for a long moment.

Scruffy nearly stepped backwards, scared and unnerved but not knowing why. The young woman
was a very intense one, when she was actually present in person.

Anna dismissed him after a moment, looking back down to the excited young child. "Likely, I will also be able to find the history behind certain other pieces you may be interested in."

The younger Mist beamed at her. "Let's find mamma's stuff first, then."

(Saturday the 12th of July, 1969. A Zolotov owned nightclub, Levoberezhny District, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Milos heaved a sigh as he sank down into a well upholstered armchair.

There was some pounding music beating at the walls, still faintly audible in the room but not headache inducing to the elderly men in here, smoke thick enough to physically cut if one was inclined wreathing the very air, but he had missed way too many of these little meet and greets as it was to let it bother him.

"Alright there, Zolotov?" Asked the Pahkan of the Kozlov Brotherhood snidely, already outright glowering at the head of a thieves’ clan when he entered the mostly hidden back room.

The Zolotov Pahkan smirked in his face, collecting a glass of vodka to nurse for the next hour or so. "Delightful, just old."

"You look rather good for a man shot through the chest." Kirillov Nahum remarked idly, toying lightly with a tumbler of whisky and staring at the play of light within it instead of actually looking at any of the other men in the private room with them. "Not to mention a man over the age of seventy."

With another sigh, the old thief pressed a hand to the bullet hole that wasn't a scarred-up mess. "These Flame things do pay off in sometimes interesting ways. Sun Flame using nurse sealed it up in hours, to the point it wasn't more than an hour later it looked weeks old instead of a bloody hole."

"Speaking of," Polyakov Ildar commented, the head of the Komarova Gang from the Marfino District which was one of the farther flung allies Milos had, "how hard will it be to get a set of Lightning twins trained up?"

"Easy, but best get them in quickly."

"Oh?"

"All the trainees we have so far will get a free pass, but..." Pausing, the Zolotov Pahkan examined the other men in the room from the corner of his eyes. "...we're not going to hold the training solely to us."

"No? Interesting." Kirillov, who headed up a loose collection of smaller street gangs in the 'no-man' zones between the more 'established' syndicates, picked up the conversation. He was only invited due to the fact that no-man's zone did allow outside recruiting within it even if he 'ran' a collection of independent groups within it. "Why ever not?"

"As more numbers pour in, we can't without hamstringing ourselves." Had the damn woman actually been upfront about the fucking problem, he might've been able to think of a way around it. He might not have as well, but the lack of preparation he had basically meant the initial assumption was going to go through in the end. "Not according to the Vindice Laws, anyways."
His clan would still have the 'best', for the short term. Milos was going to try to hold onto that, even if the biggest stick in there was abandoning ship and dragging more away with her, but... he could've not had that as well as had been completely surprised by the sudden reemergence of Dying Will Flame users like all the rest.

"So, we're shoving it off-site, and if you've got actual teachers the cadre involved will appreciate it."

"Puppeting them instead?"

Milos cut a glance to the speaker, not someone he knew on sight but his son had at least kept him up-to-date on the new local powers shifting into view. "For the short term, yes. As the more we let them go, the more they're going to start charging you."

Avdeev Yaropolk was a thug, only invited to this due to a ruthless takeover of a few smaller protection rackets on the border of Khimki and Levoberezhnny District. In fact, he was the only reason why the Zolotov Pahkan bothered to bestir himself out of his clan's territory to come here in his son's stead.

Vor Ziven had finally gotten back to his leader over why he was so far outside of their territory.

Milos had gotten suspicious over what the man was off doing on Bazanova's behalf a short few days ago, and still almost couldn't believe the woman managed to hide what she did for so long.

Admittedly she took advantage of the collective incomprehension of what Dying Will Flame users could manage, a brand new vor that only briefly checked in and so was very much 'out of sight out of mind', and the 'rumors' of a particular kid's demise. Almost the perfect storm to brew a major threat within, honestly.

Avdeev had no warning. Vor Ziven let Dorokhov Timur, the Khimki Cloud, go... or never had hold on the boy at all, and the young man viciously ripped the thug's head right off with bare hands the moment he was let into the dark room.

"Good evening, old man Zolotov." The heavily tanned blond scrapper greeted him cheerfully, blatantly ignoring the rapidly growing puddle of blood that was getting all over his charge and the wooden floorboards under their feet. "Timur was a bit over enthusiastic when you suggested he could get his revenge here, sorry about the mess."

Milos grinned at his young vor sharply. "Ah... to be young again. Certainly, no complaints on my end. Compliments to Bazanova for saving and salvaging the boy, Ziven."

"Yeah... she's going to be pissed. But she's also the one that told me we probably couldn't hide him much longer." Shrugging, the vor cast a glance over the gathered men either too distracted by the dead body suddenly in their midst or trying to keep an eye on the now calm as water young man that did the murder. "Dorokhov, I'll be outside with the rest of the bodyguards."

When the named Cloud swung around to give a sharp nod to his advisor, the Zolotov Pahkan crooked a finger. "Over here, boy. I might not have much time left, but I'll certainly keep up with the trend and tell you what you need to know to make up your own mind."

He didn't earn any of the goodwill the only other of-age Cloud in Moscow, but he could certainly build up more so maybe one damn Cloud would work with his son.

"Why you? We're closer to Khimki than you are, Zolotov." Flatly interjected one of the so-far silent men, swinging his gaze from the now dead burgeoning thug-lord to the old thief.
Ponomarev Rodion, *Pahkan* of the Khovrino Association, and a very big detractor in Milos’ ass for the last few decades.

An old rival, one of the rare few that he hadn't yet outlived. The man was maybe a head shorter and just as silvered and creaky as the *Pahkan* of the Zolotov clan, but whereas Milos still had the muscle from his long years working an honest thief’s trade Ponomarev was whipcord thin from long hours behind desks long before he lost his youthful vigor.

"_Because we actually went out there, loaned off a vor for his aid, and have been more or less keeping him covered while he regained his strength and feet under him._" Indeed, the young boy sauntered over to perch on a chair near the old thief. Milos then ignored any further huffing and puffing to look straight at the young Cloud, gesturing to the vor that had spoken. "*Ponomarev Rodion, white-collar crime. About as east from you as we are south. Next to him, on the left, is-*"

Reeling off the names and syndicates represented in the room, nearly on automatic since Milos had been here long before half had ever killed their first man, let him gauge the newest Cloud.

Indeed, the only one that would matter in a few short years.

Dorokhov Timur, the Khimki Cloud, wasn't much of a man just yet. Still on the young-looking side, just old enough to start shaving from the scruff poking out of his chin, sea green hair and black eyes that sharply took in the individuals he was point out.

Smart but wary, Milos was starting to see a trend in 'Clouds'.

Hard headed, independent, and likely just as hard to control as a particular Storm-Cloud which still belonged to his clan if only for mere months yet.

Hopefully, when Dmitriy got out of jail, he'd keep his own hard headed son from pissing this Cloud off as well.

*Vor* Ziven had done damn well, in coaching this young man. Keeping his tongue behind his teeth when in uncertain territory, listening to elders even if he might not agree, that poker face might be more Flame-centered than training but that was in his favor as well.

He wasn't coming off as a brash, irreverent upstart to the rest of the collected criminal powers in the room, but a violent-possible if more often composed and watchful young man. More likely to survive longer due to that projected image, than ignored and sidelined due to being thought of a liability.

As the *Pahkan* of the Zolotov clan, getting shot at all had impacted his image to the other syndicate bosses. The fact they didn't have the shooter was worse.

How quickly his Flame users got him back on his feet mitigated a lot of that, Dorokhov's unveiling was the last edge he needed to retain the respect of the others for the last few months of his time in power within the Zolotovs.

Milos would very much like to go out strongly than with a whimper.

The fact it was the Flame users he was regaining respect on was only a tiny bit galling, but mostly because he'd only be able to transfer a small part of it to his son.

Once he was finished reeling off names and specialties, the Khimki Cloud huffed but actually did glance to him for permission to speak. Once given a nod, the young man unfolded his hands to jerk a thumb at the dead body. "*Got a Storm?*"
"Not here." Milos answered evenly. "Did you bring one?"

Dorokhov turn his head to the door his vor aid had left through. "Ziven! Bring Vitya."

'Vitya' was an even younger young man, violently bright blond hair and equally light reddish-brown eyes. "Body disposal, Timur? It's been a long while since you needed me to do this."

"He's the one that murdered the boys of our southern reaches." The Cloud clarified dismissively, flicking dark eyes in challenge at the rest of the men in the room… more specifically the other syndicate he shared a border to.

Revenge or vengeance was always a valid tactic, and as an introduction Milos couldn't arrange a better one to this little gathering. He had suspicions he knew where the sniper had come from, as being shot just outside their territory range was a big suspicious clue, but until proven…

Milos glanced to Ziven's completely controlled and neutral face, before turning back to watch the Disintegration of Avdeer's corpse.

Now, to watch the fallout start.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 12th of July, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"…father?"

"Mmph." Shutting his eyes as he got settled in the back of the armored car, now included with a Lightning of Galina's arrange to ensure that no other sniper bullet could be aimed through the gaps of the reinforced panels or glass, the old man sighed heavily.

He was getting more than too old for this shit. Physically he was fine and fit, but… time and stress took its own toll on his body.

Primakova had ensured he was as hale and as whole in form, but it didn't dull the sharp spikes of emotion he had gone through once he realized he had been shot in front of his own son.

Spiritually, as much as he would've scoffed years ago at the very thought. He was just an old man, there was no measure of Sun Flames or mystical bullshit that could reverse that. His flesh was also starting to fail him, if he wanted to ignore how myopic he had gotten in the last decade… or the pain throbbing in his gunshot wound.

"…Bazanova saved and had the Khimki Cloud trained up on the sly." Milos opened his eyes to measure his son and heir's reaction to that news.

Gedeon was shocked, not that surprised but jarred to hear it come from him. At least he had known. "W-what? When was he here? How?"

"Vor Ziven, I don't know if you caught him coming in with a couple other young men. The blue-green haired young man? That was the Khimki Cloud."

"I knew that much. That he was alive. Galina informed me, although I couldn't identify him on sight." The Sun user remained silent for a long moment, more than long enough for one young man sitting in the front passenger's seat to lay a green sparking hand on the dash of the car and it to pull away from the nightclub. "That doesn't explain how, father. Only how you learned."
"Collective ignorance, mainly. No one thought he'd survive what happened. We assumed, and she slipped it by all of us." Milos ripped off his tie, tossing it to a corner of the car to be ignored and more importantly not around his neck. "She wasn't so sold on what 'everyone' knows, sound familiar?"

Gedeon sighed heavily, rolling his eyes at him. "As she did with the Flame thing, and with the school thing, and so on. I can understand that, old man. She's just not suitable."

"Who would be?" Shot back the Pahkan scathingly. "Name one damn person that we can shove in her position, Gedeon. Someone we have on hand, not in jail or elsewhere, that wouldn't crash and burn doing what she has done."

The silence this time was a bit more than sullen.

"Lightning, kid... what's your name?"

"Dominik, Silivanov Dominik Vasilievich Pahkan." Promptly responded the also disgustingly young man helping with his security. "Galina already informed me anything I overhear is to be forgotten unless you say otherwise, Pahkan."

"Good." At least someone else was on the ball.

Yet again another that they were losing right out, but... Milos would take his wins where he could.

"...father?"

The Pahkan of the Zolotovs grunted instead of actually respond right away.

Primakova had informed him chest pangs might be a sign of a stroke, a higher risk he was running due to possibly incompatible blood types donated for his survival and just getting injured at his age. Until the blood was naturally replaced, in three months, he ran that risk willingly.

Milos dearly hoped not, otherwise things would be getting dicey for everyone in short order.

Heart attacks were also something he was 'high risk' for, simply due to age and 'unhealthy' habits... maybe it was one of those and he could just get on with shit after it passed.

He had to at least introduce Dorokhov to his son first, hopefully without either deciding they hated each other's guts again like Gedeon and Sonya. Bother Pyotr into actually picking and sticking with a replacement of his own since his granddaughter wasn't going to remain with them. Figure out something to get Bazanov and his fucking daughter pacified with, so they wouldn't rip a god damned hole in his clan. Then-

Milos grunted, rather unwillingly, as the pain got worse. "Lightning boy. Think you can 'Harden' a heart?"

Silivanov ripped around, slamming a hand sparking with his emerald Flames right over the Pahkan's chest. Pain wracked the old man's form as he practically folded in half from the assault and ignoring both the driver's and Gedeon's shouts the kid did it again which finally got the internal chest pain to start fading as his heartbeat lurched queerly under the influence of emerald green Flames.

"What the fuck was that!" Roared his son, almost grabbing onto the Lightning if the young man hadn't pulled back sharply to avoid it.

He earned himself a flat look. "The property of Lightning Flames might be Hardening, but it's still fucking Lightning. Electrical shocks, to a stuttering heart in the right spots, acts as a defibrillator
would. I stopped the heart-attack, then restarted his heart with a targeted burst of electrical signals. Why do you think I was assigned to be the Lightning on the Pahkan's security efforts? I've got both the power and the control to also be a medical aid."

"Primakova set you up to this, didn't she?" Milos gritted out, feeling his heart-rate stutter and skip a little but more or less continue as is.

He could also breathe easier, which was always nice.

"...I was going to be one of the nurse trainees, sir. She did give me a bit of one-on-one right before she left."

Milos cracked up, painfully but the likely heart attack was fading and he could finally feel his fingers again. "Why is it you all are trying so damn hard to keep me alive?"

Silivanov glanced to Gedeon, then back again to the man still boss of the syndicate he heeded to. "Reasons, Pahkan. Reasons."

Having said his piece, as well as having added himself to the number of people with Flames that had a direct influence in Milos' survival, the Lightning turned around again to get on with the 'real' reason he was even present.

"...still think she's the 'wrong person', Gedeon?" Her sister might be an interesting fit, if they could convince her. The old man rubbed his chest gingerly, breathing a bit hard but other than that… "Silivanov, you and who else is watching me for health problems?"

"...the Mirror Lady might've been, but she was recalled for other Mist things today. They're planning something... big." Admitted the Lightning boy hesitantly with a backwards glance, avoiding the suspicious glare the Pahkan's driver was shooting him. "There's a Rain girl I haven't been introduced yet on standby instead of preparing to leave for Mafia Land's Hospital like the others in case of strokes. Another Lightning, Kulibin Fyodor Zakharovich, who trades off with me in a few hours. He got the same training as I did from Primakova."

"Good. I want to meet them." If he was leaning on them to get through the next year alive, Milos wanted to be sure they knew he appreciated the effort they were going to on his behalf.

Which reminded him, he still had to give the sisters something to show his gratitude they responded as they had so promptly after the assassination attempt on his life.

Sonya didn't seem to want a whole lot, and Tatiana had what she was after. They both were women, so maybe… fuck, why couldn't this be years ago?

Then they both would just like a few shiny trinkets from the clan and maybe a bit better accommodations than what independent clan women normally received then. Lisa would earn better things for her home, as she raised the girls into the helpful women they were now, as a given.

He owed the Mirror Lady something as well, since she got them back to the Storm-Cloud and Sun so damn fast.

After this, it wasn't likely Gedeon would so much as breathe wrong on the hospital efforts. No matter how much he disliked one of the women involved with that deal, twice now they stepped in and kept him alive.

The school one was riskier in that respect, but if Milos could get a couple alliances involved with the running of it… it would not smack as much of Bazanova's efforts and more just a clan thing.
Coughing a bit, hopefully the shortness of breath would go away in a few more minutes, the Zolotov Pahkan let himself heavily lean on the back of the rear seat bench. Out of all the things he had left to do, to be punched out before he punched his ticket, the closest one to being done was…

"Change of plans. Driver, head to Khimki. The long way around." Best let Dorokhov get settled in or let Ziven settle the kid back in his territory and bring something to show goodwill on their end, before he introduced Gedeon to the Cloud-boy officially.

He'd give Bazanova… books. Lots of books, for going over her head like this.

There was also that jewel encrusted gaudy affair she stole for Pyotr. He had no fucking clue how the clan was going to off-load that ridiculous thing, she may as well have it.

As she wasn't sticking around, not pissing her off didn't really hold much weight to it in the balance of things. Equally likely, she might not mind.

Bazanova had warned Ziven they might not be able to 'hide' the kid anymore herself.

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(Sunday the 13th of July, 1969. Hotel De Anza, San Jose, California, United States of America.)

Renato inspected every damn room, service elevator, the side water closet.

The floors, ceilings, what above those ceilings, the walls that had been patched over, and the entire fucking parking lot. Intently.

Every... damn... meter... of possible evidence bearing surface he could gain access to by polite or not means.

There was the feeling he was missing something here lurking in the back of his mind. It was driving him nuts.

The oppressive weather wasn't helping much, San Jose might be near the ocean but it was far enough inland and only next to a sheltered bay. There wasn't enough water in the air for his sensibilities, meaning it was just miserably dry and hot right now and had been for days unless the wind shifted just so and gave him some moisture to breathe in.

Sweeping off his fedora and raking a hand through sweat damp strands of hair, the hitman retraced his steps back into the hotel's service entrance and replaced the felt back on his head.

There was security footage showing one attacker going in, too fast to be picked up by the grainy and low-quality tapes that had been dismissed as a bird or something by the police. The second tape, the one the Cerrito Crime Family had at least confiscated before the local law enforcement could, showed only a green-haired man coming out of the hotel but getting shot seconds afterwards and that same damn blur flashing through the frames.

Too indistinct to be identified as anything but a wickedly fast Cloud.

…Sonya's cards were correct. If one man did manage to kill one half of whatever they were here to do, kidnap or free or what have you, then that shooter was then so much bloody paste. 'Three taken, but two are left'. Which then meant the man that only briefly was seen in the doorway and that had been shot was the Lightning, but that was now merely detail of which he could use to find him.
The hitman had to answer 'where was that dead man's remains?'

It didn't seem like an important question, obviously the man was deader than dead and as such it was a dead end, but the Italian very much liked having all his loose ends tied up neatly. It prevented 'surprises' in his line of work.

It would also inform him what method of body disposal said Cloud had used, and he knew a lot of body disposal tricks and where they originated from due to his Mafia Land work. Might narrow down the criteria he had from just 'Soviet Union Clouds' to a specific Soviet State.

Renato scuffed a shiny black shoe against the pavement underfoot, then backtracked a step.

With the heat shimmer coming off the pavement, it was hard to tell.

…but there was a shiny patch on the concrete.

If he squinted… possibly in the majority of a shape left behind by most of a decently sized man. Not entirely, which just meant this was lingering damage that was only now being revealed due to whichever factors were involved.

Folding himself down to a crouch, the hitman ran his fingers over the original patch that shined just so under the California sun.

Sandy, not glassy smooth unless rubbed in the right way.

There would be an after-image of a dead man right here as soon as enough of the partially disintegrated concrete finally broke up. That was only found when a Storm had above-average control, enough so to dictate only one thing should burn. Not enough to prevent all traces of Storm Flame use, but enough so that it wasn't immediately apparent.

A Soviet Cloud with a big talent in Storm Flames. Worse… a Soviet STORM-CLOUD.

Fuck… he had been looking for Sonya.

Renato immediately got to his feet, stalking off just as irritably and as annoyed as he'd been seeming seconds ago just in case he had watchers.

…while there was a possibility that it wasn't Sonya herself he was hunting, he really couldn't put much stock into that theory. His luck didn't run that way, of course it was the woman he was interested in. He could put off actually admitting that to anyone until he was more than positive… but really, merely a time-stalling tactic right now.

Don Cerrito wanted Sonya dead. Shamal's mamma dead.

Fuck that bullshit. The kid already lost too much as it was, and Renato wasn't adding to it for some petty American crime lord.

However, did he report to Don Vongola and Tyr the Sword Emperor that the culprit he had been sent to find was the same woman that attended the last two balls on his arm?

In hindsight, Sonya had talked to him about a Lightning she was sorting out. For 'keeping one of her sister's old gang members alive for her'. Green haired man from the security footage more likely, who had taken a shot to the chest instead of the Storm-Cloud who was likely dealing with carrying the same either critically injured or ill man.
The man saved likely more than one life after taking that bullet, he probably saved Sonya's as well. Selling him out instead as the Lightning in question was then not really palatable to the hitman, even then the thief could be tracked through her involvement with him and when she showed up with him if that was known.

…fuck again. *Now* what the hell was he going to do?

Glaring at the man he was more than certain was a Cerrito Family goon as he passed him in the empty hotel halls, the hitman bolted up a few flights of stairs heading to his own rented room.

Another few days, then he'd leave California. Verifying it was Sonya could be done easier from Mafia Land, and he had the opportunity to ask her what she wanted to do about it when she returned Shamal to Italia.

Renato did not have a whole lot of allied associates that operated at the same level as himself but had wildly different views on the syndicates they worked near, around, or for. The only time he even remotely broached the subject of hit contracts and the Russian in the same sentence he had gotten a 'do as you will' from the woman.

'I will not stand in your way, Renato' she had claimed to his face. 'I already avoid the Vongola Alliance members, and Italy as a whole, because you work there and have alliances I do not wish to encroach upon. If we ended up on opposite ends of a contract, then I would expect you to do what you do best. Expect that I will not die quietly, but I will also not hold it against you.'

As much as a 'live-and-let-live' policy as that was… he just really didn't want to kill her.

So, no, he was doing no shooting of his best thief friend. The decision for the next issue was… a bit dicier.

Don Vongola might rather like a lever over the Russian Flame expert. Sonya might just laugh in his face if he tried anything of the sort.

Renato… now had a headache.
(Monday the 14th of July, 1969. Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Silivanov heaved a sigh at his fellow 'medic-type' Lightning. "You realize it'll be the very moment one of us isn't at hand the old man will die. Then we might just end up blamed instead."

His fellow Lightning, Kulibin, merely gave a shrug. "Old man Zolotov is old. There's really only so much we can do until it's just not enough anymore. We are eventually going to fumble something, that's pretty much guaranteed by simply being human, but it's not necessarily when the Pahkan's under our watch. So, it might not even be a problem, see?"

Their only recently introduced Rain fellow glanced to the side to Anna the Mirror Lady, before Matveyeva Rima clasped her hands together and held them in front of her while she pointedly ignored the two boys.

The older of the two Lightnings very pointedly didn't frown at the younger girl.

Rains were very much a non-entity to the other Flame sections, the fact their newest and third lead had only recently gotten them out and about among the others aside mandatory things meant very few knew where they typically stood with Rains on general principles.

Galina had a couple pointed words about how he was to handle himself while attached as the emergency medical aids to the Pahkan slash obvious Flame-related security experts. Especially with how he treated or behaved to his fellow Flame users.

They apparently had enough of a bad reputation as it was. Conversely, although the Rains had the worst reputation between Flame users… did have the better one when it came to the rest of the clan.

Well, they did right on up until both Gedeon became the first vor 'user' and Tatiana proved how useful Suns could be in a pinch.

Since none of them were even older than fifteen, nor vory in the case of the two male Lightnings, they hadn't exactly been left unescorted this close to the Pahkan's office.

Aside the four Flame users in this room, there was two other men. Apparently, this side room worked as a sort of waiting room or lounge thing for either the clan's vory or visiting ones normally.

The same vor that had been the driver when Silivanov had stopped and restarted old man Zolotov's heartbeat with his Lightning Flames was also included in the office being utilized as a 'waiting room'. The man had not be amused that no one happened to mention the 'Flame users' were fully willing to use their Flames against their syndicate boss for any reason, and it was only the threat of Bazanova learning of any abuse directed at the younger Flame users that spared the older teenaged Lightning a broken arm or two.

So… Dominik was pretty much unwillingly entertaining the semi-hostile suspicion of one vor, the other one which might just so happen to be the next Pahkan was ignoring it happening. The guy in the corner glaring a hole in the side of his head, and Gedeon the supposed Sun reading something quietly in his seat.

No obvious help in that corner, even if it was his own father Silivanov saved, and so… he wasn't
really all that sold on the character of their next boss.

Would the guy just let him get beat up for saving their Pahkan with semi-dubious Lightning skills, or would he actually bother to do something if Bazanova's reputation wasn't staving off any ill-humor?

"Hey, Silivanov? How long until you think we'll be allowed to leave for the medical training ourselves?"

The others were following Primakova's orders, as in leaving in staggered groups so processing and sorting could be done over the course of a week. The first group, containing two Suns, three Lightnings, a Mist, and two Rains, should have left a few minutes ago.

That was where the Lightning lead Galina was doing today, since Miss Bazanova flatly refused to do it again.

"As soon as one of the others learn to do what we can." Obviously Primakova would arrange it when it happened, but that was still a couple weeks or months off. "Continually asking me the same question will not actually get time to pass quicker."

Ironically, 'Lightning' was probably a great label for the green electric-seeming Flame types. The Classical and Inverted Lightnings got along about as well as crossed wires.

Dominik was Inverted, as Miss Galina was. Kulibin Fyodor was one of the Classical Lightnings, and thus just occasionally he irked Silivanov just by posing yet another obvious question or chatting on about things not entirely pertinent to the subject at hand. He was more directed, his fellow flightier.

Thankfully, they rarely talked to one another.

Rima pulled up her folded hands, raising them up in a cupping motion and lighting the depression made with her watery blue Flames. "Calmly, gentlemen. I will put you to sleep if you start bitching."

The Mirror Lady smirked wickedly, bestowing said smirk to the other young woman in the room. "I like you."

"I think you're creepy." Answered the Rain flatly, letting her Flames go, and edging away from the Mist to put the two Lightnings between them. "Stay over there."

Apparently, the other woman was taking that as a compliment.

"We have company." Anna remarked idly instead of responding to that usual insult, waving one slim had to the door of the room they had been waiting within a moment before it actually opened.

Miss Bazanova looked less than pleased when she wrenched open the slab of wood, and her expression when she caught sight of the ugly look one vor was aiming at Silivanov, much less when she glanced at Gedeon, did not inspire any warm or fuzzy thoughts in the Flame users that didn't know her well.

The Mirror Lady, with all the confidence of knowing a predator was not interested in her person but something else a bit tastier than her, sauntered over to the older woman. "Boss lady, why did you have us gather here?"

"...according to Silivanov, old man Zolotov wants to meet all of you." Merely repeating what they already knew unhelpfully, the thief kept her attention on the far and lone Sun in the room. Strangely, she gripped Anna by the arm and drew the Mist behind her then twitched her fingers to get the Rain girl moving as well before speaking more. "Let's go, you can ask him yourself if you really must"
know about any other motivations."

…why was she… sort of… 'guarding' the other girls?

Dominik shared a glance with Fyodor, but he looked as puzzled as he felt.

"Move." The woman in question snapped out shortly before anyone could ask more question. "Now. Pyotr would appreciate it if we got this over with quickly."

Well… if the Sovintnik wanted things to happen quickly, things got done with all available speed.

Dominik was the last one out at her demand, he did hear Gedeon scoff in Bazanova's direction and had a decent view of her baring her teeth in return.

The Lightning kept moving. While learning the truth behind the recent rumors was interesting, and now the implication that Gedeon might've done something to a girl that Bazanova did not approve of or would not overlook… Silivanov was not a stupid Lightning.

He had no intention to get in the middle of that.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 14th of July, 1969 continued. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya now had a copy of a bible. A sixteenth century Septuagint version, which… she didn't read Greek.

Worse, it was Medieval Greek. She knew a language away, but she was also sure her Italian would never be up to translating Medieval Greek into something understandable like she sort of could with modern Italian and Spanish.

Why was there a Greek translation of the bible in Russia?

Was it once more popular than Latin versions?

Which she had expected this to be, honestly. Now she had to learn to read Greek, and learning to speak it might be something to do at the same time.

She tried once, a lifetime ago, to learn Latin. It hadn't stuck. Lack of interests, rare opportunities to utilize it, and just general inability to buckle down and focus on learning it meant Rachel hadn't managed to embed the language into her mind.

The thief paged through the fragile parchment, examining the ornate lettering and elaborate border illustrations on most of the pages. Since she couldn't read anything within those painstakingly illustrated pages, admiring the craftsmanship was all she could do.

Well… now she didn't need to source her own bible, and it wasn't the version that was 'edited' by an English King when he decided to break with the Roman Catholics over the issue of 'divorce'.

Maybe Father Luka could help her place if this bible had more or less in common with the current accepted 'canonically' taught these days in Catholic enclaves… once it was no longer recognizably stolen.

"It's very… shiny?" Shamal commented dubiously from her lap, able to see the same things she could
about the bible and was about as skeptical over the so-called 'boon' as she was.

Brat had a point. A major one.

The cover was bleached leather covered wood. Mostly inlaid with emeralds, sapphires, and rubies, held in place with gilt fixtures and fittings in the style of two angelic forms holding a crossed set of swords. There was a group of thumbnail-sized teardrop cut diamonds laid out in a cross pattern on the aging leather between the figures, just over that was faded and cracked gold leaf lettering trying to spell out what the book was if you just happened to not know it was a bible due to the religious themed decorations. Within the pages held a wealth of old lettering, more than five different colored inks shading in the elaborate borders when it was likely produced by hand by some poor monk-type in the middle of a drafty monastery.

Meaning it was disgustingly pricy considering it came from the same period of time as Ivan the Terrible, but it could've been purchased or commissioned after the man died or before he became unstable.

She would be peeling the gemstones and gilt off the cover, and maybe getting it rebound in a more stable arrangement, before she seriously tried to read it through.

Sonya dropped the massively oversized and overly gaudy book to her borrowed desk, where made a rather satisfying thunk of metal striking wood. "Right... well... what do you want to do today, brat?"

Scruffy coughed hesitantly, awkwardly. She blatantly ignored him.

Galina wasn't here, she had finished off the 'have to do' shit the Lightning left for her after Mass with Shamal yesterday. Therefore, she had little herself to work on that couldn't be set aside for later.

"Can we go somewhere? Anywhere? Just... not here? Your office is kind of boring, mamma."

Seriously considering it, the thief first inspected Peter's mildly resigned expression then Shamal's slightly pleading one.

...she could be really, really evil right now. Frankly, it would be good for Shamal's grasp on less than morally upright skills to get some practice in with non-hostile opponents...

"Convince Peter of it, and we can do whatever it is you want."

Her brat gave her a totally unimpressed look, but dutifully glanced over to Scruffy to study his adversary's initial reaction and the defense he would be mustering up.

The Sun fidgeted with the paperwork in his hands, almost half-hiding behind the flimsy things until he realized what he was doing with them and pointedly put them down instead. Then the fact he had nothing to hide behind nor anything to distract with in hand permeated his brain, but after a moment he either decided he was an old man or adult and therefore should not be afraid of children or that Shamal wasn't likely to hit too far under the belt.

Either irrelevant or utter lies, but okay.

Sneaking the paper so her poor beleaguered scholar-type wouldn't be able to re-hide behind them, she allowed the kid to go badger the man in lieu of cutting the day short and earning herself some passive-aggressive huffing from her Lightning when Galina returned.

Sonya did not require babysitting herself. She didn't really appreciate anyone attempting to 'manage' her. Galina was a nitpicker, attempting to 'manage' others was as much her nature as it was her
keeping the thief on-track so things were done at decent rates.

Although, telling Galina that would ruin some of her fun so she wouldn't be doing that either.

Either way it helped, so she wasn't going to spike it into a sudden halt.

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(Tuesday the 15th of July, 1969. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Handing over a copy of the one multiple newspapers available to those that bothered to sign up for them, the elderly lady seated next to Sonya and Shamal tapped a badly manicured fingernail against one of the articles. "Rumor has it, and you didn't hear this from me, but rumors say the capitalist Americans are only days from attempting to send their astronauts to the moon."

"...that's nice." Mamma commented blandly, only disinterestedly glancing down at the papers. "But if they do reach the moon first, that still leaves establishing a space station first or maintaining a moon base next. Let's see if they can rush out something that won't explode on them while our men steadily work on the issues in the proper ways."

The other lady, a steel-haired old grandma type that smiled thinly at the younger woman's response, left them the papers and got up to walk off.

Shamal's godmother flipped open the tiny leather case she lifted off the other woman, sourly eyeing the government issued ID for KGB officers for a moment. "And this is why I rather hate talking to others."

"How did you know?"

"Her hands. A business woman, even an old spinster or someone that only recently went into the secretarial pool, would've taken better care of their hands. She got the hair-do, the make-up, and the dress right… but not the longer-term skin and nail care that requires actual upkeep." Sonya intently examined the laminated card, scrutinizing whichever details she was suspicious of. "I sometimes play secretary in my work, so I need to know those details… her being wrong in that was a red flag."

He was given the leather case to have since it was a Tuesday, but the ID was tucked away in her purse.

"We can use that, though. She's about to suddenly forget what our faces looked like."

Should Shamal do that, or was whichever of the Mists his mamma had today going to do it?

He had lost the grey-haired lady in the crowd of pedestrians they were studying before that occurred to him to wonder, so hopefully one of the others was on the ball today since he wasn't. "Can we go somewhere to talk, mamma?"

Firstly, he should ensure things were clear. Since he rather failed to do anything to the government-lady and because he kind of wanted to ask about what she was going to do with the ID. He was curious, and that was interesting.

The thief hummed a moment, picking both herself and the Mist occupying her lap up to wander off. Shamal got set on his feet in an absent movement, but she took his hand instead as she led them off in a seemingly random direction.
That could be because he still had little idea of where things were around here, a few walks with zio and a few with mamma didn't get him the familiarity someone would need to learn to orientate themselves in different cities. Shamal had no desire to wander about himself just yet, he couldn't quite read Russian yet and things looked too eerily the same for him to be confident he could navigate around alone.

He was a little surprised to be led into a tea house, as it didn't look like so from the outside.

Having expected a bookstore or something from the newsboy managing a little stand right on the sidewalk next to the door, the Mist curiously looked around the brightly lit polished wooden tables and counters that made up the little cafe.

He had never had much tea before coming to Moscow. In Italia, he only got it when he had been sick.

Russians drank it all the time, it was like their coffee. Actual coffee was reserved for when they had things to do but were a bit too tired to see it through or for the evenings.

It was sort of near lunchtime, so the place wasn't entirely packed but there were a good number of people sitting at the bare wooden chairs and tables either wolfing down some kind of breaded thing in-between sips of tea or nursing said tea and sneaking looks at whichever clock was the closest.

While his mamma got them some tea and something to snack on, the Mist tried to recall the grey-haired lady and the things she had pointed out to him that proved the other lady wasn't what she looked like.

The thief brought the tray she ordered to a small window seat that hadn't been occupied with, a small pot of the dark tea with two cups and a bowl of sugar lumps and black currant jam.

Shamal hadn't known sugar came in 'sugarloaves' until he had come to Moscow. Nonna Lisa had half of a big one in her kitchen, which she chipped into using a special pair of tongs she called 'sugar nips', instead of a small bag of granulated sugar as he was used to back home.

The best part of Russian tea, in his humble opinion, was that you were supposed to take a bite of sugar chips or jam and hold it between your teeth to strain the tea you drank through. Kind of messy until you got the hang of it, and mamma occasionally took it plain, but it was really good.

There was also a small cheap plate of some kind of biscuit, in a powdery white mess. "What's that, mamma?"

"Tea cakes." She responded absently, pouring him a cup of tea first then herself. She also nudged the little plate of the so-called 'cakes' closer to him to let him know she didn't really want any. "If you want to talk, you need to ensure we won't be overheard."

First of all, no offense… but those weren't cakes. Shamal had seen big cakes and small ones in the Iron Fort. Cakes were supposed to be bigger, and with a lot of gooey frosting, not small and hard and…

…okay, these might just be really tiny cakes. Little harder than most cakes that weren't stale, but still soft enough to count in his modest opinion. Shamal nibbled on the first one he picked up to try, amassing his Dying Will Flames as he learned back when he was really young to redirect attention.

Mister Renato had… sort of apologized for scaring him when he first started living with the man, but the hitman had also maintained that if he could do the net-trap with his Mist Flames then he could do his own security as well.
Shamal had several years of ensuring he was safe even when his godfather was sure they were under his belt, ensuring they were overlooked like his mamma wanted would be easy. "Okay, was I supposed to do anything with the grey lady?"

She swallowed her bite of jam and sip of tea before responding. "No, it's Usov's little project. He'll take care of it."

"Huh...." Less work that he had to do, so he was fine with it. "Is there more things you can spot that tells you when someone's not what they say they are?"

He was a Mist, such things would be good to know and avoid. Mamma knew already, she was a working thief, and she could teach him that too. Mister Renato never seemed to have a lot of time to detail things he should know just yet and getting a bit ahead of where the hitman would expect him to be was a good idea. His godfather was a taskmaster when he taught.

No, he didn't mind pickpocketing lessons. The morning's practice in the actual movements had been interesting and fun, and watching people walk by and trying to guess what they did and therefore if they were safe to steal from was as well, but... girls.

Mamma had little issues stealing from other women, Shamal... wasn't nearly as comfortable with that.

They always looked so sad and upset when they noticed they were missing something or had been stolen from. He didn't really like that much, so he kept trying to pick targets that were men.

They got angry and mean, which Shamal knew how to work around more than the sad ladies.

"I can, but splitting up the time we've got left of your summer vacation means you won't learn how to pickpocket well enough that I'll sign off on you practicing on even civilian targets."

"I'm a Mist, mamma." He reminded her pointedly. "While I wouldn't bet on me when it comes to Mafiosi, I can do civilians easily enough right now. I can practice on my own, mamma. I swear I will."

"We'll see about that." She decided after a moment. "You do realize you're giving up your pickpocketing days for these other lessons, right?"

A breath away from agreeing, Shamal paused and wondered how much pocket money he had.

Russians didn't use a lot of money for most things, just the extras. The ice cream mamma had bought him and Mister Renato to try, the books zio had bought him to read or the junkyard finds, the tea to have in the middle of the day not where they lived.

Nonna Lisa apparently left really early in the morning to queue up in a line to get the 'basics' they would eat over the day, the amount of which had apparently taken a bit of a hit when mamma, zio, and zia had all left home.

In Italia it was different, you needed money for everything. Shamal had saved up a bit of Russian rubles which, once he got back to the Iron Fort, he might have some of it exchanged for lira or euros to actually use... but he wanted to keep a bit of it.

"...maybe after today?" Shamal would have to avoid buying something Saturday, and he knew they were leaving Moscow the Friday after next, in order to have anything to show for his summer with mamma that wasn't thief skills or books in Cyrillic. "Why can't we do it after dinner or something?"
"I'd rather not overload you with things to do, you've already been working rather hard on the lock picking lessons and the Mist-imagination exercises." His godmother admitted slowly, tapping her nails against the cheap tin cup they had been given to serve the tea she bought. "You've gotten fairly far into them, for only having a few weeks to work up some competency in the skills."

"I can do it!"

"You threw a fit at Renato about how much you were doing when we were still getting things settled in last month." She reminded him pointedly, pouring herself more tea which reminded Shamal of the tea cake in his hand and the tea he had yet to take a sip of. "Shamal, you've done fairly well so far. Why do you want to add this on top of what you've already have left to do?"

...because they would expect him to keep up with and improve his skills given enough time.

Shamal knew perfectly well it would happen, getting on top of his responsibilities would let him have more time for other things. Like the fantasy story books he dug out of his mamma's collection like the 'Grimm Fairy Tales' she said he could only read when she or Mister Renato were nearby, or mischief.

"Please?"

The thief sighed heavily, then shrugged. "Fine then. I'll run over the more obvious bits while we're here, and the rest when we get back to the hotel after lunch. The moment you kick up a fuss, I'm taking these extra lessons right off the table."

Worked for him. Shamal turned his attention on the tea, and more importantly the chips of sugar he got to eat with the bitter black tea. Sugar made everything better.

"Now then… when taking the role of a service orientated job on, be aware of the damage or wear one's form or clothing would show. Water stains or chemical spills for janitors, grease and oil under the nails for mechanics, the scent of raw vegetables or fruits on cooks."

(Wednesday the 16th of July, 1969. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

"Tatiana. Quick question."

"One second, tall, dark, and snarky." Insisted the nurse, holding up one finger blindly in his direction while looking over the schedule Galina had assembled for her.

She knew Sonya had opted out this time around just because she had her brat, and really couldn't deal well with the scrabbling the brats did in transit, but it really was good to have so much uninterrupted time with the Lightning. She had a lot of fun with her old gang members last night, Verde's inclusion had just made things only a tiny bit off but mostly because the scientist was such the odd-duck out in social situations.

He had opted to nurse a beer in a quiet corner instead of 'impose', until Adrik ignored his words and dragged the man by his ever-present lab-coat into a less isolated position in the bar and forced him to actually say hi to his fellow Lightning. He was such an awkward geek, but out of sheer inexperience and lack of care instead of obliviousness and an equal amount of irrelevance like someone else she could name.

Tatiana lifted her head, intending to ask the Lightning about the personalities of the nurse-trainees
that hadn't been sent to the hospital for assigning them to a doctor or floor that might need someone with patience or stubbornness, only to get derailed by the highly suspicious look Galina was aiming at her fellow Sun. "...I take it the two of you have met?"

It wasn't entirely guaranteed, as far as she knew the Italian native hadn't spent a lot of time in the Zolotov Headquarters. They might've possibly have missed one another, although from Galina's reaction that wasn't what happened.

"Yes." Snipped the brunette Lightning shortly, pointedly snubbing the Italian stud of her little sister's for her lists. "Why is he here?"

"I believe he had a question for me." Remarked the other woman in the hallway, glancing at the man himself to see what it was.

If she didn't get rid of the hitman soon, Galina would be bitchy and snooty all afternoon and the rest of the night. They had plans to drink tonight, snippy drinking buddies might be fun but she'd done that before. Adrik didn't deserve to suffer through that, and frankly Verde was about as much of an innocent as could be found on this island of criminals.

Tall, dark, and snarky had been eyeing the brunette woman, but the moment she turned to him he snapped his attention to her. "Would you tell me if I asked about Sonya's recent movements in America?"

"Why do you want to know?" This was... new, and slightly alarming. Didn't he already stalk her little sister?

Why did he want to know more?

Renato's expression turned a touch exasperated before he responded. "I'm looking into something, and I do kind of want to be sure I'm not looking for my own best friend."

"I want an itch scratched, so... sorry tall, dark, and snarky." Tatiana shrugged in a faux casual manner. "Looks like we both aren't getting what we want."

He opened his mouth, paused for a long moment as he processed that quip and exactly whose sister she was, then shut it looking a bit annoyed. "...you are an evil young woman."

"Well... we could talk about maybe a trade... but..."

"No... no thank you. Lovely and as impressive as you are, that's not entirely in my best interests, sorry."

"Why do people actually like him?" Galina demanded shortly, sounding completely exasperated. "He's an asshole."

"Watching him belatedly process the invitation, recall he's interested in my little sister and he'd likely fuck up anything in that direction if he accepted, and then force himself to politely decline is amusing as fuck. Especially since he's a womanizing pervert of a gentleman, and his knee-jerk reaction is to flirt back and accept." Tatiana admitted wickedly, placing a hand on her hip and grinning widely. "More seriously, tall, dark, and snarky, what did you want? I'll tell you after I hear about what it's about."

Also, if he took her up on that offer then he wouldn't have the patience to wait while Sonya worked out what the ever-loving hell she wanted to do with a man. Then he'd be free territory, and certainly
handsome enough she wouldn't mind fooling around with him a bit.

Tatiana hadn't known the Lightning had started learning English, though. Awesome.

"Tatiana, even more seriously." The hitman interrupted any further conversation in that aspect, rubbing a hand over his eyes. "I rather need to know if I should cover for her or not."

"The two of you never discussed what to do if you found yourselves at opposite ends?" Asked the nurse skeptically, because her very structured little sister forgetting to do something major like that was a bit… far out there. Smaller details maybe got lost in the thief's day to day grind, but not major ones like 'what to do if my hitman contact is hired to kill me'. "Nya's very much a 'do your own thing' kind of girl."

"I'd rather not sic a large syndicate on her ass if I don't have to." Renato shot back a bit sourly, shoving his hands into his slack pockets. "Especially since they're more likely to try to hold it over her head for saving your boy Adrik and that Verde character than try to kill her, and she doesn't like them very much."

Woo, okay. Picking between pissing off or getting killed the woman he was more than just a little bit interested in had to suck. "You might want to ask her."

"Obviously." Drawled out the hitman sardonically. "I am, in fact, wasting time until she's here to talk to face-to-face about what she wants to do or we meet back up in Italia. Half the orders I have say to kill her, but that asshole can just fuck right off. The other half is a bit more… problematic."

That probably would not be a very fun phone-conversation, and there was also the risk of getting the line tapped and… yeah, no wonder he wasn't just calling her office.

"I'm not exactly sure what you want me to tell you."

Because… really?

What did talking to her do for clarifying Sonya's position on whatever Renato was up to?

"Adrik, one of the two men you've got living with you, is the one Sonya claimed Verde saved the life of, right?"

"...yes?"

"So, it was syndicate-related?"

"Mmm…"

Well…?

Pretty much, yes. Not really an ordered one, but in the aims of aiding/abetting fellow clan members. "Sure."

Sonya did it for Tatiana mainly, for Galina partially, and the rest was due to the fact Adrik owed her a favor and him dying would negate that.

"Good enough." Tall, dark, and snarky decided abruptly, flicking a glance to catch the faintly guilty cast of Galina's face before she finally managed to suppress it. "...it's not really that bad, just… fairly annoying for Sonya or very bloody depending on how she wants to handle this."

There was the more gentlemanly side to the hitman, trying to reassure the girls that the request the
Lightning had made of her little sister wouldn't end in her death. Bit close to home this time around, but Sonya's nearly default state was irritated anyways.

Bit of a close shave too, if the little blonde thief hadn't been friends with the man ask to investigate the situation… the murder half of his contract might've been fulfilled. If he thought he could get out of it, more power to him.

"Anything you want us to do?" Tatiana asked worriedly.

"You might want to keep that Verde character away from any American syndicate men, so rumor doesn't reach back to the Cerrito Crime Family before we figure things out." Renato quipped dryly as he turned to leave, tossing a salute their way by touching the brim of his fedora. "Keep his head down, for a week or so."

"They talked to a few French syndicates already…"

"Fuck's sake, I'll find him a syndicate if he just keeps his bloody head down." Snapped the hitman, coming to a halt and taking a deep breath before half-turning back to them. "I'll take a series of hits in France to do so, just… sit on him."

"Will do, tall, dark, and snarky." Promised the nurse brightly. "You make a habit of finding things for others?"

"…maybe. Then again, if I do things it gets done at decent rates and I can revisit it if whatever it is later on becomes interesting or important."

…would also buy him a lot of goodwill with contacts if he did things like that regularly. Tatiana was interesting in knowing exactly how large his usual contact list was, and who all he had nosed into the life of.

A rather helpful murderous man, added to the disharmony of being both a womanizer and gentleman.

"…sorry, Tats."

"Not your fault, Lina." Reassured the Sun, patting the Lightning on the shoulder. "It was really just a matter of time before she started getting into deadly things. Luckily, it's tall, dark, and snarky doing things this time around and no some other hitman."

"…yes, lucky." Galina repeated in a deadpan, apparently one of her little sister's habits she picked up recently. "I still don't like him."

"How much of that did you understand?"

"Not all of it, but more than enough to understand the favor I asked of Sonya just put her into some hot water." Admitted the brunette with a heavy sigh. "Shit."

"Sonya will wiggle out of this, she always did when there was something she'd might get in trouble with back when we were kids." Tatiana paused to think a bit more. "Besides, Adrik and Verde owe her the most. You just asked her to get involved."

The other woman snorted softly, looking down and seemingly slightly surprised that she had gripped her lists hard enough to impress waves where her fingers had been.

She straightened it out with a crackle of green Lightning Flames absently. "As if that is reassuring."
"Change of plans, boys." Tatiana announced brightly, thankfully taking in the fact the both of them had elected to stay in this morning and were still present in the condo. "Apparently the people that previously had you are not happy Nya sprung you both."

"...shit." Adrik breathed out, bolting from the couch and the previously badly neglected television set over to her. "Fuck, do we-"

"Calm down, it's a friend of Nya's who is not all that appreciative over who's doing the ordering. He's... fudging a bit until she can be informed, and they can work out something else."

"Honor among thieves?" Verde quipped dryly, poking something blackened and likely not appetizing from the kitchen corner she'd likely have to clean up later and apparently giving up on feeding himself this hour.

"Since this guy's a hitman, more like honor among friends." Clarified the nurse, slipping her shoes off because this was her lunch hour and damn it all if she wasn't going to be comfortable during it. "You're going to have to cut your syndicate hunting for now, for a week or so."

"I had held no high hopes for finding anything interesting through such aims." The scientist admitted blandly, turning his back on the burned food she thankfully couldn't smell yet. "I have little idea of what to search for and Adrik is more a fan of the idea of joining, or at least frequenting often, various establishments for the procurement of physical pleasure instead."

"Like seriously... you could've used five words to do the same damn thing. 'Okay, we didn't find much anyways.' Well, six and a half. Close enough."

"A contraction-"

"Verde!" Tatiana interrupted shortly. "Enough. Issues of very annoyed criminal types looking for you. That I'm sure you don't want to deal with. Focus."

"What can I accomplish alone?" The man demanded in return, equally as frustrated sounding as she was. "I am reliant on both your own and Sonya's grace for my very living arrangement. The only one keeping me from making some gaff or mistake I will apparently be killed for is Adrik. I am both nearly useless in this twisted representation of an amusement park merged with a tourist trap as well as a burden on you all. Worse now, that the previous situation I was entangled with has elected to not stop hunting after myself. Perhaps 'sucking up' and dealing with the issue myself is what is needed."

The nurse crossed her arms and pinned the man with a highly irritated look. "If Nya was here, she'd slap you one... or at least bitch you out. You've already arranged an alternate path with her, so you're just going to backtrack and make everything she's already done for you worthless by giving up?"

Verde paused, his big brain cranking away to the point she could almost smell the smoke...

...oh wait, no. That was the scent of whatever the hell he had been trying to make in the kitchen.

"Honestly, I just wanted to visit a few..." Adrik muttered mostly to himself in their native language, apparently uncaring if he was overheard by her since the other man still had yet to gain an appreciative grasp of Russian. "What are we supposed to do then?"
"Bunker down, well… more than you've been doing already." She admitted only a touch apologetically. "Lina went off to get you boys some lunch and things to snack on for today, but from this point on religiously avoid anyone from America as if your life depends on it. Because it sort of does."

Verde heaved a sigh through slightly thin-bladed nose, pinching the bridge of it even if that motion knocked his glasses askew and he had to spend another moment to fix it in order to see them clearly. "Very well. Is there any way I can ask for one of you two to find me something more substantially intellectual to read other than Sonya's admittedly remarkable store of fantasy adventure books?"

"Ran out of other things to do?"

"…I may have had the invitation to reproduce, from memory, the contents of what little I recalled of our homework."

"Damn it, Verde! Stop harping on about that." Adrik practically whined, cringing a little under Tatiana's stolen 'mom-look' she used on unruly patients.

"Why not try to make your own system if it's that important to you?"

Tatiana might've been talking to Adrik, but Verde honestly look more interested in the suggestion than the other man. Queerly, then the short security specialist then looked excited over the other man's preoccupation.

…she didn't get men at all. Maybe that was why Sonya thought she had a terrible taste in them.

"Will it keep you quietly occupied for a while?" Asked the nurse dryly, now rubbing at her temple in hopes of warding off a headache.

"…may I impose on you to acquire two computer monitors, two H-three-one-six Kitchen Computers, wire, wire cutters, and a decent amount of paper and pens? Using the money Sonya has paid for research efforts?"

"What in the ever-loving hell is an 'H-three-one-six Kitchen Computer'?"

"I'll get that." Adrik offered brightly, nearly bouncing on his toes before darting to the doors Tatiana had recently came through. "I've got a Programma 101 if you think that would help, Verde my man."

"Possibly, if I could cannibalize it for parts."

"Noted. The boss lady was storing it for me, I'll be right back with most of that."

Now utterly lost, the redheaded Sun looked between the now preoccupied scientist type hunting around the condo's living room presumably for writing utensils and the shut door behind her.

Tatiana gave up and went to go see what the hell the scientist had been attempting to make in the kitchen.

Maybe if she cleaned it up now, when she got off for the day the condo wouldn't smell like someone had started a fire.
Shamal threw himself over her lower body suddenly during their reading hour, so Sonya assumed he wanted something. "Yes?"

"Can I ask for some help, mamma?"

"Of course, on what?"

"I have an idea, but... I'm not sure how to go about actually doing it." The young boy admitted, setting his chin on her stomach and letting his book thunk to the floor while he got comfortable now stretched out over her lower body instead of actually sitting upright on the couch.

The thief frowned but didn't comment on his mistreatment of her books.

She had probably started the bad posture thing with stretching her legs out on the couch. So, commenting on his position wasn't something she could do either. Thankfully the kid didn't do this sort of thing in public, the really only place she would actually be bothered about the liberties he took with her.

She had done much worse when just slightly older than him, so she supposed it was allowable. "What are you aiming to do?"

"I want to do something for Mister Renato. And well, you too, but I had the idea for him first, mamma, no offense."

"None taken." Sonya replied amusedly, setting her own book aside in favor of threading her fingers through his hair. She had no idea why this was soothing, but the brat didn't seem to mind her preoccupation with his hair so... "What did you want to do for him that needs my help?"

"Mister Renato's on his own a lot. He can't take me with him, and you don't work in the same field." Shamal started to qualify for her, digging chilled fingers under her ribs and causing a few flinches from her. "I'm kind of worried he's lonely."

She had thought she had gotten used enough to the brat not to flinch anymore from his touch, but apparently cold things would still do it.

She didn't complain, if he was cold then warming him up was her responsibility. "So... you want to get him a pet?"

Renato had plenty of companionship if he wanted, mostly women but even frequenting a bar or two might net him some interesting conversation if he wanted. There was also the Vongola people, he seemed rather friendly with a few of Nono's Guardians and the Eighth and Ninth Skies.

"You said that he'd take Luigi once we move into wherever you were going to have us live, right? But Luigi will be old. So... maybe if Luigi had a baby, we can give Mister Renato that?"

She blinked down at the brown eyes peering up at her hopefully, actually put some thought into the issue... and made a link she was slightly worrisome. "You want to make Luigi... have an egg... with Mist Flames, so Renato would have a pet chameleon?"

"Yep!" He hugged her around the waist, seemingly very pleased she followed his Mist-logic without a stumble. "...wait, chameleons lay eggs?"
"Reptiles, insects, and fish do. There's exceptions, but those are the general species that do. I'll look it up for you when you're ready to try this." She was a bit concerned that she could, honestly. Since when did she start understanding the process by which a Mist dreamt up their characterizing weirdness? "But... we could find Luigi a mate instead... is Luigi a male or female chameleon?"

"...I don't know. Do we need another chameleon? I thought girls just had babies when they were ready... Mister Renato said you weren't ready, so I wouldn't be getting a baby brother just yet."

It was entirely possible he could convince himself that just acceptance of becoming pregnant was all that was needed, which held a bit of a concerning implication. Mist were practically the embodiment of mind over matter...

Okay... then... wait.

Did anything happen when animals were created via Flames?

Like say... have Flame resistant fur or wool since they had been partially made of it once?

She was... not really sure about the logistics of creating a Mist-imbued chameleon, but with some experimentation it shouldn't be that hard.

"Shamal... first of all, that is brilliant." She pressed a kiss to his forehead, doing a bit of semi-painful contortions to do so and cupping his cheeks to bring him up a bit more, before leaning back to see him clearly again.

Flame resistant clothing would be **phenomenal** to have.

No longer having to worry her own Storm Flames would leave her naked?

"And we can start with something smaller and less risky to Luigi's health. Secondly... that's not how-"

The thief cut herself off, as the wonder if telling him the correct way 'girls had babies' would impact his idea. She thought for another second, trying to think up an appropriate way to both correct that so she wouldn't find herself pregnant without any logical reason for why and so they could explore this wonder.

"...that's not how human women have babies. We require a male, and a certain action to have been done. Even then it doesn't always take, and there can be problems and things about being pregnant, and so human baby making should be left up to the girls until you get the whole process explained to you. If Renato doesn't tell you by the time you're twelve, I will."

Shamal looked a bit baffled at her tangent, but he did give a half-shrug of acceptance. "Okay, mamma."

"Okay then. We can start with spiders. There's one in the corner of the kitchenette, so we can start right away." The rest of it she'd pose to Verde, he might appreciate something to do. Spider silk that was Flame resistant might be interesting to play with, and she could get her Mists to try copying the experiment to give Shamal more data to work with. "I'll get Anna and Usov to help out, too. They might not hatch until after you leave, but I can always call when something happens."

"Um... I kinda wanted to do it myself, mamma." He admitted quietly, a bit subdued about the half-suggestion half-protest.

"That's fine. We can start with the spider in the kitchen, and I'll help you figure out the rest of it."
Did the fact Luigi's gender wasn't entirely certain affect Shamal's intents?

Well… the fact she was sure over the gender of the spider in the kitchen was merely luck and a childhood spent in this region.

"Okay, firstly. The difference between actual scientific investigations and just fucking around is… notes. Lots and lots of notes." Sitting up and dislodging the kid from his position from over her, she got up to wander over to her actually real end-table pushed into a corner and covered with old books. It had a drawer, which was where she kept paper and pens to write on said paper with. "I'll get you a notebook of your own to record things on, but I'll start this for you. The second thing we need, after the idea we're testing but you supplied us with that… is both the experiment deviations and a control."

"Why do we need more than just the spider?" Asked the kid as he followed along with her, trotting over to the kitchen table when she shooed him to sit at it.

"So we know what's normal. I used Lisa as my base normal human woman for when I was figuring out my Cloud and Storm Flames, not that it was needed because being able to bend metal with just my fingers and burning it to carbon at the same time was obviously not normal."

Sonya brought over a notebook to the table, setting it and a pen she dug out of a pocket in front of him. Then she noticed Shamal's less than enthused face and recalled that most people didn't share her interests.

"…I need the notes so I remember which spider is which in the experiment so you can do what you wanted with the chameleon baby idea." She tried first, but when that didn't improve the brat's reaction she sighed and sat at the table as well. "Also… I thought of a way you might make some money off the idea if it works. In order to show others, and to demonstrate that it's a workable idea and you deserve royalties for thinking it up, I need these notes."

Verde might not be happy to be forced to interpret a child's handwriting, but he would likely agree with her that the originator of the idea deserved recognition.

Of course, money was a very good motivator for most people. Even her, especially Viper, and likely any other criminally inclined person she could be bothered to mention.

The brat looked first comically surprised at the suggestion, then got up on his knees on the seat of his chair to reach the writing implements. "What do we start with first?"

"I'll write the beginning parts later, right now we need the initial description of the spider you're about to use Mist Flames to… encourage egg laying. Partially just in case something physical changes with the test subject, and partially so I can find other spiders of the same species for the control or other experimental interests you think up later to try if this doesn't work as you wanted."

Shamal craned his head around, then pointed the pen in the ceiling corner where a tiny orb weaver had set up her web. She had probably crawled in from the hallway or the vents in the ceilings, as Sonya really didn't open the windows often. …or she had visitors that decided to come in or leave by the windows.

It was possible. She hadn't chased the spider out yet due to curiosity, part of her web was attached to the window frame and if it was opened when she wasn't the one doing it or not said webbing would break. The web was the part she was interested in, the spider not so much.
"That one, mamma?"

"Yes, her. We're going to need something to keep her in, and a place for her to lay eggs without the risk of them getting crushed or eaten. Can you think of anything?"

"...a jar? Like we do with fireflies?"

"A good suggestion." She had a tiny remnants of black currant jam left over, she could use it in something and then have a sticky but empty glass jar left over. "She's also going to need something to eat, because the eggs have to be made somehow."

The Mist dropped his gaze to the paper, apparently to correct something he had already written, before looking up at her again. "Why does what she eats matter?"

"You never know. If something happens in this experiment but doesn't happen in another and if you don't know what the differences between the two are, how do you know what to correct to get a consistent result?"

Shamal blew out an aggravated sigh. "This is more complex than I had expected."

Sonya fondly ruffled his hair as he scribbled things down in her 'native' language. "Most things worth doing end up that way. But this way you can give Renato a very special, one-of-a-kind pet only you know how to make until you send someone else your notes on it."

She had to think of something to do with an entire clutch of Mist-imbued orb spiders after this, but she was also somewhat certain that Anna wouldn't mind some pets to play with herself. It wasn't all that long ago the Mirror Lady had been using nightmarish imagery to defend herself, and spiders certainly counted as nightmarish for some.

Although, maybe she should ensure the young woman Mist wasn't afraid of spiders herself first.

"...crickets? For the spider?"

"It is a bug." Allowed the Storm-Cloud, thinking about it. "I can probably keep two or three spiders fed with crickets for a while, or however long this will take."

Her young Mist brat scribbled that down, then nibbled on the end of the pen she had kept on her for a grand total of two days before handing it off. "Are we going to need things to decorate her home, mamma? Like in Luigi's cage, and the fake tree branch?"

"What do you want to decorate the jars with then?"

"Spiders build webs, so she needs something to build them on." Shamal reasoned logically, which made her smile fondly. "So... at least two sticks, and with leaves to hide under if she's scared."

That was... rather nice of him. "Alright. I'm guessing oak leaves and twigs will work."

The brat bobbed his head distractedly, scribbling that down as well.

His notes were going to be all over the place, and very hodgepodge, but there would at least be notes. Too much was better than not enough, so she would let him do his thing.

Sonya started wondering about silkworms, and how to apply an insect/reptile method of... assisted production to mammals, for possibly getting Flame resistant cloth. Obviously it wouldn't be greatly resistant, but every little bit would help and possibly when the idea was posed to another stronger...
Mist they could do more than Shamal could or would think of.

"What's next, mamma?"

"Well, we have our subject and a plan. Next, we need containment and a way to ensure she doesn't wander off on us. I need to use up a bit of jam to have a jar to spare, what would you like to eat?"

"Tea?"

"I can do that."

(Friday the 18th of July, 1969. Zolotov Headquarter, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Hey, Bazanov. Your girls have the ability, what the hell do you make of these Flame things?"

"Like extra skills." The vor answered only partially distracted from the speaker, more focused on deciding on who to tap for security with Sonya's school thing. "They're not that much different from most people, just able to rip your fucking head off or burn you alive if you're stupid."

"And that's not strange? The fuck are we letting them scurry around under us for?"

Arseniy finally looked up from his scribbled list of names, pinning the idiot to his chair with a glare. "What's the difference if I take your fucking head off or if Sonya does so? You'll still be dead, either way."

A heavy arm was laid across the speaker's shoulders, another of his so-called contemporaries leaning in to add his opinion to the conversation struck up when he hadn't been looking. "One of these... Lightnings? Electrocuted the Pahkan."

"Why?" He demanded, as that sounded suicidal and not something that had been all over the clan after it happened if he didn't know before this.

"Old man Zolotov had a heart attack." The same vor that started this admitted lowly, shrugging off the arm with a surly shrug and a sneer aimed upwards to his assaulter. "If they're willing to electrocute him, who else will they kill?"

"Sonya will, if you try anything stupid with her." Arseniy informed the both of them flatly. "Tatiana will, if you again try anything stupid with her. Fuck, I will if you bother them and they're too nice to do it. You wouldn't fuck around in the face of someone holding a fucking flamethrower, why the fuck would you do so in the face of these kids that have the biological equivalent?"

"They're not exactly normal, Bazanov. You have to admit that."

"They're more normal than communism, jackass." He snapped at Tsitnikov shortly, already fed up with the conversation not two seconds in and getting progressively worse the longer this bullshit continued. "Flames were more common a century ago, they faded from widespread use and are now coming back. Get used to it."

"Why should we get used to it?" Snarked back the vor usually in charge of clan security and managing attempts to spy on the clan's headquarters, beckoning a hand to get another bottle of vodka to go with his own work spread out on the table he was seated at. "What the hell are they going to do
for us?"

"Didn't you just say they kept the Pahkan alive through a heart attack? Then there was that assassination, and oh wait... Sonya's jewel shit too." Arseniy reminded the entire room pointedly, itching to punch someone because he was not a talker and preferred beating things instead of jawing at them. "They already do, why are you all bitching about it?"

"Bazanova's already a thief." Tsitnikov clarified equally as irritably as him. "That's different. She doesn't use these Flame things doing that."

"That's where you're wrong. Sonya's a small woman, how the fuck do you think she can lift as much as she does? Fifty kilograms of jewels and metal weighs as much as fifty kilograms of any other material, and she doesn't look like she can with her Cloud Flames so she gets it all from the same shop at once. Tatiana does the same damn shit with her Sun thing when she heals your ungrateful asses of your paper cuts and bruises. What's the real fucking problem?"

"We've got an entire passel of brats we're supposed to guard and protect, and they're not pulling anything in or their weight."

Arseni tisked irritably, snorting after a moment more of thought. "So, you dislike the long-term investments? Why the fuck are you part of this damn clan, then? Most of the shit we do pay off years later, not instantly."

"When is it going to pay off, and how many more of these brats will we be getting?"

"Not much more." Although that news he and Lisa got from Pyotr about Sonya's aims with the school didn't need to be bandied about, not just yet. "And... about six more months at most, we'll get the first Flame user that becomes a vor rather than a vor who knows a bit."

The Storm-Cloud likely wouldn't have the patience to wait much longer than that, she had been a very impatient girl as a child and he didn't expect that to change magically between then and now. A bit strange when paired with her ever so careful meticulous attention paid to stealing things, but Arseniy wasn't a head shrink so as long as the girl liked her life he wouldn't worry.

"They're still fucking useless."

"Try asking them what they can do, idiot." He knew for a fact there were a few Flame users at loose ends, not sure of what they could do the Zolotov vorv would appreciate. "I know of two types you should be very damn interested in, the Mists and Lightnings. Figure it out."

Half the goddamn fucking problem the Flame users had with the rest of the clan was the lack of communications. They fucked off to their own little enclaves, smartly since most were children and they had little to do with the greater clan's business, but that didn't help them get used to or become familiar with the rest of the clan.

Arseni was very tired of that shit. He was not an expert, had little idea what to do when idiots pissed off said brats with biological flamethrowers attached somehow, and therefore would greatly appreciate it if the others would get their shit together finally.

He still had to figure out who could be tapped for security and who wouldn't inevitably commit technicolored suicide trying to mess around with the of-age Flame girls, he didn't have time for this.
Chapter 71

(Saturday the 19th of July, 1969. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Son of a bitch."

Sonya side eyed the youngest person present in her living room. "Was that really the best you can come up with from all the examples you have?"

Shamal gave an almost full-body flinch, shooting her a guilty look before hiding it from the others behind his book they had been reading before certain people barged in with rather important news. "Sorry mamma."

"For? Oh… wait, right. The no swearing until you're either a made man or a preteen." She thought for a second, letting him take possession of the bound paper instead of using a hand to help him support it steadily. "No dessert after dinner, then. Make a note of that, Peter. No sweets tonight. You can have it tomorrow instead."

"Kay."

"Sonya." Galina near-begged in what she thought was going to be something like a protesting tone but ended up more exasperated instead. Flatly ignoring that the older Sun in question that had been here before her was actually dutifully writing that order down on a pad of paper and refusing to give in by palming her face in front of the shorter woman, the Lightning tried again to get her underboss to understand how bad the situation was. "Your friend Sinclair accepted a contract to kill you."

"And he really should've." Snapped back the Storm-Cloud irritably. "What the hell is he thinking?"

"Um… isn't he your friend?" Peter tried hesitantly, lowering his pad of notes and glancing between the women. "You share a kid who already lost a parent?"

"Peter, it may surprise you to learn that most of the people that hire hitmen and other killers to knock off some asshole don't tend to appreciate them having little things like personal morals or values that might backfire on them." She informed him flatly with a heavy sigh.

Okay… the other woman might actually have a point with that.

"Besides which, you said it was a favor-based thing and not a payment one, right Galina?" Sonya huffed softly to herself, looking fairly annoyed as she set aside whatever she had been reading prior to the Lightning barging in. "Which means the people he's prone to working with. Other fellow Italians likely, given that's where he tends to network the most. If the syndicates of his native country think he's… wishy-washy on contracts involving girls from this, it will limit what else he might get in the future. He's as freelance as can be without formally declaring himself either way, refusing to kill me is actually sort of shooting himself in the foot when it comes to future business in what is literally his native lands."

Shamal, who was paying way too much attention to his godmother to sell the image of studious book reading he was trying to present, whimpered.

The thief he was sitting on sighed and threaded slim fingers through his hair. Easy enough to do given he was situated in her lap, his near-customary seat when his mamma didn't have important
It'll be fine, kid. Renato and I will think of something. We're going to have to, if he's going to do something as silly as renege on an accepted contract."

"Are you sure you can?" Galina asked hesitantly.

"Again, we're going to have to." Sonya repeated shortly, getting to her feet and placing her own brat down on his feet at the same time. "Galinia, help Peter in babysitting since you're here anyways. There's an extra room across from mine you can use. Scruffy can take the couch like a gentleman."

"...what's going on?"

"Boss lady is off to steal things, in hopes of getting things here finished well before she's needed elsewhere." Scruffy answered her quietly, tucking the pad of paper he had been writing on into a jacket pocket and then generally looking uncomfortable in the middle of Sonya's living room. "I'm... the babysitter tonight."

"Not a baby." Shamal insisted flatly as he climbed up on the couch in Sonya's spot, dropping his book to his lap in favor of giving the older man a matching flat look and crossing his arms in a sulk.

"No, but babysitter sounds better than me being the au pair." Responed the Sun dryly as he gingerly picked an inoffensive way to the lone and very dusty looking armchair set against the wall. "Those tend to be females and exchanging household or childcare services for room and board. I'd like to think I'm a bit too manly to pull that off, myself."

"Aren't you doing that anyways?" Galina questioned, giving her collection of luggage set just within the hotel suite a considering look. "You do tend to amuse him when Sonya's needed on other things."

She'd take Sonya up on the invitation to recover here instead of trying to figure out how to get her things several blocks over to the Zolotov headquarters in the next hour before the sun set.

Way too much to handle on her lonesome since her vor driver had likely already taken off to do whatever for the night, and she didn't have the funds to rent a room herself. Likely if she asked, she would cover the cost for her… but that was possibly why the thief offered room with her in the first place.

Scruffy gave her a droll look while Shamal pondered that over and decided which he liked better. "I'd rather like to think I'm doing a favor for my boss as well, not getting into childcare because I'm that useless for anything else."

The Lightning studied the man thoughtfully for a moment. "You have an interesting sense of self-worth."

Why did it matter?

Work was work. There were any number of people she could think of that would've rather done childcare than the more thought and creative intensive work he was doing with the office's paperwork.

Maybe it was a capitalist thing. She'd ask later tonight if she really had to know, but right now taking a shower and not having to cross a few feet of semi-public hallway either dripping wet or half naked sounded heavenly.

…where was the child going to sleep if Galina was taking the 'extra' room?

This suite wasn't exactly a large one.
For that matter, if there were three people crammed into this space at the time … where had the hitman been sleeping while he was here?

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 19th of July, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Sonya had maybe a score of heists in Moscow or the surrounding areas for wildly different things. From jewels to antiques to glassware, jewelry store branches to museums to private residents.

She was therefore highly skeptical that most of the current advances in security were directly her fault.

Contributed was a given, yes. For the Cartier job she did with Tats' gang would prompt several jewelry stores to ramp up their security efforts in hopes of not getting robbed next.

No matter how careful the Storm-Cloud was, she wasn't the only thief in the city. Other thieves, that might not be nearly as careful as her or wildly more so than she could manage on her lonesome, would've contributed to how or why certain things developed in the general aim of foiling thieves.

Right now, the still Zolotov aligned thief would just like to hunt down whoever else was fond of ventilation shafts and beat them for encouraging security in them to be improved upon. Sonya was maybe overly fond of ceiling accesses, finding them firmly welded shut from the outside with a grate cover was irritating.

Well… if the high ground was barred from her… under it was.

She had yet to try dropping down more feet than she was comfortable with and wouldn't be even attempting such a thing while in the middle of a job, so Sonya carefully used some of the rope stashed in her work bag and possible loot container to lower herself back down to street level.

Leaving it attached to a roof-level water tank and dangling down one side of the sort of main street building she was going to rob, she'd go pull herself back up to the roofs after this heist to make her way over to her next one via it in a few more hours so taking it down wasn't entirely the best option, the thief took stock of what she had left to work with.

There were the main doors, a side one she actually didn't have on the building plans she stole in broad daylight during a couple free hours a few days ago, and the sewers left as possible entrances. A surface check didn't reveal any obviously open windows she might use instead, and just testing the doors informed her the building was very securely locked indeed.

Sonya paused for a smoke break back near the alleyway and street corner of the building she was to rob, to give some serious thought over the situation for a moment.

As she didn't intend to remain in Moscow for much longer, or the Soviet Union at all honestly, she could probably get away with doing a few very 'noticeable' things. Prying open doors or windows via inhuman brute force thing, the methods that were riskier and repeated too often could develop into recognizable patterns used to track the behavior or habits of one criminal.

A slim, overly strong individual could then be linked to her earlier museum heists. Possibly from there back to other jobs she did or didn't do, but the point remained.

The issue with that was she had already intended to never return to China either. Fong's little favor, which she half-suspected the whole 'asking a Russian syndicate about their Flame focuses' was
actually a part of however lucrative or whatever it ended up being, would make her eat her previous words. Before even that, she never did intend to do more jewelry stores... right on up until they became a bit more interesting than just to gain pricy and shiny bits of earth to make herself more cash to live off of.

Sonya was realistic enough to accept that if Arseniy ever asked, she'd steal what he wanted regardless of where or how risky it was. For Lisa as well, and likely Valera. There was her own sister and then Galina to also consider, and maybe possibly the other Flame group leaders if it was that important. Her brother, but he'd never actually bring himself to ask outright... maybe Renato as well if there was a good enough reason. Unlikely, but possible.

Did she take short-cuts now, and possibly screw herself over later on, or keep playing it as safe as possible?

It really boiled down to a question of time. Short cuts and cutting corners, like instead of hot wiring the security system merely trying to outpace it and steal what she could before law enforcement showed up or repeating little tricks like wrenching things open instead of picking or cracking them as most other thieves did, would save her time now but cost her later.

Did she have the time now to be careful enough to avoid that, but quick enough so she wouldn't have to spend an entire week or so trying to collect the money the school needed to operate for a few years independently?

Also... if she really was going to be trying to earn herself the title of the 'World's Greatest Thief', would doing things that were traceable now help her get it or would being nearly indistinguishable from other criminals stealing shit be more impressive to sneak in there by surprise even if it took her longer?

If she was really going to do it, then she should ensure she did it well. It wasn't a frivolous title to earn herself and would pull its own kind of danger her way.

The easiest way to get such a thing passed on would be to murder the one that held the title before another, after all. The title was also not something that had a clear-cut end-goal to obtain, simply from the nature of her specialty.

It was also possible she'd have to do something really risky and attention grabbing to earn it... more like the Pabst Theater heist than these jewelry store robberies.

Sonya puffed hard on her cigarette to ensure it hadn't gone out while she puzzled over a few things, pulling the pack from a pocket and offering the watchman wandering by one.

"Heavy thoughts?" Asked the guard, accepting her offer and pulling a lighter out of his own pocket to light up with.

"Trying to decide between skimping on quality to meet a quota as fast as I can or take the time to do it well and maybe miss it." She admitted honestly enough, as that much was pretty innocent.

Also, she was trying to figure out if he was the building's guard, a local watchman, or actually part of the law enforcement of this section of the city. Outside opinions would be taken with a large dose of salt anyways but hearing someone else's thoughts might help her quantify her own feelings on the topic.

"Also taking slight advantage of having a babysitter for the night for the quiet thinking time."

Her wry admission of opportunistic behavior earned the thief a laugh, and a subsequent cough since
trying to laugh while also taking in a lungful of smoke was rather painful.

"I'd... ha, I'd do the same. Newborn son. I love him, but... damn he's noisy." Confessed the likely-watchman she had waylaid around the filter stuck in his mouth, stuffing his hands into his pockets to ward off the nippy turn this summer night had taken. "I don't envy you the dilemma, though."

The jacket he was wearing was just heavy wool, which didn't have any insignia sewn into it. Sturdy boots, slacks, and a watch cap completed the man's outfit. Probably not law enforcement, they did tend to emblazon themselves with things to inform passersby that they could be approached for some aid, but a hired guard or a vigilant local to this part of the city were still possible.

As well as KGB agent.

Smiling politely, Sonya wasn't sure why she needed to know about a baby son to understand the man could share that sentiment but she'd make the required platitudes if she had to, she eventually just shrugged after a quiet moment. "I'd... rather do things slow and right the first time if I can. I don't want to miss my quota, and that will suck if I do, but... substandard quality isn't my thing."

"Having integrity in your work ethic isn't a bad thing." The man offered helpfully. "Rather admirable, actually."

He wouldn't think that if he knew exactly what he was talking to.

"Well then, you know what you need to do." With a shrug, and a quick glance to a wrist watch she hadn't noticed under the cuff of his jacket, the waylaid guardsman tipped his head to her before starting to walk on. "Good luck with that."

Sonya obligingly started walking away from her target herself, she had to get into the sewers and find a way in from the basement level.

An hour or two before it would be safe enough to start, so she had the time to poke around a bit to find the best route in.

(Sunday the 20th of July, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Shamal poured out one of the 'unidentified' bags on the floor, then set about prying the gems out of the settings as his mamma dictated how much was for what to Miss Galina as she helped in the efforts he was attempting.

"Save a selection of diamonds for Scruffy."

"Sonya-"

Her head snapped up and she gave the man trying to protest a sharp look while she pried the thicker metal off the bigger set pieces. "You don't have to keep them. Or even deal with them more than once. I just would like to know if you can use them or if you can't. A selection of both uncut and pre-cut stones, Galina."

"Are you going back out tonight?" Asked the Lightning, sorting aside a mess of white stones as the blonde woman asked from the 'to be sold' pile.
"I have to. Even if you manage to sell all of this in the next week or two, we're going to need more hard cash for the school's first year. More specifically, in paying back Pyotr the loan and the first few months of paychecks for the non-clansmen." Admitted the Storm-Cloud tiredly, dropping into the office chair she normally sat in a bit more heavily than normal and slapping the removed gems on the 'to sell for funds' pile.

"Mamma? Were we supposed to attend Mass today?"

"…fuck."

Shamal honestly wouldn't mind giving a miss to church today, even if that day was spent sorting out shiny rocks from equally shiny metals, but he figured that should be a fully informed thing rather than an accident.

Minster Renato was accepting of occasional misses, as he tended to miss Mass when traveling around himself, but not for things like 'forgetting'. He was pretty sure his mamma wouldn't like having another time-related thing to be teased over.

Sonya dropped the hand that had been rubbing at her eyes to give Galina a sideways look. "What time is it?"

"Just past dawn? Nearly seven." Answered the Lightning after double-checking the face of her wristwatch.

"If you were up all last night, and intend to do the same tonight, you should probably not stay up all day as well." Chipped in McScruffy cautiously, holding up his hands in response to the ugly look Shamal's godmother shot him. "You shouldn't, just saying."

"I am well aware of my limits, thank you."

"Boss lady, seriously speaking, there is a thing called 'evening Mass'. Why not take a nap first, and aim to attend that one instead of stressing yourself to get ready and you both there when it's already in progress now and you're likely to miss it anyways?"

Sonya stared at the man for a long moment, which made the older man slightly wary of the sudden shift in tone. "Are… you Christian, Scruffy? Do you need to attend church?"

Shamal's head shot up, craning his neck around to see more than just the Sun's side-profile.

That was right… McScruffy wasn't Russian. It was then possible the man shared a faith with the young Italian. Which was interesting. In a 'why didn't he attend Mass with them' kind of way.

"Technically… yes. But I haven't attended confession for nearly a decade now." Admitted the Sun a bit bitterly, looking off out the window instead of actually look at anyone else in the room. "Through no fault of my own until I got here, admittedly…"

"Peter, I have no idea about how those of your faith do their… worship, only that Catholic Christians require Mass. If you require something, which is really something only you can inform me of that you need, you need to tell me so I will ensure that basic life requirements are taken care of." Sonya drummed her fingers on her desk, narrowly glaring at the man. "You call me 'Boss Lady', that means I provide for you. If I'm missing something because you're not me and have different requirements for your standards of living, then you have to tell ME so I can fix IT."

Frowning, the Sun shifted a bit in place. First backwards, because even Shamal got wary of his mamma's temper and that was an entirely warranted action when she got irked he let that slide.
without getting mad at him, but then the man shifted his weight from foot to foot like he was indecisive.

"Do you not want to come with us?" Asked the Mist curiously.

He didn't rightly care if the man came with this time, it was the last one he was going to attend with his godmother here, so he could share.

But… why would he not want to attend church?

Everyone… well, alright. Not everyone attended church, mamma didn't before she started with him…

Shamal hadn't actually pondered that really. His godmother wasn't a church-goer.

What did she believe in if she wasn't Christian?

"I was very religious… up until the third year I was imprisoned against my will." McScruffy announced flatly, drawing his gaze from the window back to the small blonde woman that still didn't look entirely happy. "Then it got rather… hard, to keep accepting that my imprisonment and the number of others that didn't survive it were all part of God's plan. The next six years before you found me didn't help anything."

"…there are mafia priests." Sonya announced after a moment. "I know none, but I can find you one if you wish to speak to someone but not put me or any of the others at risk."

"I'll think about it." He settled on instead of giving an actual answer, a bit quickly. "I don't know if I want to return to church or not, Sonya. That's why I never said anything. I have some soul searching to do before I decide either way. You weren't neglecting me, it's just not an issue right now."

"The offer is there if you require help." Mamma informed him solidly, still a bit annoyed seeming at him. "Just mention it, and since I cannot provide it here I will take you to Italy and find you a priest you can be candid with if you'd like."

"Not Mafia Land?" The man inquired faux-lightly, but to Shamal's eye he seemed a bit surprised and wrong-footed by the entire discussion.

The thief shrugged, dropping her gaze to the piles of shiny stuff she had stolen and they had yet to sort through. "I'd rather not take you there, even if Tatiana would likely know of one you can speak to. You're still a bit… green, in mafia terms, for me to feel safe dropping you off with a hard-core killer for a private chat. Hopefully, in Italy, I could find you a priest that wouldn't also be a career killer."

McScruffy huffed a tiny laugh. "In more ways than one?"

Sonya blew out a sigh, leaning back in her office chair. Shamal immediately took advantage, jumping up using her knee to sit in her lap. She helped him straighten up again, but then also dropped a very sparkly necklace to his hands for prying out the gemstones for other use.

"That… was bad, Peter."

"…how do Christian hitmen resolve the 'murder is a sin' issue?" Asked the Sun after a quiet moment where everyone got on with sorting his godmother's haul.

"I have no fucking idea. Why ask me?"
"Do you believe in God, mamma?" Shamal asked when it seemed as if that was all they were going to say about McScruffy's religious views.

"…not really? I believe we do have a soul and that there might be something higher than us, but I highly doubt whoever or whatever it is really gives a damn about how we conduct our lives or how we treat each other. I am also skeptical that said who or whatever had a hand in creating the world or the universe down to the exact creatures that inhabit this world with us." The woman shrugged idly, prying a few stones out of ring settings. "We might be amusing or interesting to said whoever, but the… cults of worship that surround them is a bit off-putting to me too much to 'join' a religious view."

The Mist blinked a few times. "Cults?"

"What else can you call it?" Mamma defended herself a bit uncomfortably, setting down the sapphires she had freed in one pile and the scrap metal left of the rings in another to pick up a bracelet of some pearls. "I will not consider any Christian churches until someone can explain to me what the ever-loving fuck the witch hunts, the Crusades, and the Spanish Inquisition were all about in terms of their doctrine and reconciling that with 'thou shall not kill'. Christians have done a whole lot of murder over the last few centuries when it's directly against their doctrine. Judaism is something I've absently wondered about, Buddhism, and such… but I'm not that religious a person. I do not require a faith to define myself and have never been interested enough to actually investigate other faiths to see if it would be something I'd like."

Shamal stared up at her blankly, he didn't know how to address even half of that.

Sonya sighed heavily and tugged a hank of his hair absently. "That doesn't mean I think you and Renato are wrong, kid. Since nothing can be proven, I could totally be wrong in my views and the Christians could be correct… but the other way is entirely possible as well. In the end, it boils down to what you want to believe. I just… don't see a point in ascribing said 'whoever or whatever' with rules that ancient dead people ascribed them and trying to believe it. Especially when it doesn't work in my life."

"I've never thought about it." Galina offered idly, making more progress than the rest of them combined in stripping gemstones from settings while they were distracted. "I always thought at religion as something 'extra' but not really necessary. Something to do when you have the time to waste, rather than a necessity of living."

"…my old pastor would weep." McScruffy muttered mostly to himself, which earned him two eye rolls from the women and a faintly curious look from the only child present.

"Wasn't Jesus Christ actually Jewish?" Sonya asked him a bit archly, giving up on a rather heavily embedded green stone in an equally heavy setting and just ripping the ring in two in order to separate the gem out. "Since before there were 'Christians' there was mainly Egyptians, Romans, and the Jewish where he was known to live? If you believe he was a 'savior', why not join the religion that he was as well? If you have issues with your specific Church, but not with the issue of God's existence, find a new church."

"Just saying 'find a new whatever' doesn't exactly help those that doubt but were raised with the mindset of 'to miss Mass is a sin'." Peter countered a bit shortly. "I have nearly twenty years of faithful church attendance, not to mention being raised as a dutiful Catholic choir boy, that cannot be reconciled easily with nearly ten years of being imprisoned and abused by my fellow man."

"People are assholes, no matter what." Snapped back the Storm-Cloud equally as irritated as the Sun sounded. "It's real pretty to say you shouldn't do things that are 'criminal'… but I am a
professional thief. I've also killed people even when I didn't want to for various reasons, to survive, to
prevent a family from being murdered by simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time, a
bunch of fucking sex traffickers because they tried for me. It happens, it's in my nature to not see that
as wrong but only a matter of survival. Even knowing that murder is morally wrong to others… I
have no issue with it. Does that make me a bad person?"

"…most priests that aren't aware of your lifestyle would probably say yes." Answered the older man
after a long moment of studying the woman. "I actually can't. According to Christian beliefs, man
was made in God's image and killing your fellow man is a slight against God's work. I can't honestly
believe that, because I have seen the worst in my fellow man and do not understand nor want to how
they could do that to me. Then you came along… and now I'm really confused. I know what my
religion would say about what happened, that I was put in that position to be found by you for God's
plan for you… but I honestly doubt I needed ten years of suffering just to meet you. Pretty sure I
could've taken over the family jewelry store and met you that way if you had ever ended up in
Canada."

Sonya gave him a weird look. "I didn't know you're from Canada. We were kind of wondering….."

The Sun gave a slightly frustrated gesture, which popped the gemstone loose from the earring he had
been fiddling with ever since the 'diamond' issue came up and sent the rock clattering away from
them. No one went after it. "That's what you're taking from that?"

"It's nice to know you can sing. I can't." Shamal's mamma chipped in after a pause to think about it.

McScruffy gave a kind of rusty chuckle, getting up to finally chase after the rock he had accidentally
tossed to the other side of the office.

"I also don't honestly like it when people I've never met have 'plans' for me." Continued the thief
absently, taking the jewels Shamal had finished prying loose to sort out and handing the child
another piece. "It makes me… stubborn."

"…um?"

"I knew you before you decided to make use of me." Sonya clarified for Galina, waving a hand not
occupied with a half-bent ring around Shamal's other side. "Speaking of which… you're free to go.
Or do whatever it was you wanted."

"What?"

"I bargained with the Pahkan. You and the Mirror Lady are free." Shrugging, she discarded her
latest freed stone and slapped the silver in the 'melt down' pile. "I'm stuck for another year and have
to pay dues for me and my Lackey for another two, but then I'm free. Usov can do whatever it is he's
planning on, or just ask me himself if he'd like."

Miss Galina stared at his godmother for a long, silent moment. "…what?"

"Just saying." Sonya slapped down her final piece, and accepted Shamal's finally freed gemstone
from the necklace and the chain to put down as well without putting him down too. "Come on, brat.
I need a nap… and you can either take one with me or be dropped off to visit 'nonna' until this
evening Mass' thing."

"I can stay with you, mamma." It'd be a little boring… but he had things to ponder and could always
steal one of her books to read.

Or play with Luigi and his Mist Flames. Shamal had plenty to do, he just really didn't want to be
foisted off again.

"Are you sure? It's not going to be very interesting or fun..."

"I'll be fine, mamma."

"Should you leave a six-year-old home alone while you sleep?" Galina asked warily, lifting her head from the intricate studded charm bracelet she was de-gemming to give her a confused look.

"...technically I do every time I go to sleep, and he wakes up in the middle of the night." Admitted the thief after a moment of thought on the subject, not putting the Mist down per her usual nowadays. "What would be the difference now?"

"He might get bored and wander into something lethal or try playing with something you'd rather him not?" McScruffy volunteered idly.

Sonya pointed a finger in front of Shamal's nose. "Don't be stupid, then. Or you'll be exiled to nonna's instead of being allowed to entertain yourself from now on."

"Kay."

(Monday the 21st of July, 1969. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Since Sonya's 'day' started with making what was Shamal's dinner but her breakfast and then two or three hours of Catholic Mass, she had more than enough energy to try racking two heists in the same stretch of natural darkness.

She could quite easily be a complete night-owl, to only wake when the sun set and hit the bed around the time it rose again. Her few years in a circus performing mainly in the evening and night hours, not to mention it was indefinitely easier to steal things after venues and businesses closed for the night to get the gawkers and shoppers out of her way, would've made the shift stupidly easy had she not put actual specific effort into returning to a 'day' schedule afterwards.

That and it would be even more difficult to keep track of the date when on the job if she woke on one day and it was a different one before she went to sleep.

Since she also didn't want to sleep through the last few days she would have Shamal with her, the thief didn't intend to go to sleep today until the brat did to ensure she was back on a regular schedule. That would be painful as hell, not to mention she'd be more irritable than normal and would have to watch herself before she snapped at someone that didn't deserve it, but worth it in her opinion.

Strangely, after Peter and Galina showed up to babysit for her again and Sonya went into the Zolotov clan to find a driver and temporary partner for a long night, she got three vor that volunteered.

Having expected a not-a-vor-yet Shestyorka to agree to help rather than the usually too important fully-fledged criminals, the Storm-Cloud hadn't thought up or figured out a way to turn down the extra aid before she found herself in a pickup truck with them.

It was... different. Unlike the only other time in her life she had significant 'backup'... well, both times given that Renato had helped a bit himself when he was here to go along with the times Tatiana and her gang had her as an 'extra hand', this was very different.
She didn't really know them, and highly doubted they knew her by anything but her foster father or by rumor. It was understandable why she had vory rather than Shestyorka, they were far outside Zolotov territory and into rival thieves' home ground and she still was 'guarded' even within their home territory. Understandable, but… unusual.

Therefore the car trip was, in a word, awkward.

Sonya did not have the social skills to negate that. She'd admit it, and since she really didn't want to damage the Zolotov Flame user's that left her with little to do about it. Trying and failing would be worse than doing nothing… so that was what she was stuck with.

Riding in the backseat of a pickup truck with three burly, tattooed men, in complete silence.

There was plenty of time to think now instead of in the in-between moments of her next heist, but… the silence was starting to get to her.

Lighting up the third cigarette in the same hour, the thief strained to catch sight of the street signs to see if she could ask to be let off yet. With how dark the streets were, even with the pools of lamplight cast by the iron posts or the occasional lit window, the most she could see was her occasional reflection in the car's window or merely the glow of her cigarette's cherry.

Well… there really was nothing for it. Sonya sighed, then tapped the driver on the shoulder. "Let me out here, I'll meet up with you all a few more streets closer but I need the underground to get in this time."

She earned herself a brief glance backwards through the rearview mirror, but the man did pull over to let her out. However, before she could open the door the vor sitting in the back with her handed over the rather dirt encrusted car jack that had been stored under the driver's seat for the drive.

Apparently, they were going to pretend there was 'tire trouble' for an alibi. Sonya could then assume she would then be the one either sent or called up to bring them the jack, or at least that was how it was to appear to any good Samaritans or law enforcement that wanted to know what was going on.

"…right. I'll also try to get something to eat on my way back." It was going to be a long night for them, she could at least ensure they were somewhat comfortable while they waited for her.

"If you're taking requests, pick up some vodka."

Sonya glanced at her backseat bench mate, but he seemed entirely honestly about the request for liquor so she just nodded and opened up the door to leave them.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 21st of July, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Stripping the asphalt imbued cloth coating the wire supplying power to a security camera using the still tiny-sized gold ax she pulled off her chain of miniaturized weaponry took a bit of a delicate touch.

Cutting from top to bottom where she wanted no insulation instead of scraping it off from the side ensured the stiff cloth looked raggedly 'chewed' up, and it made it less obvious the damage was caused by human hands rather than some creature nibbling on it. Taking a bracing breath, she quickly twisted it to the still live but equally stripped lighting wire to short out both the lights and the cameras.
Hissing as electricity burned through her right hand and fingers from a loose arc of electricity, Sonya jerked away from the power box and the fuses she had just short circuited and jumped upwards to the shadowed entranceway over the basement-underground access of the building she wanted to break into.

Flexing the stiffened digits to work out the numbness out of them, she waited in the gloomy darkness until some poor idiot that drew the short straw slammed the steel door only a few increments under her ass. Taking a slight risk in that there wasn't another guard sent to back him up, the Storm-Cloud stopped bracing herself via her boots planted against one wall and her back pressed against the other and dropped to the stoop to dart into the basement of the jewelry store she wanted to rob.

A bit odd this building had underground access, but it could've been a really old repurposed building. Then the access door was less odd and more interesting.

Luck was with her, there wasn't a guard lingering for the one that was taking a look at her handiwork. Unfortunately, the guards had at least one brain cell to share between them and there was a stationary watchman aiming his torch down the stairwell to the level she was on.

Possibly scanning the shadows for movements, or just waiting for the other guy to return, but either way a respectable obstacle in her way.

Unless the guy switching fuses around was smart enough to notice the stripped wires that might or might not be still sparking, she only had a bit of time to reach a 'safe' spot for when the lights would be turned back on. The basement level of this jewelry store had been utilized as storage space, which meant she would be going through it to ensure there wasn't anything interesting to be had... but it was very tightly packed.

There wasn't a whole lot of room, and what there was looked too small for her to squeeze into.

She couldn't spot any vents from her position, there were only two ways to leave the room the door behind her and the stairwell in front, meaning she either had to hide out somehow or run the risk of being spotted by one of the guards she was sandwiched between.

Out of obvious options, Sonya turned to the crates piled up against the walls.

She had yet to find a way to open nailed shut wooden crates without leaving behind either tool marks or dents where her fingers had been, but she didn't need to avoid it this time. They were stacked against a wall, meaning she could hide any damage by merely turning things around.

However, climbing into unknown boxes to wait out any attention was... iffy in terms of maybe working as she wanted. Pulling another gold ax back out, she needed a knife or a less unwieldy blade for restricted spaces, the thief carefully pressed the blade into the crack between the lid and the container of the nearest non-stacked upon crate. Pulling up slowly, or what she figured to be slowly since force was a difficult thing for her to judge, at least got the cheap wood to pop loose without a screech of iron against wood sounding.

A split in the wooden edge from the sharper end of the ax, but no cringe-inducing noise.

It was full of papers. Confused, Sonya swiped up a sheaf of them from the top and applied her Storm Flames to the rest to eat out a cavity for herself. Flipping the lid around to hide the splintering she then dropped herself into the dusty and paper lined hiding spot.

Slightly offsetting the lid kept it looking, only at first glance admittedly, like it was still nailed shut. It also gave the thief a sliver of light to read what the hell a crate full to the brim of paper had held.
Just in time, as not a few breaths later the lights flickered overhead once before a handful of bulbs blew with a musical set of pops. There were shouts and utterly vehement swear words uttered while the guards started to respond to her sabotage.

Ignoring the half-shouted conversation going on about rat-gnawed wires and what kind of supplies were left to hopefully fix the things that had just blown up, she instead squinted at the tiny lines of typed letters.

Having expected little to nothing interesting, Sonya was not remotely disappointed to realize it was just old inventory records. Groping for another page under her, she compared the two.

Why were they keeping inventory lists for years?

One was from this very year, only a few months previous, and the one she just pulled from behind her shoulder blades was from nearly ten years ago.

Sonya was about to discard the paperwork, it wasn't really relevant and she should be keeping an ear out for who was passing by her hiding spot. A passing thought had her taking a third look, to make out the actual items listed rather than just what layout and heading they held.

One was typical for a jewelry store, stock metal ingots and stone orders. The other was not.

Copper was a jewelry metal, a cheap one but still, but lead wasn't. At least, she was pretty sure, given she had never seen it in any jewelry store before this.

Why lead?

"...hey, do you smell smoke too?"

…fuck.

"Yeah, I can smell it too." Sonya winced, and tried to subtly shift around deeper in the atomized dust that was left behind under overwhelming Storm Flames used to flash fry things out of her way. There wasn't nearly enough to cover her… and she was contained in a paper pile in a wooden box.

Well… they thought they sensed fire… she might as well give them some.

The wooden lid over her suddenly shifted as someone wedged their fingers under the thin plank. In response, the Storm-Cloud lit everything near or around her on bright red Flames.

There were shouts and another ugly swear word as the two suddenly scrambled backwards from her makeshift burning pyre. Sonya merely scowled as the guards bailed, there went her favorite set of lockpicks and the backpack she purchased in Paris.

…not to mention the very clothing she had been wearing.

Well… this was going to be a fairly uncomfortable walk back to the pickup truck they had, not to mention she had nothing to steal thing in… in both of the meanings of the term.

…and she just burned up her last pair of really fucking comfortable boots. Son of a bitch.

Now highly pissed off, the thief hoisted herself out of the burning wreckage that was this store's backlog of inventory reports. From the sounds of things, and the fucking fire alarm now wailing in her fucking ear, she was pretty sure the guardsmen had bolted for either firefighting duties or to get the hell out of the 'burning' building.
Was this a botched job, or could she press on and at least get *something* for having burned every stitch and piece of equipment she had on her?

Sonya threw a fistful of Storm Flames at the stairwell she had to go up before a rather chatty fellow descended the stairs to 'prove' the building wasn't on fire. After the expected 'oh shit' moment on his end, she started a slow walk to it while keeping herself on Flames for the security.

Might as well chase them out, steal what she wanted, and then fuck off herself.

Storm Flames might make a good disguise in a pinch, but it *sucked* to be forced into using. She lost way too much for the security for it to have been worth it. Now she was buck naked, had no cigarettes, lost some of her favorite tools.

Fuck, she was going to figure out how to steal *everything* here in revenge for losing her stuff. Somehow.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 21st of July, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"*I take it we don't need the jack anymore?*

"*Hey, babe.*" One of the *vory* spoke up, rising up to his feet to take the 'heavy' car jack she had thankfully stored far away from the jewelry store she had just robbed. Therefore, she hadn't needed to break into a random car and hope they had one. "*No but thank you for looking. Where did you borrow it from?*

"*Two streets over, the apartment complex. Didn't even had to knock, there was a rather nice man who let me borrow his as long as we return it before noon tomorrow.*" Actually, that was where she left the crate she had repurposed from the jewelry store to contain the things she stole from them, but this way she wouldn't have to explicitly state where she stashed stuff to meet up with them in front of a non-clan member.

Sonya put up with the Zolotov *vor* that spoke up bussing her cheek, as she was apparently playing a girlfriend or something. She also let him take possession of the jack, in favor of eyeing the *milisiya* officer that had apparently stopped to see what the group of men had been loitering around for and offered his own car jack to get them moving.

There was an actual flat tire the other two *vory* and the law enforcement officer were in the middle of changing, which made the thief wonder how they caused it. As far as she was aware, which was out-of-date information from absent half-listening to Cherep and Dmitriy back when they had been kids, the clan keep on-top of maintaining their vehicles to prevent exactly this scenario from occurring on the job.

Letting her supposed 'boyfriend' take possession of the grocery bag she actually stole from the same apartment she stole the clothing she was now wearing, which held the food and liquor for them that she also liberated, Sonya seriously wondered how they caused the flat.

Apparently, the officer had shown up as she found herself new clothes and the food for the others. They had only just jacked the truck up enough to wrench the flat tire off before she got here.

Shifting a bit uncomfortably in her ill-fitting and stolen shoes, the thief wrapped her arms around herself to make it less obvious that what she was wearing didn't actually fit her very well.
Thankfully she was less physically imposing than the vory were, and the officer's shifty side-glances flicked to her once but didn't linger for very long.

It didn't take much longer, shoving the spare tire onto the axel and tightening the lug nuts took only minutes if you were at least semi-competent which she was probably not, and with a suggestion to hurry up and leave the militsiya officer left them to it.

Her 'boyfriend' took the opportunity to pass out the food she brought back with her. "Why are you in that?"

"…Storm Flames come with the risk of burning off your own clothing if you're not careful." Sonya admitted lowly, and maybe a tiny bit bitterly. "I lost my gear as well, and my picks."

This summer had not been good on her footwear.

"We need to go pick up what I got, I've been wandering around with the car jack trying to find you all for at least ten minutes." She continued, actually towards one of the men with her. "What time is it?"

"A little after midnight."

"…one more then." After losing her picks and a bag that would've limited her to just the better quality or easily sold stuff, she had taken too long to loot the store branch to the bedrock.

She didn't regret it, as replacing her boots made her irritable enough to justify it to herself, but time was now the limiter she had to conform to.

"How the hell are we going to loiter around then? We don't have another spare wheel, not to mention some fire ensured our descriptions were broadcasted." Asked the driver a bit shortly between bites of the meat filled pastry she brought back with her.

"Lose a few lug nuts. Then one of us can go for a 'walk' until she gets back." Suggested the so far silent passenger, using a pant leg to scrub off the grime on his knuckles before taking his share of the food.

"…I can take one with me and hide it while I'm stealing to not risk burning it into dust." Sonya agreed with a shrug.

The only one taking nips out of the half-bottle of vodka she managed to locate while raiding an apartment for clothing and food was thankfully her supposed 'boyfriend', the driver had shook his head and the non-talkative one was probably some kind of liquor snob by the sneer. Her one lingering concern about grabbing the vodka in the first place avoided entirely, Sonya had no problem climbing back into the truck to go pick up her loot.

It was five minutes of a ride, and the thief's admonition that she'd be the only one to actually move her stolen goods was ignored so there was another five minutes of the three vory trying to figure out how to move the repurposed crate into the back of the truck.

Until the Storm-Cloud got fed up, snatched the massive wooden box herself, and huffed irritably at all three of them.

Slightly useful in the transport effort, but frankly she wasn't going to do this again.

Too many heads, and way too much testosterone, made things take way too fucking long.
Artemiy Nikolayevich managed a slightly awkward smile as Andrei Chikatilo poked around the classroom they might be sharing until the man was fully hired.

He wasn't sure what, but the man was a bit... off-putting. It might really be just the fact he had been hired full time and the other man hadn't been, because that was an entire degree of awkward in and of itself.

"How many students do you think they managed to pull?" Chikatilo asked absently, poking around the shelf of books he had brought in himself for hopefully future use in classes.

It wasn't hard to find reference books, and a few interesting popular stories published recently, to place an order through the library for filling the rest of the shelves. Losing the ones he brought in to bored students or just the books becoming lost wouldn't be too bad, merely annoying to replace.

The dictionary, on the other hand, would be irritating to lose. He had plans for that reference.

"More than enough for our first year." A very feminine voice announced from the doorway flatly before Artemiy could think of something to say.

Bordrov 'Scruffy' Jaroslav cleared his throat, running a hand through his silvered blond curls.
"Nikolayevich, meet Bazanova Sonya. Our... ah... principal."

"The librarian." Corrected the short blonde woman shortly. "We'll be getting an actual principal in a few years, it's just for now."

That still meant she was the boss, and the one dictating they had work and were paid for it.

Her literature teacher hastened over to at least shake the hand of the person that gave him something other than factory work to do. "Miss? Bazanova, thank you again."

"...I'm sure. I need your pick for a textbook for your classes, Nikolayevich. So we can order them in time." The woman seemed a bit taken aback by him, but apparently she didn't really mind. "You're the last person I need it from, so..."

Artemiy scrambled for his list of possible text books, taken from the master list the vice principal who only introduced herself as 'Galina' had sent to him through the mail. He had the book written down on his notepaper, he also had written down which books he brought in from home on it for whatever records needed to be kept on such things.

Bazanova accepted the paper a bit hesitantly, but while she got interested in reading what he wanted at best or what he could settle for Scruffy looked between him and Chikatilo.

"Getting along alright?" Asked the other man carefully.

"Yes?" He didn't notice any awkwardness other than on his own end, and Chikatilo seemed more comfortable than he was.

Artemiy looked over to the other man, and it really did seem as if the man didn't mind being the temporary teacher and not the full time one.
"Chikatilo, there must be a rifle club. Otherwise I leave what sports you would like to coach between what classes up to you. The more you do, and the more competitions you get your students into, the more funds I will set aside for you and Yanlin to make use of. I made the same announcement to him, you two will need to figure out how to split the load." She decided solidly, folding up Artemiy's list and putting it into a pocket. "The textbooks should be here a few days before the school year starts, my apologies for the last-minute supply but that was inevitable with the deadline we were racing for as well as how long it took to finish fleshing out the staff."

The young blonde woman stopped, took a deep breath and actually looked at the two men in the classroom.

"Otherwise, quickly get me a list of what you need still that isn't already supplied. If you do not this week, before Thursday, Galina will be the one you have to go to about missing supplies and it might take longer than you want."

"Yes ma'am."

"…alright." The substitute literature teacher echoed on the heels of his own answer.

Bazanova glanced upward at Scruffy before nodding to the both of them and turning on her heel to leave them.

"…she's not really a people person." Scruffy explained after a beat, a bit sheepishly sounding on her behalf. "But she's a damn good problem solver, which this school is part of. We rather needed one in this part of the city."

"Is that why she insists she's not the principal?"

The older man laughed a bit. "She likes books more than people actually. The principal is probably going to be Primakova Elisaveta, the Home Economics teacher, before long. Since she's… well, one of the elder instructors we've got. It's just… Sonya's bankrolling a lot of this to avoid a few of the restrictions and limitations doing it on a government contract would cause, so what she says goes."

"Where did you pick up Yanlin from?"

"Her contacts from China, obviously. It's also why you were hired." Admitted the older man to Chikatilo, honest but not cruelly so. "She's got business she can't get out of for the start of our first year, and since she was supposed to be the substitute literature teacher but wouldn't be here in the first few months… but we might be getting transfer students from China since he's here and she's got business there."

"So, you'll be teaching Chinese then?"

Scruffy winced. "Ah… no. Can't speak that worth a damn yet. Yanlin and Sonya will have to translate any issues. I'll be teaching English, as we were given permission since it's a widely used business language, as well as a few African dialects that I've… picked up as extra on the side if anyone's interested."

"So then… coworkers." Chikaitlo announced brightly, clapping his hands together and looking between them. "Drinks tonight? I need to know what you intend to teach so I can sub in, Nikolayevich. And I don't think I've actually formally met you… ah…?"

"Bordrov Jaroslav." The older man answered promptly. "But call me Scruffy, please. And-"

"If Bazanova says something about the nickname coming from a firing line in Africa, don't take her..."
seriously?" Artemiy interjected a bit dryly. "I don't know, Scruffy. You can apparently speak some African languages, and I highly doubt she's the jesting kind."

"You have to get to know her really well before she'll relax around you. Nearly goggled like an idiot the first time I saw her smile honestly." Looking back to the man that invited them to either a bar or to someplace that served liquor, the language teacher smiled wryly. "I'm up for it, so long as you don't mind I don't really get out a lot. I only moved to Moscow earlier this year, in fact. From Africa."

The 'firing line' was probably an in-joke between them. Prying the story out of the man would be some fun to do if they run out of topics to speak about. "I'm up for it. Start with a bar and work our way outwards?"

"Sounds good to me. Scruffy?"

"I'm up for that." With a nod, the older man waved a hand as he turned to follow their temporary principal to wherever she had gone off to do. "I only request we stick to this neighborhood for right now, I'm not too comfortable going too far out just yet. I'd get lost stupidly easily."

Chikaitlo laughed. "I know how that feels, I had to move here for this job and getting turned around is also something I hate."

Artemiy had lucked out by already living in the area with his wife. As a matter of fact, he had lived within Moscow his entire life. His parents lived just on the other side of the city and had done so since his childhood.

Unsure about how to add into this topic, he picked to instead suggest a time they could meet up. "Say around six?"

"Works for me." Scruffy tossed over a shoulder. "I'll be either in the office or the library with Bazanova filling out orders, pick me up there."

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 22nd of July, 1969 continued. Mafia Land.)

"You're Sonya's Lackey, right?"

Bjorn blinked, craning his neck around to fully see the speaker that had halted near the doorway. "Since you assaulted me the first time we met, I think you already knew that."

"I did not assault you." Drawled out the hitman, stalking into the little cubby hole of a room the Icelander had reserved for his research efforts and folding the information he had apparently required from the Mafia Land's info brokers. "If you really want a comparison, you don't have a bullet hole as a souvenir from those I assault in truth."

"Yes… thank you for that." Responded the Lightning-Storm dryly. "Do you require something?"

"Just curious." The Italian slapped a hand on the papers he had been looking through before the Lackey could remove them from view. "What are you doing? I am pretty sure she's not doing jobs until she gives the brat back."

Bjorn didn't sigh, but the impulse required acknowledgement. Instead, he gave the hitman that apparently was required to kill his patron but wasn't going to for reasons a flat look. "I am looking for someplace that Dama might like to live within, if you must know."
Yes okay. The man wasn't going to kill his patron even if that was apparently part of his orders. That
didn't mean he had to like the hitman, or that he shouldn't be worried over the interest he had in his
lady's business.

He also didn't have to forget how the man treated him that first meeting.

Renato Sinclair was an imposing hitman, especially with that grating sense of slick confidence that
nothing he did would get him killed. Having witnessed, personally, the man almost *waltzing* his way
through the streets through small-scale conflicts that had killed less skilled gunslingers easily Bjørn
was fully aware it was *honestly* earned sense of confidence.

Again, he didn't have to like it.

An eyebrow rose up as the hitman scanned the list of personnel the Lackey was trying to account for.
"I promised Sonya I'd find her someplace close to where we need her to be for the brat's schooling."

…so, he actually *had* a reason to bother him. Frowning, the Lightning-Storm flicked a glance from
his list to the Italian.

That was probably a good idea, the man would know his homeland better than he could research.
Even within Mafia Land's considerable reach.

"Are you sure about this?" Renato asked skeptically, twitching the paper that listed exactly how
many people his Lady would need. "Seems a bit… excessive."

"Can you argue against any of them? *Dama* is gone for long stretches of time traveling for her
contracts, so a staff for upkeep might be a good idea. Then there's keeping everyone fed. And then-"

"I get it." The hitman interrupted shortly. Another look, and the list was stolen brazenly by being
tucked into a suit pocket nonchalantly. "I suppose I should then send *you* any estates I find up for
sale then."

Less he had to do, but he would still be intently examining any suggestions. Bjørn wondered if he
was holding a grudge, and if that was a wise idea.

…probably, but he didn't greatly care. *Dama* will still be the one to decide which one, but I would
appreciate the opportunity to research how much they're going to cost, what the refurbishing needs
would be, and such to give her."

"There's a matching service for mafia syndicates and suitably prepared service personnel."
Announced the Sun hitman nonchalantly, examining the Lackey from under the brim of his ever-
present fedora. "I'll get you the number, so you can start arranging what you think she needs."

"I'm fairly aware she's not going to be happy, but I also don't expect her to object too much other
than a bit of grumbling." Bjørn defended himself a bit waspishly.

Sonya hadn't even wanted him to attach himself to her. Once she had given in and dictated a position
for him, she then added a number of other people in short order. Miss Galina had succeeded in her
aims to become indispensable, Peter McScruffy seemed to have developed into someone she wanted
to keep, and then there was the young child she was rearranging her entire life around for the long
term.

"So long as I can blame you, I don't rightly care." Announced the infuriating hitman sadistically with
a smirk. "So… castles, hmm?"
"...she likes history."

"I've noticed."
Chapter 72

(Wednesday the 23rd of July, 1969. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Hey mamma?" Shamal posed right before she hastened them both out of her suite to head to the office for the day, absently handing her the purse she had him hold while she fetched some of the school's paperwork she had left in here. "Ever want to be normal?"

Sonya blinked down at him blankly, caught flat-footed by that question. "...define normal, kid."

"Like not a... um... what you are." He finished lamely as she got on with locking her apartment door behind them, so they could go. "I mean in fiery terms and the... um... job you do."

The brat probably hadn't been really happy she more or less dead to the world for the last couple days. She had managed to get the materials to hawk off in order to not require another heavy loan from her 'grandfather', but that really didn't excuse three days of being less than responsive to what attention he needed.

The thief had to find something to do for both Scruffy and Galina for picking up her slack, even if the kid wasn't really all that happy at the major distraction.

'Normal' was... an interesting question.

Probably motivated from those few days of being in the middle of a string of heists and not paying him the bulk of her attention like a parent or guardian should've, but not nearly so much she had been expecting something like this. Renato wasn't remotely 'normal' either, and she wondered if he'd pose the same question to the hitman too.

"Is this an honest question or just a wonder?"

Shamal snagged her free hand in his own, obediently following her down the hallway to the elevators by quickening his shorter stride to keep up. "McScruffy took me to a park yesterday while you were sleeping. It's kind of weird when you don't know the other kids, but I kept being asked if he was my zio or something."

"You have a zio, and a zia. And me and Renato. Do you want more?"

"No! I'm happy enough you're with me, mamma." Insisted the young child forcefully, tugging her hand to convey some more of his honest earnestness. "It's just... I wonder if we will do the whole 'family day' thing like the other kids can."

"It's possible." Allowed the thief thoughtfully. "Not this year, and maybe not next, but I'll be living in Italy with you soon enough. Since that's so, it's possible nonna, nonno, and my siblings might visit at the same time Renato does and we'll do something together as a family unit."

She got a squeeze of the hand as he absorbed that.

"So how does being 'normal' come in?" Sonya asked curiously as she shook her hand free gently to press the call buttons for the elevator. "And you still need to define normal for me."

Scowling a bit cutely as he puzzled over his thoughts, the young Mist followed her absently into the elevator car.
Then he opted to just wave a dark blue wreathed hand around instead of finding a 'delicate' way to put what he wanted to say. "I mean not being a… uh, Cloud. Or a Storm. Or a thief. Just being a normal lady and doing normal lady things."

Technically, Sonya had already done that.

Then Rachel had died being 'normal'.

"No, honestly. Did you want me to try? I'll give nearly anything a shot, but I rather like the challenge of stealing things."

She never had thought about it, beyond the long-ago musing on if getting out of her dictated role as a thief was viable or not. Even if she had decided it wasn't realistic, wondering if she could go straight hadn't come up since Dmitriy asked about it.

Could she go straight with any degree of success?

Get a day job, not steal or kill anyone?

Sonya actually rather doubted it, not with a lot of effort or preparation paid beforehand. She did have the school starting up, and Björn working on investments for her, but given how quickly she ended up spending the bulk of her earned cash through various heists she'd be forced to steal something to provide some more.

She could try writing books honestly, taking advantage of the fact she was already published go give her a bit of a boost. However, she really doubted that would pull in a lot of money.

Additionally, she should probably put some effort into keeping up with her thief skills no matter what she was doing from here on out. Losing her picks and her fucking comfortable boots was depressing, and a rather large indication she had gotten a bit more than uncomfortably rusty being confined behind a desk all day.

Aside her actual profession, she wasn't aware of any way to stop being a user of Dying Will Flames. She had suspicions, and if those were true she wasn't touching that shit with a ten foot pole, but with the lack of confirmation there wasn't anything to be done about her Flames.

Even if she wanted to, to stop being a Cloud, Storm, or whatever her Sun Flames did, that was outside of her reach.

"We'll have family time in Italy, kid. Just be patient."

Shamal sort of cringed into himself, a rather twisted little grimace on his face as they descended in the little death-box of an elevator. "Sorry, mamma."

"I get where you're coming from, brat. So, I'm not annoyed or anything." She reassured him when the doors slid open again to let them out on the ground floor. "But I am what I am, and that's not going to change no matter what is said or tried. While one part of your question might be attainable, the other isn't."

"I know I shouldn't ask for more." He admitted a bit miserably. "But I keep wondering."

"It's completely human to wonder." Sonya offered to hopefully get the child to lighten up about the topic. "Just like it is completely human to dream bigger, want more, and compare what you have to what others have. I'm not even a bit surprised you're wondering if I can, but honestly speaking I'm not sure if I even could."
Her left hand was taken up again, this time with both of his as he followed her out of the hotel lobby.

"Dream as big as you want, I'll help you figure out what's obtainable and what realistically isn't."

"...is it?"

She sighed a bit, exchanging a nod with a vor she recognized from the group that escorted her around during her stealing spree that lost her the last pair of really fucking comfortable boots. "Not for years, I'm afraid. But... around the time you finish the school Renato wants you to attend, I might be able to take a year or so off again just to try."

When did Mafia School, Italy's branch, end anyways?

Were there established 'years' one had to get through, an age limit, or did a student just attend until one was recruited or said student decided they were done?

Hopefully Shamal would be occupied until the kid was around fourteen or so, because she'd need a fair bit of prep to take yet another year off.

Random periods in which she didn't steal might be a good thing, if she could find a way around the whole 'getting rusty' part. The less she was anticipated, the harder any law enforcement would have finding her. Sonya decided she didn't mind being asked to take breaks, but Cherep wasn't going to be told of that.

He'd ask her to do it more than it was comfortable.

"...if you get into a college, no matter for what, I'll spend the entire first year or two firmly home with you." Added the thief thoughtfully as they settled into the back of the car. "How about that?"

Shamal blinked up at her thoughtfully as he buckled himself in. "I'll hold you to it, mamma."

He might not really appreciate the bargain when it came due, but college was a life experience he should at least try.

"Alright then. One last thing." Lightly flicking his nose, which cutely made the kid sneeze, the thief sighed. "I need you to start packing as soon as we get back tonight. I have a pit stop to make on our way back, so we're leaving tomorrow."

He sort of deflated, lowering sad brown eyes to his lap. "...oh."

"We'll still spend every day until Saturday together at the very least, and tomorrow is still a steal-lesson day, but I need another day to make that last stop." Sonya clarified as the vor driving them pulled out of the hotel's driveway. Threading her fingers through his hair got him to be less mopey. "I'll be just you and me, until we get to where I want to go and then catch a plane to Mafia Land where you can spend what you want on whatever. We'll see Tats before we leave there to head to Italy. Okay?"

Shamal nodded slowly, but still didn't look happy.

She wasn't happy she had to give him back for his next school year, so she fully appreciated his little sulk. The thief also didn't really appreciate him unbuckling himself and scooting over to occupy her lap, but supposed it was forgivable since she was indefinitely stronger than any scrap of fabric and perfectly willing to mind his safety.

Sonya still buckled him under her own belt, just in case.
"Where should we send Luigi, then?"

"Mafia Land, in the care of Tats." Sonya absently answered her foster mother, pitching in with helping Galina de-gem a number of jewelry pieces. "We'll take one of the island's planes to Italy, so a small pet on board won't be too much of an issue."

"Alright then. Shamal?" Elisaveta turned to the godchild of her daughter and quirked a smile for the kid. "Sweetheart? Do you want to come with me to pack him up?"

"Her." Corrected the young Mist hastily, then the he bit his lower lip and hesitated.

"Okay, her then? Or do you want to keep her for the night?"

"Today or tomorrow, kid." She interjected blandly, actually lifting her head from her work to give her brat a level look. "You can keep her tonight, but then tomorrow she needs to be shipped off anyways."

Peter looked between the three of them, then shot a faintly confused look to Galina. Rolling her eyes, the Lightning snagged a mostly abandoned desk calendar and flashed him the next month.

What about August?

Err… wait. School years typically started in September and given how successful his godparents seemed to be in this lifestyle it was entirely possible he attended some kind of elitist school. A month for gathering up what he needed for the scholastic year, like supplies or uniforms and more clothing since he was a growing kid, might be entirely warranted for contractual-based income like Sonya typically had.

…he had been out of school for a damn near decade. He was pretty sure forgetting when the school year started and how much a hassle it was could be forgivable. Ignoring the younger brunette's soft huff, the Sun looked back down to his Mist game partner.

Poor kid. Summer vacation with his mother was damn near over and the shift of going back to his homeland had to be jarring, even if he should have the rest of the week left with his mamma.

Sonya sighed, turning around fully instead of remaining half-bent over her desk. "Adding Luigi into the staff we have to manage tomorrow will make things more difficult. I'm not saying you have to send the lizard off now, but this way we definitely won't lose her in the scramble to get to the train tomorrow."

Reluctantly pushing off the couch, the young Mist trudged over to his grandmother moodily. "It's okay, mamma. We can send Luigi to zia today."

Scruffy was entirely unsurprised the game board he and the kid had been playing on evaporated and took this to mean he'd be able to go back to his 'usual' work tomorrow at the earliest.

He'd miss the little smart-ass, but since Sonya didn't seem to wish to linger long with him in Moscow he was sure the moment she could they'd all abscond to wherever else she wanted them to be.

He had the age to understand it and appreciate would be temporary, for Shamal it probably seemed
like another whole lifetime until he got more vacation time to spend with his 'mamma'.

What year was the kid in?

Or did Italians and Russians do the 'form' thing?

Peter mulled that over while the kid gave his godmother a hug and wandered off after his grandmother to go send his pet to… his aunt before heading back to wherever he lived in Italy.

The Sun then missed whatever the woman said next, and Sonya's slightly exasperated call for his attention only jarred him back to the matter at hand well after the older woman and the young boy had left the room.

"Scruffy." The resurrection of his once often used nickname, which had been dropped recently now that he thought about it, finally had the man looking at his boss. "Can you help Galina? I've got to run to the train station myself, and she wants help transporting some of this to the fences."

"…ah…"

"The clan's fences, we won't be leaving the building." Clarified the Lightning a bit shortly.

"Sure then." He could be a packhorse, which was fine enough. He might not be in the peak of physical health still, but some stairs with a pocketful of metal… oh, wait.

Sonya hadn't waited for him to gather his thoughts, apparently after he agreed she had left before Peter fully realized the scope of the work before him and Galina.

…additionally, just why the Lightning might be a little annoyed.

"How much did she leave us to handle?" Asked Scruffy tentatively.

Galina gave him a flat look. "Three of 'her' heists' worth. Almost three hundred kilograms of material."

It really did bite when your boss was a tiny woman that could lift more than humanly possible, and she absentmindedly forgot they weren't nearly as strong. Like ripping jewels out of their settings, only the thief could do the inset ring mounts by tearing the metal in half and they had to stick to pendants and earrings just so they could realistically bend the fittings without her strength.

Admittedly Sonya might expect Galina to strong-arm some help, but… nearly three hundred kilograms was likely around or over six hundred pounds.

"How much do we have to move then?"

"Not nearly as much, about fifty kilograms is earmarked for the school as is. But that still leaves most of the metal… unless you think you'd like some of it." Admitted the woman shortly, gesturing to the slowly building pile of scrap metal on the far side of the desk.

Gold, silver, platinum, steel, titanium, and several alloy mixes Peter couldn't identify on sight made up the heap of discarded fittings and broken chain.

A… big heap. Leaning halfway up the heavy wooden desk, having been added to over the last three days while their boss collected even more.

He ran a hand through his short hair as he warily eyed the mess left behind. "…uh. I can't do anything with that until I have the equipment to melt it down. And I didn't ask Sonya for that, just
gem cutting tools."

"So, what, you need a forge?" Galina asked a bit skeptically, giving him not only a slightly admonishingly look but also a raised eyebrow.

Probably for neglecting to mention he'd need more tools eventually.

"A crucible really, but… that's only for metal and settings." Scruffy informed her patiently.

He wasn't going to take offense. Their boss could occasionally be a bit scattered and did rely on her to handle the smaller details when she had bigger distractions to deal with.

"If I wanted to make settings for the gemstones I'm going to cut for various tests, then yes. However, I'm a long way from that point. Until I know what to cut and how, giving them settings would be rather pointless aside the practice in doing so."

She turned to give the broken collection of metal thoughtfully. "Should we then set some aside for you to use later on?"

"A long time." Repeated the Sun with a measure of amusement. "And keeping that at hand would let someone stumble upon it later and connect the Boss Lady to her work, right? I think she'll end up with more eventually, she's proven that long pauses don't bother her that much, so no actually. I don't need any of this right now."

"…Scruffy, that means we have to move all of that down two floors with the rest of the loot we're to hawk off for the operating cash."

"…right. Forgot about that. Let me see."

Bending to the task of sorting out at least some silver and gold to keep, the man determinedly didn't think about who these broken and shattered pieces devoid of their crystals had been intended for.

There were the ripped in half rings, bent and shattered into shards when it didn't give as Sonya wanted them to, that might've been commissioned or created with the intent of them being gifted to a sweetheart or lover. Pendant settings and the backings of various earrings, their prongs bent at odd angles for him and Galina to slip the rocks they once contained free, probably for a mother or yet more significant others.

Pausing at an oddly intact brooch, which was just missing the gemstones as if someone had yet to set them, Scruffy snorted softly as he realized why Shamal hadn't had an issue with helping in the task.

The brat had probably just Mist Flamed his pieces apart, rather than figure out how to bend the metal with his child sized finger strength. They didn't have the delicate tools to enable this kind of deconstruction, but then again a Mist's ability was Construction.

Smartass. The kid had reassured him that he could handle it just as well as his mamma could, then cheated like hell in proving it.

Peter was going to miss the brat.

(Thursday the 24th of July, 1969. Belorussky Station, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)
Sonya now had a very good appreciation for why his teacher had defined Shamal as 'creative'.

The brat had not wanted to leave Moscow at all. He had utterly refused to go to bed on time last night, which meant he was both crabby and tired this morning. He dragged out saying goodbye to her foster parents for an entire hour, mostly with the help of Valera and their little pseudo-rivalry going on.

Then, after three mini-fights with her baby brother and giving Lisa several hugs because he couldn't decide if he should give Arseniy more than one or just give his grandmother the extras and ask they be re-gifted, the kid tried to lose his luggage.

While it was all still in the boot of the car.

She had to pitch in for the utterly confused vor that had driven them... which now that she thought about it he looked a bit familiar to her.

...at least he wasn't trying to help her steal shit. So long as he wasn't doing that, he could do whatever the hell he wanted.

"Brat. We have all day together. In a tiny-ass train compartment." Sonya informed him a bit shortly, more than exasperated with the miniature revolt the kid was trying to throw. "We'll only get to where I want to go tomorrow or late tonight. I kind of want to get there, because I really don't want to be in these shoes for a second more than I have to."

Shamal huffed grumpily, still digging his heels in to the point she didn't want to muscle him around in case she accidentally harmed him.

He was also clinging rather hard to a lamp post, so he wouldn't have to get on the train.

"Shamal, I swear to your God. Move. Your. Ass. If you don't..." She honestly didn't know what she'd do, but likely ask the vor that drove them and was amusedly watching her kid throw a fit so he wouldn't have to leave to loosen Shamal's grip enough she could pick him up.

The young Mist flinched a bit guiltily, and although achingly slowly he did finally let the painted black iron post go. Snatching him up before he recovered enough to try another method of which to waste time in hopes they missed the train, she positioned him on her hip and shot a flat look at the vor who elected to snicker instead of help.

"I can take it from here."

With another snicker, the man wordlessly turned around and wandered out of the train station.

"...look kid, I don't want to give you back either. But I've got a lot of shit I have to do that you can't come with me for." China honestly, and there were the twelve more heists she needed to get that apartment with Tatiana on Mafia Land. Which... she barely had enough work to spread to one bored Lackey much less enough to give three vory escorting her around. "And hopefully, this time next year we'll be moving into a house instead of just doing this visit for the summer thing."

Shamal merely imitated a heavy sack of potatoes in her arms.

Right... well, he'd probably feel better after a nap or something. He only did get a couple hours between fussing about last night and when she woke him to finish packing. They could do a stealing-orientated lecture when he woke up later on today.

More 'Cloud naps', but she'd take that in favor of an especially grumpy Mist brat.
Sonya grabbed her own carrying case, and the backpack her brat was using as a traveling bag, in one hand and stepped up onto the train they were taking to Ukrainian SSR.

The Conductor seemed to be an old hand at managing around grumpy or sulking children, and thankfully she had their tickets in the outside pocket of her purse. It didn't mean she liked letting the man fetch their tickets, but at least she didn't have to drop anything.

"You're being a bit of a brat." The thief informed the kid a bit irritably, contorting her hand a bit oddly to wrench open the compartment door without breaking it.

"...but this means I won't see you again for months, mamma." Muttered Shamal into her shoulder, stubbornly not facing her or the compartment or anything. "I don't want to leave."

Shoving their luggage in the rack provided, she huffed and stretched out on one of the benches provided without putting the Mist down.

Arranging him over her stomach and chest, she awkwardly propped her head on the arm rest. "If I can't get on with my work, then I won't be able to move to Italy myself brat. The longer you drag your feet now, the longer it will take later."

There were indistinct and probably not nice things said into her collarbone as the kid made himself more comfortable.

"I know it's going to suck, but this isn't the way to show it. It's more frustrating than cute."

"...I'm a boy, mamma. We're not cute."

"Well I think you're cute." Sonya insisted with a smirk, then glared at the low-heeled boots she had been forced to buy in order to have actual footwear until she bought replacements. "And I'm not only older but the godmother here, so what I say goes."

Shamal lifted his head to give her a highly unimpressed look. Then his boney forehead impacted her collarbone again as he returned to sulking. "So, you only love me when I'm cute?"

"I love you just fine when you're being a little snot." She answered amusedly. "It's just easier to show it when you're not being a brat."

Her answer was an entirely unconvincing huff as the train started chugging to pull out of the station.

"...love you too, mamma."

...utter little snot.

Why, exactly, did that seem to make the mini-fit he just threw not seem as bad anymore?

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 24th of July, 1969 continued. Kharkiv, Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.)

"Where are we?"

"...a city in Ukraine."

"I got that much, mamma." Shamal informed her a bit pointedly.

His godmother stuck her nose in air with a little smirk. "Ho? You don't say."
He resigned himself to being teased for the rest of the day and maybe some of tomorrow.

His *mamma* had been in a weirdly chipper mood once he had woken up from her rather stifling early train-ride nap, which had taken up until around dinnertime. They were to eat apparently somewhere in the city before catching a late flight to Mafia Land.

He had slept through a lot of the trip, and only woke up again when they left the Russian SSR far behind. Now they were wandering around a city while he tried to muster his fuzzy thoughts and she looked for something specific.

She stopped suddenly, which almost caused Shamal to run into the back of her leg. "*Here we are. I'm going to talk in a different language for a bit, try not to wander off.*"

Shamal gave her a curious look, but she didn't respond to that and instead knocked on a door.

Which… didn't look *exactly* the same as the rest of the buildings on the street. That was very odd after two months in a place where conformity was the rule.

As a Mist, he had a rather good idea of what was going on by just body language. It was debatable if that was what was really was going on or just his imagination, but it was something.

The guy that opened the door hadn't been what the Storm-Cloud expected, but the abrupt chatter of another, older man was. That man was old and creaky, and apparently not happy.

…or not happy about his godmother's footwear.

In response, she pulled a ruined pair of boots out of her big purse and gave them over.

The old guy exclaimed and wailed over the tattered leather, spinning on his heel and walking off with the boots.

"*…drama queen.*" Sonya remarked softly, reaching down absently for Shamal's hand. "*Come on, brat. This might take a bit.*"

This was where she had wanted to go?

Curious, in a highly skeptical kind of way, he followed her into the store filled with leather and furs.

Sonya went straight for a stool, slipping her low-heeled boots off and then helping him up to her lap. She then took his scuffed leather loafers off too.

"Mamma?"

"Boots."

"*Italian? I can do this.*" The creaky older man came back from a far corner of his shop with the ruined leather and a sharp pair of tiny sheers in hand. "*Good evening, little man. Your mother has been very naughty.*"

"*It wasn't my choice. Had I known it was going to happen, I wouldn't have worn my boots.*"

The tattered boots were waved in the air as if to refute her words. Huffing, the thief merely extended a leg to the first younger man who had a pair of stacked bowls of some grey goop.

"*Shamal here requires a pair of shoes as well, preferably along the same lines as what he's wearing but… better.*"
It was… for feet casts?

Shamal watched in confusion as his godmother's feet were first measured with the plate-thing that had been hidden under the flat and square-ish tubs, then set in the grey stuff until it squished up between her toes.

"Doesn't that feel weird, mamma?"

"Russian, kid. Vacation isn't over yet. But yes." Getting a finger poking his nose in admonition first, Sonya then glanced warily at the younger man before turning back to the old man economically cutting the seams of her old boots apart with very practiced movements. "Two or three child-sized shoes, one for now and one to grow into once he outpaces his current size. Dress shoes in between those sizes just in case."

Did that mean he got to put his feet in the goo too?

The old guy chittered something to his employee, who was probably counting under his breath as he held the goo-tubs. That guy then glanced distractedly at Shamal's feet, gave an exaggerated nod to show he heard, then carefully pulled the flat-ish tubs of goo away from her feet.

His mamma huffed, flexing her toes and planting them again on the bars that supported the stool they were sitting on. The tubs were taken to the old guy, and smaller ones were taken from the back for him.

He then missed whatever the old guy was doing with the tubs from his godmother, he wanted to see what the goo felt like. The measuring plate was the same as the one used in the shoe store next to the tailoring shop his godfather favored for his clothes shopping, but the goo… was cold.

…and squishy, but apparently he wasn't supposed to squish it from the aggravated sigh the younger man gave when he did so.

"Should we ship them, then? Darling with the marvelous legs?" Asked the creaky man fastidiously, taking the top part of his godmother's old boots from the tattered soles and tossing said shredded rubber to a bin set right behind his work bench. "Or will you pick these up at the same time as the rest of your order?"

Shamal pulled a face, shooting the old guy a suspicious look. Was he flirting with his mamma?

"I'll pick them up."

"Well-ah. Oh ho! My apologies, young man. She's a bit too young for me." Professed the elderly man with a fluttery hand, planting the other on his hip. "I just adore her lovely, utterly perfect legs. She could be a model easily with those. You only see a feature like that once in a lifetime, and that fact my leather gets to adorn those marvelous features…"

Sonya pulled a slight confused face as she glanced down at the same feature as if she stared hard enough she'd see the same thing eventually. Shamal was just happy his suspicions weren't right.

"…I thought he was just gayer than my brother." His godmother muttered to herself in her native language, before straightening up and switching back to Italian. "Can you fix those tonight, or should we get a hotel room and pick them up tomorrow?"

Creaky and flirty examined the halves of a pair of boots in front of him intently. "There's about an hour's worth of work here, darling. I won't have you wandering around in those shoddy knock-offs, so just sit tight for a little bit. Preferably, while displaying some lovely motivation please."
They would have to wait an entire hour?

At least his mamma was on the ball, she pulled her copy of 'The Grimms' Fairy Tales' out of her big purse. Shamal snagged it before she let the pseudo leather bag to the floor, digging through a lot of random things until he found the small canvas bag she had gotten from nonna.

Which were the sweet rye biscuits filled with fruit bits.

If he had to wait another hour for dinner, he needed something to nibble on.

His godmother snickered, taking her purse back only to drop it and cracking open the book.

(Friday the 25th of July, 1969. Mafia Land.)

Shamal didn't remotely like plane rides as he thought he might.

Sonya also wasn't remotely surprised at that, the brief moments of excessive pressure and boring lengths of any trip by air weren't exciting at all. While the roar of a plane's engine taking off, not to mention the sensation of being pressed into your seat during take-off were interesting… the rest of it wasn't until the plane touched down again and you got bounced a bit.

Poor brat had all his travel related illusions shattered this summer.

Carrying him again, the Mist had some issues with the air pressure making ears pop and was relentlessly gnawing on the strip of gum she gave him to help but wasn't all-together just yet, the thief got rather far into the island before he was ready to be put down again.

The Zolotov owned condos weren't the best on the island but weren't all that far away from the VIP condos were located. Her brat was dutifully impressed with the sights, because compared to Renato's single apartment it was really fancy for something owned by Russians.

Might actually be part of why her fellow Zolotovs weren't representative in Mafia Land in any significant force. It was overly ornate for Soviet sensibilities, worse than the magpie-like way they cluttered even their own headquarters, and that meant off-putting.

Even their headquarters, decorated with loot from past heists, was more about practicality than the wealth on display. A lot of it rotated when things were safe to hawk off and more came in. Making use of what they had rather than putting the priceless on display because it was just expensive.

Again, Sonya wasn't a good Soviet girl however she wasn't an American one anymore. She didn't particularly care much, just that there was space inside that was designated as 'hers'.

Well… hers and her sister's.

Shamal obediently followed along to the bank of elevators at the far end of the lobby, giving the concierge the stink eye instead of giving up his backpack even if she had dictated them to pick up their luggage from the airport terminal using the ticket stubs she still held.

"Why didn't Mister Renato bring me here when he asked you to help me?"

"He got you here before I could return." She answered honestly enough, examining her purse thoughtfully.
It had faithfully served her rather well for a couple years, but it was showing the wear. Finding another purse that didn't look like a tote was going to be a bit hard, especially one that could hold as much as this bag-like one could. Replacing it before it broke was… probably not likely for her.

She was rather hard on her gear, and that didn't even touch on the possible accidental Disintegration in the middle of a heist.

Getting off on her floor while still eying her purse, the Storm-Cloud let herself into the condo then came to an abrupt halt at what she found inside of it.

Verde had… appropriated the living room for some unholy twisted mass of metal and wires. It spread from the kitchen all the way to the far side of the living room, was liberally draped over Adrik's thighs and practically cocooned the scientist-type furiously working on something with wire bits and a soldering iron.

Shamal curiously poked his head around her thigh and the doorway to see what the holdup was to getting to his lizard and whistled lowly as he took in the same sights.

"Sup, Boss Lady." Her fellow Russian greeted cheerfully. "We were expecting you yesterday."

"...I had gotten slightly waylaid due to fixing some... difficulties." Plucking her godchild up, she cautiously picked her way through the electrified minefield cautiously as to not ruin her recently mended boots again. "Does he know his lab coat is charring under the voltage?"

"I don't think Verde even feels it, honestly."

"Mamma? What language is that?"

"English, kid." Switching languages to his native one, she addressed him instead. "*I'm not sure when Renato will get here, so you're bunking with me until then. We can kip with Tats, or I'll toss the boys out to a hotel room for the night, or I guess we can go break into Renato's place instead until he gets back from wherever... or maybe he's here?"

"Let's do that!"

Sonya frowned thoughtfully, wondering if surprising the hitman in a place that should be 'safe'... ish, was a good idea. She was actually kind of surprise the hitman hadn't popped up on the walk here, honestly. "...if he doesn't show up before bedtime, I guess we can."

Verde, either finished with what he was doing or alerted by the voices, raised his green head and peered at them irritably. "Smoking around children is a bad idea, Sonya."

She gave him the look that deserved. "I am not the one smoking."

While the scientist exclaimed, rather nastily, about his electrical issues as apparently it was not what he wanted Adrik carefully extracted himself from what he was doing to follow her to the bedroom he and the other man had been sharing for the last few months by appearances. "So, what's the plan, then?"

"Russian, Adrik. Shamal doesn't understand English. And... I have no idea. Renato and I will figure something out." Examining the changes that had happened to her room over the time Verde had been in residence, the thief sighed and dropped Shamal to the bedspread... then toed the little cot thing she was pretty sure was the other Russian's bed. "Did you need something?"

"Wondering when we're no longer under house arrest." Adrik admitted wryly, leaning up against the
"...probably not for another week or so, when we can actually address the issue and the news can spread." Sonya's worse-case scenario was murdering off the syndicate that was demanding Renato hunt her down, but she was honest enough to admit she didn't expect that to be the end of it. "Has it been that bad?"

"Verde's nicely distracted for the time being, but I'm getting a bit restless."

"You're not that identifiable, I'm pretty sure you can go out and about as long as you keep your mouth shut."

The wiry man gave her a flat look. "Just feeling the love here, oh so much love."

Shamal shot the man an ugly, suspicious look. Slinking back up to the bed instead of hurrying off to see Luigi and ensuring his lizard was doing fine with the trip he took through the postage system. …she didn't want to know.

"I'm also rather broke, just hanging here and doing exactly nothing."

She gave a rather heavy sigh. "No, you're not. You were just as good at picking pockets as I was back when we were kids. What do you really want?"

"I can steal enough to live off of, sure. But for anything else?" With a shrug, Adrik rotated a wrist in the limpest looking wave she had ever seen. "Currently, I can't even afford a ticket off this rock."

More money troubles. The blonde woman rolled her eyes, then huffed again as Verde came into view and then hastily back peddled once he realized she was in the bedroom he was intending to exchange his charred shirt in for a non-burned on.

"Really, man? She won't bite…"

"...I was unaware Sonya was in there." The Lightning defended himself in a tone a bit touchy sounding. "Whereas you may have a positive self-image, I am fully aware I am not what most women find physically attractive."

"You look fine, Verde." Sonya called out shortly, in hopes this wouldn't be a thing. "But as you have occupied the couch rather handily, there is little else to be seated upon if one is tired of traveling."

"...ah."

The scientist still didn't come back to replace his shirt, and since Adrik re-faced her the thief assumed he wasn't reassured much.

...yeah, they were crashing the hitman's apartment until the man was back.

Way too many people in the same small space made everything significantly more awkward. First, though… they needed to wait for Shamal's luggage, so he'd have more than a change of clothes that he had already gone through.

"I'll set you up with an expense account through Björn." Sonya decided after checking on the brat, who had taken the opportunity to stretch out horizontally while she conversed with the other Russian. "You use it for ridiculous shit, I will come after you and cut you off."

"Noted, Boss Lady."
Renato, after three back-to-back hits in aims of collecting the money the brat's next school year would need before that bill came due, took a moment to tiredly appreciate some of the chaos Mafia Land was famed for.

It might be in his way, but that didn't mean he had to go spoil someone's fun.

There was some kind of near-riot going on, without the damages and bullet holes that typically resulted from an invasion event. Whatever had his neighbors riled up, it had spread pretty far down the street levels to the point the raucous atmosphere seemed almost party-like.

Certainly, there was more than enough booze being hawked on the street corner to warrant a party and some kind of betting pool was being built up.

Confused, the hitman scanned the milling loiterers to catch the eye of someone that would hopefully explain what the hell was going on. Only to be interrupted by some naked man being bodily thrown out of a window.

The Sun blinked at the sight, and the crowd's raucous cheers and catcalls as the disorientated streaker stumbled upright the best he could while also shielding his groin from view, then Renato belatedly realized that window was his living room one.

Someone was either being very neighborly indeed… or was about to get shot in the head.

It didn't take him long to force a path, he was rather well known… at least by the women. They seemed under the impression he had a lady love stashed in his apartment who was doing the entertainment, which… he didn't correct.

If it was true, well… an interesting method by which to gain his attention. If not, then a bullet to the brain was still on the table.

"Alright, brat. What's the next one?"

"…can you kick him out the window anyways?"

Pausing as he recognized those voices, and the language, Renato stopped and shamelessly eavesdropped outside his own front door.

What the hell was Sonya doing here with Shamal?

"We do it too many times and it'll get stale. I assure you, there's another defenestration card in there somewhere." Reassured the thief pleasantly, which probably meant she was the one doing the throwing.

"Aww… okay." A shuffle of some heavy paper sounded, and Shamal came back with the answer his godmother was waiting for. "…the… Queen lady, but she's upside down."

"Empress, inverted." Corrected the Russian, then there was a pause. "…wait, that's just 'rejoicing public' and 'the unraveling of involved matters'."

"…can you throw him out of the window anyways?"
"Sure, brat."

Having heard quite enough, Renato cautiously opened the heavy door to fully see what the hell was going on.

Sonya was literally kicking a buck-naked man out of his window.

The pile of clothing and various firearms next to Shamal's spot on his sofa probably meant said men had nefarious or at least objectionable aims for their presence, but that really didn't explain why they were here at all.

"...little dragon lady, what the hell are you doing?"

"One second," she responded absently, giving an exceptionally strong kick which implanted a bruised image of her boot's small heel into the man's naked butt cheek but didn't quite force his protesting form through the frame, "just let me..."

"...oops." Was Shamal's opinion, swiftly hiding his godmother's tarot cards behind his back.

As if the hitman hadn't already known what was going on, or what his role in the proceedings was.

With a rather ominous crack, she forced her latest victim out of the window finally to a loud cheer from the street-level. Two stories down.

"There. Hello, Renato. Did you know you had assassins?"

He stared at her flatly.

Sonya had the utter gall to blink back innocently. "What?"

There were two more idiots shivering in a combination of exposure and fear up against the wall furthest from her, the couch had apparently been made up for someone to crash upon, and an entire pile of the would-be assassins' things to deal with.

There was an almost overpowering urge to laugh like a lunatic or snatch up the brat and make himself home on the couch to watch the last bits play out.

There was also a small part of him that wondered what the hell the Russian was doing in his apartment, but given he knew exactly who was in her condo it wasn't a stretch to figure out why she was loitering in his place with the brat instead of risk a lot less secured hotel room.

"Don't let me stop you." Renato was not nearly tired enough to give miss to the rest of this performance for little things like 'details' and 'exhaustion'. "What's the fate of the next one?"

"...good question. Brat? What's the next card?"

"Um... some old guy." The Mist obediently responded as the hitman sprawled out on the end of the couch not occupied by him. He flipped the old card stock around, so his godmother could see. "With a stick and a lamp."

"A lantern and a walking stick. The Hermit. Treason, corruption, dissimulation, and just plain old-fashioned roggery." Sonya listed off as he made himself comfortable on the pillow he was pretty damn sure had been taken from his bed. She studied her next victim thoughtfully. "Sometimes though, prudence. Generally, it's just more prudent to kill those that try to kill you..."

Sonya frowned at the man glaring up at her and glanced at the brat.
"…Shamal, cover your ears and turn away for a bit." Renato drawled out, pulling his gun from the side holster.

He would not object to being the one to shoot the asshole, and frankly he liked her surprise visit a lot more than he would a set of possibly inept assassins lying in wait for his return. Even as tired and as travel worn as he was.

That didn't mean he wasn't annoyed at the sudden advent of Russian and child, but he still liked them better.

The best of both worlds, he could deal with.

Shamal made himself a sleeping mask and a set of bulky headphones from his Mist Flames, then wrapped his arms around them once they were on. Renato shot the second-to-last Storm-Cloud victim through the head after sternly calling the brat's name to be sure he couldn't be heard, and she dropped a palm full of Storm Flames on the body to get rid of it.

Disintegrating bodies were gruesomely fascinating to watch.

"Right." Once the body was so much greasy ash and a smear on the hardwood floors she knuckled the brat's head lightly to get the young Mist to dispel his Constructions and look up at her. "Next one?"

Shamal picked up the stack of cards from his lap and flicked through them until he found another that wasn't a numbered depiction. "Um… two naked people."

Renato blinked, then plucked the card from his hands to see for himself.

…there were two naked people painted on the card. Not in any great detail, and the images were positioned with the woman's ridiculously long hair obscuring a few important bits of each, but they were naked and it showed.

"The Lovers, attraction, beauty, love, and trials overcome." Sonya pondered the meaning for a moment, then turned back to her last victim. "I think… that means you can leave."

"…aww. Can't you throw him out a window too?"

The last naked man didn't waste any time, or breath, on asking if that was true that he could go. He bolted like the hounds of hell were after him for the front door and the freedom beyond without so much as glancing to the pile of clothing heaped next to the couch.

Huffing a laugh, the hitman turned back to his entirely unexpected roommates. "So… can I ask what this is all about? The 'you're living here' bit, I got the assassin one."

"Do you know how many people are living in a space only designed for two back at my place?" Sonya demanded a bit shortly, a hand on her hip. "It was this or a hotel, and Verde's got some snarled mess of wires occupying my living room I'm not sure can be cleared out in a reasonable amount of time. I figured it would be easier to just get a hotel room, but then again… there was your place. And you didn't exactly tell me where else aside Moscow I could take the brat."

…point to the thief. Renato handed the card back to the kid and hoisted himself up off the couch, bringing the pillow with him and handing her that in turn. "Well… fine then. I insist you take the bed, Sonya."

"I've been just fine on the-"
"Humor me. You're a lady, with a child, and therefore should have the bed. I don't mind you came here but take the damn bed. There wasn't a reason to suffer a night on my couch, and frankly you do it again and I'll replace it with just another bed so you can't."

She gave him a highly unimpressed look for the threat, but instead of argue just motioned for the brat to follow her. "Come on, kid. I should've had you tucked in at least an hour or so ago. Tats wants to hit the beach tomorrow."

Shamal scrambled off the couch, delicately put his godmother's tarot cards on the coffee table, gave a lightning-quick hug to Renato's kneecap, and bolted off in the direction of his bedroom.

He rubbed the back of his neck, the tiredly started stripping for what rest he could get on his couch. He'd risk slipping in with the thief some other time, when she wasn't also sleeping with Shamal.

He was going to invite himself to the beach, though.

Just because they did have some business to figure out, and partially because he wanted to see if she'd wear the same bikini as last time.

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(Monday the 28th of July, 1969. South Beach, Mafia Land.)

When Renato announced his intention to crash their little 'beach party' before they split up for breakfast and contractual reasons, Sonya had expected the man to show up in full suit and tie per his usual.

The fact the hitman did own a pair of swimming trunks, even if they were a lurid yellow streaked with orange stripes, was… bemusing.

He still wore his fedora, because of course he did.

Sonya was guarding their spot for the towels while Tatiana was off playing in the surf with Shamal, so she had a moment to adjust to the older Italian's swimwear. "Renato, that is singularly blinding."

"Why thank you. I'm rather proud of them." The ridiculous man announced as bright as his attire.

He then appropriated Tatiana's towel to stretch out his lanky but still muscular frame upon, tipping his hat to shade his face and folding both hands behind his head.

Rolling her eyes at the silliness of her friend, she went back to rubbing sunscreen on her skin before she burned lobster red. "…what are you going to do about the contract?"

"The one that asked me to kill you? Little to nothing myself, honestly." Admitted the hitman without so much as a twitch.

"Renato… that is stupid."

"Did you want me to kill you?"

"Well… no, but that still means that backing out of a contract is stupid."

The man tilted his fedora just enough to peer at her from under the brim. "I've done a lot of supposedly stupid stuff, then. It's not the first time I've done so."
She glanced over at him over a shoulder she was working the lotion into. "So, you just expect it to evaporate into the ether?"

"I expect it to piss people off and earn me more assassins." Renato corrected her flatly. "Which… also, brings something else up."

Sonya examined the new amount of lotion on her hand, and then wondered how to get it on her back. "…oh?"

"…Renato Sinclair needs to die."

She froze, then turned to give him a hard look. "Explain. Better. Now."

The Sun actually propped himself up on an elbow, adjusting his hat to give her an equally hard look back. "I've made a lot of mistakes the past couple of years, Sonya. Especially when I was younger. No matter what I do now, it's always going to follow me. Or worse, the brat. Once you get a solid position to care for Shamal, I'll spend some time erasing my past. But that means I won't be visiting for a long while."

"…you are explaining that to Shamal." Sonya decided firmly after a long moment, scowling even if he had an actual reason. She still didn't like it, the idea or the motivation behind it. "And fuck's sake, Renato… why now?"

"Those assassins you dealt with last night aren't exactly unusual for me. It's getting a bit… ridiculous to keep on top of." Continued the hitman absently, not dropping down to the towel again but looking out over the ocean where her sister was entertaining their godchild. "I can either try merely surviving it or start over and eliminate them on the sly while still an unknown to make a new reputation as one not to be fucked with. Preferably, before the brat has to contend with my less than stellar reputation while trying to establish himself as a made man."

"I promised Shamal we will have family time in Italy. I do not care how you do it, you are not making a liar of me."

Renato huffed, but didn't protest.

She glared down at the white sticky mess still coating her hands, trying to think of someway she wouldn't be losing her best friend for a few years.

"Huh… didn't know I was that important to you."

"Of course you are. Outside of my family, you are my closest friend." Sonya snapped back moodily. "I honestly do not like this, Renato. At all."

"You'll be more than occupied fulfilling all of Shamal's hopes for a mother-figure that you'll barely have time to miss me." Predicted the hitman airily, dropping back down to the sandy towel and stretching out again. "It'll only be for a couple years, I'll be back in time to teach the brat how to shave."

She slapped her slimy hand on his abs irritably, out of locations of where to rub it in and lacking the contortion skills to reach the middle of her own back. "So… what? You are going to do nothing about this one contract you've been working on for months and hopes nothing blows up on you until you can make a clean break?"

"Of course not. We'll just have to think of a creative way around it all."
"You might want to give me the details then, or I will be of no help."

He sighed, then rattled off what he knew of the situation and how it tied into her and her 'guests'.

More specifically, how he figured it out from one scene of a crime half a world away because she had both used her Cloud and Storm Flames and there was one surviving security tape that showed only one attacker. What he was hired for, what Don Vongola wanted instead, and what he expected would be amended to fit her instead of some nebulous Cloud objecting to some American syndicate's treatment of another Flame user.

She didn't quite know how he twigged onto her being Russian from 'a stealthy Cloud', nor why she couldn't have had an accomplice with Storm Flames as backup or something.

That was probably why she wasn't a hitwoman, though.

Honestly speaking, she didn't know how Renato might wiggle out of what was asked of him. If she had to, she would work for Don Vongola for a short while just to solve some of this. Preferably Tyr, she liked that Sky better.

How that would interfere with her work back in Russia-

"Renato… I have a question. Several of them."

"…ho?"

She thrust her sunscreen at him first. "Do up my back and answer a few, would you?"

The hitman eyed the bottle with interest, then slanted her a smirk as he plucked it from her hand. "It would be my pleasure."

________________________________________________________________________________________

(Tuesday the 29th of July, 1969. St. Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

"No, I don't know what they're planning on that front. I was playing with Shamal on the beach while they hashed out their plan." Tatiana informed the far-off Lightning in Russia. "Now Nya won't tell me more than 'we have an idea'."

"Well… I'm glad they have an idea." Snarked Galina bitchily from an office that actually sort of temporarily belonged to a certain blonde woman. "Any guess on what it might be about?"

"I think it has something to do with what Adrik is doing for her. Renato's been spending an interesting amount of time with him, coaching him on something they're playing mum about."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. Boss Lady, I've a question. Why does your sister like the asshole?"

"Long familiarity, and he can be quite charming when he puts some effort into it." She divulged easily, wrapping the cord of the phone around an index finger while she glanced over the personal intake of the new Russian Flame nurses and the ones scheduled for arrival next week. "They have known each other a damn near decade, and they've been scratching each other's back since the near beginning. Of course she's fond of him."

"…I suppose he's a bit different when you don't just meet him, and he's being an asshole to the vory that want a damn good look if he hurt the near daughter of their fellow." Mused the other woman
very, very grudgingly. "Or to those just curious over a visiting hitman from another country. Are you sure he's not just faking it? He's slick enough I'd believe it."

"I highly doubt it. Renato's got a really good reputation with the women here. They adore him. It's weird, because he's slept with a lot of them and never went back for more." With a sigh, she glanced at Avdotya to see if her break was over yet or not. The younger Storm nurse grimaced slightly, which meant it was getting close. "Look, he's not nearly as bad as some of the men I've treated over the last couple of years. And he's a surprisingly loyal bastard, this situation alone is a sign of that. Give him a chance? You'll confused the shit out of Nya if you keep a grudge against him and she can't figure out why."

Galina snorted softly, which echoed a bit tinier through the phone line more than usual. "I'll reserve judgement until I know him better, but only for you."

"I'm touched, Lina. But I've gotta go, my lunch hour is almost over. Anything you want me to pass on?"

"We're good on funds now, so not really. The metals we were able hawk quickly, and the jewels will take longer but will provide an income for us while the school is on-going. Usov would like to know when she's coming back so his little 'project' thing can be started, but that's not all that important."

"Unless you know exactly what 'project' that is, it might be." Humming thoughtfully, she pondered what news she had to pass back. Björn had something… right? "Oh! Nya's Lackey put in that contract for McScruffy's tools, right? It's been picked up, maybe a week or two and we'll have it."

"I'll take some of the raw jewels out of the pile of gems to hawk, then." Mused the Lightning thoughtfully. "Thank you for the update, Boss Lady."

"You really need to stop calling me that." Tatiana half-ordered in amusement. "I won't be offended if you switch to calling Nya 'Boss Lady'."" Avdotya waved hesitantly, attracting the older nurse's attention to the fact their doctor was coming in search of them.

"…shut, Lina. I'll talk to you later. Bye." Hanging up quickly, which would annoy the other woman but couldn't be helped, the Sun nurse gathered up the files she had been absently pouring over while talking over the phone and rose from the duty station. "Sorry, Avdotya. Do you know any of these? Nya's good for the technical detail, but personality can be a hit or miss."

The Storm gave her a pointed look, but obediently turned her attention to the files brought along by the latest group of Flame trainees to learn various aspects of medical practices. "I'm not sure how much help I will be, Nurse Primakova. It's been a long while since I've been back to Moscow."

"English, ladies." Doctor Kappel ordered in exasperation as he stepped into the nurse's station. "Are you done with your phone call, Primakova?"

"Erm… heh, sorry Doctor Kappel. I've also looked over your suggestions of where to put the next group and can't see a problem myself."

The German huffed through his thin bladed nose softly, pressing his half-moon glasses farther up the bridge of his nose. "Take another look, please. When you're not distracted gossiping with old friends."

"That's not entirely correct, sir. Sometimes, Lina and I discuss the next group of nurses." Tatiana protested, then smiled sheepishly. "…sometimes."
He shot a dry look to the Storm nurse. "Really?"

Avdotya coughed once, shaking her head slightly as she buried her nose in the files. "I shouldn't comment, Doctor Kappel."

"I'm sure." Observed the physician dryly. "Nurse Primakova, please *do* make the rounds this time. If you seem to have the time to fit it into your busy schedule."

…shit. she hated having to listen to other doctors try to 'poach' her, and then getting out of it while also not pissing them off just in case they had something she wanted to learn was *hard*.

Although… better her than the newest crop of trainees. Avdotya kept pretending she didn't understand enough English when it was her turn, which was more believable than most of the excuses the redhead could come up with for each doctor.

Not quite a punishment, but annoying enough Kappel was probably just spreading the joy he was feeling around.

Today probably hadn't been the best day to test his patience with non-hospital distractions.

Whoops…
Renato waited until Sonya left his apartment to have a morning smoke, then he turned the heat under the bacon down to a low simmer and faced Shamal. "Brat, we need to have a quick man-to… brat, chat."

He blinked up at him suspiciously, then slinked over to haul himself up one of the kitchen chairs.

Even if he was told to keep his lizard off any surface they ate off of already, and Luigi was contently lounging in his hands. "About what?"

"Do you realize the full consequences of what your mamma is doing?" He asked seriously, making his tone hard enough the sometimes attention-flighty Mist actually give the question adequate thought. "I can count the number of people I've ever met that successfully told their syndicates to fuck off on one hand… and still have fingers left over."

To prove it, he raised a hand and folded down his pointer finger with his thumb to leave just three to be counted.

"Your mamma is doing that generally lethal thing just for you, and from the looks of it she's going to get away with pulling it off. Possibly putting herself in an even better position when everything's said and done. Which is so damn rare I've never heard of that happening before." Renato continued sardonically, once he was sure the brat fully appreciated the point he was trying to get across. "You had better be the best son of all time for her in return, got it?"

Had the woman not possessed Storm Flames, he'd be half-suspicious Shamal had influenced her through his own Flames to make her so obsessed over the brat's upbringing and person. As it was, he was at least sure if there was Mist Flames involved the Storm-Cloud had either ignored the influence or just allowed the child his way.

Any way it happened, she was a bit obsessed and didn't seem to mind at all.

Which worked for him, honestly.

Shamal gave some rapid nods that disordered his hair a bit wildly, showing both he knew the stakes arrayed before the thief they were fond of and that he'd obey that injunction as best he could.

The lizard flicked it's tongue out a few times but didn't seem bothered by any squeezing that might be going on.

"That being said, when she takes you in… I've got some business I need to get on top of. I might not be visiting for a long while."

"W-wait, what? But!"

"Shamal." The hitman cut him off before his jumbled little mess of a protest could become coherent. "Kid, I've been taking the best paying but shortest hits I could to keep you safe and provided for while Sonya gathered up things on her end. Those weren't good contracts, some of them were downright nasty, and I've pissed a lot of people off taking those up and surviving the mess. Once she'll be providing for you, I need to solve that little issue that caused me."
"...but why? Can't you visit like mamma did in the beginning? That-

"Brat, your mamma had to deal with my assassins."

"And we did good-"

"The fact she so much as had to be on guard when trying to secure you in my space is not something I like!" He stopped himself short and took a deep breath, deliberately lowering his voice so he wasn't almost shouting at the child. "Shamal, I should've been the one dealing with your mamma's assassins since she's making herself a big target in order to take care of you for me. This shouldn't be the other way around, yet it is."

Utterly galling his baggage had put the thief at risk, doubly so when the brat had been with her and she was looking for a safe haven to shield them in for a few nights. Not to say the hitman was happy at what he was going to do, pretending to die would put his recognized best friend at risk for the bottom feeders and scum that would look to 'comfort' or maybe hone in on his spot in the lovely blonde Russian Cloud's regard.

The Sun had claimed his spot long before anyone else realized what a terror Sonya could grow up to be. His sudden disappearance would make others think that she would start looking for a new 'friend', however supposedly special that friend might be. The fact he was trying to get the dammably dense woman to think of him as a more special friend made it even worse, the delay would be grating… and he honestly couldn't start something right before he was going to 'die' only to ask her to wait for however long it would take to shake off his own assassins.

Criminal attention spans were notoriously short when it came to specific individuals, especially when they were supposedly 'dead', but even that wouldn't help him get his past contract history and his reputation buried in any reasonable amount of time. Two or three years, if he kept his nose to the grindstone and didn't majorly fuck up before it would be less risky to associate with old friends again.

Timoteo and Sonya would be the only two that would be allowed to keep the knowledge of who 'Renato Sinclair' had been or would become. Shamal was a bit risky, but he honestly couldn't bring himself to ask the kid to forget him either.

He had built up a few favors with a couple of Mists that would be lending a hand in encouraging people to forget him, but Mist Flames would only help so much when it came to decently strong Flame users. Who were, generally speaking, the greater threats he was trying to dodge.

Realistically, Renato was looking at several years on his own.

Strictly speaking he shouldn't even risk having his 'unknown' identity linked to himself again by visiting her or the brat at all, but… saying no to Sonya's only demand in exchange for guarding his godson during the interim had been a bit more than he was prepared to do.

Establishing of a reputation as a deadly but reliable hitman would help more than his current reputation as a ladies' man, more so if he could somehow avoid letting his personality seep into it again.

He was always up for a bit of female company, but… female assassins were probably likely to be what killed him. They were just a bit too tempting to avoid, really.

Several very long, lonely years associating with none and just getting shit done.

He wasn't looking forward to it.
However, to keep his fuckups from making the thief lethally stumble from a trade she wasn't familiar with he'd pay that price. She wasn't a cold-blooded killer, Sonya still suffered nightmares and guilt after she killed. Renato would happily take that on for her, from his own assassins to the men getting in her way, but first he really did need to cull the baggage that was dogging his heels.

"...no Christmas visits?" Shamal asked after a long moment of pouting hard and trying to figure out something to have his cake and eat some pie too. "Even mamma managed them..."

"I'm making no promises, and I might not be able to do something that predictable... but I'll try to at least do something." Depending on where he could find a place for them to live, if it was decently secluded enough it might be possible to do one Christmas.

To prevent being predictable he wouldn't be doing it more than once until he was nicely established with a better reputation.

Luigi squeaked in pain, making the Mist guiltily loosen his grip so the chameleon could breathe again. Even if the child had accidentally squeezed him, the lizard didn't leave the hands caging him in.

"That does mean you're going to be the man of the household, unless Sonya's brother visits." Renato commented blandly while Shamal mused on the unfairness of life, turning back to finishing the bacon for breakfast. "I'll be counting on you to ensure she's not taken advantage of. The damn thief is a bit dense, after all."

The brat had no intention of getting along with any male that might be sniffing around his mamma. In fact, he had several plans in mind to pull if anyone aside Renato himself was around his godmother.

Which was so Goddamned loud he didn't even have to be slightly close to 'hear' it all with how vicious the kid was thinking about it all.

Pausing in flipping the meat around, he wondered if he should interrupt that line of thought or not.

Sonya didn't deserve to be lonely or alone until he had the time for her, and he wasn't going to ask something like 'wait until I'm free again for an unknown number of years' of any lady much less his best friend. Shamal's plans were a bit of a loophole in that, and most wouldn't be able to read their godchild's mind to realize it.

...it was really tempting…

Renato heaved a sigh and turned back to the kid. "Brat, if she finds someone then... I'll handle it when I get back. Understand? You don't have to like them, and I don't like the idea myself, but she doesn't deserve that."

Shamal aimed a mulish glare in his direction, sliding off the chair and stomping off back to the hitman's room to sulk.

...yeah, he might be a gentleman, but he was still a heartless asshole of a criminal. If the brat wanted to, he could contend with the thief about the situation. He tried.

Sonya took a few more minutes after that little chat to come back inside, and the woman aimed a faintly confused look at him as she shut the apartment door behind her. "Renato, I have a question."

"Another one?" The bacon wasn't ruined after being simmered for a bit, Renato plated it up and dumped the still hot pan into his sink to cool off.
"Where did Shamal sleep when I was here the first time? I had your room, you were on the couch, where was the brat that night?"

"The hallway closet. He insisted." Explained the hitman flatly, well aware that was a bit strange but that had been what the three-and-a-half-year-old had wanted. "Originally, I was going to put him on the couch while I took the armchair for the night. Shamal decided that wasn't far enough out of sight for him to feel safe and had me make up the bottom of the closet for him instead."

"...huh." She looked around at the room empty but for the both of them. "I take it that the talk didn't go well."

He sighed heavily. "You might have to go collect him for breakfast. Odds are that he's not going to want to eat with me today."

"Tough." Sonya commented absently. "We're going to hit the boardwalk today, unfortunately Tats had to go back to work. Are you going to join us?"

"I have things to do, so no."

(Thursday the 31st of July, 1969. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)

Not entirely happy that his patron had demanded he pack up his work by this day, Verde irritably stalked in a circle around the living room of the condo.

"Dude, calm down. We're almost done here." Adrik commented lazily from the newly neatened couch. "I think we're leaving today, actually."

"Be that as it may, I was in the middle of something."

"Welcome to the real world. It happens rather more than most people like." Was Tatiana's offer as she was supposedly 'bolting something down' for her hospital shift taking place in another hour, although she was taking her time with the act. Slowly licking off the oatmeal off the spoon she was more playing than eating with, she placed her elbow on the table and her chin on top of that before glancing to her fellow Russian and pointing her utensil in his direction. "Is he always this high-strung when interrupted?"

"Damned if I know, first time I've ever seen him actually stop something for any amount of time."

The wiry Russian was about to add something onto that comment, but the condo's door cracked open before he could and Verde lost interest in what he might say.

The first one through the door was not who the scientist expected. A young child, with brunette hair and brown eyes, bolted through the entranceway and nearly flung himself on the nurse. "Zia Tats!"

Promptly abandoning her meal, the woman gleefully glomped the child in return before pulling away a bit with a tiny frown. "Shamal! Bambino? Cosa c'è di sbagliato?"

Unable to understand the babble of words that followed from either individual, he swung back to the door and the two following the child's path.

Sonya and the same man that had monopolized Adrik's attention for the last few days were exchanging a look before the thief stepped fully into the suite. "Verde, ensure you have everything
either packed for shipping or in your luggage. I highly doubt you will be returning here for a long time. Adrik, a word."

A book was then shoved into his stomach before he could express any of his current irritation, which the scientist reflexively grabbed as the woman passed him without so much as an apology for the abuse. Derailed from his intents to ask why and for what purpose whatever was going on could not be delayed another day or two, Verde investigated the handwritten volume curiously.

French, thankfully. He honestly did not mind English, but the familiarity of his native language was nice.

What he was reading then finally percolated past his appreciation over the language choice, and he only looked up after someone jostled his arm a few times.

"Verde, come on. You can read on the flight." Fanning a collection of tickets and a few sheaves of paper at him, Adrik pulled him rather insistently by the elbow. "We're getting you home, finally."

"I feel it must be said, also illegally."

"Actually, no." Releasing his elbow, one of the various faintly familiar items in the other man's hand was taken and waved under his nose. "This is your passport, from your things back in the States. Because you were technically 'extracted by independent contractors for personal safety reasons', substantiated because we were kidnapped and required medical attention afterwards, the French Embassy recollected your things once we were cleared of suspicion for the explosion in the chem lab. Getting it sent here took some doing, and I'm now formally barred a few years for illegally entering the country, but you're clear and free now."

Verde cocked an eyebrow, taking that slim booklet and checking it was the passport he had received in France before leaving his home country.

There was even his student visa paperwork stuck into the pages with a letter from the Dean of San Francisco State College. "Unexpected."

"You should think of something nice to do for Galina. She's the one that called the American French Embassy and asked if they knew what happened to you… since you were a friend of one of her own and I had been recently admitted to a hospital with a man she was certain was said Frenchman. Also, the cover story for this place is 'an ocean-going cruise ship', not 'island full of criminals in the middle of nowhere'."

…Adrik's former gang member?

The other Lightning, who had supplied the Lightning section of the information Sonya had just slapped the complete translation to his chest not a few minutes ago.

This was… rather thoughtful.

"The rest of your things are waiting in France, at the American Embassy. I think they want to apologize for the 'trouble' you went through. Especially since it could end up a political nightmare for them. If you want to do that."

"That would also bring my original name into the light, and might inform those we do not wish to find me where I am." The scientist observed dryly as he followed the other man into the elevator bank absently, thumbing through the papers curiously.

"Yep. So… you can try putting yourself in the limelight but run a big risk of retribution if it ever
fades enough to allow criminal activity to seek you out. Or you can keep with us, which… in my 
unbiased opinion is probably the better option." Punching the buttons for the ground floor, Adrik 
gave him a wry smirk. "That's Galina for you, though. Nice, but with several barbed hooks just 
waiting for you to take the wrong piece of bait."

"Why has she done so?" It was… suspiciously helpful.

Verde might not be fully acquainted with the mindset of most criminals, nor what they deemed 
appropriate to do in various situations, but that didn't mean he was an unintelligent man.

"Well… you did save my life." The wiry Russian reminded him helpfully. "And now you're another 
of us that got 'collected' by a specific Storm-Cloud. Welcome to the group?"

He glanced at his friend, down to the legal paperwork that would allow him some leeway in his 
homeland regardless of what he decided to do, and tucked it into the pocket of his lab coat. "Indeed."

He liked to assume those of his 'type' were practical creatures. Björn was certainly practical, in 
keeping close to a more powerful individual that could provide protection in return for some 
logistical aid which would provide him with a better standard of living no matter what happened in 
the future.

Given how shortly and concise the Lightning section had been even translated by another short-
worded woman, Galina seemed to be the same way from what little he knew of her.

What to do for a practical woman that was testing his loyalty and commitment to those that were 
doing right by him?

He returned his attention to the stripped basics that the Russians knew on the phenomena of Dying 
Will Flames, translated for him and likely would be one of the only concise volume on the subject in 
existence he could get his hands on. None of the bookstores in Mafia Land held a similar volume, 
and from how closely Sonya had guarded the information it was likely the knowledge wasn't written 
down elsewhere either.

"Also, again, the Boss Lady would prefer you burn that to ash rather than let it fall into the 'wrong' 
hands. She won't mind replacing it, just do not lose it."

"…noted."

(Friday the 1st of August, 1969. Fiumicino Airport, Rome, Italian Republic.)

"What else does the brat need for the school year?"

"Uniforms and clothing, mainly. He's growing again." Renato mentioned lazily, staring a hole in the 
side of Shamal's head as the young Mist was still pointedly ignoring him.

For the last day and a half, the brat had kept her between the two of them. No matter of what was 
going on, she was stuck between a Mist ignoring a Sun who was rather intent on not being ignored.

A bit squished defined her entirely at the moment.

Sonya glanced between the two of them, wondering what the hell to do about this. She wasn't 
entirely certain there was anything she could do, which didn't sit right with her.
The brat could not be that surprised the hitman had majorly important business to handle he was putting off, because the entire reason she couldn’t just snatch him up and suddenly start living in Italy for him was because she had majorly important business to finish off first.

Alright, so maybe it had to be disappointing for him that the elder Italian was going to be missing for a while once she could take him in… but she had been missing for a long while in his childhood already too.

The double-standard, that she was given the allowance to be delayed but Renato wasn't, made her a bit frustrated. It also made her wonder if this was part of the reason why her brother could become exasperated with her sometimes, about things she really didn't care much about.

"…I bought him shoes already, both in his size now and for when he outgrows them."

"Which just leaves the rest of it, since I can already see his ankles and the sleeves of the shirt he's wearing ends at his forearms rather than his wrists." He countered dryly, heaving an exaggerated sigh to try provoking the brat into complaining.

Shamal didn't rise to the bait. He kept hold of her hand, but also kept on mulishly marching towards the exit of the airport without so much as glancing at his godfather.

Renato glanced at her instead, and Sonya blinked back blankly. She didn't know what to do either, honestly.

Why did the brat then not want to make the best of the time he had left with them?

Honestly speaking she was a little surprised the Mist hadn't taken advantage of the disappointment, however he felt about it, to wring some kind of concession from the hitman in return.

Although… again honestly… that was more something Sonya would've done if she hadn't been scared of her foster parents and highly wary over why she had been sent to live with them.

"…I need a drink. Try talking to him, Sonya." Renato turned on his heel suddenly, leaving them both in the middle of the hallway alone.

…did he want her to mention something like that to the kid, then?

Or… was it a request to think of something else?

She sighed heavily, confused and already with a headache. "Brat, seriously. Please talk to me? I don't know what to do."

She got a mumble that was roughly understandable as 'it's not fair'.

"…I know it's not." Sonya crouched next to the kid, faintly thankful that she had picked to wear pants instead of the miniskirt Tatiana had been trying get her into earlier that morning. "But, since he's going to be leaving, does avoiding him really do anything?"

Shamal gave her a frustrated glare, but that dropped shortly afterwards so he could intently inspect his new shoes as he scuffed them against the tiled floor slowly.

"Renato's not happy about it either, Shamal. All you're doing is making you both feel bad about this." The thief reached for his hair in a now familiar habit, which she really had to break or something because this was strangely addictive for how simple it was. A few tugs had him looking back up at her with a pout. "Why not twist the time he's going to be missing out of him now? It's
"really what I would've done in your place…"

He gave her a skeptical look. "…really?"

"…if I had a situation like yours, which I didn't." She allowed thoughtfully. "That being said, I also might've tried to hurry up things so I could get what I wanted even if it wouldn't last."

Shamal gave her a flat look. "You're not very good at this, mamma."

"Well… yes. And? Think of something better, then." She countered a bit irritably, nettled over that poke at her creativity. "I'm not really a social person, had others left me alone I would've been perfectly happy with that."

Her answer was an entirely disbelieving huff.

The brat crossed his arms over his chest, which gave her a good view of the same 'too short sleeves exposing his wrists' issue Renato mentioned, and screwed up his face as if he was thinking. "I should… demand he get me a baby brother."

"…are you still on about that? Even after Valera?"

"Valera is your baby brother, mamma. Which means he's my baby uncle." He pointed out needlessly. "I want a baby brother, not just a baby you're related to."

…point. "I'll mention it to him. Anything else?"

"Can we do Christmas with your family, mamma?"

"Possible, but we do Christmas after the new year up there." She pointed out absently.

The Mist raised an eyebrow. "So, we can do Christmas twice?"

"…huh, yeah. I guess."

"Mister Renato has to be there, too." Hastily tacked on the brat, almost visibly straining to think up of something else. "And we have to go visit that church Father Luka told us about. Before you leave."

"I... guess I can do that?"

He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully until he seemed satisfied with her honesty, and she belatedly realized they might've been just played for fools.

"Deal then. Bathroom break, be right back mamma."

Now completely chipper, he skipped off to where there were signs for the men's room past a blind corner.

Sonya slowly rose to her full height, furiously thinking back to what her foster mother might've taught him when they had been left alone together for an entire day with bits and pieces of others. "…fuck."

"What now?" Renato asked sardonically, sipping from a paper cup of coffee as he strolled back to her side.

"We both were just played. The brat's not really all that upset." She deadpanned irritably, glaring in
the direction said Mist had bolted off in. "I had to promise a few things would be done, but now he's as happy as a clam."

He stared at her flatly for a long moment, then snorted harshly. "I knew it was a bad idea to leave him with your mother."

"Hey! I tried to tell you that." She snapped back, glaring at him.

Drawing himself up and sticking his nose in the air, the infuriating man waved the hand not occupied with his coffee to dismiss that. "I don't recall that. Lies, all of it."

She crossed her arms under her chest and stared at him flatly. "Are you seriously trying that?"

"I have no idea what you mean." Renato insisted, sipping his coffee again in order to not be able to respond for a second. "So, what did you have to promise the brat?"

"A field trip after we finish with Nono, you're attending Christmas with me and him back in Moscow, and you're now responsible for getting him a baby brother. Tag, you're it." Sharply, but still carefully, shoving at his shoulder, she turned on her heel to stalk away for once. "I'm going for a cigarette, catch up with the brat once you've got the luggage."

(ooo000ooo)

Shamal squeaked in surprise when he was bodily lifted off his feet and came face-to-face with his godfather's highly unamused expression, not two steps after he left the restroom. "Shamal, explain. Now."

"...um, which part?" He knew this would likely come back to bite him, but... it had almost been perfectly set up. He couldn't help himself. "I got mamma to agree you had to help her with the baby?"

He really wondered if the older man waxed those curls into his sideburns or if that was natural. It seemed natural, they were always there. Even in the mornings before he took a shower. But they were kind of weird, and if he thought they were-

A muscle flexed in the older man's jaw, but black eyes merely narrowed suspiciously at him. "What baby?"

"My baby brother?" Because... Valera didn't count.

"...did she really agree with that?"

"She said she'd mention it to you."

"Huh... not quite. She assumed you meant I'm responsible for finding you a baby brother rather than we both are." Renato blinked and leaned away slightly... or moved his arm which took Shamal away from his godfather's face slightly. "Nice try... but you're forgiven. Do it again and I'll tan your hide."

Being suddenly dropped to his feet made him stumble, the Mist nearly face planted if his godfather's knee wasn't just placed exactly into the spot where he almost fell into. Wildly straightening up hastily, so as not to annoy the man further than he already had, Shamal nearly overbalanced the other way before a sharp tug on his shirt got him standing upright steadily.

Immediately jogging after the man that turned to stalk away, the Mist tugged only once and carefully
on his cuff. "Why? Nonna said not to do so maliciously against you two, and I didn't."

"You tweaked Sonya's purple side viciously with that little stunt." He corrected sharply. "She shouldn't be that fretful over something you're not really upset about. That was more than rude to pull on your mamma."

Shamal slowed down a bit, eying the man's back suspiciously. "Just her?"

"I'm wise to your tricks now, brat." Renato tossed over his shoulder. "Keep up."

"...you're leaving us for a bit. I'll have better tricks when you finally come back."

"I said keep up." He snapped, turning back to leading the way to wherever they were going. "Not entirely over it, I see."

Scoffing, the child skipped a few steps to return to the man's side. "Am I supposed to be? You're leaving... us... for... things."

"Not willingly. I assure you." Drawled out the hitman sourly. "Shamal, if I could put it off without risking either of you I would. But I can't. It's already started to interfere with Sonya's care of you, and it will only get worse from here on out."

"We did fine dealing with-"

"You're six." He interrupted him pointedly, over what would've not been a stupidly public admission of having interacted with killers. "You shouldn't be dealing with anything but deciding what you want to be when you grow up, growing up, and doing well in school. In that order. She shouldn't be concerned with what might be dogging my steps but raising you and focusing on her own work."

Shamal would admit he sulked a bit, because... really, he didn't want the older man to leave them. His godmother wasn't even established in Italy yet and the man was already planning on leaving them to it.

"I will be back, brat. I'll hear about it if you don't behave for her. Or pull shit like this again."

"...fine." He already got what he wanted, which was more time with his godparents. Well... mostly. "You're not mad I lied?"

"You're a... well, you'll lie as a matter of fact. I've lied to several people, and even your mamma has told a fib or two in her life." The older man sighed a bit, adjusting his hat as they came up to the rotating baggage claim thing. "As long as it's worth it, you can avoid being caught by it, and you think you can live with the consequences... lie as much as you want. Your mamma and I will probably find out the truth in short order, so it had better be worth it if you're going to lie to us."

That was... rather intimidating to think about.

"Of course, now we're going to be a bit more hesitant before actually believing that you're upset from here on out." Renato informed him pointedly, which hadn't been a consequence the Mist had thought of. "But thanks for the warning."

(Saturday the 2nd of August, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)
"Don Vongola? A Mafioso Sinclair and-ah!"

A particularly chipper looking hitman just so happened to hip-check the poor servant doing door-duty today, making the boy stumble and cutting his words short. "Timoteo! I've a little something for you..."

Timoteo of Vongola, Ninth Sky of the Vongola Famiglia, pinned the utterly unapologetic man with a look over the paperwork his last appointment left him with. "Renato, really now. They don't deserve such treatment."

A dust encrusted bottle of brandy was set on the corner of the Sky's office desk, which the older man appreciated for a moment before glancing back to the freelance Sun.

"Not that I'm objecting, but what is the occasion?"

"Consider it a consolation prize." Renato informed him flatly, then jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "May I present to you the head of the Moscow School number Three-Zero-Five-Four, otherwise known as the Mafiya Flame Academy. She has a... complaint, which has to do with that little thing you wanted me to look into for you."

"I don't think I've ever really appreciated how much of an asshole you can be before this." Sonya Nikishina, or Bazanova or whatever it was she was going by now, remarked absently from the doorway. She had paused to ensure the boy manning the Sky's office door wasn't greatly inconvenienced by her friend's actions and to help right him, mostly to get him out of her own way. "I mean the deliberately being an asshole part, not the thoughtless type you also occasionally do."

Ganauche understood first, and he gave a bit of a wheeze even if he clapped hands over his mouth to try and not make any noise. Coyote Nougat spoke up before Timoteo had the time to process exactly what that meant when taken together with the favor he had loaned the other man out for. "That is a fairly tasteless jest, Sinclair."

"I know." Spoke the Russian thief before the Italian hitman could, taking the strides to join them in the office when the servant indicated he was finally steady on his feet. "But as I can't get out of it due to... politics, I'm afraid I do have to complain about the mistreatment of one of my Mafia Home Tutors while he was in the middle of instructing some poor baby Flame user that popped with Lightning Flames right next to him."

Timoteo placed a finger on his temple to try and ward off the sudden headache that had sprung up. "Excuse me a second, do you mean to say that Miss Sonya here is the head of a school for Flame users that the Cerrito Crime Family have... inconvenienced?"

"Technically, the school's not exactly open yet. Next month." Waved away the Storm-Cloud absently, before she refocused on the Sky rather sternly. "That being said... I only have so many Home Tutors right now, Nono. I did not appreciate one of them being kidnapped right in the middle of informing my assistant of needing to instruct some French native Lightning about the parts we're required to pass on by Vindice Laws and getting some Lightning orientated tips. I realize he was a bit far afield, but... most of our other students are contained right now or under different Tutors and he was off on personal business."

"...ah." He managed after a moment.

This was... not good.

Admittedly, she could've been even more pissed off that they might've had a hand in the
mistreatment of one of her own. Which would've made the entire situation worse to have the Cloud friend of an allied hitman pissed off and needing special handling.

"To make things a bit more awkward," she continued thoughtfully after a moment, "said Home Tutor almost died due to some... rough handling. Eventually popped his appendix, not maliciously intended so I'll let that part slide. Said baby Lightning nursed him the best he could, and likely saved his life, while they were otherwise detained. I owe the ass now for that, but that does mean I'm prepared to be... unpleasant, about this."

"Define 'unpleasant', Miss Nikishina. Please." Best to see what she knew she could do and what she was prepared to do, Timoteo would handle it if it was not particularly unpleasant.

Depending, anyways.

"I'm fully aware the Cerrito Crime Family has little to no Flame users themselves, I was the one that went to... retrieve my wayward Home Tutor." Sonya deadpanned, shifting her weight to one hip and placing a hand on it in order to free the other to wave. "As my clan, the Žolotovs, have a fair number and kidnapping and attempted murder is always a reason to fuck someone else's shit up... it comes down to it and they do not back off, I will press a complaint the best I can to the Vindice. Even if they do give me the creeps."

The Sky grabbed his 'consolation prize' and cracked the wax in a sharp movement to take a healthy swallow. Not entirely the best situation, and Sinclair did do him a favor in bringing it all up to his attention before she figured out the 'special' benefits being a head of a Mafia Academy allowed her to use, but not entirely a good one either.

Handing the bottle off to his Storm Guardian, who was sourly eyeing the hitman that hadn't warned the Ninth head of Vongola about this before they were ambushed with it, Timoteo leaned back in his office chair and studied the Storm-Cloud standing across from him. "...would you take a seat, Miss Sonya? I think this is going to become a long conversation."

She glanced distractedly to the match to the seat the hitman had taken after directing attention to her, then back to him. "Thank you, but I'll stand for a little while. I've been traveling a bit too long to be comfortable sitting right now."

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 2nd of August, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Timoteo of Vongola basically bought himself time to figure out how to get around Sonya's little, possibly evil, plan to derail anyone attempting to 'acquire' Verde out from under her.

As the Sky probably did have to contact the relevant parties, sound them out about how much they were willing to risk, and then figure out what the Vongola Alliance's stance on it should be, she let it happen without sticking her heel into things.

Also, fairly powerful individual with ties to her best friend. It wasn't like she was going to be able to be malicious about the situation, being gracious would also prevent the tiny little cracks in her story from being stressed too much and breaking wide open, so allowing the Sky his way was pretty much always going to happen.

Claiming Adrik as a Home Tutor was a bit out there, she only belatedly thought that Ziven might count as one on a beach and it had been an absent wonder for what qualified as such that tripped her onto this method of wiggling out of trouble.
Both men *didn't* have Flames, but also there weren't very many fully-grown Flame users she might actually dictate to leave Zolotov territory to teach another. Technically then, she had two 'Flame-less' Tutors and then herself.

Two and a half hours of basically being talked into circles, and she wasn't exactly feeling chipper. Sonya led the way out of the office, nursing a headache and downright *itching* for a smoke break.

Renato slung an arm around her hips, which was new and unusual enough she let him do it while she tried to figure out if this was a 'hug' thing or a 'guide' one. *"Thank you for being nice, Sonya. Although I am aware both Tatiana and Galina might've wanted you to be... less so."

"You realize Galina will probably make me pay for this later, yes? Especially if I can't inform her those that assaulted her ex-gang member will definitely not be doing it again." Maybe...?

No, the hitman wasn't doing much more than slowing her down. Not a guide-thing then, a hug. She could do hugs.

"But... you're welcome?"

The Italian getting up close and personal with her looked highly amused. *"I'll make it up to you."

"*How? Bitchy Lightnings are a pain in my ass.*"

Then again, if *Tatiana* learned she hadn't pressed home an advantage over the people that harmed her former underling... Sonya was in for a lecture or three. Possibly even passive-aggressive bitching from her sister, who might then inform their mother.

"*Fuck... Tats is going to kill me.*"

"*Your sister isn't' going to kill you.*" He countered her pleasantly with mildly annoying assurance, finally tugging her to a stop in the middle of the hallway.

Okay... if blocking doors was a 'bad' thing here, exactly why was blocking hallway traffic an ignorable one?

They were both in the category of 'obstruction', right?

The hitman looked torn for a second, probably between either continuing the 'second' layer of their little story or actually addressing her thoughts, but he pressed his mouth into a thin line and glanced back the way they had just come. *"Did you need something, Ganauche?"

"A-ha... sort of?" The one-eyed Lightning Guardian skittered out from a turn in the hallway, sheepishly ruffling his hair when they both stared at him in various levels of curiosity. *"Erm... I'm to ask if you two have any plans in the next week or so."

Sonya glanced upwards, frowning slightly because all she really could see this close to her friend was his jawline. Normally being shorter than some didn't really bother her, but then shit like this happened... Cherep took some amusement from doing the same damn crap to her too.

"*Well..." Renato drawled out slowly, taking his time *just* to tweak the other Italian's nose a bit from what she could tell. "...tomorrow is Sunday. There's a church in-country the brat wanted to visit, we were thinking of making a day of it.*"

 weren't they leaving for that in... like, minutes?
Shamal should've checked his luggage, unpacked a bit to find clean clothing to make an overnight bag, ensured his lizard was situated, and then gone to a waiting room on the ground floor to wait for them. "If you're going to talk more, let me go so I can fetch Shamal."

Preferably to allow herself a quick smoke break too. Sonya hated politics, the very thing Nono had used to buy himself time with.

"However, I'll probably be leaving in a bit to go take care of that little favor I owe that baby Lightning." She belatedly tacked on as she recalled she was part of 'you two'. "Then I have various things to do I've been putting off for too long as it is. Including a Mafia Land contract and some personal business. Why?"

"Just so Timoteo knows what kind of timeline he has to work with." Ganauche reassured her hastily, holding both hands up in a gesture halfway between an 'I'm unarmed' and 'please don't hurt me' one. He even waved them a tiny bit for the added emphasis. "So, say... Monday we'll get this straightened out?"

"Sounds good to me, Sonya?"

"I don't really care." She affirmed with a shrug. "So long as I don't have to deal with the Vindice again."

"...heh, yeah. We'll, um... try to avoid that." The Lightning attempted to reassure them, badly. The grimace that painted itself across his face was not confidence inspiring. "I'll just... go then. Bye."

He ducked out of sight down the hallway he took to come up just behind them without actually following their path. The hitman and thief exchanged a look as they listened but didn't hear the footsteps generally required to move down polished marble stone floors in hard soled leather loafers.

"...I'm going to go back and have a quick word with Timoteo." He informed her needlessly, finally letting her hip go and taking a step back the way they came. "Should I find you in the foyer or...?"

"Outside." She corrected flatly. "Hurry up, the sun's nearly setting and we still have to feed the brat."

"Heh. Sure."

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 2nd of August, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"...head of a Mafia Academy?"

"In my defense, I didn't know that until I finally made it into Moscow." Renato offered pleasantly, shutting Timoteo's office door behind him firmly. "Sonya has a steel trap of a mouth when she wants to, frankly it took me about seven years to even learn she had a syndicate."

The Sky ran a hand down his face, then threaded fingers through his bristly mustache a few times thoughtfully. "Still... that was a fairly major oversight, Renato."

"I didn't make that oversight, I was just content to let her tell me on her own terms." He corrected a bit more gently than he was usually with others.

The man was a Sky, and the head of a powerful Famiglia. No real reason to piss him off, even if it was a bit annoying his best friend had been dismissed from being important a touch too soon.
"Worse yet, by our standards she's fifth in line to inherit her syndicate. Take Tyr's position, smash it together with what your mother has oversight on, and you have a Russian's 'Sovintnik'. Her clan's Sovintnik is her grandfather through her mother... and I think he was aiming to have her take over for him until certain Flame things upset that."

"Our' standards?" Repeated the Storm Guardian cautiously, who was doing a fair bit more nursing of the brandy bottle than his Sky was.

"By Russian vory ones, she's not likely to inherit unless things get bloody."

Ganauche laughed, a bit hysterically. "Our bloody, or is there a Russian version of 'bloody'?"

In response, he dug into a pocket to pull out a clipping of a Russian newspaper. "Well... see for yourself."

The tiny scrap of paper was passed first to the Storm, got a fairly incomprehensible look by the Lightning, was merely glanced over by Nono, and was finally placed in the hands of Croquant Bouche as he pulled away from the Construction that made him seem like part of the bookcase behind his Sky.

The dark-skinned Mist examined the paper intently, then passed out translated copies to his fellow Guardians and Boss.

Renato bounced a little on the balls of his feet while he waited for them to read through the little news story.

Ganauche was finished first per usual, looking up at him curiously as he waved his scrap of paper in the air. "How the hell did they keep it lit for three days?"

"Either chemicals or Storm Flames." Coyote suggested before the hitman could, giving his fellow Guardian a disgusted look. "Use your brain, it's there for a reason."

"Renato, a bit more detail please?" Timoteo interrupted before either Guardian could continue bickering, placing his Mist Flame copy flat on his desk. "Do you know who did this and why? It would help to put it into perspective."

"...well, the thing about that is..." He sheepishly scratched the back of his neck, because it could've be so much worse than it had been if the thief had been less self-controlled than she was. "...I was teaching Shamal the basics of firearms that night. I gave him an unloaded pistol to investigate, but the brat's a Mist."

"Constructed bullets?" The deep voice of the dark-skinned Mist echoed a bit in the office, with an audibly amused edge to the words.

"Freaked Sonya right out to the point she went berserk." Renato confirmed dryly. "She was very disappointed they weren't, to use her own words, 'better'."

Croquant pulled a faintly disgusted face, which was... interesting. The Lightning nicked the brandy bottle from where the Storm had placed it, and the Sky of the office looked like he'd rather much prefer something stronger right now as his Storm glared at the theft.

"Also found out and met up with her two little Mist minions that same night," he continued after a long moment to let them process that, "who basically just sat on the entire situation until she was done murdering the fuck out of anything that moved wrong. She's got this Lightning assistant who basically manages her paperwork so she doesn't have to languish behind a desk all day, some wreck..."
of a Sun processing a lot of the Flame information her clan is pulling in, and recently picked up some young Rain kid to help her out a bit more. Baby brother's a Cloud, not to mention her own… twinned Flame situation, meaning she's just missing a Storm or I'd swear to God she's got some minor Sky Flames herself."

"Clouds do have a minor pull of their own." Timoteo reminded him a bit weakly. "The more powerful, the more they can catch under their wings."

"…no, wait. Her Lackey's part Storm." Renato corrected himself absently. "And she still insists she's not a Sky."

"…is there a reason you're bringing this up, Renato?" Tried the actual Sky next, now sounding exasperated and a bit tired of the entire topic.

"She's moving here. I've promised to help her look into properties near or around Mafia School for the rest of Shamal's childhood. She's also been intending to ask you for French syndicates that might like a Lightning, but… she seems to keep on forgetting to do so."

Timoteo drummed his fingers on the top of his desk thoughtfully, ignoring it when the translated copy of a Russian news article went up in indigo Flames next to his hand. "When is she moving?"

"By next school year. She seems aware not everything will probably be done by then, but she intends to be in Italy full time at least by next summer. Even going so far as to formally divorce her syndicate… while keeping enough good-will to allow her to return to the area to visit family."

"How the hell is she managing that?"

Renato glanced at the flabbergasted Lightning with wicked amusement. "Partly the end result of a botched assassination attempt against her 'Pahkan' she stepped in to help with, being the 'adopted' daughter of a fairly high-ranking vor, being the granddaughter of another high ranking Zolotov, and general incompetence of another Flame user who apparently violently hates to the point she could probably kill him and get away with it scot free but is important to said boss… and a healthy dose of blackmail."

He waited another moment.

"Oh... and her mother. Who is... a very brilliant piece of work in and of herself and teaches thieves how to steal and get away with it for a living. She gave Shamal 'tips' that are... rather insidious, for your information." Renato made another few bounces and continued when no one spoke. "I think Sonya plans on shoving her mother into the 'head of a Mafia Academy' slot she really doesn't want."

The Sky gave him a flat look. "Advice would be appreciated, rather than a ridiculous amount of detail on your lady friend's many accomplishments."

"...I don't know, Timoteo. I'm still impressed she doesn't use her father or her grandfather to boost her reputation at all, and most of those on Mafia Land are still afraid of her." When the older man merely looked fairly annoyed, he shrugged. "I've only pissed her off once, and I bought her shiny weapons to get her to be less pissed off with me. Even still, it took me half a year to get her to stop being uncomfortable around me again. Her whole problem with you was that her brother got injured on your territory, and she wasn't even informed the problem was being taken care of until Tyr said something when she asked."

Timoteo glanced at his Lightning Guardian, who had winced and adjusted his eyepatch a bit self-consciously. "That still is not particularly helpful, Renato."
"I have no honest idea what you could to, Timoteo." The hitman informed the man bluntly. "None of Sonya's little minions have fucked up enough where they had to recover from the same indifference she has for you, to her it's mainly behaving because I like you and she doesn't want to impair my relationship with you. I'm not sure if that's an allowance you can make use of, or if she's just 'humoring' me and will react badly if she thinks you're taking advantage of it."

"...she likes Tyr, doesn't she?" Ganauche asked quietly as his Sky pondered that. "So okay... Timoteo Isn't going to be able to get more than tolerance out of her, but he's not the only way we can earn some consideration from the Russian Flame Academy's temporary head and the next one's daughter. And while the Sky might be out, we can still talk to her somewhat. Right?"

Renato gave the man a flat look. "She thinks you're defective."

Coyote laughed at the entirely wrong moment, spluttering a fair amount of brandy onto the floor. Even Croquant Bouche snickered at the expression that crossed the Lightning Guardian's face at that bit of news.

The youngest man in the room gave them all a disgusted pout and huffed.

"...I need to go catch up with her before she becomes suspicious."

"Very well. I take it that...?"

"I'm not killing my best friend, Timoteo. Not for some little backwater mob boss with illusions of grandeur who's put out over losing a fresh-faced Lightning they stole in the first place. He won't ever be able to touch on how useful Sonya is or can be to me, which really doesn't make it worth it to earn the utter hate of an entire Soviet Mafia syndicate that specializes in breaking into highly secured places and stealing shit. Some of whom probably would have no problems adding in an assassination or two to their names."

The Sky puzzled over that for a second. "No... that isn't entirely balanced, so I don't blame you. I'll see what I can do about it from my end then, thank you for your efforts Renato."

Touching the brim of his fedora in salute, the hitman strolled right back out the Don's office to find his wayward godson and fellow godparent.

Now all they could do was wait and see if Sonya's political heft and possible future usefulness would outweigh the bitching of an offshoot syndicate that was inconvenienced. He rather thought so, the whole Flame Academy thing alone made picking a fight with her a risky situation on the outset, much less what her foster parents could probably muster up if anything happened to their youngest daughter.

However, it really was up to Timoteo.

The thief's claim of Adrik as a Mafia Home Tutor was rather brilliant, really. Maybe she hadn't expressly intended to use the man as such, and it really was 'he said she said' kind of thing at this point since the groundwork for claiming that position hadn't been done yet on the Russians' side, but fucking around with Home Tutors was a great way to involve the Vindice in any scuffles.

Hopefully, the fear of the Vindice would prevent anyone from calling her bluff.

Renato cracked his neck as he wandered down the hallway leading to the main staircase, rubbing the abused joint absently as he wondered.

If this was what the woman was prepared to do just for a former associate of her sister's and a friend
of one of her underlings, what kind of hell would she raise if anyone thought to upset Shamal?

(ooo0000oo)

(Saturday the 2nd of August, 1969 continued. Rain Bar, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Why should we?"

Larion, who was fast becoming known just as 'Larion the Rain' much to his irritation, paused speaking and lifted his head from the paperwork he was reading off from to give the older boy who spoke rather out of turn a mildly curious look. "I would assume because that is the reason we are assembled here. To explore the limits and capabilities of our Flames, and occasionally collaborate with other users about how our Flames interact with theirs. Correct me if I am wrong, please."

That literally was why they were all crammed into the dusty wine cellar of a bar right now, so he could inform the others what was going on in the research efforts if they'd like to contribute and trade tips or tricks. It was depressingly rare when a Rain volunteered for something, but it was a responsibility to give such announcements.

Which was also something the former Rain lead regularly failed to do more than once or twice a month.

It probably wasn't Galina's request to send a few Rains to the next Lightning section meetup, nor the request to start pondering what Tranquility would do when paired with a Storm's Disintegration or a Mist's Construction aside the inevitable corrosion, but the general assumption of where these remarks and comments came from that was the current issue.

With his fellow Rains, 'from the head office' generally translated to mean 'from that bitch Bazanova'. Which...

Larion was very much a Rain, a Classical one even. He liked getting along with his fellows, true.

He didn't like getting along with stupid people, though. That left a rather bad taste in his mouth, however smoothly said stupid group got along. Might be easy to do, but not particularly a proud thing to help along.

The kid that spoke, probably one of Yanovna's friends who was likely not happy about how she got dismissed, had stumbled over Larion's question before bullying on ahead with his little attempt at a mini-revolt. "I meant, why should we listen to a sell-out when we all know the office jockeys don't like us?"

"...because that's exactly why the office 'jockeys' don't like us." The younger Rain pointedly reminded him in a flat tone, ignoring the blatant and avid listening in of everyone else in their section. "We're the 'troublemakers' to the rest of the Zolotov clan's Flame users. So ill-behaved and stupid it isn't actually worth it to deal with. I'm not sure about you but being thought of like that is a bit galling... especially for a bunch of Rains that were not only so far into the wrong they were also dismissed, even if we really should have someone older doing this, but who left us and never looked back."

"No, we're not." Of course, then the older boy paused as he tried to fruitlessly recall anything he could use in a counter argument.

"Yes, yes we are." Larion patiently continued aggressively. "We are so badly behaved that even with
one of the eldest Rains being 'technically' the best vor produced so far... that's only because he was the only male of his generation by the way, no one else wants to work with us. There's already pairs of Mists and Suns, a Lightning girl who attached herself to a pair of Storms, a Sun that collaborates with a Lightning and another Storm... but we're noticeably absent from that, aren't we?

"...that's not our fault, is it?" Asked one of the eldest Rains in the room, a teenager with blonde hair and blue eyes but with a highly unsettled expression on her face.

"That is so much our fault that we've been left behind for almost an entire year, but we never noticed because we're so 'put upon' and 'special' here in our little enclave." He corrected brightly, cheerfully paging through what Galina had asked him to do to see if there were any of the health-related bulletins to pass out or not. "There's a handful that aren't considered stupidly insular and not worth it, those are the ones that took the nurse-option out of here. I've gotten to talk to Raisa recently, you know. She and Stella are having ever so much fun under Miss Tatiana the Sun nurse's guidance, including the whole 'on a criminal island so most illegal things aren't actually illegal' bit."

Passive-aggressive behavior for the win, he had to thank the Lightning lead for giving him pointers.

"But, of course, if you'd rather only just associate with Rains that's fine. But if you'd like to be involved or even just figure out the truth for yourself... you're going to have to break out of her a little." Larion pointedly ruffled his papers, thumbing through the pages in a fan in a faux curious manner. "Which... is what this is a part of. Seeing if Rains can work with other Flame users as the other groups are already far into. In a manner that might let you skirt around the unfortunate reputation we just so happen to have with the others."

Instead of proving they would just mindlessly go along with the flock, which was an unfortunate drawback to Rains in big enough groups, they would instead have to prove they could work with non-similar mindsets. Which would also force them to lose that 'but others agree with me' assumption that Tranquility tended to impose in greater concentrations.

Tranquility didn't mean 'no-conflict', just calmness. It was entirely possible to peacefully argue with another, but that did undercut the whole 'difference of opinions' thing a bit because it wasn't obvious there was a difference that needed arguing over.

"We do not have a bad reputation." The original speaker insisted sourly.

Larion smiled as the bait was taken entirely. It wasn't a happy or particularly pleasant expression. "Prove it. Prove me wrong, I dare you."

He had to try to murder the same woman they disrespected just to save his mother, who then regarded his attempt as 'curious' then did the actual saving for him. As far as 'Larion the Rain' was concerned, until they proved to be just as helpful to the very woman they bitched about... they were a bunch of brats he was unfortunately responsible for.

One year, then hopefully he wouldn't be responsible for them anymore.

He was rather wistfully counting the days already.
(Sunday the 3rd of August, 1969. Lanciano, Province of Chieti, Italian Republic.)

"...it's very shiny." Sonya observed blandly from over Shamal's shoulder.

The silver Ostensorium the brat had wanted to see was very pretty in a way, the round divot of ancient brown flesh nearly destroyed by the passage of time held in a medallion of crystal and silver in some sunburst-like arrangement topped with another cross. The cup directly under it made of more glass with silver details held five rather big lumps of dirty yellow substance, supposedly the coagulated blood centuries old, between two silver angels on a very ornate silver stand.

Again, shiny but... really, really just ick. Why would anyone want to preserve something like that?

Alright so... it was possibly a miracle, of blood and a body part. Of some random human, most likely, and hopefully not the doubting monk of the story.

The thief supposed that while it might be one of the weirdest things she had ever seen preserved, it probably wasn't as bad as a chalice made out of a skull of one's foe or shrunken heads. Both of which she was pretty sure were for sale up to this day and age to anyone that wanted grisly souvenirs from exotic vacations.

Wasn't there somewhere an entire church made out of bones?

Human ones?

She... only really vaguely remembered hearing something about that but was at least somewhat sure the brat would probably like to go ogle that one too.

"...a church of bone, hmm?" Renato remarked softly into her ear, likely to keep his words just between the three of them even in a crowded public space like a post-Mass cathedral could be, dropping the Mist back to his feet so they could make way for the others that had come to see the 'Miracle of Lanciano' too. "Interesting."

Considering it, and the strange look Shamal was aiming up at them for the partial conversation, the Storm-Cloud tapped a finger against her lip. "...if I can find out where it is again, that's for next summer. So... when were you thinking of disappearing?"

"That's cold, little dragon lady." He informed her dryly, pressing against Shamal's back in order to ensure they didn't lose the brat in the crowd but also that he was headed in the right direction.

Shamal snickered, pausing and being an obstruction just to hug her thigh tightly. "Good one, mamma."

Renato heaved a sigh and flicked the brat upside his head in revenge. Sonya herself got a finger jab to her side, which made her flinch a bit violently as her stomach muscles contract involuntarily from the unfamiliar contact.

The hitman froze at her reaction, then arched a fairly demanding eyebrow at her. "What the hell was that?"

She rubbed her stomach defensively yet being forced to step closer to her Italians just to keep from being pushed out the cathedral's doors by the crowd. "It just happens, I also flinch from my siblings
and... used to from Shamal until I made myself get over it."

To prove it, the Mist yet again stopped and this time dodged around the older man's hand to put his own on her stomach without the normally automatic flinching thing happening again.

Sonya carefully took a wrist and turned the kid around, just so they could leave the church eventually before someone asked them to move.

"Yes, like that." She observed dryly as they finally left the church's interior to the rather nicely warm late summer morning air, only minimally jostled in crossing the flow of traffic to get to the right side of the church's parking lot. "But fondling my belly in public isn't something you should do, Shamal. That's usually something you only do to pregnant women, and I'm not pregnant."

"It takes skill to do without being awkward." Renato chimed in unhelpfully, wrapping an arm around her hips as they started towards the car he had borrowed from Vongola's Iron Fort motor pool.

Then the complete ass poked her in the stomach to make her flinch again as soon as she was distracted looking for the heavily armored sedan.

"...Renato. Do that again and I'll break your fingers."

The sensation wasn't nice, and it made her slightly anxious if it happened more than once or twice. Not to mention uncomfortable.

"Fine, fine." He loosened his hold until his hand was planted on her hip instead, which seemed to be his new favorite thing to do. "Anything you two want to do before we head back?"

"Brat?" Sonya asked instead, she really had little desire to do anything else but wouldn't say no to more time with them both.

It was about to come to an end, after all.

"We missed the Saturday trip to somewhere since you were talking to Nono." Shamal reminded her, before yanking on the back passenger door to climb into their borrowed car.

She glanced up at the slightly confused hitman before following suit. "I've been teaching him the petty side of my skills, and as a reward for doing well picking targets for me I give him half the funds I get. I'll teach him the actual stealth skills that go along with it later, but he's got money so visiting places he can spend it have been a thing."

Renato still looked a bit blank, which was his 'public' version of confused, so she thought back to their various pickpocketing lessons for him to get the general idea out of her memory.

"...ah. There's... not much open on Sundays around here, Sonya. This is a bit rural for that."

"How far off are we from Rome? There were a couple of places there that might've been interesting to browse that I saw on our way out of the city."

He considered it as he finally let her go so they could join their godchild in the car. "...an hour or so. I guess we can get lunch or something on the way and we can pick up the brat's school uniform order while we're there."

"Sounds good to me."
Sonya got through getting into the car and buckling herself in before Shamal tugged again on the elbow of her sleeve to get her attention again. "Mamma? Are you going to keep going to church?"

"…erm… probably not."

"Unless the brat is with you, I hope." Interjected the Mafioso a bit pointedly as he pulled the driver door shut and started the car. "You might not be Catholic, but he is."

"Yes, well… I'm not entirely comfortable attending religious worship with the devout." She informed them both a bit sourly as the car pulled away from just one of four churches within the same city limit. "I know you both are, or at least you are Renato and would like Shamal to be, but… I'm not. At all."

"I rather liked that you were at least willing to attend with him in Russia, even if you're not." The older Italian informed her, with a pointed if glancing sideways look to help hammer home his point. "This is Italia, Sonya. Everyone is Catholic here. If you don't attend, it's different and makes you stick out like a sore thumb. I know you might not care, but malicious gossip might just affect your people and the brat later on."

There were another few tugs to the long-sleeved shirt she was using to conceal her tattoos while in public. "Please, mamma? I like having you with me in church."

Sonya heaved a sigh through her nose, disgruntled at the use of those like Galina and Shamal to manipulate her future actions. "I've already embarrassed myself asking a priest about if he was really advocating the cannibalism of your religious icon, odds are that I will do it again in short order. I don't like embarrassing myself."

"Wait… you actually asked that?"

"Father Luka was very nice about it." Shamal protested maybe a touch too loudly for being inside a car, as they weren't all that far away from him that made yelling necessary. "And he told us about this, which sort of fit your question."

"Yes, he was very nice about laughing at my question." Deadpanned the thief, waving a hand to dismiss that. "That doesn't really address the problem. I'm not familiar with the act of religious worship and getting there will mean I will probably offend or outright incur the wrath of those that were raised in this mindset as I question their traditions and beliefs."

Renato heaved a sigh… after snickering a bit himself. Which did nothing to help her on the subject at all.

"Sonya, I do greatly appreciate you trying to understand and being there for Shamal. I'm aware there's going to be awkward points and some difficulty while you explore some of it, and frankly with so much history some of it is unsavory and downright bad so there's going to be more, but… can you keep trying? For him, if not just because I ask?"

"I probably will never convert to Christianity, Renato."

"Never say never." Countered the infuriating man brightly, finally getting them out of the post-Mass traffic and onto the main thoroughfare of the township. "But still… this wasn't that bad, right? Somewhat interesting, something to do together, and actually somewhat fun to make a day of. I'd call this a success, however it started."

She flatly stared at him.
Shamal huffed from the backseat. "And you're leaving us, so we're not likely to be doing things like this again."

Tapping his fingers on the steering wheel for a moment, he glanced through the rearview mirror only once to drive home his annoyance with the whole topic being repeatedly thrown back in his face. "Shamal. You already know why and what for. I can't put it off, so if you forgive me or not is your own choice... but do please stop bringing it up. Repeated reminders will just make things all the sourer until I have to go."

...right. That was also a thing to consider.

"I'm not saying I won't take Shamal to Mass next summer or for however long he needs me to take him, Renato. But eventually he'll be old enough to go by himself, or I'll feel safe in letting him make the trip alone... or he'll decide Christianity isn't for him, and then I won't have a reason to go myself."

"...thank you. Until that time, can you try to keep an open mind? There's plenty that's family orientated to involve yourself in, and the brat does deserve at least the chance of experiencing it himself."

...Renato said he'd been on the streets by a very early age, right?

First kill was at... seven, when he also woke up his Sun Flames. Meaning if he had parental guidance, it was probably over with before he reached that age. So... this was another of those 'I wanted it, brat should at least have the opportunity' things?

"I make no promises. There are a few parts of history I don't like, and they generally are religious conflicts or genocide. I'd rather not try to understand those parts." Like the Crusades, or the Spanish Inquisition. Those were rather big tripping points for her, especially for a 'God of love and peace' to ignore or passively advocate through non-action the systematic murder of entire races or schools of thought an 'all knowing' God would've arranged to occur in the first place. "So long as this family-religious thing is reasonable, I'll at least try it."

Honestly, since she wasn't remotely 'innocent' in that way either, she couldn't really point fingers. However, there were limits to how understanding she'd try to be.

"Thank you. I really do appreciate your willingness to go along with this, Sonya."

Speaking of... "What the hell is one's 'First Communion' supposed to be, anyways?"

"We don't have to worry about that until next year... at age seven one is considered to be at the Age of Reason, when one can fully understand sin, guilt, and one's moral responsibility. Generally the age when Catholics have their first confession done and receive their first Communion, and then it'll be a thing he's allowed to take from then on." The Sun glanced backwards at the six-year-old in the back seat and then to her before returning to watching the road. "I will be here for your First Communion brat, hopefully you can be as well Sonya."

"So... around or near his birthday?"

She earned another sideways glance. "...be in Mafia Land by the end of January, I'll pick you up for it so you'll be on time this year."

"Oh, shut up." Huffed the thief, flatly ignoring the snickers from behind her.

"It's kind of a... thing, a tradition." Renato continued after a moment to let the brat get his giggles out
at her expense. "We'll get dressed up all fancy-like, the brat has a little ceremony in a church done with others this age, and there is generally just a kind of party thing afterwards to celebrate one's first step into being a responsible Catholic adult. I'll introduce you to a Mafia Priest you can avoid embarrassing yourself with if you ask awkward questions of, who is currently Shamal's regular priest until you move in somewhere full time and then probably will be again when he requires a Mafioso's take on parts of Christian doctrine. Alright?"

"...fine."

Two thin arms suddenly sprouted from either side of her head rest as Shamal hugged her around the neck, even with her seat in his way. "Thank you, mamma."

"...you're welcome. Now sit your ass back in that seat and buckle up. I might trust Renato to drive us safely around, but I certainly don't trust these other assholes on the road with us to be as careful."

Renato frowned slightly, but it took him several minutes as well as two turns to get them onto the highway in order for him to bring up whatever it was he had been thinking about. "So... your brother drives a motorcycle, yet you've sent Shamal off with him too."

"Cherep is a professional stuntman. He knows exactly what he can and can't realistically do on a motorcycle, and exactly how much leeway 'riskier' tricks give him. He exceeds and redefines it nearly every damn week, when he performs a show or works out a new stunt. He's probably the best driver on the road when he doesn't have a reason to drive crazy."

"Think he'd be any good as a getaway driver?"

"...if you give him enough time to become familiar with a car instead of a motorcycle, maybe." She allowed thoughtfully. "He knows how to break into them and hotwire them if need be, and he's still a good driver when in a car instead of a motorcycle from what I know, I did a bit of traveling with him in a car and there was that class on driving those lorries we took together, but I'm not sure how much professional stunt driving will translate over."

The hitman merely hummed thoughtfully as they pulled onto the highway that would take them around the mountains that sat between Lanciano and Rome.

That had been a rather interesting question, and entirely fit into Cherep's pacifist nature while still being more or less criminal in nature. Her brother would probably just prefer to drive than be otherwise involved in anything possibly hurtful, which was interesting to think about.

(Monday the 4th of August, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Timoteo gestured from Sonya to the Rain about around Renato's age as she and hitman that was her friend entered the second-floor meeting room, directed there by a footman that greeted them at the Iron Fort's main doors. "Miss Sonya, this is Don Bergamaschi. Rain user and head of the Bergamaschi Famiglia. Sergio, this is Sonya Bazanova nee Nikishina. Russian Storm-Cloud, Flame expert, and the... head of a Soviet based sister school to our own Mafia School."

There was a moment when the two silently judged the other, the Don had a less practiced poker-face than the Russian possessed, and the Sun could almost pinpoint the moment the other Flame user decided to try to get into her good graces using this situation.

Halfway across the room or not.
Or, if not him in her good graces, then to twist her into his.

Glowing as he fit himself into a corner with Visconti, Renato wondered if Shamal could somehow pop up and start his little war against any suitors of his mamma's a touch early. This may not be a romantic suitor exactly, but he was probably going to try courting her anyways.

"...charmed." The blonde woman announced flatly, sounding anything but, shifting her weight to one leg and planting both hands on her hips. "I believe you have an issue with me?"

"Not in so many words, no." Sergio Bergamaschi insisted smoothly, reaching out a hand to shake hers along with a professionally chagrined if still ingratiating little political smirk. "But unfortunately, I am involved with an offshoot branch that might. Hopefully we can get around this little stumble quickly."

She inspected the hand held in her direction dubiously for a long moment, flicked a skeptical glance up at the Don, then gingerly accepted the gesture. Slowly and with great obvious reluctance, as if she wasn't fully aware that was rather rude to do in the face of diplomatic overtures. "...hopefully. I'd rather not start off our branch of Flame schools with an international incident."

The Ninth Sky of Vongola released a near silent, if not a completely motionless, sigh. Since it seemed they were going to at least get along professionally, or try in various meanings of the word, he then gestured to the two of them to join him and his Storm Guardian at the table set up off to one side under the bay windows. "Now then... you said you would like to avoid the Vindice, Miss Sonya?"

"They give me the creeps." Admitted the thief bluntly, after pointedly extracting her hand from the hand-holding the Rain was trying to get away with, taking the seat open on Coyote's left on one side of the table. "Even if I do know, from prior personal experience, they are diligent in their duties and quick on the mark... I don't like relying on others to do my work when I can do it perfectly well or have no problems doing so."

Which was also a reminder that since this was a meeting attended by the head of a Mafia School for Dying Will Flame users, it was likely there was a corresponding overseeing Vindice Officer lurking around somewhere.

Also, an admittance that she was high-ranking enough expert that her meetings had been observed before and she expected it to happen again.

Kind of a way to prove her credentials, if only by hearsay… so long as her word was accepted as is.

In that, her admission and prior attendance as a Cloud in Vongola's Christmas Balls would help.

Clouds were stereotyped into being less than interested in political posturing or with falsehoods entirely, only interested in their territories and securing them against threats.

Renato didn't even know if Sonya's motivations in this were territory-based or just her guarding the important people of her family. He did know she could lie just fine, convincingly enough to fool professionals in various occupations, and what her worst case scenario if nothing was agreed upon.

Instead of pay attention to the recap, where Timoteo ensured the both of them were caught up on what the issue was and her stance on the problem and how the other man was involved and his stance on what was going on, the hitman examined the backup Don Sergio Bergamaschi brought along with him.

As the head of a Vongola Alliance famiglia, not to mention the patriarch of a Rain-bearing lineage
that Daniella Vongola's Guardian Beretta originally hailed from, the Don had any number of bodyguards to pick from in any given day. Generally speaking the originating families of any one Vongola Sky's Guardians got very well acquainted with each other, and there were decades' worth of those inherited alliances that could be traced all the way back up to Vongola Quarto's Guardian picks.

No one with sense would bring a Mist into a meeting containing an independent Cloud, however rumored that Cloud was about being fond of select Mists. The man was a decent Rain in his own right, meaning his pick of another with the looks to hail from a Lightning bearing line as a bodyguard today was sensible to cover defense if his diplomatic attempts failed horribly.

…as long as you didn't know Sonya was more considerate of Soft Flame Lightnings than she was Hard Flame Lightnings.

Renato was pretty certain he could take the other man out if it came down to it. Hell… the thief wouldn't have more than an issue if she applied enough force to overwhelm his Hardening and his store of Flames. With either of them doing the taking down there was still a fairly serious risk of collateral damage to both the room and the others sharing the space with them, but hopefully Coyote was a quick Storm and Visconti wasn't given orders to neutralize Sonya first if violence was offered. The Lightning bodyguard was brought along to buy maybe seconds if things went sour and at best to be an additional target to be dealt with in the end.

He was pretty sure she would be unamused to be informed of that. She did seem more practical than wasteful when it came to the lives of those around her.

"…to cut this short, I don't really care beyond the fact one of my Home Tutors was impeded. I care that the instructions we are required to pass on was interrupted." Rather rudely interrupted the thief before Timoteo could detail exactly why Don Bergamaschi was the one invited to this meeting. "Because of that interruption, I now owe that temporary student my Tutor's life. I am fairly annoyed, and it was due to something that really could've waited a few days until that Lightning wasn't our responsibility anymore."

Utterly true and not entirely at the same time, but probably not the best starting position she could've gone with.

"I understand that, Miss Bazanova. However, I am not responsible for their-"

"You are the one putting forth the pressure. I was content to leave things be after retrieving the Tutor and by chance his student, had you not allowed them to press a complaint up to Don Vongola we wouldn't be here." Sonya cut the, rather politically powerful, Don off shortly.

Sergio Bergamaschi glanced sideways at Nono, likely for the Russian's rather insolent behavior as an invited guest to this little Alliance meeting table. When the Sky didn't so much as twitch, because really… back chatting Clouds were always preferable to violently aggressive ones hands down, the Rain heaved a sigh mostly under his breath and turned back to her.

The non-comment on woman's behavior held another purpose beyond the mildly insulting obvious. Mainly to indicate that no, Don Vongola had no control over her and that no… they didn't know nor suspect she had a Sky to control her behavior through.

"Be that as it may, as you interfered when one of your people ran into trouble, I am also honor bound to interfere when my own do so." The Rain offered on his own end evenly. "They might not be explicitly mine in that way, but they do my famiglia favors from time to time and deserve the consideration."
"...well fine then. YOU can pay the hospital bills my Home Tutor racked up as a 'guest' of one of your subordinate syndicates." Insisted the thief flatly, digging out a sheaf of papers from her oversized purse and shoving them across the table at the man seated directly opposite of her. "Since you've decided to claim enough responsibility to stand in for them as well as push forward their own agendas."

Renato raised an eyebrow, hidden under the brim of his fedora.

"...I didn't say that-

"Someone is going to pay for dragging this out far enough to involve me again." She cut him off flatly for the second time, letting her grey eyes flash purple and narrowing them at the Rain even if that made the Storm to her direct left tense up. "It can either be you, as the one that allowed this little backwater syndicate to bitch so damn much, or them as the ones directly responsible. Or you all can shut up and let me murder off said backwater little group. At this point, both options are equally as troublesome as the other."

A couple of wires seemed to connect on Don Bergamaschi's end, and the man flicked a glance from the tiny blonde woman to the hitman loitering in the background.

Renato would be the first one to admit Sonya could clean up very nicely, but blonde wasn't a rare color in Italy. There was everything from her own golden to even platinum blondes in country, if not nearly as common as black or brunette hair colors. Beyond just physically speaking, she didn't stand out as overly tall or overly friendly and didn't really socialize beyond a handful of Italians when she felt like it.

He did know perfectly well that last Christmas Ball he took the pain to introduce her to him, so his delay in recalling who's Cloud he was dealing with was really rather pathetic.

Admittedly, the jump from a Soviet 'Flame expert' to a Soviet 'Mafia School Headmaster' was a non-intuitive one. The hitman would give him the benefit of a doubt… if he was feeling magnanimous.

He wasn't, so no.

"...paying this would set a rather bad precedent, Miss Bazanova."

"That you have a sense of honor about when you land in the wrong?" Rather snidely asked the Cloud, who set her spine against the back of her chair and affected a bored mien which fooled no one in that room. "Pick an option, I don't care which. Preferably sometime soon."

The Rain pursed his lips in irritation, hiding the action behind folding his hands in front of his lower face. "That is a rather bold claim to make without substance."

Sonya blinked at him slowly, glanced down at the bill lying between them on the table, then at Nono's form to their side. "You have a lot of balls to try claiming I'm blowing smoke."

"...point." Don Bergamaschi admitted genially, sweeping up the forms from the middle of the meeting table and merely glancing at it once before putting it aside. "Is that all you're demanding?"

She studied the other man for a moment longer than would be needed to read his body language. "...I fucking hate Rains."

He lightly laughed at her. "I will take a minor fee over the massacre of one of my tribute syndicates easily. They've been making a nuisance of themselves as it was, this just adds to the excuse I can use to smack them down a peg. I can be amenable in this… so long as you won't mind being so in
Cocking an eyebrow, the Storm-Cloud merely waited instead of possibly take the bait to do something she wasn't ready to commit to.

"They aren't very good when it comes to Flame users, as you probably noticed." Continued the Don leadingly, moving one of his hands away from his mouth to tap a finger on the table. "You apparently have a School..."

"...I suppose I could suggest immigration to a few students." Was the utterly dismissive response, which was a tad bit too slow to be considered willingly given. "So long as they're old enough to make their own decisions as well as interested in leaving Soviet territory."

"Well then, I look forward to hearing all about it."

Sonya flatly stared at the man, which practically bounced off the Rain's now cheerful grin. "It will take years, if at all, until I am able to fulfill such a request."

"So, there will be several chats over the next few years, until such can be done." Continued the Don pleasantly, unrepentantly smug even in the face of the Russian's severe disapproval. "Or... you could go yourself and give a few lectures yourself. I'll take either option, myself."

There was a beat, then she gave a sudden reversal of her own and echoed the Rain's smug little smirk. "Oh... I can do a few guest lectures instead. As a matter of fact, I like that idea. Very much. Say... next spring? Early? It's the quickest I can fit something in."

Renato blinked at her for a long moment, even as the two Dons were caught off-guard by her sudden mood shift and had to pause to rethink what they were about to say or do.

Why the hell...?

...oh. Oh. Oh no... was there any way he could arrange to be there when she went back?

"...um." Timoteo fumbled at the sudden shift of disgruntled Storm-Cloud to an utterly agreeable one. "I take it these are the terms you both will agree on?"

Sonya lifted a shoulder in an absent shrug, Don Sergio Bergamaschi wasn't quite on the mark enough to protest.

"I do request you take someone from the Vongola Alliance with you when you leave to deal with this, Miss Sonya." The Sky turned to the other man when she nodded. "Sergio, if you could pay or repay her in the next few weeks?"

"...of course, Nono."

The Ninth Sky of Vongola glanced to his Storm Guardian, who seemed equally as baffled as he was by the thief's copying a Rain's abrupt about-face, then rose and gestured for the others to do so as well. "Well then, thank you both for taking the time with me to ensure this is smoothed over."

She did as bid willingly enough, even extending a hand only after a brief pause to shake the lower ranking Don's hand before turning to leave the room somewhat happily.

"...Renato, can you please explain what the hell that was?"

"But of course, Timoteo." Agreed the hitman cheerfully, pushing off the wall and facing his lone Sky
friend. "Sonya's syndicate has a branch dedicated to the teaching and education of their younger members... and her foster parents run it. Those 'lessons', the neighborhood, and everything that goes on within there."

"We've seen her foster father, right? He came here last year." Chipped in Coyote thoughtfully, taking his sunglasses from the top of his head to fiddle with while he tried to recall the incident. "The... big tattooed guy."

"They are all tattooed. But yes, that was vor Arseniy. Coincidentally, Sonya's sister Tatiana once told me something interesting." He added casually, which fooled no one in the room but he didn't really care all that much right now. "That her younger sister acquired a habit for going for the hands from their foster father."

"That's speculation." Timoteo remarked, then he actually paused to really think about it as well.

"It is. I've only seen invasion grunts with shattered or dismembered hands in her wake, and one incident where she took her battle hammers to a few shy of a dozen gunmen's hands for pointing their weapons in her face." Renato confirmed brightly. "But... well. If you won't take my word for it..."

Don Bergamaschi swore softly.

"...just to be sure it's said again, Sonya's a Storm-Cloud. Might want to keep that in mind."

…and a bit of something she still had yet to clarify, but also something that didn't actually present ticks of to be identified.

Leaving the other men to discussing the pitfalls and issues with negotiating with Clouds, however Stormy they might be, Renato instead stalked after his favorite Russian.

He, predictably, found her shamelessly coddling Shamal in the middle of a hallway a floor down. Near the waiting room they had pointed out for the brat to meet up with them for saying goodbye to the blonde for a while.

"-behave yourself, I'll be back in a few months and will hear about it if you're not." She was dictating to the mopey Mist brat, who had his face half-buried into her stomach but his entire body was all but screaming 'depression' to anyone that cared to look. "Pay attention in school, try not to break any more teachers, and all that other shit I'm supposed to be blathering on about. More importantly, take care of yourself and try to have some fun. Time will pass quickly if you do."

An unconvinced huff from her midriff was the only answer. Shamal winded his arms around her hips the best he could instead, perfectly content to add in the obstruction of the hallway so long as it was being allowed.

Renato decided to do the Russian thing and ignore the traffic issues they were causing. It was far enough outside the higher trafficked areas of the Iron Fort, they weren't plugging an intersection of hallways, everyone else could easily go around if there was something important needed.

Sonya had a looming meeting in France, some work waiting for her in China, and then more beyond that. The brat was entirely justified in being upset his godmother was leaving him to get on with things. He did seem a bit more invested in her presence in his life than the Sun himself, if only for the emotional aspects Renato wasn't entirely comfortable dealing with.

She didn't seem to mind, so he found no reason to rock the boat.
Eventually, the Storm-Cloud got tired of standing half-bent over in order to allow Shamal to cling to her. She decided the middle of the hallway was good enough to sit down and pulled the young Mist down with her instead of let go.

Eyeing the both of them skeptically, the hitman assumed such things was why the kid preferred being smothered by the woman. He really couldn't bring himself to join in on the floor, so he picked a wall to 'ape a particularly foul-mood gargoyle' upon.

"...you're eventually going to have to let go, brat." Sonya mused aloud after a few more minutes of letting him have his way, despite the fact she liked to at least keep her mind occupied with something she seemed perfectly content to sit there. Being used like an oversized teddy bear instead of reading something as per her usual. "You'll get stiff or hungry eventually."

"Want to bet on it?" Shamal snarked irritably into her modest chest.

"You'll hurt yourself in the long run trying to do that." She informed him absently, finger his hair to tug or shift strands around while they sat there. "Please don't until you're fully grown."

Yanking a bit on her buttoned blouse, the Mist huffed again before craning his neck around to look up at her. "When are you coming back?"

She blinked down at him. "Christmas? I believe you demanded so... Renato, are we doing the Ball this year?"

"I wasn't thinking about it myself." Admitted the Sun idly, causing the kid to start a bit violently as apparently he hadn't realized the older Italian had followed his mamma. He merely stared back levelly at the brat when wide brown eyes turned on him, until Shamal decided to pay more attention to her all of a sudden. "Unless you really want to, we can skip it and spend Christmas in a hotel instead."

Surprisingly, it was the younger Italian that hijacked that plan. "Doesn't mamma need friends down here? And connections. And peoples-

"We get it." Sonya interjected dryly before he could finish. "Renato, would it be easier to do so in the Ball or can it be done some other time?"

"...probably in the Ball."

"Son of a bitch." Sighed the woman, giving what she needed for attending a high-class criminal ball some serious if sour thought from her scowl. "Fine... so I'll be here the last week of December, we'll head up to Moscow for a week after, and then come back down again."

Shamal very slowly, glacially so, finally untangled himself from her. "Fine. You better not be late, mamma."

"I'll try not to be." Sonya drawled out tartly, helping him steady himself after standing stock still then occupying her lap for a good quarter of an hour. "Get interested in school or find a hobby kid, I can't even describe how much that will help make the time fly."

The Mist sulked instead acknowledge that. "Love you, mamma."

"I love you too, don't do anything I wouldn't." While Renato was still adjusting to exactly how far their relationship had developed while he had been off doing other things, Sonya dropped a kiss on the brat's forehead and got up herself. "Renato."
He saluted her by tugging the brim of his fedora. "Have fun, little dragon lady."

She gave a backwards wave as she left them in the hallway.

The hitman glanced downward at the Mist brat. "...love, huh?"

He made a rude sound in his direction, starting the walk he had to do in order to get to his room in the child's wing of the Iron Fort. "You have to do your own work on that end, Mister Renato."

He scoffed, stalking after the Mist. "I assure you, I don't need your or anyone else's help in that aspect."

"...mamma actually does have a favorite candy." Tempted the utter brat cheerfully. "I got to try some."

Pausing momentarily mid-stride, he skeptically inspected the kid's back. "Ho?"

"...surprisingly tasty, even if it wasn't really all that sweet." Shamal continued just a touch too thoughtfully, meaning he was teasing his godfather and it was pretty chancy if the kid would be telling him anything.

...perfect. Time for plan b. "And here I was going to take you out for gelato since this is the day she had to leave. But I guess you aren't all that heartbroken after all."

The look the brat aimed over one shoulder was just perfect.

Suspicious, wary, but oh so tempted even so.

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(Wednesday the 6th of August, 1969. Nice, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, French Republic.)

Adrik eyed the back of the disgustingly chipper scientist as they wandered rather freely down a French street.

It was very eye-catching, with the white facades and red tiled roofs paired with a tan bricked ground. Paired with a wide-open sky overhead and the nearby coastline, it made a pretty picture… but the interests he had in admiring the view faded pretty damn fast.

There was a good copy of the local architecture in the Mediterranean section of Mafia Land. He'd seen something like it before, just not on this scale.

Alright, no. Not everyone would enjoy an island far enough out in international waters to be completely lawless and therefore a haven for criminal dealings. However, that was pretty much his place and his kind of people.

Getting back to it, however temporarily, reminded the Russian security expert about what he had been missing while he was piddling around checking boxes off his list to acquire a full college degree. While civilian life had its own perks and drawbacks, a nearly completely safe lifestyle and more casual contacts… life connected to the trade of violence had its own attractions.

Mostly an unspoken companionship with equally blooded criminal types, more lucrative work, and definitely less personal curiosity aimed his way.

Sonya probably overpaid him, for what amounted as getting a guided tour of a few French cities.
while they kept on the move and waited for her to clear the tail they might've picked up. He was pretty certain she wouldn't ask for the remainder back, not if she could calculate the quirks a Mist she was associated with into the funds left behind for her minion to managed so easily, so he had half a million in francs to live off of until said thief managed a meet up with them.

"-the current mayor, one Jacques Médecin, who is the son of the former mayor Jean Médecin, has continued his father's work in developing the city. Most of the damage from the American bombings has been repaired, and--"  

"Hey, Verde? Quick question." Adrik was… pretty sure the man wasn't born around here. They had, in fact, ensured they were some distance from the Lightning's birthplace while they were 'hiding out'. "Why did you go to the States if they destroyed some of this place?"

Blinking at the interruption, which really had only a slight chance of actually working without the man bulldozing over anyone else talking, the very green Frenchman glanced backwards at him through his spectacles. "…I suppose that boils down to the A-bomb."

He came to a stop to stare at the man blankly, when that didn't quite make sense to him. "…what?"

"Terrible although the final cost in lives might have been, the atomic bomb and nuclear sciences are genuinely some of the greatest scientific advancements on this age." Explained the scientist bluntly, adjusting his glasses as he came to a stop in the middle of the pedestrian walkway as well. "Which occurred in America. Whichever way you look at it, only the superpowers of this day and age have the willingness or interests in developing atomic sciences further instead of covering ground already gone over by others. The superpower of the Western world, the United States… or the Soviet leaders of the North, the Russians. Which then, do you suppose, was easiest to obtain a student visa within?"

Thinking about it, the wiry man scrubbed a hand over his jawline and his stubbly whisker shadow while said thought was taking place, he eventually had to shrug. "…that doesn't clear up your thoughts on the States."

"I hold no ill-will towards them, in honestly." Concluded the Lightning thoughtfully himself after giving the matter some additional brain power. "Admittedly, I also hold no fondness towards them. Nor to my own 'homeland'. They are places, beyond being the local for certain people, a few ancient productions of great minds, and assemblies of fellow intellectuals… I hold no interests in such things."

…and so, why had he given him an hour's worth of information in a dump the first thing in every city they had visited so far?

Not really seeing a way to ask nicely, Adrik rather bluntly just stated his query than find a way to phrase it better.

"I am your local 'guide'," Verde observed dryly, waving a hand to the rather striking surroundings and including the rather brilliant sunset just starting to paint the sky overhead. "However, as I am not nearly as confident as you yourself are in your specialized matters… giving all the details I have and allowing you to make use of such as you saw fit was what I settled upon after pondering the situation. As a native son, I suppose I do know more than a fair share of history."

"…man, you could've just said so. I thought you were just really proud of your country or something." With a despairing shake of the head, he took the man by the arm and steered him in a new direction. "You want to learn something interesting? There’re hotspots around here where you can learn the… less savory tidbits about these places and the people that run them. I'll show you a few."
Since the scientist allowed himself to be led, it was probably likely he was at least interested if not objecting to learning more 'criminally flavored' skills.

The fact it would allow Sonya a better chance of tracking them down quickly if today was the day she was meeting up with them again was just a bonus.

Nice was a port, a not an ancient one but decently old regardless. As with most ports over a certain age, it had a 'seedy' side of the docks where the sailors and those undertaking seafaring typed job descriptions could drink the local rotgut until they passed out. Next to those, or under or right next to depending on the situation, you could usually find a rather shallow mafia bar.

Not the deep mafia ones, Adrik actually didn't know how to get into those or even locate them in the first place. He knew they existed, and some of the signs of how to identify it when you waltzed into one, but they were places you had to be taken to and have the methods explained in detail before being able to find one yourself.

Tatiana hadn't taught anyone of them how she knew where they were, but it was likely her foster parents had taught her before she left home. Then that would also mean Sonya would know… maybe she wouldn't mind pointing it out to him?

He eventually got them through the rougher edges of Nice's port and into a suitably designated mafia contact bar. After the expected suspicion for new faces, the two of them had more than enough time to hear about one Mayor Jacques Médecin's links with former OAS terrorists and their lingering remains in other countries before something more interesting happened.

Sonya found them just before the slightly loud conversation in the corner got into very interesting topic about a former OAS agent turned photography studio owner and what he was being watched for by the local Mafia.

"You're clear, Verde." She announced shortly, seating herself a bit abruptly at their little table while flatly ignoring the attention taking off her jacket and showing her tattoos had drawn to them. "Adrik, I regret to say you might need to be on the lookout for assassins. At least until I can arrange a small visit to the States and… re-educate a few idiots about what is and what isn't realistic to tangle with."

The other Russian swallowed his mouthful of port before looking over to her. "So… what. You swapped the tail on him for siccing them on me?"

"Are you complaining?" Asked the Storm-Cloud shortly, taking a rather hefty draw from her own glass of whisky on the rocks before making a face at it. "Shit… I forgot I didn't really like this crap."

Her fellow Russian stole the amber liquid happily enough once she shoved it away.

"So… did you find any syndicates you wanted to check out? Or was whatever it was you had spread out over the living room too interesting?"

"How, exactly, is this to occur?" Verde inquired skeptically over the rim of the beer he had been nursing for at least an hour. "Correct me if I am wrong, but advertising what we are after will only attract further ill intents towards ourselves. Which we were in the middle of avoiding for most of the time we have been acquaintances, correct?"

Sonya held up a finger, stole Adrik's drink in revenge and draining it in a second, and then giving the empty tumbler a rather nasty look. "…right, port isn't a whole lot better. Well, to be honest here Verde, announcing it in suitably secured places and then just waiting for them to recruit you is actually my whole plan."
From the utterly flat look the scientist aimed across the table, he wasn’t a fan of that plan.

"...look, I don't have very good contacts out here." She explained bluntly, waving the tiny glass around the barroom to likely include the entirety of the country. "Those that I can ask about the syndicates around here I wouldn't trust if they told me the Sky was blue."

"Isn't it actually orange?" Questioned the other Russian curiously.

"Exactly."

"Be that as it may be, why do I require one away from the local we have just left behind? An ocean away from the same situation, and it is not nearly as likely they will continue to try to hunt me." Asked the Lightning a bit shortly, folding both hands around his beer stein and glowering over it. "Admittedly for protection and security of fellows, I believe you said. Do I not have that now?"

The younger Russian and fellow user of Dying Will Flames shook her head. "Look, Verde. I can't afford you. I am barely pulling enough in to afford my Lackey right now, and I have yet to find a way to realistically stretch that for, at the very least, three more adult dependents, and maybe two child ones, if not more in time. Once Bjørn starts regenerating the cash I'm paying for his lessons, and maybe after I have a sense of the drain this housing thing is going to cost me, I will have moved to Italy and be a tiny bit more concerned with the instruction and well-being of my godson than my research efforts."

"I can afford myself, thank you. And as for research, you have already paid that for the short term at least." Verde countered blandly, his tone doing nothing to disguise his intents on wiggling out of joining a French syndicate. "Putting myself out there and making a target of myself just to find a protector goes against the grain. I am fully aware I am painfully green in this endeavor, whatever the hardships remaining at hand to a master or expert is generally regarded as the intelligent option."

Adrik chewed on his bottom lip as Sonya argued that she had nothing for him nor the intents of extending her already stretched protection further, and Verde picked holes in her arguments and countered with the fact she had already more or less exceeded any unknown syndicate in protecting and guiding newer Flame users by just doing as she had and if not left here alone her protection would not have to stretch more.

Well… if this was what the other man did when mildly annoyed at being brushed off or interrupted, remind him not to ever try that. Draining the tumbler of whisky, he snagged the port glass and now empty stein of beer for refills.

He would, not even two hours later, admit if only to himself that volunteering himself to do so was the worst idea he ever had.

By the time he returned to their little table, Verde had successfully argued himself out of 'you have to' in regard to syndicates and sort of back into Sonya's protection. If only because she had invested in him, at least monetarily. Said thief was looking more and more fed up the longer the Lightning dodged around her words and twisted them for his own purposes.

"...fine. Fine, if you can go six months, alone, without dying or requiring my assistance… I will drop the subject and not continue to insist." Announced said pissed off Soviet Storm-Cloud flatly, but then she flicked her hand to include the neat as a pin barroom they were in. "But you realize, Verde, that just about everyone here is connected in some way shape or form to French syndicates… and they heard the same thing?"
It took him a few moments to really process the words, and also dodging around her hand in order to not get smacked or drop their liquor took a bit of attention, but when he did realize what she was saying it was far too late.

"Woah, wait a minute-"

"Very well." Verde agreed pleasantly, or at least as pleased as could be while also trying fruitlessly to remain tactful. "I do believe it would go without saying that regardless of what happened we would not continue to dwell around here."

"...Verde, man. Stop." Almost slamming the stein of beer in front of the scientist, he set the Russians' to the side instead of drain both of them like he really wanted to. "Sonya. What the hell?"

She gave him a slightly pissed off, but more alarmingly a mainly resigned, look of her own. "After my example, what the hell do you think Verde assumes? I cannot adequately explain why it will not happen for him as well, I have nearly next to nothing to do with how my own example actually succeeded beyond happenstance. And, at the very least, he should learn if he can or not himself. Think of it as an educational experience."

...'educational' Adrik's pasty white Viking ass. "You and I both know this isn't going to end well."

"And if I really said 'no, do it this way' do you think he'd not sabotage or screw with it himself if he thought he could get away with it?"

"No, because that's stupid and Verde's not stu-" He paused, looked back at the Frenchman about halfway through a swallow of beer, and amended that statement as he turned back to her. "...Verde's not usually dense."

Said scientist choked on his drink, but the thief threw her hands up in the air. "And what the hell can I do about that? I could tell him until I'm blue in the face that it's going to be damn near impossible to accomplish, that the syndicates that want a free Lightning will either outright try to murder him or hammer him into a corner in order to get him to gratefully join up with them or some ally or whoever for reasons, but until he sees it for himself I don't think he really understands how bad it can get. And while I could waste months of time trying to get him into a syndicate that won't murder him for his current outlook... I frankly don't have that much free time."

"You don't throw the poor man to the wolves just because you're on a time limit!" Adrik shot back, a breath away from hysterical and seriously wondering what the hell he had done in his life to deserve this shit. "For fuck's sake, Boss lady! If you're not near-by, no one's going to keep in mind denting the Lightning or the other Russian with him will earn them the ire of a Soviet Cloud... which we were banking on to prevent the wrong sorts of pressure while fitting Verde into a syndicate."

"I cannot put my entire fall schedule on hold for this one thing." Sonya flatly dictated, jabbing a pointer finger into the table between them a few times to make her point.

...and by 'into', he really meant into. As in at least a joint was driven into the highly lacquered wood without her so much as wincing from breaking a nail in half.

"I not only have a fucking school to open, but an island contract due shortly that will take me into China on their syndicate's businesses, at least ten or twelve other contracts this year yet, and somewhere in all that I have a home in Italy to find and purchase with two medical checks and my three years of missing immunization shots to take. All that I have to do by the end of this year. How then, do you think, I can safeguard Verde's social experiment with all that needing to be done?"
"…appoint a neutral third-party?" He tried weakly after admitting defeat.

This was… a whole lot of not good.

"Who?" Demanded the tiny blonde woman skeptically. "I have a hitman acquaintance I'd probably bet on more than any one syndicate, but he's a little busy himself from what he said. I could ask Don Vongola… but this isn't the kind of thing one takes to a head of the Italian families without a major bribe to go with it. Aside those two men, I might be able to get Tyr the Sword Emperor interested for a tiny bit… might. IF he's in a good mood this week, and frankly I'm not even sure if my marginal once-in-a-blue-moon words with him would stretch that much or not."

…when the ever-loving fuck did Sonya find time to rub elbows with Nono Vongola and the man's head assassin?

Verde rather solidly put down the heavy mug, now only half full of his drink, on the table to attract some attention his way. "Is a third party required at all?"

Sonya snatched her refill of his port away from where her fellow Russian had been holding them hostage, draining it herself in seconds before giving the scientist the answers he was seeking. "Frankly, Verde… I would not be surprised if a syndicate murdered everyone that moved on one street to freak you out enough to join them for the protection or for revenge or what have you. You are not really all that much of a threat, personally. A third party would ensure any rules you or I would like to set for the act of 'courting' you have to be obeyed. That means they think they have a wide lateral range of options to pick from, so long as they remain outside your grip and my view."

"There's safety in numbers is taken a bit extreme with us." Adrik chipped on the heels of her own words, a bit glumly. "Or in our case, so long as someone has direct control over assets like you or Sonya over there, the less large groups will bother with you. Flip side is also as bad, if you're too noticeable… again like Sonya over there, then you'll either be the reason the entire syndicate ends up wiped out or kicked out so you don't end up causing that."

"The Zolotovs have not been wiped out." His fellow Russian protested.

"No? Has it been tried?"

She looked a bit thoughtful. "To what extent is 'tried' covering in this? I've preemptive a few things, and apparently my own assassination has been preempted a few times by the clan."

"I'll give you good odds that either removing you or at least knocking us down a peg in influence was the aim of at least one or two of those attempts."

"…no bet."

Verde, thankfully, took the time to puzzle over that.

Adrik really, really hoped he decided to at least play this part safe.

(Thursday the 7th of August, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"…you did what?"
"Do you think she will be mad?"

Galina blinked blankly at the wall opposite her, marveling over how just perfect coincidence could be. "Nope. However, you might want me to break the news to her."

There was an almost puzzled seeming pause on Björn's end before he realized what she was saying, because the Lackey might be still young he wasn't really foolish.

Often, anyways.

"Although, if you're still taking requests, I'd like to at least have beach access for this 'castle' of ours."

"…Miss Galina?" He flatly called from the far end of the line. "I know it sounds ridiculous, but I did do up the numbers. Unless you are saying you'd like to be a full-time housekeeper for a small Italian boy-"

"I did not say anything like that."

Alright, on second thought there was perfectly logical reasons why Sonya's Mafia Land Lackey was sourcing Italian castles for them. They probably weren't the grand, sweeping fortresses of Russia's, built to keep out not only the deadly winters but Viking raids and serf revolts.

They'd be… what?

Built to withstand pirate attacks?

There was that whole nastiness with the Mafia Wars, maybe marauders and vagabonds as well.

She frowned delicately as she realized that they might just end up with a fortress of a castle anyways without the cold having something to do with it. "Why do you want my opinion on this anyways? Amusing though it is to hear what you've-"

"I," Björn rather strongly cut her off testily as she did to him before, only to uncomfortably clear his throat, "…did not really spend a lot of time with Dama. I do not know what aesthetics she likes."

Galina raised an eyebrow at her unseen conversation partner. "Björn, no one with sense lets a thief decorate. You did get an eyeful of the messy shit shoved in random corners here, right?"

"…then do I find a place we, or she, can fix up to her liking or find a castle already habitable and just hire an interior decorator for that!" A thump sounded on the other end of the line, likely the Lackey banging his forehead on his desk or some other flat surface over there. "Why are there so many options…?"

"Honestly? I'd suggest the interior decorator, preferably a local one. If you have to go through the headache of hiring outsiders for the upkeep of whatever, might as well ensure it's not too different from what they'd expect to keep curious noses out of Sonya's, or our own, business."

Scruffy blinked blankly at her as he pulled his head out of the work he had been embroiled with all afternoon in the far side of the office, only to obviously and painfully ineptly eavesdrop on her phone call.

She paused in thought, fitted 'we're getting a castle' into English and ran through how the lip movements were supposed to look, and then mouthed the phrase for him. "However, you could try asking her."
"...I think it might be better to ask forgiveness than permission in this case." Björn commented a bit self-deprecatingly. "I have the numbers, and the logic, and practically everything else... but it still sounds a bit farfetched to say 'we need a castle and the staff to run it, Dama.'"

"...maybe because it is a slight bit out there?"

"If you're not going to help."

"Oh, I'll help... by not mentioning this to her." Admitted the Lightning wickedly, grinning at the heavy sigh from one end of this conversation and Scruffy's entirely bewildered expression on the other. "I'll also run you some interference, just so she won't catch on until you've got things in place."

A slightly incredulous huff was her answer. "I'm not sure I'm alright with this, Miss Galina. While... no, she's probably not going to be happy about the size of what I'll be looking for... it's her money. She does deserve to know what I'm doing with it."

"Kid, she wouldn't have put you in charge of it if she had any idea how to manage it like you do." She informed him pointedly. "Has she ever asked about the money you're handling for her?"

"...well, no."

"I'm telling you, she's not going to ask. And since I do find it funny, I'm not going to tell her for you."

Because maybe this way the blonde woman would stop leaving her behind. Galina would like to see more of the world too, at least a tiny bit more than she managed with Tatiana and her crew.

Björn made a rather disgruntled sounding groan on his end. "Very well... I take it Scruffy-"

"Do not bring that poor man into this." Galina snapped with a frown.

The Sun had done nothing to deserve that, and frankly she wasn't remotely amused at the suggestion. "Fine. Did you need something, or was this just a social call?"

"...oh, right. The fences finished parsing through the Boss lady's hauls and picked what they wanted to keep. The remainder is what I wanted to bring up."

The Lightning-Storm shuffled a few pages, knocked something glassy but full of liquid into something metallic, and then thumped something solid on something else equally or more so. "Lump sum deposit or...?"

"Well, it was gathered to fund the school. Half to acquire the correct number of rocks, half to pay the teacher's wages. I have been selling the pricier shit to buy the semi-precious in bulk and putting the remains into a savings account when what I sell is a bit more than what I buy at one time."

"...okay?"

"You're the money man, aren't you?" She demanded shortly, a bit annoyed by his sudden turn to thickness. "If we don't want to annoy Sonya by requesting semi-frequently that she top the accounts off, then how the hell do I or you or we invest this damn thing so it'll pay itself later on?"

"...ah. Well... probably illegally, right now."

She took a deep breath, pinched the bridge of her nose, and heaved a heavy sigh. "Björn, I am aware of that. That is why I'm calling you. With the account number, and all that other business I
had to do to open the account in the first place."

Instead of an exclamation of surprise or a sudden outpour of helpful tips and advice, there was a sigh. "Miss Galina… Russian banks are a bit… weird."

"How so?"

"…just take my word for it. They're very weird."

"That doesn't exactly help me, now does it?"

"Unless you somehow got a Vneshtorgbank of the USSR savings account, I can't actually get to the money to manage from here. And one of those would be a bit… noticeable for what we wish to do." Explained the Mafia Land Lackey patiently. "There isn't a whole lot of funds moving in or out of the Soviet Bloc at all. If I am to do anything with the funds you want to set aside, we're probably going to have to use runners and maybe a smuggling operation or two. Maybe a moneychanger or several for the added security."

Galina scowled at the news, lightly kicking Sonya's desk while she turned that over in her mind. "...I bring you precious gems and metals, you turn it into funds to invest we can get transferred over later if the account falls below a certain point?"

"That would probably be the best idea, yes."
Chapter 75

(Friday the 8th of August, 1969. Draguignan, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, French Republic.)

Verde was well aware he had greatly annoyed the Russians he had dealings with by backtracking on them about his joining of a syndicate issue.

They were supporting him while he was in-between aims, as well as ensuring he was safe enough until a decision could be reached, so they were completely entitled to being so with his person.

However, no matter what he tried to do he couldn't quite uncouple the assumption of 'syndicates' equating more or less to 'cliques'. As in high school cliques like the jocks and the math nerds, cheerleaders and the outcasts, or just the artist types and the poets.

A rather juvenile assumption admittedly, but the only one that he knew of and that put a foul taste in his mouth anyways. Especially with his previous associations with such scholastic social castes, most of which were entirely negative.

After being hurriedly relocated to a rather tiny town a bit more removed from the southern French coastline, Sonya had laid out the limitations and rules for his 'social experiment' before leaving them to it. Six months, so either the middle of or after February of next year, Verde had to remain 'freelance' and somehow find his way unaided by Adrik's influence back to Mafia Land to find her Lackey Bjørn without being killed.

If he accomplished what she asked, then she would consent to renegotiations to give him more security or at least a decently well-defended place of his own on her dime and they would drop the subject of him finding a native syndicate to join.

Maybe she had insisted.

Given how surprisingly sensible and honorable the professional thief was when it came to looking after her people, Adrik and her Lightning-Storm Lackey were both in good health or ensured to become that way and had been supplied appropriate wages for their work even if she had dictated nothing to them to do for her specifically, Verde had little worry she would shortchange him on any basics of living if he could not find a way to ensure it himself.

According to said Russians, 'freelance' was still the point of selling one's skills but with a more mercenary day-by-day bent than in exchange for continued protection and or inclusion to pre-established support system or networked supply line.

He had to agree to that much, as Sonya was the one he was trying to arrange something different with, but then on the trip out here Adrik tacked on his own additions to his fellow Russian's terms.

He'd be teaching the scientist how to be a 'made man', apparently something he'd need to know if he insisted on being solo in this lifestyle as well as a measure of what one had to be comfortable with in order to thrive when placed next to other cut-throat criminal types.

Verde honestly had no intentions on dealing with the mafia while he was hiding out for the time Sonya demanded from him, or at least while he was only aware of the 'survive' mandate he had no intents of it. The more intelligent option for him would be to clear out of where he was expected to be and work on that 'return to Mafia Land' part closer to the time he was due to return to Sonya's Lackey to prevent miscalculations from occurring.
However, it was then a bit bitterly pointed out to him by Adrik that while he might want one thing it didn't mean others would play along if it suited them.

An entire barroom full of degenerate-types in Nice knew he was a user of Dying Will's Lightning Flames. Or at least those that had paid attention to the tiny blonde woman's words to her fellow Soviet citizen could draw the correct conclusions that one of the two men was so. Those that caught the wiry male's rebuttal would know it was the Frenchman and not the Russian, and that the thief was a Cloud Flame user interested at least peripherally in their wellbeing.

Both Russians' dubiousness over his being able to remain freelance was probably not a good sign for his eventual aims. As Sonya held a reputation that had enabled his mostly safe if marginalized survival, on an island too far out in international waters to be policed by any one government or association, without her there to breath down necks and Adrik was another raised in this lifestyle they likely did know what they were trying to warn him of.

Not being particularly dimwitted or slow, the scientist could easily understand his current aim would be hard if not nearly impossible at his current level of ignorance. He had no reputation, knew of any acceptable skills beyond the combat or Flame orientated few, nor connections in the 'trade of violence' to enable his success… and it was possible he had to work up to something approaching or similar to the Soviet thief's current reputation in order to accomplish his goal.

However, Verde also wasn't particularly committed to even the idea of joining any group or collection of criminal types on a whim.

No matter how one tried to explain or reword the premise, to him 'join a syndicate for the protection' sounded a small part like 'go with the first/easiest group that shows any interests'. Given the lack of talk on any 'leave' option, it was likely the joining would be considered permanent for life.

Research could be done, and information compiled on their various aims, but they would not be his directions nor aims and that did not really greatly appeal. As there was still a chance he would not have to, that was what he wanted to explore before resigning himself to following those that would not share his interests at all.

Dissatisfaction and boredom were two states Verde was regretfully familiar with. He was equally as aware of his reactions when presented with either, which was likely things any 'boss' would take issue with. Few would appreciate a subordinate dropping whatever duty or project to get embroiled in something completely different and be highly reluctant to return to the previous work.

He could foresee several ways his new 'freelance' situation could eventually resolve. Either he used his scientific skills to engineer designer drugs or manufacture pharmaceuticals outside the purview if any medical safety board or industry oversight committees, or somehow sold himself on the still unfamiliar Dying Will Flames of Lightning in a stereotyped but still possible 'bruiser' role.

Verde was not a physical man, so relying on his Lightning skill of 'Harden' and acquiring more combat-oriented traits to become a guard or criminal enforcer was not palpable to him. Beyond what he was comfortable with or was willing to do that he had not actually defined yet, he did not have the physique to be fit for such roles.

More than likely, the Lightning attempting to be threatening would rely on whatever weaponry or others he had at hand.

While defense was more than assured with his Flames, offence would require some creative thinking or physical touch. Possible, but not attractive nor mentally stimulating enough to assure some success.
Since that was the case, then just anyone would be equally or more fit for such things and he would not stand out doing so. However, it was likely he would not gain the reputation or information required to meet that six-month deadline either.

Whereas he had the chemical knowhow, at least could afford a bit of seed money to start up a decent amount of production and didn't honestly see an issue in supplying harmful concoctions to those inane enough to abuse or risk their health's integrity by taking them… he was pretty sure doing so would be a terrible, terrible idea.

Lucrative although it might be in the short term, those that became addicted or made their livings off the supply of such would not appreciate a sudden halt on his own terms.

Likely said theoretical situation would become lethal or hazardous to both life and whatever 'reputation' he built then. Being able to 'Harden' one's skin did not evade the issue of poison nor unanticipated attacks from unobserved angles.

Beyond the short-term issues he could expect, being a drug dealer was surprisingly disquieting to him personally as he was fully aware how easily it could be done but held no malicious desires to actually harm the third or even fourth-hand victims of such ploys by proxy.

Leaving him with manufacturing medical compounds, possibly utilizing his previous college experiences in some way to diversify his illegal portfolio of crimes, and the lone medical text Tatiana Primakova had allowed him to take possession of as she had a more inclusive volume acquired shortly after purchasing the second-hand text for her own studies.

Given his prior scholastic record, the Frenchman was well aware he would eventually tire of medical sciences or whichever eventual aim he sought after to 'make' his reputation among the criminals of his home country. However, he at least intended to have more than enough information that the next time someone became physically infirm near him he could at least identify what the likely complication was and what could be done in aid.

"Figured something out yet?"

Verde winced, glancing to the door that had been silently opened while he had been otherwise occupied with pondering out his current goals.

To say Adrik had been less than thrilled with his decision was understating things greatly. The Russian's outlook had yet to improve any even a full night and a morning away from both the place and time of said incident, and the scientist was fully aware the other man didn't have to stick around to help him.

Frankly, he actually didn't understand why he was still here helping him if he was annoyed with the situation.

Yes, Sonya was paying the man a wage to provide him advice and rudimentary instruction on a few skills… but a phone number would fulfill most of that without the personal attentions being present offered. He could hope the other man was still around because of a possible bond of comradery, but it was more likely just career orientated or something along those lines instead.

"…possibly." Answered the Frenchman after a puzzled moment more vainly spent trying to clinically dissect the aims of his fellow, shifting around on the rented hotel bedspread to face the man fully.

"You continually refer to this lifestyle and work as the 'trade of violence', and since I am not a violent man… is there a way to supply the tools of such a trade instead?"
"What, weapon manufacturing?" Adrik questioned skeptically, fully pausing after a moment to give it more thought after his first and probably dismally pessimistic take of it. "...actually, I could maybe see that. Eventually. But... right now? You'd need a factory at least, and a workforce to boot, before anything like that would become profitable enough to warrant your continued independence. And then their desire to gain control of the local weapon maker would be another sort of headache for you."

"Not if they are exceptional weapons." Verde interjected, becoming more interested in the proposed course the more he processed it. "Not if they are Flame weapons."

The wiry, but still more physically fit than the Lightning, Russian shut one eye and peered at him through the other warily for an achingly long moment. "Verde, that's a tall order. As far as anyone knows, the only things a Flame user can use with their Flames are those rings they sell only on Mafia Land and high melting point metals like tungsten. Everything else tends to go... poof, in various levels of violence. With all the money the Zolotov girls poured into maybe finding cheaper alternatives, and I'm talking easily a billion if not more in euros, Sonya still has yet to find something that will reliably work for more than one or two types at a time."

"Admittedly a bit ambitious, but that would be a long-term goal if possible." Backtracked the scientist after adjusting to the information that his loosely termed 'patron' had more information he had not thought to ask for. That would require another round of negotiations with the Russian thief, and Verde was uncertain if he needed the added motivations to finish this 'quest' of his quickly in order to obtain it. "As for right now, commissioned pieces customized for a buyer's need. Handguns without the serial numbers, for instance. Poisons, some... certain chemical compounds for ill deeds or medications not normally widely distributed, effective industrial cleaners or acids to remove evidence from law enforcement. Manufactured weaponry to industry specifications to allow for aftermarket parts or customization, but without needing to evade the regulation of such arms nominally applied by the government and law enforcement."

Adrik pursed his lips, but the ghost of a smirk did tilt his mouth up a bit and gave the Frenchman a bit of hope. "You're going to have to be insanely careful with that. The wrong step, trusting the wrong person at just the right time, and that could backfire spectacularly."

"Indubitably."

"...who the hell even says that these days, Verde my man?"

"Obviously, I do." Countered Verde, depressingly aware of how pleased he was that things seemed now to be less tense between them.

He rolled his eyes, taking various food containers out of the bag that had been hanging off his wrist for the last few minutes of conversation to hand over. "Whatever. Here, eat up. We've got... a lot of shit to do and ground to cover, and precious little time to do it in. Boss lady's doing heists locally around here, which might muddy our trail for at least a few days, but then we're on our own."

Taking the small brown paper covered beignet, which was likely to be the main part of their breakfast for the day, he gave the other man a questioning look. "Sonya is still around?"

"Boss lady is a thief, a working one. She's got... a few days? Or so here. She originally set that time aside for setting us somewhere to test out a syndicate... then she had something to do but would've been back in a week or so to move us somewhere else if we hadn't liked that option."

Adrik shrugged, setting his own wrapped pastry to the side and digging out some fresh fruit next to dole out. "She said she'd ensure it was big, showy, and more importantly at least recognizably her doing things so if anyone tried to start after you real early they'll end up sidetracked chasing a ghost of you
Verde accepted that, and the few not-quite-ripe pears, silently without asking if another meeting could be arranged with the woman. Fully aware he could be annoying to others when he was after something specific did not make waiting any more attractive of a proposition.

Although highly tempted to ask anyways, he was still the 'green rookie'. Gallingly enough, again and without being able to utilize his prior scholastic studies as a type of credit towards being 'reliable'.

He was somewhat certain that with the stakes as high as they had been trying to impress on him the night before there would be no 'hazing' as with his freshman college experiences. However, this was a very 'sink or swim' style situation regardless.

Either he'd succeed, and therefore evade cumbersome ties with dubious individuals he shared nothing but a homeland with, or he'd fail and possibly die or be horribly maimed in the process.

At least then his jaggedly emerald, supernatural seeming ability with 'Lightning Flames' would then be of some use other than to guard him against his minor mishaps with his equipment.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 8th of August, 1969 continued. Montpellier, Hérault, French Republic.)

As good as Bjørn was as a Lackey these days, his ability to get her things to do was still limited by the actual contracts others had put in to the Thieves' Hall. Other than that, when asked if he needed anything he merely trite and minor things which really didn't impact her too much to afford him.

There were no Mafia Land contracts to steal something in Montpellier, France. No good ones she'd like, anyways. While on one hand that was good, meaning she had the ability and leeway to work at her own pace and leisure, it also meant Sonya would have to get creative in order to attract the attention off Verde and Adrik.

Montpellier was a university town, slightly more inland than most coastal cities tended to be. There wasn't any major Greek or Roman architecture that it had been built up from, although it did have a few interesting gardens and old medieval architecture along a few streets.

It also had a shit ton of churches.

Annoyed, the thief stubbornly turned away from the various cathedrals and monasteries when she came across them. If she did steal something from them, and she was highly tempted to, every damn time she attended church with Shamal she'd think or remember nothing else.

Attending Mass was already awkward enough, she'd adjust first before making it more so.

An ancient Jewish mikveh was not really that interesting, but she spent a few minutes staring at the square bath thing with steps set well below ground level and wondering what the fuck it was used for anyways.

Upon leaving that little tourist attraction, as apparently said mikveh was now not a valid one due to shifts in the water-table and therefore just a historic curiosity now… although how that was decided was entirely beyond her but something else to wonder, the blonde Russian set off down another cobblestone road to try to find something.

Anything interesting. Preferably something interesting that she could steal, and maybe eventually sell.
What was currently popular?

Aside jewelry and shiny metals, she had more than enough of that crap and didn't honestly want to steal French jewelry this week.

There were the vineyards, while liquor was always useful it wasn't really attention grabbing nor really that risky for her. She could steal several barrels at a time, which would only confuse the civilians but not really alarm or grab the attention of the local French syndicates. Equally so for any other food-items, she knew stealing cheese was still a thing that surprisingly enough paid decently in the right markets but that wasn't 'impressive' either.

Sonya sidestepped the pickpocket trying to use the semi-crowded streets to cover his snatch for her purse, flashing the young kid a warning glance to get him to back off her with a bit of Storm Flames in her eyes to hammer that home. The moment he did step backwards she made an abrupt left onto another suitably 'main' road to get away from any possible accomplices.

From the startled oath he gave at her back before he bolted off, said pickpocket hadn't been aware that was possible for a select branch of humanity.

Well, not her problem. Kid would either learn more eventually or forever wonder if she had been demonic or something.

Her semi-unexpected detour took the Russian to the Place de la Comédie, a fairly open square in southeast part of the city, ringed with various eateries and large buildings. She looked between the large fortress turned high school on one end to the railway station Gare de Montpellier Saint-Roch, and then to the Italian style Opéra Comédie on another side of said square.

She'd done an auditorium heist before, nothing that was kept in train stations stood out to her as a good target, and robbing a school was just… no.

Stumped, and irritated that she was so, Sonya blindly stalked off in another direction entirely and probably irritated others that she cut in front of to leave the square quickly.

Not being very creative had never before been an issue for her, but she supposed that was the pitfall in relying on contracts for the bulk of her work. A random heist should not be this hard, she was a thief that had lived two lives and could magically summon lilac or crimson fire to her hands. Skirting a tourist group that sounded as if they were from Britain, an unusually large one which suggested either a tour group or a school production but while one was semi-lucrative to pickpocket the other was less so, ended up forcing the Russian to stop short of the paved walkway to a rather large building.

The Storm-Cloud blinked at the tan building, and then wondered if Lisa's comments on the difficulties of robbing museums took Mafia Land's contact network into account or not.

That, she was semi-sure, was the Musée Fabre.

She'd done a museum before, and another one rather recently for those armor pieces, so… well, she did need the practice from recent events.

She was getting a house, right?

Might as well do a bit of pre-purchase scouting for decorations and things. Björn could store things for her in his apartment, as her storage unit was a bit full up of books and other papery goods.

Hopefully there wouldn't be anything too ugly or disgustingly ornate she might like. At least she'd be
able to sell the worst of it to fund some better decorations if need be.

…hmm, maybe there'd be books?

(Saturday the 9th of August, 1969. Musée Fabre, Montpellier, Hérault, French Republic.)

Eyeing her sturdy brown leather boots as they helped support her high overhead a few security guards, the very same pair she had ruined and then replaced this very summer, Sonya basically loitered about the rafters of a museum's painting galley while the guards below finished their inspections and locked the building down.

As per her usual when waiting on other people to get a move on so she could start working, she occupied herself thinking about something she had started to wonder about but wanted some actual privacy in her mind first in order to do so. The fact that she had to wait for a time like this in order to be assured she had that was a thought for another time, since something else had become a bit more concerning.

Horatiu the cordwainer, Crina's fellow Romanian bootmaker in the Ukraine, apparently really liked her legs. Just to admire, not in any way that could be taken which could possibly be less flattering and all around creepier.

She wasn't sure how she felt about that. Not that she was bothered by the idea, if he did then he did and if he didn't then she could care less, but… the ideas it gave her were a bit unusual.

They were… legs. Things you stood on and helped with the locomotion most required for getting from point A to point B. The fact some people just liked legs was something she had been aware of but hadn't connected to her own possession of the same feature, meaning the idea that someone else might like her legs for more than being supposedly just aesthetically pleasing.

The thief wondered if she liked legs too or was it 'off' to her. Was she more an 'arms' person, or did she appreciate another aesthetic feature of another human?

Honestly, she had no idea.

She couldn't recall if Rachel had been a leg woman, or how she knew if she did or not like some physical feature, or anything among the previously personal details about her former lifetime.

That was… a tad bit unnerving to realize. Especially since that meant her assertion to Renato's face, that sex was not particularly exciting nor interesting, had then been based off of forgotten memories she actually couldn't recall enough to make accurate use of.

Furthermore, any other assumption she had made off her former lifetime was now suspect. If she couldn't say with certainty why she thought certain things about said subjects, then it was entirely possible she was erroneously recalling the information.

Sonya pointed her toes, curiously watching the flex of the leather contort to allow the movement as a series of security measures were set below her.

…she did like boots, at least. Or her boots, it was not certain yet if it was all boots or just the ones she acquired for herself that were comfortable and functional.

She hadn't really attempted to study the same subject on another's form to know if it spread to more
than just her own boots.

Taking the fact she did like her boots, which she was certain was true since they were on her and she could appreciate them easily enough without having an issue trying to, the thief then wondered if that would apply to another wearing similar or these boots.

Which was… kind of odd for her to be thinking, but…

The lights dimmed on her before she could then decide what she wanted to do about this recent wonder of hers. Annoyed, she glanced over and down and the ground floor to check if things were finished on their ends.

In this day and age, Sonya had to worry mainly about the security on the displays rather than the floors or walls since guard patrols were still a thing. Doors leading outside and windows were also another issue, but ones she could avoid by not needing to open them in the first place.

Honestly speaking, in her last museum heist, she did the stupid thing by breaking the glass displays. Breaking the glass nominally set off vibration detectors which rung alarms in security booths and could occasionally be wired directly to police stations, if the establishment was important enough. An issue of time or not, that was not how she'd be doing this night's work.

It was similar to the same situation with the display in jewelry stores, and most other boutiques that sold pricy and small objects. Break the glass, set off alarms. That was part of why they knew how to pick locks, since going through the part of the display made to be opened often was just easier.

However, museums also had pressure switches and infrared motion detectors to also worry about. Moving the displayed items, or even putting a finger into space she shouldn't be, would also set off alarms.

Mildly annoying in and of itself, but there were also security cameras and guards to avoid.

Hence, as with her first ever museum heist, going after the displays were not really a good idea.

The backroom storage of past displays, items being refurbished or prepped to be displayed, or just the shipping and receiving part of any museum were insanely easier to steal from. Or, at least, not unless you wanted to make a statement.

Sonya needed to make a statement. She also needed to make a big enough statement that both the civilian law enforcement and the French syndicates would sit up and pay attention to her and not a random Lightning sneaking off with Adrik up north somewhere.

So… she would be doing stupid, risky things tonight and tomorrow night in hopes of making said statement.

Yay.

Even if most, or all, of the display pieces were fakes used to prevent just this situation.

Nothing was moving beneath her, so she dug out the polaroid she took of the galley from the perspective of the security camera right next to her while there was still enough daylight in the building so she could cover up the flash and still get a recognizable image. Using a spool of lightweight wire taken from her pack, she made a holder for the picture and as quickly as she could posed the picture before the lens and ensured it would stay until morning.

That done, Sonya sat back to wait five minutes before moving onto the next security camera in this
gallery. Then, after she was done with this wing of the building, she'd do the same to the displays she marked out to steal from until she had a block of space secured.

Then she'd use the hardware tools she also bought in the city to break into the displays to rewire the security on select displays. The wire cutters, some more wires, a flathead screwdriver, various lengths of insulated wire, and a pair of leather gloves took up a tiny part of her available pack space next to the carefully wrapped camera she had already made use of.

Getting whatever out of here would be simple enough, waiting for dawn to arrive she'd take a crate she had watched be emptied the previous day when she was setting up for this and fill it with whatever. Once someone did arrive to the museum to start the pre-opening chores, she'd simply force her way out of the building in a way that looked as if an inattentive employee had forgotten some part of the security arrangement on the back-loading dock.

The truck she had rented and parked a street away was the riskiest part, as she'd have to carry said crate to it in the daylight.

Hopefully she could find the lid and pretend it was empty if unwieldy.

Out of everything she had to buy and would be hopefully making away with, ironically enough it was the Polaroid camera she was most fond of. She wasn't particularly artsy, so the paintings she decided were not that weird or just bemusing to be stolen tonight and the statues she would only be taking because they were old and therefore 'ancient' enough to be pricy, would mostly be sold unless Tatiana wanted one or two.

Assuming they weren't fakes, that was.

The camera she had wanted for Shamal's childhood, the art and antiques were just a means to an end to her.

Which her outlook would help a small amount, truthfully. She wouldn't be 'holding onto' incriminating evidence, at least.

She was a terrible, terrible solo thief. It was always 'need to', and never 'want'. Maybe she should just try a bank robbery on her own time next. It would certainly cover the money issues she was continually plagued by.

…or maybe a university library.

Sonya scowled into the dim light, tugging one sleeve back in order to study the wristwatch in order to see if enough time had passed yet to move onto the next security camera.

She had no place to put more books, so she couldn't do that any time soon.

Damn it.

(Tuesday the 12th of August, 1969. Grand Hôtel du Midi Châteaux's Café, Montpellier, Hérault, French Republic.)

"-no, because I will be leaving today."

"Rémy, I don't think-"
"Rémy?" The willowy blonde repeated blankly, glancing over a shoulder at the two men approaching her table. "…Rémy Sartre?"

"Miss Sonya de Mort, I thought I recognized your lovely voice."

Bjørn frowned and gave the man that interrupted his meeting with his patron a questioning look, which didn't seem to register with the interloper as he only had eyes for the Russian that rose from her chair to greet him. His fellow was at least more appreciatively responsive to the rather rude interruption, shifting a bit sheepishly in his cheap fake-leather shoes.

…when the hell did the former street-rat from Iceland become such a snob?

*Viper* might have a heart-attack for not getting the business part of their meeting out of the way first and foremost, but as the thief was providing the funds he was living off of what she wanted was what they were going to do.

With a wry sigh at himself, the Lackey set aside the few contracts he found for Sonya and instead gestured to the maître d to allow the interruption and to bring more seats.

"I honestly did not expect to see you this far southeast, truthfully." The Russian informed the first man in a tone that could be mistaken as bland but to her Lackey's ear sounded rather fond really. "I owe you some coffee, don't I?"

"Ah, well…" The man fumbled, seemingly only just realizing he was interrupting a meeting of the business sort.

'Remy Sartre' glanced to Bjørn back to the woman questioningly, but he was interrupted from saying anything by the two busboys the head waiter had directed to their table with the extra chairs and the additional menus to order from.

"Apparently nothing will be decided today that is time-sensitive." Offered the Icelandic teenager in some honest amusement, collecting the files to slot back into the carrying case he had invested in for just these kinds of meetings with his patron. "Don’t mind me, I'll just eat something while I can."

"Once you're done, I can use a set of plane tickets to reach Bethel, New York. Or however close you can get me to it." Sonya directed, before getting distracted by the second man's obvious peeking at her Lackey's paperwork while he took a seat between them on one side of the little café table. "Preferably today. Logistics for this last shipment delayed me too much to be comfortable as it is."

"…why is this contract for paintings by François-Xavier Fabre?"

She blinked at eldest of them seated at their tiny table intended only for two blankly. "Because that is what the client wants and therefore is what is written on those?"

"They were stolen two days ago." He informed her a bit bluntly, suspiciously. "From the Fabre Museum. Have you paid no attention to the headlines lately?"

The thief blinked a few more times as she absorbed that, and the fact it was for something she had already stolen and was likely part of what she had him ship off before sitting down to a late brunch together. "…oh."

He sighed, removing that contract from the set he was about to return to a leather folder and handing it back across the table for her to peruse. "That is actually why that contract exists, it's for a print or reproduction of one of the stolen paintings. The attention suddenly directed to those artists is likely why someone wants a copy of a specific and now missing one."
“…huh. I can do this one then.” Muttered Sonya to herself in bemusement glancing over the file only in what seemed to be pure curiosity.

As she finally stopped insisting that she was about to leave and realized she might want to look over the things he could arrange for her, before she took more personal time off, the Icelander marked the edge so he could arrange to have it fulfilled.

Obviously, as a Mafia Land thief, she could read between the lines that made it sound more for a ‘safely legal’ copy of the actually stolen paintings in question to the ‘to whomever it may concern we want this back and will pay heavily to have it’ message under it whereas the other man was only just suspicious.

News agencies in this day and age were getting pretty good of disseminating information around and, with how damn indispensable the Mafia Land networked supply lines were in smuggling efforts to the criminal underground alone, someone posting an open-ended contract to hopefully reach a thief of a specific heist wasn't actually that strange.

He knew of three still open contracts for decades old heists in the Mafia Land's Thieves' Hall, rumor was that all three had been done by the same thief.

"Fabien." Sartre nearly hissed across the table reprovingly before turning back to the Storm-Cloud and gesturing to the still unidentified man. "My apologies, Miss de Mort. This is Inspector Fabien Laflèche, with the SDLCODP. The Sub-Directorate for the struggle against organized crime and financial delinquency. That… museum break-in is what he was just assigned, and why he's being a rude fellow in such company."

"...ho?"

"Inspector, this is Sonya de Mort. A former client of mine and a historical researcher when not acquiring things for her company's clients."

Bjørn carefully ensured his surprise and chagrin wasn't painted across his face from hearing he was yet again interacting with the local police about a crime they had a hand in but were about to pretend they knew nothing about. "I would be her 'handler', or the one that arranges for said clients to hire her through while she's on the move. Mishka Aleskeevich."

Sonya twitched nearly invisibly, telling the Lackey that he might've mangled Russian naming customs or she found his assumed name a bit strange.

She forced a slightly wry little smile of her own before looking back at the man that started this little interruption. "So, as we can entirely do coffee right now since I finally have some breathing room… what brings you to Montpellier, detective?"

Oh… they both were law enforcement. Wonderful.

"Ah… I was asked-"

"For consultation an ongoing investigation we can't speak of, miss. Sorry." His slightly older and admittedly a bit better dressed fellow cop interrupted a bit hastily but he did at least muster up a slightly sheepish smile for them. "Although you could probably guess on what topic, but we’re really not to speak of it."

"But enough about work." Insisted the private investigator that Bjørn finally recalled he had the card of somewhere in his office rolodex. "Can I ask about your brother…?"
"Skull has a world-tour next year, our older sister and I are about to meet up in America to get him a new motorcycle for it." Wryly admitted the thief a bit self-deprecatingly herself, a tiny twist to her own lips masquerading as a wry little smirk of her own. "Hopefully I'll remember to ask if he can send you a French-orientated ticket to a showing if he can."

Rémy Sartre gaped for a split second before he shut his mouth a bit quickly.

"I'm pretty sure he'd love to meet you… I think. I actually don't know how he deals with any fans but given what a goofy dork he can be I can make a decent guess."

Bjørn actually didn't know her brother all that well, honestly. Certainly not nearly as well as he knew her mother, sister, and father. A few glancing meetings did not make a good estimation of any man, but the very purple man did seem pretty affable in person.

At least when around one or both of his sisters, anyways.

"…some men have all the luck." Inspector Lafleche muttered to himself, shifting a bit uncomfortably when the waiters set two additional hors d'oeuvres plates and glasses out for them around his elbows.

Snickering, even if that topic was a bit strange given that the woman was more like highly demanding and strict aunt than someone to objectify like that, he put in the order for the 'coffee' his Dama apparently owed the private investigator with one of the waiters. "Ah well, lucky him. Breakfast?"

"…if it's not too much trouble." Responded the elder man after a beat of looking taken aback then a bit sheepish yet again. "I didn't eat before leaving home this morning, it was a bit of a trip to pick Rémy up and get here in time."

"Since my business partner is a bit occupied, the company would be appreciated." Bjørn tempted smoothly, a bit despairing that he somehow picked up his patron's complete nonchalance when it came to law enforcement.

Between her example and Viper's unholy dictations and Mist Flames, he could easily fake what he didn't really feel in the face of someone that might have a few issues with how he made a living.

"You have my sympathies about odd hour work, I've seen a bit of it myself with red eye flights all over the world."

Maybe, maybe, the other will end up spilling a bit of information about his just started investigation. It wouldn't kill anything to try, since his patron seemed interested in something about her private eye and was now greatly distracted, he did have the time to spare.

(Wednesday the 13th of August, 1969. John F. Kennedy International Airport, Queens, New York, United States of America.)

"There you are." Tatiana exclaimed exasperatedly, rounding the luggage caravel and glomping her little sister hard enough to almost pull her off her feet. Hopefully that was 'hardest' and she could fend off extra hugs on the point they both were here. "Cherep and I have been up and down the same stretch of tiled room at least three times already."

Said stuntman poked the redhead in the side, to engineer her release and to give Sonya a touch
gentler hug of his own. "Sup, little sis. Can I ask why you had us come here now, or what?"

"I am a little surprised you two have not heard yet, actually." Sonya offered absentely, still trying to find her pack in the little rotating machine. "But, as you have not, then I am not going to ruin the surprise."

The nurse huffed, snagging the thief's backpack before she could spot it and letting it thump to their brother's feet. "Then can I ask why you had us pack 'things you will not mind being ruined or lost'? Cause I've got to say, Nya, doing anything that would result in something like that doesn't sound like… a lot of fun."

"I will remind you that you said so in two or three days." Taunted the blonde with a smug little smirk.

Cherep laughed, sneaking in another hug even if she shot him a glare for it. "Awesome. So, since we got here early, I got a head start on finding myself a bike. Found a good one for stunts, but I wasn't sure if I should go ahead and buy it or not. Tats had me rent a car, so…"

"No, that might be more a thing to do before we leave." Finally grabbing a hold on the duffle bag she had packed with the provisions she figured they might like to have with them, she hefted that one over a shouder instead of risk bursting one of the plastic containers she intended to fill with a lot of water. "The car is a good idea, getting there before tomorrow night will either take a short trip through a shit ton of traffic or one heck of a walk."

"A… wait." Tatiana frowned at her, more thoughtful than mad. "I heard about some great traffic pile up on the radio last night."

While her fellow Cloud was giving her backpack an odd look as he picked it up, probably since she had it packed to the brim with camping equipment and dried provisions, he was at least paying attention enough to chip in himself. "Yeah, about something up in Bethel, right?"

"They're calling it Woodstock." Sonya confirmed, pleased with herself for actually getting this started and them both here to attend. "It's a music festival."

The Sun user arched a red eyebrow at her, placing a hand on her hip. "We're here for a music festival? In the middle of the United States?"

"Trust me, you will enjoy this. Or hate it completely." Really, even in the decades to come, no one would agree if it was the greatest music festival of the age or a complete disaster-fest. "We really should have been ready to go two days ago to get around the traffic, but that thing with Adrik and Verde decided to drag out on me and I needed a few days to ensure their trail was muddy."

"With said traffic," interjected their brother a bit absently, "wouldn't a motorcycle be more versatile than a car?"

"Can you fit all three of us on it?" Demanded Tatiana in return, still looking skeptical and a bit confused.

"Since Nya's like… half a person because of how short she is-" His words were cut abruptly off after getting one end of the duffle bag rammed into his stomach. "Oof. Ow. Okay, not half a person."

"You fail to take into account any luggage or personal effects in that. And I," insisted the thief flatly, "am average height for a woman. I am totally normal-sized and happy with that. You are a damn freak of nature, mister taller-than-everyone-else-but-Arseniy."
The nurse laughed, bumping hips with the stuntman who chuckled a bit sheepishly. "What does that make me then?"

"Busty."

Tatiana glanced downward and readjusted her shirt's collar down a bit to show off more cleavage cheerfully even if Cherep then whined about her doing so in public. "Damn straight."

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 13th of August, 1969 continued. Queens, New York, United States of America.)

"...seriously, though. I think the motorcycle-

"Cherep, do please stop. Not everything would fit on such thing."

Rolling his eyes for what seemed to be the fourth time in the last half hour, the stuntman went back to inching their rented car down maybe half a foot down the road.

"There are at least two days before the festival is supposed to start." Sonya informed both her siblings a bit tartly, slouching in order to stretch out her legs across the backseat's bench. "Maybe a hundred miles, a hundred and fifty kilometers, to get to the town this is being held outside of. Yes, traffic is bad. That is why I asked you both to be here well before it can get to 'gridlock'."

Tatiana gave a gusty sigh of pure boredom, then wound herself around the back of the passenger's seat to snatch at her purse. "You've got a book or something to pass the time with, right?"

"So!" Cherep interjected before his sisters could get into some kind of bitchy snip-fest that looked to be building since the nurse kept on being skeptical of what she had brought them to see. "What's the plan, anyways? Get a hotel or something in this Bethel town, or what?"

"Camp out, actually." Responded their baby sister, flicking away the grasping hands and digging through her purse herself. She came out with a heavily abused paperback and a pack of cigarettes. "If we get a good spot, losing it will be a bitch."

"Oh no. No, no, and no. Put those away, little sis."

"Cherep, do you mind if I smoke back here?" Inquired the Storm-Cloud in a sugary sweet tone.

"Heh... no, I don't really care." Ignoring the punch to his floating ribs from his right, the former Czechoslovakian run-away merely cranked down his own window. "Just please open the two windows back there, please. Before Tats breaks my ribcage."

"But it's fucking hot out there." Whined the Sun using nurse, throwing herself to the other side of her seat to not only crank down her window but also make use of the noon sunlight beating down on the highway for reading. "And that's bad for you."

She heaved a sigh of her own as she pulled a cylinder of paper filled with tobacco out of the thin cardboard pack of them. "I seriously wonder why you think I am stupid enough to not know, or be ignorant of, the consequences of smoking."

"You keep doing it."

"Which means that I am fully aware of and accept the fact it is not healthy." Stated the thief flatly,
flicking a tiny lavender Flame to life in the cup of her palm to light her so contested cigarette. "Strictly speaking, even with the risk smoking imparts, the fact is these will probably not contribute much to my eventual death. Either I will end up dead from my work, some enemy of Renato's or another friend's, my own detractors, to keep Omertà intact, some fresh scut who wanted a boost to their reputation and got lucky, or just from taking stupid risks that end up backfiring on me."

"Or you'll get lung cancer." Tatiana threw back shortly, slouching in her seat. "Throat cancer, mouth cancer, a cyst somewhere along that, maybe even just a severely compromising frequent upper respiratory infections that might suffocate you to death."

"Or I might walk into traffic at exactly the wrong time and get hit by a truck." Countered the blonde in the backseat equally as tartly. "I could spend the next however many years obsessing over what may kill me, or I could live like it will not last. Which… it will not."

Cherep raised a finger, wagging it between his sisters. "I… actually kind of like her answer."

"…probably because that is why I do not harp on your case about your career."

"Point, however," another wag, "I still like the sentiment. And Tats, I know you would prefer us to keep as healthy as possible… but, is that possible? I mean, I risk broken bones and every complication that can come from blunt force trauma. And that's… a civilian's job description."

The nurse sulked in her spot, the paperback long since abandoned to her lap for the duration of this conversation. "I do not understand why people do unhealthy things. They know it hurts them, but the ignore it to continue the hazardous actions. And then when they get sick, of course they fail to realize that not just they are the only ones affected. Nya, how would your brat feel about you killing yourself inch by inch?"

Stopping cold, she processed that for a long moment as the smoldering cigarette halfway to her lips.

"Oi, Tats, that's a bit below the belt."

"No, no it's not. It's something she should take into account before continuing her nasty habits. I'm just being a bit of a bitch in pointing it out." Snapped back his older sister, poking a finger into the stuntman's bicep. "You know why I do this, and frankly her bambino does not deserve to suffer through that too."

"Not entirely similar, Tats. You were what? Five? Bambino is older than that, and Nya's still as healthy as a horse."

"Um… yeah. Speaking of that. She's got three years of immunization shots to redo."

He glanced over at her sharply, then through the rearview mirror at the thief in question. "Well. Fuck."

"What?" Sonya finally spoke up, tucking the previous query away to actually ask the Italian 'baby' in question later. Shamal might or might not care but asking should probably be something to do.

Even still, she examined the cigarette she had with a measure of concern.

Tatiana tossed her fiery red hair in an impatient gesture. "I'm calling in reinforcements."

"…this winter?"

"Sounds good to-"
"...what reinforcements?"

"If, when you're deliriously sick, you bend something a normal human can't..."

"Oh." Well, at least it wasn't the so-called 'childhood story' Cherep kept trying to pass off as true. If it was, she'd recall something along those lines. "Right, about that. It might take until next year for me to get enough time for that."

"What is more important than ensuring your vaccinations are up to date?" Demanded the professional nurse sitting in the passenger's seat suspiciously.

"The twenty, at least, contracts I need for that shared apartment for us. Whatever it was that Fong wanted me for that will be requesting me by name. Shamal weaseled two Christmas celebrations out of me and Renato, so there's also the Vongola Christmas Ball to shop around for and later attend." Expounded the thief dryly, batting the hand holding her cigarette around to emphasis her point. "I have... what? Fifteen right now? Or at least, it will be fifteen once Björn processes that contract. It might be iffy if I can get all that done this year alone, to be truthful."

Tatiana turned half-around in her seat to give her a hard look. "What about Adrik?"

"...Verde decided to take the hard way out of his troubles." Offered her little sister slowly, glancing backwards out the back windshield as if that would allow her to see what was happening in France. "Adrik was intent on helping him through it, no matter how stupid he found it, so I am paying him to do so and get the scope of French syndicates for me. Fuck knows when I will be able to use that, but..."

Blinking at her a few times, their older sister sighed heavily. "I'll pay you back for this, Nya. Or Adrik will. Or I'll make Nicholai pay you. Somehow. But thank you for letting him live on your kopeck, even if that time is starting to get a bit tight."

Sonya shrugged uncomfortably. "Well... you asked."

She pursed her lips at her, then glanced to the side to Cherep. "...can I ask you get a move on, then?"

Their brother made a frustrated gesture to the road ahead of their rented car, so his sisters could take in the bumper-to-bumper packed road ahead of them. "How? If you have a suggestion, I'm all ears."

"Go off-road?" Suggested the nurse instantly.

She flicked some ash out of the window. "Play tourist and drive on the wrong side of the road?"

"Take the back roads instead?" Continued the redhead restlessly with a cheerful smirk.

"Do either of you want to drive instead?" Asked the stuntman exasperatedly, carefully bullshitting a turn that required them to drive slightly down the median just to reach before being hit by oncoming traffic. His slamming on the gas to get them through in time nearly threw Tatiana into the passenger side door, and had Sonya nearly tumbling to the floor of the car, had the sisters not been buckled in. "You two seem to have a lot of opinions for passengers in this rental."

"We're women, we always have opinions." Tatiana threw back with a bit of a disgruntled edge to her tone, and then she searched around her legs a bit frantically to the point both her siblings got distracted by whatever had alarmed her. "Uh... oh shit."

"What?"
"NOTHING!" Slamming her ramrod stiff spine against the back of her seat, the nurse gave her siblings a slightly too-stiff seeming wide smile. Which also looked as plastic as the car's dashboard. "Absolutely nothing."

"What are you looking-" The stuntman cut himself off, looking a bit spooked himself now. "You didn't. Please tell me you didn't."

"I didn't!"

"Did not what?" Sonya questioned curiously from the backseat.

"NOTHING!"

She blinked at the back of her older sister's head, then narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Tatiana… what happened to my book?"

"No killing each other in the car! Or ever, thank you!" Cherep hastily threw into the air between the siblings himself, putting a bit more weight on the gas pedal than strictly legal on these non-highway roads. "We'll get you a different one, okay Nya? A better one."

"…I had not finished *reading that*, Tatiana!"

---

*(Thursday the 14th of August, 1969. An underground meeting room, Temple Street Market, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)*

The three men seated in the middle of the ornately detailed dining room were probably arguably the most powerful men in the Triads.

They were not quite ready to speak yet, so no one else would say a word of the subject they were gathered to discuss until they were.

Set behind them and their three couches, set in a triangle shape in the middle of the room to facilitate any discussions, were the twenty-one subordinate organizations. They shared smaller and individual tables with the one bodyguard they were allowed for this meeting. Those slightly less important but still powerful figures were arranged in a careful pattern, behind their allied organizations and branches but separated from hostile or rival ones.

Behind even them was a gallery of tables and seating, but the fringes were almost completely removed from being able to suggest anything in the meeting that had yet to take place. Their slightly higher position allowed for a good view of the depressed 'meeting room' it overlooked but was isolating by the same respect.

Fong was bored out of his mind in this pre-meeting tea and *shaojiu*, but as appearances had to be maintained and as everyone else had brought their picked fighters as 'bodyguards' his Triad's Mountain Master had brought him along in the stead of his nominal aide.

There were things he could learn from the power struggles on display between separate Triad branches, a fight waged with honeyed words and silken promises or cutting looks and grudging nods instead of fist and blade. It did not greatly interest him even if it was a method to fight with, but there were options to focus on.

…but nothing was really being discussed beyond the already confirmed details of the upcoming
martial arts tournament, and the parts of the rules that had been decided upon so far. Most of the rest of the current dinner conversation was all about whose fighter was cutting a more impressive figure, or the speculations on what might be the prize for having the ultimate winner.

Discussing the business they were here for before the 'hosts' of this meeting were ready would be in bad taste. And probably really foolish.

Hence why Fong, and a great number of the other martial artist he knew at least by sight and reputation more than personally, were all equally either bored or puffing with false arrogance… or worse yet, swelling with uncontrolled ego.

A flash of electric green caught the Storm's eye, and he flicked a glance to the Lightning nearly a third of the room away. If he recalled right, that man used paper-thin blades hidden in his clothing to kill his targets…

Said Lightning of razor death nodded slightly further down the room, and the eventually did allow his eyes to follow the direction after ensuring it wasn't a distraction for any reason.

A fairly familiar face gave him a sharp grin from behind the Head of the Sun Yee On Triad, seated next to the Luen Group Triad Head.

…interesting. Fong nodded to the fellow former student of a former master, folding his hands into his sleeves.

Any martial arts tournament hosted by the Triads would probably not be a safe one. As the Storm using martial artist had been unaware any of his fellow former students were involved in the underworld, he now had to adjust to the idea he might end up killing or bearing witness to a death of someone he knew rather more than most.

Well… it wasn't the first time such a situation had happened. Still, not incidents Fong appreciated in any respect.

The clink of delicate china echoed through the respectfully silent room, as one of the three towering figures in the Triads finally opened up the meeting by setting aside his empty teacup and greeting the others formally.

He blew out a silent sigh as the opening feints went along predictable lines in the center of the room. Of the three Triads that had control of the center of the room one was hosting the tournament, one would hold the hostages before and during it, and the last was judging.

As the organization that suggested the idea, the 14K Triad had control over how the tournament was conducted and finding the appropriately vetted and trained referees. Their main rival, the Sun Yee On Triad which Fong's had a firm alliance with, had control over the location, both the main and backup location to use in case the first was compromised in any way. The Tai Huen Chai Triad would then be taking the hostages in trust, and arguably had the more difficult job in diplomatic terms. Ensuring each other knew how much more important their jobs were was… well, expected really.

Posturing. Attempting to make themselves more threatening or impressive to discourage the backstabbing and political maneuverings that was likely to occur anyways. Not really wasted time, per say, as they were being observed by lesser Triad branches.

"…you seem very calm, Sōng." Zhōng observed lowly, copying his bodyguard for the meeting in how he arranged his arms as they waited for the bulk of the remaining logistics to be worked out. "At
"This will not be my first tournament." Fong respectfully reminded his Mountain Master, possibly a touch wistfully but he had enjoyed most of the competitions he ended up attending as a representative of the Wo Hop To Triad. "Likely, this will not be my last. I will leave the posturing and worry to those greener than I."

"The Lightning?"

Nodding slightly, he disguised the motion to the rest of the room by switching which shoulder his long braid rested upon. "He will be an issue, I believe. Disarming someone like that, if this does become a 'no-weapon' tournament which is not guaranteed, will be near impossible."

The Mountain Master of the Wo Hop To Triad turned his head to give him a steady look. "Should we be concerned with the one that made it obvious, or ones that are merely pulling the strings to observe your reactions?"

"As I cannot find them yet, I cannot be assured they do exist." Fong countered calmly but accepted the non-direct rebuke simply enough. "Ah... but keeping an eye open will never be a bad idea."

"No... it never is." Agreed Zhōng wryly, turning back to watching the debate on what the penalties for losing should be.

The obvious buy in to participate, which would contribute to the 'pot' the Triad of whichever fighter won would receive, almost went through without ever being suggested as should be.

After a bit more suggestions of less obvious ties or forfeits were dealt with, the Tai Huen Chai Triad's Head then suggested that any loser would have to indenture their 'hostage' for a time to the winner's specifications.

Fong and Zhōng exchanged a look when the Sun Yee On Triad Head casually mentioned there would be at least one user of Dying Will Flames of Cloud lingering around as a hostage. Before he could ask how one would enforce that, the suggestion was immediately removed from the table and all agreed it was a bad idea and a jest in poor taste.

As the Storm's last-ditch resort for a hostage had been his little sister, he wondered if he was thankful Sonya finally agreed to his rather impertinent request or merely irritated his suspicions on what might've happened to his sister was likely true.

They now wouldn't know for sure, but the possibility still rankled.

His Mountain Master took a deep breath, tightening his folded arms. "Remind me to send Huiging a gift basket."

From what the martial artist posing as his bodyguard could see, the Head of the Sun Yee On Triad had looked perfectly happy to use what they had gained from close association with them to tip things being discussed in his favor. Before he could ask how one would enforce that, the suggestion was immediately removed from the table and all agreed it was a bad idea and a jest in poor taste.

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Chapter 76

(Friday the 15th of August, 1969. A pasture outside of Bethel, New York, United States of America.)

Rudely chased from her dreams and back into reality by old gory memories given new and disquieting twists, because her mind was that fucked up sometimes, Sonya waited a few moments to be sure she hadn't woken anyone then sighed heavily into the dark and extracted herself from her warm spot.

From between her siblings.

Which was easier said than done, given one was a former thief herself and the other was a stupidly overly concerned sort who was always up for midnight chats if needed. Worse, they were all sharing the same bed-nest-thing rather than wrapped up in their separate sleeping bags... and it was cold in what was likely the predawn hour.

It had been a good idea last night, even if they had been tired after hiking the last few miles with all the things she'd insisted they bring with. As in the very tent and sleeping bags they had the use of to sleep with and some dried foods and water jugs, which would probably fully prove their efforts in bringing them in only a few more hours.

Getting free and upright without disturbing the both of them took some doing, and achingly slow movements, but the thief managed it with enough time. Then there was getting around Tatiana's loose and long hair splayed out everywhere and trying not to step on Cherep's wide cast limbs. In the dark, already half-bent over in respects to the tent's limited standing space. A bit tricky in any estimation.

She managed to get past her elder sister's contributions to the obstacles before her, but her brother woke up slightly from her leaving a spot near his chest empty and cold. At least she assumed so from the disgruntled shift and frown while she was stepping over him.

A hand gripped her ankle before she reached the tent flap proved he had woke up from something at least. "...Nya? You okay?"

"English, brother dear." She drawled out wryly, shaking her leg in hopes of loosening his grip. "And no, not really. Nightmare, excuse me."

Instead of the expected release, there was a strong tug on her ankle. "Does sitting alone for a while really help all that much? Come back here."

Sonya glanced to the exit, then back to him. From how chilled she was from just standing up, it was probably really cold outside and would remain so until the sun fully rose.

Another sigh, and she crept back to her spot. "I am not going back to sleep. My reactions get worse the more I try."

"Noted." Managed her fellow Cloud around a jaw-cracking yawn. "We can chat instead. Hello, Nya. How are you?"

"You do not have to stay up with me, there is hours before this festival is supposed to kick off."
"I'm not doing anything I don't want to do." Cherep informed her pleasantly, shifting a slight bit so she could face him this time instead of just be curled up on his chest. "Which, however much you don't say anything about it, I am fully aware is partially thanks to you. And in the future, when things finally catch up to me, you'll probably continue to help me remain free to do what I want. So, I guess I can spare you a few minutes."

"...you probably would have been fine on your own." Sonya corrected after a long moment of just lying there listening to his heart beat. "You did manage to make your way out of the parent's home completely on your own terms after winning that motorcycle, all I did was slowed you down a year or so. I think you could have made it without me butting in."

"But, because you did, I have two sisters and a baby brother. A pretty awesome little nephew. Parents, a place to go in-between aims to recover a bit, and more than enough information not to stumble into things I don't want to do." With their positions a hug was a bit awkward, but he managed it anyways. "You might not have had to, and I might've done it alone true... but you did, and I appreciate it anyways."

She huffed into his chest, squirming out of the hold but returning to her previous position instead of drawing away. "Does that make the rest of it worth it?"

He hummed instead of responding right away, tugging a few strands of her own hair absently. "You're the only one that can decide that, little sis. But if it isn't, then maybe whatever it was you're having nightmares over isn't worth it."

"I actually do not think it is worth it, but it happens anyways." Then abstaining from the violence wasn't the appetizing option. "And then I cannot get out of it without harming those that do not deserve it."

That French family, those girls back in Moscow.

Had she not interfered, intentionally or otherwise, they would've been the ones hurt. However, again, it was hard to keep them in mind when they had little impact on her and their antagonists held more influence on her subconscious.

Cherep clicked his tongue, frowning mostly at the canvas overhead before glancing back down to her. "Is there any way to get out of the parts you don't like so much?"

"Part of what makes me terrifying is that issue, and the more I do not do what is expected then the more others will attempt to do worse to me or others I care for in attempts to verify what I am or not." That asshole clerk back in Mafia Land, a bit of the undercurrent of her issues with Gedeon, the staff of the Iron Fort. "I did not earn the reputation, but it seems as if I must continue it even if I do not wish to. Otherwise... you or Tats, or Shamal and Valera, might pay the price for that avoidance."

"...well, that's depressing." He offered after some more thought. "All I can think of to help you is that I won't hate you whatever it is and am always up to distract you if you need it."

"Want to bet on that?"

With a sigh, the stuntman poked her in the forehead a few times. "While I might be the pacifist in the family... I'm also perfectly aware what kind of lives you all opted to have. I did tour a bit of it under Arseniy's eye, remember. I might equally hate war and the thought of hurting someone, but I also know that some people in your lifestyle are utterly ugly people both inside and out. I won't immediately dismiss the issue or turn you away if you really need some help or just someone to talk to."
"I do not really want to talk to you about the issue, because I am perfectly aware you probably will not like the subject matter." Sonya informed him a bit tartly, poking him back in the space between ribs and his arm that her position allowed her to reach. "I have talked to Tats, and there's something that might come up to help later on a bit, but really… right now I just have some nightmares. It's not that bad."

"Bad enough you know what you can and can't do once you wake up, and often enough you're as calm as a clam not five minutes afterwards?" Her fellow Cloud questioned a bit skeptically, trying to shift a leg out a bit more but being foiled by the fact their sister's long hair was wrapped around his calf. "Forgive me for calling bull, little sis."

"I am leery over how much dragging the issue out again and again will help. Perhaps just getting used to it is what I need to do."

He hummed a bit, looking a small amount of conflicted himself.

"How about changing the subject?" Tatiana offered sleepily from behind her, suddenly rolling over to snuggle up to the Storm-Cloud's back. "Like… why are you two awake?"

The younger sister frowned, trying to get out of her elder sister's grasp only to run out of room because their brother wasn't budging. "Because you're hot, Tats."

"Of course I'm hot. Look at me." Blindly gesturing to her body at least let the blonde Russian sit upright instead of remaining prone.

Then Tatiana realized how far her long hair had spread out while they had been asleep and got distracted pulling it free again, which required her to actually open her eyes.

"I think she meant you're a bit warm to snuggle with under thick blankets." Cherep chipped in dryly, still being an obstruction to all efforts and doing it cheerfully. "But yes, the both of you are beautiful. Happy now?"

Blinking at him, then glancing to her sister when she chirped a bright 'aww, thanks', she glanced down at herself to see if she could find the attractive part of her. "What dictates what is thought as 'beautiful' and what is merely 'pretty'? Or 'attractive'?"

Both her siblings stopped dead and looked at her blankly, then the two of them shared a glance of their own even in the gloom of their sleeping space.

"You want to take this one?" Tatiana asked wryly, pushing herself upright now that her hair wasn't wrapped around various limbs or objects. "I already got in trouble with Lisa about possibly 'pushing her into things she wasn't ready for'."

"Erm… fuck, yeah." Her fellow Cloud agreed slowly, running a hand through his own short hair bewilderment. "I can take this. You owe me."

"Excuse you both." Sonya flatly interjected. "I merely asked a question."

"It's not just a question, little sis." The nurse drawled out dryly, flicking a wrist to dismiss that objection. "It's something that will shape how you view others, how you interact with them, and possibly who you allow closer than most. It should be handled by someone whose advice you trust, and who can take a step backwards to help you understand in your own unique ways. I've failed at that once before, may I add. I'm too impatient to help you as you need."

"What, don't you trust me?" Asked their brother as he too finally got sort of upright. "I'll try not to
steer you wrong, Nya."

"…okay?"

"If he confuses you to hell and back, I'll take a crack." Promised the Sun glibly, crawling to the tent flap to start their exodus from the confined quarters. "But let's start you off easy like, alright?"

She stared at her back blankly, then glanced to her brother.

Cherep just shrugged, gesturing her to follow their elder sister. "First and foremost, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. But there's a few generally accepted 'guidelines' to separating the pretty from the plain."

Sonya followed as bid, resigning herself to being patronized with good intentions by her siblings.

She had intended to get their views on what was attractive to them, and maybe how she was classified as 'pretty' or 'beautiful', not get a lesson on how to differentiate what was and what wasn't pretty. She already knew she was horrible at figuring that out, since she couldn't tell 'classy' from 'trashy' even to this day.

Hopefully, if she gave it long enough, she'd manage to at least get that much out of her brother.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 15th of August, 1969 continued. Woodstock Music Festival, Bethel, New York, United States of America.)

"…oh, my… god. I hate you."

"I get that was factious." Sonya cut in before Cherep could offer to explain that it wasn't uttered with ill-intent, rubbing her chest where some of the overly-loud notes had thrummed. "I will not take it personally."

Her brother snickered, stretching out his legs as they watched the third act of Woodstock take the stage as the sun started to sink behind the horizon. "Seriously, though. This… is pretty awesome."

There wasn't really a whole lot to see, as the stage was rather bare-bone and obviously a slapped-together kind of affair that still made it clear it was made of particleboard. There were the musicians, the crowd, and the sky to look at. After the third glance around, the pasture was just a plain of grass and the pond a muddy divot next to the amp towers.

The fashions were interesting… but not her expertise.

What was important was the music, and the atmosphere.

She hadn't seen too much of the 'free-love and drugs' this gathering would be known for, but it was early yet. Woodstock had only just started, she'd give it a day before declaring she was bored of the spectacle.

"I will remind you that you said so." The thief merely offered again dryly, glancing upwards to the looming storm clouds overhead.

They looked pretty ugly backlit from the setting sun, and she'd guess rain in a few more hours.

"Meh." Was his belated reply after glancing up to the same visage. "If it rains… well, then we won't
have to figure out how to take a shower out here."

"That is disgusting." She informed him flatly, looking back down only to give him an equally disgusted look as her tone had been.

"...well, there's that pond near the stage. Pretty sure we could take a bath down there." Thoughtfully mused her fellow Cloud after a beat. "Besides which, we've done equally weird things while with the circus, little sis."

"I meant relying on rain to wash with is disgusting. You do wash yourself more frequently than that, right?"

"The peanut gallery needs to be silent now." Interrupted the nurse, flinging herself backwards so she was splayed out on top of her younger siblings and taking up the greatest portion of the blanket they were sitting upon. "I like this next band."

"You are going to like most of the bands playing the next few days, Tats." Sonya informed her exasperatedly, extracting her knee from under her sister's back before either started to hurt. "I fail to see why this matters at all."

Tatiana twisted around, shaking a finger under the Storm-Cloud's nose. "I will beat this. Somehow. Some way. I will top this. I am the groovy sister, you're supposed to be the sweet if grumpy one."

"Mmmhm." Cherep snickered a bit, holding up his hands in an 'I'm innocent' gesture. "Hey, I know when to toss in the towel. I'll judge instead, how about that?"

"You're on." Snapped the nurse with a smirk. "I will find something to top this."

Sonya blinked at her. As far as she was aware from what remained of Rachel's memories, nothing had topped this as a concert slash gathering of those that loved peace and weed.

...a lot of weed. She had thankfully forgotten what burning marijuana smelled like, and this just reminded her how cloyingly nasty she found it. Thick enough to sneeze at, acrid enough to sting the eyes, and sticky enough to linger long after when even her cigarette smoke evaporated.

"Okay." She wouldn't put it past the nurse to find something, as it was entirely possible she was recalling incorrectly. "What are we betting?"

She blinked at her blankly, then pouted hard. "I don't know. We'll think of something later."

"Well... whatever you find, will probably be better organized than this." Observed their brother idly, waving a hand at the utter mass of humanity around them here to witness and enjoy the same thing they were here for and the nearly complete lack of... well, anything else around.

Sitting space was starting to become pretty rare, making her glad they had gotten a middle-far spot and not tried to cram into the front of the crowd near the stage.

"So... how are we judging this bet? Because there might be a way to win on a technicality rather than by content."

"The shitty organization is not my fault. I intended to scope this out... time just got away from me." Sonya protested in exasperation, poking the nurse from looming over her and back on her heels. "At least there are bathrooms. Some of them. And I brought food, so there."

Snickering, the Sun did finally back off a little bit. "If that was the case, I could arrange a cruise for
us and still win. Alas…"

"Okay, no. So…” Cherep puffed up his chest, giving his sisters a snooty look, which merely amused them both. "By content. You have to find some way to top a marathon few days of musical acts."

"By surprise." Chipped in the youngest Russian wickedly. "Since I did manage to spring this on you both without you hearing a word of it beforehand. Somehow."

Tatiana flipped her off, being unable to speak because Sweetwater decided to start up their set and nothing anyone said for the next however long would be heard over the music with how close they were to the amps. Their brother gave her a thumbs up instead, which made Sonya smirk even as she winced over the overly loud strains of music.

Okay… a hippie drug-fest it might be under the surface, but at least her siblings were going to enjoy it.

Now, if only her Russian sci-fi fantasy book hadn't been ripped in half, with half tossed out a car's open window, and replaced with an American dime-store trashy romance novel. She almost couldn't read the replacement her sister thought would compensate for the damage she did, because it was just that… bad.

She had tried, since she might be able to glean something out of it about the mystery of attraction, but… the book was kind of painful to read.

(Saturday the 16th of August, 1969. Woodstock Music Festival, Bethel, New York, United States of America.)

"...and I don't see the need, man. Not for a couple of political pigs with no intentions of helping the people."

"Fair enough, I guess." Cherep responded absently, also a bit bemusedly, at their unanticipated lunchtime guest. "Although I'll admit I know nothing about the Vietnam War myself. We're from out of country. Just here for the festival."

The shaggy haired man who had asked for something to eat nodded while he chewed the slice of beef jerky he had given him. "It's cool. I certainly won't rat you cats out, you've been pretty groovy."

"...I cannot believe people really do speak like that." Tatiana whispered to Sonya behind a hand, in German.

"Ladies, be nice. A language we all speak." The stuntman waggled a finger at his sisters, with a smirk that probably told them he agreed or at least found the observation amusing. Even if it wasn't nice. "Did you have something to add?"

The look his little sister gave him spoke volumes of 'not impressed' before she switched to polite and bland for the other man. "I heard a quip once upon a time… 'war does not determine who is right, war only determines who is left.'"

"...that's deep, and I know where you got it." Their 'guest' nodded a few more times, rocking his upper body a few times to give it that extra emphasis and to clink the beads stacked around his neck. "The Montreal Star, right? I read that in Reader's Digest. Totally right, and the message is so important. Especially now, with the weapons of mass destruction all over the place."
"Right on." Cherep agreed when Sonya opted to not respond. "Hey, it's been… ah, groovy, but my sisters and I were about to go wander to see what's around before the music kicks up again."

"Thanks for letting me jaw you ear off, and for the food man." The rose-spectacled man easily got upright, which they all followed suit, and shook his hand cheerfully. "Peace."

Tatiana barely waited for him to leave, grabbing their younger sister by the arm to pull her away. "Well?"

"English, Tats." The blonde responded a bit tiredly as they picked their way around other blankets left to mark someone else's spot. "And he was… hairy?"

"So… a full faced beard and long hair probably isn't your aesthetic, but I didn't really think it was anyways." Remarked her fellow Cloud user, jogging a bit carefully to catch up and claim the youngest sibling's other side so they could sort of keep the conversation between them. "Wanna try a girl next?"

"I still do not know what we are looking for." Sonya replied shortly, almost tripping over someone's leather satchel placed at the edge of their blanketed spot trying to keep pace with their elder sister. However, the blonde was always a bit irked when she ran into things she didn't understand. Cherep shrugged that off, and while Tatiana huffed a bit he knew the nurse wasn't taking it personally either.

"We are only looking for something you'd like to look at." He informed her brightly, tugging his sisters in another direction. Away from the drug peddler's little setup on a muddy 'lane' that headed to the windbreak forest edge of the pasture, because trying acid apparently appealed to none of them. "Beyond that? Just what you like to talk about when you have the opportunity. We can find you a type from that."

"I have never noticed a preference before… other than who I speak to had best not be stupid." Was her next protest, glumly following their directions in resignation. "I do not hold out hope this will work."

"It might help to be a bit more open." Tatiana started, only to back off from an exaggerated pout Cherep aimed at her over a blonde head.

"Nya has to do nothing. If what she wants to do is follow and eyeball a few people while we talk, then that's alright. She just needs to be herself." Instructed the stuntman loftily, slinging an arm around their little sister's shoulders even if that made picking their way through the throng of people gathered for the concert a bit harder than need be. "As it is, I do have a general guess for what she likes already so…"

"Really?"

"…what?" Sonya asked curiously from under his arm, peering up doubtfully at him.

It was the eyes. His baby sister didn't really have an expressive face, but she made it up with the eyes. That he had never really worked up a resistance to, so every hopeful look from her could break his resolve pretty quickly. "You… like the classy, clean cut types. At least when it comes to men."

The nurse made a disgruntled little huff when the thief accepted that thoughtfully instead of immediately deny it or argue.

Yes… well, Cherep hadn't made a nuisance of himself to the point their foster mother had to weigh in with her own opinion on the subject.
He also wasn't 'pushing' her to do anything or consider anyone in particular, just generalizing. As a matter of fact, he'd be perfectly happy if she picked an entirely different 'clean-cut' type to experiment with than the men that he knew she associated with.

Amazing what waiting for Sonya to bring it up did when convincing her on a topic.

Then again, both their foster father and just about every other vory in Russia were clean cut as well. It wasn't just the men she found to befriend but the general aesthetic she had grown up with, therefore what she'd more likely default to if she was specifically looking for someone.

Sudden shifts, like beholding a bearded man who was perfectly fine with his face-rug, would be at least a little off-putting at first for her. Then she'd either like or dislike it, but that was later.

Now that she was paying attention, anyways.

"We might find someone like that here, and you can figure out if that's true or not. Since you are the only one that it matters to and therefore only your opinion matters to take into account." He continued after letting her have a moment to absorb that, squeezing them past a few people that had broken out a few musical instruments to experiment with in the lull of the concert. "And we can see if you like certain female types while we look around, or a few other male types too."

His utterly ridiculous little sister puzzled that over happily enough, especially since he put a stop to forcing her out of her little shell. Since one sister was so occupied, Cherep aimed an admonishing look of his own over her head at their elder sister.

With a little moue of embarrassment and a light blush, Tatiana shrugged that off and waved a hand behind them.

…right, she had opted to leave this up to him for very specific reasons yesterday.

He sighed a bit gustily himself as they picked their way further into the mass of humanity they had joined for the next few days. This wasn't exactly his idea of a good time, actually it was a bit awkward to help his little sister figure out what she was attracted to… but if he could spare her a bit of future hurt or discomfort he'd suffer happily enough.

Sonya rarely asked anything for herself that wasn't either more books or for some scholastic effort to help other Flame users. She was just happy to spend time with them when they could manage it, which made it all the more important when she finally did ask for something.

Besides which, socializing around with a bunch of American hippies wasn't that bad even with an ulterior motive. He'd probably do it anyways just simply because 'hippies' sounded like his kind of people. They were going to avoid the stoners because it seems the thief didn't like the smell of the joints and the nurse would frown disapprovingly when they passed any drug abuse, but it couldn't be that hard to find non-tripping people to talk to.

As a matter of fact, Cherep could see another knot of people that weren't passing a joint or too stoned to even sit upright… or dancing to some imaginary music just because, apparently. A strategic tug got them on a new 'path', even if that finally exceeded Sonya's tolerance for touching and she shrugged out of his hold.

"So… round two."

A few fingers tugged lightly on his jean’s pockets. "You do not have to help like this if you do not wish to, Cherep. Just a few examples would help me well enough."
"I don't mind." Her fellow Cloud responded cheerfully, hooking her arm in his instead of slinging an arm over her shoulder again and risk actual disgruntlement. "Seriously. We can even go pick up chicks after this if you'd like."

Sonya actually made a face at the offer, hilariously enough. Half taken aback and half disgusted. "I wouldn't, actually. I will excuse you to do so if you want, although… seriously, be careful with that. Sexually transmitted diseases are a thing."

"Please avoid those." Tatiana offered in deadpan on her side of their little sister. "Even with the freaky voodoo shit you've got, just ew."

"You have no room to say that."

"I've been good!" Protested the nurse, affronted as she stepped around a blanket holding a pair of sunning half-naked ladies. "I've only had two boyfriends in the last year!"

The blonde Russian huffed and rolled her eyes. "None of whom I have met, so they could not have been that important in the long run."

"This is the first I've heard of any dating from that end this year." Cherep chipped in gleefully, smirking at the redhead. "What's this about boys? …and weren't you dating Nicolai?"

"…yeah. Once upon a time. But we broke up a long while ago." With a dismissive shrug, Tatiana stuck her nose in the air and sniffed as they passed a group sprawled on raw earth while examining hands in fascination.

"Really?" That was news to him, he had thought the nurse was just waiting for her man to get out of the slammer. "Why?"

She huffed a wry sigh, giving him an unamused sideways look. "We wanted different things from that relationship, okay?"

"Like what?" Sonya demanded, confused and a bit bewildered at the sudden tone shift that wasn't completely opposite but a touch more serious than they had originally. "Tats?"

"…never mind. We're helping you right now." Dismissed their elder sister faux brightly, taking the blonde's other arm and giving her a smile. "Just be aware, sometimes even if you both work at it… some relationships don't work out the way either of you think it will."

She gave her a fairly confused stare, which eventually made the older woman roll her eyes and expound on the topic before they reached the group he had been steering them towards.

"He didn't like the idea of me leaving to learn to be a doctor at the hospital I'm at, I didn't like that he expected me to sit tight for half a decade until he had time for me again. So, yeah."

Cherep blinked, a bit surprised but not at the same time. "Ouch."

"Mmm… ever get the feeling we're between generations?" Tatiana asked factitiously, a slightly bittersweet smile on her lips. "The old one is too hide-bound, the next too reckless, but ours a bewildering mix of the two?"

"Often." Their little sister deadpanned, freeing one hand to jerk a thumb at Cherep. "See my case study."

"Hey!" He pouted, a bit outrageously, until he earned at least genuine smirks from his sisters. "I
resemble that."

"…isn't it resent?" Questioned the nurse skeptically after a blink.

"I caught that pun, Tats. Wow are you behind."

She shot her a dry look. "Give it two seconds, and you'll be the one behind again."

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(Sunday the 17th of August, 1969 continued. Woodstock Music Festival, Bethel, New York, United States of America.)

Honestly speaking, the three of them had completely diverse set of tastes when it came to music.

Tatiana's tastes had not change much as she still loved the folk pop and blues tunes more than what was labeled 'rock' these days, Sonya seemed to really like said rock and some of the faster jazz numbers, and Cherep had never really pinned down one specific genre that he liked.

Therefore their elder sister seemed to really enjoy the musical acts that had played the first night, the youngest even had a pleased little smirk all afternoon, and he was just wondering what was on the next night's schedule.

Two for three, even if he'd be keeping an ear out for Santana and Creedence Clearwater Revival just because he had liked what they showcased here.

The stuntman shifted, and rolled his eyes when Tatiana sleepily pinched his thigh for the criminal sin of doing so while she was using him as a pillow. Instead of bitch, because he was fully aware his elder sister was not going to bother to listen, he instead turned to the nice sister. "How long do you think they're going to go tonight?"

"…today?" Sonya corrected a bit absently, checking the time on her wristwatch via the glow from the stage's lights and a bit of flexibility before sticking her last cigarette's filter between her lips. "It is Sunday."

"Damn. Already?" Well, that had gone by stupidly fast.

"There will be more later today, but Sunday is the day this is billed to end." Even as she stated what she knew, the frown on her lips said she highly doubted it as she puffed on her burning tobacco. "I believe they are going to overrun, however."

"Yeah, that's probably a safe guess."

Given the amps had overloaded and forced a pause this night already while they were either fixed or a jerry-rig was figured out, and there were a couple more acts to get through to match yesterday's offer, it was likely a few musical groups would be pushed back to the next 'day's' set. An hour or so for each, and it was possible things would continue to dawn's break both now and when they started up again.

That didn't include yesterday's rainstorm nor the possibility they'd get drenched again later on, nor any other minor disaster waiting to go off that might put a wrench into things. "Should we stay for however long this is to be, or cut out early?"

"I have nothing terribly important waiting for me but more work in France."
Cherep nodded thoughtfully, looking down at their elder sister who had run out of energy after pitching in at the 'first aid' tent earlier since she was a professional nurse. "Tats? Any opinion on how long to stay?"

"...as much as I'd really, really appreciate a shower to get all this mud coating near everything off... I kind of want to see how they intend to close this thing out." Tatiana drawled out tiredly, rolling onto her back to peer up at them. "And if the two of you are right and they overrun, those that have to be back to wherever on Monday would then clear out a day early. I took the whole weekend off, so I don't have to be back until Wednesday."

Well, he had nowhere to be until next year. There was just the motorcycle to get, and he could get that any day this week than just Monday. "I think we'll stay until the end, then."

"Sounds good to me." Sonya put the stub of her cigarette out on the mud just left of her, rolling over to occupy his previously free thigh and stretch out tiredly with the apparent intent to nap.

Whelp... he was going nowhere. Again.

Sighing, Cherep tugged on short blonde and loose red hair spread out over his lap. "Why do you do this?"

"Because you'll let us." Tatiana responded sleepily, the sentiment echoed by the youngest sibling's amused huff. "And this is comfortable."

"Speak for yourself." His ass was going to go numb in just a few short hours of this.

"...plan better, then."

"Thanks, Nya." Drawled the stuntman wryly, huffing a laugh as he leaned back to get as comfortable as he could get. "I can just feel the love you hold for me."

(Sunday the 17th of August, 1969 continued. Woodstock Music Festival, Bethel, New York, United States of America.)

Being woken up by her ever-thoughtful little brother just in time to catch The Who's set, even if that one weirdo had tried to interrupt only to get promptly chased off the stage quickly enough by the guitarist, put Tatiana in a good mood.

Even the mid-afternoon thunderstorm, and all the goddamned mud that resulted, didn't put a damper on anything for her.

Well... it didn't affect her mood.

Sonya, on the other hand, got irked when it ruined the second book this same weekend and attempted to soak everything else they had brought. Apparently disgusted enough to 'dispose' of the book with utter vengeance in the privacy of their tent, and entirely out of the nasty tobacco shit, made for a slightly grumpy little thief if poked too much.

Whoops. If it was bad enough the little bibliophile would resort to burning anything papery and written...

She'd buy her little sister a much better book the moment they got to a semi-large city which might have a bookstore, both to make up for ruining the first one and the sub-par gas station peace offering.
Then again, the original book would've likely ended up destroyed anyways given how wet everything was right now.

Cherep was somehow sleeping through the rain, as apparently he got little sleep while they had napped on him. The nurse wondered if they should wake him once the concert picked up again, or just let him sleep until he woke up on his own.

Her little sister was of no help to figure that out, electing to slowly chew on a slice of jerky than respond to her question of if they should wake him immediately while they supported one of the more water-resistant sleeping bags between them so their brother's face wasn't rained on. "...I honestly do not know what kind of music Cherep likes."

"Damn."

They both glanced down to the man cheerfully sawing logs between them and studied his sleeping form for a long moment.

Tatiana glanced up first, pushing a loose length of wet cloth away from her face. "What do you think he'd like?"

"...heavy metal, maybe. Or he'll be a complete dork and like disco." Sonya offered irritably, and then cast a skeptical glance from under their makeshift rain catch at the either sleeping, quietly chatting, or dancing in the rain crowd they had joined for the last few days. "Both are entirely underground right now, and not likely to be present in the line-up."

Well, she did get out and about around the world more than the nurse did and would likely know more musical forms that weren't 'mainstream' yet. "Well shit."

"He might like Jimi Hendrix's bit. When it comes up. I think he is to close out the festival."

"What are you taking that from? Your program list-thing said The Who would close this out, and they played the second-to-last set this morning."

The thief's frown slowly switched to a confused scowl, obviously dredging her memory but not coming up with anything to share. She even dragged the much-abused paper out of their 'water-proofed' crevice between already muddy blankets and one of the empty and plastic trail mix bags. "...huh. I do not know why I think so."

Getting side-tracked from scowling herself at the ever-present mud that was slowly, insidiously creeping into everything they had brought with them, the Sun user grabbed one of the last few water jugs her little sister had thoughtfully packed for them to take a one-handed sip. "Hmm... maybe we should just wake him when the music picked back up."

"That will not be until well after the rain stops. But a couple of these have yet to take the stage, so there is a lot more music yet to be played." Sonya offered after studying the flyer a bit more, tucking it back into the contrived safe place for later perusal. "He might also like Jeff Beck, if they got him to play. I think this is actually a 'wish-list', and not the actual line-up."

"Hands back up, little sis." Instructed the nurse playfully, making a face as wet cotton started dripping down her one dry wrist and arm instead of the lower corner behind their brother's head or the arm holding the far edge up. "Please, because-"

A crack of thunder kept anything else she wanted to say from being heard, but also woke up the stuntman they were trying to help keep asleep. She couldn't decide if it was perfectly timed or badly.
"…HOLY… what?" Cherep blinked purple eyes at them rapidly, glancing between his sisters in confusion until how wet they all were permeated his brain and the echo of thunder rumbled back to them. "Oh… huh. Thanks."

"You're welcome." Tatiana chirped, then wrenched the sodden blanket away and to the ground so she could stop supporting it and letting them all be rained on. They were already either wet or going to be that way in a short few minutes, so why not. "My arms were getting tired anyways."

Sonya hadn't been expecting the sudden movement, she got almost knocked over by the wet fabric and ended up with some kind of bastardized cow-lick from the muddy corner of their picked 'rain shield' being dragged against the back of her head. "…the hell, Tats?"

"I'd say I'm sorry, but… that is funny."

The stuntman snickered too, pushing himself into an upright seated position and raking a hand through his hair before yawning.

Shooting the both of them a glare, the thief shoved herself upright and growled at them lightly before stomping off while trying to control the now dirty blonde strands.

Likely to go find herself someone to bum more tobacco from… or, more likely, to steal some tobacco from someone else.

"Our tent is leaking, by the by." Tatiana informed her brother wryly, flapping a dripping hand while they were drenched by even more rain. "And there's mud in everything now. Hope you didn't bring anything you mind that I'll be pitching once we leave."

He hummed absently, glancing around at what the sisters had managed to do while he knocked out for a few solid hours of rest. Stiffly pushing himself to his feet and squishing in his boots uncomfortably from the face he pulled, Cherep stretched out once before finally looking back at her. "Well… at least we will only smell of wet hair, mud, and maybe dirt instead of-"

"Oh, shut up." Urg, then they'd have to pack up and drag everything back to their rental. Keeping mud out of the car would be a headache, and the traffic back would be horrible, but she was sort of looking forward to whatever little room they rented for a night just for the bathroom and a damn shower. "Speaking of, thank you for not wearing leather jackets to this thing."

"Nya did warn us not to wear anything we want to keep to this." He reminded her thoughtfully, cupping his hands for some rainwater to splash his face with. "So… old boots and a jacket I picked up from a thrift store and not my motorcycle boots or my favorite jacket."

Sighing, the redhead stretched out herself now that she wasn't needed to be one half of a makeshift tent and cast a glance over their 'neighbors'. "How do you think she cottoned onto this, anyways? This… really isn't something I'd expect her to get involved with."

"Honestly? At this point, I'm not really surprised." Cherep held a hand out and helped her to her feet, sneaking in a warm hug apparently just because. "Nya's been networking all over the place, from a freelance info-broker we both know to a… big group in Italy and apparently China through that Chinese Faw-guy. She'll probably hear about a lot of things before we get word of it in other ways."

"…I bet it was Bjørn." She groaned, running her wet hands over her face to check that she hadn't gotten mud on her face then running her fingers through the muddy ends of her hair in hopes of scraping the worse off. "Surprising her with something is going to be a bitch and a half."

About to say something, the stuntman was cut off by another rumble from the rain clouds overhead.
He frowned and glanced upwards, then ruffled his hair hard enough to fling some of the water soaking it off. "Mmm… shit. If anything gets struck by lightning out here…"

"I think all the mud will ground us, hopefully."

Cherep barked a laugh, smearing some of the mud that had gotten on his legs as he accepted that little truth.

A few sucking, plunked steps alerted them to Sonya's return as she trekked through the miring mud that now surrounded every little ‘plot' between sodden blankets. She was carefully shielding yet another smoldering roll of tobacco… but she was frowning at it suspiciously instead of looking a bit more settled.

"Nya?"

"…I think there was something 'added' to this." She explained thoughtfully, glancing up at her after a beat. "I am not sure if I like it."


"I feel fuzzy." She explained slowly, her attention drifting back to the suspect cigarette in her hands. "I have not felt fuzzy since I picked up smoking, or after I stop for a while and pick it up again. Which… it has not been long enough for me to feel that again."

"…you're stoned." Cherep breathed out suddenly, grabbing the cigarette from their little sister quickly and flicking it away before grabbing her next. "Please just be weed."

Sonya blinked blankly up at him, letting herself be maneuvered back in-between her siblings without any kind of protest or her usual resigned little pout for being manhandled. "I do not think I like this…"

Poking the blonde experimentally a few times and measuring how slowly she responded compared to how she usually was when so prodded, the nurse sighed and reseated herself as their brother lowered her down to sit. "Wow, Nya. Just wow. Go you…"

"That's not nice, Tats."

She gave the stuntman a flat look, even as he knelt down to pat uselessly at Sonya's cheek.

"I'm pretty sure none of us missed how many drugs are being passed back and forth around here. She, probably, stole something instead of asking and get warned it's laced with whatever. I have to say she kind of deserves it."

Their little sister suddenly scowled flatly at the sky overhead, blinking rapidly as the rain peppered her face with water better than any pure human effort could do. "…yeah, no. I dislike this intensely."

Tatiana swore when the blonde suddenly went blisteringly hot under her fingers, jerking her hands back and wincing when even the rainwater still falling started to sizzle off her skin. She grabbed one of the sodden blankets and dumped it on top of the younger woman to hide whatever was going on. Then the thief picked herself up, so the muddy blanket fell away from her face, still looking cross and now dirt-streaked but not nearly as absent-minded or 'fuzzy' anymore. "…well, that was… something."

Their brother frowned at her sternly. "Okay, not that it's bad or anything… but how are you
suddenly fine?"

Sonya cocked an eyebrow at him, peeling the muddy length of cloth off her body and tossing it back on Tatiana's lap. "Storms are good for something, even if it is the reason why I have three years of vaccinations to redo."

"Do me a favor, Nya. Stop smoking random other people's cigarettes, and just wait until you can find non-tainted sources."

Something vaguely apologetic and sheepish painted itself across her face, and the younger sister picked absently at the mud now flecked across the slightly ragged clothing she had packed for this event. "...sorry."

"Don't get me wrong, you want to experiment I'm all for that. Just... some warning before I have to nurse you through a bad, or even a good, trip." Tatiana insisted wryly, flicking her baby sister on the forehead. "Preferably when we're not in public, yeah? That was close."

She grimaced, and straight out sulked for a moment, until she visibly made herself get over the angry part of being chastised. "...okay, Tats."

"Okay, she said she was sorry." Cherep interrupted whatever was about to be snipped back sternly, giving her a look of her own before turning back to their little sister. "I need a walk, so I'll see about finding you something that's not tainted if you don't want to ask people politely."

Rubbing at her temple, the blonde sighed heavily as their brother got upright again. "Alright."

"...I'm never going to let you forget this." She informed the Storm-Cloud brightly, rolling up the dirty and sopping wet blankets to take up less space until it cleared up enough to spread out in hopes they’d dry somewhat before they left the area. "I mean... how did you miss that being possible?"

"Some people seem to be immune to their 'alterations', Tats." Sonya snarked back irritably, blowing out a sigh and slowly pitching in neatening things now that one of their number wasn't sleeping on it. "I did try to be cautious... but apparently my tolerances are not the same as a few others around here."

A miscalculation was markedly better than just being simply absent-minded or ignorant of the possibility, but the results spoke for themselves.

Tatiana glanced upwards when she realized the rain had lessened the downpour they were under, holding a hand out to feel how much water was still being dumped on them and if it was worth it to try sorting their things out. "Well... help me dry some of this stuff out, will you? I think the purple won't scorch everything, better than my yellow or your red. I'd rather not sleep on anything wet."

"...I will dry out the tent floor first." Sonya decided after a moment to ponder the issue. "Might as well start from the bottom up."

"Leave the flap open, hopefully that'll disguise what you're doing in respects to steam. I'll sit in front of it to block any lights."

"Sure."

"And try not to accidentally get stoned while you do, please."

"...oh shut up, Tats."
The muddy wool blanket thrown in her face was probably her due, but still.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 17th of August, 1969 continued. Woodstock Music Festival, Bethel, New York, United States of America.)

Cherep had greatly appreciated the work his sisters had put into getting them some dry clothing and a place to sleep, returning halfway through their work to grab nearly half the dried provisions Sonya had hauled to the site to trade for the non-tainted tobacco their younger sister appreciated a lot more than the nurse. He did managed to get some fresh fruit somehow, which after two days of beef jerky and salted nut mixes Tatiana was damn near close to declaring him her favorite sibling for.

In dry and somewhat clean clothing, and lounging on their least dirt encrusted blanket, she peeled the last orange the other two had somehow silently agreed to let her have. "Do you two think it is worth it to stay up just to see what's playing all night?"

Sonya, banished to the far edge of their 'spot' because the cigarettes the stuntman found for her were far harsher than her normal brands and smelled like it, hummed thoughtfully. "Possibly? It is slightly difficult to sleep through that level of… music."

The redhead was pretty sure her little sister was going to say 'noise' and not 'music'. Apparently the last couple sets had not been to her tastes, although she'd be keeping an eye out for a few of them because they seemed to have some promise.

"You two can stay up, I need to sleep if I'm to drive us back." Cherep managed around a yawn, wiggling his sock-clad toes uncomfortably. "Are my boots dry yet?"

"Probably not." The blonde checked anyways, reaching a hand into the right boot their brother peeled off his feet when she demanded he do so. "…nope."

"Tats, can't I just-"

"No. Trench foot is an issue with wet footwear, and I'd rather you two not get it. No boots until they're dry." Dismissed the nurse before he could get the entire question out, popping a peeled wedge of orange into her mouth to chew on before glancing to her other sibling. "Who do you think is next, Nya?"

"…hopefully someone that will not have a song entitled 'Good Morning Little Schoolgirl'."

Deadpanned the younger thief flatly. "I do not care if you can guarantee that they are not the first to cover it, nor that the original is not much different, a song with that as a title and lyrics to match just sounds disturbing."

Tatiana sighed, peeling another wedge free to eat.

"…yeah, I'm going to hit the hay for now." Cherep decided solidly after a few minutes spent watching the next set assemble themselves on the stage. "Are either of you going to stay up?"

"I will." Sonya volunteered easily enough, glancing at the surprisingly still half-full pack of cigarettes and then at her siblings. "Any requests for wake-up calls?"

"There's nothing left I really want to see." Offered the nurse after a beat, still digging the orange free of the peel. "The bands I liked already played, and what's left is just… bonus."

"Please wake us before the end, but other than that… I agree with her."
(Monday the 18th of August, 1969. Woodstock Music Festival, Bethel, New York, United States of America.)

The end was, as she had thought, Jimi Hendrix.

Who introduced himself and his group as 'Gypsy Sun & Rainbows' to a very reduced group of concert-goers left to watch him play. The exodus had started well before nightfall yesterday, and now barely half of the people that had shown up remained in the pasture.

Her siblings hadn't needed a wake-up to catch them playing, as the group didn't get on-stage until well after noon.

Cherep had loved it. He was a fan well before 'Foxy Lady' finished, got a bit confused over 'The Star-Spangled Banner' until one of their neighbors pointed out it was their national anthem with a rock-bent, and the rest of the set just cemented the stuntman's newfound love for the band.

Even the thief had to admit, having 'Hey Joe' in preformed in person was pretty damn spectacular.

Now she just had to get used to not hearing music loud enough to vibrate her lungs all day.

"Three for three, even if it was kind of close." Sonya informed her elder sister smugly, tossing tent pegs into the duffle bag as is… dirt and all. "Top that."

"Just you wait." Tatiana vowed playfully, helping their leftmost neighbor dig their car keys from the mud where their blanket had been stretched out. "I will find something."

Their brother just snickered, weirdly hyped up and overly cheerful as he rolled their various blankets up to all fit back into the rough canvas carrying bag. "I got to admit, Tats… I don't think you can find a better musical act that this."

After her fellow Cloud dumped the last load of mud and dirt encrusted blankets into the duffle, Sonya crammed the empty plastic jugs on top and finished their packing off by what little trash they had generated while out here.

"You doubt me? Such faith, I might cry." Tossed the nurse over a shoulder with a flick of her dirt streaked red braid, then she aimed a dry look back at them. "I can at least guarantee one of us won't accidentally become stoned with whatever I find."

Stopping flat, the thief sighed and bent to gather a handful of mud from the 'lane' just in front of where they had been set up the past few days.

"What are you… no. No. Nya, I said no!" Squealing rather satisfactorily, the Sun didn't dodge quickly enough to avoid the face-full of mud.

Cherep gaped for a long moment, then he started laughing hard enough to take him to his knees.

"I have no issue rubbing your face in the mud, Tats." Sonya informed her elder sister loftily, planting her muddy hand on a hip. "Nor your apparently pretty, pretty hair. Pick your battle, sister dear."

Tatiana wiped the watery earth off with a hand, then scooped up her own handful. "This means war, little sister."
Sliding back a step warily, she opted to start moving before the nurse could throw her ammunition. "Well… alright then. War it is."

"…yeah, no. Diplomacy!" A sudden tackle by stuntman had both sisters slammed into the mire they had been trying to climb out of. "Now behave, or I'll rub your faces full of mud."

Tatiana spit out an unfortunate mouthful of raw earth, slitting a look to her little sister who was equally squashed. "Truce? We'll trounce him instead."

"…wait."

"Agreed." Sonya snapped before their brother could run for it, helping the mud splattered redhead roll their stupidly strong brother over and sit on his back.

"Sibling abuse!"

"You can't claim that!" Gleefully denied the Sun using nurse in a sing-song tone of voice, sitting pretty on the spot right between shoulder blades just so she could shove the man's face into the very same mud he had slammed the both of them into. "You joined in! It's implied to be allowed since you did."

Snickering, she wickedly returned a few of the salutations and farewells their temporary neighbors gave after laughing a bit at the stuntman's predicament. While sitting on Cherep's legs so he couldn't wiggle free without compounding his 'crime' of tossing them into the mud by a repeat offence and trying to get the mud caking one side of her face off.

She didn't know when they'd be able to do something like this again, so enjoying it fully was something to do.

Besides, it was funny to hear her brother squeak and splutter in protest every time Tatiana patted his hair or face with a handful of mud.

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(Tuesday the 19th of August, 1969. The Pahkan's Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Milos felt his heart stutter again, but thankfully it just seemed to be a stutter and not anything more serious.

Of course, the eagle-eyed young Lightning attached to his 'day' guard still caught the moment of physical pain.

Silivanov frowned at him heavily but didn't move when he waved a hand for him to stay in his position next to the windows.

The brat was starting to get really good at that. To the point he couldn't quite hide it from Pyotr anymore, who had learned to watch his 'granddaughter's' people for hints of what was happening with him.

"…Milos."

"Oh don't start. I have enough people yapping after me." Dismissed the Zolotov's Pahkan irritably, rubbing his chest because it wasn't worth it to keep up the façade now the other man was aware.
"Now isn't a good time."

"It will never be the 'right' time. Just pick one, you stubborn old fool."

Barking a laugh, the equally old man shot his contemporary an amused look. "If I'm the stubborn one, what does that make you?"

"Healthier." Deadpanned the Sovintnik in a tart tone. "I picked the less stress-inducing option, remember."

"…they can't do anything but treat the symptoms, Pyotr." He reminded the other man tiredly, pressing the heel of his hand against a bewilderingly new but old looking circular scar on his chest. "Staving things off with a barge pole, when I'm already headed to the rapids."

"Then maybe you should stop flirting with the inevitable."

With a snort, the Pahkan threw his weary form back into his seat heavily. "Which inevitability? Death or old age? As varied as these kids are, they haven't yet come up with a way to deny the progression of time itself."

"I think…" Silivanov interjected a bit hesitantly, emboldened when Milos gestured him to speak up. "…you might want to talk to the Mists about that."

"Oh?" That was… something.

"I'm pretty sure a few of them have been fucking around with their ages. If it's just how they appear or how they really are is… subjective." Continued the Lightning obediently to the prompt, giving a one-shoulder shrug after a pause where he seemed to be thinking hard. "Then again, 'Construction' is very… open to interpretation."

"Do you know how to find them?" Pyotr asked wryly, which was fair enough of a question.

The Zolotov Mists were mainly very conspicuously absent, at least up until they weren't anymore. Once they had a reason to toss reality out by the ear, everything rapidly got stranger as they bent things to their liking.

Case in point, the 'Mirror Lady'. Young Anna sliced through distance and time willy-nilly, arranging things to how young Bazanova would want without so much as a 'excuse me' uttered to those she was rearranging.

Admittedly, Milos owed his life to the young woman's ability to warp things to her liking. That didn't make the realization that the Mist could reach anywhere she wanted to be and then be gone in the next second without a trace to betray her any more pleasant.

…and the young lady was firmly not around for Gedeon to somehow make up some of the horrible reputation he had with Bazanova's people.

Rubbing a heavy hand across his face as he thought hard, because there had to be a way to hand things over to his son without it all going up in Flames behind him, the Zolotov Pahkan wondered why he didn't just visit the Flame using enclaves.

No, a fair number might not like Gedeon… but that young blonde scamp was about to make off with a lot of them. Leaving fresh faced young Flame users behind to manage things, which hopefully his sometimes-thick son wouldn't screw up networking with.
Maybe he could instill enough appreciation for him to enable a few of the older ones to ignore that they didn't really like Gedeon all that much. It stuck in his craw to think so, but... if they wouldn't follow his heir out of personal dislike or sheer unfamiliarity, maybe he could motivate them by clan loyalty.

"Which of your peppy little brats run the Mist side of things?" Milos asked after settling his idea into what was possible and what would be nice to accomplish but not needed.

"Usov." Responded the Lightning boy with some amusement. "I'm pretty sure he's about nine or ten years old, but somehow looks like a slightly older preteen right now."

"Any reason why?" Pyotr asked, which since he asked meant he was curious but it damn sure didn't sound like it.

"I couldn't say, Sovintnik." Silivanov could only shrug. "I just noticed because... I'm a Lightning. I notice things like that."

"Then speak up when you notice things like that." The only standing old man ordered wryly. "From some of the reports I've been getting, we're no longer the only syndicate around here that has Flame users."

"We have... things in place for that." Offered the young scut dryly, a smirk painting across his mouth. "Any Mists trying to encroach won't like it, I can assure you."

...right, a few of them were territorial little bastards. Milos rubbed a hand over his lower face, musing on what the 'Mists' could do to anyone they ferreted out.

He was fairly certain his imagination failed to match what could happen in a Mist's version of reality. That was almost more motivation than he needed to actually find a way to stretch things out, just so he could live and see how that would work out.
Chapter 77

(Wednesday the 20th of August, 1969. New York, New York, United States of America.)

Tatiana threw open the bathroom door dramatically, steam billowing out after her as she sauntered into the hotel room wrapped only in two towels. "I love bathrooms. Like... so much."

"You said that last night, Tats." Cherep reminded her dryly, pulling off tags of the new clothing they had bought to replace the dirt stained once they brought with them. "Which, while I agreed with you at the time, I must actually state it is now officially weird."

"Entirely." Sonya echoed absently, simply enjoying the ability to lounge on one of the two bedspreads and stretch out her limbs at the same time. "...did you need to be back on the island today?"

"Eh, by their morning. Which is in... yeah, I should probably head out and catch a plane." Sighing, the redhead pulled the towel from her head and dropping it on their brother's efforts. Selecting the slightly bigger set of women's clothing, and completely ignoring the stuntman's irritated look, she gathered up her set of clothing to get dressed. "Are you coming with us, Cherep? Or me, since I think Nya's for France."

"...I think France. I need to get whatever motorcycle I get shipped over to Europe anyways, might as well."

"I have to work, my main work-type." The thief informed him lazily. "Are you sure?"

"I can find something to amuse myself with." Responded their brother loftily, ripping off the last plastic/paper tag from the dress she'd be wearing once the nurse finally cleared out from the bathroom. "But if I don't have to go back there, then I won't."

Sonya opened her mouth to say it wasn't really that bad... but remained silent when she realized her opinion was mostly due to the fact she had stopped noticing the really bad parts he'd be disgusted by. After a while, someone getting beaten for being stupid or shot to death in the streets just sort of faded into the background there. It happened fairly often, and rarely actually interfered with her day-to-day life.

No... Cherep was a bit too good for Mafia Land.

She rolled over instead, setting her cheek on her forearm to look at the shirtless stuntman fully. "...are you sure that will not bother you?"

"It would bother me more if you were out to specifically kill someone. Stealing is... somehow, not bad." Offered her fellow Cloud in amusement, finishing with his self-imposed chore and grabbing socks sized for his feet. "Shockingly. I'll be fine, little sis. Might as well take the opportunity to splurge a bit."

"Can you afford that and a new motorcycle?"

He rubbed his nose as he dropped to the bedspread next to her stomach, looking slightly sheepish as he hauling the cloth onto his feet. "...there are these things called 'underground racing circuits'."

"Of course there is." That was probably the most whitewashed of crimes, speeding. Her brother was
risking no one's neck but his own, and maybe a pedestrian on the badly managed circuits, but…
"Somehow, someway, we corrupted you. I am… in awe."

The **look** he gave her was entirely dry, utterly sarcastic, and entirely **worth it.** "Shush you. And **Vipes** got me into it, after Master Liam cut short my stunt work this year."

"Just so they could bet heavily on the 'newcomer' and make a killing, right? Did you at least get a cut? You must have, if you have enough to 'splurge'."

"I'm not talking to you about this subject anymore." The stuntman informed her snootily, hauling one half of a brand-new set of motorcycle boots the sisters had chipped in for to gift for a late birthday present on top of what they had already gotten him. "So… you were very, very, very bitchy about ruining your boots earlier this summer. What changed? I mean, you ground a ton of mud into them this weekend."

"Those boots are the mended, old, battered pair I got from Crina." Sonya informed him, gathering her own clothes for when their elder sister **finally** vacated the bathroom so she could get dressed without making her brother uncomfortable. "I only keep them for things I know will be hard on my footwear, and I finally actually managed to use them for that."

"Ah… smart."

She rolled herself upright with her dress against her chest, pinning her brother with a suspicious look. If anything, she expected him to mutter sourly over the old bat being brought up. He never had really liked the old woman.

"What the hell was that?"

Cherep raked a hand through his hair. "I don't think you want to do this now."

"Do **what** now?"

"I'll tell you when we reach France. I don't want to put a damper on the last few hours we've got together."

Tatiana came out of the bathroom again, finally fully dressed, dabbing the rope of damp red braid a few times before rolling the length up into a bun and sticking a few bobby pins into it to keep it up. "Right, Nya? You want to go grab something to eat with me before I leave? I owe you a book, we can find you something to make up the destroyed ones."

"…what am I supposed to be doing while you two do that?" Their brother demanded, while she grabbed the sweater-dress thing her sister insisted would look cute on her.

"Buying your noisy ass bike and getting it shipped to wherever you're picking it up?" Drawled the nurse wryly as Sonya darted past her to get dressed. "You can grab something quick and probably greasy while we have actual food and meet you at the JFK International Airport for splitting up."

Cherep huffed at her. "Right, right. Okay. Kind of need a shirt first."

"One second!" The thief called back through the bathroom door, peeling his new shirt off so she could pull on the thick knitted garment she would be wearing today.

Wriggling **into** the datted thing took longer than yanking out of tee shirt, which irked her slightly.

Leaving the humid and slightly steamy room with the still chilled floor tiles, she tossed the contested
shirt into Cherep's face and presented herself for Tatiana's inspection.

"...I do not think I like this."

Tatiana pulled on the hem of the skirt-end first to make it lay evenly, then placed her hands on grey clad hips. Not her own hips, but her little sister's. "You look lovely. Might be a bit easier when not dressing in steamy rooms, the humidity probably didn't help."

More arms wound around the two of them, and the stuntman hauled his sisters off their feet for a very stifling hug. "You both look lovely. I'll see you two in a bit."

"Bye Cherep."

"Mmm, have fun." Echoed the Sun of the Storm-Cloud's heels.

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(Thursday the 21th of August, 1969. A hotel, Bordeaux, Gironde, French Republic.)

Whatever Sonya had intended to do today was abruptly sidelined by the letter Cherep gave her the moment they got in, and the news that Crina had died earlier in the year.

The stuntman was shooed out of their hotel's door easily enough, while she did stumbled a bit at the realization of why she was getting a letter from her previous master of mysticism she also managed to shove it down for a few minutes and insist she'd like to read it in private.

While he was gone, a guaranteed few hours to have the Indian Motorcycle he bought delivered once it reached Bordeaux's dockside and the paperwork involved to prove it was a legal shipment, she fingered the slightly wrinkled paper.

Knowing Crina was going to die and being confronted with the realization the old bat was dead was… very different. The abrupt removal of visiting the old crone as an option she could do infuriated her, equally as much as it depressed her in equal measure.

Sonya had held absolutely no desire to go back to being the crotchety old woman's apprentice once she left, nor any desire to return to circus life even now. Why it was she suddenly bitterly wished to have had a bit more time with the old bat was… something.

She had been aware they were friends of a sort, one built on insults and digs and just generally not being the most social butterflies around but stuck together in a crowd of such. However, their relationship was mostly unstated.

The thief liked the old bat because she gave back just as much as she got and sometimes more, seeking to lessen any irritation they might've had as two people randomly crammed together by ignoring the caustic shit and supplying the ultimate social lubricator known as liquor.

She both did and didn't regret the time she had spent with her. It did hurt a little to know the old woman was gone, but she did have some fond memories that were now bitterly better.

Although there was also the aggravating reminder that the old bat died because of her own choice not to seek medical help. The recourse to both check up on her brother and poke the elderly woman a few times had been cut short because of that, making it hard to keep in mind that had been her choice not to get help. Meaning it was her choice not to allow the option to continue, or that promise of shelter given near the end of her circus years to stand.
Confused, bewildered, a bit hurt, and irrationally angry summed up her thoughts on the subject entirely.

Curling up on the supplied couch of the hotel room, she inspected the envelope her brother had handed her while wondering if she was mourning the old bat or just numb still. Finally sliding a thumb up under the flap of the letter, Sonya was rewarded by about nine pages of written words and two other letters addressed to people she didn't know.

The contents of the missive, like the old gypsy woman in life, got straight to the point.

Crina had wrote out every old legend and half-forgotten fable she knew of about those that were a bit 'fiery' she had heard in her lifetime. A few excerpts about a number of former 'apprentices' that were a hair away from being downright bizarre, in personal habits or what impossible things they seemed to be able to do on the sly, and a short summary at the end for why she was writing all this.

'...you never would ask, girl, and I know you couldn't tell us if we did. The others made that rather clear. So here's everything you couldn't question like a brat, and all that I know.'

Fuck Omertà. She pressed a hand against her face, ignoring how wet she was around the eyes, and sighed heavily.

She should've asked once it was made clear to her that the circus was well aware of those that could use Flames, even if they only have a partial understanding based on Mists. Crina hadn't been a stupid woman, she would've kept it to herself if she had made it clear that not doing so would hurt someone down the line.

She hadn't... because, well... Omertà.

If she didn't ask, then she wouldn't know if stories would spread further or require someone to stop it. Requiring someone beholden to the Vow of Silence to eliminate the storytellers as she was. As it was, she should probably have a fairly involved conversation with her old circus master to ensure there was no leak before it came back to bite her.

...of course, if she had and still didn't do anything, then the old bat would've shared what she had known with Master Liam and he was cut of the same cloth as her brother. Just... a tiny bit smarter and more willing to royally screw with heads.

If it had ever come down to it, Liam would've helped anyone in a bit of Flame trouble and possibly risk pulling the Vindice down on his head for it.

Rubbing her face more or less dry, and immediately tearing up again much to her own disgust, Sonya sniffed wetly and picked up the three extra letters.

Letters of introduction, actually. If she wanted to follow up on the fables and folk-stories, she had a written kind of 'she's okay' from Crina to her old traveling caravan and her very extended family.

The late Romanian had no close family left, but apparently she had a cousin still alive. Said cousin had kids before Crina left them to join a few traveling circuses to reduce the strain on the family group and to earn money to send back. She couldn't tell her former apprentice where what remained of her family was but knew they did pick up the money she sent to a post box in a certain town.

One letter of introduction was for said cousin, for one of said cousin's children if the young man the dead gypsy recalled had met with his death before her, or for the leader of the caravan if she couldn't find either.
Sonya slotted the extra letters between her fingers slowly. They weren't sealed, so she could see what they said without raising suspicions.

Not that it being sealed would be that much of an obstacle to her, but the thought behind the omission counted.

Instead of open them, because she was quite wet already and she wasn't morbidly curious to see what else was written by a dead woman, the thief picked up the hardcover book that was Tatiana’s make-up gift to her and slipped them inside.

The next time she called Björn she'd see if there was anything in Romania. Might as well actually earn that 'amateur historian' thing she kept claiming.

Cherep was not stealthy normally by any measure of the term, Sonya had more than enough time to ensure the fact she had been crying was covered up and think of a distraction for the day.

"I have to do something tonight, and probably the rest of the week." She informed the stuntman the moment he opened their hotel door, earning a mildly curious glance as he tossed keys and paperwork on the little end table under the window. "Um… I have to talk to Master Liam sometime soon and have a thing in Romania I should probably follow up on. But those can wait. Have you ever tried to set up your own stunt show?"

Her brother raked a hand through short purple hair as he joined her on the couch, sitting a bit heavily which bounced her a little. "Uh… actually? No, I haven't. Why ask?"

"I don't really have a whole lot to keep me here, here is just where I need to be for the moment." Expounded the thief absentely, tucking the book with the letters against her chest. "I'm likely to be moving on in as little as a week."

"I'm not particularly fussed, Nya."

"You really want to come with me while I travel the world doing contracts for the island you heartily dislike?"

Stretching out his long legs, and mostly just looking thoughtful while she studied his profile absentely, her fellow Cloud eventually shrugged. "I'm actually just kind of… drifting a bit. I've traveled a lot over the last few years, but I didn't really experience a whole lot beyond what was local with the circus needing constant attention. Right now, where you are is interesting and I might stay a bit longer after you go, or I might follow when you move on. Depends on what I feel like, really."

"…Romania in a week? Or at least an attempt to wander in that direction?"

Cherep smirked at her. "Sounds good to me."

"Well then, going back to the question if you've ever put on your own show..." Sonya set the book and its possibly interesting cargo to the side, swinging her legs off the couch to get up. "...I might, might mind you, know of a fan around these parts. A fan of yours, I mean."

"…oh. Oh." Scrubbing his right through his hair again, the stuntman gave her a silly grin. "Well... a local following, huh?"

"And now that you remind me, I was to ask if you knew of a stunt show you'd be doing locally? He did me a bit of a favor while Tats and I were on vacation here."

He held up a long finger. "Is this one of your people, or one of mine? I'm not asking because I really
care all that much… just, do I have to be careful?"


"Well, I certainly can't do anything in a week's time." Sighed the stuntman after looking highly tempted for a long moment. "…but I suppose looking into the logistics of arranging it solo is probably something to poke at."

"Also, just to know how much you can pull, and what to charge. It's business, Cherep. Didn't Viper go over this kind of crap with you?"

With a snort, he kicked up his heels to occupy the space she left open and settled in for what seemed to be turning into a nap. "I haven't asked them to be my agent this first go around just yet."

"…no?"

"Err… the last time I saw Vipes, well… Crina had a letter for them too. It tweaked their nose rather sharply."

Sonya snorted a laugh, weirdly pleased to hear it. Taking a seat on her bedspread, she pulled out the phonebook supplied in the bedside table between the twin mattresses they had rented.

Hopefully, she could find a target in this without having to trek all over the city aimlessly again.

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(Friday the 22th of August, 1969. Bordeaux, Gironde, French Republic.)

Bordeaux, France, had a lot of bridges and cathedrals.

Both of which helped Sonya with absolutely nothing. There were a fair number of museums and theaters, which went along with being a large metropolitan area, but the local companies were either government, military, or wine distributors.

Not entirely, there was a large pharmaceutical company and a paper-based packaging one within the city. Although that really didn't scream 'hard to steal' nor 'attention grabbing' to her, and Tatiana would have a little something to say about stealing from the former.

A bank robbery it was.

She had technically done one before, even if the mint and the machines to stamp gold coins in a museum display/actual minting office had been the real target. Breaking into an actual bank vault was something new at least.

As the siblings had gotten to France a bit late in the day and elected to turn in rather early, and Cherep had fairly bounced his way out of the hotel to do whatever today, she had a rather earlier start than she was used to.

To both give her a little reasonable doubt and a cover story for scoping out the bank she had picked, the she had her Lackey send her a set of traveler's cheques via courier last night before actually turning in for the day. The heavily scarred man wearing the pressed suit and tie pin of a recognizable Mafia Land agent nearly made the hotel's concierge swallow his tongue despite the classy dress, because the man looked rather beaten up by life and ugly with it.
Well, he was well past the normal age for those in their line of work too. The gnarled hands and the scars cutting into the bridge of his nose, not to mention the lazy eye with chemical burn markings around it, didn't paint a pretty picture. Sonya tipped the old vet heftily for bothering with her errands, adding an additional hundred euros when she verified the old asshole hadn't attempted to sneak a peek at nor stole a few of what he was transporting.

From the grin she got in return before he left her in the lobby of the hotel, either he had been highly amused by her or he had managed to get into the envelope without her catching on before taking his leave.

As far as she was concerned, if he managed that he earned the extra padding.

Badly hiding a yawn, because frankly she appreciated sleeping in when on the road, the thief clicked her way into a branch bank of Caisse d'épargne on a set of heels and in a skirt-suit jacket combo she had picked up after her couriered checks arrived.

Mustering a smile for the doorman that opened the glass doors of the bank for her, she calmly strode into her target.

A clerk wasted no time in assisting her, as the lobby was nearly empty this early.

"My apologies," Sonya offered the slightly older gentleman as politely as she could manage, "I actually just need to know if you cash traveler's checks. My company just put in for a fairly awkwardly timed acquisition request for French wines, and the funds by which I am to make such purchase only just came in on the heels of it."

"Ah?" He took both the stack of cheques, and her barely legal ID she had used to get from France to the States and back, to examine. After scrutinizing the signed 'Selena Bruneau' on the cheques against her signature on the passport, the man nodded in a pleased fashion and thumbed through to see exactly how many traveler's cheques she had. "These seem to be in order. We can certainly help you and your company this morning, miss."

Giving the bank clerk a small smile, the Storm-Cloud followed his gesture to what seemed to be his desk. "I am delighted to hear it. While I'm here... how much to rent a safe deposit box? Obviously, I do not wish to walk around with this much money on me unless I have to."

The smile she was given was entirely professional and understanding as the total she had was rung up on a rather meticulously maintained mechanical calculator. "Understandable, miss. Was there anything else you wanted to store, or just the bills?"

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 22th of August, 1969 continued. A hotel, Bordeaux, Gironde, French Republic.)

"Sixteen of my steps."

"Yours, huh?" Cherep eyeballed her folded legs skeptically for a moment over the newspaper detailing the American Apollo 13 astronauts and their clean bill of health after visiting the moon. "Say about... thirty-five feet."

Sonya returned her attention to her work and noted that down. "Ten more, then three to the side."

"...twenty-ish, then six."

Jotting that down, and then adding it together with the thirty-five from before, the thief compared the
 basic floor plan she had 'liberated' from a government building that same morning and then the service tunnels under the city. "So... any reason why you're doing it in feet and not meters?"

"Eh... Americans are weird." Noted the stuntman dryly, lazily stretching out on the couch enough to jostle the woman trying to calculate things on the floor next to him. He also flipped through a number of pages, apparently continuing a front-page article deeper in the publication. "Trying to get used to the 'standard' system they use compared to the rest of the world's metric."

"Are you planning on a road-trip there?"

"My new motorcycle uses the American standard and not the metric system."

Sonya cocked her head, still trying to make sense of the negative space not on the blueprints which likely contained the bank vault she wanted into. "...right. When is that getting here?"

"A while, actually." Cherep responded absentely from behind her. "Say... maybe... the week after next? End of next week at earliest?"

She hummed, finally getting an idea of where she needed to be for this heist. "$That's fine.

Her head popped up as the actual meaning of his words finally sank in and gifted the man a highly skeptical look over a tattooed shoulder.

He gave her a blank one in return from behind his paper. "$I didn't pay for express shipping by air, just commercial sea-routes."

"...son of a bitch, Cherep! I don't want to hang around after I steal shit."

"Then don't!" Insisted the stuntman, flapping a hand at her and discarding the newspaper on the back of the couch. "$Go city hoping and come back in a week, or I can meet you somewhere else."

She shoved a hand through her blonde strands for once, casting the paperwork to the floor and leaning back against the couch irrtably. "...I don't want to."

The couch cushions dipped behind her as her brother sat up and set his legs on either side of her. "$Aww... I missed you too, sis."

"...I know not of this 'miss' you speak of." Sonya denied immediately, shrugging but not quite dislodging her brother when he draped his arms around her shoulders for a rather odd and awkward hug. "$Get off me."

"Mmm, no." Setting a pointy chin on the crown of her head, Cherep pulled her back against him in order to push himself forward to see what she was doing. "$What are you about to steal?

"...I intend to rob a bank." Tugging her left arm, which had been pinned in an awkward half-raised position between her chest and his arms, the thief sighed and gave up. She didn't really want to escape, honestly. It was half the reason she picked the spot she had. "$Did you want anything else?"

A hum was the first answer she got. "$Can you? I thought Tats was the safecracker."

"...safes and bank vaults are a tiny bit different." She informed him wryly, using her only free hand to gather the paperwork she had acquired via dubious means. "$A safe is a box made of heavy-duty materials, not really built to be moved nor easily opened. A bank vault is an underground room built to be nearly impregnable."
"So… 'nearly'?"

Sonya shrugged a shoulder, which still didn't get him to let her go. "Nearly, because bank robbers have been breaking into and out of them for nearly half a century. Of course, every time we do so they redevelop how to build them to foil the preferred methods so new ways of doing so have to be thought up."

The one part of her work she hadn't picked up was snatched up by him and things were finally rearranged so she could lower her left arm and his pointy chin wasn't digging into her head. "What do you mean?"

"Ever see a bank vault?" Questioned the professional thief curiously, continuing when he nodded. "They're mainly built underground, right? And the vault doors are made with those steps in the edges that sit in corresponding steps in the entrance. Those both are the result of bank robbers breaking into them, one because digging under or breaking into a building then rob the cellar is difficult to do without alerting semi-regular guards or just local police... and the other to prevent gunpowder or liquid nitroglycerin being forced in-between the cracks of a safe's 'plug' and the lip of the entranceway to blow the doors open."

"...the fuck? You're pulling my leg, right? Liquid nitroglycerin?"

"I am pulling nothing. Then thieves thought to use cutting torches to drill holes into said plug-doors to force the lock through and get in that way, but a plate of copper or different alloys were added so it would diffuse the heat or possibly melt into the holes made to plug them again." Sonya drawled out wryly, picking up her calculations again to return what she had been doing before he got her off tangent. "So now... bank vaults are reinforced with concrete. Generally speaking, if they're new enough, it's more likely the 'impressive' looking plug-door is actually steel plated concrete and not solid metal."

Cherep stole her 'homework', but finally stopping the whole 'lean over her' deal in order to cast an eye over the dimensions she had to work with, so she didn't really mind. He could then double-check her numbers and correct them if they were wrong while she got up.

"Would you like some tea?"

A heavy motorcycle boot was thrown back over a couch arm with a thud before he responded rather absently, still absorbed with her notes and the negative space between the two blueprints that was her target. "Do we really have any?"

"...there's this 'complimentary' green tea shit, or coffee." This hotel had a tiny coffee maker to go with it, so there was at least adequate hot water to make it. "I might go out to pick some actual tea up with something for lunch."

"Sounds good... hey, what is your plan for this?" Cherep waved the papers she had brought in at her, as if she couldn't guess what he was asking about.

"Guess."

(ooo000oooo)

(Friday the 22th of August, 1969 continued. Bordeaux, Gironde, French Republic.)

Sewers were not the Russian's favorite method to get into anywhere.

Aside those underground tunnels being normally utterly nasty to trek through, they were cramped
and dark. Getting turned around to the point she'd get lost easily was entirely possible, and someone climbing out of a manhole cover was always noticeable.

Getting the schematics for the sewer and underground utility lines was just her wanting to check how big the vault possibly was, and how much the open space she visited meant for how deep some of those safe deposit boxes had been. With a bit of abuse in respects to the stuntman's math skills, she had a pretty good idea.

She would rather take the roof-routes honestly, so even if it would've been so much easier to go in from the underside she was breaking into the bank from the top.

Roof-hopping also meant it was less likely she'd be caught on a security camera she hadn't accounted for. She might've marked out a few on the street and within the bank, but she also didn't expect to catch all of them on a quick glance-through.

She also didn't expect to do this perfectly without a bump. Banks were not her specialty, for all she'd danced around the issue once before… the fact remains there was an industry that thrived on foiling those more experienced and skilled than she was.

While telling her big brother some of it was amusing, it was also just a small sample of what had already been tried and what was developed in response to stop it. Bank robbing had in fact dropped in popularity within criminal ranks because of the difficulty in keeping up with civilian defensive practices.

Probably why Tatiana's pick to specialize in safecracking eventually meant she lost interests in favor of becoming a criminal nurse. Partially, since some of that had to be her big sister's mentality rather than available opportunities to use her specialty.

Sliding over some irritatingly tiled roofs, slick and not the grainy type which made gripping a tad bit hard, Sonya dropped down to the bank's rooftop from a neighboring one that didn't have an alleyway between the buildings. There wasn't a skylight, which made them smart bankers, but there was a fire-escape.

Which, while good in respects to fire safety… meant she could get into the building relatively easily.

As long as she dealt with the security alarms, which were not all that hard with proper support under her and time to inspect the office window. There wasn't a sign for any recognizable security provider she knew of to give her a hint or two, but after careful inspection she could tell it was a 'break the circuit' style alarm.

Which left breaking the glass.

Another minute to give her both time to ensure she knew what was needed and to see if she could spot anything else, and to pop the window screen free, then she brought out the little old-fashioned kerosene blowtorch she found in a junk shop from the duffle bag she got from a neighboring thrift shop.

She'd give the little brass gizmo to Cherep later, he might like it. For now, though, it was just here to provide the 'obvious' for her way in.

Setting the nails of her right hand on the window, the Storm-Cloud made use of her blood red Flames to dig out a handful of glass. Once she had a suitable gap, meaning most of the pane was missing, she then lit and applied the blowtorch carefully to the edges to melt them. Avoiding the wired edges only.
No matter what she did, the glow was going to be noticeable until the glass cooled. Instead of risk an ill-timed glance, she settled into position to wait for however long it would take for the gleam of molten glass to fade.

"…meow?"

With a blink of surprise, the thief looked down.

Sitting pretty on the bottom landing of the fire escape was a truly mangy mongrel of a cat, eying her suspiciously through the slats of the grating that made up the structure.

Rather spooky, given the damn thing's fur nearly perfectly blended in with the dark down there.

All she could really see were the lamp-like yellow eyes glaring up at her.

"…don't suppose you want to clear off, huh?" Sonya asked the little beast wryly, in her native language rather than French since she didn't think it cared all that much.

It just glared back at her.

"Thought not." Stupid ass thing better not get her caught.

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(Saturday the 23th of August, 1969. Bordeaux, Gironde, French Republic.)

The dratted little beast followed her inside.

It made a spectacular leap through the hole in the window she made wide enough for her own hips, mimicking her own dive through, and landed prettily to only saunter under a desk as she stared at it.

On one hand, Sonya could understand why. It was probably motivated by seeking better shelter, and 'inside' was so much better than 'out'.

On the other, she really didn't appreciate having another complication to worry about.

Hopefully locking it in the small office she broke into, the thief ended up strolling down a hallway rather stupidly hoping this bank had a close circuit camera system rather than one that recorded and transmitted off-site.

Destroying the tapes would give her more leeway than just avoiding or disabling the security cameras and make her job easier over all. As well as remove any evidence of her visit, or that it was a slim woman that visited and not just some other dark clad thief that came knocking late at night to make a withdrawal.

It was the third door she tried that yielded something interesting, and not in the 'security room and tapes' kind of way. Well… it had the security system she had been looking for, but…

A head of a bank's office, which did not look like an office of someone that ran a bank.

Not that she had any great experience with such places, but… surely someone who ran a bank would be more interested in the rise and fall of various denominations rather than spying on their own employees.

It couldn't be a security office because the bank of monitors that took up an entire wall was set across
from a cushy looking office chair and a solid walnut desk, an equally pricey and comfortable looking couch against the only wall with the windows complete with a small kitchenette corner and a coffee table stacked with several different phones and recording tapes.

What the hell had she walked into?

Suspiciously inspecting the door she just opened didn’t net her any unexpected security systems, so the thief took a few steps inside the room and dropped the still mainly empty duffel bag on the floor next to the desk. Then she set to exploring the bank of monitors for what she wanted, before poking around the rest of this to see what there was to find.

This was rather… ‘big brother’ to her.

On the plus side, after she robbed this place the police would have cause to search the rest of the building and check this weird ass shit out.

Now then, which one of these was where the security tapes being recorded too?

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 23th of August, 1969 continued. A hotel, Bordeaux, Gironde, French Republic.)

"What are you doing-" Cherep cut himself off, half-tripping over a stack of old beaten coins and scattering them across the floor because he hadn't been watching where he was going in favor for his sister's form.

"Shh…" Flapping a hand at him, Sonya cranked up the volume on the little battered TV set.

She then went back to mindlessly sorting some violently yellow and red colored franc bills into various little piles next to her.

Picking his way past the various multi-colored bills and the small pile of coins now scattered across the carpet, the stuntman gathered up several handfuls of golden yellow colored bills in order to sit down on the couch next to her.

Not entirely what he expected after getting back from eating breakfast in a little café a few streets down. Admittedly, he had been a bit worried when his little sister hadn’t been back early enough to be included in breakfast findings.

He certainly wasn't expecting to come back to find the vault contents of a moderately successful bank spread out over their little hotel room, though. What made the hopefully temporary decorations all the more bemusing was the little pile of knick-knacks near his sister's feet.

People put those kinds of things in banks?

Cherep glanced up at the tiny television screen provided, which had a breaking news coverage of a just robbed bank, and poked her with the money until she took it irritably. "Are you really watching this?"

"Why not?" She answered a bit sarcastically, thumbing through her stolen bills absently. "It's a valid way to ensure I didn't do anything too stupid they can catch me for."

He gave his sister a sideways look. "You sure there's not a bit of hubris involved?"
"In what? Double checking to be sure I'm not currently a wanted fugitive?"

"…point."

Had he stolen anything, he'd be way too embarrassed to see anything connected to his 'work'. Any mention of the theft would've had him either stuttering or cringing.

Well, that was partially why he wasn't a thief. Give him a bit of honest work any day.

"If I wanted to be smug about it all, I'd get a newspaper to share with Tats."

Blinking a few times at his sister's admission, the stuntman gave her another sideways look.

"Really?"

Sonya finally gave him a little more attention. "She reacts, it's funny. Do you want any of this? You probably can't use it in-country for a while, but-

"I'm good, thanks." Cherep was fully aware she had given him the fruits from her thefts for years, going all the way back to when they had just met and she kept supplying him with the rubles to help afford something hot to eat every night to go with a roof over his head he had managed.

He didn't have a problem with accepting stolen things, although he was aware she put in some effort to ensure she legally bought a lot of the birthday gifts he got now.

This was her work, and her money. Same as with the proceeds of a stunt show, that would be his work and money. As he wasn't tight for cash, he didn't particularly want anything from what she had.

He glanced back at the news coverage just in time to catch something… interesting.

Especially interesting since said subject was apparently how the alarms were tripped to interrupt the bank robbery that had almost gone off without a hitch. "Did you really go through the ground floor to reach the vault?"

"Yes."

"…then what's with the cat?"

She glared at the smug looking scraggly tomcat, lounging in the arms of a police officer doing the 'we'll tell you when we can, but right now the investigation is still ongoing' thing. "…fuck that cat."

"Ookay, little sis."

She started stacking bills into a shoe box that had been hidden between her ankles, which looked like the one his new motorcycle boots had come in when his sisters had gifted it and their separate birthday presents. "I've got to follow up on my 'robbery' of myself and get this shipped off so it's not going to get me caught. Then do a bit of wine trading. Do you want anything?"

"I already ate."

"Mmm… alright." Getting up and sweeping the small pile of pricey looking jewelry and figurines into the same box she had full of francs, the thief started to reassemble her load of stolen money into something to transport it all. "By the way… the owner of that bank was a Soviet spy."

Cherep's head jerked around to give her back a surprised look. "Really?"
"Yeah. I don't really expect a whole lot to be said about the robbery until that investigation is over, but when you get your bike… meet me in Geneva, Switzerland?" Sonya glanced at the television once more, then bent to gather the coins he had knocked over the floor. "And let me know what they finally say, if they get to it before you hightail it out of here yourself."

"Sure. Umm…" Scratching at the day-old stubble on his jawline, her fellow Cloud glanced from the hotel room's beds to her expectant gaze. "You don't want to crash for a few hours?"

"...I'll be fine. I occasionally do overnight things like this." Shrugging, and stretching to reach the last few coins that ended up under 'his' bed, she finally got the last of them and stood upright again to toss the full shoe box onto the beds. "I'll sleep on the bus to… Lyon, I think."

"Not quite done with France?"

"It's far enough I can get some sleep, but… once more for good measure. Not sure what to do yet, but I'll think of something."

He snorted, jerking a thumb at the television set still blaring out what little was known about the thief's work last night. "What tops a bank robbery?"

"I have no idea but finding out might be interesting." Dumping most of the stolen money that had been on her bed into a rough canvas duffle bag that he was only semi-sure she hadn't taken to Woodstock, Sonya set the shoebox within it and slung the whole affair over a shoulder. "Although, the likelihood I'll end up accidentally revealing a KGB agent again is pretty remote. Alas."

"Probably a good thing, Nya."

(Thursday the 3rd of September, 1969. Fondation Bodmer, Republic and Canton of Geneva, Swiss Confederation.)

Her brother's boots were not particularly quiet on the tiled floors. "You are very lucky I thought to ask Bjorgn where you got to."

"Shh… we're in a library." Sonya informed him tartly, examining the tome on display in the truncated 'public' display case and the incomprehensible letters printed within a red leather-bound volume. "And you're early. I thought you wouldn't be here until next week?"

"I see that, and I am." Drawled the stuntman dryly, slinging an arm over her shoulders and peering uncomprehendingly at the same volume of ancient writing. He huffed after a few seconds of study, giving her a small squeeze. "Are you going to hang around out here long?"

"Probably not. I'm for Romania, remember?"

He hummed, softly in respects to the environment they were within. "I'll probably break off after you get there. Road trip?"

Sighing, the thief poked him in the stomach. "You just want an excuse to ride your new bike all over."

"Yep." Agreed her silly brother happily. "But there's no reason why not, especially since I can spare you some traveling fees."
"I actually have a contract for around here, so as long as you don't mind a small break and a bit of a scenic trip?"

"I heard." He informed her. "And no, I don't mind at all."

Which yeah, if he called her Lackey to get her latest position then he'd know if she was busy or not. "Are you sure there's nothing you want to do with me, or want from me? I'm not sure how much time I'll have for the rest of the year until Christmas."

The first answer she got was a snort, then another hug which finally made her feel a bit squished and fed up with all the touching. "I just really wanted to wander a bit now that I have some time."

"Fair enough." She had hated how slow the circus was, and the restrictions on her time. Cherep was a whole lot nicer than her, but not that different in nature. They were both Clouds, however oppositely Polarized they were. "Any particular desire to see anything, or just the whole 'wander' thing?"

The only reply was a shrug.

"Well, don't be a stranger. Call in occasionally, okay? I'd like to hear you didn't have an accident somewhere."

"What, that's it?" He questioned curiously, following her as she peeled away from his side to walk down the hall of the library slash museum. "You don't want to come with?"

"Sort of, but I wander pretty far on my own and don't have such itches very often. Well, so long as I'm not stuck behind a desk." Sonya explained as they reached the door of the building she had been wasting some time on a guilty pleasure within. Turning on a booted heel, she started walking backwards to see him clearly as they adjusted to sunlight. "I'm kind of surprised it took you so long to get itchy with another's pace."

The stuntman rolled his eyes at her, grinning at her pointed look in return. "I'm not 'itchy' yet, just… wanting to explore a little."

"That's itchy, brother dear. Wanderlust, itchy feet, ring a bell?"

In a measure of how much they had grown over the years… he stuck his tongue out at her. "Now I'm going to have that stuck in my head. Every time I get to this point… I'll think I have to wash my feet."

Sonya snorted a laugh and was almost surprised by that. "W-what?"

"What? Every time my feet itch, I wash them." A shrug, and a sheepish looking grin, were aimed at her as she finally went back to walking normally to navigate the exit of the museum of literature. "It's ah… habit. I've had it since… well, before you."

"You are weird."

"Yeah well, I'm your weirdo."

She hummed as they joined the pedestrian traffic outside the Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, stuffing her hands into her jeans pocket as she started just wandering.

Ignoring it when he hooked her arm with his, because in a crowd it did make sense to ensure they were closer. "True enough, I suppose."
"Only suppose?" Cherep teased brightly, aimlessly ambling along with her. "I feel so loved."

"…we are about to get very, very lost."

He released her arm only to wrap an arm around her shoulders and give her another rather stronger than normal hug. "At the moment, that sounds perfect."

…eh. They could wander until she found something for them to order dinner at, then he could get them back to the main streets once they were done wandering around.

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(Tuesday the 23rd of September, 1969. Hotel Vojvodina, Zrenjanin, Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.)

"You have got to be kidding me."

"Engin, Dama." Bjørn offered apologetically from the other end of the phone, shuffling papers on his end. "The, ah… Wo Hop To organization has requested you for the last three weeks of October."

That would be Fong’s Triad, and he had warned her they would be putting in a contract for her. However, three weeks? "What the hell is going to take that long? …no, never mind. When do I have to be there?"

A ruffle of papers as things were again reordered, and then her Lackey cleared his throat. "By the thirteenth, according to this."

Well, that gave her a little time.

Not quite enough, especially if she wanted to make a good impression on Crina’s extended family, but she could at least finish her work here. "Well… accept it on my behalf. I did say I’d take it."

"Very good. There is also… a contract for a thief in the Kingdom of Albania, or a more risky one for the Republic of Turkey."

The Lightning-Storm sounded more skeptical over the latter than the former. "Basics for each?"

"Ah… one is for a general target snatch and go, the other is a present for details one. Another in-organization, like the one that resulted in this China contract."

As highly tempted as she was to investigate Turkey a bit and see if she could poke into a few syndicates of dubious aims that might've had a hand in Cherep's early life, she likely didn't have the time to make a full inquiry. That was another thing that would have to wait for her time with the Zolotovs to end.

The Russian Storm-Cloud had a rather long list of such things by now, the Romanian thing was her latest addition to said list now that she didn't have the time. "Albania. As much as I'd like the other for personal reasons, I will need some travel time to make the first."

While she couldn't hear him write down her orders, she could hear him uncapping and then recapping his pen.

"Anything else for me?"
Now that the business portion of the call was finished, Bjorn made a significantly less professionally sounding hum of contemplation. "Not really, Dama. The… ah, French work? I have it cycling through the wash. I can start applying it here shortly, and it looks to be more than enough for… restocking what was gone through so far."

…she was only now breaking even again?

Holy fuck, people were expensive.

The Zolotovs were equally as expensive, if you looked at it sideways. The more time she spent idling about their headquarters, the less time she had to work and build up a comfortable cushion to ensure no one looking at her for their livelihoods was starving. "How much is that October contract paying?"

"Ah… about two thousand per week."

…and using the current exchange system from yuan renminbi to euros, it was about eight euros for seven days. "Bjorn, recheck that."

"Dama?"

"If that's really how much I'm getting paid, I'm socking Fong in the jaw."

"…two thousand euros a week? Actually half a million renminbi, in three installments, but I converted it. Should I not have?"

"Oh." Well, that would've been a bit embarrassing.

Actually, that was a bit pricey.

What the hell did they think she did a week to pay that much for her time? "Fine then. So long as that Kingdom of Albania thing is not too lengthy, use your judgement on that, I'll take it and that'll be three out of the last five I need."

The Triad's payments would actually just finally push her back into being 'moderately' comfortable again. After nearly two years hovering just over scraping the barrel, and that was even accounting for the three or four additional people tacked on.

Maybe she should look into ensuring she had the padding to counter any drain even more people would put on her finances. Knowing her fondness for her sister, she'd of course send Adrik more cash if he needs it. Even if the man would likely turn around and help Verde with it, which he wasn't supposed to.

…then there was that French Lightning himself. She should probably ensure she had the funds ready just in case the scientist did manage to pull off his little experiment and she had to argue over why she didn't want another little minion.

"Da, Dama." Bjorn absently responded a bit belatedly, but as he was likely jotting down her orders she found it not particularly irritating. Just a bit… noticeable. There was another shuffle of papers as the young teen probably double-checked everything they had discussed. "Can I have the shipping number for the contract you just finished? I think I smudged a number."

Sonya glanced at her inner left wrist, where the Cyrillic numerals he asked for were listed. "Read off what you have, I'll correct it if it is wrong."
As the Icelander obediently rattled off the shipping number, a fairly familiar pair of boots suddenly entered her field of view. She glanced up at her brother curiously, but he just shrugged and gave her a wary looking grin.

"Right… no, that's correct. Call me back here at least by tomorrow if that other contract is possible."

"Da, Dama."

Hanging up on the teen and pushing the telephone back across the counter so the concierge could pull it back to his little desk under it, she looked up at her fellow Cloud. "Did you find anything interesting or something?"

"Yeah… about that." Cherep gestured to the exit of their hotel's lobby, shoving his hands in his jean's pockets and following her out of the building when she obligingly started moving. "A couple backpackers invited me to wander with them back up to Switzerland and maybe down to Budapest if we've got the time."

"Sounds fun. Are you splitting then?"

"Thinking about it, yeah." A finger was waggled just under her nose, which made her give him an odd look. "That being the case, there's… one thing I kind of wanted to talk to you about. And since we're probably splitting here, in a few hours when I'm to meet up with them, there's this one thing…"

"…ho?"

"We're going to need beer. Lots, and lots, of beer for this conversation." Deadpanned the stuntman dryly, looking resigned and a bit reluctant when she glanced over at him in concern. At her second glance at him, he rolled his eyes and pulled a face at her. "I seriously don't want you to answer any of this. Okay? I can live happily without knowing a damn bit of this subject. But… since you asked last month, it might help you figure out what you want."

Sonya skeptically inspected his face for any hint of what he was on about. "You… are making little sense."

A hand applied to her right shoulder had her taking an unexpected left, which had her nearly face-to-door with a corner tavern's entranceway. "Beer first, then questions."

Bemused over what he was talking about, she went along just to see how this would end.

Eventually with beer in hand, and half hunched over a booth table, Cherep raked a hand through his hair first then took a long gulp of his drink. "Okay… remember, I don't want to know."

Blinking at him blankly over her own glass of wine, she nodded. "Okay. Can you get on with it?"

Setting his stein down firmly, her brother leaned halfway across the table instead of just be hunched over his side. "…do you masturbate?"

"…um." Ah… that's why he demanded the liquor.

"Nope. Don't answer that. Just… it might help?" Another hand ruffled his hair, and her now highly uncomfortable fellow Cloud fidgeted with his beer. "But, as you don't really seem all that interested in the physical beyond just… I mean the looks of anyone, maybe you're more abstract? You like personality traits, not long hair or muscles or, well. You do have a 'type', but it doesn't seem you like it much beyond just looks of those you talk to longer than the bare minimum… I'm going to stop talking now."
Sonya shut her mouth slowly, then took a sip from her wine from a lack of anything else to add.

"…and. I'm going to forget I ever had this conversation with you." He tacked on after draining his beer stein, glancing a bit desperately at the bar but taking a deep breath and returning his attention to her. "Again, I don't want to know."

"…thank you?" She tried slowly, actually feeling more amused than embarrassed or awkward over the topic just from watching her brother freak out slightly over the subject matter. "So… um. How about… that football stuff? Do you like football?"

Cherep snickered, thumping his forehead against their table.

"Were there any pretty ladies that invited you to go backpacking with them?"

"Yes, yes there are. Both of them." Admitted the stuntman with an actual laugh, lifting his head and giving her a squinty-look. "Let's drop that subject."

"Let's." However, now she almost couldn't stop thinking about it.

She didn't, actually. For the record… or hadn't.

Her brother did have a point, maybe she should start with herself rather than with another.

It had been a long time since she was Rachel, and while she knew she had once in another life… she already knew she was recalling some things wrong or just incorrectly. Maybe she needed a refresher.

"…I'm drawing a blank." She informed him absently.

"Yeah… me too."

The thief glanced down at her half-full glass of wine, and then at his empty stein. "More beer?"

"Please." Cherep drew out dryly, finally opening both eyes to give her an overblown beseeching look. "I love you… not in that way, but I do love you… beer me, please."

"I don't think that needed stating." She drawled back, gathering his glass up and sliding out of the booth.

________________________

(Friday the 3rd of October, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Having not expected an ambush by Mist brat the moment said brat spotted him, Renato waited until the rushed babble finished before knocking the kid's skull with his knuckles. "Calmly. Beginning, middle, end. Detail, structure. Now, what?"

Shamal pouted hard while clutching the spot he didn't hit that hard, but as he wasn't a soft-hearted little thief lady the hitman was unmoved and the kid eventually started with whatever the hell he wanted. "There's school clubs. And they do… lots of things. Can I join one?"

…yeah. If the brat was specifically asking, there was a catch.

Strolling over to the short table supplied in this 'study hall' type room the brat had to himself somehow, he kicked out one of the chairs and seated himself since getting details out of a Mist was notoriously hard or as stupidly easy as asking.
Brat had been making great strides in that respect of his Flame type, especially with the support of his equally confusing mother-figure.

Not to mention the utterly and wickedly evil grandmother.

A chair made to set someone at a short table lowered Renato about as far to the floor as he ever wanted to get. Stretching out his legs straight out then hooking one ankle over the other, and crossing his arms, he gave the kid a flat look. "Why do I care, and what do you want."

Shamal instantly scampered to pull out another chair, then seated himself neatly and looked straight back at the hitman.

Another thing he could thank Sonya's mother for, the brat had learned how to argue his point at hell of a lot better all of a sudden. It was getting pretty hard to deny the Mist without coming across as a complete asshole, and… well, given who he was sharing parenting duties with…

"School clubs. Things to do after school lets out. Mamma said to find something to get interested in, and I found it." Reaching under the table, a bit far since this wasn't exactly where the kid had been attempting to get his homework done at, and he dragged out his school bag. Out of it he dug a flyer, which was passed to the hitman. "There's a general one for primary school students, which will give a general overview of a lot of different clubs we can join once we get into secondary school."

"You're not going to be-"

"I know!" The Mist cringed, lowered his tone, and managed an apologetic shrug for the hard look he earned interrupting his godfather. "Sorry. But I do know that."

"Be that as it may," Renato drawled out sarcastically to a slight flinch, flicking his eyes back to the flyer to see what it said the Mist was probably not saying, "if you're not going to be attending public, or private for that matter, secondary school in favor of Mafia School… why bother with this?"

"Because I'll get the basics of a wide variety of subjects." Shamal informed him brightly, almost waving his hands but clenching them and forcibly dropping them back to his lap. "Like a book club, and a chess club, and a radio club. All of which I can use later on?"

That sounded a lot like the same words he gave the brat on his first day of school.

"And it gives an obvious reason why I might know a bit more than most, if I happen to use it later on in life." This part sounded rehearsed, and a lot less enthusiastic than his other argument.

However, it was still a reasonably well thought out point.

It wasn't a particularly bad idea, might help the kid figure out what he wanted to do with his life.

"So… what have you not told me yet?" As he did control his education still, it wasn't entirely out of the question Shamal was just checking that he could expand that slightly… but if it was just a question of permission then as a Mist the hitman would've expected it to be secured after the fact.

The kid fidgeted with his fingers. "There might be fees?"

Renato glanced up at him, to the flyer in his hands, and turned the damn thing around to read the list of prices he could've sworn hadn't been there when the paper was handed to him. "…yeah… no."

"But-! Mister Renato-"
"Brat, with how much I'm shelling out just for your stupid school..." He glanced at the paper again, a curious thought occurring to him before he got too far into that topic. "...try asking your mother. I can't afford this at the drop of a pin, but she might be able to."

"...oh."

"The earlier I know, the more likely I can do something." The hitman explained to him dryly, satisfied he found a way out of this without Mist dramatics or an utter snit thrown at him. "Next time, don't spring this shit on me the last week this allows you to sign up in."

Shamal blinked at him innocently. "Sorry."

Well, obviously that was bullshit. Probably done specifically, just so he could throw a childish little fit if he said no. Which then could be used as some emotional blackmail, or at least Renato could think of a few ways to trip into something like blackmail especially if he then threatened to go to Sonya with the issue.

...Lisa had made him paranoid over Shamal's possible motivations. Next summer vacation, the brat could visit with the Russian Storm-Cloud on Mafia Land rather than Moscow.

And that had no bearing on Christmas, which a week or so would be spent there anyways, or the time brat would be living with the thief in her home.

With a snort, he handed the flyer back to the kid and drew up his legs to stand up again. "I'll get you Sonya's current number before I leave, if I can. If I can't reach her kid, you're out of luck."

"Alright." The brat agreed way too easily for a kid that just got the 'ask someone else' brush-off excuse, not clamoring for the thief's number now and not later. "I did feed Luigi, she's doing good."

...terrific. When was the dratted thing supposed to croak?

There was no realistic way how he'd be able to take care of a lizard on the road if it was a tank-trained creature. "I would hope so, as you can't get a dog unless Luigi's alive at the end of next summer."

"Wanna see her?"

Renato paused, then tugged his suit down once and straightened out his cuffs. "I'll pass, thank you. Do you need anything else? I'm probably not going to be around a lot for the rest of the year, kid. So, speak now or miss out."

Shamal hopped up from his chair, shoving it under the table with a quick movement to trot after the hitman. "I don't think so. Will you at least still call in?"

"Every week, yes." He kind of wondered how the kid would deal with his upcoming 'death', but at least he'd be with his godmother for that. "I'm not sure why you expect that to change."

"...because I'm getting older?" Skidding to a halt, the Mist darted back for his book work then scurried to catch up with the older Italian again. "That's how it works, right? The older I get, the less you and mamma will keep tabs on me?"

"You're enough of a pain in my ass I'm going to be keeping tabs on you for a long while yet. Don't worry about that, brat." As he wasn't a tiny Russian Storm-Cloud, he couldn't speak for Sonya. However... "And I can almost assure you, Sonya will be always interested in what you're up to."
Chapter 78

(Monday the 6th of October, 1969. Berat, Kingdom of Albania.)

Albanian still twigged her as something 'off'.

Sonya could not figure out how, why, or for what. It wasn't quite driving her nuts, but the awareness that something was off was persistently in the back of her mind no matter what she tried to distract herself with.

It was the week leading up to the eleventh birthday of Crown Prince Leka Anwar Zog Rezza Baudouin Msiziwe, the son of King Leka I of Albania and his Consort Queen Samira Neshhipi. A lot of preparations were ongoing, a lot of visitors were passing through, and it was generally just a good time for crime.

Ignoring the 'festive' feel to the interestingly paved streets right now, the Russian thief merely picked her way through a few bookstores for history texts to waste some time before heading to where she needed to be.

Unfortunately, a lot of the textbooks she found were ‘pro-Albania’. They all had very flattering takes on the monarchy… all three generations it had so far, and the paths the royal family had taken to establish their rule.

Although it was interesting to learn that the Kingdom had once been a subordinate state to Italy when they had a complicated royal family. Reading between the lines told her that it was mainly the Mafia Wars that prevented the ex-president turned monarch of Albania from being ousted in short order when things went to hell in World War II, it didn't really help her all that much. She didn't end up buying anything in the few bookstores she poked around.

…wait.

Did the Mafia Wars happen in Rachel's lifetime?

Was that why the country pegged her as 'off'?

That was something new to ponder, and not something she'd find the answer in a book, so Sonya left the bookstore to get on with her work. After buying at least two different history texts simply to read in-between things even if she didn't know where the hell she'd put them later.

Having once done a robbery of the current military establishment, the thief had taken some precautions for just in case while walking around. As it was impossible guarantee her description hadn't been noted her first visit, either when she got into the country or when she stole shit on her way out, her bright blonde hair was dyed dark brown and she actually invested in shoes with inch-high heels and inserts that topped her height off at a half-inch more. Fake reading glasses, with merely straight glass lenses but prescription grade frames, made her rather look like a librarian.

Unsurprisingly, she rather enjoyed looking like such. The initial reaction most had upon sighting her on the street was to treat their reading material better instead of asking her strangely random questions about what she was doing later.

Yeah, flirting. However, she didn't know a lot of those people and the continued overly-familiar questions irked her. Especially when it persisted after she indicated she wasn't interested, and she was accused of being a tease or lying slut for denying whoever some 'fun' with her.
Mostly from civilians… which, murdering them was not something she wanted to start doing.

Maybe she should keep the glasses?

No, she didn't need it but… anything that staved off the bullshit that she hated dealing with was then worth the hassle. Unless she wore the glasses with her natural hair color and the results were replicated, it wasn't really something to incorporate into her daily appearance.

Sliding the fake accessory back up the bridge of her nose again, the Russian entered a rather old auction house to inquire about the lots showing later that night.

Much to her chagrined pleasure, she was first handed a list of ancient books up for auction first.

There was a first edition copy of Le Avventure di Pinocchio: Storia di un Burattino by Carlo Collodi up for sale, as well as a slightly damaged copy of Fables of Aesop and Other Eminent Mythologists with Morals and Reflections by Sir Roger L'estrange.

There were pictures of the title pages which looked lovely, and she could almost make out the first sentences of the intricately detailed first page of the stories in the pictures provided on the list.

A throat cleared, yanking Sonya's attention from the lot list in her hands to the clerk who had been helping her. The highly amused youth handed her the actual list that had the lot she had been hired to steal over the counter she had been lingering at while he went off. "I believe this is what you asked for?"

With a probably slightly awkward smile, she straightened up and accepted that list before asking something in the French they thankfully had in common about the first paper she had been handed. "…sorry, but when are these two being put up for auction?"

"The ninth, miss."

…shit. Fuck, if she stayed to buy them she'd probably run late for Fong's whatever.

She couldn't steal it now that someone knew she wanted it, she had just went and made herself memorable with this.

…she wanted, even had the money for splurging a tiny bit, but… work.

"…that is mean." Like, really mean.

They were beautiful, and she could totally read them to Shamal! The brat had her copy of the Grimm Fairy Tales and seemed to enjoy it… Aesop and Pinocchio wouldn't be nearly as graphic as a witch being forced to wear red-hot iron shoes and dance until she died.

"I can't stay that long…"

"I could inquire if it is possible to have the lots changed to tonight, miss."

The thief blinked at him blankly, then after tucking the papers into her purse she pressed her hands together in a prayer position just under her chin. "Please?"

Her target was tomorrow night, but she was pretty sure that wouldn't be recalled. Just that some librarian-type had gotten highly distracted by two books of children's fables and got her business cleared out a bit early. Frankly, with how much these two might run up in a bidding war… it probably wouldn't be expected for her to remain for a second night to lose even more money.
That was assuming the switch would be allowed for a prospective buyer. Which wasn't guaranteed to happen, if they had another buyer in mind and that was why the date they were to be auctioned had been picked. Also, the possibility that they would change the lineup for one prospective buyer when they expected a particular lot to sell high was pretty minor.

Nothing would be lost by attempting to see if they would… except her own money. She could risk stealing them anyways, or not safely right now, but as this was the second contract she had accepted in this country that would mean even more convoluted methods to disguise herself on her next visit.

Sonya was not a stupid thief. She might want, but if she couldn't get it legally then she would miss out.

However much she'd regret it.

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(Thursday the 9th of October, 1969. Arrival and Departure Hall, Mafia Land.)

Björn absently waved a hand in response to a question someone he passed way too quickly to note who called out to him.

Slipping a bit on a tight corner in his dress shoes, which were not made to be worn when running and he regretted not splurging for the refitted type with actual rubber treads that allowed a limited amount of traction, the Icelander opened a door to bolt down another 'employee only' hallway Lackeys were allowed to make use of.

This hallway only ran from a disguised closet door to the tarmac, enabling a two-minute shortcut. Of course, with the number of criminal types that made the man-made island home, getting into the shortcut was rather easy but getting out was hard.

He cheated by being the recognizable Lackey of the only Mafia Land associated Cloud Flame user. Most others that worked on the island that had no interactions with his patron made a point of getting to know him or what he looked like.

The Lightning-Storm had never actually outright ran with any urgency while on the island before. Aside the one bitter regret over his choice in footwear, he also intended to never do this again.

He kept getting resigned looks, and a few nervous gulps. The slightly hysterical questions weren't very fun either.

It wasn't that majorly bad, Sonya had just asked that if Renato Sinclair ever contacted him about young Shamal she wanted to know immediately. She had been in the air when the call came in, immediately then meant she wanted to know the moment she got off the plane.

Why did everyone think Sonya was a mass-murderer?

She was nice, or at least nicer than your average criminal tended to be.

Slapping his ID card against a door's tiny window had it yanked open, and the Lackey immediately bolted past the guardsman armed with a shotgun to the plane which was only now taxiing down the runway.

Thankfully at least the plane didn't stop halfway down the tarmac or anything else equally as facepalm inducing.
Absently straightening his tie as he recovered his breath, the Lackey eventually forced his hands behind his back to prevent more fidgeting as a moveable staircase was maneuvered into position to allow the passengers to disembark.

His patron was the third one off, and she glanced at him questioningly as her boots hit the blacktop. "Bjørn?"

"Dama, you have a call to return. The one you insisted that if your Italian hitman ever called about I was to immediately inform you of."

The thief paused between steps, then gripped the material over his bicep carefully and pulled him aside enough they would be able to notice anyone attempting to eavesdrop. "Talk."

"Mafioso Sinclair asks if you are willing to cover extracurricular activities." Responded the Lightning-Storm obediently. "Deadline for acceptance is tomorrow."

"...shit. Yeah, how am I to help?"

"I have the details written down on a notepad in my apartment. Although, merely calling the Iron Fort will work from what your hitman has claimed." Gesturing to the processing building, thankfully she was in enough of a good mood to be nudged a bit, had her slowly starting for the closest building with a phone. "To get things there in time, a courier will be needed."

Sonya nodded absently, digging through her purse for her wallet and the passport she had made use of while she had been on both personal and business reasons. "Did he at least give you the details I am to cover?"

"...again, with my notes back at my apartment."

"Then start gathering together what you need to make a trip to Italy. Unless you can get the same courier you sent my traveler's cheques with, I would rather you handle it personally."

...apparently, she had liked the man he sent after her. Bjørn pulled a small notebook out of his inner jacket pocket and a pen out of his slack's, jolting down the name of the man. He was pretty sure it was something like Garrett McCarthy. "Da, Dama."

"Next time, just handle it. As long as it is reasonable and not... like, a few thousand euros."

"...erm."

"What the hell would cost that much?"

"It is apparently a private school's extracurricular sampling of multiple possible clubs one could join in later scholastic years." Her Lackey explained quickly, tucking the writing implements away again. "Hence why your associate apparently can or will not cover it himself, as he does the main costs as it is."

"I... no, I will hear about this from the brat." She decided, getting preempted in opening a door by a scrambling service personnel and not appreciating it from the scowl she gave the girl. "Get on it."

"Da, Dama. Ah... will someone be picking me up or do I need directions?"

Another few skeptical glances around at the processing room which was suspiciously devoid of other people, and the blonde woman glanced back at him. "I will try to arrange a pickup, check in with me before you leave so I can give directions if I cannot. Excuse me miss, do you have a phone?"
With her distracted by dealing with the processing people, Bjørn split off to do as she asked.

Giving a slightly exasperated look of his own at the now highly confused security guard a bit desperately gripping a pair of brass knuckles. "That was why I ran. So she wouldn't be irritated."

"So long as you're on top of it."

Rolling his eyes at the man, the Lightning-Storm straightened his tie again and reused the so-called 'shortcut' to get on his patron's orders.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 9th of October, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Brat, explain. Now."

Shamal stiffened his spine at the unamused tone to his mamma's voice through the tinny reception. "You said to find something interesting, and I did!"

"A something that costs a thousand and three hundred euros?"

"For the entire year," He hastened to explain, clutching at the phone receiver the maid had handed to him. "Or eight installments of two hundred. But it's the contents, mamma. Which is a... lot of subjects. Book clubs, sport clubs, introductory lessons for electronic radios, a horseback riding club."

"Brat." Shutting his mouth a bit quickly, the Mist bit his lower lip when the silence stretched a bit. "If I pay for this... Renato can pull you out if your grades suffer. You hear me? This is extra, you let your schoolwork suffer and it will stop."

"Okay!" Shamal would promise anything to get to try this out.

No, it might not be as interesting as he thought it would be, as a matter of fact it was nearly guaranteed not to be with how much it was talked up, but nearly half his class was going along with it.

He just didn't want to be left behind with the few that wouldn't be going.

A gusty sigh echoed down the line from wherever his mamma was. "My Lackey is on the way with the money. I'm calling this your Christmas present."

Ouch... he'd still take it.

It hurt a bit, but if that was what he had to do... "...okay."

"Alright then. I'm glad you found something, brat. Next time, a bit more warning."

"I'll try, mamma."

Sonya gave a tinny huff in his ear. "I'm sure. Love you brat, behave."

"Love you too. Is that a 'behave' like you do, or a 'behave' like what most people tell their kids?"

"What the hell do I care for what other people tell their damn kids?"

Snickering, he handed the phone receiver up to the maid that had summoned him to the second-floor
meeting room to take the phone call. "Good news, young master?"

"Yes, thank you." One was not rude to the help, even if they were not your help, because that was not what gentlemen did. At least according to his godfather. "Excuse me."

Although the whole giving up his godmother's Christmas present kind of… sucked, he did just get introduced to the rest of her family. Maybe zio or zia would get him a present and that would make up for it.

…there was a lot of time to get through first, and if his godfather was being given the reigns of his club activities then he should get on top of his homework so it wouldn't be taken away. The hitman probably would yank him out if he let too much slide, and say it was his own fault if he complained there was a bit much to do in the time given and keep up with learning to pick the locks he had been sent already.

But it was really neat of his mamma to let him have this, even if it was a bit expensive.

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(Sunday the 12th of October, 1969. Hong Kong international Airport, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Liqin gave her a sheepish smile, lowering the sign scrawled with her name on it he had been holding to attract her attention. "…miss Yu."

Sonya eyed the man irritably. "Obviously, you do not have to use that name. The other one is on that paper."

"Yes, well…" Shrugging a bit awkwardly, the Triad member folded the sheet up and tucked it away somewhere.

He didn't have a purse, where did he put it?

"I merely needed a way to ensure you would know where to go. You have not given me permission to use it."

Rolling her eyes, she gestured for him to get on with it. "I need to update my wardrobe, what Chinese garments I have are ill fitting. So, whatever it is you want, it can wait."

"…aa." Almost visibly cottoning on to why she was a day early, he hastened quickly to match steps with her on her way out. "Fong was not expecting you for another day."

"I wasn't expecting him to meet me." She informed him shortly. "In fact, I wasn't expecting you either."

She had wanted to do a bit of arranging herself, as in getting a suitably secure 'drop' bag set up on the mainland part of Hong Kong for just in case she had to hastily bail out again. She did have to rather unexpectedly extract herself from the country once before and preparing for any further complications was just smart.

Having a tagalong would make that harder, and therefore she wasn't amused at this.

Liqin merely kept pace with her, grabbing the doors exiting the terminal before she could and gesturing to a waiting taxi.
...so, no. She wasn't going to be able to do what she wanted to before getting into it.

Well... not without some creativity. "I merely wanted a cigarette."

The man paused, confused.

Sonya set her backpack against her left leg and dug her cigarettes out of her purse. "I also have to go fetch my luggage, as well."

Liqin gave her a slightly suspicious look.

"And... lunch kind of sounds nice about now."

Folding his hands into his sleeves, the taller Chinese man gave her a wry little smile. "So it is going to be like that, is it?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about." She observed slowly, hiding the act of lighting her cigarette with both hands and what little concealment her short blonde hair allowed. Lifting her head again, she took a long drag from her smoke before continuing. "Are you accusing me of something?"

"There is nothing to accuse." He informed her pleasantly, still wearing that tiny little smirk. "I can wait."

For the record, she didn't appreciate his sense of humor either. It was going to make things a bit harder.

Tapping the filter of her smoke against her lips thoughtfully, Sonya turned her attention to figuring out a way to give him the slip to do what she wanted to accomplish before she had to be anywhere. Liqin still had that stupid little smirk on his face.

A taunt, which she really wanted to wipe off.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 12th of October, 1969 continued. Wo Hop To Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"Your grudge with Liqin is still unfortunate."

"I," the young woman insisted without looking up from the old-looking tome she was reading from, "had things to do. I did them. If Liqin had issues keeping up, well then... that is not my fault."

Fong shook his head, smoothing a hand over his mouth to hide the smirk and gesturing for the hovering tea-carrying girl trying to be a good hostess to an indifferent Cloud user to take her leave.

Not that there was any real reason to, Sonya wasn't watching him at all and seemed to not care what the young woman attending to her still full teacup did. "I believe you just ensured his respect, since this is the second time you've evaded him when he intended to follow you."

"Is his job keeping up with people? More specifically, people that do not want him to follow?" Questioned the thief sarcastically, finally lowering the collection of papers and leather in her hands to give him a suspicious look over the top of it. "I could blame someone else, if you rather."

"Ah... no, thank you." He refuted after a moment of consideration.
Liqin knew why she was so agonistic to him and had yet to actually take issue with her obvious dislike of his person. It hadn't actually affected anything too important, merely inconvenienced one man a slight bit.

He had no real opinion on the subject himself. Merely that it was slightly amusing and rather petty for a Cloud to do towards someone she decided to snub, and it was rather interesting to see her think up more ways to show her opinions on the subject.

Joining the Russian in the little nook she found to quietly read things until he was free, Fong seated himself on the other low bench supplied for this tea table and investigated the abandoned teapot steaming away on the table. "May I ask what you are reading?"

"…a collection of children's stories in Italian." Slipping a scrap of paper in-between pages to mark her spot, Sonya set her book aside on her purse and looked straight at him. "So... I'm here. Now what?" "Now... well... there's a complication."

"Of course there is..."

"We are not the ones arranging the tournament." He explained a bit apologetically, unable to do more in the face of the facts. "For about a week, you will be held with a number of other hostages. There have been a few attempts to take advantage of that, so there is a question if you would mind extending some protection to a few select others."

From the utterly flat expression she had, it wasn't likely.

"A few will be children?"

"I'm not a monster, Fong. If they are young, if they can't do it themselves, I might step in if it's that urgent or obviously not something they're comfortable with." She shrugged, seemingly only now recalling she did have a cup of tea that was cooled on her side of the table. Investigating it with a fingertip, she apparently found it too cool and lit a finger with purple Flames to reheat it as she held it a touch over the surface of her tea. "Aside that, I reserve judgement if I should step in or not. But that doesn't tell me anything good about this little favor I'm doing for you."

"We had not expected anything too alarming, until a bid in one of the meetings that made it clear one of the branches arranging things have an ulterior motive aside the gambling that can be won off the fights."

Taking a sip of her reheated tea, she aimed another impressively flat expression at him over the rim of her cup. "Are you really that surprised?"

"No, it is why I asked you instead of risk my other option."

The woman shrugged, digging one handed through her purse for a small pack of cigarettes.

"I thought you quit?"

"My sister had insisted. But then it turns out Storms can get to the point of only being affected by what they want to be or, if they get too low on Flames, sometimes unintentionally." A flick of red Flames this time lit it, and the thief huffed a smoky sigh as she inspected the fragile cylinder of paper. "So... I will be held captive, supposedly with other women or dependents, at the hands of dubious intent holding others. Did I miss anything?"
“…there is a few days of meetings and discussions before that.” Fong corrected after a moment accepting how strange that did sound. "And a martial arts master you asked me to find for you."

Sonya sighed again. "Do I need to know anything about this master of yours?"

"…he probably will not appreciate your gender." Admitted the martial artist slowly. "But there is some time until then… would you like to spar?"

She blinked at him slowly, then a small frown settled on her lips. "Oh… that reminds me."

He ducked the hammer that almost took his head off.

"I do not appreciate your last 'gift'." She informed him pointedly, jabbing a finger a hairsbreadth from his chest. "As soon as I figure out how to use them, I will be using them to whack you around a few rooms."

"I hold no objections to that." He informed her brightly.

The Russian paused, rethought her statement, and then retreated back across the tea table into her seat. "Allow me to correct myself, I will use those weapons to kick the ass of everyone but you."

He narrowed his eyes at her.

Sonya pretended to ignore his reaction, puffing on her cigarette and inspecting the surface of her black tea instead. If the reflection gave her a satisfying image of his frown, well… luck.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 12th of October, 1969 continued. Wo Hop To Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"She's tiny."

"Not everything powerful or intimidating has to be large."

Sōng Mingxia squished herself to avoid the two gossiping wives and still get through the doorway they were nearly blocking, entering the courtyard of the Wo Hop To Triad's headquarters at an angle that wasn't quite comfortable.

Her brother was in front of her for all of a second, then he was a red blur dodging out of the way of a massive gold battle ax that would've split him in half had he been a moment slower. As it was, the ax made a deep gouge in the earth before skipping up and shattering into Cloud Flames before it could hurt a bystander that also came out to watch. Flicking his braid out of his field of view, the elder Sōng sibling feinted left then ducked right to weave around the business end of a long-handled slim ax and close in on his opponent.

A willowy blonde woman wielding the halberd redirected the retaliation punch over a shoulder with an upraised arm holding her weapon and stomped her booted left foot… causing a localized small-scale earthquake that threw off the footing of everyone in the courtyard.

Taking advantage of the opportunity she caused, she released her pointy weapons in flairs of lilac Cloud Flames only to summon a massive maul from the energy to swing double-handed at the martial artist's guts.

Fong had to take the hit as he was wrong-footed to dodge quickly enough, and even with catching
the handle behind the head of the hammer and rolling with the strike he ended up knocked clear to the other side of the enclosed yard. He did manage to take the maul away from the woman, and discarded it himself, but the Cloud-woman merely flexed her hands lit with her Flames to summon two more gold axes to them.

Her brother considered his opponent for a moment, then kicked back up the maul he had discarded.

"That is cheating." She observed dryly, dropping an ax to snap her left fingers and imploding the weapon in his hands in another bursting puff of her wispy lavender Flames. "Why in the world would you pick up my weapons?"

"...I'm curious about what they can do." He admitted easily, a shrug as he sidestepped far enough to slightly circle the woman to the left in order to keep him directly in front of her... which then put a rather shallow crater at her heels.

A slide of a foot, and Fong suddenly kicked up a plume of dirt and soil from the disturbed ground instead of dart forward.

Flinching away from the grit thrown in her face, his opponent only just managed to bend backwards in time to avoid another kick to her head. Instead of righting up once the shin passed over her, or overbalancing into the shallow crater behind her, the blonde continued to go backwards into a one-handed handstand until Fong had to withdraw from his position to avoid a leg of her own kicking up between his.

Completing the backflip with an attempt at her brother's jaw with her other heel when he didn't back up as much as she apparently wanted, the woman growled slightly when her opponent took advantage of her odd position to grab a blue-clad leg and try to toss her away.

The axe she still held instead bit into ground as she gripped it in both hands, tearing up even more of the courtyard but preventing the owner from being tossed around like a ragdoll.

Mingxia sighed, rubbing a hand over her face before looking back up again in hopes of finding a good spot to interject.

Fong did not give up his advantage easily, dropping a bit to a crouch to apply some leg strength to hauling on the limb he had.

The woman tried to tug back, but her axes didn't equal out her brother's more solid grip and his leverage on her. A moment spent in the tug-of-war where nothing moved, then the gold blade embedded in the ground started to slide toward her opponent in spite of the grassroots they were digging into.

Her free leg kicked out, not really doing more than making the martial artist wince when it impacted his right shoulder, then it kicked out again with a flash of lavender fire and the sound of heavy fabric ripping.

He released a second too late to avoid the sharp pick end of a delicately slim warhammer summoned from the side of her calf, it sunk a good two inches of metal through Fong's bicep.

Not quite straight through the arm, but enough so that it was likely skin and a bit of muscle was now punctured.

"I win." Observed the woman slowly, righting herself slowly now that she was released and ignoring the damage to her clothing. Leaving her axe in the ground in favor of helping her brother extract the strange war hammer from his arm. "...to be honest, I didn't even know I could do that."
The elder Sōng sibling flexed his bicep once the weapon was carefully pulled out, clamping a hand over the coin sized punctured marks in his clothing to prevent too much blood loss. "I was unaware we were actually doing more than testing each other, so I object to that 'win'."

"Big brother," Mingxia spoke up, then when he glanced to her she pointedly looked at the damage the two had wrought on the courtyard, "I believe you were told not to do this anymore."

Fong blinked at her innocently, smiling serenely as he turned to face her. "I have no idea what you are speaking of, little sister. There were no fights with invading and hostile Triad members."

Clapping a hand over her face, the Rain silently despaired over her brother's sense of humor. "The two of you put three holes in the yard, brother."

Both combatants obediently looked around at the damage they caused since she mentioned it.

Mingxia watched between her fingers as the blonde woman was entirely uncaring of the mounds of dirt thrown up, which was likely also her fault, and the martial artist absently stamped out a small fire near the veranda she was standing on that had started well before she got there.

"…whoops?" Offered the Cloud blandly, sounding utterly unapologetic and more confused if there was a tiny slant to her tone. "There wouldn't happen to be a Sun around, would there?"

The bloody end of her weapon swung to the ground, and she used it as an awkward and ill-effective shovel to push the bigger mounds of loose dirt back into the holes they probably came from. Before she could ask what use that would be, the older woman then also stamped the small heap back down to level ground.

Leaving an utterly obvious bald patch in the grass, which she supposed was a tiny bit better than the still smoldering charred ones.

"I will fetch one." Mingxia offered to her, glancing expectantly to her brother.

"Ah. Sonya, this is my little sister. Mingxia, this is Sonya Bazanova. A Russian Flame expert, and thief."

"I caught that she was your sister." Sonya responded absently, finishing up her rather blatantly obvious patch-job on the small strip of grass by leaving the bald spot stamped with the indentation of her heel in order to 'fix' another. "She is your 'other option'?

"Yes." Fong informed her back solemnly.

She glanced backwards at him first, then slid those grey eyes over to the younger girl. The Rain held her breath to prevent any hitches that might translate to a flinch and returned the look the best she could.

It felt like a minute, but probably was merely a second.

With a shrug, the Cloud-woman went back to what she was doing.

That… wasn't bad, right?

Mingxia looked to her brother, who merely shrugged himself.

"Huang is in, little sister." He informed her instead of be reassuring, taking a hand away from his bicep and eying the spreading bloodstain. "I think he will not mind healing this."
Alright… good luck explaining this to the Mountain Master.

(Monday the 13th of October, 1969. Wo Hop To Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"Did you get in trouble for yesterday?"

Fong rubbed the side of his nose, then dropped the hand back to his lap. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

The martial artist's little sister sighed heavily on the man's other side, so Sonya assumed he might've. Which… yeah. They didn't have a very large enclosed yard here and from the shape of the building and the look of the layout it was their only one, so maybe hammering a few holes in it was probably not a great idea.

She wasn't going to apologize, she didn't start the little tussle that was entirely his fault for insisting that he should be the one she tested any new styles out on since he gave her the weapons.

Although… finding out she could summon her weapons to any part of her body was interesting, and probably worth the hassle being involved might cost her. Possibly worth tearing through her jeans.

"I heard about that." Xiasheng observed from her other side thoughtfully. "I take it you were the one to leave the holes in the grass?"

"Unless they were charred, then it wasn't my fault."

Her once-sparring partner smirked, glancing over her head to the man that once set him up to spar with her with his rather unique yellow eyes. "Really, Fong? You couldn't even wait for a suitable place to be prepared?"

Fong opted to ignore him in favor of taking a bite of his food.

Was there such thing as 'Cloud-proofing'?

The only Triad member she actually had a decent opinion of merely lifted a shoulder in response to the question being posed aloud, swallowing his bite of breakfast to answer her. "I believe we will shortly find out. Not many like facing Fong, he's a bit of a perfectionist and a little over-competitive."

She could easily believe that, given the little tiff the man picked with her yesterday. Sonya poked her bāozi to see if it was cool enough for her, then glanced at Fong's half eaten tāngbāo he was chewing while they discussed him.

More steamed buns, she was starting to see a pattern here.

The man's little sister was like her, waiting for her street-vendor procured food to cool first before eating it. They were sharing a pot of green tea, while the men actually ate it in spite of the heat of freshly steamed food.

"So… this was the day I was to show up. What's happening today?"

"There will be a meeting later tonight." Xiasheng informed her, a bit muffled by a sleeve as he
swallowed a bit hard. "Wherein you will be introduced to a few allied branches, and the others that will be hostages."

Sonya blinked up at him in confusion. "...why?"

"Mostly an overview of what to expect, now that the details of where you will be held is known." Fong offered, apparently finally deciding to be helpful in some way. "There is also the thought you might be able to rely on each other's abilities or protect each other once you are... elsewhere."

Right... and they weren't expecting this to go smoothly.

Picking up her breakfast, the thief nibbled open her pastry for the interesting and savory vegetable mix within instead of further question either Triad member or the little sister that had decided to eat with her.

She rather appreciated it, she had found herself left alone at a table in a full hall when she first sat down to eat. Which while sort of understandable, was also irritating and a little lonely.

The Chinese Storm who was responsible for her even returning to China at all was obviously invested in ensuring she didn't find her trip all that objectionable, but the man's little sister and Xiasheng were surprises she hadn't expected.

"I'm sorry." Mingxia offered to her from across the table, refreshing the entire tables' teacups regardless of the level they had. Setting the pot down delicately, the young girl flicked an interesting clear wine-red colored glance she shared with her brother up at her and bowed her head slightly. "It's... I'm not a very good fighter."

"...some people just aren't." Observed the Storm-Cloud neutrally. "That is not something to apologize for. Since you are not an alternative was needed, I really don't mind all that much and I am being paid. That is generally the basis for most services sold from one person to another."

The girl frowned slightly. "You aren't one of the Cloud-types that only respect power?"

"I'm a professional thief, girl." Sonya reminded her wryly, wagging a finger at her. "I can do power, and it is something to appreciate in action sometimes... but I can look past that if need be."

"What do you like, then?" Asked the younger female right before she took another bite of her breakfast steam bun. "What do you look for in others?"

Lowering her food again, she cocked her head to the side. "A bit broad of a question... what do you mean?"

"If power isn't what you go after, what do you like to see in other people you deal with?"

"Frankly, nothing. I don't tend to have good interactions with more than a bare handful of individuals." All her dependents had found, and then attached themselves to, her on their own.

Her opinion had not been particularly cared for nor sought after, unless they were counting Shamal. Which she didn't, brat was her godchild and more than deserving of demanding her attentions if he wanted it.

"Why?"

"Not anything?" Questioned Mingxia, looking slightly anxious and a bit depressed.
Well… fuck. Sonya hadn't intended to upset the girl. Why was she asking, and why did her opinion on the subject matter at all?

"…my views on the topic was never sought after before. My Lackey decided I was fit to follow on his own, then decided following me from Finland into the Iron Curtain was what he wanted to do. He… kind of… started it. I now have a Sun, two Mists, a lady Lightning and a male one attempting to arrange his own inclusion."

"Oh."

"…I like people that aren't useless?" She tried again, as the young girl's expression hadn't really changed all that much. Surprised didn't give her a lot of range to pick from for what she might be thinking.

To be honest, she really didn't want to make Fong's little sister cry. She didn't appreciate feeling like that kind of bitch.

Especially if the man would go to a semi-unknown woman in hopes of protecting his little sister, as that meant he probably would likely become even more annoying if she made her cry.

Speaking of, the man was particularly unconcerned by the topic of conversation. Of the possibility she might've upset the girl. Fong's non-reaction to this was rather… confusing.

She would be rather pissed off if anyone tried or almost made her brother cry, but then again Cherep was her dork and she could probably be over-protective of the stuntman due to his pacifistic nature.

Not that she thought her brother was a wuss or anything, she was fully aware he probably could make someone else cry by being Skull-level irritating or asshole-ish, it was… just… he was family.

"Why do you ask?" Figuring out what she was supposed to be advising about might help a little bit in her aims of not making the girl cry.

Mingxia pushed her small plate to the side, only one half of her two steam buns eaten, the young girl then leaned forward to directly address the Soviet Storm-Cloud. "I would like to become a lawyer. While most Triad branches have someone on the payrolls that can do that already, and… female lawyers are few, if I do not specifically secure some way to study law it is likely not to happen."

Sonya could then assume the girl was questioning her because she knew of a Cloud that might need a lawyer.

Which made a lot more sense and made her rather sorry she started off the way she had. "You do not have to wait for someone else to start your education, sourcing a few law books should not be that hard. Besides which, although I am aware this is grossly oversimplifying the effort needed, studying law should include studying the law of the land within which you intend to practice."

"I have… some books. And I do study law, just not in any established schools for it." She informed the older woman earnestly.

"That's good." She offered in return a bit awkwardly. "That being the case, most Clouds are susceptible to logic even if they don't like the parts or the result of the argument. I believe the equivalent in lawyer speak is 'bury them in evidence'. And you can rely on the fact most Clouds are rather ornery, so being told they shouldn't or being challenged to do something is a good way to catch their attentions."

As far as she was aware, and she was slightly more aware that she wanted to be, with the current
unrest actually decent lawyers for the next generation should be encouraged. It wasn't her country, nor her society, but she had gotten one Chief of Police executed and helped the Triads with removing evidence the police had gathered on them only to learn they hadn't actually been using it as evidence of crime should be.

What she could advise in respects to Clouds was taken from her own nature and various other baby Cloud brats, but it should be somewhat similar since they share natures and other types tended to share traits across national lines.

"I will show you what I have after the tournament." Mingxia offered excitedly, nearly bouncing on her heels and almost tipping over the small table they were seated around in her enthusiasm if Xiasheng hadn't pressed down on his side to keep things level so only the teacups rattled. "I have several law books, and a few flyers for local schools. Although really, I would like to go to another country to study health and environmental laws and why they're implicated there. With, obviously, a side of criminal law."

"Ah... I'd advise you to look into studying in Russia, the United States, or the United Kingdom. The States are probably your best bet even with the student protests going on right now... and even if London has some of the better foreign student programs, but Russia would not be too far behind as long as you come from a fellow Communist state. If you go further west, you'll also be able to study how and for what reason they were implemented easier without running into censorship. Which also means catching the less 'environmental' parts and the company backroom trading that enables a few of them to even exist in spite of contradictory scientific studies." Sonya got three more bites into her food before the stares from the men on either side of her made her realize she might've said a bit too much. "...what?"

"How do you know all that?" Fong asked curiously, plucking his teacup up as he had polished off his portion of the food.

"I have everything except the paper for a master's degree in Foreign Affairs." And there was also the school thing, ensuring the non-criminal students could then go on to study more told her the rest of it.

Clapping her hands together, the man's little sister beamed at her. "You're a diplomat?"

"...I studied some of it?" Tried the thief hesitantly. Rachel hadn't exactly had a plan of what to do with her degree, and never did get around to putting it to use. "Being a diplomat would require others to actually debate or seek accords with me, rather than flat out avoid. And precious few bother enough for me to actually make use of the information rather than just know it."

Xiasheng hummed thoughtfully on her other side. "Interesting. I can easily understand why you might find that avoidance of your person irritating, but... why did you pick to study diplomacy?"

That was... why had she studied Foreign Affairs?

"...I wanted to travel, which I do, but I also intended to not offend when I did so. Until... well, I got... Cloudy. And stopped caring."

"Oh, this is perfect." Mingxia enthused brightly, settling back on her heels finally and staring up at her with those slightly disturbingly bright red eyes that made her paranoid that she had Storm Flames as well as her brother. "After everything is over, can I have a moment of your time?"

...a dry run?
Or did she just want another second opinion on what she already had as well as some help with her sales pitch?

"…sure." Sonya wasn't entirely sure what would happen after this tournament but leaving should be entirely up to her for what day it happened. As long as everything was over.

This way, Fong might be interested in ensuring she had a relatively peaceful recovery from 'captivity'… if only to keep her word to his little sister. How much could his little sister have? She looked… maybe, a bit older than Usov but certainly younger than the Mirror Lady.

…did the little sister have a Flame type?

Then again, it wasn't just Flame users that could be resourceful. Probably best not to underestimate the sister of a man that would gift a small fortune in weapons in hope of her fighting him with them and then picking a fight when she opted to try not to give in to expectations.

Fong blinked back in confusion in return for the semi-suspicious glare she shot up at him.

(Monday the 13th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed meeting room, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Sonya was not providing the most 'inspiring' of images for those that had any expectations of what a Cloud Flame user was.

Instead, she was fiddling with the jade and brass tobacco pipe she had been given by one of the other ladies when she asked about replacing her nearly empty pack of cigarettes.

Fong really couldn't blame her, nor bring himself to request she provide a more awe-inspiring face to the meeting as it wasn't yet starting nor would be all that interesting. All he asked for, and indeed gotten, was a 'deadlier' option than his little sister to provide as a hostage for the Wo Hop To Triad's inclusion in the martial arts tournament. Anything further was beyond the exchange he had requested.

The already implied allowance for those uncomfortable or unwilling and unable to refute any impositions was almost more than he could ask for.

Clad in a skirt and a long-sleeved fitted blouse supposedly bought when she gave Liqin the slip the day before, the woman could almost walk around the streets of Hong Kong and receive no undue attention for her attire. Except… for the obviously western style boots.

The same boots she wore into the country and had been highly reluctant to give up even if she did not mind removing them. She would carry them with her, or place them in a purse, instead of leaving them by a door. They were in fact in said purse at the moment, as they were not in the Wo Top To Triad's headquarters.

Fong was highly curious over why she did that, but now was not the time.

The heads of the Wo Shing Yee and Wo On Lok were discussing exactly how to handle any unexpected split-ups of their respective hostages with Wo Hop To's Zhōng. Said respective hostages was an elderly lady who was the mother of the Wo Shing Yee's combatant and what seemed to be the other's girlfriend.

As equally bored of the proceedings as the Storm-Cloud, the eldest woman was knitting a scarf as
the conversation went on and her son held her yarn. The only young Chinese native woman in the room was not nearly as calm as the other two but striving to at least keep up somewhat even if this was probably her first close encounter with the life her man had.

As the meeting would only start once the rest of the Wo clans arrived with their own to-be hostages to introduce to each other's, the distractions various attendances had were not impolite yet.

Sonya eventually got distracted herself by the clicking needles, thankfully either missing or ignoring the comment that drew Fong's attention.

"-and this is the rumored 'Cloud user'?

"I have three holes in my front yard that say so." The Mountain Master of the Wo Hop To Triad confirmed dryly.

"I heard of that." Admitted the Wo On Lok's Mountain Master slowly, glancing to the distracted Storm-Cloud. "A pity, you had a very beautiful courtyard."

"The hazards of gathering the enforcer types to me." Zhōng dismissed calmly to the man, as he merely borrowed enforcers when his loan-sharks needed the muscle. "I have a fair amount of repair bills to pay when they become distracted."

The far sliding door slid open to allow the Wo Shing Wo head and his people, adding another young woman into the room. Still, Sonya was the only blonde and overly recognizable as a non-native for it when paired with her exceptionally pale skin tone.

Meng ZhenKang, the Mountain Master of the Wo Shing Wo Group, eyed the Russian skeptically as his people arranged themselves in one of the empty sides of the room behind him as he joined the others of his rank. "That is your Cloud?"

Sonya took a strong draw from her pipe, then proved she was indeed listening to the pre-meeting chatter by lighting the smoke she blew out with her Storm Flames. Her Flames licked the hazy cloud of grey in a wash of deadly ember-red threads and they traveled alarmingly far by only slightly burning the smoke until it very nearly just missed the speaker's face.

Getting up from Fong's side, she ignored the silence she caused and reseated herself in front of the knitting old woman.

The needles had paused as the owner watched the fiery smoke in fascination, and the Storm-Cloud's rearrangement of seating only drew attention when she leaned forward to take the yarn from her son. "Can you teach me, åyí?"

The steel-haired old woman studied the younger thoughtfully. "I would need more yarn, young miss. And another pair of needles."

Sonya reached into her hair with the hand not holding her pipe, pulling two red tipped needles from them. The hairpins were almost needle thin… until she applied her Cloud Flames to it and they grew. Searching for the end of the elder's yarn, she somehow sliced a section off no longer than one of her finger joints by drawing her nail along it. Another application of her lavender inner fire, and she had a heap of loose string almost matching the size her elder had remaining.

Taking the Cloud Flame based craft items from the younger woman, the old woman put her original supplies down in her lap and ran her fingers over the lengths of steel then tested the strength of the yarn. "…interesting."
"They will not last, I merely wish to learn the basics from you. I will bring more suitable tools when we meet up again."

"Oh no, I could not ask that. I will bring the supplies."

"I insist." Sonya refuted politely, absently rolling the loose yarn she had made into an easily handled ball. "You have the expertise I would like to learn already. The items to learn on is the least I can do for humoring me, as well as more yarn to express my appreciation."

"Any teacher is happy to pass on their skills to the next generation."

"I might end up repurposing the needles or yarn for non-polite reasons." Countered the thief next, sounding more amused as they continued the niceties. "As that is so, ensuring the quality to stand up to that abuse is something I must insist doing myself."

"I may not be young, miss, but I know how to do that. I've done a lot over my life." Insisted the elder woman serenely. "You are a guest, a very polite one. It would be my pleasure to encourage your interests."

Pausing to pull on the pipe again and looking pleased when the old lady didn't flinch back from the smoke, the Russian set the pipe aside. "If you are sure…? I suppose you would know best what to learn on."

"I only know enough to start you on your way, really. Now, watch."

As Sonya was happily enough distracted with the impromptu lesson, Fong glanced back to the four Mountain Masters of the Wo Triads already present. The Wo Shing Wo head was giving the head of his Triad branch an impressively blank look, to which Zhōng did not respond to.

Wo On Lok's Mountain Master smoothed fingers down his neatly clipped goatee. "…Zhōng, you seemed to have acquired a little dragoness."

"Hired." Corrected the Wo Hop To's head dryly. "She does not come cheaply."

The thief in question glanced up at the men skeptically but didn't actually say anything about what had caught her attention.

"Two for one, and most will only focus on the one." Wo Shing Yee's head observed idly, glancing at the two young Chinese women that had apparently not had front-row seats to a semi-belligerent Dying Will Flame user before. "You may have paid, but it seems worth it."

Having his duties usurped by the blonde, the elderly woman's son left the two females to their crafting and reseated himself next to Fong. "That was… unexpected."

He slanted an amused look to his possible future opponent. "Are you complaining?"

"No. Far from that." Countered the younger man wryly, massaging his forearms. "Holding up even something as light as a few hundred meters of yarn can be straining after enough time has passed. Aside that, my mother seems to enjoy teaching your little dragon."

"She has stated those that can't or won't fight can look to her for some help." The Storm offered the man, as that was his mother.

Pausing in his ministrations, he glanced to the blonde and back to him with dark brown eyes. "I am relieved to hear that."
According to the restrictions on 'hostages', to ensure they were valuable enough to ensure compliance with the tournament's few rules, there were few that could qualify for the position.

Generally, family would be the first thought when 'dependents' was used but in recognition to those that had no suitable family that could be held in bond for their word 'partners' and 'associates' were allowed.

The only qualifier that prevented Fong or any other entrant in the tournament from putting up their fellows as hostages was the 'no Triad members' restriction. Supposedly to 'prevent any backstabbing or pre-arranged sabotage by taking a fall in a bout'. Furthermore, if using the associate clause, one had to prove they actually were known to each other well before the tournament was announced.

He lucked out in his selection of hostage by the incident where Sonya lost her temper and he ended up helping her through her rage. As that paired with the school effort his Triad was helping her syndicate with probably would stand in the face of a Cloud's peculiarities even with the infrequent meetings, hence why he didn't have to risk Mingxia.

The Storm was fairly sure no one believed the previously stated reasoning for the restrictions any more, but they had been put in place for a few months now and altering them would be an uphill battle that might not be worth it.

The sound of lacquered wood being drawn against metal signified another group's arrival, actually three from the looks of it. They might've gotten distracted on the tea room floor overhead, or merely arrived together for their own reasons.

Regardless, it meant they had the bulk of the Triads invited tonight and the meeting could be anywhere from five to ten minutes away. "Sonya."

A twitch signified she heard him, and the thief looked back at him only when she reached the end of the looped yarn around her finger. Her final response was merely a cocked eyebrow.

Fong sighed slightly. "Please."

She glared first, then thought about it, and finally turned back to her instructor in the art of knitting. "Excuse me. We will have to continue this later."

The old mother nodded in acceptance, watching in fascination as the Storm-Cloud's utensils went up in her purple Flames leaving behind two tiny hair pins and a small length of the original yarn. Pausing only to pick up the tobacco pipe again, she retreated back to Fong's side.

Grudgingly. Obviously unhappy at the interruption, even if she was polite enough waiting for her temporary instructor's son to vacate her former spot so she could reseat herself again.

Her use of Cloud Flames had suddenly made her the most interesting thing in the room, and she refused to acknowledge that. Instead, the thief only pouted in a not quite insolent but also not entirely rude or arrogant manner.

"I am beginning to see a pattern here." Meng ZhenKang informed his fellows, which mostly confused the newer arrivals but earned him a few amused looks from those that had been early.

Fong wondered if Sonya restricted her Cloud Flame use to only creative applications when not in a fight. She lit things on fire with her Storm and seemed to have more day-to-day use of her red Flames than for her lavender one.

"Shall we jump straight to dinner, or start with tea?" Wo On Lok's Mountain Master asked of the
five other Wo Triad group heads present so far.

"Tea." Decided Zhōng after a moment of thought. "Let us allow our fellows the time to catch up. It is not yet seven."

Being underground, the Chinese Storm of the Wo Hop To Triad's couldn't judge what time it was by using the sky. They hadn't been waiting long, however easily his to-be hostage had become distracted.

…speaking of dinner, Fong turned to Sonya curiously. "Can you use chopsticks?"

"...I've never tried." Responded the thief after a moment. "Will there be a fork if I ask?"

"You have been through China twice before. That I know of."

"Once with a traveling circus, who had their own ideas for dinner, and once more on top of that. Yes, twice. But... I generally stuck to finger foods or soups." She admitted idly. "...that will not help me now, will it?"

"I can teach you." He offered, since it seemed she was in the mood to be taught.

Sonya slotted her hair pins back in place, having used the time since she stopped using them as knitting needles to inspect the red paint on the sharp ends for chips or cracks, and nodded once she no longer had sharp things in hand near her scalp. "...I would appreciate that."

(Friday the 17th of October, 1969. Flame Office, Zolotov Headquarters, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"I don't see the-"

"No, no, no. Look," Peter 'Scruffy' McScruffy flattened the old study he pulled from a nearby library he found and basically used as a second home-away-from-home after being kicked from the Flame user's office for the day when he wasn't tired enough to sleep. "This is a report of a set of experiments back at the turn of the century. They made rubies."

"We can't use rubies." Galina reiterated flatly.

"Well, no. But then they did sapphires after some trial and error. And before you say so," continued the Sun hastily before the Lightning interrupted him again, "I am aware we can't use sapphires either. But... the point is that it is possible to manufacture gemstones."

From the mostly confused look on the brunette's fairly pretty face, she still wasn't following his line of thought. "And while that is all well and good, is it worth it to make our own? Reselling gemstones means we take a hit on their value, especially in bulk as Sonya sends them. Exactly how many rubies and sapphires would you have to make to equate out the price of making them?"

Scruffy let his forehead impact the desk. "No, Galina. Ignore the rubies and sapphires for now. It's not the type that's important, it's that it was done. Possibly then, other types can be manufactured. Possibly I can manufacture certain stones of specific elements to systematically find out what is reacting to our Flames. And then-"

"Scruffy." She interrupted strongly, nearly making him bite his tongue in surprise. "Anna?"
A ripple of Mist Flames ebbed in the window pane right behind the woman that called for her, before the Mirror Lady stuck her upper body through it to address them. "I took care of it, they forgot there was anything else Peter wished to say about the subject after your price comment."

"Peter, Sonya does not wish to give the Zolotov clan any more than she has to." Galina explained to him calmly, gesturing him to sit down instead of loom over her with his extracurricular research. "That includes you, for your information. Next time you find something like this, just ask me for a moment outside the office."

"…ah. Right. Sorry." With a sheepish cough, he absently smoothed down the papers he laboriously copied out last night to bring in today. "Well… ah…"

"Your idea. I like it. Sonya will appreciate the help… probably." Clearing her own throat after the slightly tacked on admission, she tugged the papers out of his hands to read herself. "However, we have less than a year here. Before you put in a request for the equipment, calculate how much it will take to transport it elsewhere and what an interruption would mean for the… um, manufacture of whatever."

"Oh, no. I'm actually going to have to do some study before I can ask for anything. As I have no idea how, aside a crucible and a glass blower's pipe with a lot of glassblowing elements." He had just gotten excited at the realization it was possible to control the variables for what jewels reacted to what Flame type. Then he wanted to share his excitement, and really his closest friend right now was Galina. "I um… yeah. Hello Galina, how are you today?"

Anna giggled at him, falling backwards back into her weird mirror-verse existence she seemed to greatly prefer to real life.

The Lightning herself pursed her lips to hide the small smile of her own that was obvious only for a split second. "Scruffy."

"I… should get out more."

"You can speak and understand Russian now. There is nothing keeping you from going back to the rest of the Suns and actually talking to them." She reminded him dryly, starting to sort her things into various drawers in the desk she was seated behind. "Or just striking up a conversation with others you may pass on the street. Or finding another Flame group and asking them questions until you find someone else to talk to. There are a lot of options now, Peter."

Peter shuffled in place a bit, hands empty and not entirely sure what to do with them now. "That's easy to say, but hard to do. I'm just not… comfortable with imposing on strangers right now. I mean I did once and that worked out, but first someone else did to me and that didn't work nearly as well. And… the other Suns are rather… young. And hyper. I feel old just watching them."

"I regret to inform you… that you are old." Galina announced, almost sounding genuinely sorry about it. "You are the second oldest Flame user we have right now… discounting Gedeon, but we don't count him for anything."

"Thank you, Galina. I really appreciate that."

His deadpan acceptance of her words earned him a smirk from her as she took his arm. "I am entirely willing to repeat it however many times you need."

"…where are we going?"

"Bit of an early lunch. I'm hungry, and I'll bet some good money you didn't get breakfast this
morning."

Well… no, but… "Galina…"

"It's not entirely healthy to only speak to me, Sonya, or Shamal." She interrupted before he could think up of an argument. "I won't ask you to talk to anyone, just to join me for lunch in public every now and again."

…and that was probably for the best, yes. "I got to the library on my own."

"And I'm very proud of you, Scruffy. But that is the weakest public place you could've gone to. Talking isn't exactly encouraged in such places."

Scruffy laughed, finally giving in to the insistent but light tugs on his arm to start walking.
Mingxia bit her lower lip. "I don't think that's a good idea, Madame Bao."

Lian Bao frowned at her sternly, still looking prettier than her even with the not really pleasant expression on her face. "What do you draw that opinion from, girl?"

"Our guest is already in an ill-humor, surprising her with something so… social will not likely end well."

No one in their right mind tried to force a Cloud Flame user to socialize, that was just not done without property damage or murder. They were very much like cats, only came around when they wanted to and could just as quickly turn from pleased to violent in a blink of an eye.

Aside that their guest was only slowly picking up more phrases in Cantonese, her main common language was Mandarin which only those that actually left Hong Kong or came from outside it also shared and could converse with her.

Sonya Bazanova was not that different from what was known of 'Clouds', however more she was with the added Storm Flames.

The same woman that had supplied a lot of helpful advice one morning over breakfast had quickly turned moody after the meeting she had been required to attend her second day with them. That moodiness had turned to outright snappish yesterday morning to Xiasheng, who she seemed to generally like well enough before that, until Fong suggested some sparring to work it out.

The Cloud user had taken the invitation with a vengeance, giving the Storm user two broken bones in return for a broken nose and three fractured ribs. Then, after a Sun was sourced to heal them both, insisted on another as she didn't feel quite 'settled' yet.

A broken jaw for her and a cracked collarbone for him, a near amputation of his arm in return for the Russian's broken leg, four smashed bones in her foot and a slipped spinal disk from a nasty kick for the Storm, the two of them were getting steadily more violent in each bout until one or the other had to stop to attend to their injuries.

Of course, Mingxia's battle-crazy brother was loving the opportunity to work out the kinks in a few of the more brutal moves in an actual fight. Sonya seemed equally pleased just to have someone to fight, and they were providing a rather bewildering moral boost to the entire household with how skillful they were in dodging the lethal blows.

Just… no one wanted to watch them actually try to murder each other. Not even her, as much as she wanted to support her brother that was a bit… more than she could stomach.

It wasn't so much that everyone else was equally as squeamish as she was, it was the two of them were destroying a lot of things a bit mindlessly while they fought.

Zhōng seemed rather resigned to losing most if not all the rooms for practicing the forbidden martial arts the building had, as the two fighters had gone through two training halls and a smaller outdoor shed so far. One had only just been rebuilt, and the two were currently in there trying to gut one
another with the Cloud's mysteriously appearing weaponry.

The courtyard held a new furrow when one of their spars wasn't quite contained by four walls of a partially sunken basement dojo, which was how that one small gardening shed got a bit... smashed. That was why everyone else found other things to do, no one wanted to know if they were accounting for watchers or if they weren't.

Mingxia wasn't even sure if the two would stop for the midday meal or not today, even if the Russian was supposed to be fitted for a wardrobe she would be wearing while she was the Wo Hop To Triad's hostage for the tournament.

Surprising the woman with a 'dressing/makeover' party would probably send her right back out to attempt brutalizing the Rain's brother again.

"I will see if I can ask... but it is not likely to occur. If not, I will acquire the measurements you will need."

She had to go back and try interrupting the current spar almost giving the entire building fine tremors. That might be... slightly hazardous to her health.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 18th of October, 1969 continued. Wo Hop To Triad's Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"I'm fairly certain," Fong started slowly, not from confusion or hesitance but due to the shortness of breath he was currently laboring under, "I broke your leg."

"I worked something out." His guest replied through gritted teeth, slowly spinning her seemingly more favored long-handled if strangely small-headed battle hammer as she eyed his form for an opening. "Worry about yourself."

Spinning it so the thin beak of the hammer was the side she was bearing down on, she brought the weapon in an arc at his side from the left. Dodging to the right to give him more room then rolling under the strike, he then had to impose his only non-broken forearm before his face to redirect the backwards mule kick she turned her movement into.

Striking at the back of her knee didn't work as it had earlier, she had learned and turned her missed kick into the start of a no-handed cartwheel. Fong had to dive out of the way as he couldn't immediately tell where the kick from overhead would come from or if she was bringing that weapon down again so redirecting that would only be a matter of luck and chance.

He did catch her ankle with his own, tugging it from under her and forcing her to go to a knee still.

The broken leg knee, which didn't seem unstable or being favored.

Did she have Sun Flames as well, or was this something else?

Whatever it was, it obviously didn't keep the pain from registering from her tight features. "Sonya, I think we... should maybe take a moment."

She flicked her thankfully now grey eyes from his left arm, which felt as if it had been snapped at least in two places by an errant hammer strike earlier, to her really broken but apparently not entirely leg, and then she sighed heavily. "Probably. Damn... I nearly had you."
He huffed softly, since she was the one kneeling when he had gotten back to his feet. "Huang? Anyone?"

"...are they still out there?" Sonya wondered as she used her long-handled hammer to get upright, gesturing to the rather hastily done patchwork on the east most wall once she was on both feet again. "I wouldn't have, had that been something to risk."

Fong blinked at her, then actually took a second to actually take stock of the room.

The mats underfoot were either ripped or torn, some outright still smoldering, showing the now heavily scarred pinewood floors underneath. Two of the walls, aside the one with the ill-patched hole through it she had made with his body and helped along with his Flames to prevent any spinal injuries, had massive cracks. Both of them were caused by him dodging repeated attempts to use him like a shovel.

One of the lanterns had shattered from something, spilling some oil and a fair amount of glass in that corner of the room.

Aside a few more gouges here and there, and a hole in the ceiling he actually wasn't sure from what, and... well...

Hopefully the prize purse from this upcoming tournament would be fairly substantial, otherwise he'd be paying for the last day and a half for a few years yet.

"...Fong? ...Fong!" Snapping her fingers under his nose, the thief looked fairly worried for a moment. "Did I hit your head?"

"You tried but missed." He reassured her quickly, gesturing so she'd lead the way out of the half-underground room so they could find one of the Sun users. "I am fine, merely thinking. You have gotten better at not allowing strikes to your own to connect."

"Yeah... well, I think you still broke a cheekbone." She informed him blandly, running a thumb carefully over her left cheek and wincing away from it before she got anywhere close to her own nose. Severely eyeing him a moment more, probably to be sure she hadn't addled his wits with a misjudged hit, the Cloud user let her hammer go with a puff of her Flames and did finally start making her way out. "But seriously... thank you. I feel a lot better now."

"I am glad to hear it... but we should probably wait for the rooms to be doused and somewhat fixed before doing this again."

Actually, pausing to think about it... he was fairly sure that not just his right arm was broken now. Something rather painful was twinging in his hip, and his breathing had yet to recover even in the short while they had to catch it. Probably another broken or possibly bruised rib.

"May I ask what it was that made you...?"

"More Cloudy than normal?" Sonya finished dryly, heaving another sigh at the staircase they had to traverse to get out of the underground rooms. "...I do not do well cooped up with people gossiping about me. The last time this happened... I could range as far as I needed to in order to be less... violent. I also had more things to distract myself with."

Fong had the pain to prevent anything from crossing his face, not that she would see anything as she was ahead of him. However, he hadn't thought of that.

From the few Clouds he had interacted with, 'stationary' was not often applied to them.
'Patrolling' he was fairly sure the Chinese Cloud Tian of the former Green Gang had claimed about his own wandering habits, just generally getting out and about and not occupying less than a thousand square meters every day.

She was doing that, and would be doing more of it, and it wasn't sitting right with her. Her dislike of gossip was something he could understand more easily than just be aware she had issues with, but even still...

"I am... unsure how to help."

"There's really nothing for it. I can deal, so long as you don't mind my attempts to shatter your bones."

"While I will never mind a spar or two," and that really couldn't be stated enough, she was interesting to fight against with the not-trained but still fluid movements, "is there anything else you can think of? I don't mean to say we should not do this more, but I am fighting in a tournament in a few days and you will be held hostage for at least a week if not longer while I am otherwise occupied."

The broken arm was actually kind of concerning, it had broken it twice today alone. Five times if one counted yesterday's bouts as well.

Fong wasn't sure how she kept breaking it, but it did tell him that he had some flaws in his own mixed fighting style to ponder and try mending. Doing so before a major fight like the tournament promised to be wasn't always a good thing, but at least he was aware something about his left side was vulnerable.

Perhaps he should go back to trying to learn to be ambidextrous. While there were Sun users in the Wo Hop To Triad, that didn't mean there always would be one nearby when he broke something important. If she could manage that with his right...

Sonya glanced backwards at him, about to say something that was cut off by a soft 'oomph' and she flinched backwards from whatever had impacted her into his chest. Not having expected that from the usually sure-footed thief, Fong barely managed to wrap an arm around her and grab the railing to prevent them both from tumbling back down the stairs they had just laboriously climbed up.

His broken arm twanged painfully, but not nearly as badly as when the Russian flinched again from it being wrapped around her stomach. That movement also highlighted there was something wrong with the martial artist's right hip.

Breathing deeply through the pain, or as deeply as he could go having been recently winded from the woman's mule kicks that were significantly more painful than most thrice her size could deliver, Fong flicked his eyes over to his slightly panicked looking little sister. "...Mingxia? Did you need something?"

"I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?" Asked the Rain of the woman in his arms instead of actually answer her own brother, hovering nervously over them as she was standing on the landing instead of the stairs. "I'm sorry."

"Shush. I just... really don't like it when anyone touches my stomach. I'm not injured there." The Storm-Cloud replied a bit shakily. "Fong, release me."

Fong did so quickly. She knew his arm was broken, that was probably the only reason she hadn't broken it again if she really hated being touched there.
His little sister backed up suddenly, almost flattening her back against the far wall opposite the staircase they were traveling up. "I am really very sorry."

"It's fine, girl." Replied the older woman a bit testily, then she reached the landing and took her own deep breath. "I also don't like it when people shrink away from me, by the way."

"This is a very narrow hallway." Mingxia pointed out a bit timidly, not quite leaving the wall but at least now not pressed against it.

"Neither of us are big women." Sonya countered a bit sarcastically, as they weren't.

His little sister seemed to have inherited their mother's frame, which meant she would only grow tall enough to tickle his nose with her hair. Fong wasn't exactly sure where his height came from, but their father had been a rather stocky man when he was alive so he knew from whom he inherited that much from.

The Russian herself wasn't exactly short, but she wasn't tall either. She only came up to Fong's collarbone, but she had more muscle weight than his little sister could manage at the tender age of thirteen with a past history of not having nearly enough to eat every night.

"May we continue?" He interrupted as it seemed his little sister couldn't find anything to say to that, not entirely without his own motives. For one, the younger Sōng sibling probably needed a very good impression on the Storm-Cloud in order to gain what she had been looking for over the last few years and for the other… well, his hip really did hurt a fair bit. "Sonya, are you sure that leg is fine to walk on?"

Not entirely neatly distracted, the blonde did at least glance down to her left leg as she took an experimental step down one side of the hallway. "Probably. It doesn't feel alright, but that's part of the trick. Where are we going?"

...she was a guest and probably didn't know where any of the Wo Hop To Triad's Suns generally spent their time. "Well, yes. But as the two of you may not be particularly robust, I am. To the kitchens, please. I believe you know where those are located."

Sonya glanced at his significantly bigger form thoughtfully, to Mingxia's sheepish half-smile, and rolled her eyes before she started walking again.

His little sister gave him a strong hug for the aid before he passed her. "...I regret needing to ask, but Miss Sonya?"

A disinterested hum from ahead of Fong signified she was at least listening.

"Did you bring anything to wear during the tournament?"

Another pause caused him to stop short again, and Sonya turned around to lean against one wall to see past the Storm to the little Rain behind him. "What I'm wearing isn't good enough?"

Blinking himself at the question he hadn't thought of, Fong took in what she was wearing thoughtfully. The thief favored things she could move in more than form-fitting clothing, which did match the current 'fashions' popular in the city. Long sleeves, slacks, and generally only tighter across the abdomen than strictly allowed by the Red Guard. She had been dressed similar yesterday, only the skirt from the first day she had arrived stood out as particularly feminine.

Mingxia leaned a little past Fong's side herself to see the older woman clearly. "Erm… it will be a big production, Miss Sonya. Most will likely be dressed up for it."
"…son of a bitch."

"Can we dress you up a little?"

Considering the question, she glanced first at the charcoal grey and black outfit she had on before taking in Fong's red long-sleeved tunic and pointed at that instead. "Can't I just wear something similar, but in purple?"

"Well… yes? But that would be advertising you are a Cloud to everyone."

"And why… no, I get what that might not be the best idea." Finally continuing on her way, it wasn't until they were halfway to the kitchens that the Russian glanced over at the smaller Rain. "…I get to refuse anything too restrictive."

"Of course!"

"And anything too tight." She continued flatly. "If I can't do a cartwheel in whatever it is, I will actually wear this instead."

The younger girl nodded quickly. "Understandable, yes. Anything else?"

"…I don't do green colors well."

"So, we can?"

"Who's 'we'?" Asked the Russian skeptically, not budging even if neither of them were in the best condition.

"Some of the other girls." Reassured, or at least tried, Fong's little sister as he reached around the thief to open the so far forlorn kitchen doors while they discussed things. "They've gotten really good at hiding something fashionable under their Mao jackets."

"…the same girls that keep gossiping about me to the point I had to try to break your brother's face for the stress relief?"

"Um… yes?" Having only gotten a step into the kitchen, which was long enough for Huang to notice him, the martial artist turned back to the women just in time to catch the highly suspicious look and hopefully bright smile being traded. "They might not gossip if you provide them some time to get to know you?"

Sonya considered it, and the other girl, for a long moment. "Well… I haven't tried that one yet."

Fong suppressed a wry smile. "I will be sure to leave the evening free."

Huang sighed heavily, setting his wok down for another of the kitchen workers to handle so he could heal them of their latest injuries. "I take it I'm not getting out tonight either?"

"I could go for a walk instead." The Storm-Cloud observed dryly as she turned to face them through the doorway. "Ranging a bit far generally helps with minor irritability or just restlessness."

…she would probably be stopped by the Red Guard in short order, wanting to see both her paperwork and to ensure she was conforming to the general guidelines of the so-called 'Cultural Revolution' while the obviously non-native was being a tourist. As she had a less than legal paperwork trail, she'd probably have to murder them in order to remain available to attend the tournament as a hostage. Even with the unrest the Triads could cause, the disappearance or brutal
murder of a Red Guard patrol would be fairly noticeable.

It was probably for the best she didn't go out.

The Sun user they had sought out huffed as he took Fong's left arm to piece back together. "I had a few new recipes to try out anyways."

"We appreciate it, Huang."

"…what he said."

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 18th of October, 1969 continued. Wo Hop To Triad's Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

The courtyard building thing the Wo Hop To Triad operated out of was an older building with an actual stretch of slightly damaged greenery meant to be a courtyard, meaning it didn't have modern plumbing.

There was a well instead a bit further down the street, where water was drawn and brought back in buckets fairly regularly.

Sonya didn't really make much of an issue of that, because it was a different part of the world and she probably had done worse things to keep clean enough than outhouses and a washtub.

She traveled with a circus cross-country through the Arabian Desert, enough said on the subject.

She could deal with a washtub of water in a sink happily enough to bathe with, if need be.

A washtub barely big enough for the younger sibling of the martial artist that brought her back to China was another thing.

Studying the wooden construct bound in rope skeptically and ignoring the gossip going on behind her, which thankfully was at least in another language therefore she could pretend it wasn't gossip no matter how many supposedly covert looks were shot at her, she wondered how the hell she was supposed to take a bath in that.

"Miss Sonya?"

"…my legs will not fit in this thing."

"Oh, you just need to sit in it. We'll wash you."

Sonya gave the girl a flat look.

Mingxia blinked her rather striking red eyes up at her, spoke something in the Cantonese she didn't really understand even if it did share some similar sounds with Mandarin to the other women in the room, and then merely gestured to the wooden tank unhelpfully. "Please?"

"I don't like people touching me."

"I promise, we will somehow get you to an actual bathhouse before you have to be taken hostage. But for right now… I'm really sorry, but we need to scrub you down before Madame Bao will let you try on the pieces the other girls think will fit you."
Instead of asking why she cared about 'Madame Bao's' opinion on jack shit, which she didn't but…
guest, the Storm-Cloud regarded the tub in irritation before starting to strip out of the 'Mao jacket' thing that was apparently all the rage in-country.

For some reason.

The thing was uglier than sin and did nothing for a girl's figure. Which, with the 'Cultural Revolution' thing on-going, was probably the point.

Although a surprising number of girls had more fancy clothing underneath, well hidden from casual inspection and more for their own sensibilities than for looking pretty. It seemed to be the thing to do for the women also house in the building, Mao jackets were for outside or the main floor and whatever silk or cotton brightly colored thing they really wanted to wear was only for the second or higher floors.

"Oh! You have a tattoo as well?" Mingxia asked as she took the Russian woman's right bicep as she was sliding the blouse that served as an undershirt off.

"...yes." It wasn't worth it to deflect, with her pale as parchment skin the colors stood out vividly and just about everyone could see it.

Glancing over the cat tat herself, the thief made a mental note to get her cloud and paw prints touched up again the next time she could a tattooist.

Also, she really needed a tan or something. She was way too pale.

Removing the buckle of her armlet of chains and the miniaturized weapons earned her even more attention, and not just from her current 'attendant'.

Fong's very brave little sister took the chains curiously, not folding it over an arm with the rest of Sonya's things.

Plucking off one of the golden battleaxes with a tug and a clink of metal on metal, the younger girl fought had to keep a smile off her face. "Oh... oh, Fong's going to be so mad he didn't figure this out himself."

"I cannot have been the first Cloud to have thought of that."

"...there might be stories of something similar, but if there are I haven't heard any." Allowed the girl thoughtfully, examining the tiny charm intently after dumping the bulk of the cloth she had removed on a bench. Holding up the mini-ax, Mingxia tilted the scrap of gold-plated metal to the side in order to peer through the little hole drilled through the butt of the haft. "Why do these have this?"

"...they're ax charms. They can go on a bracelet if I need to be more 'dressed up' and still armed." Sonya responded absently, stepping out of her pants and underwear and picking it up to add to the rest of her pile then reaching behind herself to unclasp her bra. "Speaking of, if you can find a small enough chain and some wire I can reset them as such."

Handing the chain over to another woman, with the little ax charm, the youngest female in the room spoke to that woman quickly for a second before rounding the entire little 'bath' setup and the even shallower wash tub set ready with various soaps. "Ready now, Miss Sonya?"

Completely bare, and now out of excuses to postpone it, she gingerly placed both hands on the rims of the bigger tub and carefully lowered herself into the water. It wasn't exactly warm, not with how much time she had spent dithering over the logistics of doing this, but it was only a moment and a
brief flair of Storm Flames to warm it back up to near-boiling.

Then she was practically beset by droves.

Two ladies she couldn't actually speak to decided to take each leg, she only escaped two more from taking possession of her arms by yanking them closer to her chest… which was foiled when Mingxia gingerly tipped her head backwards to wash her hair from the upside-down view she had of the girl's set up behind her and the thief grabbed for the sides of her tub reflexively.

"Mingxia. I am not comfortable with this." Hissed out the Storm-Cloud, which did at least stop the hands on her dead for a moment.

"Five minutes, Miss Sonya." The girl promised her a bit apologetically, picking up a bucket the older woman only barely shut her eyes in time to prevent the water within from splashing into. "Then it'll be over with."

Something rough and a bit abrasive was scrubbed over nearly every inch of exposed skin, from between her toes all the way up to mid-thigh where the water was and from fingertip to shoulder. No matter how much she twitched or lightly tugged away, because it was likely some of them were just purely human meaning Cloud Flame strength might harm one or two.

Squinting her eyes open to irritably glare up at the girl scrubbing something into her hair, Mingxia froze with wide-eyes and spoke something sharpish into the air over the Russian.

The touching stopped suddenly. Again.

Sonya took in a deep breath, guessing that her eye coloring probably wasn't her normal grey right now from the reaction. "Slowly, girl. I'm not used to this, and currently I'm highly uncomfortable."

She wasn't sure how much crowding she could stand but knew this wasn't helping at least.

"…right, sorry." Likely repeating her command in another dialect the others could understand more, the rather brave little girl went back to scrubbing her blond hair.

Slowly as she had asked.

She couldn't help the rather violent twitch when one of the other women took up her left leg again, but that was more pain than just being touched in general. Things went a lot more slowly from that point on, at least.

In a desperate attempt to distract herself, the Russian took mental stock of the rest of her body instead of just feel others touching her.

The 'spars' she had with Fong weren't exactly what most would think of as spars, a civilized testing of similar martial art styles shown to take forever in those kung-fu movies yet to be popularized in the West. It was a lot quicker and dirtier than that, and she still ached in places even after being given a once-over and healed by a decently practiced Sun using healer.

The Chinese Storm's fighting style was built around brutal takedowns and debilitating strikes, aiming to disable or cripple an opponent well before a retaliation was mounted. Past that first polished exchange, he was a lot more reactionary than the aggressor as he meshed multiple martial arts styles into a slightly disjointed but still fluid whole on the fly.

Sonya's was merely brute strength and inhuman speed with little skill, less precise but then again she didn't need to be in order to cripple her opponents. She wasn't really all that wedded to the idea of
murdering the man, which limited her responses to a more 'human' realistic levels even if it handicapped her in the bouts. Or at least she tried, but he didn't hold the times she hit too hard or moved too fast against her.

They weren't exactly well matched, Fong's overwhelming skill meant he dealt out more damage even if the Russian seemed more flexible than he was and able to alter the surroundings to suit her own purposes to take him by surprise.

What it was in summary was a violently moving seesaw of experience and ideas given form.

Neither of them could 'win' at the spars really, as whoever was not as badly injured didn't consider her holding back in order to not instantly squish the entire building nor would the last one standing be fair to the only one of them that relied on pure human-limits of stamina.

The Storm learned quickly, never falling for the same exact trick twice… or it would seem so if it wasn't for that one thing it seemed he couldn't help but doing every damn time he was blindsided. In every fight Sonya got better at trying to hit him by surprise, gaining the lacking experience she had been missing up to this point in leaps and bounds with someone to play target for her. Again, expect for that one tell he had she took advantage of when she was lagging too far in the bout.

Experience vs creativity, inhuman force against human limits, the environment vs the martial artist. What kind of spar they had relied on what they were personally aiming to do or experiment in.

As it was, with a dedicated and prepared Sun standing by, she was pretty sure the two of them could happily go an entire week just trying to murder each other and fail to do more than disable a limb or two per bout. More for her than him, but then again… she had a 'cheat' of her brother's she was trying to work out.

Hence why her left leg hurt, especially as it was hanging over the lip of a wooden washtub and had the rest of her leg's weight pulling on it. She wasn't sure if it was the tibia or the fibula, but it hurt when so much as jarred wrong above even the low-level throb it had died down too after a few hours.

It was probably a good thing Fong called a halt when he did, she really had only half an idea of what she was doing with it. Maybe taking things slowly, and not stressing it out if she didn't have to, would be the smart thing to do.

Huang the Sun had dutifully examined it when Fong insisted, but informed them he found nothing wrong aside what felt like an 'old break'. Now the Storm was all sorts of suspicious and had waved off any further fighting right after lunch to arrange things, so she could meet the martial arts master he had in mind for her other favor.

Cherep had said the pain was a sign of his ability working, but Sonya wasn't actually sure how long she could go with a nearly blindingly painful throb in every other step. It was helping her keep her temper, oddly. Pain was very attention grabbing.

She had a few days before the start of the tournament thing where she had to be fit enough to defend herself just in case. She'd decide closer to that time if she could keep it up or not.

A few more aches were being none-too-gently prodded, bruises she had ignored and didn't ask to be healed from or scraps she hadn't realized she had at the time. A few of her old childhood scars were being stroked with soapy hot washcloths in hopes of scrubbing them away, which elected a very odd sensation and she focused on numbering them instead of giving into the anxiety laced panic attack trying to build.
One did not escape working with sometimes exploding weaponry without the marks to show for it, a lot of the few scars she had happened from working in Aleksandr's basement trying to replicate her initial Cloud Flame trick without knowing what she was doing.

It wasn't just her arms peppered with tiny white lines, there were scars from shrapnel of badly abused concrete floors imploding from the force applied to them on both legs.

Aside her childhood scars, there was one just over her tattooed shoulder from a near-missed gunshot during one of the rare times she was present on Mafia Land for the invasion events. A raised bumpy scar over her right hip, which was caused taking a tumble learning to walk a high-wire for her brother and grinding a braided wire rope into her hip hard enough to remove a strip of flesh before falling to the safety net that had been set up beneath it.

Her right hand held a few oddly shaped scars from when she shattered it by destroying a floor for Tatiana's gang, which ached when it rained every now and again and tended to stiffen a little after some plane rides. A number of tiny old nicks from learning to juggle weaponry under Faris littered both palms and randomly cut across some of those older scars on her arms, not to mention the oddly distorted divot of flesh in her palm that resulted from testing sapphires with Galina and Dmitriy.

"…Miss Sonya?"

"Are you done yet?" Asked the thief a bit desperately, pretty sure the answer would be negative from the feeling of something grinding lightly against her nails.

Both toe and fingernails. Probably nail files, meaning she was getting a mani- and pedicure.

"Another minute. Will you need a moment for yourself before the fittings?"

"That is likely."

Never, never the fuck again. Sonya didn't care if someone was supposed to be the world's greatest masseuse or whatever, she was never letting anyone else 'bathe' her or touch her unless she knew them better than she did her own damn siblings.

Fuck this bullshit.

Nails scraped against her scalp, causing a near full-body shudder of unease. The fingers retreated quickly, then lukewarm water was poured over the soapy strands slowly.

The moment her right hand was released she yanked it back and glared at the manicure she now had. Her left side limbs were released nearly at the same time, her right foot took another few moments.

Mingxia finished with her hair a bit later than even that and spoke some words to the other women while the thief tried to re-center herself without slamming a fist down on her technically broken but not leg to help that along.

By the time the Storm-Cloud could risk cracking her eyes open without the desire to throw something hard at whoever she spotted first, only the younger girl was left in the room with her.

"Umm... are you alright?"

"…no." Cupping her hands in front of her face, Sonya inspected the slightly lavender tint cast on her skin even in a more or less brightly lit room. With a sigh, Sonya dropped her hands back into the water and slouched in hopes of taking the pressure off her left leg enough to stop the throb in it. "It will be a while until I am."
"Do you need help?" A tiny tanned hand was lit with wavering blue Flames, a Rain's Tranquility flooding the room.

First, she merely narrowed her eyes and resisted the tug on her rolling emotions.

As much as she had been looking for a Rain, giving Fong's little sister some hold on her mentality wasn't something she was prepared to do. A few days did not give her a full understanding of everything that made up Mingxia's personality, nor if she really wanted to take risks with her.

She was a little surprised the girl hadn't picked a fight with her upon meeting. Which probably meant that thing with the Four Rains had been entirely on their own terms and not due to a 'predisposition'.

While interesting… it didn't really help her much.

Causing herself pain, leaving to pick a fight with Fong again, or giving in and letting the little Rain-girl manage her were her options.

Sonya was not doing this again, so leaving to pick a fight with the girl's brother would mean she'd have to redo the bath thing again and that was out. More pain was just masochistic and not really a habit she wanted to cultivate.

Either try to wait it out, or Tranquility.

"…Mingxia, I don't wish to slight your rather useful skills or anything… but… I think I just need a moment alone." Suggested the thief after a moment of struggle with her absent long-term aims and current sensibilities. "Maybe some tea instead?"

Thankfully not taking it badly, or at least doing it with a smile which meant she had a fantastic poker face, the younger girl nodded. "Anything to eat to go with that?"

"…I don't know. Use your judgement. But," gesturing to the pile of her things when the Rain looked expectant, "can you hand me my pipe before you go?"

Taking the surprisingly solid thing after Mingxia pulled it out of a pocket, Sonya tamped down the tobacco she had loaded the bowl with in perpetration of this fiasco and lit it with a press of a thumb now with the nail painted bright red.

Puffing on it quickly and frequently first to ensure the ember caught, she took a longer draw once the brass bowl became uncomfortably hot under her fingers.

Blowing out the smoke from her lungs in a hazy cloud, the Russian hunched into the warm water and felt just miserable and strangely a bit violated.

If she couldn't stand to let some strange women touch her, nor found other women particularly attractive if she bothered looking at them, then it wasn't looking good for the possibly lesbian wonder she held. As she didn't look at men and bother with how 'hot' they were, and rarely felt comfortable with them from the short periods she had partnering a few in a bare handful of Balls or just on the street being cat-called.

Where did that leave her?

…well, no. Wait.

She didn't mind Cherep or Tatiana, nor Valera, putting their hands on her. Just if they were squishing her or pinning her in place. She didn't mind Renato touching her or the whole 'holding a hip' thing he
had started up. Dancing with Tyr wasn't bad, and that was even more 'rare'. Shamal had stopped triggering that weird-ass flinch thing that happened when someone touched her stomach.

Maybe she should try a friend first and see if that countered the violent dislike of touch thing she had.

Not Renato, for as much as she was pretty sure he knew the whole routine very well and could guide her through it damn well… he didn't exactly 'do' exes.

Not even on Mafia Land, where she would put good money on the possibility he had slept with at least a good third of the single women on the island, did he really bother keeping up with them aside names and appearances. Occasionally maybe another one-night stand here or there, but in general his relationships were really shallow and temporary.

The Sun was really nice about it, not a braggart or anything that would make the entire thing off-putting according to Tatiana, but… didn't do anything longer than maybe a weekend long 'tryst'.

If Sonya could figure out what the hell was up with her sexuality, then she'd likely want more than just a night or something just for the reassurance that she really wasn't somehow broken inside. Besides which, she didn't feel like making that relationship awkward with her possibly fumbling around a relationship, especially since there was both Shamal and the future Arcobaleno thing to account for.

Fong was probably the closest 'friend' right now… but she didn't really trust him all that much just yet. The thief would trust him in a fight for damn sure, but outside it she didn't have a good grasp on his personal motivations or aims. She knew he was surprisingly attentive big brother, was a bit more stubborn than even her when he felt like it and viewed her Cloud Flame strength and speed as a challenge rather than something unfair.

…so, no. Not right now. Maybe sometime in the future, when she knew him better, maybe.

Well… what other people did she know?

Galina… was… hmm… she didn't know if the Lightning liked women or men, but that was something to investigate. Scruffy was… no, the man didn't need her own issues heaped on top of his own.

Dmitriy?

Well… she'd see when he got out of prison. His time away might've changed her old childhood friend, aside which the Rain might not be looking for a girlfriend the moment he got out of jail.

Sonya ignored the click of the window in favor of pondering if Tyr did relationships or not.

She might not like Nono Vongola, nor Ottavia, but the Sword Emperor was surprisingly inoffensive to her still. Probably her understanding of 'Varia' and what it would come to be, a bit like the CEDEF branch but focused more on assassinations of threats to the Family than policing the various branches.

Glancing over at her visitor, the Storm-Cloud studied the man awkwardly hesitating in the now open windowsill.

"Do you speak Mandarin?"

"…um, yes?" After another belated moment of flabbergasted staring, the man shuffled around so he was facing the wall and not her. "My apologies."
"What do you look for in a partner?" Sonya questioned his back, putting the pipe stem back between her teeth to worry absently. "Like a girlfriend?"

A glance backwards, which was aborted halfway through the motion and the man rigidly inspected the wooden walls instead, and another shuffle before her answer was given. "Err... I have a wife, miss. It was arranged."

"...ah." Well, that was of no help. "...who are you, anyways?"

"No one important." Was tossed over a shoulder as the man slid over to the closed door jerkily.

"So... you don't belong to the Wo Hop To Triad?"

Freezing in place, her rather rude visitor yanked a knife from somewhere on his front she hadn't caught sight of when he was coming through the window and spun on a heel. Sonya threw her tobacco pipe like a dagger through his chest hard enough to get the man to also fall back through the now shattered door and pin him slightly off the floor against the far wall of the hallway.

Mingxia awkwardly juggled the tea tray over the gasping man and into the room a few moments later, delicately stepping around the legs in her way and eyeing the damage to the doorway before giving the thief a questioning look. "Miss Sonya?"

"...he came through the window and proved unhelpful." Gesturing to the now open window, Sonya eagerly sat up to take the tea tray and serve herself when the Rain got highly distracted by the changes to the room. "I need a new pipe, I think I broke the other one... or will when I try to unpin the asshole from the wall. Either way, I don't think anyone will want to use it now."

She turned around with some wide eyes to give her a look she didn't really understand. "...would you like a towel?"

"...why?" Balancing the wooden tea tray on her knees, Sonya sat back with the freshly poured cup and sipped carefully. "I don't feel like getting up just yet."

Crammed as it was, it was still a hot bath. Her arms and legs might be getting a bit chilled, but the heat for the rest of her slightly abused body was wonderful. She just didn't like the scrubbing thing that she had to suffer through before she got the time to actually relax a bit.

"Ah... I think someone will want to figure out why he's here?" Mingxia tried a tiny bit hysterically, which did finally earn some concern from the Storm-Cloud.

"...well, he's not going anywhere until someone can pull the pipe out of his chest and or the wall. And I don't feel like it." She lived with Triad members... it couldn't be that exciting there was a break-in.

Maybe it was the growing puddle of blood?

The girl had chastised her brother for that fight her first day, and he had responded something about 'hostile invading Triad members' to excuse his actions.

"Does it bother you?"

"Miss Sonya... you're undressed."

"I am in a bath right now."
The Rain opened her mouth, shut it as she slowly turned first to the window then to her entirely unexpected and unhelpful visitor supported slightly off the floor by the broken ruins of the door, then spinning back to the Russian and yanking a towel from the pile of them set on a stool. "Miss Sonya, I must insist. One of the men will likely be here shortly to figure out what the shattering wood was all about, and you shouldn't be undressed in front of some male not your husband."

"...I don't have a husband." Observed the Russian slowly, again.

Not entirely sure what urgency the other girl had motivating her… but she wasn't doing the 'scrub' thing again. Not for anything.

Taking a sip of her tea and sinking down further into the water, she eyed the little girl suspiciously. "Why are you so insistent about the towel?"

"Does your father know you're here?" Mingxia demanded in a scandalized tone, lowering the fabric as her attention was derailed into a bewildering twist.

"...probably? He knows I do work for Mafia Land that takes me all over, and I wouldn't put it past my elder sister to be informing our mother of my movements." Then again, she also wouldn't put it past Lisa to still have connections in Mafia Land that could inform her of anything that went wrong with either Tatiana's or the thief's life.

Her foster mother had let Sonya go off and work for the island at eleven, after all. Lisa was not a stupid nor unprepared woman.

"Why are we discussing this?"

Arseniy wasn't someone she thought of when she traveled here or there, nor did she often think of what he'd approve of.

Did that make her a bad daughter?

Should she think of her foster father's opinion more?

The Rain started at her with wide, red eyes for a long moment. A huff, the towel draped over the widest part of the tub and the Russian contained within, and she left the older woman to it.

…well, that had been weird.

Transferring the tea tray to the nearby floor in order to attempt readjusting her really broken but not quite leg again, and Sonya sipped her tea again wondering if Mingxia would bring her another tobacco pipe when she came back.

A wheezing, hacking cough signified her unanticipated guest was somewhat recovering from the shock and possible concussion of her throw. The man scrabbled a hand around rather uselessly while he gasped under the likely constricted breathing space he was allowed by the admittedly long but not that long pipe stem, or so she thought since his other was clutching spastically over the pipe bowl protruding from his chest… until he pulled out yet another knife from his waistband.

He attempted a sloppy throw at her head, which was easily caught by the former knife-juggler.

Flipping it one-handed to grip the blade, she threw it back hard enough to embed it hilt-deep into the wood next to his head. Panic wide-eyes flicked from the humming hilt, to her, the ruins of the doorway he had been forced to, then the bloody splotch on his chest bubbling around the still smoldering bowl of tobacco protruding from it.
Taking a sip of her tea and frowning when she was left with barely half the cup left, Sonya caught
sight of Xiasheng stomping a heel down on a wrist before the intruder could find his other knife out
of the corner of her eye.

She looked up and watched with some amusement as the Storm bent to eye the bloody chest pinned
against the wall.

"I feel better, by the way."

"...that is good to hear, Miss Sonya." Xiasheng responded slowly, still studying the man almost on
the floor and not looking back at her. "When will you 'feel' like unpinning him?"

"Well... give it at least fifteen more minutes. The tea is rather nice."

The actual member of the Wo Hop To Triad sighed a slightly huffy sounding laugh, standing upright
only to put his back into the broken doorway. "May I ask you to make it a quick fifteen minutes? I
apologize for the imposition, but... we do need to fix the doorway now."

As he was tending to the knife wielder, she leaned over to refill her cup now that she didn't need a
hand to defend herself. "Mmm... we'll see."

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 18th of October, 1969 continued. Gang Jiao, Longgang District, Kwangtung,
People's Republic of China.)

There was something very, very wrong with what he found when he reached his former martial arts
master's former school.

Admittedly it was not the usual time one visited the home of another... but that wasn't the only issue.

Stepping delicately over the scattered ruins of a vegetable patch, Fong flicked a few suspicious
glances around the dimly lit small and normally neat yard. Shattered pottery littered the veranda of
the dojo, two of the sliding wooden doors that had once opened the building to cooling breezes in the
midst of sweltering hot summer nights were broken and left where they fell.

Dusty footprints and muddy smears were ground into the floorboards of the dojo itself and stood out
starkly in the moonlight, and there was definitely something left to rot just inside the building.

Settling his hands more firmly into the sleeves of the nondescript charcoal jacket he was wearing to
avoid attention, the martial artist waited.

For his old martial arts master, one of his other former students, or for one of the locals to pass by.
Any would give him more information, even if a few might just end up a bit bloody if what he
suspected happened had.

"Still a hot-headed and reckless fool, I see."

"Master Yaozu." Fong greeted with no small amount of relief, not turning but glancing at the elderly
man that stepped up to his side to also regard the damage to his former residence. "I am very pleased
to see you are fine."

"I am not fine." Countered the martial arts master shortly, pulling the cap he wore over his steel grey
hair low so he wouldn't have to behold what had been done to his home. "I now live like a fugitive in
my own village, 'shamed' for being a teacher on the streets and by word of mouth spread farther
than I can travel alone. I had not thought my own students would fall to this madness that has
spread over our country like a virus."

"…obviously not all of us, or I suspect you would be a bit less healthy as you are."

Yaozu gave him a sharp look from under the bill of his cap, tugging the Mao jacket he was wearing
to more conform to regulation about cuff length even if it was a bit short on him. "And now I have to
pin my hopes whatever you have not said about this offer of your 'contact' will not be too
objectionable or return here and hope I can outlive this 'Revolution' and not the goodwill of my
apparently more morally resilient students."

"From what I know, and I have looked into it as far as I can sifu with my own connections, this
contact is well accommodating to their people. You will not need to live in fear with them."

"That does not answer the question, Fêng."

"Fong. I do not wish to forget, but I do not want my past to chase my sister's heels sifu." Asked the
student instead of immediately offering the information the older man was digging for. "The contact
is in Hong Kong for the moment, I ask you meet them first before making a judgement."

Glancing at, then wincing away from, the state of his dojo… the elderly man finally nodded. "It
seems as if I am out of options. Very well, Fong. Let us see this contact of yours."

Inclining his head, Fong turned to lead the way out of the ruined yard but came up short as he
spotted movements in the shadows down the main street. "…I believe your reemergence was noted."

A tired sigh from behind him, and the elderly man stepped in the opposite direction to a more round-
about way out of the village. "I do not want my leaving to be marked with destruction or pain.
However, it has turned against me this is still my home."

…he wasn't nearly so nice, but then again he also had less attachment to this village than his elder.

Fong merely glared down the street but followed him after a moment of indecisiveness.

If Sonya did somehow get Master Yaozu to move to Russia with her, then there would be nothing
preventing the Storm from returning and dealing out a few reminders of how one should treat their
elders as well as how to respect another's home.

He just had to wait until after the martial arts tournament to finish first. If he survived it.

Maybe his old master wouldn't mind helping him figure out why Sonya kept breaking his left arm
with concerning regularity. Once he was… eased past the revelation of Dying Will Flame user and
the fact said contact was a tiny Russian lady.

(Sunday the 19th of October, 1969. A warehouse, Saint-Nazaire, Loire-Atlantique, French
Republic.)

Adrik handed his friend an unloaded pistol of a make they didn't have 'in-stock' just yet. "Are you
really sure you're okay with this?"

"No." Verde informed him dryly as he stripped it down to the components in a surprisingly efficient
set of movements. "I do not feel particularly inspired nor satisfied with my work. As of right now,
this is a means to an end which isn't mentally stimulating enough for a goldfish much less someone like I."

"Okay, point... but honestly speaking here." The Russian interjected before he was snapped at yet again, spreading his hands in the scientist's view so he'd at least recall his wit was a weapon of its own that could be quite cutting every now and again. "These things move at their own pace. There's what? A week less than half a year left? Verde my man, exploring some of your other options might stave off a burn-out."

…and would actually give him more time to scope out their current 'clients' than merely being forced to rely on word of mouth for most of his understanding of who they were supplying weapons to.

Pausing in his mechanical actions, the Lightning examined the smear of burned gunpowder on his fingertips from the trigger parts. "Am I getting in over my head here, Adrik?"

"You were in over your head the moment the chem lab blew." Admitted the other man wryly, because although the other was highly intelligent that didn't mean he was entirely adaptable the way mafia members kind of had to be. "How far you go into this life is entirely up to you, so if you're not sure about something you really do need to speak up so I know."

Selecting a solvent from the rack of them slightly sloppily built over the scientist's work table, Verde squirted the liquid on his fingers and used a terribly stained rag to wipe off the carbon absently. "I mean, am I proceeding too quickly for you to keep up? I am aware you are attempting to ensure we are not ambushed with those that may have ill intentions."

"Ah... well... that too."

Instead of then applying his solvents to the guts of the gun he had been given, the Lightning turned to him and inspected him from behind those coke-bottle glasses that doubled as magnifying glasses when he was working on removing identifying manufacturer stamps on their pieces. "Do we now move again?"

"As far as I know, it's not that bad. It's known you're somewhere around here, and that I come to town in order to hand off packages. We do a few additional things, and you won't have to give up this place." Adrik informed the other, waving a hand at the tiny corner of an ill-inspected warehouse he had re-appropriated for their own use.

The equipment and chemicals that reeked to high heaven were left here overnight, they retreated to a surprisingly modern little apartment on the edges of town for actual living in-between orders. Of course, that didn't mean a highly bitter and sometimes tangy reek didn't come from Verde now and again when he got into the more powerful acids... but then Adrik could tell the other man to take a damn shower.

No matter how hard the scientist worked at it, there was no way to hurry a reputation. Well... no way to earn a good one quickly. You could easily gain a bad one, but then no one would...

"I have an idea."

Verde grunted absently, having turned back to his work in a moment when the other was distracted by his own thoughts.

"We could make you undesirable to the local syndicates."

Blinking green bug-eyes at him through those entirely stupid looking glasses, the scientist frowned at him suspiciously over a shoulder. "How?"
"Being reckless." Adrik explained slowly, trying to run the entire suggestion through his head a few times trying to figure out the part that made it too good to be true. "If we take a few of the lesser hits and only just skate by the skin of our teeth, no one will want you for any other reason than your manufacturing skills."

"...would that then make it a 'good idea' for someone to risk Sonya's eventual retaliation for your murder to get me off the streets and safely barred in some underground workshop? Furthermore, can 'skate by the skin of our teeth' be done without really being skilled enough to judge what will or will not work?"

"...oh yeah." There it was. "Damn. Well, there goes that idea."

The Frenchman sighed again, returning his attention to the gun parts spread out before him. "Adrik, I appreciate your aid. Greatly, more than I can adequately express. However, my haste is... part of something else. If it has become an issue, I will merely start replication instead of alterations to give you more leeway in your aims."

Taking a seat on a slightly miss-stacked crate which made a little bench for him when he visited, the Russian cocked his head at the other man's back even if it wouldn't be seen. "Alright... so can I know what this is all about?"

"...I have been allowed to vacillate between subjects my entire life, Adrik." Verde began absently, his tone falling into a kind of drone instead of his rather bland but still lively usual tone used when his attention wasn't split. "From an early age, when it became apparent I was smarter than the average child, I was allowed to study ahead in classrooms. I was taken out of public schooling in favor of tutors once I outstripped the teaching experiences provided by such establishments, and said tutors saw no reason not to allow my wandering attention to dictate what was instructed for the amount they were paid."

The story was not a short one, and the security specialist was somewhat sure the other was just rambling on without much attention paid to what he was saying for about half of it. In the spill of miscellaneous information contained the few facts relevant that actually required one to not nod off mid-way through.

Verde was rewarded for switching subjects of study by his tutors, as they were paid depending on how much time was spent teaching him. That continued up through the accidental death of his parents and his emancipation as a fresh-faced but fully educated fifteen-year-old that argued his way through a court case and out of foster care or requiring to be adopted by those that might want his inheritance and not his well-being.

That habit had spread to even his college education, where switching fields of study meant the scientist was allowed the information and equipment that went along with it with almost an overabundance of new things to investigate or explore.

The near-decade worth of college education had been spent at the whims of the Lightning's brilliant mind and wandering attention span.

"So... you're doing this speed thing because you want to..."

Verde sighed heavily, blindly groping for a water bottle left somewhere near his chair as acid bubbled away on the serial number of the gun's butt. "I wish to establish some sense of dedication in myself and my work. Frequent changes will give me a broad experience base to draw from... but little beyond that mere awareness. Whereas continuing with this for at least two months will..."
Frowning, the scientist fell silent and visibly pondered the possibilities.

"Will reassure yourself that you're not entirely a spoiled rich boy out of your depths?" Adrik finished for him with a laugh. "Okay, whatever you want."

Another bug-eyed glare was tossed over a shoulder as the man took a gulp of his water. "That is what you decide to take away from that?"

"Well… I could also-

"On second thought, I do not think I would like to know what else you could take out of that." Verde interrupted flatly before anything could be stated.

"I won't tease you too much." Adrik reassured him, grinning broadly. "Just… man, should've guessed. What else could let you switch majors as frequently as you did?"

"I informed you I had an inheritance."

"Well… yeah. But that doesn't include 'tutors'. I bet there was also a big manor house and maids involved with that. Did you have a butler too?"

Carefully tapping a small amount of the neutralizer, which the Russian swore smelled worse than the acid itself, onto the bubbling liquid already at work on the butt of the gun, the scientist quickly lowered a kind of hood-thing over the entire table and flipped on a jury-rigged fan hood to suck the previously described 'hazardous gases' out away from them.

Even still, the Frenchman retreated to the crates blocking the view of their setup from the front of the building. "Exactly how long will I continually be hearing about this?"

"A long while, Verde my man."

Taking the thick-lenses from his face and slipping back on his normal pair, the Lightning gave him a measured look. "…I suppose that means you do intend to remain in contact at least."

"Was that in question?" Adrik questioned in confusion, giving the other man a strange look. "You think I'd go through this much effort for just anyone?"

"As far as I would be aware, yes. It has already become apparent Dying Will Flame users are afforded more leeway and benefits than the regular criminal ranks."

Putting his hands on both of the other man's shoulder, the Russian ensured he caught his eyes. "Verde. My man. Suffer. You're stuck with me."

There was a suspicious searching look first, then a soft hum, and finally a nod. "I see. I chose to suffer gladly. Even if you will call me a 'spoiled rich boy' again."

"Well… you are." With a shrug, Adrik glanced at the humming machinery then jerked a thumb the way he had come in. "Come on, let's let your voodoo work."

"It's not voodoo, it's chemistry."

"Whatever. Food. Breakfast. Things to eat. I noticed you didn't eat anything last night when you came out here. So that also means a shower and sleep, man. Before you keel over."

Verde rolled his eyes at him but was at least smirking with good humor as they left the large and mostly empty building.
(Monday the 20th of October, 1969. Wo Hop To Triad's Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Sonya smoothed a hand down the rather simple if still overly colorful silk dress, which was an interesting long tunic-thing she was wearing over a pair of silk pants as she got herself some space.

In the additional 'thumb their nose' at the government this tournament thing didn't quite cover for the participants' desire for rebellion, and in respects to the fact fashions haven't really advanced all that much with the unrest the civilian and government ranks were in, everyone attending the Triads' little arrangements were reaching far back into history for what to wear to the first night's affair.

Meaning they had to dress up in ancient Chinese court fashions. At least she wouldn't be the only one suffering old stuffy outfits. Theoretically speaking, anyways.

This was surprisingly not too bad, compared to the other things she could've worn. She and Mingxia had been able to paw through the entirely of what was available, and even set things aside for a few others.

Fong's usual bright red changshan and pants set would be replaced with an equally red but also black hanfu. Sort of a wraparound long-sleeved jacket thing paired with, funnily enough, a skirt or a set of pants. She wasn't sure if he'd be fighting in that or if it was just for whatever passed as the opening ceremonies, but it would be something to see.

The thief was getting stuck with an áo dài. Technically Vietnamese, partially picked in respects to the fact she wasn't Chinese but mainly due to the fact she was a fair bit bulkier than most of the clothing in storage within the Wo Hop To Triad headquarters’ attic was comfortably made for. It was the only thing that almost fit and, with Mingxia's help, the first one was altered to not constrict the Storm-Cloud around the shoulders too badly to see if altering the rest was worth it.

Hilariously enough, the first one she was trying out to ensure she could move in it as she wanted was a bright, lilac purple worn over a pair of seafoam green pants.

The little Rain girl was pretending to ignore her amused smirk as she settled on the veranda with what would probably be their breakfast. A tray holding both a pot of likely green tea and another basket of those steam buns the Chinese girl's brother seemed to prefer.

Summoning three of her Bec de Corbins to hand from the single miniature taken from the hidden inner pocket of her purse, the Russian planted two of them into the rather battered turf facing the same direction. Placing the third lengthwise across the small catch between the haft and the hammer face gave her a rather interesting looking pull-up bar affair.

Then she considered the colorful panels of the dress that hung past her knees.

The 'upper' half of the outfit was kind of jacket-like and all in one solid light color, tight long sleeves and a rounded high color she really didn't mind all that much. It sort of 'ended' being a jacket around her waist, as that was where the front and back panels separated to allow for full movement of the legs.

The 'skirt', or really two flaps of fabric masquerading as such, were an embroidered flowery riot of colors that occasionally moved to the side in order to expose the light green pants that probably went
with this jacket-thing. There were no other green-shaded tunic tops or even more with a full garden embroidered into it, so that was what they were guessing.

A pair of soft-soled cloth shoes, which she was nixing to hell and back again the moment this 'tryout' was done, and socks completed the whole affair. Being able to feel the odd stone underfoot was just strange after years of having at least an inch of rubber between her and the ground.

Sonya hopped the distance needed to grip the handle of the sideways Bec de Corbin, swinging a few times experimentally to be sure the mocked-up set up of a horizontal bar wouldn't fall over. Folding herself in half on a backswing, the thief balanced her silk-clad thighs on top of the tungsten bar and pulled herself upright on top of the whole assembly.

Pausing, she eyed the courtyard fencing to ensure her assembly of weapons wasn't tall enough to allow someone on the streets to spot her form. Assured she wasn't risking anything, she tipped forward while hooking both ankles around their respective posts.

Now upside-down, the Russian inspected the split in the outfit over her hips. Or under, with her current perspective. No splitting seams even with the tugging the exercises she was doing, so she supposed it would do as something to wear.

Her sleeves, on the other hand, were too short. They were pulling at her forearm rather than her wrists now.

That wasn't alterable with a few lengths of silk string and an hour's worth of stitching.

In order to 'fix' the cuff issue, they would have to rip the seams. Either just the cuffs, to add a strip of 'bordering' to artificially extend the length, or all the way to the shoulders to remove the sleeves entirely.

Sonya had only a minor amount of skill in sewing, she could do seams and making some roughly right-shaped clothing on her own as long as there were templates. Taking in a seam to tighten something or picking apart a previously altered one to loosen it was simple enough.

If there would be any major alterations done, it wouldn't be by her.

…that might mean she would be forced to suffer through 'fittings' to change the fit.

Sliding her legs off the mocked-up horizontal bar, the thief allowed herself to lightly fall back onto her feet and let go of her Cloud Flame copies. Ignoring the throb in her left leg she carefully measured her steps backwards, so the limp wouldn't be obvious.

"Are you happy with the fit, Miss Sonya?"

Eying the inch of naked wrist as she tugged the smooth cloth to cover as much as it would, she shrugged as she lightly stepped over to the girl. "Sure. Something like that."

Mingxia poured her a cup of green tea, which she was starting to get a little sick of but didn't say so as she took it. "Is there a problem?"

About half an inch of her wrist were exposed and pulled the skin a bit awkwardly for a woman used to longer sleeves. "…not really."

She'd just keep her hands down, unless it was needed. Problem solved.

Sonya gingerly settled herself on the other side of the girl and next to one of the posts holding a slight
sloping roof over the wooden planking that bordered the main building.

Jeans and woolen slacks weren't things she got nervous over dirtying, but silk and avoiding that scrub-thing again made keeping the green and purple embroidered cloth out of the dirt something she was keen on.

If she wasn't so obsessive over keeping this costume clean the silk outfit would be really comfortable in the already warm morning. Long sleeved it might be, but it breathed a lot more than the wool and heavier cotton she normally dressed in to ward off the cold.

The only other quibble she had was how tight the sleeves were. She couldn't wear her bracer of chains with her weapons on it with this on, it wasn't snug enough to show muscle definition but it would make anything underneath a bit obvious.

Mingxia left her spot in a blur of black cloth, darting over the admittedly ragged grass of the courtyard to greet her newly returned brother. Sonya inspected the martial artist's oddly subdued attire compared to his normal bright red as he pulled the cap hiding his coiled braid off, then slid her eyes over to the older man equally as mutely dressed that joined the Storm in the courtyard curiously.

The Rain had brought out more teacups than what the two of them would need, so instead of get up and risk dirt in the silk the Storm-Cloud poured more tea.

Eventually, she would steal out of here one night and find some black tea. Somewhere.

…and she'd put a call to Björn to bring her some. Actually, she was pretty sure she forgot to bring a gift for the man hosting her.

Fong's poor Triad head had put up with her destroying a fair amount of property so far, she should probably ask her Lackey to bring something to make up for a bit of the imposition. If she was going to the effort to be non-descript while she visited, at least in the civilian sense, then maybe she should also get the Icelander to bring something for that old knitting lady that agreed to teach her instead of asking to go shopping in Hong Kong.

She'd done so her first day, dodging around Liqin. It wasn't all that interesting, a lot of what was available to buy wasn't beyond the basics of life and maybe a handful of odds and ends wares only notable because it was made in China. There was probably more, but she would need more than a few hours to find it.

Fong settled the elderly man he brought back in his little sister's former spot while he listened to her rapid chatter, and the thief offered a full cup to the elderly gentleman. As it was in Cantonese Sonya didn't know exactly what was being said, but by the gestures and the raised eyebrows in her direction she could guess.

The silver-haired old man, with rather exhausted looking features and a bit dusty from travel, snapped something sharp at the girl. The Storm replied calmly, earning himself a sharp look of his own, seating himself on the ground off the lip of the veranda. Mingxia rounded everyone to take the spot that left her back against a wooden wall and facing her brother across the tea tray.

Sonya was suddenly the center of attention without quite knowing why. "…what?"

"May I be allowed to impose on your teaching abilities?" Inquired Fong evenly in a language she did understand, picking up the cup of tea his little sister poured for him with a thankful and slightly tired smile. "Sifu Yaozu isn't in the know."

Sipping her own tea, she flicked her eyes from the old man to the not-so-ancient one. "Does he even
Flicking red eyes to his latest guest and then back to her, the martial artist quirked a wry smile for her. "He was the one to teach Mingxia and I to speak it, so I would assume so."

"Okay... then why?" If the old man was a Flame user, and yet didn't know about the phenomena, she'd eat her boots.

The old man narrowed his eyes on her.

*Feisty*, thought Sonya in amusement.

If Fong was asking her to teach the elder about Flames, then he didn't know what a 'Cloud' was nor did he hold the automatic flinch from them a lot of other users tended to have. Depressingly, that would likely change quickly if the Storm had a good enough reason.

"...sifu may not have the option to return to his village for a long while." Explained the Storm slowly, turning his teacup around idly. "As I cannot see him back, I believe he might be interested in attending the tournament as a spectator while things are... arranged. Either with you or something around here."

"Are you asking me to inform him on a whim?" Questioned the Russian skeptically, pretty sure she was missing something because that sounded just *stupid*.

One did not risk *Omertà* as lightly as this, and Fong wasn't a stupid or reckless man. Or at least she thought he hadn't been.

If the old man didn't take it well, they'd have to kill him. *She'd* have to kill him, by Vindice laws. While dodging the requirement of murdering someone he knew through a technicality was a possible motive, not one she would've expected from him.

Of course, old and feisty wasn't a stupid man himself. Obviously long since cottoned on to the fact whatever they weren't talking about would be interesting or risky, he cradled his tea in both hands and narrowly inspected both speakers instead of speaking up himself.

"Not a whim, no. Sifu was the teacher I was under just before I... ah... figured out what I can do." Fong temporized easily enough, either not taking offense to the questioning or hiding it pretty damn well. "There were things I could not tell him, and a few incidents I could not explain. Now that he is as much a fugitive as we are ourselves..."

"The difference is he might be able to return to that life. We can't, or at least not without complications." Sonya countered a bit flatly, flicking her own gaze to the subject in question waiting out their conversation of him rather patiently. "Old as he may be, do you really want to gamble on him taking it well and upholding our laws no matter what happens in the short or far future?"

'Sifu' Yaozu cocked an eyebrow at her in return for her look. "You have laws? I had believed criminal types like you all flouted them, not upheld them."

...feisty wasn't entirely covering it, then.

The Triad Storm gave her a slightly wan smile over the rim of his teacup. "Do you believe we can keep it from him? While that may be possible here normally, between you and I?"

"There's only... what? Two days until I go in as your token hostage? I can behave myself that long." Between her not really but kind of broken leg, and maybe some really antisocial behavior, she could
maybe managed another twenty-four hours of doing near nothing. "It isn't required, Fong."

"Miss Sonya… there is what happened yesterday." Mingxia piped up hesitantly, taking a quick sip of her tea when attention was aimed at her. "That may repeat, so ensuring there won't be a bad reaction when and if it happens later is… just wise."

"What happened yesterday?"

"…a break-in." Explained the Storm-Cloud concisely with a one-shoulder shrug.

"You might want to talk to Xiasheng about that, big brother."

"…was he there for a reason or something?" She inquired a bit curiously. "He didn't say anything too interesting to me."

The younger Sōng sibling blinked up at her innocently. "I wouldn't know, Miss Sonya. My brother is the only one who would be able to find out if no one has said something to you yet."

"…I will see about it shortly. Returning to the subject," Fong allowed his little sister to top off his teacup before glancing at the Russian expectantly, "aside my own wishes there is the consideration of your own setup in Moscow. Can you keep it from him there?"

"I had intended to as you said he wasn't in the know."

"Are you done discussing me?"

Sonya eyed the old man, taking a long draw from her lukewarm tea first. "…sleep on it. Take the day, recover from your trip and settle somewhat from whatever will prevent you from returning. If I tell you, you will not be able to escape us even if the three of us let you. There are things that frighten and intimidate us, that enforce the laws I previously mentioned. If, when you wake tomorrow or sometime in the coming day, you decide you want to know without being egged on by this or whatever else Fong might say… I will inform you."

To his credit, he visibly pondered her words and didn't insist to know what they were hinting around. "The girl is involved."

"We don't have a choice in that, like Fong and I she is included as a matter of fact by circumstances. It was our choice to be… more involved than she is." Mingxia was a Rain, she was probably automatically on the same level as Cherep was. A user who knew enough to keep her use to herself, and therefore likely away from unwanted attentions. Not beholden to Omertà, but still subject to Vindice Laws. "But your situation and hers differs due to ability. She has it, you don't. It's likely that will never be an issue for you."

"Explain."

Snorting softly and wondering if he'd continue demanding things from her when he knew, she lifted a shoulder in an absent shrug. "The eldest I know of that has achieved it, either through accident or intent, are all in their late to early thirties. While the possibility that you might learn to use it is unknown enough I will attempt to help you if you want, the likelihood is remote as far as I know. Part of the issue might be the fact the older one is the more set in their beliefs they are, or the components of the ability are too rigid later in life to be adapted as needed."

Thick, oddly flattened fingers smoothed over a rough amount of stubble as the older man puzzled over her words.
Fong set down his teacup, giving his little sister a smile of thanks but a shake of the head when she lifted the still half-full pot to inquire if he needed a refill. "I will show you to a room, sifu. I don't believe either of them have anything too pressing to do today."

"Sewing." Sonya deadpanned flatly, again giving the exposed wrists she was suffering an ugly look. "We have your outfit picked out, you'll need to try it on and tell us if it needs tailoring as well."

"Oh! I didn't notice... we can fix that, Miss Sonya." Setting the cast-iron pot down, the Rain almost took her wrist but pulled short at the last moment. She then tilted her head to the side, taking in the actual silk clad limbs and pulling a slight face. "...or really, we can shorten it, so it is less obvious."

"If we can't figure something out, I can just keep my arms down instead." The Storm-Cloud was actually rather on the tall side for a woman in these parts, likely stemming from a recent past-history of famine and internal strife.

Equally so, she was also a bit bulkier with muscle than it was possible to sustain with the food available in this corner of the world without criminal help.

At least, by with what was available to the civilians. Which, of course, didn't entirely mean their criminal ranks were subjected to the same.

A clink sounded as their elderly guest set down his own cup and accepted the Chinese Storm's arm to help him to his feet. The steel-haired old man gave the females a sharp nod in farewell, then followed the long-haired martial artist into the building.

Sonya was distracted by a tiny tug on her sleeve, as the Rain examined the seams of the cloth covering her arms. "We could shorten it to about mid-way up your forearm... or remove the sleeves entirely."

"Think we can find a similarly colored bolt of silk as the pants? I would prefer longer sleeves, myself. So, an undershirt maybe?"

"That would be a little hard, but I can try." Mingxia offered slowly, inspecting the shoulder seams they had let out in order to make it fit her and not some likely deceased former owner. "...maybe there is something else in the attic we can adapt."

"I can go sleeveless instead if need be." She countered reasonably after a pause. Because rethinking it, removing the sleeves and instead having pale green sleeves might give that ill-cast to her skin she wanted to avoid.

The Rain was young yet, she could panic and get flustered when incidents overwhelmed her limited pool of internal Tranquility. She didn't want the girl to stress herself out trying to find something she'd be more comfortable with if something else would work just as easily, especially if her suggestion might not work well.

Her reward was a sweet smile from the younger girl. "I will keep that in mind. But... either way, we need to remove the stitches in this."

Therefore, she had to get out of it, right. "Go ask your brother if he wants to take breakfast with us before we get to work or what. I'll handle the tea tray before I change."

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 20th of October, 1969 continued. Wo Hop To Triad's Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)
"Why don't you explain this 'unsaid' thing to me?"

"...I am unsuited to teaching. The possibility I will handle it wrongly is high." Fong admitted wryly, wrapping the over robe around himself and belting it close with another length of black silk. "I may still be a bit 'hothead', as you called me."

He could easily see why his sister and Sonya were currently trying out the outfit they had picked for the Russian, his own borrowed formalwear was a touch tight around the upper chest. Not badly, it wouldn't affect anything but his comfort, but each breath would probably pull at the seams.

His sleeves were rather voluminous, probably picked by Mingxia since she knew he rather liked to store small things or fold his arms into them.

Yaozu snorted at him when he presented himself to his elder. "You have the collar too tight. It should be lower. The end of the wider collar strip should be mid-chest."

…well, that would explain why he thought the garment was too tight. Undoing the belt and loosening the cloth reduced the pull… but maybe a bit too much.

"The waist needs to be taken in." Observed the martial arts master dryly, the only one in the building that knew how the outfit picked for him should look when worn correctly. "You are more fit than whoever wore it last."

"Then I should find Mingxia. Will you join me?"

The elderly man didn't budge from the chair he had claimed once they had woken properly.

Having traveled overnight meant they were far outside the village Fong had retrieved him from in a short amount of time, but that they both got little sleep on the various train lines taken to get back to Hong Kong without leaving an obvious trail for the Red Guard to follow. A few intermittent spots of cart smuggling, that he was glad he had pre-arranged on the possibility Master Yaozu would attend a meeting with a possible patron with him, ensured they did at least have a few solid days if not a week or so of time before it would be possible anyone would be able to track the elder man.

Any more would be risky, so Fong had a week of time to find his former teacher either a hiding spot or to get him out of China.

While not infringing on the elder's utter dislike of criminal elements.

Withholding the sigh, he regarded the martial arts master evenly. "You should at least meet more with Sonya, as she was the one to offer to move you and supply non-criminal students to teach."

"A woman." Master Yaozu remarked evenly, not showing what he really thought about it but more just stating the Russian's gender rather strongly. "A surprisingly patient woman, with a level head."

"If you can convince her that you are settle enough to take it well and not risk us, I could show you why she commands respect." Fong offered temptingly.

Sonya didn't seem to have a 'careful' fighting style, there was a 'gentle' style that took her a touch too long to respond to a strike but would reduce the amount of damage she dealt out. Xiasheng had described the differences between his spar with the Storm-Cloud and what Fong received, and the only reason why he didn't get entirely flattened in his own bout was she allowed him to start and merely responded instead of being the aggressor.

He preferred the more active bouts with the woman, himself. They were more interesting to try
fighting against.

However, he couldn't show his former teacher any of that without inducting him into the umbrella of the Vindice Laws at the least. Without a more restrained fighting style of the Cloud's side, they couldn't hide the Flame use and just impress a more than average fighter on the thief's end.

Leaving either relying on Sonya's diplomatic efforts, which in light of her scholarly pursuits probably was better than anyone just off the street, or the old man's own sense of self-preservation.

The same man who remained in his school for martial arts well after the subject was outlawed and his picked role in life discriminated against in broad daylight.

"I will make the decision tomorrow." Master Yazou responded repressively. "As asked. I will meditate instead of socialize and seek to understand my own feelings on what has happened the last few years."

That would also allow him to refrain from rubbing elbows with less than legally obedient residents went unstated but still understood. "I will bring you a tray for dinner, then."

Fong did seriously wonder if the martial arts master really didn't know what he felt about his village turning against him, or that a few of his students had joined his detractors. As both were probably things the elderly man had precious little time or the luxury to honestly ponder without the worry of being caught or risking whoever it was that gave him sanctuary, he wouldn't try to insist the elder not spend an entire day within the same four walls.

Taking his leave instead of trying more dialogue with the elderly man, the Storm started his search for both his first guest and his little sister.

Which… Mingxia was capitalizing a little on the fact she was a Rain and the Russian a Storm-Cloud. Taking leave from the 'lessons' she attended in more usual days, she instead had been granted leave to tail around the thief in aims of preventing another small-scale meltdown of the Cloud sort.

Instead of finding her in a predictable set of rooms or on a specific schedule, he actually had to hunt through the rest of the building for where she was 'entertaining' Sonya. Not the courtyard, kitchens, nor the previous nook near the kitchens he found the thief that first day, but a third-floor room that had two walls worth of windows.

Fong had intended to say something to attract attention, but… Sonya was snipping stitches with a tiny gold ax head. Set up underneath a window in a semi-full room of other women doing various fabric related tasks, carefully and methodically slicing delicate threads with a miniaturized weapon to remove a panel of the purple silk dress she had been wearing earlier.

He knew that ax. He had seen a larger version tossed at his head fairly often the last few days.

Eventually Mingxia noticed him standing in the doorway, staring at the thief's efforts in dismay.

With a giggle, his little sister set aside her work. "Did you need something, big brother?"

"A bit of tailoring." Admitted the Storm wryly, still not looking away from the tiny weapon in the Storm-Cloud's hands. "This hangs a bit oddly from the shoulders, it was recommended to have the waist taken in."

"...it wraps around you." Sonya interjected skeptically, glancing up momentarily from her own work to study his form narrowly. "How would taking in the waist help anything?"
"Oh. Wait." The little Rain stepped around the Storm and tugged slightly around his back, smoothing down a few wrinkles he hadn't noticed. "...Miss Sonya? Can you come here?"

She glanced down at her own work before setting it aside, not getting directly upright but sliding to the side to avoid being spotted by anyone looking up at the windows from street-level.

Padding over in bare feet, the older woman rounded Fong and then hummed. "Ah. That is what 'take in the waist' meant."

Fong's long braid was tossed over his shoulder and it nearly smacked him in the face, and a few more tiny tugs pulled the fabric that lay across his back.

"...more 'take in the shoulder panel seams', really."

"That is the waist. I think we only need to adjust the bottom sleeve seams? If we take it in there..."

"We'd have to adjust the rest of it as well, otherwise the silk will look obviously pinched where we stop. That, and that only pulls this... we need to take this part in more." A significantly lighter touch pulled the back of the material under his left shoulder and some of the looser fabric across his back, pulling the lay of the fabric tighter to his form. "So... pins?"

Mingxia darted off to one of the others stitching together various pieces of both colorful and drab cloth, acquiring a number of tiny metal needles after a quiet word. Sonya poked his left arm up with a finger, lightly at first then more insistently when he didn't move as much as she wanted.

Fong hoped she knew what she was doing, otherwise there was a risk of getting stabbed deeply with a needle by a Cloud in his immediate future.

"Both arms up, brother." Asked his little sister as she circled him again, only for the thief to poke him around so his back was to the natural light coming in from the window.

Once everyone was shuffled around to the older woman's satisfaction, the fit of the wrapped jacket right under his shoulder blades was tugged and slid around until it lay better and pins were inserted in both sides so the girls would know how much to take them both in.

"There. Was there anything else?" Sonya's slightly muffled voice came from behind him, a soft ting of thin metal dropping to the floor and a Russian curse elected a small snicker from the Rain.

"Nothing I noticed, no."

A light tug to his left cuff, another to his right, and the blonde woman stepped out from behind him to return to her own work. "Then leave that here. Shoo. We're working."

Someone translated that order into Cantonese, and every other woman in the room suddenly looked up from their work with interest.

Fong smiled wryly, mostly at himself but a slight bit for the sudden feminine attention. "I think I will go change and then bring this to you."

The thief shot him a strange look as she settled herself in her previous position. "Why? You, and it, are here now. Admittedly we probably won't get to it right away... but why leave?"

"You really need to talk to Xiasheng, brother." Mingxia reminded him a bit pointedly, ignoring the giggles as their words were translated to Cantonese and repeated around.
He didn't understand what that had to do with getting an over robe fitted and the logistics of undressing in a room full of women, until one of them asked her neighbor if 'the Cloud-woman really didn't move from her bath when the assassin tried to murder her?'

…ah, not just a break-in happened while he was gone then. "If you do not need it right now, Sonya, I can investigate the fit a bit more to catch any problems."

"…be careful of the pins, then." She reminded him pointedly, putting her share of the pins the Rain had gotten her on one knee in favor of her tiny gold ax and the purple silk she had been wearing earlier that day.

Fong turned back to his little sister. "That ax…?"

Mingxia's smile turned a touch mischievous. "She has an entire collection of them, worn on the magnetic chain wrapped around her left bicep. They're very cute."

"That is a real one, then?"

"They are mostly the similar size as it."

"Not entirely," interrupted Sonya a bit tartly, slicing a few more threads and pulling the silk threads out of the seams she was pulling apart, "there are a few older ones about twice the size I sometimes use as hair sticks."

"Can you find some gold or gold plated chain, big brother? Apparently the axes can be worn as a charm bracelet, and since it looks like we have to remove the sleeves of her outfit she might need a different way to bring her weapons with her."

"I'll see what I can dig up." If he was being asked, then they had already been through what stored clothing the Wo Hop To Triad had hoarded when everyone else abandoned their finer things in favor of Mao jackets and plain coarse clothing and didn't find something that would suit.

"And thin wire I can use to attach them, if you do." Tacked on the thief absently, finishing with pulling the last few stitches from the one remaining sleeve and putting the extra pins to use folding the seam material over into cuffs to make the pale purple dress into a sleeveless one.

"Alright." Fong carefully gave his little sister a hug, without stabbing either of them with the pins now lining his sides and possibly some of his back.

Mingxia waved him off with a smile, taking her pins back to the woman she borrowed them from.

He wasn't sure what the girl would do once Sonya was occupied with being their hostage, she would likely have to go back to taking lessons from the Madame and the rest of the 'loose' women again.

It wasn't all the lessons the occasional streetwalker or courtesans had to teach were bad, sometimes they were from the wives and mothers of various other Triad members for just general education and Mingxia adored those lessons. Fong… just didn't want his little sister to consider maybe picking the streetwalker's profession up to help pay her way. Not before the 'Cultural Revolution' started, nor now when it was even more hazardous for a prostitute to safely work their trades in the streets.

If Sonya wouldn't take the young Rain on as a possible future lawyer type in a different country, he wasn't sure what else he could do for her.

Zhōng didn't need nor desire another lawyer-type, nor the risk of being the patron of one in the current political minefield in the country right now. It was more than risky to try studying something
or just even being a teacher. Sending a possible lawyer outside of the country risk losing them to whatever cultural mess was going on there, and the real possibility they didn't have the assets to support anyone or any establishing groups sent along to protect an investment.

Finding another Triad branch that could use an assistant to one of their few lawyers in hiding would be even more risky, and just be a repeat of the situation with the Wo Hop To's Triad's Mountain Master's own stance on the issue.

Although… it seemed like the Russian thief wasn't against at least hearing out his little sister's sale pitch. Fong would merely hope Mingxia earned the Russian's regard and assistance, somehow.

They seemed friendly enough, or as much as Sonya ever seemed friendly. It did seem to be the best option available to the little Rain right now.

…and didn't that make him feel more like he had failed her and their late parents?

He fought with his fists, his sister with her words. Just because he was uninterested in learning her favored form of battle didn't mean he was alright with being unable to help her study it.

What little Fong could save up from fights and jobs normally went to ensuring this place remained safe, through bribery of the local police and Red Guard officers or merely buying provisions needed to keep Mingxia fed and warm outside the basics provided to all residing here.

Sonya had people already, didn't seem to need to work end-to-end jobs to afford them, and her Lackey was both busy and healthy not to mention her own sister was studying to become a doctor on her own terms. If Mingxia earned the Storm-Cloud's patronage, he wouldn't have to worry nearly as much a misstep of his might harm her and work on building up a better reputation of his own so when she came back she would have someplace secure to practice her art.

As awkward as talking to Tatiana could be, he would much rather the Russian sisters provide role models for his little sister. They were both formidable in their own ways, and properly honorable ladies… mainly.

They did tend to have mildly embarrassing conversations occasionally… but again, better than what courtesans and prostitutes would probably talk of in front of his younger sister.

"Xiasheng. Mingxia advised I speak with you about what happened with a break-in?"

His fellow Storm smirked wryly, turning to face him with a grin as the martial artist entered the men's dorms. "Miss Sonya really does have either pure steel nerves… or she didn't care an assassin looking for her broke through a window while she was in the… ah, middle of something. She wanted to finish her tea before getting around to helping me unpin her assassin from a wall."

"Is she really pale all over?"

Liqin sighed heavily, scooping up the pair of dice from the floor and nailing the speaking in the head with both of them. "Do stop being disgusting, please. I would be more interested in knowing who was supposed to be on guard when the incident happened."

"I wouldn't know what she looks like undressed." Xiasheng informed the entire dorm flatly, returning his attention pointedly to the newspaper he had been reading. "I didn't impose on her privacy by trying to sneak glances like some undisciplined green youth."

"What was he seeking?" Fong questioned curiously, carefully peeling the wrapped garment off his
form in hopes none of the pins the women put into the seams pulled out.

"That much he was at least willing to divulge." The assassin who recently changed his name to 'Liqin' permanently answered him, taking back possession of the dice as they were returned from where they had scattered to continue the game on-going. "He was sent to kill the Cloud you brought in, preferably at night when no one would notice until far too late. Someone apparently didn't like that you found one."

"But not where he hails from?"

With a shrug, the man actually cast the dice for his roll. "That he stubbornly remained silent upon until Zhōng decided not to bother with keeping him alive any longer. You'll apparently have a better change figuring it out during the tournament."

Xiasheng glanced at his fellow Storm over the newspaper with amusement. "I would actually place money that they were jealous you brought one in yourself."

"That's not a bad assumption." Liqin interjected before anyone else could, giving a toothy smile at the real winner of their little game to have half of his coins returned to him and the other man heckled a bit for giving in to the assassin so easily. Pocketing the coins and rising to his feet in a smooth motion, he faced the pair of Storms. "As if we claimed we were bringing a Cloud, but didn't..."

"Instead he walked right into her taking a bath and ended up on the wrong end of her pipe."

Fong blinked in surprise, recalling he hadn't actually seen the Storm-Cloud with the tobacco pipe at all this day. "What?"

"Apparently her time at the circus was spent learning some... interesting skills." Xiasheng answered for the non-Flame using assassin, discarding the paper and rising from his bunk to take the pinned garment from him when he beckoned for someone to take it. "Knife-throwing for one, and with a bit of her Cloud Flame strength... she threw her lit pipe right through her assassin's chest. It was still burning when I got there."

"Ouch." The man Liqin abused with the dice spoke before Fong could, rising to join them instead of getting involved in the next round of dice. "Wouldn't the blood put the ember out?"

"Not if it's lit with Storm Flames, apparently." Liqin informed the boy, grinning. "It's still burning. We just buried it in the courtyard, and it ate away at the dirt that fell into the bowl before someone poured concrete over a scrap of wood set over it and that finally let us pack dirt on top. If you go out there, there's a spot near the corner that is still oddly warm."

Fong tried to recall exactly how long that pipe had been. "Where did we get that from?"

"One of the Mountain Master's deceased relatives. He wasn't remotely upset at what final use it was put to. Finding a replacement will be a bit harder."

"I might know where to get one." Offered the boy a bit hesitantly, sliding a bit closer to the three of them. "My father smokes."

"I do hope you're not suggesting we take your father's pipe, boy."

"No! No, but he knows where to purchase them..."

Fong spread his hands between Xiasheng and the younger man. "Peace. If you could... ah, could you introduce yourself?"
"Shao Xieren."

"Xieren, if you would ask your father to find a decently sturdy one, I will reimburse him." Offered the Storm. "Even if he refuses, ensure you convey our respects for listening."

Liqin waited for the boy to agree and dart out, slanting an amused look to the pair of Storms. "A newfound Lightning. A bit peppy, isn't he?"

"They have to start somewhere." The martial artist merely observed evenly, pulling his normal clothing on finally now that the discussion was mostly over.

Xiasheng handed back the finery that needed some tailoring with a slightly forced neutral smile. "He makes me suspicious as a matter of fact. I don't think any of us were that eager in the beginning."

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 20th of October, 1969 continued. Wo Hop To Triad's Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"Good evening, sifu." Mingxia greeted the elderly Yaozu softly, which was more than enough to rouse the man from his meditations next to a window.

"I thought Fēng was supposed to bring a tray."

"He was, but he got unavoidably distracted with his duties. Miss Sonya also reminded him that baiting you about what was not said is most rude over the dinner we took in the common room." Admitted the Rain pleasantly, bringing in the wooden tray with the several dishes filled with simple but at least filling food and the smaller teapot he could nurse as long as he liked. "And I wanted to see you again, sir. It's nice to see someone from... before."

The same martial arts master that had instructed her in Mandarin Chinese and a few other skills she had wanted to learn to safely travel even in a slightly backwater town she had been born into sat before her again. While her brother had spent his nights honing his martial skills in the elder's dojo, she had bothered him for all that he would teach her after her chores were done.

After their parents died, landowners were not nicely treated in the start of Mao Zedong's rule, the old man had taken them in for a while until her brother found a way to support them both... even if his then former master hadn't liked the methods.

Master Yaozu painfully raised himself from the chair he had probably been sitting in for hours, a bit creakier than she recalled but still the same old strict teacher she had cried on after her parents were... no longer around. "Pour the tea then, Mingxia. I would like to know you are fine, in spite of my worries."

"We both are, sifu." Insisted the Rain happily, settling the tray on one of the guest beds in this room and sorting out the tea for them. "Although, I know Fong isn't happy about needing to keep me here. But he was... is very nervous over something he does coming back to bother me even now."

A stubbornly neutral look was plastered over the elder's face as he took the full teacup from her and seated himself on the bed instead. "...I see."

"I've decided to become a lawyer."

A steel-grey eyebrow rose. "...how do you see that working out?"
"Everyone needs lawyers. Even criminals." Mingxia informed him, with a wry smile of her own as she seated herself on the floor next to the bed. "It will be a long while until I can call myself one, but..."

"Hmph. Better than your brother's path, I suppose."

She sighed softly. "Fong tried dock work first. He was fired in short order, apparently it wasn't appreciated when he would defend himself from the older hands trying to haze him for a 'country boy' doing better than them."

Yaozu merely snorted, taking a sip of his tea before setting down the cup and picking up the first tray of a medium sized cooked fish and the chopsticks provided.

"In-between mostly labor work, he then found a few tournaments to fight in. But then the Cultural Revolution happened, and he couldn't fight in any official tournaments that was really paying for my stay with you." Mingxia continued after a few moments of stubborn silence. "He tried an unofficial one, right after the ban went into effect. It didn't end well."

"Obviously he survived whatever it was, since he's here."

She merely spread her hands and shrugged. "If you want to take it that way, it is up to you. But he did end up here after that fiasco, where he was offered the opportunity to learn more about things not taught most places."

She got a mildly curious look. "What are you doing, little Ming?"

"Giving you the parts of the story you probably wouldn't get out of my stubborn brother."

"You think that will change my mind?"

"No. That's not my aim here." Admitted the Rain simply enough. "I only want to inform the one that took care of me for him why things happened the way they did."

"You just admitted to wanting to be a lawyer, Ming." Yaozu pointed out after swallowing his next bite.

"There are laws, for a select section of the world. The bare basics that are required to be passed on are... inadequate to say the least. We both have the trait, and he knew if he went into the Triads he'd get the information and could help me with it."

She only earned another stubbornly blank look.

Well, no. Baiting the old man wasn’t polite. Sonya had informed both siblings of that over dinner, aimed more to the Storm than the Rain.

Mingxia was fully aware of that, she just chose not to listen for right now. "Even if it earned him your animosity, Fong needed the help and wanted to give me it without allowing the Triads to hold me on that. The fact he was a good martial artist allowed him to find a place here, one that might even give him more legal work once the unrest is over."

"That doesn't excuse the fact he is using what I taught him for petty criminal acts and likely a few more serious ones. Against the tenets I tried to instill in him."

"That is your prerogative, and it is understandable."
The elderly man put down his half-eaten fish and pinned her with a no-nonsense look. "Will this thing you all are dancing around not saying anything about make this all 'magically' better?"

"No... it will make it worse." Mingxia didn't actually know why it was only the criminal ranks Dying Will Flame use was restricted to, or why everyone went along with it. The only ones that could answer that question were the Vindice, and she was not that brave.

"I believe I said not to tempt the old man." Sonya Bazanova observed a bit pointedly in Mandarin from the doorway.

Since even Master Yaozu was surprised by her sudden arrival, she didn't feel embarrassed over her jump that spilled lukewarm tea over her fingers.

The thief inspected the both of them, and then pinned her with a stern look over her newly replaced tobacco pipe. "Also, I'm fairly sure telling another how to feel about something unknown is rather impertinent."

"I have no idea what you might be insisting, Miss Sonya."

"I'm sure. I was wondering if you were a bit too nice to be real. Nice to see you do have some vices." Observed the older woman dryly, leaning up against the doorway. "Although, I will admit, hearing about Fong's early years was interesting."

"What about yours?" Asked the martial arts master a bit defensively, which both Flame users caught easily enough from the look the Storm-Cloud pinned him with.

"I started out a thief. At nine." She informed him blandly, pausing to draw on her new completely brass pipe again. "Then I kept on being a thief. I steal things, it's what I do."

"What are you here to steal, then?"

"...Mingxia's spot as a hostage for good behavior in a Triad hosted martial arts tournament."

Yaozu glanced at the Rain, who merely nodded to indicate the woman was telling the truth. "Big brother did not want to risk me like that, but with the limitations on what would be accepted as a hostage... he reached out to a foreign associate to participate in my stead."

"Were you looking for Mingxia for a reason then?" Inquired the elder man a tiny touch more respectfully, not a whole lot but nearly as much as she once recalled him addressing her mother.

"No, actually. I was looking for you." Announced the Russian, padding her way into the guest room and taking the other bed to perch upon. "Did Fong explain anything about my job offer?"

"...only that it existed. The contents of your letter...?" He paused until she inclined her head to accept the connection to it. "Is all I know."

Sonya mused on that for a moment. "Mingxia, shut the door if you would. I won't ask you to leave but do keep what you hear confidential."

The thief only continued when she hopped to do as ask, starting with the explanation well before she returned to her seat.

"I asked Fong for a martial arts master who might be able to teach my brother aikido. He is very much like Mingxia, involved due to something beyond his ability to control but choosing a more civilian lifestyle for himself irrespective of the knowledge of what our lifestyles are like."
"…your brother, not yourself?"

Sonya pulled on her pipe instead of answer right away, obviously thinking through her words with deliberation. "You would need a lot more information before you could instruct me of anything that might be useful. Aside all that, my brother is a complete pacifist. He refuses to entertain the possibility of harming another, even if that would save himself. Even if we both know full well most humans aren't actually all that nice."

Master Yaozu set down the shallow dish now only filled with fish bones on the dinner tray she had brought in and picked up the dish of Ma Po Tofu. "Interesting, but only one possible student. It is unknown if we would even suit, or if a pacifist would want to learn any martial style."

"I recently rescued a man from Sierra Leone, Africa. The man was skeletal thin, utterly overly concerned with his fellow man even half a breath away from starving to death, and also peripherally involved in our lifestyle without choice. A nurse that checked him over for me recommended moderate physical activity, which I am sure he's not getting."

"You cannot teach the unwilling."

"I can only set it up and lead a horse to water." The older woman shrugged that off. "Aside those two, who are the only ones I can almost guarantee will not abuse what you might teach them, there are either younger students who might be interested in learning but are criminals in training and the civilian residents of Moscow itself. What you teach, to whom, or how much, is up to you."

The elderly man chewed on his tofu, Sonya smoked more, and Mingxia fidgeted with the tea out of nerves.

"You will forgive me if I require some time to consider the offer."

"It would mean moving countries and exiling yourself for at least a short few years or longer. I will not hold it against you for taking your time, in fact I expected you to need some." Spoke the thief around the stem of her pipe blandly. "Hence why I sought you out now and not tomorrow."

The martial arts master went back to chewing on his food, giving a nod of thanks when the Rain refreshed his tea before pouring a cup for the Russian that seemed to be less than enthused by the offer but still took it politely.

Then Fong lightly knocked on the doorway before sliding it open, looking a bit surprised at who was all within the room.

"What part," Sonya asked in exasperation, wagging the stem of her pipe at the Sōng siblings, "of 'do not bait the old man' did the two of you not understand? I thought I was rather clear."

Mingxia giggled into her hands even as her brother gave the Russian a politely bemused look. "I have no idea what you might mean, Sonya. I merely wished to see if sifu wanted someone to talk to yet."

Not remotely sold on the Storm's stated reasons, the older woman looked at the elderly man. "Were they always this stubbornly insistent?"

"Yes." Yaozu confirmed flatly, returning his attention more to his food than his various visitors. "Their father was much the same way, if I recall correctly. And I'm fairly certain I do. I didn't expect it from Ming, but I should have."
Alright, complaints?" Galina asked of the assembled teacher-types she was hosting.

Sonya might be a bit annoyed they did this in her apartment, but the Lightning couldn't invite the few civilian teachers into the Zolotov Headquarters without a few awkward questions to answer. Masquerading as if this was her home was just as awkward, but the Lightning was sure after the rough opening month few of the teachers would want to do this in the school.

"Miss Galina, I know the… Chinese students are part of… something." Artemiy Dyrbov started slowly, glancing at the only Chinese native in the living room before snapping his gaze to her. "But… they are not the… best behaved?"

"That is why they were sent outside of the People's Republic of China." Yanlin explained a bit apologetically, which still earned him a few strange looks. "The… current views of my country are not flattering of teachers or those that think for their life's work."

"Part of the reason Bazanova isn't present is that she is in China at the moment." Explained the brunette as calmly as she could, giving the poor beleaguered Literature teacher. "Most of the reason we have Chinese exchange students is political. We are aware they are little hellions, but we are also trying to educate them not to follow the small-minded take of intellectuals being less than respectable."

Scruffy cleared his throat a bit nervously, still not entirely comfortable putting himself out there on a wider scope than just one-on-one. They really should've made him a counselor or something, honestly. However good he was at drilling why science might be something to know into his classes.

"If it is that bad, refer them to Yanlin for behavioral corrections. While overwhelming the man with too many 'problem' students would be rather inefficient, he might be able to reach them if you are getting stumped."

The lone Triad member and Rain Flame instructor inclined his head to accept the referral, which did finally relax some of the tension that had been in the room when the various teacher-types assembled.

Lisa, which Galina still almost couldn't believe she was the one directing and not the other way around, gave the entire room a tight little grin. "I like stumping the little snots on what they would do otherwise if they refuse to think or listen to me."

Peter coughed a startled laugh, echoed a moment later by Andrei Chikatilo's more robust chuckle at the quip. The Lightning shot the older woman a small, thankful smile as a few smaller discussions started up on the various ways some of the teachers had found to circumvent the more rebellious students' antics with those that hadn't found a way around it.

Allowing it to continue, the brunette reflected on how the first two months of her teaching career had gone.

To say their exchange students were a bit problematic was understating the issue, severely.

Yanlin had tried to prepare them, but who in hell thought that anyone sent to a foreign land would try to disrespect their instructors because they merely taught?

It was probably the more enduring issue, as the slight fiasco of ordering too little food to feed the
students the first week had been solved by Lisa in short order and the hiccup in the Flame instruction lessons being almost walked in on by a civilian after hours had been ironed out by Usov with appreciable haste. Andrei the Sun being the one in charge of the dorms after hours helped reduce the number of incidents between the Russian students and the Chinese ones. Installing Anna as the head of the girl's dorms was a bit more problematic as she wasn't a student nor a teacher's aide, but not nearly so much as they didn't have female Chinese exchange students.

The actual lessons were disturbingly easy in comparison. Teaching a bunch of snot-nosed brats how to setup and manage a budget, track and file invoices in various filing arrangements, managing the building of what limited savings they could probably manage to scrape together, or just simple addition and subtraction wasn't all that hard when the brats paid attention.

"Okay, quite down." Galina spoke up after allowing the chatter to continue long enough for most of the better ideas to be banded around. "Anything problematic you noticed? I cannot fix it if you do not speak up."

"That's a double negative." Dyrbov pointed out a bit needlessly.

She pinned him with a flat look. "Noted. And...?"

Most of what she got in response were minor nitpicks, general supply issues they had no idea they needed more than just some arbitrary limits or quibbles about the texts selected for some subjects that would devolve into a round-robin debate if she let it go on. Noting the more easily fixed in one notepad, and the ones that would either need involved discussions to air out or more than a bit of creativity in another, Galina let Lisa take over the discussion and manage it so someone else suggested maybe getting out of the Lightning's hair before dinnertime came around.

Hey, there was a bar just down a few floors. Maybe they could move things there?

Yeah... Galina was still slightly scared of Sonya's mother.

Scruffy engaged her in a discussion over book recommendations, which he carried most of until the last few civilians trickled out with Irinei following the Chinese Triad member and the eldest woman in the room to provide the two of them a bit of cover.

The moment the door shut, leaving her and Andrei the Sun behind with McScruffy, Galina turned to the man absently chatting her ear off expectantly.

"I think Chikatilo is still suspicious of us. I'm not sure what Usov did, but apparently it didn't stick."

Sighing heavily, the Lightning slumped into the couch. "It's only been two months. Not even a quarter of the way through the very first year. And we can't even keep the civilians out of the sensitive stuff?"

Anna let herself in via a window's reflection, the same way how they opened up the thief's apartment to host this meeting in the first place.

Dusting her hands off absently, the teenaged girl gave her a bland smile. "It wasn't our fault, Usov did catch him before he ran off."

"I'm not blaming anyone, Mirror Lady. Merely observing how badly we handled the first month."

"He didn't escape, and it is entirely due to you and Usov. I'm just reporting what little I could get out of him about it, especially since it seems as if I'm not 'in' on the secret." Scruffy defended himself a touch too quickly to be entirely described as 'non-panicked'.
"Anna, if we select certain days to do more 'normal' things for the so-called after school activities... can you arrange Chikatilo to 'spy' on it?" Ballet practice and firearms practice wouldn't be something any school faculty would hide, so not that. Those were morning activities anyways.

There was the possibility of using Yanlin's nationality and the Chinese exchange students, suggesting they were having their own meetings after-hours that might be believable enough.

What else would be something one would want more privacy than normal to use the basement for?

Galina glanced up to Scruffy's features skeptically.

The man blinked back in confusion. "What?"

"...how do you feel about starting a poetry club? Or a... capitalist-writing reading club?"

Scruffy blankly stared at her for a long moment. "Is that safe?"

"No, but then again that's the point. Chikatilo thinks there's something going on, so let's give him something that won't have us visited by the Vindice." She explained with a wave of the hand. "Even if he tries to blackmail us about it, we can either stave him off until Sonya returns or handle the problem if he tries to overreach himself about it."

"What if he does nothing about it?" Andrei the teacher's aide asked when his fellow Sun pondered that. "Are we just going to let him linger on our flanks with something illegal to hold over us?"

"That is a scenario that will take longer to set up and pull off believably. Let's try the less risky options first, like maybe a Chinese only meeting Yanlin's trying to moderate their students' behavior. If that bait isn't taken, then to keep a lid on things until Sonya can decide what to risk or do with the man might be necessary."

Scruffy shuffled a bit in place, looking a bit conflicted. "...can I do it anyways? I mean, I'm not going to try... ah, insulting? Your communist ways. But... as an implicit lesson on how others in the West see the mindset might be... interesting?"

"Peter, we're criminals." Galina reminded him pointedly. "If you can find the students interested and believe you can keep a lid on it when we're inspected or even from the children's parents, then feel free."

"Just... you might want to recruit Usov's help in keeping things quiet, yeah?" Clapping his fellow Sun on the shoulder, Andrei turned to leave them. "Let's try to only have one crisis at a time."

"Seconded." Anna interjected before turning to fold herself back into the window's reflection.

The Lightning inspected the slightly conflicted expression on the older man's face when they were left alone. "Peter? Was there something else?"

"Ah... coffee? I mean, would you like to go get some coffee so I can pass my ideas through an actual communist?" Peter kind of hunched in on himself a bit as he started rambling quickly. "I don't want to offend, and a lot of the takes the western world has on communist life is not... good. I don't... I only have a vague idea how to address that?"

"Probably not something to do in public, Peter. So, coffee probably isn't the best idea." Galina gently refuted after pondering the request. "However, there's nothing stopping us from finding where Sonya stashed her tea and having some here."
"...oh, right."

The Lightning took him by the elbow and shoved him around a bit, so he would start moving to the table set within the kitchen corner of this apartment. "Or you could just say 'I would like some company, Galina'."

The man sheepishly laughed a bit nervously. "If you are busy then I don't want to impose..."

"Impose, please. The breaks from my current headaches are rather nice." She sighed lightly once he took a seat, putting her notepads on the table to search the cabinets for the tea kettle and tea leaves she was sure was somewhere on the right over the sink.

Keeping in mind Scruffy's recent past as a prisoner against his will to a diamond cartel was slightly hard.

Like most Suns, he had bounced back from the trauma inflicted on him rather quickly once given something else to do. That didn't mean he had dealt with it, nor that he had put any of the issues it might've given him behind. Merely that he could continue his life, such as it was half-hidden by the Mafiya due to his Flames and half-drafted into Sonya's staff through mere circumstances of his Flame use.

Galina had only belatedly noticed the man wasn't actually dealing with any of the issues he had or expanding any distance beyond what he had been limited to as an unwilling dependent. Even now that he had the funds and leeway to live more than merely exist, he remained in the same cramped accommodations and bare-bone routine.

She was pretty sure Sonya didn't even know there might be more lingering issues to deal with, and to keep the Sun from collapsing in on himself she'd ensure he recovered as best she could.

Tatiana had a few suggestions and was the one to clue her in that something might be still affecting the slightly greying blond man. Peter didn't seem to mind her occasionally nudging him, but then again it had only been a few days.

Thankfully she was an Inverted Lightning, slow and steady work at it was completely within her abilities.
Chapter 81

(Wednesday the 22th of October, 1969. Wo Hop To Triad's Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Master Yaozu took an extra day, for what reason she could only guess at but it likely involved yanking Fong's braid, then he confronted the thief her last 'free' morning before being taken hostage. "I would like to know what it is that is unsaid so far."

Sonya, who had sought out the early morning sunlight since she wasn't sure when she'd get more in the next week or so, cracked an eye open to see the old man. "...mmm, alright."

"May I sit in?" Xiasheng inquired politely from across from her, finally looking up from the cup of tea he had brought out as part of a tea tray but she snubbed taking a portion of. "Actually, a few of the others might be interesting to hear how you Russians induct others."

Heaving a sigh, she replaced her pipe stem between her teeth. "You may sit in if you'd like, but we are not doing a mass lesson right now. I think we should keep this small, it is rather surprising in content. Aside which, I don't like crowds."

The Storm accepted that easily, silently asking the elder if he would like the so far forlorn empty cup and a measure of tea by lifting the pot questioningly.

"First and foremost, the ability I will talk about is called Dying Will Flames of the Sky." At the skeptical look she earned, she lifted one hand and lit the tip of her index finger with her lavender inner Flames she identified with and by the most. "I am a Dying Will Flame Cloud user. My ability is Propagation, or to make more of something. I can make more blood to bleed... and... make more steel to wield."

Dumping a full-sized Bec de Corbin into his lap, summoned from the wisp of a Flame she had lit on a fingertip, she went back to smoking for a moment to let him absorb that.

"...of the 'Sky'." Yaozu remarked after a long silent moment in an utterly even tone of voice, setting the butt of her favored weapon on the ground and leaning the shaft against one shoulder. "Why 'Sky'? Is there an 'Earth' to go along with it?"

"Yes, but I've never met an Earth Flame user. I've only read about them." Picking the second question before the listening younger man could offer the negative most would probably give, which wasn't correct and damn it all she was doing this brief, Sonya shifted around and backwards slightly to directly look at her audience. "As to why we are Elements of Sky Flames? Because our Flames are compatible to a Sky Flame user. What happens if we find and bond to an Earth Flame user isn't known, or if Earth Flames have their own spectrum of types like how Earth and Sky are supposedly different. I believe it was... gravity vs Harmony."

The martial arts master ran his fingers down warm and smooth metal, which never did grow cool no matter how low the temperature was outside. He didn't glance at either Flame user bracketing him but instead studied the far courtyard wall in an absent way.

Before she could decide if she should continue or let him have more time to absorb the information, the old man set her weapon aside and picked up his spilled teacup. Xiasheng poured him more obediently when he belatedly noticed there was no liquid inside.
When that was all the old man did, Sonya continued.

"There are seven Elements of Sky. There's Sky, Cloud, Storm, Rain, Sun, Lightning, and Mist. Harmony, Propagation, Disintegration, Tranquility, Activation, Hardening, and Construction respectively." Pausing to pull on her pipe again, she blew out the smoke well over their heads in order to not bother either man with it. "Any sane person's first question is why we keep it hidden... and the answer is the Vindice Laws."

That earned her some attention, and she picked back up her weapon to immolate it into nothingness again without setting anything a-Flame.

"What are the Vindice Laws?" Master Yaozu asked tiredly when she didn’t directly continue, now staring up at the sky instead of the wall.

"...the Vindice are individuals that dress in nearly all black, their face and hands either masked with gloves or wrapped with white bandages. I've seen them once... and once was more than enough. They move via portals ripped into surfaces, or possibly into nothing, and arrest those that violate their laws in black chains that I think cannot be broken. No one knows what or who they are, nor what happens to those they take. All we know is that they've existed for a long time, and they relentlessly hunt their law breakers."

A sharp glance was thrown at her, a more wondering one from the Storm on the elderly man's other side.

"If Mingxia, or Fong for that matter, draw attention to their Flame use... they'd be arrested, and you'd never hear from them again. If I walked into the streets and massacred the Red Guard in droves... I'd be arrested, and you'd never see me again. Anyone that has Flames and actively uses it tries to hold government office or join the military even knowing it's forbidden... they would disappear without so much as a word. If we draw any unwarranted attention to ourselves through Flame use, well... see previous examples."

Nearly giving himself a crick in the neck, the martial arts master shot a questioning look to Xiasheng to collaborate her words.

He only lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "I've never seen them. I would never want to, either. As far as I know, what she says is true. Sightings of the Vindice do sometimes arise in gossip, and occasionally a few on our ends just go missing... with a proclamation declaring their lawbreaking given to their leader so we know who took them."

Yaozu stared at the other man for a long moment, glancing back to the thief once, then examined the tea in his hands with a furrowed brow.

"How the Vindice Laws got wrapped up in organized crime I can easily guess. Flame users are allowed to freely use their abilities as long as it's not 'public' or would cause panic, and the mafia and or Triads are not public. The only thing we are required to pass on are the basic rules, not how to control one's pyrotechnic self-immolation habits. In order to get that, one would have to swear to their specific group in order to have the tricks another learned taught to them. And on and on... until, well... the only ones that know are all criminal types."

"It is nice to gather with others that understand how difficult it is to manage our abilities." Using his Storm Flames in a probably copied from her maneuver, Xiasheng re-heated the elder's now likely cooled tea with a flash of his ruby red Flames.

"I had to help Fong with learning more control myself." Sonya tacked on after a silent moment,
examining the remains of the tobacco she had packed into the pipe's bowl last night and wondering how many puffs were left. "And that wasn't all that long ago."

Yaozu shot her a look, a suspicious one she didn't understand. Suddenly surging to his feet rather fast for an old man, he turned and damn near stormed into the building while his abandoned teacup rolled in the now muddy ground under the veranda.

Sonya and Xiasheng exchanged a set of blank looks, then they both got up to follow in curiosity.

Or at least she was curious as hell and could guess the Storm was as well since he kept up with her and the older man.

The steel-haired old man made a turn for a hallway she hadn't been down yet, and when the martial arts master threw open a sliding door with a slam it drew a lot of male voices exclaiming in surprise.

"Fēng! Did this… FLAME thing! Was that the reason you burned a hole in my dojo's wall?"

Sonya snorted, clapping a hand over her mouth as she snickered. Xiasheng slowly shut his own mouth slowly, looking slightly bewildered.

"...sifu, I would not mind discussing what really happened when I left. However… this is the men's dorms. And I do hear Sonya past you. Perhaps somewhere more private?"

"Oh no. No. I want to know now, Fēng. Did you LIE to me? To my face?"

Coughing in hopes of stopping her little giggle fit, the Storm-Cloud looked over to the other pure Storm. "Breakfast, Xiasheng? I think they… heh, might need a moment."

Hawkish yellow eyes flicked to her, to the back of the elderly man reading his former apprentice the riot act for hiding his issues in the first place and then covering up his difficulties with more lies, and he nodded slowly. "...that might be something to do, Miss Sonya."

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 22th of October, 1969 continued. Wo Hop To Triad's Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"I only have your word these 'Vindice' things exist."

"Probably something I can do about that, but they freak me out." Sonya Bazanova responded lazily, stubbornly sitting in the late morning sun even if a rather severe looking woman was arguing with Mingxia about when the thief had to get ready for being taken hostage later today. "I think they make everyone that are near them irrationally panicky, so that might be something to see about much later on."

Yaozu cradled his freshly poured tea in both hands, to allow the heat from the beverage to sink into his joints abused by a lifetime of perfecting his chosen lifestyle.

He had not really appreciated having a fundamental part of the world irreconcilably altered out from under him. Fēng's, or Fong's, difficulties in his 'Storm Flames' should not have been hidden from him, as he had been the young man's instructor… but he was also fully aware of what would have happened then.

Had his student confided in him about the strange fire ability he suddenly suffered from… he would either have done much the same as the young man had eventually or done the supposedly law-
breaking alternative of asking others if they knew of the phenomena. If the criminal ranks were the only place to find instruction for these Dying Will Flame user, they then could demand whatever in return and get it even if he had his own opinions when reaching that conclusion.

Fong had cut short the entire issue, circumventing Yaozu and still providing his little sister some safety from the same fate.

He did not appreciate the ability to make the decision being taken from him but was also irritatingly glad he had not needed to compromise his own honor at another's whim. There was also the fact his student apparently hadn't trusted him with the problem, instead seeking his own answers. However much he had not shown comprehension of the problem when viewing the accidental result, Fēnɡ-Fong had no way to truly know that without asking in the first place.

He wasn't sure if it was the start of the so-called Cultural Revolution that had caused the 'Storm' to seek an alternate instructor for something the 'civilians' seemingly had no knowledge of, or if it was something he might have said over the years that made him doubt Yaozu would take him seriously. However it happened, whatever it was that influence Fēnɡ to keep his fire-related problem to himself, it had and he now had to decide his stance on the subject.

Mingxia hadn't been… what had the woman claimed?

'Impertinent', in claiming the underpinning reasons things had happened the way they had was not good.

"...why does Fong think you command respect?"

The thief he was trying not to interrogate sighed heavily, recollecting her half-sprawled position into a neater posture as he insisted on speaking more with her than she seemed to wish. "Ask him. I could answer in various ways, but he would know why he said something better than I."

He gave her a sharp look. "Try."

She glanced over at him, those normally grey eyes flashing a bright purple for a moment before it faded back to her original eye color. "…Cloud Flame users are notoriously ill-tempered creatures, with the reputation of massacring their detractors to back it up. I naturally figured out how to Propagate force, I can and have destroyed entire buildings on my own over the course of a night. Turn a fully-grown man into a bloody smear with a flick of a wrist, bend cold metal with a hand, and smashed craters into the ground effortlessly."

Yaozu stared at her hard, trying to figure out if she was lying or telling the truth.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not proud of a lot of the more lethal things I've done. I still occasionally have nightmares, but I honestly don't regret it either." Sonya cast a glance over the courtyard, which had what seemed to be formerly neat greenery recently ravaged by a bull gone mad… if it had various lanterns tied to its horns. "Between my own safety and seventeen other girls'… or the near hundred men trying to profit by selling said girls and me into sexual slavery…"

His eyes went, slightly unwillingly, to the exasperatedly arguing Mingxia standing in the doorway blocking a much older woman's path to the Russian woman. Said woman being discussed suddenly surged up to her full height, stretching in a way that could only be described as sinuously, which cut short the ongoing argument in a highly suspicious way.

There was some fear in that reaction, on behalf of the older native woman. Mingxia was still merely exasperated, but of her elder. She held no fear of the blonde woman's motions.
A glaring flash of fiery purple, and a solidly massive double-headed ax that would be taller than the woman that summoned it to hand embedded itself right in front of Yaozu with an audible but still muffled thunk next to a sharper crack.

"I don't know what it is between you, Mingxia, and Fong. Frankly, I don't care either. It's your business, and I don't feel like digging into it. However... this does need to be pointed out." Ignoring the weapon she had thrown at his feet, Sonya planted her right hand on a hip and stared flatly down at him. "If you, now or later on, try to say something in public about this Flame stuff… either the Vindice or this Triad will come after you. Worst case, Fong will be tasked with killing you before you trigger the Vindice to make a house-call. If you feel you can't stand saying nothing, of letting this monopoly continue… which I am fully aware is unfair in the extreme but it is what it is... tell me soon so I can spare Fong the guilt of your death. I don't like killing people, but it would probably be even more distasteful if you know the victim."

She turned on a heel before he could think up an answer, going over to investigate the young woman's visible irritation and why it was going on.

Turning back to the almost bewildering oversized ax seated in the earth before him, the martial arts master took as sip of his unfortunately rapidly cooling tea.

A few sharp words denying any assistance needed for a run to a bathhouse from the thief's end, a quieter word to the younger woman, and the female he wasn't sure was arrogant or just supremely self-assured left the courtyard for somewhere deeper into the building.

He wasn't surprised when Mingxia seated herself next to him when the older two left her behind.

"I've seen magically appearing weaponry, your brother burring holes through things that shouldn't burn... what can you do, little Ming?"

Two tiny hands cupped nothing, until they were filled with wavering blue Flames of her own. "I'm a Rain Flame user, sifu. I have the ability of Tranquility."

Yaozu paused as a feeling that could be described as 'Tranquility' spread through him, blunting the edges of his emotions without the need of meditation to investigate the source of them. "That is..."

He could now think of six different ways to use that for less morally upright purposes than just calming someone or a room of agitated individuals down so peaceful talks could occur.

Carefully keeping the wry bitterness from his face to prevent upsetting the girl, he instead inclined his head to show he appreciated the illumination over her own involvement.

Fē-Fong, had provided her a way not to abuse her special gift that she seems to have taken. His equally disappointed and proud feelings on his former student aside, he could still appreciate that much without conflicted emotions interfering on his own.

"That is very impressive, Ming." He informed her honestly as he could, give his limited exposure to the phenomena aside it was different enough to be noted either way.

"Rains are rather common, so not really sifu. Next to them, some of whom live here too, I am terribly unpracticed." Mingxia explained a bit apologetically. "And I don't have any major combat applications for it yet, all I can do is calm a room with a limited amount of people. Big brother, Miss Sonya, and most others can shrug off my Tranquility easily."

So, there was a way to resist these magical 'Flames'?
Did he need to have them, or could it be trained in anyone with enough determination?

Yaozu tugged on the beginnings of a beard growing on his chin thoughtfully. "...I find it impressive."

"There will likely be a lot of Flame users at the tournament, sifu. If you go, you will probably find those better trained than me."

"I am not sure if I would want to, but if it is just a matter of practice... there is nothing stopping you from working on it alone."

"I would need a target, and not many want to risk overdosing on Tranquility for some young girl when better trained Rains are around."

He tugged on the short whiskers again, planning to bother one of Fong's roommates for his shaving kit to deal with it soon, and shot the girl staring at her hands clasped in her lap a stern look. "I am led to believe that woman is some sort of Soviet expert or instructor of these 'Flame' things. Did you think to inquire with her if there is anything you can do without a partner? There is always a way, Ming. Find it. Neglecting your education because of another's dim views on who you are will do you no service later. If no one else will help you, I will."

…and that decided him, didn't it?

If he was already planning on keeping his eyes open in this so-called tournament for any 'Rain' tricks to help the younger Sōng sibling, he wouldn't be trying to rock the fishing boat for at least a few years yet.

Yaozu heaved a tired sigh, wondering how in the world one acquired a traveler's visa or passport in the mess the government was in now.

"...I'll be right back, sifu. Excuse me!" Rapid footfalls faded in quick order echoed back after the young girl's words, leaving him with half a cup of tea and a massively oversized gold-plated battle ax embedded in the courtyard.

A moment of considering it, the martial arts master set aside his beverage to test the give the weapon had... and belatedly noticed the bladed end had bisected one of the flat stones that made up the flagstone path.

Not cracked it in half, which would be confusing enough, but the metal had cleaved right through the flat grey stone with just the force the woman had tossed it with.

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 22th of October, 1969 continued. Wo Hop To Triad's Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"...I only know of one way, really. I didn't pay a whole lot of attention where the Soviet Rains are right now, nor the precise methodology they developed the basic exercise into." Sonya admitted after a moment of consideration.

Mingxia bit her lower lip. "Can I ask then...?"

"I believe you already did. Give me a second, I think I have the components with me." Having stated that, she turned to scale back up the staircase she had only just came down.
“...I offered—”

"I know, big brother." His little sister interrupted a bit abashedly, wringing her hands together. "And I could probably practice with you now that you have less issues not burning through the Flames of anyone attempting to Tranquilize you, but... you’re busy a lot of the time."

Fong grimaced slightly as he accepted that. It would be different if he was just waiting out the ban on martial arts but getting sent to Mafia Land to help with security there as well as pick up more martial art styles to preserve them and hopefully teach later on meant he wasn't here for her a lot.

The fact Mingxia hadn't been able to convince one of the other women in residence here to be her subject was... not particularly surprising.

Tranquilizing someone to death was the current favorite use of Rain Flames in the country. Especially as the normal side effects of such a thing was similar to dying from pure stress or, with enough preparation to fake it, drug use.

Digging into a pocket reminded the Storm he did have a bit of topaz on him, and he wondered if 'component' referred to another gemstone.

The he wondered if Sonya carried around a selection of jewels with her everywhere.

Vaulting the staircase, the Storm-Cloud in question lightly landed halfway down the stairs and skipped down a few more steps to bleed off her momentum. Coming to a stop right in front of the barely teenaged Rain girl, the thief held up a nearly colorless little gem so they could all see it clearly. "This, you will be careful of. Mingxia, this will shatter on you... and you press too hard with it, it can explode. I had one of these eat a divot out of my palm because I wasn't being careful. girl."

His little sister gingerly took the tiny pear-cut stone from her warily. "What do I do?"

"Light it, slowly, with Rain Flames until it splinters into shards. It both a control and a sustainment exercise. If not build, because I don’t think we build up more Flames than what we have naturally, it will allow you a tighter control over what you do have." Sonya shoved her free hand through her blonde hair, eyeing the little stone she had given over warily herself. "That is a bit of white sapphire, and to whoever is eavesdropping... do not use sapphires. Again, they have a nasty tendency to explode."

"Why give one to Mingxia, then?"

"Rains are pretty much the only ones I know of that can make limited use of sapphires. And some rubies. Go slowly enough flooding it with Tranquility, and they'll just splinter apart instead of shatter violently." The woman shrugged that off easily, turning to snatch her bathing things from the amused Liqin tasked with holding onto it while she sorted out the request. "The shards then can be used to slowly Tranquilize another person, just slip one on whoever and let them walk away. Leave it on long enough and they'll die, but..."

The assassin waited until the woman wandered off to take advantage of a bribe they paid out to reserve an entire bath house so she could clean up for later tonight, then turned to the young Rain. "I'd be interested in those shards once you're done with them."

"Liqin."

"If it would bother you, not to kill with. Just... reliably taking out guards without needing to fight those that walk in on possibly awkward situations would be helpful." The man explained smoothly, rolling a shoulder in an absent but still easy-going shrug. "I'll spread the news to a few other Rains,
see if they want to try this as well... because interesting isn't quite the word to use about this tidbit of advice you got out of her.

Mingxia stared at the gemstone in her palms while the other man was talking, then up at him questioningly.

Fong kept his features blank. While yes, he could understand that... if she wasn't comfortable with that then he would prevent any pressure.

"I don't know how long this will take me, and we don't know how fast or slowly they'll work once I do have shards." Offered the little Rain after thinking hard. "How about... you can have the shards from this one, which will likely be shattered before anyone else's, as long as you find me a replacement once I break it?"

"I would not mind at all." Giving her a brisk business-like nod, Liqin shot the Storm an amused glance as he walked on to wherever he had been headed before Mingxia waylaid their Russian guest with her question.

"Are you sure you are alright with that?" Fong asked his little sister once they were left alone in the middle of the hallway, concerned at this sudden switch in aims.

"...it's not guaranteed Miss Sonya will take me on, big brother." She reminded him slowly, folding the little gemstone into her palm and looking up at him worriedly. "Either way, if it happens or not, this is another way. Not a very appetizing one, but... something I can do. Hopefully it'll only just be the one."

"I could try asking her for you." He offered instead of the automatic 'don't' that tried to escape him. "Sonya might be very annoyed at the imposition, but-"

"I think she has an easier time saying no to you than she does to me." Mingxia informed him with a small smile. "It took you... how long to get her to talk to you, again?"

Fighting down the wry smile, because that was very true as it had taken him months to get the woman to offer something on the subject of her gemstones and his little sister had taken all of five minutes, he turned to follow Liqin's path. "I see you have no respect for your long-suffering brother forging the way for you..."

"Is that what it's called these days?" She asked, almost genuinely sounding surprised and a touch wondering... if it hadn't been for the mischievous little smile betraying her real feelings. "Doesn't she still call you annoying?"

"I don't believe I will be able to get rid of that descriptor for a long while." Fong admitted dryly to her with a shrug. "But... getting her to pay anyone attention beyond just acknowledging they exist was... well, no one else managed it by the time I met her. And she did eventually hear me out, even if she does think I am so."

"It's a good thing, big brother. It will keep you humble."

The Storm shook his head at her. "I believe the fact she very nearly ran me into the ground sparring with me over the course of a day and a half, not to mention the fact she refused to go all out and still broke a lot of things including me, will keep me humble enough little sister."

Mingxia snagged his braid to tug on lightly, darting off back to the courtyard with a giggle.

Fong watched her go in amusement, glad she was acting more her age again. She tried so hard to be
mature and self-contained so he wouldn't worry about her, not realizing the more stiffly she behaved herself the more he worried.

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 22th of October, 1969 continued. A bathhouse, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Sonya knew how bathhouses worked just fine, she didn't need an attendant. This was her third visit to the People's Republic of China, she got the gist already.

In hindsight, she probably should've asked Mingxia to handle whatever that was supposed to be even if she had an old man she apparently knew for years to catch up with. Keeping that older bitch from trying to wash her like she had no idea how Chinese water-culture was done had long since passed annoying and gone straight into aggravating.

No, actually. No matter how damn painful the broken leg was… she had to keep it, or she'd start bashing in heads just to get some peace and quiet. Which would probably not help, as that would then trigger that 'be afraid of me' reputation she didn't really like all that much still.

It'd be earned, but… as she couldn't speak to about half the women that were also taking advantage of the Storm-Cloud's inability of dealing with another touching her, the act of aggression would probably be misinterpreted into who knew what.

Abandoning the fussy older bitch when she turned for whatever she was going to try insisting on next, the thief darted around her and slid into then under the water of the pool-like heated bath.

She had done as much scrubbing as she was going to do under the showerheads already, she didn't want a scrub with something that has the texture very much like sandpaper. Her tattoos would not scrub off, no matter how much the biddy wanted her to try.

Coming back up near someone else's legs meant she startled two girls around her age. Not badly, thankfully, but they did stare until she gained some space from them.

Interestingly, Sonya could almost use the heated bath as a swimming pool. Standing in the middle had the water come up to her collarbone, but her pale skin was drawing more than enough attention to her person than she really liked on average so she merely found herself a submerged step near the far wall to sit on.

Besides which, the heat was settling into her broken leg a bit painfully, so maybe she should abstain from anything too involved right now.

Her pick of seating gave her a decent view of the entire hall-like room, from the bank of showering stalls separating the bath from the locker-type entranceway. There was a pathway that wrapping around three sides of the heated pool, paved with smooth cool tiles in light green edged with concrete painted a faded grey-blue. What windows this room had were high and small, and the steam rising off the water curled lazily through the intermittent sunbeams.

…the only thing she was missing was her tobacco pipe… but she had been playing with that thing way too much lately.

In the face of her attempt to abstain from nicotine, she wondered if there was any liquor in the building.

"Is there a reason why you are being so… willful?"
As she had a very good view over the room, Sonya wasn't surprised at the bitch-lady coming back to bother her more. "Is there a reason why you're trying to commit suicide via Cloud Flame user?"

"I thought you were 'settled' after destroying so much of our building."

"Is it leveled yet?" Sonya questioned scathingly, slitting the woman a glare that made her back up several steps. "The last time I had such a rapid mood swing, I put a burning hole into my city… that kept smoldering for three days. Leave me to manage myself, thank you."

Finally earning herself some space from the older woman, she'd probably regret it later but that wasn't now, the thief settled herself more firmly in her far spot and tried to find something else aside the pain of a broken leg to ponder.

She couldn't recall if there was something she wanted the space to ponder or not, unfortunately.

Maybe she should try not-thinking?

She hadn't tried meditation in a long while, not since her childhood.

Maybe it would help.

"…um, excuse me? Miss?"

Cracking open an eye again, the Russian studied the white-haired woman that had spoken.

Not Miss Silvery-White's hair color, white without the metallic silver edge to it.

The other woman settled herself respectfully far enough from the Storm-Cloud, blinking flat black eyes at her in a mostly faked politely curious expression.

…Sonya didn't really care if it was faked. It was, and right now it wasn't irritating her. "What?"

"Just before we left, rumor had it you gave Mingxia something to do with her Rain Flames."

Ensuring her hand was free from the water, she let Lightning Flames spark between her fingers. "Do you know anything for Lightnings?"

"…why is it Mingxia had to ask me for help?" Questioned the thief skeptically first, wondering if Galina would be annoyed if she shared the brunette's nail polish trick with anyone. "Shouldn't you be helping each other? Isn't that the point of why you all gathered under the Triads protection?"

The white-blonde Lightning blinked, taken off-guard enough the skepticism she really felt shown through for a split second.

"Look, the stones I have are crutches. They do things, either pop when you push too much Flame through them or provide a slight edge to control, and that you can earn honestly through enough hard work." She lectured flatly, tipping a head back to take some of the stress off her neck and so she could safely ignore her current irritant while not entirely looking away from her. "Fong's kind of an odd case, he's a pretty powerful Storm…"

…wait.

"So… you've nothing to offer?"

"Did I say that?" She shot back more absently than with any real heat, still caught on her belated wonder. "I don't see a reason to. You're more than old enough to have had some time with your Flames, by now I'd hope you know what you're capable of."
Surely one of the Soviet Storms had containment issues. Right?

Just saying Fong was definitely more powerful than her in Storm Flames was easy, she had only minor things to do with her blood red inner fire so she was just a finer touch. Besides which, she was both a Storm and a Cloud. They both pulled from the same pool of willpower, but she could do more with less that Fong merely used brute strength to force his own way through.

A portion of her Cloud Flames was always being used, with her stupidly tricky strength-bullshit she could never really seem to scale to any one general mode. Either too hard, not nearly enough, slightly more than she should have, or just a touch too light to actually hold something.

She'd get it eventually, it just took an insane amount of practice she had formerly abstained from with other fragile human beings.

More so than she was getting right now.

Shamal had never complained when she squished him a little, merely wiggled so she'd know. Thankfully the brat was a smart one, making himself comfortable with her when she epically failed in human contact.

Well… that lead back to maybe getting a lover, didn't it?

Shoving that mental train aside for later, she went back to trying to recall what had been tracked on all that paperwork Galina had placed under her nose over the last year and some.

Had any other Storms she was currently kind of responsible for suffered any self-control issues?

Without going like those twin Storms back in Russia that burned themselves alive?

…was the fact Mingxia popped with Rain Flames have any bearing on that?

Sonya sighed, slinking down farther in the hot water as she pondered that new wonder.

Were the deaths of all those kids because they couldn't spread the information of Flame use far enough to prevent them?

Were they preventable, or just gut-reactions to being on-Flame that got out of hand and would've happened no matter what prior knowledge was had?

Was spreading the Flame use information far enough to avoid those possible?

She was taking it on faith the Vindice had a reason why they dictated the limitations they had, but... there were those like Cherep and Mingxia allowed to exist.

…but mafia cultures and Omertà.

Was it just because Flame users established parts of the widely known syndicates that Dying Will Flame users were thought to all be criminals themselves?

Were there non-mafia Flame using circles?

If there was one, there probably was more. The mafia didn't reach everywhere at the same level, one only had to look at her former life's homeland to understand that. Maybe something like Viper's Espers, or... had Crina had more than a fable-related reason to giving her letters of introduction to what remained of her family?
Her fingers twitched for her pipe, which was entirely bewildering. She only had it for a couple days, how the hell had it turned into a habit already?

"…what do you have to offer, then?"

"What do you have?" Countered the thief distractedly.

She tugged her wet white hair firmly behind an ear, slicking back the rest of it with a wet hand when it flopped into her eyes. "I have a gold chain bracelet. I know you didn't manage to find one in storage."

She shot the other woman a skeptical look. "…you're Inverted. A decently strong Inverted Lightning I know of put ground malachite into her clear nail polish, which helps her conduct Lightning Flames from her fingertips. She uses it for both breaking listening devices and electrocuting those that get too close to her. If that'll work for you or not…"

The Lightning hummed thoughtfully, eyeing her strangely. "Interesting. I'll get you the bracelet when we return."

"Pleasure doing business with you." Drawled the thief blandly.

"Will you speak to the others, or will you be more 'figure it out yourself'?"

Sonya sighed, drawing herself upright and sitting back properly on the sunken shelf. "Look, there's two basic facts we can't change. There is only so much Flame to any one person, you can only get better at drawing it out or get more finesse in how you apply it outside of yourself. Second is that copying another's methods will never work nearly as well as what you find out and develop for yourself. The extent of my advice? Experiment."

Blinking at her blankly, the white-haired Chinese woman cocked her head to the side. "…how does that explain Fong? He's… powerful. Was he always so?"

"…Fong's a freak of nature." She decided stubbornly with a grimace.

The Strongest Storm Flame user, who wore red. Martial artist type. The next Storm Arcobaleno. She'd get proof enough in the coming days if he really was the strongest Storm in the Far East.

Sonya either had really good luck, or really shitty luck.

She couldn't decide. The man was really fucking annoying sometimes.

Like right now, and he wasn't even here.

"Are any of you Flame using women up for a job?"

Her entirely unwanted but not really minded all that much visitor paused and sank back into the spot she had been halfway abandoning for probably someone more socially inclined than her. "What do you mean?"

"There's… an old, dead Rain woman I'm looking for any mention of. Yang XiaoJing, the former Arcobaleno of Rain about three hundred years ago. By description, and other things, I'm pretty sure she originated around here. If it's China, Japan, or even Singapore… I don't know."

"…what in the world is an Arcobaleno?"

"That is the question, isn't it? I'm not sure, all I know is that they existed."
The Lightning flattened her lips together but appeared more thoughtful than skeptical. "What do we get if we find this for you?"

She leveled an incredulous look on the other woman. "I am a thief. Nearly anything you could name."

"Nearly?" She echoed doubtfully.

"I'm not stupid. At most, half a million in euros or something you want but isn't for sale."

A mainly polite, but a touch too sharp, smile was her answer as the other slid off her perch to wade off to another grouping of women.

It wouldn't be until after the Cultural Revolution, and maybe a year or so after even that, that Sonya would have the leeway to search out the answer for herself if the late Rain was Chinese. She wasn't a native nor knew how the government had, if they survived the current regime, recorded past generations and how to see a copy.

Passing on the foot-work again wasn't a good habit to get into, but frankly she had little expectations that anything she did in this country would speed up the search.

She'd do Crina's hint herself, at least. Maybe before she had to go to Italy for the Vongola Ball again… hopefully for the last damn time.

…ah. Between the pain in her leg and the bitterly understanding take she had on her old master of mysticisms' death, she had a way to manage her own emotions without destroying something for the catharsis. Finally.

The next week and however long would suck.

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 22th of October, 1969 continued. Wo Hop To Triad's Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Carefully threading the wire through the tiny hole in the ax charm, Mingxia used a pair of pliers to complete the link and attach it to the delicate golden chain Sonya pressed on her once she had some time to recover from her trip to the bathhouse.

It looked a bit strange, tiny golden chain and slightly too large charms linked with cheap tin.

She glanced at the small heap of metal and chain piled in her lap, to the smaller brace of them she was working on, and to the screen that hid the Cloud woman's form as she changed into her borrowed finery for the opening banquet for the tournament. Unsure of what else could be done, she snipped another length of wire using the cutters and bent it to shape for the next charm.

"…I'm not sure how much I like this lace-thing."

"Is it bothering you?"

"No… I'm fairly sure in that respect it's better than I expected. The sleeves are long enough now, too… but… I'm going to get cold easily." The silk stockings, apparently being refused out-right but then again the older woman had warned them she was wearing her own damn boots, were left on the paper and wooden privacy screen as it was shoved aside none too gently.
Mingxia had to admit, that did look a bit breezy.

Once she had removed the sleeve panels, it had a gap in the bodice from the armpit all the way up to the collar. They had to replace that with something, and someone had dug out a length of silk lace from somewhere. It wasn’t quite the same shade of purple as the main body of the dress, it was darker actually, but it didn't look too mismatched.

It continued the flower motif from the skirt, small silk flower patterns were knotted into the sheer fabric. Paced out sparsely at the top and becoming denser near the cuff of the sleeves.

It hung past the thief’s fingertips from where it hung from her shoulder, so they hadn’t gotten the measurements quite right. Aside that minor nitpick…

…her tattoos were mutedly showing through the sheer cloth. She knew what image it depicted, so she could make out the form of the cat and the storm-clouds next to the moon, but anyone else would just see a smear of color.

"I don't think you're going to be able to wear your chain, Miss Sonya."

The Cloud woman inspected her left arm, lifting it so they could see what was visible just by that slight motion. "Probably not. Do me a favor, Mingxia? Look after them until I get back."

Sliding the sleeve back, she ran a few fingers through her shiny blonde hair experimentally. Pulling a lock as far as it would go and skeptically inspecting the tips for a moment.

"Do you want to put your hair up?"

"…it's too short. I need to grow it out longer. Might as well just grow it out from now on, I keep having to put it up." Not looking happy over that observation, she ignored her disordered hair to seat herself on the bench next to the younger Rain, hiking up her pale green silk pants until the very tops of something…

She was wearing an assembly of small belts around the top of both thighs, which held up her own sheer stockings that turned her skin a few darker shades. Plucking one of the tiny charm weapons, one of the short-handled hammers from the rank of them, she threaded it through the loops of her delicate belts next to the skin of her inner thigh.

"…what are those?"

"Garter belts. Keeps your stockings up even if you're doing less than ladylike things."

Mingxia glanced up at the white silk stockings, then back to what Sonya was wearing. "…it's possible they will take your shoes while you're being held hostage, Miss Sonya."

She glanced up sharply, shoving aside the loose gold strands that freely swung into her face with the motion. "What."

"Well… it's possible?"

The Cloud woman blinked at her blankly, then sighed and unhooked her darker stockings to roll off her legs. "Fuck."

"Sorry."

"It's a good catch, girl. I'd be rather vexed if someone tried to take my boots." Half-rising from her
seat, she reached out an arm to snatch the white silk to put on. "Anything else?"

In response the Rain lifted the delicate chain of gold, so she could see it and how odd it looked next to the oversized charms. "This… isn't… it doesn't look right, Miss Sonya."

"Well, that I can fix." A lick of Cloud Flames sunk into the metal links, which extended it and enlarged the chain so the differences in size wasn't noticeable anymore.

…but, maybe the chain was now too long?

The younger girl went back to linking the tiny gold axes to the now less delicate chain, wondering how the Cloud would solve that issue.

They worked silently for a bit of time, the thief finishing with her stocking in short order and going back to threading a selection of her weapon charms into her garter belt while Mingxia finished off the ax charm bracelet. Once she had all the weapons she wanted on her, the older woman reached into the smaller pile of metal in the Rain's lap and pulled out her two necklaces.

One was a jeweled key in red, the other a small stylized hammer. Not normally seen on her, they mainly resided under her clothing.

Awkwardly untangling the silver chains, with more gravity than tugs, the Russian looped the key around the Rain's neck and the hammer around her own.

"It's a Storm-key. They can melt through locks with a dab of red Flames." Sonya informed her before she could ask. "I'm not wearing enough red to excuse it. And since I think the stones are common knowledge now, best not to tempt fate. Don't break it."

Mingxia inspected the panels of her skirt, which actually didn't have bold colors. It was all softer shades, mainly greens with some blue and yellow and the rarer darker purple. The closest to red was the pale pink rose that sat off-set from the middle slightly near the bottom.

Confusingly the Russian then took her longer hammer weapons, the ones that didn't look charming and tiny, and threaded them through tiny loops that had been added to the bottom of the skirt. Four, two on the front at opposite edge and repeated with the back panel.

They weren't hidden, and the silver made it noticeable, but they really did only look like slightly out of place accents to her dress than her hiding weaponry.

Sonya's last step was her hair, blindly parting it to the side and twisting the short-side hair around a finger to slide her bobby pins into and keep swept back from her face. She treated the other side similarly, then slid in the two straight pins with the red painted tips into the result.

"Right. I'm ready. Hopefully Bjørn will get here soon."

Mingxia blinked at her blankly, which wasn't noticed as the woman took her recent work and twisted it twice around her left wrist. "...who?"

"My Lackey. I'm aware I haven't been the best guest, and the lot of you put up with me being so, rather fantastically. Relatively speaking."

"Is there a way we could do better?" Asked the Rain rather bemusedly, not sure if she was bemused or slightly offended.

"...the main issues most Clouds have with other people is that we're feared. Why the hell would we
"respect someone that cringes away from our very presence?" Sonya informed her in her characteristic bluntness. "Which, surprisingly, wasn't an issue I had in any appreciable amounts. Or at least I didn't understand it if it was said. Aside that, just being included is nice even if we don't take the option. Sometimes I'm just not up for socializing or it's safer for all if I don't."

"Being a Cloud sounds lonely." Mingxia offered after a moment of absorbing that, settling on bemused.

"It can be, but we never really notice until we're suddenly that outcast on the edges of a new group… excluded by circumstance and hearsay." With a sigh, the thief turned to look her straight in the eyes. "I appreciate that you bothered following me around. Even when I got snappish. I'm not used to large groups or communal living."

"You were very agreeable to amuse yourself rather often." Refuted the Rain easily.

"...are you calling me easily entertained?"

"Possibly." She giggled, gathering the metal she had been asked to care for up in her arms so they could leave the dressing room.

An amused snort followed her out of the door, the whisper slide of silk finally betraying the woman's movements.

It only lasted a moment as the thief noticed the same, and her steps started to become more silent as she moved to follow.

(ooo000000)

(Wednesday the 22th of October, 1969 continued. Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Bjørn had to help his escorts with the crate, shifting a bit uncomfortably in the plain jacket and pants set he had been recommended to purchase for this trip once they had it off-loaded from the rickety vehicle.

He didn't normally mind visiting his patron in the countries she worked in, it could be very interesting often, but China was… weird.

The Lightning-Storm had taken the opportunity to read up on the local newspapers while he was assembling what Sonya had requested from him over a phone, and it was… not entirely correlating to what he saw on the short drive from the Mafia Land servicing airport to where his Lady was staying here.

The papers were reporting on 'select cases of Red Guard brutality that were unwarranted', but it seems as if the individuals on the streets held no hesitance to beating some old man who apparently didn't meet their standards. In broad daylight, so he was somewhat certain they were part of the 'Red Guard' and not a criminal syndicate.

That was just… backwards.

Seeing the group of olive-green youths with the red stars and armbands get arrested for the assault had been equally as confusing. The scuffle had been rather drawn out, eventually the youths were arrested for their assault but the older man was left in the dirt instead of helped.

In short, the Icelander didn't understand what was going on and hoped his patron at least had half an
idea. A short visit and some newspapers didn't mean he had any kind of grasp of what made up any
country's governmental policies.

Thankfully, he did speak Mandarin Chinese. It was one of the 'business languages' as Viper had
termed it, before drilling the information and language skill into his skull using Mist Flames even if it
rendered him unable to speak his native one for the rest of the day. His familiarity with the language
was a bit lacking, which nothing but practice would help.

Getting hustled into a gated open-air affair in short order meant another had to be tasked with
muscling around his Lady's requested shipment, which he oddly didn't quite appreciate.

Sometimes a bit of physical work was de-stressing when he had multiple things going on.

"You took your sweet time." His Lady observed from behind him in her native Russian.

Bjørn sighed and turned to his patron tiredly. "I have everything you asked for... but I really must
ask, why couldn't I have done it groups of four?"

"Traditionally bad luck. 'Four' in Cantonese sounds like their word for 'death'." Placing a brass
tobacco pipe between her lips, which was interesting and not something he had seen her with before,
she idly watched the men wrestling the literal crate into the courtyard with them. "...was the really
big box necessary?"

"Dama, you demanded twelve pounds of black tea."

She gave him an odd look. "Twelve cans of black tea."

Well... that made more sense on second thought.

"For fuck's sake, Bjørn."

"Forgive me, Dama."

"Is there a problem?" Asked a red-eyed gentleman he was certain he had seen before occasionally
on Mafia Land... just not dressed that way.

As a matter of fact, his Lady was rather neatly attired herself.

They both made him feel shabbily dressed, which made little sense as he was dressed for the streets
and not for whatever it was they were about to do. Of course they were not similarly attired.

"...I'm blaming the connection issues. Get a better phone line. In other news, I apparently ordered
twelve pounds of black tea for your kitchens." Sonya announced a bit exasperatedly, shaking a
measure of lace off one hand in order to pinch the bridge of her nose.

"Oh?"

"My apology for being so ill-tempered for Huang and taking so much of his time. Black tea,
hopefully a lesser amount of jasmine tea, and various others left up to my Lackey's digression."
Responded the thief blandly enough, so he could take it that she wasn't greatly annoyed by the mix
up. "There's also some seeds, because I did destroy the garden a bit."

Both men standing with her looked to the courtyard which, after a moment to adjust to a bit of
greenery in a large port city like this, did look a bit more than just ragged. It was nicely leveled,
but... that didn't mask the large tracts where the grass was removed entirely.
"...Dama."

"*There isn't a burning hole in the city, I see it as a success.*" Sonya insisted defensively, dropping her hand to cross her arms over her purple silk clad chest which waved around that tobacco pipe and the aromatic burning scent of smoke all around as well.

Which, fair enough.

"*There's also eight... Bjørn?*"

"Da, Dama. *Only eight.*"

"*Eight bottles of liquor for your Triad's head. Forgive the delay.*" Holding up a finger before anyone could break into the crate, she waggled it. "*Also, something for sifu Yaozu for meeting with me. No touching.*"

Summoning one of her favored weapons to hand, she planted the pick end into the lid and pried it up without so much as a hesitation to account for the nails hammered into the wood. Bending over the lip of the container, she fished out a red wrapped present and left the rest.

"*Now you can have it.*" Sonya tossed over her shoulder as she left them.

"*I apologize for the twelve pounds of black tea.*" Bjørn informed the men in clumsy Mandarin Chinese when they all glanced at him. "*I did think she ordered that.*"

"*Why would anyone want twelve pounds of black tea?*"

"*She has been known to try drowning out her irritation in tea. Or, more to the point, of letting us try.*" Explained the Lackey a bit defensively himself. "*And, taking into account that hole in Moscow that burned for three straight days, with what she was asked to do here I thought it wasn't that odd.*"

The man with the braid he was speaking to inclined his head in acceptance of the point, a little bemused smile on his face. "*I see. I don't believe we've been properly introduced. Sông Fong.*"

"...Bjørn, just Bjørn. Dama's Lackey. I remember you, actually."

"*Yes, the incident with that Italian fellow Sinclair.*" Confirmed Sông evenly. "*I recall. Excuse me for asking, but what does 'Dama' mean?*"

"*Lady. It's... Icelandic.*" Was it also Finnish?

Mmm... he didn't quite know.

"*Or Scandinavian, either or.*"

"*You're a Viking?*

"*Don't worry, they settled down to become a lot of cut-throat merchants.*" Sonya observed dryly as she followed another well-dressed Chinese man who regarded the shipment he had brought with him somewhat blankly. "*He's not about to go a-Viking.*"

Flushing slightly at the sort of backhanded brag he wasn't sure he earned, he awkwardly scratched the back of his neck in response to the amused looks.

"*Bjørn, catch up with Renato if you could about the issue he contacted you about for me. In a... week? Around there, when this thing is supposed to be done, I want to see Galina. If she can't make
"It, I want a full report on the school to pass on to whomever it is back here who sent us students."

Probably several copies of that report if paper was going to be the medium, from what the Lightning had said some of those exchange students has issues with each other that could occasionally be district-based. Pulling out a notebook, he made a quick note of that order and a reminder to double-check her godchild had the school function thing he had wanted.

"Anything else, Dama?"

She considered it, then shot a look at the equally as finely dressed individuals in the courtyard with her, and back to him. "Send books. Lots of books. At least one per day."

"From your collection, or...?"

That caught the thief up, probably wondering if she had the space to store more.

She didn't, and he only knew because he had a shiny new bookcase in his living room starting to fill up with volumes he hadn't purchased himself.

"Actually, yes. It's been a while, re-reading a few might be interesting. Dig out whatever is on the bottom to send." In contrast to her words, her expression wasn't what one would call 'accepting'. Sourly accepting maybe.

"Very well. I'll."

"Um." An equally red-eyed younger girl to the braid-man peeked curiously around Sonya's greensilk clad hip, biting her lip but speaking up when most of the attention in the courtyard turned to her. "Can I have a word?"

The Russian studied her thoughtfully, then shrugged at the Icelander. "You're choice, Bjorn."

He had two hours before his flight out, it wouldn't hurt to try assisting his patron with building connections."...alright?"

"Her name is Mingxia, Rain user. I think she need some more non-boss advice." His Lady informed him more quietly on her way past him, staring hard at Fong Sōng when he held out an arm for her to take before gingerly accepting it.

Bjorn blinked at her back as the three rather nicely dressed individuals left in short order, then turned to the young Chinese girl that batted her eyes up at him hopefully.

Oh no, he recognized that look from Galina's little 'chat' with him. "...you wish to attach yourself to Dama's staff, don't you?"

"Does she have a lawyer?" Mingxia asked curiously.

The Lightning-Storm paused, thought about it and where everyone was and what individual aims they all had, and heaved a forlorn sigh. "Right. You might want to go over your argument with me, I know how she thinks."

"I'll get my books."

Pursing his lips, the criminally trained investor and professional Lackey wondered if the Soviet Storm-Cloud realized what the girl wanted.
Honestly?

He actually rather doubted it. It seemed he was the only one to ensure she knew what he wanted from her first.

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 22th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Zhōng didn’t notice anything strange until his prized martial artist's elegantly attired guest leaned over to address the red-clad Storm Flame user in an attempt to be covert. "I... this is a bit off from what you said. This is rather bitter. Is it supposed to be?"

Fong snapped his head around and snatched the plate from her spot at the banquet table, ignoring that his ridiculously long braid nearly smacked the Wo Hop To Triad's Mountain Master in the face when it was flung off his shoulder in response for the violent movement. Forgiving the man silently because what she had claimed was alarming, he watched the other man inspect her plate in concern. The martial artist eventually isolated some kind of spice in her food that wasn't in theirs with the back end of his chopsticks, looking rather irritated as he plucked out the tiny tan fragment with some kind of brown fiber coating one side. "I am not sure what this is, but it is not in my plate."

"Well... it wasn't bad, I was just asking." Sonya took back her plate with a stern look to the Storm that had taken it from her, picking up another length of marinated jellyfish to try before returning it to the table. "You could've just said yes or no."

"Sonya, that might be poisoned."

"You cannot poison an aware Storm Flame user." She countered, looking irritated when the strip of flesh slid off her chopsticks. "Supposedly."

"It's not supposed to be bitter."

"If it is poison, they'll be really fucking surprised when I'm still here in a few hours. Or however long it was supposed to take to kill me." She refuted blandly next, finally getting a bite of her dinner with a bit of slurping. "...still odd, though."

Their fellow diners, who had all stopped eating when the Storm made his observation without bothering to keep it to the two of them or even to a limited portion of their table, either attempted to be as brave as she was about eating possibly poisoned foods or started inspecting their own plates with suspicion.

Pressing two fingers to his temple, Zhōng abandoned his first plate of the banquet and tried not to listen to his prized fighter and his guest/hostage bicker like children over whether or not eating something you thought was poisoned but were immune to was a smart move. The Cloud woman was still eating the food even so, discussing it openly as if it was a normal occurrence was not… normally done.

Normally there was panic, and disorder. Maybe a dramatic accusation. A graceful, or disgraceful, death or two to follow once someone made the mistake of being happy over the first death.

Where all Russians like her?

"Sonya, I must insist you stop eating that. Your father will have our heads for allowing."
“ALLOWING? Fong, step lightly there.” Aborting what would've been her pointing her chopsticks at his chest, the thief curled them into a palm to do the pointing with her index finger at the last second. "Arseniy isn’t the most understanding vor, but I am myself and also he does not interfere with my choices. He’d be more upset with you trying to refuse something I want. I want to try more of this, I’ve never had it."

With an utterly pleasant expression, the martial artist swapped out her plate for his own in a quick movement she couldn’t prevent with one of her battle axes fast enough.

"...fine. Whatever. Mine now." Digging her chopstick into the mound of marinated jellyfish strips and ignoring the weapon she had embedded into the wood of their table, she tried one of what was served to the Storm. "...oh, this is very different."

Fong poked the now his, probably, poisoned plate of food suspiciously with the contaminated chopsticks a few times before setting the whole plate and the sticks aside.

Zhōng tiredly sighed. "Would you like to guess how much of what else she is served is poisoned in hopes to insure she expires before she could interrupt any mischief planned for the hostages?"

"Not particularly." Replied the man next to him absently. "She’ll still probably eat it."

"I can hear you two."

"Yes, and?" Fong teased the woman cheerfully, seemingly pulling on some past interaction no one else at their table was privy to.

"Mmm... I probably will still eat it." Admitted the Cloud thoughtfully around her chopsticks, snapping her left-hand fingers to get the ax to evaporate into her pale lavender Flames that nearly perfectly matched her dress.

"I see no reason for you to object to that observation, then."

"I’ll object to whatever I want. Your tone, for instance."

"Must you always be so argumentative?"

"Yes. It's still a way to fight, just without the casualties." Flicking her off-hand at the ax-scar in the table in example, she experimented with picking up some of the cold suckling pig served with the jellyfish to try next. "It doesn’t work nearly as well as an actual fight but helps in taking off the edge of whatever is irritating me."

Fong blinked at her blankly, along with more than half their table shamelessly eavesdropping. "...ah."

"But I can count on one hand how many are brave enough to actually argue back. My family," her pinky finger was flicked up, then her ring finger, "my best friend."

"No one else?"

"Limitedly. Case by case." She eyed him suspiciously. "Usually dependent on the situation."

Sighing again, he shot the slightly aggravating woman a stern look.

She pursed her lips but did pull back slightly and go back to eating silently.

Well... he actually hadn’t expected that to work. Apparently what guilt she felt for being a 'poor'
guest was more than enough for her to at least take the suggestion to stop talking. Not that it was bad
to know how to better manage her temper her next visit, but this wasn't the place for such a
discussion.

From all he had heard about her type, he had likely gotten off lightly for hosting her in a sort of semi-
imprisoned kind of way in his headquarters. She had stayed under any government notice and within
the bounds set out for her until invited past them.

The 'gift' he had only a moment to investigate before leaving for this banquet was unexpected
enough.

When it was time for the second course, the servers were at first taken aback by the suspicious looks
they gained from their table. Either they didn't know about the assassination attempt, or they were
surprised the woman was still alive. Either way, it wasn't just the foreign-born Russian that gave
them more attention than normal.

The braised scallops and dried oyster that replaced the roast pork and marinated jellyfish was
collectively regarded questionably… except by the one person who had genuine cause to abstain
from eating it.

Nearly stabbing the Storm's hand before he could take possession of her new plate with the
chopsticks she had from the first round, the Russian elected to stab one of the scallops with a single
stick and used that to transfer it to her mouth.

"…well?" Asked the older woman that had promised to teach her to knit from across the table.

"…how the fuck would I know if it a bit off?" Responded the woman a bit thickly, using the pad of a
thumb to smooth away a bit of sauce. "It doesn't taste bitter… I think."

"Better you than us, Zhōng." The Wo On Lok's Mountain Master informed him cheerfully, endlessly
amused by the drama as he always was. "We greatly appreciate your sacrifice."

Considering they would have the Cloud's implied protection for their knitting old granny, without the
headache of dealing with her, he could see the point. Not appreciate it, but see it.

The Mountain Master of the Wo Shing Wo Group barely managed to conceal his snort further down
the table, earning a wide-eyed look of incredulousness from his picked fighter.

"Likely, it will be worth it."

Fong gave him a side look of his own. "This is the second assassination attempt on her life so far."

"...shitty assed attempts." Sonya offered on her own end thoughtfully, trying the oysters next
curiously but returned to the scallops in short order. "How much longer will this thing go on,
anyways?"

"Well… with banquets? Usually ten or twelve courses, and nothing important will be discussed until
the end." Responded the Storm thoughtfully.

"I utterly regret not bringing a book." Nibbling a bit on another scallop that was a bit larger than one
could comfortably eat in one bite, she scraped her bottom lip with her teeth and gave the Storm
seated next to her a slightly more serious look. "I think I'm going to have to request you bring me
something to actually eat each day."

"Along with the requested books you asked of your Lackey?"
Eying her plate suspiciously for a moment, the martial artist offered her his nearly untouched one.

After a second of visibly thinking about it, she took it and started in on his oysters. The thief made a sound of discontent after a second of chewing. "...yeah, no. It was the oysters this round."

Wo On Lok's Mountain Master smoothed fingers down his neatly clipped goatee, considering the Russian thoughtfully even as he tipped his dried oysters to one side of his plate like the rest of their table. "Bets on the next course, anyone?"

Zhōng utterly regretted the necessity of bringing her here. It was amusing, in hindsight likely moreso and would probably do wonders for their reputation among the other Triad branches, but he wasn't sure if the property damage costs were worth it.

If there was so much issue ensuring she was calm while under a limited type of house arrest for half a week, a probable week and a half of being held hostage might see this entire place go up in so much purple Flames.

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(Thursday the 23th of October, 1969. Budapest, Hungarian People's Republic.)

Having split from his very lovely traveling companions yesterday, Cherep ended up just wandering the cobblestone streets of Budapest a bit aimlessly.

Not to say he wasn't entirely enjoying his time without deadlines or traveling plans to conform to, but he was just ambling along at his own pace for once and enjoying the novelty of the act. This city was huge, very easy to just get lost in, and there was always something interesting to see every turn he took.

He had dipped into a few pubs just to see what was on tap and maybe taste a few, kind of skipped the museums and libraries because they reminded him of his little sister and he couldn't share that with her, wandered down a large section of Andrásy út to take in the sights and what was for sale, and skipped the baths because that reminded him of Tatiana.

Actually, maybe he could explore them and write them letters about it?

They had kind of drifted apart a little, which was understandable now that they weren't half living out of each other's pockets under Lisa and Arseniy. Working on their own separate paths had left little time to ensure they caught up with one another, last couple of years it was either Lisa's pregnancy or only Christmas he saw their elder Sun using sister. Maybe a phone call here or there for his elder sister, a few postcards exchanged with his little sister and random glancing meet-ups, and that was it.

It wasn't until Sonya got them all together so much this year, a brief visit that overlapped to welcome her brat into the family and the concert she somehow found out before either of her older siblings, that he realized he had spent maybe less than a month with Tatiana in the last couple years.

If it was his little sister demanding sibling time from them, then there was something seriously wrong. …ooh, a theme park!

Making a beeline for it, even if he cut across a park's green and got dirty looks for that, the stuntman
jogged down the streets until he came up on a seasonal fairground type affair.

A bit different than a wandering circus, this was made to be stationary and never move. That meant it likely had a fun-house full of a mirror-maze. Those were awesome to think in.

Shelling out a bit of money and ignoring the strange looks he got for being excited to solo a 'kiddy' attraction, the Cloud Flame user happily got himself turned around all over the place.

About the third time he banged his nose off a pane of plate glass, it occurred to him that writing a traveling journal might appeal to Sonya more than just letters. Would be easier on him too, then he could write however long letters to Tatiana and not worry he wasn't giving both of them enough attention.

…the nurse might like pictures more, actually. Of the local sights, fashions, and maybe just cool-looking things. She spent most if not all her time on a tropical island, which had to get same-y after long enough.

Sure, in Mafia Land you could get just about anything from anywhere in the world as long as you didn't mind a trip… but as a nurse she probably didn't like being very far from the hospital she worked at in case of emergency.

He had also seen her utterly insane and thick medical textbooks. He'd get the pictures he took developed in each city, and write a short blurb on the back, before sending them to her. She wasn't quite as much a fan of written word as their younger sister, short and sweet might be the way with her.

What to do for Valera?

Baby brother was… a brat, really. He didn't have much of a personality beyond that, if you discounted being really viciously protective of what he saw as 'his'.

Cherep could be really evil and send the brat stuffed animals from a city in every country in the world. With a Cloud's irrelevance to another's opinion, the kid would likely hoard them even well after he became a vor or picked a different path.

Pausing to sneeze, and rubbing his much-abused nose, he took a random turn and unfortunately found himself at the end of the maze.

…aww. He'd been through this configuration before then.

"Now, now, gentlemen!" …the hell? "Let us not behave hastily. That is the way people come to harm… mainly me, right now."

There was… a very terrible Master Liam impersonator with a less than practiced dictation and with an accent. Still rolled the 'r's rather nicely, honestly. Curious now, the stuntman backed up to the corner of the fun-house to see if he could hear what was going on clearly.

"There hasn't be enough time! Ah… ahem. I mean, dear… investors, let us not be too eager to judge things over and done with. My contracted agreement was to the end of the week, yes? You are ahead of yourselves and will feel quite foolish when I deliver my end of the bargain."

Okay… this sounded as shady as fuck. Cherep wondered if he was interested enough to figure out what was actually going on or not.

One hand, it was a carnival. He liked them. They had enough of a bad reputation about kidnappings
and shady business practices, if this would add to that then as a carnie himself he should probably alert someone.

On the other, he wasn't what one could call intimidating or scary. Likely, if he got involved, he'd get beaten up or shanked in the gut for a few painful days.

This was a job for… Viper.

The stuntman wondered when his Misty friend would swing around, and exactly how much he should gather up to shell out for the miser doing him the favor.

Mmm, he had a camera and a journal to source for his sisters. He wouldn't be leaving the city for a bit anyways.

Maybe he could also get started on that stuffed animal collection for Valera somewhere around here too.
(Thursday the 23th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"Lady Cloud?"

With a tired sigh, that stupid banquet thing ended really late and frankly the thief had little to no patience for the hour-long talks and speeches that followed afterwards but sat through anyways, Sonya slit open an eye and glared at the speaker.

The young boy flinched back a full foot of space, dithered with the formerly neatly pressed little robe he was dressed in by trying to tug it neat again, and tried to not spastically gesture to a low table being filled with food trays by subdued dressed servants.

He failed.

"Erm… Lady Cloud, they're serving breakfast."

"They tried to poison me. I'm not eating anything in hopes that will spare the rest of you."

She informed him softly, trying not to scare the ever-living shit out of the poor boy.

Given by how much he paled, and the scandalized gasps all around from those awake enough to comprehend the statement when her words were repeated in different dialects to allow the rest of the room in on the issue, she probably failed horribly too.

The other hostages that had been near her when that had come to light last night weren't so fluttery, the steel haired old knitting granny nonchalantly picking up her own chopstick to make a plate of food even as the servants hesitated at the sudden attention aimed their way. The two twittering bitches who regarded her as some kind of oddity one moment and some kind of monster the next, especially after last night, were all but plastered to the far wall away from her already but gallantly trying to put forth a good face in not fainting outright.

The remaining Wo hostages, of which the boy was one and her 'assigned' translator, didn't really seem to know what to make of her. One was an elderly gentleman who seemed bemused at the Flame thing but nonetheless proud of his young fighting possible son/student the last few times she'd seen him, now sitting in a corner meditating.

Of the two remaining, one was a three-year-old girl and the other a slightly older boy.

Old knitting granny had them, and she was in the middle of taste-testing the food while cutting it up into smaller bites to ensure it wouldn't kill the kids before transferring the food off her plate to theirs.

Aside the Wo Triad Groups' nine hostages, there were about forty other people all crammed into the same three open rooms. Of that forty, only about six other unknowns were in the same open-space room with them. The rest were further inside, but she didn't rightly care at all.

She'd done an inspection of the whole interconnected set of rooms before settling down, knew four ways to exit them without her Flames and five more with. Two bathrooms on both ends, one side for women and one for men from the looks of things. This one was the middle, the very room they all had to enter by.

There was only one door in and out, a heavy affair that had ridiculously easy to pick locks on the
outside of it, and Sonya had kicked a few cushions to lean against it for her bed once she was satisfied with the layout. She was in fact still lying on them, not particularly bothered to move even when the 'head' servant guy had damn near gone as pasty white as her skin when he spotted her watching him in the dim morning light when he came in to start the delivery of the food.

So… actually, she knew there was food. She was pretty sure the people involved in her possible attempted poisoning hadn't expected her to survive to morning, so breakfast was probably safe enough. Even so, old knitting granny's caution was very smart of her.

Stretching a bit lazily, the Soviet Storm-Cloud flicked her eyes back to said 'head' servant guy standing rigidly at his post right next to the doorway. Who was still pasty grey under his naturally olive skin tone, striving to ignore her very presence and the suspicion aimed at him.

With a wicked smirk, she turned back to the young preteen trying really hard not to let his nerves get in the way of his assigned task. "Go eat, little man. It should be safe enough for now."

"…not even some rice? Please, Lady Cloud? You should eat something."

"I will eat later." Refuted Sonya, still a bit more gently than she was wont to but the kid looked spooked enough as it was. "Just... not what they bring."

"Is it wise to bait them?" Wondered old and creaky who had been meditating in a sunny corner of their very nice prison, taking advantage of the high but tiny windows letting in small slats of sunlight into the room.

As he was nearly half a room away from her, and there was some noise-level since the others were waking to the scent of breakfast, he was a bit too loud to be ignored.

"I bait them by surviving." Observed the thief equally as tonelessly, merely allowing some bored threads into her voice. "Would more or less intentional baiting affect that?"

They each were given a small, flat chest to hold things within. Like clothing, various vanity items, or amusements. Sonya had, very politely and she didn't know why one paled so much and fainted straight away, glared off the middle-aged old bitch a room away from taking possession of all the younger children's chests.

Her own contained her tobacco pipe and a leather pouch full of shredded tobacco, as well as a change of clothing she wouldn't mind spending time in and the books she had already read through. Since she wasn't going to obey the slight gnawing in her stomach she pulled that out of the cedar wood box.

Knitting old granny had collected their group's children chests, filling it with their things under their dictations. The wonder over why the girl brought an entire collection of dolls aside, the boy wasn't much better but he only had two wooden samurai figures, the only others that brought smoking supplies were mostly the older men.

Point in fact, she was mostly sure the meditating old man was another smoker.

However, second hand smoke around kids was still… eh.

Rising from her spot of very comfortable indeed cushions and flashing the sickly-looking servant man a few teeth too many with a bit of Cloud Flames in her eyes, she wandered over to him and took a seat in the next strip of sunlight. A touch of Storm- Flames, both to the pipe's bowl and to the exhale of smoke, solved that issue for her.
"The point remains that," offering her pipe earned her an actual look from her new seat-mate as he gingerly took it, "I am here more for your protection than anything. Reminding them that trying to kill me has failed already, twice actually, may prevent another attempt spilling over to you and the others. I would be then somewhat obligated to murder my way out of here in attempts to find that 'them' I speak vaguely about."

After staring at the burning pipe's bowl for a moment, he pulled experimentally on it. He looked pretty damn surprised when she lit his exhale on Flames as well. After a moment of blinking stupidly, he handed the pipe back. "...I see. Why... do you refer to whoever is trying to assassinate you as 'them'?"

"It may not be the syndicate that is holding us. Excuse me, Triad. It could be the ones hosting, or someone else that have designs on the tournament of their own." Stretching out her really-broken-but-not leg again, and fuck did it just occasionally twinge painfully sometimes, the Russian examined the room again thoughtfully in the light of day. "As I don't know for sure, I cannot justify outright massacre right now. Further attempts would likely shine more light on the culprits. They can't have that many assassins that can keep their traps shut about them."

Well... she could actually justify it. As a matter of fact, if Fong went ahead and did something exceedingly foolish like tell Arseniy about the assassination attempts, her foster father might have a few things to weigh in on himself.

Would probably be on his way to have his say, and the vor wasn't really a greatly talkative man.

Given the shit he dug into to save Tatiana from some teenaged stupidity from haunting her steps, which he really didn't have to actually do as everyone in Russia had criminal records of various degrees, Sonya felt safe in assuming he would be equally displeased at this current trouble of hers.

He had hunted down her biological parents without being asked, stood up for Cherep's sake against a criminal doctor that hadn't known why the Cloud had the injuries he had but was about ready to murder them all for it...

Actually, her foster father might've seemed like he did little for them but be there during their years under his roof... but he had done a lot.

...what was the Sŏng sibling's fascination with her father?

First Mingxia asked if he knew where she was, then Fong basically had a very restrained stroke over 'allowing' her to eat something they were sort of sure was poisoned he thought Arseniy wouldn't like her eating.

Now Sonya couldn't stop thinking about the vor. She kind of missed the grumpy, gruff man that raised her to be the thief she was. Rather badly right now.

Fuck, she hoped the man was on his way. Even if that would probably include a fair bit of risky political murder or several hundred.

Arseniy was still a Cloud, he just never needed the Flames that went with the mentality.

"Is there a problem, young lady?"

Reminded she had a smoking partner and she had been holding onto the pipe for a while now, the Russian took her draw and handed it off. "...homesickness. I, and most Clouds, abhor being away from their territories for any length of time. It's already been most of a week."
She still didn't believe, or didn't want to believe, her 'territory' was people. Just having 'pack' as part of being a Cloud was somehow less personally abhorrent, so Sonya bitterly missed her pack mates.

Even if that sounded utterly stupid and was never going to be said aloud ever.

Mostly because she was, yet again, shut in and barred from seeing them if she wished.

It probably wouldn't be nearly so acute if she had the option to go visit them, which in hindsight she did a lot when she was at loose ends. Arseniy, Lisa, and Valera when she was in Moscow and Tats when she was in Mafia Land… with occasional asides with Cherep here or there.

Frankly, the Russian was just sick and tired of not having regular contact with her siblings and Shamal. Yes, she and her older brother bounced around the world a bit too often to have reliable ways of communication at hand. Frankly, a week to months of no contact would probably never bother them. Had never bothered them yet.

Just as long as it was ended on their own terms when they wanted it to, they probably would never really bother to stop wandering off and wandering back every now and again.

Kind of an odd realization to come to light while playing slightly lethal damsel in distress for a Triad branch, but… well… whatever.

The minute she got out of here, Björn would be pulled from whatever he was on under Viper to find her a damn home already. Renato too, the asshole had promised to help.

Fuck Moscow up the ass and sideways for good measure. Fuck the Zolotovs too, frankly she utterly dreaded going back and didn't really intend to remain either. She… just… no longer cared.

Something non-physical snapped sort of behind her eyes, which was weird enough to feel and not entirely know the origin of, and…

Huh. Sonya didn't care anymore.

That was… oddly relieving.

Galina was more than good enough as a steward for the Flame groups for the short term, depending on what she wanted to do either the thief would pay her to remain a teacher or abandon ship entirely with her once Dmitriy was sprung from prison. Scruffy was already hers, the Mirror Lady was free to do what she wished, Usov would likely be along shortly.

Was she missing anything?

The Cloud brats should be warned she would be M.I.A. from then on, but she'd do that around Christmas time. Then…

Hmm…

Old man Zolotov and his fuck-wit son?

If she told Lisa her patience was gone, and it truly was from the dead non-reaction she got contemplating her former role in the clan, her foster mother would probably manage things. The older woman had been digging here and there for the breaking point and if she had passed it, and she was pretty sure the whole 'no reaction' thing would be scores better than attempted homicide-suicide by Cloud Flame user.
It wouldn’t be 'official' until she and Tats got that shared apartment thing, because why give up the condo before they had to?

A nudge against a lace-clad arm, and Sonya winced as she realized she forgot the old man again. Taking back the pipe which the poking was done by, she sighed a bit heavily before puffing on it to ensure it was still lit.

"We should probably arrange for some kind of entertainment." Knitting old granny announced out of the blue, settling the children she had taken under her wings behind the Soviet Storm-Cloud prudently and handing each one of their dolls. She made her creaky way over to the two of them, using the thief’s politely if stiffly upraised hand to help lower herself to the floor with them. "Idle minds left to wander will get to us before long, and they were not all that forthcoming about if we are allowed to watch the tournament."

"Oh… I can assure you, they will not stop those of us that want to." She promised her a bit darkly, taking her draw off the pipe and first offering it to her and getting a negative shake of the head before passing to her other side. "But that said, we should also sort of organize this group a bit. I am only one person, I cannot be everywhere. And anything too dangerous goes down, they will likely come after me first."

They had taken her ax charm bracelet, probably because she had used it at the banquet last night. Unfortunately for them, their screening for other weapons passed over her other charm weapons because of their unusual locations. She still had two garter belts full of miniatures, some of which were digging to her skin a bit uncomfortably but that she would bear, her Bec de Corbins and the Thor's hammer pendant.

"Physical exercise as well. Some of the younger ones will need to do something or they will never calm down for the night." Observed the old man on her other side idly, now not jumping when she applied her Storm Flames to the smoke he exhaled. He in fact looked rather thoughtful. "I will admit, I do not know much about you Flame users."

"That may not be wise to do myself, your syndicates should have say over what they wanted to risk with you all." Shrugging a shoulder, the thief accepted the pipe back. "Although, I will admit maybe a general overview would be needed for those that are only now aware Dying Will Flames exist."

…that reminded her. Looking over a shoulder, Sonya eyed the two Wo Triad Group women crammed into a corner practically all over each other.

Odd, but okay. She had thought they were girlfriends of certain fighters, but it could totally be they were lesbian sisters of those young men. Or something.

How many other 'adults' were in here?

There were a handful of old people, a shit-ton of kids, and a sprinkle of fully-grown hostages.

"I refuse to be in charge of anything but security and Flame-related lessons." She announced to her two fellows flatly, pausing to draw on the pipe before handing it back. "I know ballet and some tumbling routines from traveling with a wandering circus, and will not mind teaching… I think. But I don’t do well with large groups. Kids in the morning and right before bed, whoever wants to learn near or around lunch, and Flame lessons occasionally in-between."

Knitting old granny hummed softly, reaching to massage her left shoulder joint with a brief grimace of pain. "My son told me some of what you can do… if you can 'Propagate' the knitting supplies, I can teach more than just you."
"History lessons. One should know where they come from to understand where they are going."
Decided the old man firmly, passing back the pipe. "If we had writing materials, I would also say
reading and writing… but I did not bring such things."

Sonya blinked at him, dropping her eyes to examine the burning tobacco pipe in her hands, then
eyed the bare pinewood walls with interest. More specifically, the moving panels that opened up one
room into another.

"Actually… if you have a book of matches, I believe getting that might be easier than you think."

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 23th of October, 1969 continued. Wo Hop To Triad's Compound, Wan Chai
District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Fong was not… worried, per say.

Concerned was a good word.

One really only had to take one glance at the scars the courtyard of the Wo Hop To Triad's
Headquarters to see the imprint of Sonya's brief stay with them. Added to that two assassination
attempts they knew of on Chinese soil…

Well. Nervous might actually cover it.

He was in Mafia Land enough to see international news, from all corners of the world. There were in
fact two very visible signs that however reasonably well-mannered the Russian thief tried to be,
sometimes her temper escaped her grasp. Once in Mafia Land, one in her native city.

Marvelous self-control for her type, really. He wasn't doubting her, or her ability to manage herself,
but… well-

Something hard and knobby, Master Yaozu's newly acquired walking stick in fact, whacked him
upside the head in an admonishing manner he had not missed. Hard enough to sting, but not hard
enough to do more than merely force the head of someone unprepared for it forward a bit.

"Stop daydreaming, Fong!"

"…yes, sifu."

Mingxia giggled next to him, clearing her throat and dropping her ruby gaze on the gemstone the
Soviet Storm-Cloud had pressed on her to help develop her Flames when the both of them glanced at
her.

Fong was pretty sure his old martial arts master was getting his revenge right now. For… yes, lying
to him.

They had a very good reason, and the old man had accepted that they didn't have another choice, but
that didn't eliminate a lot of the more troubled history between them.

He hadn't quite expected things to work out this way.

At most, he had expected Yaozu to disappear into the thief's motherland without so much as a word
or simply refuse to hear him out. He had been rather strict on the point that as long as Fong was
working for the Triads he would have nothing more to do with him. Even getting Sonya's proposal
heard had been a gamble, which probably only succeeded because of the Cultural Revolution's toll on him.

The revelation of Dying Will Flames, although that did throw the old man a bit, put a bit more weariness in his eyes but gave him more understanding of why. Why they didn't have another choice, not if the Flame problem they shared was to be solved.

Not expecting and not appreciative were two very different things… just… who gave Yaozu the damn stick?

Fong caught the next strike before it could connect even with his wandering thoughts, triggered as it was by his little sister succeeding in finally putting a crack into the tiny jewel.

Snorting, with satisfaction and a bit of tiredness, the old man folded himself down to sit on the Rain's other side as she gleefully took in the tiny hairline fracture. "Nerves, boy? Rather odd… for you."

"I am not nervous over the tournament, sifu." Refuted the Storm easily, unable to prevent himself from taking in the damage to the yard yet again. "…if the arena survives Sonya's temper about being shut in, on the other hand…"

As dismissive as the thief was over the attempts on her life, she also was willing to risk more than anyone that knew someone wanted them dead and was within striking distance should be. He wasn't sure if that was from experience with those after her, or if it was just sheer acceptance of the fact people wanted her dead.

The fact he didn't know sat ill with him. Fong had set out to befriend the woman, and yet faced with the opportunity to actually talk to her more he had instead spent most of it trying to break her in half. His little sister had more dialogue with her than he did now.

He did not like to fail, especially in goals he set for himself. While fighting a Cloud was a genuine method by which to earn their acceptance, it was also probably the easier one. One didn't have to appeal to the Cloud's rational mindset and ensure their presence outweighed the possible annoyance it caused that way.

Additionally, Fong was not a fan of taking the easy ways out of a problem. The results were usually rather fragile in endurance and did not help build strong relationships.

"She seemed very even tempered these last few days, big brother." Offered his little sister, losing some of her smile in respects to the subject matter. "Maybe watching the tournament will put her in a good mood?"

"...I broke her leg, her left one. I am sure Huong didn't heal it, and she shifted her weight onto it when she got bored enough to fidget last night."

"I believe she's been using it to... temper herself."

"If it is broken, then how can she stand on it at all?" Yazou demanded skeptically.

Fong could only spread his hands and shrug. "I do not know, sifu. All I do know is that right after I did break it... she flexed it twice, only the first time gingerly, before just standing up again and proceeding as if nothing was wrong."

The older man stared hard at him for a long moment. "That is a mildly terrifying ability. If it took her to the ground at first, then it cannot be just sheer endurance."

"Isn't that a good thing?" The Rain asked of them curiously, pulling a slight face as she thought over
her words again and found something wrong with it. "I mean, not that she has a broken leg, but that
she isn't hampered by it?"

"Something that isn't stopped by pain or physical inability..."

"There is always a limit to one's Flames, sifu. Eventually, in any fight that takes long enough, even
Sonya's would run out." The Storm scowled at this turn of the conversation. "Not that I am ill-
wishing, but it should be said."

Yaozu glanced down at the paving stones making up the walk from the courtyard gates to the
veranda they were seated upon, and the one stone split in half that had yet to be replaced.

"And that is why no one wishes to upset a Cloud Flame user, sifu." Mingxia informed him, and
Fong belatedly realized Sonya might've been the cause of that specifically and not just it being
damage from their spars. "Delicate as she appears, she could likely flatten a mountain before
someone can take her out."

...now they were back to the topic of Sonya possibly destroying the tournament area before he could
fight in it.

No, Fong would like to speak to her before she possibly got infuriated with being held prisoner on
an island south of Hong Kong proper and did a large amount of unanticipated remodeling. The arena
would be a loss, but one they could solve in short order as long as there was a decent Mist user or
seven about.

"Fong." Huang the Sun shuffled out of his kitchen, holding a small lacquered box in one hand. "I
have the meal you requested, and no. You may not eat it."

Well... that was an odd qualifier-

Wait.

"Oh no." Mingxia sighed softly. "Master Huang, you didn't."

"I included a list of all the dishes for the lady Cloud who got me tea." The Sun lectured sternly,
waving around a ladle with suspicious red stains on it. "If the Mapo Tofu does not get to her, she will
know."

Yaozu ran fingers down his neatly shaven jawline suspiciously. "What's this now?"

Turning to him with a sly little smile, his little sister could occasionally be quite mean, the Rain lifted
a shoulder in a shrug very reminiscent of the Storm-Cloud the boxed food was intended for. "While
my big brother still likes dumplings... while here he came to love a spicy kind of tofu dish. Mapo
Tofu in fact, he has an unhealthy addiction to it."

"I do not." To prove it, the Storm sat the box down and didn't respond to Huang's dramatic eye roll.
"Mingxia, can you watch it while I change? It is nearly time for the Mountain Master and I to leave,
especially as there are only limited times to see the hostages."

"Of course, big brother. I will watch the box containing the evil tempting dish as you heroically put
space between you and it."

...why did he miss her being mischievous, again?

Heaving a sigh, and ignoring the Sun's rather loud guffaw at the teasing, he rose from his spot to
dress in something easier to fight in.

No, it wasn't quite the same as it was. Might not ever get that way again.

Fong did not mind, they had all grown in some way and that would always show. Yaozu would look at him again without glancing away in stern disapproval, Mingxia would tease him in the open instead of saving it for the rare times they had alone.

It was fine as it was.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 23th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

…holy fuck was that spicy.

Sonya blinked a few times rapidly, eyeing the dish she had taken a bite out of warily. It had been specifically packed so it would be still warm when it reached her, so she had curiously started with it just to see what the hell it was.

"Is there anything you can observe from your… situation?"

"I think the head waiter guy knew or at least is involved in trying to poison me, either that or he's terrified of my very existence for some reason." Which… really, all options were equally as likely as the others.

Turning around to suddenly see a person in a full room of sleeping people was watching you intently had to scare the shit out of a lot of people. Maybe.

Her mouth was also burning, ow.

The thief scrubbed the roof of her mouth with her tongue, waiting out the sensation of taking a bite of something a bit spicier than she normally liked. Attempting to get more of the diced tofu than red sauce onto the spoon this time, she tried another bite even if Fong looked a bit grumpy.

Zhōng sighed yet again, probably over the fact the martial artist had been not so subtly trying to indicate he wouldn't mind taking the really spicy dish off her hands and she was ignoring him.

Sonya waved the spoon in his direction as she got over the harsh bite of her latest mouthful. "That sigh? The sensation of things getting a bit weirder than you can stand? Is how you know there's Mists about. The stronger they are or the more there are, the stronger that feeling. Last night there were about twelve to fifteen all in the same room, for reference. Do you normally sigh so much? You sound like a half-assed boiled teapot."

The Mountain Master of the Wo Hop To Triad stared at her blankly for a long moment, then with an annoyed air and a rather ferocious scowl he got up from the table they were seated around to address the ceiling. "We were assured all hostage meetings would be private."

"They're not going to admit they heard you or did so in the first place." She informed his back blandly, moving the shallow bowl of whatever it was away from the Storm's fingers and taking a maybe too big bite of the food she instantly regretted.

The hell was up with Fong, seriously?
"They… wow hot, they're also not going to leave in hopes of proving me wrong for just long enough. While you can confirm with your own Mists back at your place what I say is true… but by then it would be too late for you to press the complaint home. You would 'technically' accept the imposition as a necessity security option if you don't object now, if I recall the arrangements gone over last night right. Besides which, Mists have odd ideas about what 'private' means."

"Do you deal with them that often?" Inquired the martial artist curiously, all but lighting up in happiness when she shoved the almost lukewarm dish finally deemed a bit too spicy for her across the table at him.

He caught the spoon she chucked at his head like a complete asshole, leaving her hands free to dig into the blue lacquered box for something else.

"There's a pair of Mists back home I interact with pretty often. While the old wives' tale about how Clouds and Mists interact have some basis in fact, I can actually deal with the Flame type decently enough if enough precautions are taken."

What else was in Huang's care package?

…grated lotus root and carrots in something oily was in the next container she opened. She was going to send the Sun user several hundred pounds of tea at this rate.

The minor headache she had from not eating all day had long since faded, but the… hmm, vinegar and root dish was doing wonders for her scorched taste buds.

"How are we to be sure you are in fact in no distress from the accommodations?" Demanded Zhōng shortly of them both, looking highly vexed in her presence for once. "Or if any of the other hostages are even alive?"

Sonya and Fong exchanged a look over the table and the food. She twisted her chopsticks, the ones with the core of steel purchased for her in hopes she wouldn't shatter all the eating utensils with stupid-insane finger strength, in the air a few times while they both swallowed to buy time.

"A, there's two Storm Flame users in the room."

"We are both on guard, Mountain Master. It would take a considerable amount of Mist Flames to change our minds on that alone before a suggestion can be implanted."

"B, I'm fairly sure the level of Mist Flame needed to fool Fong's understanding of what is going on… only exists in one person I know of or at least ten or so other Mists pooling resources. And that one person is a friend of a family member. Whereas with my own defenses might be less robust to a pooled attempt… there is also that folktale about what happens when a Mist runs afoul of any Cloud that likely stayed the hand of whomever might've tried. So, they're not likely to try at all because that's stupidly suicidal and likely to not work. Weird and rather insane Mists might be, but they do have a great understanding of self-preservation and what they can realistically do."

The older man did not look entirely convinced, but he did return to the seat he abandoned once learning they were being observed.

"…you believe there is a Mist stronger than me?" Fong asked after a moment of chewing, before his next heaping spoonful of the really spicy stuff.

Sonya frowned as she munched on a piece of lotus root, seriously wondering. "Honestly? I… have no idea. The two of you might be the strongest in your respective Flame types for all I know. Whereas sometimes power is just not easily overcome, the other is a Mist."
Rubbing the old knife-wound that cut into his left cheek in a manner that suggested nothing good for whatever her was thinking of, the oldest individual in the room leaned forward to gain her attention. "What is a 'pooled' attempt? I have never heard of such a thing."

"Kind of a Mist-only technique. They can Construct something with the understanding of another's Flame work, which is insanely hard to try replicating without their ability to change the 'intent' behind their Flames." Nibbling a carrot slice shaped as a flower, she ran her mind back over all the attempts she had probably annoyed her brother about how they might share Cloud Flames because him running out was one of her worst nightmares. "It's... also insanely hard to try replicating in other Flame types. Not even in Rains, and you'd think with their Tranquility it would... erm... 'stack', better than any other type's."

Giving her a strange look, Zhōng took a deep breath instead of sigh.

Blowing it out again as he attempted to corral his probably wonky thoughts into a less Mist-impacted way. "You are unusually chatty today."

Sonya bit through the chopsticks, actually how she kept losing the damn things now, and irritably fished out the shattered wood splinters and the steel out of her mouth.

Clearing her own throat after swallowing her bite, she turned slightly to face him directly. "There. Are. Twenty. Kids. Being held hostage here. I'm fine with kids I'm not related to... so long as I don't have to interact with them."

Fong glanced up with a measure of concern from scraping up the last of that really fucking spicy red stuff.

She shrugged, peeling the paper off the thankfully full steel chopsticks that had been tucked in the very bottom of the Sun-made care package for her. "I'll deal. They're kids. They deserve to be protected. Aside twenty fucking children of varying ages, there's about six more near my age and ten adults a bit older than us. The rest are old people. I rather loathe one of the middle-aged women, can't deal with the other six near my age, and have about two old people I can more or less deal with easily enough. However, twenty kids takes a lot of work, especially as several are already missing their parents or want to go home but don't understand why they can't."

Those few who weren't alright with not seeing their guardians or caretakers kept triggering those that were a bit more adventurous, meaning crying jags could spread from one side of their prison to the other no matter how careful they were.

She could understand that old biddy, the bitch trying to set herself as the ultimate child-authority, was actually a professional caretaker someone managed to send in as a hostage. Sonya didn't mind if she wanted to structure kiddy-activities or whatever. More power to her.

She had a very big problem letting her hit the kids when they didn't obey her right away. Some of those kids maybe, the older ones being rebellious just because they were unhappy or specifically being dicks to the old people. The Russian was not so self-righteous as to assume violence was never an answer, the various parents of the kids might actually see that as a valid tactic and they weren't her kids.

…slapping a three-year-old because the boy was just miserably missing his mom and you didn't want to hear it, or wouldn't shut up when told to, was another thing entirely.

It put her in the awkward position of not allowing someone to do their job because she had actual honest problems with parts of that job, but not the rest of it. The bitch was decently alright when
there wasn't a problem, keeping childish attention spans on story-time or whatever for solid blocks of
time, but the option of behavioral correction she defaulted too…

Culturally speaking, she probably shouldn't have gotten involved no matter how much that put her
on edge. She honestly did not know what was allowed or what was viewed as child abuse around
here, and insisting her sensibilities were the right ones was a moral grey area she didn't want to
assume.

Corralling those kids for naptime with her instead of allowing them to be hit and continuing with
whatever the distraction was at the moment had been her recourse. They got to either be miserable
then recover, fall asleep, or got to commiserate with each other over being miserable at lower
volumes.

Probably in the wrong here or not, there was also the problem of however longer this was to go on
and not murdering her fellow hostages.

Sonya was realistic enough to understand if that bitch did more than just slap a kid she'd probably
hurl twenty pounds of steel through her corpse without so much as a rational thought about the
consequences. Which would be a hell of a lot more scarring to the kids than just getting hit once or
twice.

She had avoided no-win situations like the plague before this. They were not fun, nor could they be
easily solved. It came down to a compromise no one liked very much but would hopefully do the
least amount of damage.

…wait. "Quick question."

As what they were really doing was wasting time while she ate food they all knew wasn't poisoned,
both Chinese men politely gave her their attention.

"...are we supposed to have the kids with us for this tournament thing? No one has said if we can
watch or not, or if we're supposed to ensure they either sleep through it or watch. Or if we split up
for that who's taking care of the kids then."

"Fong, go inquire for her."

…oh, awkward. The Storm did as asked without question, leaving her as… was she the Triad head's
bodyguard right now or what?

Folding over one of the white lattice looking lotus root slices to manage easier, the thief sighed when
it sprang flat again and entangled itself on her chopsticks.

"Is there anything else wrong?"

"Mostly just cultural things I'm not sure of, and a whole lot of very opinionated people in one room
makes for several arguments I was subjected to." Aside that, it wasn't annoying per say.

Labor intensive and a hard draw on her patience, and only sometimes annoying.

"Why not ask?"

Biting another lotus root slice in half, Sonya eyed the man thoughtfully. "Is it okay to hit children
here?"

Zhōng stared at her flatly for a long moment in return.
Seriously, was she ever told his last name or had she completely forgot it?

She could not remember. He stared a lot, at her and into space and sometimes just at Fong too, though.

"Because I have issues with that. It wasn't the way my siblings and I were raised, and mostly Russian vory don't harm kids too young to really understand what's going on. At most, I got slapped upside the head for being a smart-ass."

"A bit more clarification. Now."

Sonya sighed, finished off the last of that plate and exchanged it for something less crisp and rather rice-filled as she detailed her current main issue being held hostage. Fong returned about halfway through, electing to remain next to the door while she talked.

Well… more rambled. She couldn't recall the last time she had talked this much.

"Enough." At her raised eyebrow, the older man inclined his head to acknowledge her point she wasn't one of his people. "Thank you. I will speak to some of the others, and Fong will speak with some of the other fighters, tonight. We will return with your answer tomorrow."

"To your other question," interjected the Storm, who looked very much less amused since the topic had been what was or what wasn't child abuse in this country, "apparently you will be witnessing the tournament's bouts. All of you."

"…they fucking need to tell us something, otherwise we would've had all the kids asleep around nightfall." Finishing off the rice dish, she glanced through what was left. "I'll inform the others went I go back."

Huang the Sun had packed a lot of food for her, but she wasn't sure about taking it back to the 'prison'. She'd leave it unattended for the tournament at the very least, and even she had to sleep sometime.

…were those chicken feet?

Opting to instead pick up the, yet again, vegetable dish right next to it instead, she gingerly tried whatever it was hoping it wasn't sliced green bell peppers. It wasn't, but she also had no idea what the green shreds were. "Fong, can you do me a minor favor?"

"…oh?"

"Call my father, would you?" Having other things to focus on didn't really negate the other things she had to deal with, and one of which was a rather acute sense of homesickness. "Don't tell him about the assassination attempts, I'll do that, so he won't kill you. But it's either you all visit me every day, or he comes here and does it... and he can do his thing for whoever's trying to kill me."

Sonya kind of wanted that over with before the twenty kids she was being kept with got caught in the crossfire.

She kind of couldn't get over that, twenty to forty parents thought sending in their children for a criminal hostage was a good idea. While yes, a bunch of kids could be sent off and their parents claiming they went to visit relatives was a lot easier than someone with an actual job dropping everything for a week or so without earning suspicion… just… kids.

"Do you not hold faith that we can find whomever it is ourselves?" Zhōng questioned a bit sharply.
"I believe you have a minefield to navigate even accusing someone of the act." Corrected the thief blandly, finally feeling full and slowing down the rather mechanical eating motions. "I think I am too hampered, your people probably known. And frankly, it's really an excuse because I want to see him again and he might find it fun."

The Wo Hop To Triad's Mountain Master skeptically took in her slight physical form, then shot Fong a questioning look. The only other one in the room that had met her father shook his head, holding a hand up about two inches over even his own rather tall form.

"Arseniy's also built like a brick shit house." Sonya added in helpfully, packing up the leftovers back into the little box they had come in but keeping the steel chopsticks with the book her Lackey had sent to her. "Cloud mentality, but never needed the Flames."

Odds were, she'd bite through them again tomorrow or something. Better than having purely wooden ones shatter between her fingers and thumb again, the splinters had been annoying.

"…that might be… interesting to see." Decided the older man after a silent moment contemplating that.

Poor, poor sucker. She was almost sorry she wouldn't be able to see that meeting.

(ooo000oooo)

(Thursday the 23th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

As a hostage, she and the others the thief had been imprisoned with had their own little boxed in room directly under the balcony the various Triad Heads were located upon. They would have a very nice view… when the bouts actually started up.

There were a lot of cushions, and really at this rate she'd start stealing them they were that comfortable, they had bedded the kids down upon. Another large open-area type affair with wooden railings separating them from the arena. Two doors, the one they were escorted through and likely another for whoever would be delivering dinner.

As this was the actual opening night of their rigmarole, yesterday had been a sort of a thing for the behind the scenes people, there were a large number of criminals and rowdy types filling the area's higher tiered seating. Noisily, and with a couple fist-fights here or there.

Again seated with her back to the wall containing the only door into their little prison, Sonya was more interested in her book than she was the spectacle of the tournament getting sorted out to start.

As she read it once before, it wasn't really all that easy to get absorbed again. A rather absurd take on the Russian Revolution featuring a dog turning into a parody of a man, she wasn't actually sure where she picked it up from or if it had originally been one of her foster mother's books before she got into them.

Some rather nasty feedback made practically everyone wince, but also cut out a lot of the noise in the high-vaulted several story large room. Sonya attempted to bury her nose into the book again, while three different announcers took turns announcing a lot of the same shit that was told to the participants last night.

It didn't mesh very well with the upset and rather sleepy children she was contained with. She wondered if the Triad Heads over them appreciated the noise as well.
One of the bolder kids, that three-year-old she rather strongly objected to getting slapped for crying for his mom, abandoned the piled cushions the other children were gathered upon to climb into her lap.

Sonya lifted the book to stare at the toddler, who ignored her in favor of making himself comfortable. …well, alright then.

Ignoring the pain throbbing in her broken leg as the kid curled up for his interrupted nap, the Storm-Cloud went back to trying to read.

Then the lights dimmed when the announcements were over, which she did not appreciate. The first fighters she didn't know, nor did she care about.

It did make her wonder if, when the Flame-eye lights were 'on', could she read with them?

As it turned out, yes. Yes, she could. Storm Flames didn't really work, the red didn't light up nearly as much as her Cloud Flame's light purple, but she had to hold the book pretty damn close to her face in order to make out the letters.

Once she figured that out, and a check to be sure she wasn't missing the fights yet, the Russian settled back a bit to try getting absorbed in her book.

A thump behind her made the Storm-Cloud look up from her book eventually, disturbing the toddler napping on her enough to get the kid to roll over on her lap painfully. While setting her teeth against the pain, another two half-assed muffled thumps from the hallway drew more of her attention.

Another glance to the arena, Fong wasn't in the ring so she really didn't greatly care, the thief carefully pulled the toddler off her lap and let him have her cushion to sleep on. Awkwardly getting upright, with the broken leg and the kid she had to make a few strange contortions to get the leverage she needed, Sonya paced around the little niche she had made for herself to face the door.

It bulged against force applied to the other side, it sounded like someone was smacked bodily into it, but didn't break open right away. It took three more hits for someone to spill into the hostage room… and he fell right at Sonya's bare feet.

A glance up through the broken door, the green dressed 'guards' they had been in the care of while transferring from their dorm to this room were struggling with several black-dressed individuals of which the guy at her feet scrambling to get up was with from the uniform, and the thief punted him back out of the room.

…she probably broke his neck kicking him in the face. Fuck.

Good news, her action attracted a whole lot attention which let the Lightning guards finally gain the upper hand. Bad, two more tried to rush her.

She punched them out in short order, drawing back a touch too much on the first guy so he got kicked in the gut too but actually managing to just ring the clock of the second one. Amusedly, the second guy was bodily tackled right after she punched him in the face.

With that over and done with, she helped the guards by picking up the now broken door and setting it to the side while they handled the bodies. Then returned to her seat, unfortunately waking the toddler but he was happy enough to go back to sleep on her.

Between the book, the kid, the clean-up just outside the room, and trying to keep an ear out for
Fong's name or just the Wo Hop To Triad's as one bout ended and another started, she didn't get very far doing anything. Bored, restless but pinned in place, and not particularly feeling like being difficult right now made for a frustrating mix.

Elderly knitting granny knelt down next to her, divesting herself of a skein of grey yarn and two sets of needles. "Would you like a distraction, Lady Cloud?"

"Not you too. I get the kid stuck to me as a translator was told to call me that, but it's not entirely what I am." A check of who was in the ring right now, no one she knew but one was using Rain Flames and that still wasn't interesting to her because he had obvious uses for his Flames, and she gingerly accepted the needles passed to her.

She started something, showing her how to start looping the yarn slowly so the thief could copy it. Then making an insane number of the little slip knots-type things on her shiny needle. "You may not be able to evade the title, young miss."

"I can damn well try." Sonya informed her blandly, holding up her own mess of loops and comparing it to what her elder had in her hands. She'd need about… a hundred of them? "'Cloud' is only a part of what I am, even if it is a large part."

Satisfied with her start, knitting old granny started doing something a lot more complicated. "While that might be, because it is part of you and easy for others to understand in the shortest amount of time."

Stereotyping at its best. In a more limited way than just 'Russian', or 'woman'. The thief might know of it, and understand of why it was used, but that didn't mean she had to like it.

…she had what, ten? Knots.

Granny wasn't even finished with knotting her more complicated stuff, so she continued in a more methodical way.

Knotting string was weirdly engaging, and she wasn't even knitting yet. Only glancing up once when apparently there was the first major injury, even with how expansive the room was even her and the rest of the hostages could audibly hear the snap.

Of course, not even a broken arm stopped the fight. Getting a bit overconfident because he had managed to break a limb, he was taken off-guard by a rather nasty spin kick to the jaw.

How many entrants were there?

There were a couple hundred people there last night, assuming that each group was three or so large, there would be… anywhere from forty to sixty Triads that had an individual fighting.

Which wasn't exactly true, because one of the Wo Group Triads had two fighters. Two fighters for a hostage, and how they got that arranged she wasn't sure.

That being the case, it wasn't too far to assume there were just under a hundred fighters. Given there seem to be ten-twenty minutes per fight, at least a five-minute intermission to put the arena to rights and allow betting to occur but more like fifteen minutes for once the preliminary rounds were over…

Three rounds… six fighters?

At best, per hour.
They had started near nightfall, somewhere between six or seven at night, and there had been two bouts and long enough she'd call it an hour. Was this to be showy, showcasing everything they had for the entire tournament, or was it to get the more amateur fighters out of the rings early?

Well... it was entirely possible Fong wouldn't be fighting tonight. Or if he would be, it wouldn't be until nearly the end as he was probably on the 'professional' end of fighters. No one in the ring yet were all that skilled, they were merely duking it out with a polished move here or there to either take advantage or create one.

Sonya returned her attention to the needles and her mess of knots when her theory was born out by not recognizing the names of the next fighters called. Things continued in that manner until the first... round was called to a close.

Apparently, this would be done in sets. Which did give the theory that it was arranged in some manner, rather than randomly set up fights. She amused herself wondering if they had to draw lots or if there was a very fierce round of rock-paper-scissors going on, even if more likely there was some kind of bookie doing the match-making.

Not bothering to put down her knitting needles when the far end doors were open, merely glancing up to ensure it wasn't another unscheduled interruption, the thief gently poked the toddler in her lap awake when she noticed it was just time to be fed.

The little brat planted both hands on her broken leg climbing out of her lap, which aside a twitch of pure pain she was merely happy to have her legs back. Sonya glanced out at the arena, where a few people were righting the few broken floor boards and mopping up the blood and few broken teeth.

Ignoring the food, merely nodding in thanks when knitting old granny left her needles and yarn so she could see how to do the next rank when she got to about a hundred knots, Sonya settled back to knit... whatever the hell they were making.

"A refusal to eat will not be accepted."

"I'm not refusing to eat." Responded the Russian absently, counting sixty knots and wondering if it was more than a hundred she needed or exactly so. Glancing up at the probable Mist user, then to the table everyone else was eating at, she returned her attention to the yarn. "The first banquet I attended last night I was served poisoned food. About eight of the plates. In hopes of not aggravating another attempt that might catch the other hostages, I am not eating what's provided. The Triad I'm with has it handled."

"This is the first I've heard of such a thing." The man who was and wasn't standing over her observed darkly.

"Well... that's not my issue, is it?"

"I only have your word this happened, and you are not refusing to eat."

"Ask whoever it was eavesdropping on hostage visitations for collaboration." Sonya countered blandly.

A five-minute warning was called for the next round, which was going to be Fong and someone she didn't know anything about according to the announcement.

Really?

A second-tier fight?
Worse yet, *starting off* the second set?

Well… the man had been in Mafia Land a lot recently, might be the problem. Semi-unknown locally then, depending on what kind of work the Storm really did for his Triad. They were in for a shocking upset.

The Russian was almost sorry she couldn't lay down bets herself.

As the Mist went off to whatever it was he was up to without so much as a word, Sonya put her work down and got up to get a much better view of the next fight.

The crowd calmed down a bit, but the noise level didn't go down until the announcers repeated the names of the Wo Hop To Triad's entrant and whoever the fuck was opposing him. Leaning up against one of the posts that helped support the balcony over the hostages' heads, she actually paid attention to how this was being conducted.

Fong entered from one end, his opponent from another, and there wasn't a ref in the ring with them. They got to pick if they were going to start from far or near, which the Storm seemed a fan of closing in early but his poor target didn't.

No one started until the announcers counted down, in three different dialects, from ten to one.

The kid, and she really couldn't even look at him and say he was fully grown without wincing internally, immediately backed the hell up. It didn't really help him, Fong darted in from the right way too fast for him to completely dodge.

Said kid instead dropped before the Storm could hit him. Striking out at a leg with his own, he attempted to catch his opponent's knee.

Smoothly transitioning into a one-handed cartwheel over the strike, which she easily recognized might not have been stolen from her but it was one of her favored tactics, Fong landed lightly near the kid's upper left but not quite positioned to immediately strike with his hands. Even scrambling upright a bit ungainly, the Storm's opponent couldn't quite duck the mule kick that caught his left shoulder.

…and if the ass put bets on himself, she was demanding a cut.

Poor kid was decent, really. Not a professional fighter, but scrappy enough to have a bit more luck in the ring than the last set of fights. It wasn't showing very well next to the better trained Storm user kicking him around the arena.

He did manage to dodge and twist himself so none of the hits were nearly as bad as the first kick, but he was obviously favoring that side for the entire scuffle.

Once Fong did finally manage to close with the scrappy bit of an opponent, with a roundhouse kick to the temple, there were a whole lot of groans but a few cheers as those that lost or won their bets celebrated. A very loud shout from over her head was a first, but she was a bit more interested in the winner who glanced up at her.

Sonya flipped him off.

Grinning, the Storm helped his very groggy opponent up off the floor before leaving the ring.
Cherep scratched his hair absently, examining the book he bought for an idea for how to start the traveling journal.

Should he write a sort of mini-letter?

This book was started with a 'preface'. Which… seemed to be a mission statement. He really didn't have a mission, but an intent.

Did that work?

…would Sonya share it with anyone when he was done writing it?

Fuck, he hoped not. That'd be kind of embarrassing.

"Well… I suppose this is a tiny bit better than the slum holes you normally lurk in."

"Sup, Vipes." The stuntman responded absently. Snapping his head up, he glanced over at the Mist poking around his hotel room and set the books aside. "You've been gone a while."

"Your sister and I do better when there's business to be had." Observed the miser dryly, turning to him and planting a hand on a hip. "And you were… occupied, recently."

Cherep scratched a cheek sheepishly, making note that his friend would give him privacy if he was… occupied. It was a good word. "I won't mind if you want some attention too, Viper."

The hooded visage of his friend stared at him, and he really did wonder if the Mist pulled faces at him under that thing. Or at least made weird eyes, as he could see the mouth and lower jaw.

Slapping himself for his weird ass thoughts and electing a snort of a laugh from his visitor, Cherep pushed himself up off the bedspread. "So, actually, I'm rather happy you popped in."

"Oh?" The Mist picked up the camera he had a hell of a lot less issues figuring out how to start in with, absently spinning the wheel that panned the film inside for subsequent pictures.

"How much to hire you?"

"...you're not going to ask for a 'friend' discount, are you?"

"Have I ever?"

Viper made it obvious they were thinking hard on it, even with half their face disguised.

Cherep snorted. "I've got six thousand euros, and I am also assuming dinner and dessert is included in the cost."

"Deal. What do you want to know?" A small hand was held out demandingly, so the Cloud dug through his duffel bag for the cash earmarked for the Mist and handed it over.

"There was this weird ass conversation I overheard yesterday… I want to be sure the local carnival, one of those seasonal ones? I kind of feel a bit responsible for ensuring the carnies aren't getting into shit they can't get out of."

Yanking their hood off and licking a thumb first to start counting the money they were handed, Viper
shot him a strange look as they sorted bills. "Far be it for me to prevent a fool parting from their money… but it's not your business, Cherep. I'm still taking the money."

"You can have the money, Vipes." He dismissed easily, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I don't care about it. And no, I'm not really involved. But… I can't just ignore it. Call me a fool if you want, but as far as I know it I'm part of that 'masking' level of the mafia. We're supposed to screen for good or bad secret keepers, right? This guy is so horrible at lying I'm embarrassed for him."

"An Omertà issue, then?" The Mist didn't look remotely sold on his reasoning, but perfectly happy with their six stacks of bills floating in the air. "Fine. You've paid, and it doesn't sound that tricky. Expect the information tomorrow."

"...don't you need me to describe-

"We have dinner to discuss details. I want something authentically Russian." Tucking their money away somewhere he could not actually comprehend for the life of him, Viper made to walk to the door.

"Erm. Wait." Cherep ran his mind back over the last few minutes but still… "Where'd the camera go?"

A pointed hand gestured to the same place he had put it after experimenting with his new toy.

How it got there when point A and point V had absolutely no correlation was… right, Mist.

"...right. Authentic Russian in Budapest? Well… worst comes to worse, I can make something if we can borrow a kitchen somewhere."

Viper paused for a second, both hands gripping the hood. "...really."

"...Vipes?"

"Nothing." Claimed the miser flatly. "Remember, authentic. I don't care where you find it, how you find it, or how you get it. If your mother wouldn't serve it, I don't want to eat it."

Cherep blinked at them as they used the door for once, wondering where would be a 'Lisa approved' restaurant around these parts.

Frankly… it might just be cheaper in a time-sense to make it himself.
(Friday the 24th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Teaching a bunch of brats how to fall, generally the first thing any acrobat or martial artist were taught so Sonya deemed it safe enough to start them with, should not be this… unruly.

The floor was made of waxed hardwood planks, why did the brats get so much enjoyment flailing around it?

Ballsy toddler boy was just flopping on the pillows and giggling his little head off, his fellow younger children copying him instead of the actual movement she was trying to teach. A few teenagers too 'cool' to do more than the bare minimum, but as they were not doing anything else but standing there all snooty-like she ignored them. Between those two groups, there was just… a lot of flailing around.

The Soviet Storm-Cloud scratched the back of her head in bemusement, running her fingers through the blonde strands to neaten it afterward. Her 'class' was perfectly happy amusing themselves in various ways, she wasn't sure if she should try getting kiddy attention again or just let them get the experience of how they tumbled around.

Doing the first would do nothing but result in the second. Just… slightly less efficiently than letting them gain the experience under the power of their own curiosity. More orderly, less efficiently.

One kid slipped and tumbled backwards into another who was doing the belly flop, which was not appreciated at all from the little fistfight the two got into. Before it could spread, the thief picked her way through the tiny bodies and fabric bags filled with feathers to separate the two by grabbing the back of their outfits and lifting them off the floor.

The little girl kept swinging for a moment, fruitlessly kicking her sock clad feet in mid-air before realizing something was wrong. The slightly younger boy stuffed his fingers in his mouth, pouting a bit more and just limply hanging from her hand and masticating his digits.

Depositing them on separate ends of the room, which had turned into a sort of 'dorm' slash 'classroom' type thing just because without discussion about it, Sonya picked through more wildly flailing children to sort out any more issues. There were two teenagers attempting to be helpful, somewhat succeeding but also causing their own issues she merely helped when it seemed to overwhelm them.

The weird cushions they got for comfort, which the kids were supposed to be tumbling on, were kicked around all over the room. Inevitably, it resulted in her only briefly organized class resulting in a large pillow fight in short order.

Faster than she could respond alone to the melee.

Blinking as a pillow bounced off her face, Sonya ducked the next one on instinct.

As it turned out, that was a bad plan.

The Russian couldn't dodge them all, her opponents were tiny but many and she was trying not to do things at inhuman levels right now. A split got her out of the first round, and she had to roll to the
side in a split second to avoid a few ill-tossed missiles, then she had to scramble to get out of the way of the next volley.

Oddly, her light sweater and slacks weren't nearly as easy to move in as that outfit she was wearing for the tournament. She found that unfair.

It ended when a few older ones that could plan and use some tactics amassed an entire wall of pillows she couldn't to more than merely brace for. Peeking around the upraised arm, the Storm-Cloud gave her class a highly unimpressed look.

The pillows were now stacked against the wall behind or around her.

Shrieking gleefully, the kids bailed on her. Spilling out of the half-closed off section of their dorm and into the other two which were occupied with the rest of their fellow hostages.

Shaking out the irritable throb in her broken leg, which was pretty minor given she decided her attempted class was probably a success in the aims of distractions if not for learning, the thief kicked things to a more orderly pile and followed them out.

A whole lot of exercise, an opportunity to be 'naughty' and getting 'away' with it, and the kids were easily corralled for breakfast and more importantly something to drink. The older teens who had more stamina than their younger fellows were at least under the thumbs of that nanny bitch, so Sonya joined the smoking circle instead of following up on her class.

The only old man that seemed to like her at all, which wasn't saying much because he had this 'oh… you're a girl' sense to him every damn time he talked to her, handed over her tobacco pouch she had donated to the making charcoal cause.

As a bit of a bibliophile, Sonya didn't understand exactly how many of the kids couldn't read their own written native language. Not just the younger ones who might not have been taught yet, of the seven teenagers four of them couldn't read or write.

Finger-painting a few Chinese characters on the walls with wet tobacco ash and having the kids 'read' them repeatedly, mostly names but occasionally a few apparently common sign posts around Hong Kong, might not do a lot to address that. However, it was something.

If it stained the plain wooden walls, she didn't greatly care all that much.

Pulling her pipe out of the little chest she had utilized for her stuff, Sonya packed the shredded tan leaves into the brass bowl and accepted an actual match passed to her in order to light it.

To be perfectly honest, this was really boring.

She had heard 'hostage' and assumed it would be a semi-tense, maybe not entirely calm affair.

Maybe with a bit of intrigue and a fair dash of interesting political fights she could observe and not participate in for once.

Her fellow hostages were more treating it like a vacation, and it was just really a whole lot of waiting around with rare punctuations of short violence.

Which… okay. She wasn't complaining, as her first experience as a hostage this was pretty tame. That wasn't bad. Just… it was not very easy to past time in here.

There was nothing interesting to do.
She could read, but she read the books she had already. There was knitting, but she wanted to keep that for later when they were attending the tournament's bouts. She wasn't all that social, so talking or just questioning her fellow hostages would be fairly awkward for her and not something she wanted to do although she probably should ask for names or something. Even the minor Flame use, using her Storm Flames to remove second-hand smoke from the room where kids passed through, earned her wary looks she didn't like receiving.

Puffing a few times on the pipe, the thief wondered what to do until Fong and his Triad's Mountain Master visited with something to eat. Also, if the martial artist called her father yet.

How intimidating could Arseniy be over a phone line?

The man didn't really like to talk all that much, and when forced to as in her childhood thievery classes he got surly and grumpy. Phones were probably not his favorite pieces of technology.

Sonya was one of the few that didn't twitch or recoil when the same Mist man from last night, or at least she thought he was the same one as it was hard to tell with them, suddenly joined the tiny 'smoking' circle by blinking into existence. She'd dealt with an obsessive Mist boy and a mirror-dwelling Mist girl, surprise visits by their types she had gotten over a long time ago.

"We are taking your complaint under advisement." Started the Mist blandly, ignoring the skeptical attention aimed his way from the rest of the hostages either old enough to understand or surprised by his arrival.

Snorting at the completely useless comment, she pulled on her pipe again. She really did wonder if it was her actions last night or just because she was supposedly 'intimidating'.

"We request you do not seek out the cause while we investigate."

"Way too late for that. Sorry." She informed him completely unapologetically, touching the smoke in the air with her Storm Flames to rid the room of second-hand smoke. "One incident is one too many… but there were eight separate incidents that I had to deal with before I was even taken hostage. All in short order, which inspires no confidence in your security measures."

"We were not the ones hosting."

"Should that matter?" Interrupted the thief questioningly, not arguing but honestly curious. "It happened, you did not know. By that alone, I do not feel entirely safe under your 'protection'. Therefore, I will take the precautions that is both non-disruptive and limits the risks I and others are exposed to."

The Mist pursed his lips at her disapprovingly for a long moment. She blew smoke in his face in revenge for the light manipulation attempt.

Coughing, he waved the smoke away with a few irritable bats of a hand. "You failed to say anything."

"Now that's entirely bullshit. Everyone at my table knew, as a matter of fact bets started up after the second round of plates." She made a tidy sum herself, although she had to bet on how many plates would be poisoned.

Guessing eight was just because she had no idea how intent the people trying to kill her would be but weighting on the stupid side because of Mist Flame effects.

One dish had been a soup, shark fin or turtle soup maybe?
She couldn't tell and was a bit worried about asking.

The other had been the dessert dish. The only two not poisoned out of ten, the third dish and the last.

"If you didn't know, honestly speaking, then you have horrible communications with others providing security. If they did and just you didn't know, I think your information networking skills are horrible." Sonya held up a finger and waggled it before the man. "Either way, not my problem. The assassination attempts are, and you have yet to say anything for why I should not defend myself... so I will continue."

"Would anything I say change that?"

Sonya pulled on her pipe for a moment considering the question. "Hmm... not likely."

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 24th of October, 1969 continued. Wo Hop To Triad's Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Zhōng Duyi winced slightly as their visitor heavily slammed into the ridiculously fragile looking chair across the table from him that had apparently been a bit lower than expected.

Shifting to a more centered position and straining the usually sturdy wood slightly, then giving a look to the chopsticks provided for his use in something eerily reminiscent of the man's daughter, his guest returned his stare flatly.

Vor Arseniy Bazanov was... significantly larger in person than he had assumed based off his daughter's... physical form.

Fong and a few of his fellows being taller than a large number of other native Chinese men was sort of a point of pride but meeting a man who was about twice of the Chinese Storm yet only a few inches taller was... bewildering.

...how did a man like that result in a daughter as willowy as the thief?

Zhōng was somewhat sure his thigh wasn't nearly as thick as the other man's heavily tattooed bicep. He was pretty certain Sonya Bazanova was an entire foot and several inches shorter than the man, as well as maybe between half or a third of his weight.

He wasn't sure which one was more intimidating, one physically the other by reputation. It was fascinating to ponder.

His own interest with their latest Russian guest was echoed by a fair number of others in his Triad, which at least was somewhat reassuring. Those that had met the man before, mainly the Flame users that took advantage of the slight discount Fong acquired for them in jewel matches for their types, stared less but seemed no less bemused by the walking mass of muscles.

They also greeted him rather politely, which he could entirely appreciate just on the physical side.

Arseniy fumbled his chopstick a bit, adjusting his grip over and over again before he was satisfied with how well he handled them.

Most belonging to the Wo Hop To Triad were still collectively staring at him when he passed them in the hallways and even in the Mountain Master's office, and the vor was doing phenomenal in ignoring it. His daughter didn't take it nearly as well, but she also stuck out a bit more as she didn't
have his tan or darker hair and mainly avoided being in the public spaces or around others at all.

"We can give you a room if you would like to get some sleep."

"I slept on the plane."

Fong visibly hesitated, apparently not sure how to continue the conversation after that point.

As a matter of fact, no one seemed to know how to talk to the very brusque man. There had been six words spoken in the last hour since the vor showed up glowering on their doorstep, and five had just been uttered.

Rumor had it Sōng Mingxia chattering at him about his daughter's stay with them only earned her an approving pat on the head while Zhōng cleared his schedule. The Russian had announced himself with a short 'Bazanov' at the gate, but the only one that got a verbal acknowledgement was the Storm who earned a grunt of recognition instead of words.

Anyone asking if he needed anything earned a shrug and questions about what he was seeking were treated with a flat stare.

…he kind of wanted to visit Russia now.

Zhōng had never had much a desire to leave his homeland, not for any reason before this day. However, he was now insanely curious if all Russians were similar or if father and daughter were just atypical examples. Even if not, it would still be fascinating to see them in their native homeland and how they conducted themselves there.

Huang, yet again proving the price of saving the Sun using chef from government oppression for probably foolishly refusing to cook for certain people back when the Cultural Revolution started was maybe too paltry, brought in what he had decided to serve for lunch today. Saving the few in the Mountain Master's office from trying to figure out how to politely talk to the mainly silent Russian without tripping over something sensitive.

"…we will be visiting your daughter in about an hour." Fong gamely tried again as Huang's helpers transferred plates and dishes from his cart to the table.

Arseniy hummed approvingly, awkwardly utilizing the chopstick to start transferring some of the sweet and sour pork on a bed of fried rice placed on the table to his plate.

If it was over the food or the martial artist's words was entirely debatable. Huang took it as an approval over his food and almost preened, caught himself doing it, then shooed his kitchen helpers out of the room and following in short order.

Zhōng was now highly interested how his daughter would interact with the man.

Would it be mostly chattering from the woman and grunts from her father?

He honestly couldn't see another way it would go.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 24th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"Arseniy!"
The burly Russian swept his foster daughter off her feet to return the hug she jumped to give him without so much as waiting for the door to be closed behind her. Not entirely surprised at the greeting, she did something similar in Italy after all, Arseniy ignored the two Chinese men and the hesitating 'guard' type that seemed to have escorted her to him.

"Why did you have me called?"

It wasn't exactly an imposition, with the shift of training to that school house she set up he had a fair bit more free time on hands than he was accustomed to. Lisa could handle most of the criminal-orientated lessons on her own after years of sharing the job with him, and with Sonya's Flame users at hand to ensure her mother was respected he didn't have to involve himself nearly as much.

Following up on security issues, which really was a lot of visiting other syndicates and informing them their watchers were noted and not particularly needed but if they'd like to add some to the security on the school building it was fine. Really not needed, but inevitable so they'd work with it.

Mostly intimidation tactics and the sort, but he wasn't the only physically imposing vor that could do it.

His lover didn't mind taking their son in with her for classes, leaving Valera under the eyes of the Mist pair pitching in there. The only part of their new criminal school she wasn't particularly a fan of was the homework, since she had to grade it.

He had some time, not a whole lot but more than enough to spare his younger foster daughter a few days.

What was more concerning is that she asked for him to come here at all. The blonde had never asked for help, at least not for herself, before.

"I'm homesick, which is odd. Not for Russia, or anything in Moscow." The thief he had trained dutifully informed him without needing more prompting, touching back to the ground gingerly when he set her down but not looking away from him. "Partially I really just wanted to see you again. But I gave my word I would be their hostage for this thing meaning I can't leave, there's this assassination thing happening, and well... yeah."

The vor blinked at her blankly. That homesick part would be reported to Lisa, because he didn't know how to help her with it. If visiting would help, then he would... but the issue was a little out of nowhere for him.

"Eight poisoning attempts, an attack on the room the hostages and I were held in last night, and just general incompetence on behalf of those holding me. I'd rather you hunt that down, if I can't."

"Why?" He demanded shortly, which might've earned him confused looks from the natives but only a kind of half-shrug from her.

"I can't leave without, and I quote, 'without being released by the Triad taking hostages' or I'll forfeit Fong's spot in this thing." Sonya answered slowly, biting her lower lip for a moment as she ordered her thoughts so he could make informed decisions with the best information they had between them. "Which would invalidate the time I've already spent in-country and forfeit my contract, but... also there's a shit-ton of kids involved in this."

Arseniy accepted that grudgingly. Fair point, a few of them, but it didn't mean he had to like that she was risking so much for others. For her career was one thing, but this wasn't a heist.

The younger woman ducked around him to formally exchange a nod with the older Chinese man
and take the box the younger one he did remember visiting her in Moscow handed over.

If she was getting poisoned, and he really was very interested in how that came about, then getting food outside the arrangements was just smart.

He eyed the scarred man, who seemed to be running things at least on the side of the Triad Sonya was currently working for.

"I kind of think they snuck that in because I was attending." Continued the thief only well after she finished one dish of something made of pork, waving the chopsticks made of steel she pulled from a pocket to eat with. "The 'no one' can leave thing. So... damned if I do, but not doing anything is stupid."

The vor didn't raise stupid kids. Considering it while the young woman bolted noodles quickly in the chair next to him, Arseniy wondered what she expected that he could do.

Sonya couldn't bail on the Triad's contract with her, not without damaging her reputation both here and in Mafia Land if she survived that at all. Which also tied her up from actually actively seeking out and dealing with whomever was trying to kill her. Therefore, calling in some backup was understandable and from what he knew of her personal life outside her work that left that Italian hitman or her siblings. Or her foster parents.

That didn't mean Arseniy had more leeway than she did in this. This wasn't Russia nor Zolotov territory, what reach he did have was mostly due to their connections with the Wo Hop To Triad.

...he still found the name stupid. 'Harmoniously United Association', or 'Harmonious Union Plan' however you wanted to read that, sounded more like some civilian worker's political party than a criminal syndicate. Maybe that was the point...

"I didn't hear about any attack." Duyi observed neutrally into the silence.

Sonya paused, swallowed her mouthful, and cocked her head at the man. "Did you hear the brats last night? They wailed a bit when the announcers startled them."

The older Chinese man thoughtfully smoothed the pad of a thumb down a seamed scar on his cheek. "I did not."

"Mmm... Mists. It wasn't silent, especially after they broke the door. I wondered why no one said anything about the kids crying." The thief dug back into her meal, apparently finding that more than enough for her end of things.

"What really happened last night? So we know what they're trying to claim." Asked Fong curiously.

His daughter clicked her chopsticks together to buy a moment, slurping up the noodles she was caught halfway through eating. "Um... the guards we had mostly had it handled, until they broke the door between us and them using someone or said someone broke the door with himself. I kicked him out in short order, got rushed by two more I punched, then that was it. The guards puttered about the broken door for most of the night, I kept half an eye on it while learning to knit."

Her Chinese contact exchanged a slightly confused look with the head of his Triad.

"Can you raise the issue with whoever the fuck this is?" Arseniy demanded, because that was the obvious resolution and while not likely to work should at least be attempted to cover all the bases.

"I am not sure how your own fraction of the underworld operates, but here it is possible a branch of
"one Triad might be working at odds with the rest of it." His foster daughter's fellow Flame user explained, spreading his hands with a shrug to cap it off. "Accusing a specific gang of working at odds to their parent branch is dicey enough, and if handled wrongly or if things go far enough then it is possible one of them will falsely take the blame and not solve the larger issue."

Sonya nearly snorted her mouthful of lo mein in surprise, drawing a sigh from Arseniy as she started coughing.

That really could describe her little group of Flame using miscreants. Trying to keep an eye on how they were starting to feel their way out of their little established niches was hard enough since they didn't seem to care with who they started, and they weren't really all that accepting of the normal dredge work most newbies were tasked with.

Which he could see that being slid to the side case by case, if the brats were anywhere near as useful as her Mist duo could be. Just being favored because they had multi-colored fire they could use wasn't something he was a fan of. Especially not when their skills didn't lend to critical help in any job in any way. In his personal opinion, they had to do twice the work to be nearly as useful as a purely thief-trained newbie.

His various brats were too level-headed or grounded to have expected special treatment for their various fire-related skills, and hopefully he and Lisa could continue that trend in Valera.

Tatiana was dealing the best with getting deferential treatment, but as being a nurse already had established guidelines for how to behave she could draw from others her grace wasn't surprising. Cherep might be seeking out his own influences, but through the hard way of earning it so hopefully he'd keep a level head once he got it. Sonya was… struggling the most, mostly because it was at first unearned but well deserved even so.

Fong dug out a container, a tin thermos, from the food provided to help the still spluttering thief with whatever liquid it had within it.

Zhōng Duyi elected to regard the elder Russian while she was a bit occupied with regaining her breath.

Then once she could breathe he returned his attention to her. "As to your question of yesterday, I have spoken to the others and they will speak to their own people for your answer."

Sonya cleared her throat awkwardly, blinking rapidly and settling back with the thermos that seemed to be filled with lukewarm tea. "Ah… alright. I was kind of hoping that would be resolved quickly… but I can wait."

"I could not reach all of the others, we are somewhat segregated depending on who our opponents and who our related Triads are." Fong informed her apologetically, earning himself just a hum of contemplation from his daughter. "From what I did get, and apparently not the parents of the younger children you are being held with, they do not mind the caretaker's brand of correction."

"The teenagers? I don't really care all that much for them, they're some rude little snots." Agreed the thief idly after a hefty swallow of her tea. "They're more than old enough to have known they're being unreasonably idiotic but picked to do shit anyways."

A gesture inquiring if she wanted more time was answered with a negative shake of the head, and while the younger man gathered up the leftover food the older Chinese man probably around Arseniy's age leaned forward in a probably pointless attempt to be covert. "Miss Sonya, I feel I must request you be less… agreeable. If another 'incident' happens. I find I am most irked that little seems
to be done in response, but I do require some leverage to hammer it home if you'd like."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Sonya observed calmly, obviously lying through her teeth to anyone that knew her even a little by the wicked little smirk. "But I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 24th of October, 1969 continued. Wo Hop To Triad's Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

With Sonya's foster father introduced to Liqin, and the Russian vor and the Triad assassin deciding they would not mind working with each other, Arseniy immediately left the Wo Hop To Triad's Hong Kong compound.

Actually… with how things worked out when the larger Russian left suddenly and without a word spoken of his intent, it was more the Zolotov vor leaving the Chinese man behind and forcing the long-suffering assassin to hastily drop his preparations and run after him in order not to be left too badly behind.

Fong found it amusing that father and daughter both ducked Liqin in what seemed to be either pure habit or just because, and it seemed to now be a thing without either knowing of the other's actions. As well as slightly impressive, for Arseniy was not a slight or easily overlooked man and yet that hadn't impacted his ability to be stealthy at all.

He was there and present in one moment, then suddenly no one knew where he had got to.

Showcasing for any that doubted that father and daughter both did hail from a clan of thieves and deserved the titles.

Master Yaozu scowled heavily when it became apparent the significantly larger Russian was not returning, irked he had lost the staring contest with the foreign criminal and that he was likely not returning for a while.

"I've found Russians do not say goodbye very often… or at least those Russians do not." The Storm informed his former teacher idly, for really there was nothing he could say about their behavior other than what he had observed. "They also rarely apologize, for anything."

The old man grumbled to himself instead of responding, sipping the jasmine tea that was part of the gift that made Huang the Sun decide to all but adopt the blonde Russian if the quality of her care packages were anything to judge by. Mingxia, who was sharing the tea with them, finally dissolved into the giggles that had been threatening ever since the staring contest started.

Smiling wryly himself, Fong turned his attention from their various absent Russian guests to his former teacher. "Will you attend the tournament tonight?"

"I see no reason to." Yaozu informed him testily, settling back on his temporary bed firmly to imply he was not moving.

A pity they couldn't do this in the courtyard, but the few gardeners they possessed had chosen to start trying to coax the formerly well-maintained garden strip back into some semblance of its former glory. It wasn't that anyone was barred from sitting out in the sun on the veranda, but that unexpected mouthfuls of soil were being tossed about as they tried to set things right.

Fong was not sorry, Sonya kicked him through a wall and several feet of solid dirt. Yes there might
be an interesting little divot near the basement dojo where she had done so and he burned away what he impacted in hopes of not having more broken ribs, but he thought the both of them should at least share the blame instead of just him.

"Although I will admit a lot of the audience seem to be criminals, some are merely criminally connected sifu." He tried again, because he was rather keen on at least getting the elder man to attend one of the nights. "That should not detract from what it is being held for."

Part of the reason they were holding the tournament even in the current political climate was to keep the tradition and honor of their native styles of martial arts alive. It might be illegal, but governments and policies could change in the coming years. As a martial artist, the Storm was rather glad something was being done to preserve it and share with others who might like to learn themselves no matter what connotations it now held.

He wasn't sure if he should press his luck, or merely accept the martial arts master was going to refuse anything more than the bare basics of living for the short term. Yaozu might not approve of their lifestyles, but he was also making a concentrated effort not to offend anyone in it while he relied on them for security and safety.

"Can I go?" Asked the little Rain curiously into the more or less comfortable silence, peering up at her brother hopefully.

"...I believe Xiasheng and a few others have secured tickets for the next night's bouts, I would rather you go with them than alone." Fong informed his little sister honestly, wondering what his fellow Storm would ask in return for watching her for him. "I can get you in if you will wait a day."

He would just much rather her go with others that would look after her, rather than have her go alone into a den of admitted and not particularly nice criminal types he didn't know the quality of.

Master Yaozu harrumphed, examining his empty teacup before firmly setting it aside. "Tickets?"

"Yes, more or less a way to keep the spectator numbers manageable and implicate the viewers if they try to report anything." Depressing that it was required, but this wasn't the first illegal tournament arranged over the last half a decade that Fong knew of.

It was merely the first one that managed to get all the way to the opening night and through the first round without things becoming dicier than realistically possible.

A lot more secure and safe than the illegal fistfights he had started out with in Hong Kong's docks, not that the specific part of his early years here were things he liked to reflect upon often.

The Storm wondered if he should reexamine those two years he spent outside the Wo Hop To Triad before Xiasheng contacted him about their shared Flames, or if the possible motives and undercurrents didn't really matter all that much in the long term. The slightly older man had been completely straightforward about why and what he wanted while helping him keep low and out of the Red Guard's search for him, but that didn't mean there had been no other influences that might've helped along his conclusions to join up with a Triad himself.

"How many of those tickets do you have?" Demanded the elderly martial arts master shortly, flatly ignoring the hopeful look Mingxia was pinning him with.

Fong carefully erased any amusement from his features. "The Incense Master is controlling our group's admissions, I can easily arrange for one or two myself if need be."

Yaozu thought about it, ignoring the younger Sông sibling's stare while he pondered things over.
The elder Sōng sibling wondered if his little sister did that light manipulation against him. Then again, Rain Flames were all about manipulating things to be less implosive or active in nature.

Could or would someone hold his Storm Flames or elements of his own nature attributed to possessing them against him?

Was that right...?

He didn't think so, so no. Even if Mingxia was using such things against him, Fong would not hold it against her as long as it wasn't done to convince him to do things against his morals or for anything greatly against his will. Which he didn't believe she would do in the first place and so made the wonder moot.

The question turned then was there a right or wrong for her doing the same against others... which he wasn't sure if he could judge. Brother or not, it greatly depended on the situation and who it was not to mention for why.

Then again, that seemed to be Sonya's whole issue with most other people. Her Cloud nature was held against her before anyone actually took the time to get to know her or her social limits.

Out of fear of her lashing out, rather than prejudice or elitism.

He wasn't sure what this wonder was in aims of, but it was something interesting to ponder in moments between things.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 24th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

As Sonya distracted the kids with exercise in the morning hours, apparently the afternoon would be school lessons and maybe naptime depending on age range.

Which... the thief was of two minds about. Not the writing and reading bit which she was contributing to even if one system she couldn't exactly navigate with any amount of skill, nor the arithmetic. Naptime was fine, she could wish it wasn't entirely under her watch but that she could deal with.

Free history lessons from an actual person, perfectly fine in her opinion. Possible propaganda she couldn't have a physical copy of for later research and or compare to other accounts, not so much.

Reseated in a corner of the 'smoking wall' at least somewhat removed from the toddlers and crankier young children due to smoking but not that far away, the Soviet Storm-Cloud second-hand eavesdropped on the current lesson on the last dynasty of China and how it was viewed these days.

Obviously, as under the Ch'ing Dynasty one of the Opium Wars happened due to their repeated civil unrest rather harshly put down and rampant corruption of government officials, the last dynasty was not looked upon with favor or fondness. Between the First Opium War, the Anglo-French War, the Sino-Japanese War, the Boxer Rebellion, bureaucratic inefficiency, said corruption, severe floods, a long stretch of famine, and massive overpopulation the last Chinese dynasty was used as a fixture of what the Chinese people had thrown off in favor of the People's Republic.

Nothing good was spoken of nearly two hundred or so years the Ch'ing... Qing? Dynasty were in charge.
Which, if it was entirely so objectionable, the thief would've thought someone else or some other regime would overthrow them long ago. Did nothing good happen, or was it more a position that could be taught to kids without earning them the ire of the current government, did the man actually believe it, and or was it all true?

…was Fidel Castro still a thing?

She couldn't remember, nor recall.

Maybe she should see about it sometime soon?

She didn't recall enough about it, other than a 'Cuban Missile Crisis' which might be wrong given how long it had been since she last thought of the situation, to do anything but wonder.

Back to the ongoing lesson, if in two centuries and several rebellions had not unseated them then it couldn't have been entirely objectionable. Beyond which there was the industrialization of China to consider, which could have gone either way depending on how it was implemented.

Sonya didn't know enough to ask about it, and she didn't feel like talking to the old man giving the lesson.

More irritatively, she had to actually listen to the teenaged boy assigned as her 'translator' in order to understand the lesson going on. That raised Cantonese just higher than Japanese in the languages she wanted to learn but had yet to set aside the time to do it.

Waving the teenager quiet, the thief readjusted herself and narrowly inspected her fellow hostages.

There was the kid that was tasked with talking for her when it came to purely Cantonese speakers, but with the quality of education the kids seemed to have had before this that was probably a dismal prospect. No fault of his own, more so the people tasked with his upbringing or the current government if this was really a thing and not a completely unbelievable coincidence, but not ideal.

The elderly man currently giving lessons, who probably was the best informed as he took the task upon himself, didn't speak a dialect she could understand. Translation errors and possible misunderstandings were high if she tried to ask him even through an intermediary, added to the awkwardness of her questioning his understanding of his own history.

Out of the rest of the adult hostages, she had only two others she even wanted to speak to.

Knitting old granny was taking advantage of the ongoing naptime for the younger children to take a nap herself, and the equally elderly old man she split some tobacco with that first day was involved in some kind of game involving random tokens appropriated for reasons.

Sonya could branch out and try talking to someone else, not bitch-lady who was 'caretaking' because fuck her royally. There were the few others near her age, but… that possible lesbian couple were apparently not fans of something about her and tended to avoid her religiously. The other four weren't much better, seemingly following the norm of avoiding her put forth by the others without really knowing why.

Aside them and the sheep, there was a lot of kids again and a handful of elders.

Again, excluding the children who seemed to have been let down in terms of their education that left someone who was old.

Of the twelve of so people left, three were asleep, another was currently teaching in a dialect of the
native language she didn't understand, several were occupied playing a strategy game using wooden
dolls and various other items they had to spare, a few were holding their own conversation on the
opposite side of the-

Sonya snapped her head down, examining the toddler that just spilled himself into her lap.

…what the actual fuck?

The kid ignored her yet again, or perhaps didn't care for what face she was pulling at him, curling up
and stuffing a good handful of the material her sweater was made out of into his mouth to chew.
Balssy toddler boy merely snuggled into her thigh even if there was no reason she could see for him
to do so.

That bitch-lady was a room away, or at least more to the point a sliding wooden panel wall was
between them. This room wasn't foreign anymore, or at least it was understandable that nothing bad
had happened here yet. The kids had seemed rather glad to return here after the last fight of last night,
or at least to return to the more comfortable cushions than their 'cage' had.

From what the Russian had seen… no one really liked her in the beginning. She wasn't sure if it was
her or just her being a Cloud and affecting others instinctively like how concentrated Mist Flames
did, but most were highly wary of her in the first few meetings.

Instinctual or unintentional coincidence, she wasn't used to being sought out by anyone but those she
already knew decently well.

…Fong was still a freak of nature, and possibly not right in the head. Additionally, so was Liqin. She
still blamed him for stupid shit. She wasn't sure what the kid was yet.

She was getting off-topic again.

How often did she fail to finish a thought because of other tangents that occurred to her when trying
to think?

Drool leaked onto her thigh, causing the thief to sigh and resign herself to being another's bed again.

She wouldn't be asking anyone about Chinese history today then.

If she had to wait, she might as well as Fong tomorrow and avoid possibly learning she hated another
of her fellow hostages or risk pissing them off herself.

The waiting to do anything was starting to get to her, and it had only been two days so far.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 24th of October, 1969 continued. Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's
Republic of China.)

Mingxia tried not to wander too far from Master Yaozu, but she was really excited to see what this
was all about.

Her brother had been a strong supporter of the 'Underworld Tournament' while it was in the planning
stage, and now that it had become reality she wanted to see it before it ended.

The young Rain girl was actually slightly surprised her older brother hadn't protested her attendance.
Perhaps it would have been different the opening night to what he had expected, or the fact he knew
a few of the others in the Triad would be attending so he could rely on them to ensure she wasn't bothered, but she was very pleased to be allowed with only the elderly martial arts master as a protector.

"Ming." Yaozu called with a slightly exasperated edge to his voice, too disciplined to show if he was uncomfortable or wary of their surroundings by tone or posture. "Patience."

Retracing her steps, she gifted the elderly man with a small smile. "Sorry, sifu."

He sternly eyed her for a long moment, then turned his attention to the admittance to their highly illegal spectator's seats.

Their entranceway to wherever the Triads were holding the tournament was on the outskirts of Yung Shue Ha, a tiny and mostly fishing related collection of houses on the Tung O Wan Bay. After taking the ferry to Pok Liu Chau Island, they had a long walk with a few others on a hiking trail halfway into the forest until reaching a slightly disguised fork in the path.

That path led straight to the southern side of the mountain that speared out of the lower half of the island, and a man taking tickets to allow others into a cavern he and a few others were guarding.

No, there was nothing to see yet. Mingxia didn't greatly care, she wanted to just see.

It had been a long time since Fong moved her into the Hong Kong headquarters of the Wo Hop To Triad, and even longer since she had the relative freedom to explore anything. She was aware it wasn't safe on the streets these days and did not begrudge her brother his worries over her.

It just meant she wanted to get the most out of this opportunity. Especially before they had to enter a tunnel.

Even just walking through a forest was a breath of fresh air for her.

"Come along, girl." Master Yaozu nudged her after handing over their tickets to be verified and returning the speculating glance with a hard one of his own when taking them back. "One last look before we head in."

Mingxia flashed him another smile, spinning to take in the wooded clearing one last time before she followed him into the tunnel. As the elderly martial arts master had done his own hiding as an almost or actual fugitive, he also probably appreciated the opportunity to get out and about as much as she did.

In sharp contrast of the wide-open air walk there, the cramped and hemmed in earthen walls that twisted and turned to utterly baffle the Rain Flame user's sense of direction were nearly claustrophobic. What was interesting was how sharply cool it had been at first, yet the farther they walked the more it heated up.

Yaozu eventually led her into a cavernous arena, a rapidly darkening skylight and probable vent on one side of the vaulted ceiling letting in the last dying lights of the day. Mingxia adjusted to the thought it was later than she had thought for the supposedly short trip, not terribly surprised to see that she had lost track of time.

Aside the fading sunlight still being the strongest illumination in the large room, there was the ranks of benches bolted to the rough concrete floors. Part of the spectator's benches were cramped and nearly stacked on top of each other, the higher ranks, or short and adequately separated, which seemed to be the part they were headed for.
The walls were either rough rock or poured concrete, dressed up near the ornate balconies on opposite sides of the arena and left bare on the spectators' sides. Mingxia vaguely recognized Master Yaozu got tired of her wandering attention and took possession of her elbow to guide her down the gradual steps to their seats.

There were a lot of people within the room, braziers lit in four cardinal directions given the carvings on the bowls showed the Four Symbols flickering brightly giving the room more illumination. Various banners depicted with characters or images associated with certain Triads draped over the railings separating the spectators' seats from the arena. It was unsurprisingly loud with idle or not so idle chatter and bookies trying to get bets set down for the bouts to be started.

She wondered where Miss Sonya was. There was no obvious place to hold hostages and yet allow them to witness the fights, from what her brother had said of yesterday's events the thief had watched his so they had to be somewhere in here.

"Ming… will you please pay attention? At least until we can sit down?"

"…sorry, sifu." She should probably reach her seat before gawking around like a country girl, so she refocused on where he was leading her.

As Fong was a fighter in the tournament and the Wo Hop To a participating Triad, they had tickets for one of the semi-private spectator's benches. As front-row as possible if they weren't a Triad Head, but not far away enough to be in the purely spectators' ranks.

There was just too much to look at and Mingxia was probably jumping all over the place, which did blind her to the others held within the same space. Refocusing on their path, she was actually slightly surprised they past three fist-fights and at least several arguments over various topics they had to pass for the seats Yaozu was leading them to.

Against the impulse to soothe the fractious air with her Flames, the Rain clasped her hands together before her and refocused on the bench the elderly man checked against their tickets before gesturing her to seat herself first on the far end away from the designated pathway others were moving through.

Exciting it all might be, but this was almost overwhelming for her.

So many people she didn't know, so many conversations to hear, nearly too much to pay attention to only one thing.

"Fong will not be fighting for a while yet." Observed her elder grumpily, folding the flyer he had been handed sometime between entering this room and the Rain finally noticing he had it.

Tucking it into the breast pocket of his Mao jacket, the martial arts master shot suspicious looks to the people they were nearest to.

"I am not surprised, sifu. Big brother is a very good fighter." Mingxia responded calmly, sliding to the edge of the bench just to see if she couldn't spot where the fighters or the hostages were being held deeper into the arena.

They had not been early to this, but she also hadn't thought they left it for that late. She hoped she remembered to inform Fong's friend Xiasheng that he and the others should probably leave fifteen minutes earlier than he recommended for them.

The few lights started dimming not too long after they found their seat, leaving just the overhead lights focused on the arena and the four braziers to give illumination. Tiny tea lights bobbing around
the balconies signified it was probable that the various Triad heads attending were finding their seats with the help of some attendants.

Mingxia examined what little else she could see aside the far tiny flames and the great open floor space held in reserve in the arena.

…she still couldn't figure out where Miss Sonya and her fellow hostages were being held.

A sudden crackle of feedback nearly made her jump, and the Rain huffed silently to herself as she got over the scare. Three different voices quickly ran over what would be on display, how long between bouts in case more bets or collecting on one was done in between fights, and that joining the fighters in the ring would be treated as sabotage.

Even if Yaozu had stated Fong would not be fighting anytime soon, and she wasn't really a fan of watching two people try to hurt one another for someone else's amusement, she paid attention because her brother would ask about those that fought before him. Even if that would be more something he'd ask the martial arts master than her, she would like to still participate a little in what wasn't the same old thing that happened every day.

It took three fights of the first 'set', when Master Yaozu was rather absorbed in how the fighters conducted themselves and how the rare spark of Dying Will Flames were utilized, for something odd to happen.

At least, odd if you had not made the acquaintance of a very independent woman from Russia and her more violent habits.

Mingxia found it safe to say someone being forcibly thrown through what seemed to have been a gap under the balconies the Triad heads were positioned upon and straight into the fighters was not supposed to happen. Also, that even with having an elder brother who practiced martial arts for a living, she had never seen any merely human person kick or throw another horizontally farther than a few feet.

Well… not until recently anyways.

"I found where Miss Sonya is being held." She informed the highly perplexed elderly man attending with her, who seemed more confused where the additional man had come in from than who had propelled him that far.

(Saturday the 25th of October, 1969. Budapest Zoo and Botanical Garden, Budapest, Hungarian People's Republic.)

Cherep had been investigating various ways to take pictures with his brand-new camera, intending to go through at least three rolls of film at least before picking one to stick with for what he sent to his eldest sister.

He wasn't sure how long he'd be sticking around for. At least long enough to figure out how to start a traveling log for his younger sister… but he wasn't sure about past that. He wasn't tired of this city yet, but he had less enjoyment just wandering here or there than he had at the start of his stay.

Not done yet, but probably soon.

Forest-type pictures and quaint café arrangements were easy in his probably not-so humble opinion,
but animals were a bit harder. They were really just too cute, or in some cases just really gross, to stop taking pictures of. That, and he’d only know how the pictures would come out after he had everything developed.

The aquariums were pretty damn awesome in his opinion. Especially that rather playful little octopus he luckily got a picture of before it absconded with a seashell and hid itself in a reef.

Hopefully that would develop well, or he might just pout because it had been so tiny and adorable.

Wandering out of the display house filled with small and large freshwater or salt tanks, the stuntman absently wound the film in his camera as he people watched a bit and wondered which way to go next.

"Mauricio Sebastian Ciceron," Viper suddenly droned from his elbow, their sudden appearance not surprising anyone as no one even gave them a second glance, "a small-time illusionist and stage magician with horrible business sense. Mou… that's who you overheard a few days ago, he recently got in debt to a local loan-shark racket for the lovely tune of one hundred and fifty thousand forint."

Cherep did a bit of calculation in his head to change that to a denomination he knew better as he wandered to go see a few of the big cat enclosures. "Seriously, Vipes. I'm going to start questioning your adoration of money in all its forms here soon. So, what… about… two thousand five hundred euros?"

"Around there…" Agreed the Mist user tartly, ignoring his comment on their miser-ness. "A stupid-assed get-rich quick scheme he probably heard Americans did from rumors and second-hand stories, actually trying to peddle snake-oil."

The Cloud user paused mid-step, side-eyeing his companion. "…I thought 'snake-oil' was a saying. For that 'cure-all' medicine that never really worked way back in the 'ye olden days'. Was he really trying to sell actual snake-oil? As in trying to sell it as something beneficial or just because?"

Viper only shrugged, apparently not particularly interested anymore or they hadn't got that kind of information.

"Where the hell did he even get that?" Cherep wondered in exasperation.

The Mist came to a halt in the middle of the path, giving him a longer look than normal.

He blinked back at them in confusion, eventually turning around to face Viper himself. "What?"

The heavy cloak the other was wearing, not entirely against reason like it would’ve been in the middle of summer but in a rather brisk fall afternoon that much wool cloth was probably nice and warm, made it really hard to tell what Viper was thinking at any given moment. They weren’t very expressive with the only visible part of their face, aside the nearly always present frown.

Sometimes the tattoos flexed a bit, which was a sign that some squinty-eyed action was being had, but that was pretty rare when he could make the other think of absurd things.

"I want you to repeat after me, Cherep."

"Why…?"

"Just do it." Snapped the Mist irritably. "'The actions of idiots does not concern me'. Repeat it."

Instead, the stuntman merely gave his friend a skeptical look. "Seriously? You call me an idiot some
"...Ciceron's a Rain. A minor petty talent, at best." Admitted the other only after a whole minute of Cherep's best puppy-eyes... and fifty euros they immediately pocketed. "Not enough to bother with."

"Wait... really?" Actually, putting that into the equation gave the former Czechoslovakian runaway a bad feeling about why that loan-shark ring let a circus type take out a loan in the first place.

"...mou, Cherep-"

"We're required to help him, right? Sonya said there were rules we had to pass on." He cut himself off, looking at askance down at his wrist which didn't support the hand his camera was clutched in.

The one with a twisted Mist-rope of Viper's cloak wrapped around.

"It is not worth your time, Cherep. Yes, as I noticed I am required to pass on the laws if he does not know. Two seconds with a piece of Mist Flame paper, five if you insist, and that's it." Lectured the miser sternly, tugging the stuntman back in the direction of cuddly cat creatures instead of the nearest zoo exit. "He's not a particularly talented individual, in anything, and he's more a risk than an asset. Forget it."

"He is a fellow carnie." Cherep refuted, gently because he did get where Viper was coming from but that wasn't him. "Besides, you wouldn't like me so much if I was an asshole to everyone."

"...I wouldn't mind you being more of an asshole to others occasionally." Countered the Mist user irritably. "I still highly advise you to forget about Ciceron. He'll be snapped up by a local syndicate, drown or learn to swim with the sharks, and that'll be it. 'Mertà will be held up, no one inconvenienced, life will go on."

"I really actually don't care about propping up Omertà, the only one you're concerned about being inconvenienced is yourself, and life always goes on no matter what." With a roll of his eyes, he started trying to peel off the Constructed end of Viper's cloak.

Easier said than done, apparently said Mist wasn't yet done trying to prove their point.

"He's not just indebted to one syndicate, Cherep. Mou... the moron is playing four against each other." Viper informed him in their usual monotone, which the stuntman actually didn't hear all that often so he was aware his friend was starting to become truly annoyed with him. "He borrowed from one for some stupid 'double your money' trick which unsurprisingly failed, then borrowed from another to pay that first one off... then again to pay them off plus a little extra to try another little get rich quick scheme. Failed again, borrowed again to pay off his debts. Do you see a pattern here?"

Cherep thought about it. "So... did those others catch onto his Flames...?"

"The idiot uses his Rain Flames in his magic shows. He makes a thin sheet of Tranquility ice for mirrors and frosted glass, melting it when he needs to 'disappear' or to change the reflection to make things vanish." Drawled the Mist flatly. "What do you think? He needs to be taken in soon, for his own safety if not for the rest of ours."

"I think... that is an interesting application my sister might be interested in poking once or twice?" At the utterly unamused look Viper actually removed their hood just to pin him with, the Cloud user darted in to give the prickly Mist a big hug. "Besides, you can get a whole lot of enjoyment pointing out how stupid he was with money. You do it to me all the time."

"Mou... the difference is you can be taught."
Melting into pure smoke instead of 'suffer' a hug when there was no reason to get one also released the stuntman from their grip on his wrist.

Cherep bolted… and got no more than five meters to the exit before Mist Flames made some kind of creeping ivy twine around his legs like some kind of weird cat-plant. Right in the middle of a path where no one noticed he was acting a bit oddly nor realized a Mist was bending reality in knots.

In short, he got stepped on a few times to add insult to injury.

Viper's right boot toe reformed with the rest of them right in front of the stuntman's nose. "...are you going to insist on this?"

"If you broke my camera, I'm going to pout."

Something hard bounced off his head, and he scrambled to slam close the panel that normally hid the exposed camera film when it popped open due to the abuse. "Noo... Vipes, you're so mean... that picture of the little cute octopus... if you ruined it I'm going to really cry. It was adorable."

The Mist palmed their face with both hands in pure exasperation. "...why am I friends with you again?"

"I think you said because I can make you laugh." Which, depressingly enough, wasn't the weirdest way someone indicated they wanted to be friends with him. There was those several months of being stalked to contend with... "So, are you going to help me or what? I mean, I could probably just pay things off for him and have the guy work for me for... erm, something. That... on a second thought, is a horrible idea. I'll send him to Sonya instead."

Viper gave him a flat stare, fully visible instead of requiring one to guess what expression was on their face due to the hood they had yet to replace.

"...what?"

A hand was held out demandingly.

"Didn't I already pay you?"

"For information. Operational backup is three times more. And if you can't pay now, five times."

Cherep pulled himself up off the ground, smoothing a thumb over the closed lid of his camera as he eyed the hand warily. "That's going to take me a little while to gather up, Vipes."

"Five times my usual rate for just information then. You also better hurry... Ciceron's about to piss off the last syndicate that'll give him the time of day."

Yeah... there was no way he could scramble fast enough to get everything done and Viper paid off today. "Will leaving him for a day hurt anything?"

"...depends on what you mean by 'hurt'... or 'anything' for that matter, mou."

"Confidence inspiring, that." If the guy wasn't going to die or anything else nearly permanent, then Cherep could use a bit of time ensuring he wasn't running into something way over his head. Also, he could use some time to contemplate how he wanted to approach this. "Well... if nothing painful is going down now... are you mooching off me for lunch?"

Rushing to the guy's rescue only to endanger himself would amuse no one, especially not anyone in
his family. Besides which pain was painful, and he did try to avoid it.

Normally... sometimes.

"Just for that... yes, yes I am. And I demand something hellishly expensive and fancy. I hope you have a suit jacket handy, or you'll just be paying."

"I've got something... but... do you really only give those poor suckers you come across two seconds with a copy of the laws? That's cold, Vipes." Cherep got three more steps before something else occurred to him when the Mist user elected not to respond. "And wait, you've got Mist Flames. Why the hell can't you just... magic a suit jacket or something?"

Something hard yet bendy whacked him upside the head without Viper so much as twitching. "...a hundred euros for me to Construct you something appropriate. Mou, two hundred if you so much as whine for the next hour."
Chapter 84

(Saturday the 25th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Sonya blinked sleepily at Fong when he poked her in the arm with his elbow. "What?"

"Ah... you seem to have a slight... um... guest?"

"Yeah. I have no real idea why he keeps doing this." She informed him blandly, setting her head back against the wall they were leaning up against. Ballsy toddler boy ignored everything going on, including his father's highly agitated behavior for his actions, and groggily curled up to pillow his head on her left thigh. "A couple guesses, but those could be wrong."

Good news, the child-care thing was now solved.

Bad?

She was right that she was in the wrong in that.

The only good side of that for her was that the fact it was cultural for her made her interference somehow alright that she objected to the various parents and guardians. Not entirely appreciable in a few cases, but excusable since she had been asked to protect her fellow hostages and that mix-up was made clear to all parties.

Miss bitch-lady wasn't so snotty anymore, since she had been taken to task for how she started some kind of slander campaign the Russian honestly hadn't noticed all that much. Made a few things belatedly understandable in respects to her limited conversation partners, but really not all that appreciated by her anyways.

Just... no. Not even for the few that tried to apologize.

Sheep-people were sheep, allowing for the possibility but getting the truth for themselves was entirely possible and reasonable. The fact they hadn't done that made her less than interested in them even more than she had already been.

If Sonya had been aware her option for alternate body disposal in the second hostage re-taking event would result in this, she would've taken a nap herself yesterday.

The tournament was well and truly over with for the night, and yet they were still held in a general waiting room for the various Triad heads to re-hash out the security arrangements. 'They' being the hostages and their various reasons for being such, meaning twice the volume of people than she had been accustomed to over the last few days. Since apparently while it had been expected for certain factions to try to derail the tournament, but no one appreciated not being told of the attempts on their people, the obvious solution was to stick the hostages with their fighters to prevent anything while holding discussions.

At least they did have the various entrants even for an insanely late night for most the children, which meant a lot of the kids were both really grumpy and really clingy but at least they were being so to people that actually responded to that how they wanted them to.

Aside ballsy toddler boy. Who had insisted his very bewildered father sit near the Wo Triad Groups' hostages, just so he could childishly introduce the two of them in nearly incomprehensible baby
babble and apparently continue napping on her once the excitement of seeing his father faded.

To be honest, the Russian was starting to think he was either a baby Mist or a baby Cloud. She had given her one piece of white sapphire to Mingxia, meaning that unless she asked someone to source a piece for her she wouldn't know for sure right now.

That was, if he was anywhere on the level as Valera was a year older.

This was very much similar behavior to her little brother once he got the message she was part of the family. Proprietary behavior in respects to her person, an assumption he had a right to her lap, and just general comfort seeking once he knew she'd allow it.

However, Mists could be equally obsessed with certain things or individuals.

One really only needed to look at Usov to understand that much. If the Mist had thought he'd get away with it, she wouldn't have put it past him to try sleeping on her too way back in the day.

"He is very bold." Fong eventually commented to the other man pleasantly, only to earn an embarrassed kind of shrug.

"Possibly a bit too much."

"He's fine." Sonya interjected blandly, shifting slightly to get toddler weight off her broken leg she was semi-sure she managed to hide from her foster father. She'd probably hear about it later if he had caught it, but hopefully only well after she had a better handle on her temper. "The kid was probably really confused over what was happening the last couple days, and probably still is. He's not hurting anything, so I don't really care all that much. Besides, I'm probably a lot more comfortable than the floor."

The man she was speaking to, whom she knew hadn't yet been one of Fong's opponents but damned if she could recall how he had handled himself in the tournament so far, cast a general glance over the room they were being held within while alternate arrangements were made for the hostages. Which didn’t include those stupidly comfortable feather pillows, merely a lot of mats and chairs the elderly had the most of.

Nudging her again, the Storm sitting next to her quirked a small smile but nodded to the kid in her lap. "Is that indicative of anything? I honestly wouldn't have expected you to put up with the imposition."

"It's really only for naps." Had he tried to do anything else, like demand her sole attention when she was busy with other things or earlier yesterday morning when she was teaching, it was likely she'd have an entirely different opinion. "But… possibly indicative of Mist or Cloud Flames, the possibilities are about equal from what little I know of baby Flame users. And I have a really limited experience with those."

If you stretched it, the kid's comfortable behavior with her could also be a Storm's obsessiveness or a Lightning's hyper focused and fixed attention span showing. Maybe even a Sun's cheery social-ness expressed to the strongest Flame user in the room who was protecting him. She could even make a case for a Rain's desire for neutrality or safety causing him to seek her out…

…only if the other kids weren't wary of her moving suddenly even after their morning tumbling lesson turned brief pillow fight.

Sonya had thought that was just kids in general responding to her normal distaste for childishness before this, which she had to admit Shamal had tempered a lot but not nearly enough for her to
actually seek out children for adorable or 'cute' behavior to twitter over. It could be more her Cloud nature and not her personally, which made for an interesting problem to turn over in her mind.

Ballsy toddler boy had an immunity to that natural wariness she was semi-sure was just part and parcel of someone being around a Cloud Flame user. Either his own yet-to-be-expressed Flame nature countered or made him immune to it, or he was so self-confident he ignored it by sheer and pure willpower alone.

Either way, he'd be one to keep an eye on in the near and far future.

It might feed into that 'only one alpha-Cloud per territory' theory, or just be something generally about them that let baby Clouds feel safe around even grudgingly protecting Clouds. Which might or might not be the issue right here.

Aside ballsy toddler boy, there was the Wolfpack Gang Cloud's behavior when she confronted him in his territory to account for.

Did his younger age make it easier for him to accept her advice, more so than the Khimki Cloud?

She really needed to follow up on the both of them, but it was really a distant secondary concern. They'd either survive or not, and it was depressingly doubtful anything she did would help either other than to draw more attention to them.

"Sonya?"

"Mmm?" Fong really needed another way to get her attention before she broke his pointy elbow.

"Is there any way to tell? For sure?"

"Right now? Not really."

Valera had three active Flame users around him every now and again, he knew Dying Will Flames were possible and his siblings could use it. The fact he might not have it likely had never occurred to her little brother at all even with Arseniy and Lisa not using the colored Flames around him.

If he got a cut when Tatiana was around it was healed with bright sparky yellow Sun Flames, if Cherep was visiting they could have unlimited toys to play with from applications of soft pale purple Flames. If he bugged her enough, she'd enlarge his fluffy toys to climb on using the same purple Flames. That made her giving her baby brother the piece of white sapphire only a calculated risk, as he had the prior knowledge but not the practical application experience to really pull anything up yet without the help.

This kid?

She had no idea if he had Flame using family to know it was possible and if he had ever seen them screw over the rules of reality on their own whims. Giving this toddler a similar bit of off-white sapphire when she wasn't sure of his background history made it more questionable if it would do anything.

Aside which the brat was happily snoozing away, so the question was rather moot right now.

Sonya sighed, feeling a strain on her knee and a responding throb in her broken leg but unable to adjust things so she would be more comfortable. "How much longer? This is getting a bit… stupid."

"Well..." The Storm on her right side hummed thoughtfully, cradling his chin with a hand as he eyed
their hopefully temporary holding cell. "It is entirely possible they will decide to move you all to another place instead of return you to where you were. You might have different guards in hopes of derailing the next attempt without your interference. Any way they try to solve this, it will require renegotiation about who and where."

She flatly stared at him, earning a slow blink in return.

"What?"

"...that's it, I'm going to sleep."

Ballsy toddler boy was unhappy to be hauled up out of her lap, but the relief of the stress in her leg was more than worth that baby upset. Picking to just slide down and lay on the floor, and to prop her head up on Fong's thigh, the thief heaved a sigh as the toddler squirmed irritably until she placed him down on her thighs.

"...ah?"

"Put up with it." There was nothing she could use and still support the brat in her hands as he seemed to want, why it had to be on her was a question, so the martial artist would just have to deal.

There wasn't a whole lot of space in here, she even had to fold up her legs in an awkward way just to get down herself and not kick the toddler's father on the other side of her.

Good thing she was wearing pants under this lacy silk tunic thing.

She just had her eyes shut, she wasn't ignoring the rest of the room. When a few other children decided to wander over for nap time too she said a few very nasty things in her native language that startled a laugh out of the man she was sort of taking advantage of.

"Does this happen that often?" Fong inquired in which she was going to consider a criminal level of chipper-ness, with a lot more amusement in his tone than she found polite as a lot of children got sorted out by equally tired parents that decided not to question the mass child response to her lying down.

"...shut up."

The asshole hummed instead of actually articulate a response, from the feel of tiny fingers curling into her hair meant he probably let one of the kids climb into his lap as well.

Why her?

Sonya didn't even like kids.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 25th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"-required to merely report any incidents and not involve yourself."

Sonya yawned broadly, blearily inspecting the chips in her nail polish instead of paying a whit of attention to the man trying to speak to her.

Said man, who was one of the announcers given they both seemed to recognize only his voice, was
not expecting that reaction to the demands someone thought was a good idea to place on an already insolently behaving Cloud Flame user and glanced at Fong for some reason.

Probably to elicit some aid.

To be honest, he had only pretended to pay attention himself while somewhat dozing through the conversation. It was probably near dawn's break, and he was slightly regretful he hadn't followed the thief's example and slipped into sleep himself soon after she finally made herself comfortable. The only problem he had with trying to sleep in a room full of unknowns was the fact it was entirely possible someone was waiting for him to try in order to harm him or his 'hostage'.

Given how things had turned out, with almost everyone trying to cheat in some way or form already or the previous attempts on the hostages, he'd rather be cautious for now.

Fong knew, for a fact, at least two of his to-be opponents were using outside Mist Flame users for 'assistance' in their bouts. There was the Lightning that had been paralyzing his opponents before they even entered the ring, someone poisoning their opponents instead, two that were using drugs to deaden themselves to pain, and at least three more he found shifty but unable to decide why.

That didn't include the Rains slowing their opponents in the ring, the Sun he was sure was healing in the bout instead of risk healing outside of it, that Lightning assassin staring at him still flicking blades around the arena before the fights formally started, or any of the other Flame users finding their own ways around the rules.

Sonya's report that someone or some organization had tried for the hostages had not been all that surprising.

They were criminals, they weren't the most trustworthy around. Trying for the reason everyone had to at least appear to conform to regulations was the obvious tactic if someone didn't like the constraints.

Additionally, it was entirely possible this demand was a throw-away one. The one they expected the Cloud to stridently object to and therefore trap herself into something even worse but more politely worded. Fong was not skilled in reading between the lines of spoken word to tell for sure, a deficiency he should probably work on.

He blinked innocently when given an entirely exasperated look, probably for being unhelpfully silent instead of trying his own hand at irritating the Cloud user.

Likely, that man had no idea how lucky it was the thief was paying him and his demands no mind at all.

"If you remain silent, I will take that as acceptance."

"You can do that." Dismissed the blonde woman propped half on his thigh tiredly, apparently way too weary to really be bothered at all. "So long as you know I'm more likely to laugh hysterically than actually conform to anything you try to use that for."

Surprisingly diplomatic if it wasn't for the mocking end. Fong actually expected her to treat that as more of a threat had she been paying attention as it seemed she had.

Well… she had more forbearance than he did in that. Something else to work on, then.

He rather hoped this tournament became a once a year thing, given how much he could take from the whole affair in hopes of improving himself. He had been running out of things he could improve on
by himself, frequent testing against others ensured he knew where next to focus his training. Whereas forbearance and patience hadn't been things he expected to learn he needed to develop more, not after the struggle to contain his Storm-ness in his teenage years, he could probably pour more effort into it so he didn't lose his edge.

…but it was slightly galling on a personal level that a Cloud was more patient than he was.

Their… visitor, eventually deciding things had not gone to plan and realizing he had no backup idea to try a different way, huffed disgustedly and rather minced off.

With appreciable relief in his form.

Fong huffed irritably himself, thinking not to polite thoughts about whoever sent him with the demand. Obviously, the man had been aware he was being given a nearly suicidal task. It was just the Russian's entire disregard for the insult that spared him.

"Odds are… half an hour or so." Sonya informed him blandly around another yawn, idly patting the groggy toddler shifting around her ribcage for a more comfortable position to sleep in. "Then they'll come back and actually tell us what the fuck is going on. Or try something else, depending on how stubborn they are."

Humming to show he heard her but had nothing to add, he ensured the two children that opted to clamber into his lap were still asleep. One had knotted her hand into the Soviet Storm-Cloud's hair, but the other had grabbed his braid and was masticating the end.

He wasn't sure how he had become 'safe' to these children so quickly, especially as it seemed the woman hadn't been appreciative of being crowded by them. From Sonya's previous behavior and comments, he had thought she was not a fan of younger children at all.

If it was just purely her influence, that was very… interesting.

Settling back to wait out and see which of her observations would be borne out, Fong examined his various to-be opponents to see if he could get a bit of sleep himself safely enough.

He wasn't the last one awake, although he suspected the thief did nothing more than lightly doze for the last few hours herself rather than actually sleep. From what Fong could see there were about fifteen other fighters and maybe three of the Russian's fellow hostages still somewhat responsive in various levels.

It was interesting to see who left considered who as their greater opponents in this room. He might be making a point of ignoring a Lightning using assassin's attempts to unnerve him, but that was no reason to behave recklessly and fail to take measure of the other entrants he might be fighting later today or sometime in the coming week.

"You know…" Sonya informed him lowly, idly staring up at the ceiling with red rimmed grey eyes as she adjusted her legs, "the more you ignore him the greater the obsession he's going to have."

"I have no idea-"

"Fong, Lightnings are fucking scary." She interrupted bluntly, giving him an upside-down stern look. "I've only dealt with them in glancing ways so far, will likely have more in the near future, but if any of them had the same disturbing intent on me as they had on their various aims I was remotely involved in… I'd at least be concerned of that if not disturbed."

Considering it while he untangled his braid from tiny sleepy fingers, the martial artist shrugged
absently for her. "I do not see what giving him attention will do. How did you notice?"

"Lightnings are not subtle." Sonya drawled out sarcastically. "He's been staring at you for several hours now."

"Perhaps he just wants attention."

From the utterly unimpressed look he received from her, she didn't believe that.

Admittedly, he didn't either.

The newest Lightning in the Wo Hop To Triad, Xieren, was a rather intense young man. Very helpful, but almost conspicuously so in aims of integrating himself with the other Flame users to get tips that might help him. If he was an example of the range of personality most Lightnings had, then there might be a highly uncomfortable incident or several in his near future.

Hopefully Xieren would settle down sometime soon, otherwise Xiasheng would take offence with the young man.

"Not to be a hypocrite… but ignoring him won't work."

"You do tend to ignore some things that most wouldn't." Fong agreed neutrally. "Or shouldn't, for that matter."

"So, I would know where and when it wouldn't work, right?" A sigh, and the thief shut her eyes again. "It's your life but Lightnings can be nearly or almost as stubborn as Storms like you and I can be. If you fail to give him what he's looking for in this situation, he might go outside it for whatever he's seeking."

The Storm Flame user in question paused at that, wondering if the whole situation was Flame based and not situational or personal. He was… mostly certain he had done nothing to deserve the attention, but that might not be the situation on the other end.

Even if it was purely Lightning and Storm issue that has become personal, something situational that got tangled into Flame nature, or something personal he was unaware of that was situational in how it was expressed… all of it still meant there was a Lightning that seemed to believe he had an issue with him.

Fong pondered the question for a few silent minutes but was unable to decide it in any satisfying way.

He then wondered if he was alright with being defined by his Flames first and then being Fong second. It seemed to be an actual problem, various Flame users buying into or conforming to the general 'understanding' of what and who they are to the eventual end of defining themselves only as such.

Was he being too stubborn in situations because he was given the leeway to do so as a 'Storm'?

Or because Fong as just himself was merely known to be stubborn?

"Do you think a Storm can be patient?" She was partially something else, as well as diplomatically trained apparently. Sonya might have an interesting opinion on the issue.

"…I don't think we're predisposed to be so, but that doesn't really mean anything." Answered the woman eventually without opening her eyes. "I am apparently obsessive over my self-control that
makes me an entirely baffling Cloud Flame user. You might be able to become obsessive over your patience."

Meaning it would be a matter of self-control?

Or simply dedication… "Is that you're advice then?"

"Do you know how ridiculous it is for anyone asking me for Flame related advice?" Sonya informed him bitterly, actually opening her eyes again just to gift him with a glare. "I make up half the shit I do, and basically guess for the rest of it."

Fong blinked down at her blankly. "...truly?"

"What do you think 'expert' means?"

"...someone that can provide advice?"

"Supposedly." She agreed tartly. "An 'expert' is a person that can provide experienced advice for problems of a certain type, yes… but anyone thinking I'm experienced is fooling themselves. I'm not even twenty yet, and while I might have a decade of Flame experience… it's mainly for Clouds, Storms, Mists, and Suns."

"Maybe they just want to hear what they already know." Offered the martial artist thoughtfully.

Sonya arched an eyebrow up at him, huffed, and decided to go back to napping instead of answer with the obvious.

That would include him, yes.

Fong settled back against the wall with a huff of amusement she snorted at, taking another glance around to see who else would refuse to sleep in such an open area with their dependents.

Not many were still awake now, mostly those that took a nap earlier and had been wakened by their friends so they could get some kind of rest and those like him too stubborn to drop off.

Him, and the Lightning, and maybe a handful more.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 25th of October, 1969 continued. Wo Hop To Triad's Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"...where is Fong?"

Mingxia bit her lower lip, looking up at Master Yaozu apologetically. "I wouldn't know, sifu. If Fong doesn't tell me, I don't tend to know what's going on. I only know the Mountain Master came back without him this morning. Xiasheng offered to tell me anything involving big brother when he hears when I came here, but he hasn't been by recently."

The elderly martial arts master scowled slightly, taking the seat across from her and examining what was in her hands. "What are you doing?"

"We used the lace from this in Miss Sonya's outfit, I'm replacing it with spare cloth to preserve the seams." Explained the Rain simply enough, shifting the expanse of dark blue silk and the plain white she was using to hold the garment together to help her sew straight.
"Why you?"

"Everyone works here, sifu. Especially big brother and I." Without a particularly prickly Soviet Storm-Cloud in residence, she couldn't claim to be pacifying Sonya's general irritably anymore.

Thankfully, there was helping with the cleanup after the brief visit she could pitch in with instead of going back to the daily lessons on being a good housewife or lover.

…or how to be a good consort.

Mingxia winced when the needle she was wielding punctured through skin, extracting her left hand before her stabbed thumb bled onto the white silk and stained it. Placing the abused digit in her mouth, she rather failed in one-handedly manipulating the silk to see if it needed to be cleaned in a fast hurry.

Master Yaozu had to help in checking over the half-mended garment, although she had never seen the old man ever sew anything he did at least embed the silver needle into the seam for her to pick up later. "How do we get tickets to tonight's bouts, little Ming?"

She blinked at him curiously, but the elderly man didn't explain why he wanted to go back. Extracting her hopefully non-bleeding thumb, the young Rain lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "We would have to ask one of the other men, sifu. Without my brother to arrange it…"

"Actually, Fong himself received a ticket for a guest for entering… as well as Miss Sonya." Xiasheng offered from over their seated elder, stepping through the doorway Yaozu had left open when he entered. "I am somewhat sure, unless Miss Sonya's father reappears in a few hours, that you both may use their tickets without issue."

Giving the hawk-eyed Storm a grateful smile, Mingxia pulled the silk back to where she could work on it more. "Xiasheng, where is my brother?"

"Ah… the final decision was to hold the hostages where the entrants could keep an eye on them… since it seemed the original security arrangement was so 'dubious'. Likely," concluded the man teasingly with a dry smile, "Fong is with Miss Sonya at this present moment."

"Why wasn't that done from the beginning?" Yaozu demanded shortly, not particularly happy for some reason.

Probably because the Storm was a completely shameless type, who didn't care if one of his fellow's old teachers held an issue with his career choice and refused to be sorry about it.

"That part of the facility had been unfurnished upon the start of the tournament. Apparently, it had been finished in the last two days." Explained the man simply enough, glancing over his head to the young Rain. "Fong will not be returning here after his fights, Mingxia."

"I understand, thank you Xiasheng."

Inclining his head, the Storm moved off to continue whatever else he had to do today.

Yaozu gave her a mildly confused but more demanding look.

"…Xiasheng had to promise Fong he'd look after me if big brother joined the Wo Hop To Triad." Explained the Rain obediently to his expectations. "While the other men here would help me if I need it, Fong asked before he knew that."
"Why that man?"

"Xiasheng recruited Fong." For a meaning of the term.

From what her brother had to say about it, it was more an invitation of a new and less risky place to hide out a probably death-sentence warrant for his arrest for participating in an illegal public brawl. Not that the invitation was at all objectionable, her brother was alive and not in some government run work camp after all. But... it was entirely possible the other Storm used the younger one's less than desirable situation to his own benefit.

Again, neither Mingxia nor Fong particularly cared all that much given what the alternative might've been.

"...would you be willing to leave this place?" Yaozu asked after a long moment mulling that over to himself grumpily.

Mingxia paused in her rather mechanical sewing motions, blinking at the elderly man. "To be honest here, sifu? I have... a few options."

"Oh?"

"I'm going to try to get Miss Sonya to take me on after the tournament." Which wasn't entirely guaranteed, even if she had the Soviet woman's help and some advice from her own Mafia Land Lackey. All she could do was ask, the worst that could be said was 'no'. "If I can't get that... one of the local women were looking for a servant. Cleaning, mainly. But it would be legal work... so there is that."

"So, a thief or a...?"

"She runs a... erm. Escort service?" The sheepish smile she mustered for him did not derail the man's suspicion.

"...a thief or a... whore." Yaozu concluded with distaste. "Are those your only options, Ming?"

"Not very many would have any use for a girl, sifu. Busywork, or taking a risk with Miss Sonya's allowances." With a shrug, the young Rain shook her head and returned the bulk of her attention back to the work in her hands. "Otherwise I am too young, or too green, to be of any asset to anyone right now."

The elderly man stared at her flatly for a long moment until she blinked back in confusion.

"If Miss Bazanova won't take you in, you can come with me." Yaozu decided solidly after nearly a full minute of a bewildering staring contest she wasn't sure what the reasoning for was.

"Are you taking her up on the offer she gave?" Mingxia asked, a bit startled and in hindsight that was a rather inane question.

Of course he would if he was inviting her to go with him. As it wasn't likely the elderly man would survive returning to their hometown alone, and she wouldn't assume he'd risk her there, the only other scenario that would make sense was either taking the thief up on her job offer... or striking out in another direction entirely.

...wait, that would make her question not inane.

"I am." Confirmed the elderly martial arts master shortly, cutting out the confusion Mingxia had
mired herself in with his words. "It remains to be seen if I will be doing any teaching of the
dividuals she mentioned, but the temptation to return to my life’s work is more than enough for me.
Either way, hopefully you might be able to find something less… disreputable, to support yourself to
become a lawyer."

Oh dear.

Getting the Soviet Storm-Cloud interested in her hopefully legal-embroiled hope for a career was
actually the best option she had, but she was semi-sure Yaozu thought his suggestion was better.
Hopefully, if nothing went terribly wrong, he wouldn't take offense if she opted to barter her
eventual future work against the Soviet woman paying for the school hours she would need soon.

At the very least, she wouldn't have to indenture herself to Madam Huizhong and partially pull her
brother into the situation just to enable her wish to be a lawyer. Regardless of how it resolved itself,
she would be heading to Russia.

Hopefully this wasn't what Bjørn had meant when he claimed everyone else had just sort of simply
followed her without asking.

Mingxia would rather have permission than impose herself unwantedly.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 25th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile
from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People’s Republic of China.)

"…Fong?"

From the slight snore she was answered with, Sonya assumed the man was still asleep.

Which… really didn't help her right now. Unhelpful lout.

The dormitory they had eventually been moved to was rather nice. A lot nicer than the empty
partitioned rooms the hostages, which might've been an unfurnished VIP room for a high-ranking
Triad official and his staff. There were actual rooms in this one, with beds and actual seating in a
common room where the hallways leading from the bedrooms opened up to.

She'd miss those stupidly, insanely comfortable cushions. Weirdly.

Half of the closet-sized bedrooms held twin single-sized beds installed in them, but most of those had
been taken by elderly hostages and those with their kids by the time she got the entirely too tired and
zombie-like martial artist shepherd down one of the hallways. Instead, they had a tiny cupboard with
most of the space take up by what probably was fondly thought as a double-sized bed.

With a taller than normal Chinese man and herself, and she wasn't exactly small for a woman in these
parts, it wasn't a double-sized bed. Just so that complaint was out there.

The Russian hadn't been in the mood to check this place over for escape routes or listening devices
when they were finally escorted into here, which Arseniy would not be impressed with but it was
highly unlikely anyone else was in the mood for more than just simply knocking out for a few solid
hours so there was that.

She'd do it now that she was less exhausted… if only the martial artist she had shared a bed with
would let her up.
Sonya blinked up at the ceiling a few times, wondering if she could somehow slide out of Fong's grip without him gripping harder on her ass or left shoulder. It wasn't as if he'd bruise her, she was weirdly resistant to bruises even when she banged a shin on someone's low coffee table… Renato.

Asshole probably had his furniture slanted just so in order to ensure any erstwhile assassin banged around noisily in the dark, so she hadn't fucked with how he had his living room arranged… but damn was that annoying when she nearly kicked the flimsy wood halfway across the apartment because it hadn't been where she thought it was.

Out of all the people she had shared a bed with, from her siblings to her godchild to her best friend, her current bedmate definitely tied for the clingiest if not exceeded what was required for first place. Her sister could occasionally be equally so when they ended up in the same bed, but at least the nurse minded her hands better.

Yeah, okay. She slept on the Storm first. Napped, really. Not the same thing happening here.

She wasn't exactly sure how she slept through the martial artist half rolling over her, much less the man working a hand and arm behind her ass and back. However it happened, the thief was pinned in place because he had his nose buried into the crook of her neck and his arms barring her only obvious escape route.

…maybe she could slide down?

Digging her heels in for the added help, Sonya attempted to wiggle her way out from under the still insensible Storm. The utterly irritating ass snuffled when she got an inch, and then hauled her back up again with his grip on her rear when she attempted to duck under his shoulder.

Then a thigh was shoved in between hers, removing that option from what she could do.

Well… shit.

If the asshole didn't wake up shortly, she was going to refuse to sleep with him again.

She was bored and, now that he was entirely laying on top of her, a bit squished. Sonya didn't have a whole lot in terms of chest, but what she did have was a bit sensitive to being flattened into her ribcage.

Not to mention her stomach. If he touched it, with something other than apparently flat abs she was weirdly immune to, she would be shoving him off even if she'd likely break his arms doing so.

From what little she did glean from the long wait last night, if you broke something you had to keep on fighting with it for however long it would take to figure out a 'best fighter'. The guy from the first night, as well as three others from last night, still had broken limbs rather nicely bandaged now but obviously still hampering them.

She did wonder if she broke it would it then be healed, but she was kind of doubtful.

Eventually, the moment Sonya ran out of things to ponder or got too uncomfortable due to the pressure, she'd try poking Fong awake. Even if she could likely stab a finger through steel or concrete, meaning flesh and bone probably would be less than resistant to her.

Was she like the cool side of the pillow to him?

She wasn't a full Storm, and between Fong and Renato sharing her bed she was fully aware she didn't have the same kind of high body temperature as them. The hitman was very nice hot water
bottle to have in a drafty attic inn room and, even if they only had sheets at the moment, the martial artist's body heat was rather nice right now. If a bit… overwhelming with the latest readjustment.

Well, Mingxia would be on the even cooler side of the spectrum then… right?

Rains and Mists were the lowest, in fact they were almost hypothermic compared to any normal human's internal temp.

…did Cherep ever end up in bed with Viper?

Could he confirm that?

She knew Usov was a bit chilly to her the rare few times she had personal contact with the preteen after he got a measure of control over his Flames, but that might've just been Russia's usual climate.

Then again, Shamal wasn't really all that cool to the touch yet. However he was still growing, which might throw off any assumption she could make. Depending.

"I wonder… Fong?"

Sonya wasn't sure if the snort was the martial artist responding or just impeccably timed happenstance.

"…this tournament and the fights have been stupid."

After a minute, she concluded that it didn't work when the man slept on completely unbothered by her comment.

With a sigh, the thief wiggled slightly as much as she was allowed by the Storm's grip on her to test how easily she could move. While the weight of a fully-grown man on her ribcage didn't really impact her breathing all that much, the only thing she could move without getting an unhappy grunt from her bedmate were her hands.

When she moved the thigh trapped by his, Fong suddenly yanked himself into a more or less kneeling position over her and blearily inspected her neck with visible puzzlement.

"That's what wakes you up?" Sonya asked archly, shifting again to draw upright when the Storm absently followed along to finally allow her to move.

"…erm." Fong offered roughly, still looking a bit more than addled and now entirely confused instead of just puzzled.

He absently tugged his braid out from behind Sonya's right shoulder, and definitely didn't seem to have all his wits about him just yet.

"Move your legs, then you can go back to sleep." She couldn't move her left leg without kneeing him somewhere she was pretty certain he wouldn't appreciate being hit, and she couldn't pull herself any farther up the bed because her back was already against the wall. "I just need to get up."

He blankly peered down at her for a long moment, then obligingly did as she asked with a semi-controlled fall onto his left side. More or less face-planting back into the dense and flat pillows provided for them without so much as a word, which she was slightly sure hadn't been his intent but a result he wouldn't mind at all.

Rolling her eyes, because that was pretty much as helpful as Fong ever was so she wasn't sure why
she expected anything different, the Soviet Storm-Cloud slid off the bed to first figure out where the bathroom was and then where her chest got to. Then… well, she might as well go back to sleep herself.

Hopefully the Storm would be less grabby when she got back.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 25th of October, 1969 continued. Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Arseniy slugged his assaulter in the jaw, knocking the gangly youth out cold while his whipcord 'guide' knifed both of the other 'muscle' sent to discourage the Russian's poking about.

Faster than the last man could cut and run, he slammed his left hand directly on the man's throat and hefted him up a good foot off the ground.

Liqin cleaned his knives off on the jacket of one of his two victims and kicked them into a more sheltered part of the alleyway, sheathing the blades back into his sleeves and calmly strolling over to the kid the vor had knocked out. "Honestly speaking, I had expected it to take longer for anyone to go after you."

With a snort, the older man sourly eyed the chatty idiot that made it semi-obvious he was the one calling the shots before he admittedly hit first.

Obviously, the mere act of visiting his foster daughter in her captivity had advertised Arseniy's presence perfectly well. While Sonya might be constrained due to the contract she agreed to fulfill, he was now the more concerning Russian in the People's Republic of China just simply because he could ask awkward questions or dig into suspicious behavior.

There was a lot of it on the streets, and not all of it was Triad-related. Some kind of regime shift was making all sorts of things unstable and confused, which just helped him rather than provide an obstacle.

Arseniy slammed his victim against the brick wall a few times to knock him out for easy transportation, letting the insensible man slid to the ground where the Chinese assassin was pouring a small amount of some liquid in a hip flask out on his gangly target. With a curious sniff, the Russian narrowed his eyes and wondered what was in that.

It wasn't wine… hopefully it was some kind of whisky.

Liqin picked up the teenager, handing the flask over so he could 'doctor' his own explanation for why they'd be carting around two individuals against their will in broad daylight. Arseniy took a nip for himself before wasting a bit on his victim.

Hmm… rum. Not what he was used to, but decent enough in a pinch.

"Is this all you're going to do? We're going to have a few rather disgruntled prisoners in short order..."

"Why bother hunting? They'll come to me." Especially as the thief was 'contained'.

Sonya was in a predictable location, with an easily found schedule and surrounded by softer targets that might suffer if it came down to an actual fight.

Arseniy… wasn't.
He was free to be a very big, ugly ass thorn in someone's side if they were specifically targeting Russians. Eventually, someone he ran into will be connected to whoever was going after his daughter and he could tailor his movements appropriately.

It didn't mean he was going to ignore the patently obvious until he got there, but until he got an actual bite on his 'baiting' just clocking a few upstarts a new punch card was entertaining enough and hopefully distracting.

He really only had to give his foster daughter enough time to wait out her constraints. If things were that annoying, she could take care of it herself once she could move freely. Making himself a general pain in the ass could backfire eventually but keeping to the 'Wo' Triad Groups' territory made thing harder to accuse him of anything.

The brief excursions outside it was just him ensuring he had the widest range of exposure to keep stress of his daughter.

Between their two victims this afternoon, or the four including the two enforcer types, he didn't really expect a whole lot. Maybe something the Wo Hop To Triad could use in exchange for taking the bodies, but probably not anything he was interested in yet.

So long as he wasn't the one picking fights, no one had the grounds to bitch to the Triad 'hosting' him.

Which was incredibly flimsy in all respects, but anyone complaining would then have to explain why their people assaulted a guest of another Triad in their own territory to be taken prisoner in the first place. Mustering any kind of attack would be inviting a full-scale war between Triads, which made it highly unlikely if the attempts started off with something as anonymous as poison attempts.

He'd rethink his approach the moment things escalated.

Eventually, things might get rougher than he could handle alone or with a single man to back him up. Hopefully before it got to that he would find who it was trying to assassinate his foster daughter.

Arseniy paused, half to let Liqin catch up after putting away his flask of rum and half to wonder what the hell he would do if nothing showed up in a reasonable amount of time.

He didn't really want to get too embroiled in these parts. Sonya might be interested in China, but he wasn't.

As amusing as it could be to scrap with a few idiots around here and duck the Hong Kong Police, he had Lisa and Valera waiting for him back home.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 25th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"-have no idea why you keep apologizing."

"It's… just accept it." Fong asked with appreciable exasperation as he came into the holding room. "I didn't mean to… ah…"

"…do I want to know?" Zhōng inquired before the young Russian woman could respond, placing a box he was unsure the thief still needed on the table between them.
Oddly, the usually self-possessed Storm flushed slightly before settling back into the seat stiffly and not looking at him.

Sonya looked equally as confused as he did at first, turning to him with an utterly flat look after a moment of staring. "Fong is apparently embarrassed that he-"

Fong slapped a hand over her mouth before she could fully explain the situation. "Sonya. Please. Good evening, Master Zhōng. Was there anything else we needed to know?"

"Nothing of consequence you could not guess for yourself." He informed his fighter blandly, settling into his seat while the Russian pulled away from the martial artist with a strange look for him and dug into Huang's care package. "Most the conversation I was involved in that didn't concern where you are being held was more of how the revenue of the betting would be distributed once the fights are finished."

She clicked her chopsticks together, swallowing what was probably the only thing she had eaten for an entire day. "...where we're being held? Is tiny. They don't have big enough-"

Again, the Storm moved to physically silence his fellow Flame user. Who looked highly unamused at the obstruction to her meal, and instead of allowing the imposition again she bit his hand.

Well… more closed her teeth down on the webbing of the hand between the thumb and index finger but not hard enough to actually catch any flesh hard enough to rip into it.

Sonya pointed her steel chopsticks in the martial artist's face with a scowl painted across her lips. "Do not do that. Once, sure. Whatever. Twice? I will bite a finger off if you do that again."

The Mountain Master of the Wo Hop To Triad wondered if there were more Mists about, or if the two of them just happened to be ridiculously behaving on average. It wasn't something he would've thought of Fong, but from her brief stay within his headquarters he did expect if from her.

"Miss Sonya. Your father visited us briefly." When all the thief did was raise an eyebrow as she took another bite of the dim sum packed into a plastic container, he continued. "He left us two prisoners and wandered off again."

"...yeah. Sounds like Arseniy." Confirmed the woman needlessly before going back to her boxed meal, as if that needed to be verified.

Zhōng pressed his mouth in a thin line, wondering if she was being obtuse for any reason or if she genuinely didn't see an issue with her father's behavior.

Admittedly, he didn't greatly mind the Russian attracting attention to himself off his daughter's issues here if it did stop some of the incidents. It had yet to be proven, but he could take advantage of the incident regardless.

However, the numbers brought in might become a bit difficult to handle in short order.

He wasn't in the business of kidnapping, what secure rooms he had were few and mainly smashed due to the thief's irritability. Maybe he should look into remodeling the compound a bit… and include some of the more modern plumbing…

…and an off-site facility to enable the two of them to destroy to their heart's content.

Hopefully that way he wouldn't lose the garden again if they held this tournament again. Outside a yearly demolition, he could task it to be storage and have it cleared out without needing to task
someone to it.

Her succinct response left them with little to talk about now.

He pinned his prized martial artist with an expectant look instead of attempt conversation with another brusque Russian. "Care to fill me in on what the issue might've been before my arrival?"

"…not particularly-"

"he cuddles in his sleep." Sonya informed him bluntly between bites.

Said Storm pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed heavily. "Yes. Thank you, Sonya. I am fairly sure he didn't need to know that."

…he regretted asking.

"Also," continued the thief blandly, "actual blankets might be nice."

"I will convey your request." Vowed the Wo Hop To Triad's Mountain Master. Anything to get away from that particular topic.

Fong frowned pensively, glancing sideways at the woman. "…is that your only complaint?"

"Honestly? Yeah." She considered him in turn. "Well… that and you have a weird obsession with my ass."

Zhōng now wondered if Sonya held some Mist Flames, or if just a few Flame users in the same room complicated the 'weird' factor anyone Mist puts out. While he had learned more than he had about his arguably best Storm user in the last few minutes than he had the last few years… but they were really things he could've happily gone his entire life without learning.

The man being discussed in question opted to pretend as if nothing too embarrassing was being said about him. Giving the Mountain Master an impressively straight-faced look of polite attention, Fong smiled tightly. "Master Zhōng, did anything else interesting happen recently?"

"The Red Guard was finally formally disbanded instead of merely backhandedly slandered in the news. Chairman Mao advised to have the youths sent to the countryside and it looks as if it really is happening." He offered, certain that it was news to one of them if merely an update for what the other already knew. "A fair amount of reorganizing is going on to account for the unhampered police force."

Appreciatively Fong's eyebrows rose up and even the Russian paused in eating.

Sonya cocked her head to the side after a while to mull the information over, pulling the chopsticks out of her mouth to pose a question. "Does that mean your Cultural Revolution is over?"

"I highly doubt it. Merely that the main arm of the unruly interruptions and disorganized chaos coming from them will decrease." Explained Zhōng tiredly, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Hopefully it will mean the mess will get organized, but that might be too much to hope for in just one policy change."

Simply inclining her head to accept the information, the Soviet woman went back to her meal.

"Has it impacted anything important?" Inquired the Storm next, idly so if the older man deemed anything too important to speak of in a likely observed meeting he would not object to a subject
"Not as of yet, Vor Bazanov seemingly is perfectly happy to wait at the edges of our territory and confuse the hell out of everyone attempting to cut corners into it... as well as drawing a lot of attention to himself."

Sonya hummed appreciatively for the update, polishing off the dim sum in a few more quick bites. Setting that empty container aside, she pulled a shallow dish with likely lukewarm dumplings to eat next. "Question. Do you end up supporting a fair amount of civilian infrastructure as well?"

"As well?" Zhōng echoed, considering the question coming from the woman.

She shrugged, attempted to stab Fong's hand for stealing one of her steam buns, then glanced back at him. "We do it a lot. Arseniy's usual duties involve keeping up my childhood neighborhood, like fixing up utilities or leaking roofs and the like. In exchange for the clan shoring up the local infrastructure, the area generally ignores anything too strange going on and won't report us for stupid shit young thieves might get into."

"...interesting." No, he wasn't talking about how childish the two could be in the same room. He was getting slightly used to it now.

The head of the Wo Hop To Triad wondered if that suggestion would work here. Obviously, that was a long-term investment... but an interesting one.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 25th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

It took until Fong's fight in the tournament for Sonya to realize what was bugging her.

There hadn't been anything resembling an attempt on her or her fellow hostages this night.

...she was actually surprised to be slightly irritated by that.

Shit. Had the attempts been helping her subside peacefully in a very nice and gilded cage?

...whoops.

The Soviet Storm-Cloud, too antsy to have settled down with her knitting project and without her book or pipe, paced instead to work off some of the energy she had. She earned herself a betrayed little pout from Ballsy Toddler Boy, but the kid eventually bedded down with his fellow brats when it became apparent something was off with her and the thief wasn't settling down anytime soon.

Hopefully the lack of anything happening wouldn't key her up too much, because in captivity she had no idea how to bleed it off without ripping their much nicer prison apart.

With the addition of the tournament entrants, she wouldn't appreciate having to go back to that empty set of rooms again. Even if she was still tempted to break out and steal those stupidly comfortable pillows.

Turning back to the ongoing tournament, which really wasn't all that fun to watch for her as she wasn't participating but she hadn't realized she might be tempted into such things before being taken hostage, the thief attempted to focused on the fights instead of pace.
She set her teeth when she realized Fong still had the very nasty bad habit of always dodging left first when surprised. Now that whoever was organizing the tournament's bouts realized the Storm wasn't any kind of green horn in a ring, he was getting more interesting fights that lasted more than fifteen minutes if he was being nice.

If he did it again, she'd say something. While yeah she took advantage of that little habit of his in their tussles, the thief was interestingly not alright with anyone else using that tell against him.

Stopping her fidgeting, Sonya ran her mind back over that thought suspiciously and tried to make sense of the tangled feelings under it. It took barely five minutes, in which Fong utterly failed to actually land a hit on his opponent of the night, for her to start pacing again.

…really not good. This non-incident thing was really throwing her off.

She had not actually experienced a whole lot of jealousy in her life, there was that Cherep and Dmitriy thing and that had been about it for her. Queerly, she was really jealous of the Storm that asked her to be his hostage right now.

He got fights, she had to just watch.

Chewing on her lower lip irritably, Sonya scowled at the floorboards under her bare feet as she tried to figure out something to drain off her irritation and general ill-feelings without trying to murder someone.

There was a dull roar from the spectators somewhere above the Soviet Storm-Cloud, signifying first blood in the bout went to Fong's opponent against some expectations.

She paused, wondered if the martial artist had gotten a bit over confident from the last few 'easy' nights, and shoved that thought to the back of her mind as likely jealousy induced and not fit to be spoken as she continued moving.

Besides, the Storm gave back as good as he got with a probably rib-cracking palm-thrust to his opponent's upper left chest just under the man's arm.

He had to duck under a knee aimed at his head in revenge, but the martial artist managed it at the very last second to the point his braid wrapped around the other man's foot.

Interestingly, Fong then grabbed his braid and lit it with Storm Flames. Startled, his opponent back peddled awkwardly on one foot trying to disentangle himself. Blinding himself to the leg sweep and the subsequent knee drop to the man's sternum.

Sonya blinked when a very different roar, this one of approval, clued her into the fact she had stopped for at least a full minute watching the scuffle end.

…maybe she should watch more than just Fong's bouts. It really couldn't hurt, and maybe she could find something else to temper her antsy behavior.

Cocking her head curiously, the thief took a full three steps to the left. It put her in reach to the pillar that held up the left side of the balcony over their heads, and just in range to grab the man attempting to scale the side of the arena's walls while most were more distracted by the last few exchanges of Fong's bout.

"Um..." Coughed out the new man uncomfortably, gripping her wrist in exchange for her nearly crushing his windpipe out of suspicion. "...I was... just... curious?"
Sonya blinked at him blankly as he shakily fought to keep his footing on the railing likely intended to keep the kiddies from falling out.

…not a 'retaking' of the hostages?

Well… free target anyways.

Drawing him further into their little alcove, she positioned him just so that when she punched him he'd at least break through the door they had been led into. The man realized at probably the last second what she was doing, but even if he dug dirty fingernails into her wrist it didn't save him from getting slugged in the cheekbone.

Irritatingly, as he wasn't trying to kidnap them she was trying to avoid killing him, she didn't hit him with enough force to break the door. And the Lightning guards outside it were prompt in yanking it open to take possession of the moron.

A tug was applied to the hem of her skirt, and the knitting old granny offered her abandoned knitting supplies. "Feel better?"

"Much." Even if the man was rude as hell for not breaking the door. Sonya took the offering and sat next to her. "I missed your son's fight. How did he do?"

"He lost, unfortunately. I think he broke his nose tonight..." The elderly woman sighed, absently straightening out her yarn.

"…ah. I am… sorry to hear that." Responded the thief probably too slowly and a bit woodenly to be fully believable. "You can at least see him shortly? That might help."

She earned a mildly amused but still a bit worried looking smile in return.

(Sunday the 26th of October, 1969. Björn's Apartment, Mafia Land.)

With a wince-inducing thud, a sizable stack of paperwork was added to the Icelander's battered coffee table.

Which, if he was pressed to be honest, hadn't exactly been cleared of other bits of paperwork he had yet to sort through.

Björn looked up at the hitman who had done the dumping of paper on him suspiciously. "What is this?"

"More than half of that is estate properties for sale in the area Sonya needs to be in for Shamal's eventual education in Italian Mafia things," Renato Sinclair, the Italian Mafioso and fellow godparent of his Lady's godchild, explained simply with a wave and a sharp turn to make his way out again as abruptly as he let himself in, "the other half is the shit I promised Verde for the whole keeping his head down."

"…you could have knocked." Critiqued the Lightning-Storm irritably, reaching for the top file to start sorting through this instead of contracts his patron wasn't available to run for at least another week and a half if not more.

The hitman paused, giving him a sardonic look over a shoulder. "I could have. Slightly less efficient,
"It's generally considered polite," continued Björn dryly, "especially as while my Dama might enjoy your company... I don't."

"Is there a particular reason why you're being so snippy with me, Lackey?"

"You assaulted me the first time we met."

The Sun user blinked exactly once, and then he considered the ceiling thoughtfully and made a little tisking sound as he turned back around. "...oh, right."

He gave his entirely unwanted visitor an irritated look over the first folder of a... castle that needed some serious renovation and actual rebuilding of certain parts to be habitable. "Is that it?"

"If you're expecting an apology, you're not getting it. Sonya missed Shamal's birthday, that was why I wanted to talk to your 'Dama.'" Drawled the hitman sarcastically. "Getting the brush off meant he had been very upset at the lack of Russian thief in his life. Guess who had to put up with that shit."

"Very sorry." Shot back the Lightning-Storm equally as sarcastically. "But if you picked to distrust the Lackey of the woman you wanted to reach with the situation in question... then fuck you."

The smirk that painted itself across the man's face was not heartening nor nearly as irritated as Björn might have wished. "Ho? You've got some, as the little dragon lady would say, brass ones, boy."

With a shrug, because honestly he wasn't exactly sure where the 'snappiness' was coming from, he discarded the first folder to start a 'maybe' pile and investigated the next one. "Dama will be most unamused to lose the investment she made in me."

Renato Sinclair gave him an impressively droll look. "Hiding behind Sonya's skirts?"

"Wouldn't you? It's surprisingly efficient to keep incidents low without having to barter or rely on anything more valuable."

The other man considered it, then him, and shrugged. "Fair enough. I'm doing the same thing with Shamal, so..."

The Icelander picked up the third folder, the second was too small for what they would eventually need if his Lady kept adding to her staff at any rate she had previously and so started the 'no' pile. "If you insist, sir."

"Cute." Drawled the hitman sardonically, turning on his heel to finally leave Björn's apartment. "Call me that again and I'll just have to explain a bullet hole in your leg to Sonya."

"Good luck." Called the Lightning-Storm after the man, sighing heavily when the door slammed behind the Italian and now making a new 'maybe' pile that didn't need so much renovation but had historic regulations on the property.

Maybe he should just have a 'maybe for various reasons' pile instead...
(Sunday the 26th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Being less exhausted this time around meant that he at least woke first, if in a bit of a mirror of yesterday's positions.

Meaning Fong had a Russian Storm-Cloud thief half-sprawled across him this time.

…and he had absolutely no idea how to extract himself from this without embarrassment before she woke herself. At the very least, he could release the back of her left knee and not mention it was likely he was the reason for her practically half-straddling his hip.

He didn't know which of them had moved to enable it, but at least he wasn't the only one with wandering hands. One of hers had ended up under the waist of his changshan to find the skin of his stomach, and while he couldn't tell where the other one was exactly it likely had grip on his braid from the tiny tugs on it not in time with her breathing.

Musing on the issue was the least he could do, as he wasn't sure how to move without the woman sprawled across him waking from it.

The Storm didn't know how long it was between realizing what position he was in and when someone knocked on their door, but he didn't think it had been nearly long enough.

"…lady Cloud?"

"I'm up." Sonya called mostly into his chest, stubbornly not moving even if answering had betrayed her coherent status.

Fong poked her in the arm after a moment of hesitation both on his own end and on their caller's behalf. "How long have you been awake?"

"Who knows." It didn't seem as if she was all that bothered by their position or had any intent to bestir herself anytime soon. All she did was stubbornly bury her face into his chest more before calling out so the individual behind their door could hear. "What?"

"I'm sorry for interrupting, but could you perhaps…" A blonde head popped up to give the elderly lady that slid their door open slightly a look Fong couldn't see, but he could see the surprised expression on their visitor's face. "…ah, are you…? Should I come back?"

Sonya huffed, pushing herself fully upright. "I'm awake. What is it?"

He jerked his hands away from the yawning woman that moved without shifting away and ended up straddling his stomach, but the Storm was depressingly aware that probably didn't help things.

Maybe if he closed his eyes, this wouldn't be happening?

"…um. Can you… bleed off a bit of the energy the children have again, Lady Cloud?"

"Fuck… yeah. Give me a minute to really wake up." Responded the thief thoughtfully after stretching out her back as if there was nothing about this she found strange. "Fong? Want to come with?"
"What are you doing?" If there was any justice in the world, she'd get off him before she slid back enough to notice something he'd really rather her not.

Crass, and a bit rude, but... she didn't seem to even notice her own provocative behavior might cause him some issues.

"Baby tumbling lessons." Sonya didn't entirely leave her position but leaned forward far enough to require a hand planted on the mattress in order to reach the pipe she had left on the ledge of their headboard.

Fong ended up nearly nose-to-chest with the woman for a long moment, which took a few breathing exercises to not react impulsively to... and he did not mean to take a deep breath. "...do you often sleep with other people?"

"Erm... mostly my sister. Occasionally a few others depending on the situation. Why?"

...that had been a bad question to ask.

He had seen Tatiana and Sonya merely perched on the same bench, and how that ended. Twice. Likely, their bedtime antics were not much better.

However, it did mean she likely didn't see an issue with her behavior. Siblings of the same gender would probably have less issues climbing over each other, or anything else an entirely different person would assume was less innocent in intent.

Since he had made Tatiana's acquaintance himself, and knew of her sister's mischievously conniving ways, it was entirely possible the Sun had specifically mislead the Storm-Cloud in hopes of making others who ended up in bed with her uncomfortable. Or even if not intentionally, then through understanding of how her little sister's mind worked and accounting for that without mentioning others would not think the same.

He wasn't sure how to raise the issue, especially as she sat back on his stomach to investigate the bowl of her pipe before finally getting off him.

Fong took a second for himself before following, still wondering how one held such a conversation with an at most friendly acquaintance and trying not to think of what he would've thought had a different woman done the same things.

Sonya didn't wait for him to gather his thoughts, nor for him to untangle himself from the bare sheet they had, she left their room for the common room without a look back.

A less than graceful stumble, caused by the tangle that only became apparent after she slid out of it by virtue of her slim form, the Storm followed with slightly undue haste. There was an early brunch served and apparently they were finally deserving of thin wool blankets, laid out in the decent-sized sitting room arrangement.

His erstwhile sleeping companion made a beeline for the blankets without so much as glancing at the food, either absent minded distraction or a dismissal of any concern he found slightly impressive as he knew how long it had been since she had last eaten. Passing on the food himself, anyone wishing to get rid of her would really only have to kill him to invalidate her whole reason to be included here so he would not mind following suit and only eating food he knew wasn't poisoned, Fong ended up with an armful of two blankets shoved on him.

She spread three down herself, then turned and gestured to a spot for him to presumably copy her actions before putting a few fingers in her mouth and unleashing a rather piercing whistle before
starting a few stretches one could do in a stationary position.

He found the number of children that quickly obeyed that call unsurprising, even the sullener teenagers and a painfully earnest young man who looked surprised that she was waiting for them all semi-impatiently.

"Same drill as last time, they only have to do it once for me to accept them fucking off." Instructed the thief to the only helpful looking young man, before shooing the younger ones in a more or less single file line.

It devolved into three ragged ones, which she eventually deemed good enough. "We don't have the same things this time, so we're going to do this one by one. Fong can check you lot over first."

While her… aide? Was busy translating that for those that didn't speak Mandarin, she ensured that at least some attention was being paid to her before collapsing backwards only to roll with the motion and end up in a crouching position a foot from her starting point. Demonstrating it twice more from different angles, with a brief pause to tap none to gently on the head of the only young girl that wasn't paying her any attention, she then gestured for someone to come forward and try themselves.

She got instantly embroiled in the argument between three young children that had their own ideas of what to do, leaving Fong suddenly on his own with a handful of young adults.

…wait, he was teaching?

"Just watch them so they don't break something. Again, they only have to copy it decently to be excused, most of them will probably only do it once." Sonya reminded him needlessly, which probably meant he had unfortunately said that aloud.

Instead of saying that, he merely nodded hesitantly.

One of the younger men said something a bit insulting about needing to be included under his breath, not nearly low enough to get both thief and martial artist miss it. She likely didn't understand the words, but with his entire demeanor a translation was probably not needed to get the general idea.

A hand shot out and gripped the young boy's throat, lifting him off his feet by it and bringing him face-to-face with a highly annoyed Russian. She bared her teeth in a too sharp looking half-smile, half sneer.

"Ensure this one can do it perfectly." She dumped the now cowed young man in front of the Storm.

"…that much, I can at least do."

The Soviet Storm-Cloud eyed him oddly, then heaved a sigh and made a motion for him to get on with it in a lazy rotation of her wrist. "I have no idea why I thought you'd be any help here when you're not usually so…"

He blinked at her back blankly, wondering what in the world she was talking about. This was him helping her, wasn't it?

…were there times she wanted more, and he didn't realize?

(ooo000000)

(Sunday the 26th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)
Sonya eventually got all the children through the exercise, letting a few of the more excited brats loop around for another go without protest.

Fong, in his utter unhelpfulness, only worked on that one snotty brat while she handled the rest.

When the last brat, ballsy toddler boy, eventually got fed up rolling around with her help and wandered off for something to drink and probably cuddle-time with his dad the thief took an entirely ill-timed opportunity to reflect on how ridiculous it was she was doing this.

Her brother would burst a rib laughing if he could see her now. Frankly, she would assume the rest of the family would be equally as amused if less exuberant in it. Renato, as much as he'd probably loathe being lumped in together with the stuntman, would be nearly as amused.

...fuck, Crina would've-

She stopped that thought there, striving to prevent a scowl from twisting her lips and disturbing any of her fluttery-flighty fellow hostages.

"Something wrong?"

Of course Fong would notice right off the mark.

Sonya threaded a few fingers through her hair, restlessly and fruitlessly trying to ignore she didn't know what her old master of mysticism had done with her body and if there was a grave or not to visit. "...no. I'm going back to sleep. Wake me up when Zhōng gets in."

She couldn't go visit the circus and have some fun getting the old gypsy woman smashed or trading snippy little quips with her anymore. One part of that was now gone and dust forever, meaning the impulse to go check up on the old bat was invalid. Cherep wasn't even with the circus right now, there was no reason to blow off this Triad thing just to double-check what she already knew and likely make things awkward for those trying to move on.

Snatching the topmost blanket from the 'kiddy pile', she turned on a heel and stalked back down the hallway to their room. At least tried anyways, she got stumped by the fact all the doors looked alike and she didn't know if Fong had left their room's ajar or anything.

...which was not good for her steadily fraying temper.

"Two more doors." Corrected the Storm, having apparently dismissed his poor sap for wobbling on his way when she bailed in order to follow her. He did at least prevent himself from repeating his query until the point when she finally located their room and stopped dead because she had forgotten her damn pipe. "...are you sure-"

"Fong, it's nothing you can help with." Apparently today was just a day to depress herself. Curling up and pretending she was anywhere but here sounded good. "Unless you want to get in bed yourself, shoo. And grab my pipe for me."

Annoyingly enough, the man had been right in which one was theirs.

Straightening out the tangle of sheets and wondering what the hell Fong had done to get it all twisted like that... the thief paired the sheet and blanket together then tossed the whole assemble onto the bed. Before climbing in, she took a second to dig one of the books out of the chest provided for storage.

How had they gotten from their former prison to here?
Suspiciously, she inspected the bindings and the cover of the hardback tome. Seeing nothing besides the wear and tear a life of travel imparted on her things, she fanned through the pages quickly.

The needle that stabbed into her palm had been embedded into the binding itself, just waiting for her to open the book to read and deliver whatever method of death was being tried, something sticky made pulling the tiny splinter of metal easy to extract.

Now highly irked, Sonya sat on the bed and investigated the rest of her things to see what else had been tampered with.

She ended up with three more needles, one that had spilled into the bottom of her chest and the other one she extracted from her other book. Zhōng had not delivered a book yesterday, so the very battered Russian sci-fi book was likely the one that lost the needle before it could stab her.

When the door slid open again, the thief snatched her pipe and shoved the likely poisoned pins on the Storm she was sharing accommodations with. "How many times does it take before I can formally raise the issue with the head of whichever of these damn groups?"

"...technically, once was one time too many." Fong replied absently, rolling the tiny needles around his fingers thoughtfully. "What... what is on these?"

"Sap, probably. Any known poisonous plants around?" Sonya got fully under the covers, her now de-booby-trapped book set aside for pipe-inspection.

She should look over the pouch of tobacco she had been given for this shit too. Luckily, she was pretty sure one of the old men had it in his chest and so it was probably not poisoned.

...probably.

Looking up before she started inspecting the other frequently used item with her, half curious over what had distracted her bed-mate and half to either order him out to find her tobacco or into bed with her, she got distracted by his obvious unhappiness. "...Fong?"

"...this is probably not safe to handle with bare skin." The martial artist informed her a bit pointedly, a grimace on his face as he eyed the latest attempt on her life.

"Pull up your Storm Flames, not enough to fill a palm but just enough so your skin warms." Sonya cut herself off when the man's entire forearm burst into angry ruby Flames. "...or you could do that. Storm Flames burn everything but us including things in us that isn't, so if you use that be careful. I burnt off three years of immunization shots doing it."

He shook off the ash that now was the only remains of the pins and his right sleeve, then turned to her and cocked an eyebrow. "Is that how you ate all those poisoned dishes the first night?"

"I couldn't get anything from eating them, but I could still taste. Even if they were all likely a bit off from what they should taste like."

"Interesting... I'll work on that little trick." Barreling on before she could ask if that meant he panicked and used too much Storm Flames, Fong nearly folded his arms into his sleeves before he recalled he only had one now and ended up just gripping his right wrist instead. "Will you now tell me what's wrong?"

Son of a bitch. She had only just managed to focus on something else…

"Sonya?" The irritating asshole perched hesitantly on the edge of the bed, making things dip...
shift in his direction and earning him a look from her. Fong regarded her levelly… if it wasn't for the faintly worried crease to his brow. "The week is nearly up, two or three more days of this then we're free. You've done wonderfully so far, if it's getting to you-

"No. Well… yes, but no." Frustrated, a bit moody, and now a bit more depressed, the thief raked the fingers of her left through her hair again. "It's not the tournament… although I don't think I can do something like this again without more help… it's just-

Being unwilling to talk about Crina was stupid, the woman was dead. Outside of anyone's reach, even if she pissed off every last criminal element in the world the old gypsy woman would never be used against her or harmed by the association.

Knowing all that didn't mean Sonya was alright with the idea.

However, Fong still deserved something. He was sharing space with her and she knew some thought she was terrifying when she was calm. Sharing space with her when she was antsy or highly irritated at the drop of a pin had to be unnerving even for him.

"An… old, friend of mine died." Was safe enough, but she struggled with how to phrase the rest of it rather innocently. "…they refused medical help. Which was their choice, but I still disagree. But it's useless now, because they're gone, and I can't go argue or see them and-

She twitched when she got a sudden hug that pulled her forward a bit awkwardly.

Confused, she absently patted Fong's shoulder and tilted her head back so her voice wouldn't be muffled by his shoulder. "…what's this for?

"I'm sorry about your friend." Fong informed her honestly enough, giving her an extra squeeze which she would forever deny made her eyes itch with even stupider tears. "Was it recent?"

"…earlier this year. I only learned about it recently." Sonya corrected absently, setting her chin on his shoulder. "I haven't… adjusted to the idea yet. The reminders still hurt."

Fong hugged kind of like Cherep did when he was more concerned and less playful. It was nice. Probably went hand in hand with being a big brother.

Did all big brothers give good hugs, or had she and Mingxia just lucked out?

"…thanks."

"You're welcome."

Sonya grimaced as she realized her cheek had ended up smeared with what was likely ash from his Flame-fit in the course of this hug. "…can you let me go now?"

He jerked back, thankfully releasing her beforehand. "Sorry."

She plucked the pipe up from her lap to absently toy with and shrugged. "One of the others has my tobacco pouch, I don't know if it's been tampered with… I kind of didn't check everything over when were moved in here."

Then didn't pick up a book or her knitting needles for an entire day. No telling what her yarn was laced with now.

"I'll go ask for it." Fong's wine-red eyes fell to the slender brass she was sliding between her fingers.
"What about that?"

"…well, if it was it's not now. I generally use Storm Flames to light it."

"How does that work?"

"Badly, which is the point. I was supposed to stop smoking, according to my sister. If I light my pipe with Storm Flames, it eats the tobacco before I inhale the smoke. I only occasionally use matches." Then she was just left with inhaling smoke and ash, which didn't really burn again even with her Storm Flames very well… "But the act of smoking is habit forming when you did once smoke… and I find it relaxing even if I don't actually smoke anything."

"Ah. I see."

Sonya arched an eyebrow at him, which the man eventually realized after a few more moments of contemplative thought.

"What?"

"Shoo. Find my tobacco." She glanced over to the empty side of the bed. "Or get in, one of the two. I don't care which."

Fong's mouth opened, shut, opened again.

Then he blinked rapidly as he got upright. "I will… find your tobacco."

Probably something to do before someone smoked tainted and dead plant life.

She slouched down in their bed, lifting the now bobby-trap free book and opening it to a random page. "Have fun."

(o00000000)

(Sunday the 26th of October, 1969 continued. Wo Hop To Triad's Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

This time, instead of immediately heading off again once he dumped his 'cargo' off, Arseniy lingered a bit in the Wo Hop To Triad's headquarters.

His 'guide' took the few moments free to fuck off somewhere, so the vor lingered in the nicely sunny courtyard. It didn't take very long for someone to join him temporarily, but the cook merely dropped off a tray of tea for him before leaving him too it.

Not objecting in the least, even if he'd prefer coffee right now, he took a fortifying swig of the hot liquid.

Black, not green tea. Hmmm… more than likely imported, from what he'd seen on Hong Kong's streets so far.

It was all green, or some white, tea available from the street vendors that had it. That, or this Triad had a lot more pull in the local infrastructure than he had thought.

Eventually, the pad of small feet heralded his next visitor before she slid open the doorway behind his left shoulder to join him. "Vor Bazanov! Good afternoon?"

He supposed that was why he was given a few extra cups on the wooden tray.
The young girl, which he recognized as the younger sibling of that Storm-man his youngest daughter was involved with just from the blood red eye color they shared, sat herself down neatly on the other side of the tray set on the veranda.

"Did you come to see your daughter with the Mountain Master?"

Obviously, or he would've been gone by now. He glanced skeptically at the elderly man shadowing the young one's path, just settling back with the admittedly decent tea when the girl didn't so much as flinch from the extra addition's imposition.

"...Miss Sonya talks more than you." Mingxia sighed out, pouring herself and the old man cups of the steaming liquid before continuing. "I don't think I've heard a word from you yet."

"Sonya's her own person." Arseniy offered slowly, a bit nonplussed by the observation and how that facet of his foster daughter pertained to anything about his admittedly minimal conversational skills. Grinning brightly up at him, she shifted to face him more instead of looking out over the courtyard. "So, you do speak! Hello."

He took a sip of the tea.

The girl deflated, glancing first to the old man before looking back at him a bit more hesitantly. "Would you answer any questions I ask?"

…maybe.Depended on the question.

"You know, barking at a mountain will not make it move."

"I am a Rain, Master Yaozu." Insisted the girl, elevating her nose slightly. "Enough rainfall can wear down even the biggest rock."

The elderly old Chinese man glanced across to him. "Do they all do that? 'Storms' are stubborn and lingering, 'Rains' are persistent to a fault?"

"Pretty much." Fuck knew he heard enough from the Clouds teasing the Sun over her overbearing nature while his eldest brats were growing up.

There were also all the other ways their 'natures' could be used to describe or explain what they were doing... or at least they had thought it would.

"It sounds like an excuse for stupid behavior." 'Master' Yaozu observed a bit pointedly, which had the girl blinking at the very idea.

"Trick is not to fall for it or let them excuse it all the time." Dismissed Arseniy with an absent shrug.

"You raised Flame users." The sudden interjection earned her a lot more attention than she probably counted on, Mingxia looked a bit surprised. "Erm... she said to keep it to myself but did not ask the same of Master Yaozu. I... thought you knew what she was seeking here."

"What?" His brats weren't something he liked being questioned, especially not by unknowns.

"I am to teach the one that's apparently a pacifist." Offered the elderly man bluntly, which the vor appreciated. He settled his tea firmly into the bowl created by his hands, probably to leach the heat into his battered hands. "Your daughter specifically went after my service as I know the way of aikido, which might appeal."
That meant absolutely nothing to him. Cherep's complete unwillingness to defend himself worried more than just his sisters, but if Sonya thought this would work…

He glanced back at the girl after a moment contemplating the issue. "What about it?"

Arseniy might be a bit defensive about the kids, but they had enough troubles with just the shit Sonya had dug into for the clan. More trouble would be… exasperating.

"...do you have any other advice for young Flame users? I can see the trap you just spoke of, of excusing not particularly good behavior merely because of what I am..."

He tisked at her. "Not the one to ask."

His youngest daughter might be blind to a few of her own faults, but she would at least pin them down and dissect them once she knew of one. The fact she had to go the long way about finding them was probably half her nature and more the unwanted reinforcement that she should already know being an 'expert' and from getting looked at as an advisor when someone wanted help.

That did weird things to a kid's head, when they weren't quite old enough to have assurance that they had seen it all before yet kept being asked about things as if she should have. Her momentary spots of ignorance and arrogance weren't excusable but understandable in that light, especially as she tried rather hard to keep herself level-headed and learn what was required of her even so.

He had faith she'd pull through it.

"Well... the one I would've asked, had I thought of it, isn't here right now." Confessed the young girl sheepishly. "But she turned out... well? Very... non-hostile for a Cloud woman."

He gave her a suspicious look.

"So... is it a self-fulfilling prophecy? What certain Flame users are 'supposed' to be like?" The Sōng girl set aside her tea to cup her own hands, revealing a welling of her blue and very... liquid-like Flames. "Your daughter is and isn't bound to her type. But how?"

That was actually a decent question. He didn't know.

Tatiana was very much what 'Suns' were 'supposed' to be like, Cherep very much wasn't how 'Clouds' should be in every respect aside the willful part. Sonya was both between and a slight bit more like her older brother, and Valera was just a stubborn little brat right now.

If his eldest, who grew up without knowing what her type was supposed to be like, and his two middle children, who knew what they should be like but went differently in their own ways, were so different in that aspect... then depending on how Valera turned out he'd know if knowing the 'usual' influence those growing up with Flames any.

...he didn't like that thought.

Sonya was one thing, she had specifically dug into the unholy mess to figure out her abilities and what she could do with it. Valera wasn't yet to the point he could make an informed decision about what to do regarding his Flames, and it was part of his responsibilities as a father to ensure his son was without confining influences like that.

"Sonya had her own scars before we got her." If that had anything to do with how she evaded the 'known' behavior of Clouds was debatable, but it was something to give the girl for making him consider the issue fully. "Might want to think on who you want to be first, then fit your Flames into
Sonya and Cherep had their own sense of selves well before most would due to their situations, Tatiana had been a little later getting there and she mostly found herself only after leaving home that last time. Valera would get there whenever he would get there, but until then he should probably keep an eye on things.

"...'got' her?" Mingxia repeated in confusion.

"She's adopted." Arseniy ensured he gave the girl a look to convey that part didn't really matter all that much to him.

"Oh." The little Rain girl gave him a searching look, then settled back with a slightly bewildered look. "That... actually makes more sense."

He rolled his eyes, examining his delicate looking teacup and the level of lukewarm liquid inside and wondering how much longer he had to wait for someone to take him to see Sonya.

No, he didn't look anything like his foster children. That was kind of the biggest example for the fact he wasn't their biological father. Frankly, at least the younger two, he didn't think they would mind claiming him as such even if they had different men that were their actual fathers.

"Well, you're big. She's not." Defended the young girl, a bit sheepishly. "It's a bit... strange when you see the two of you together the first few times. Or even just one first and then the other."

With a snort, he drained off his tea and set the cup down on the tray as he caught sight of the 'Mountain Master' leaving his headquarters to join them.

"Vor Bazanov, good. I have something taken from one of your... gifts, you might be interested in."

Zhōng Duyi glanced at the two keeping their visitor company while he waited, nodding shortly to the elderly man nursing his own drink then gave the girl a mildly inquiring look.

Mingxia gave him a bright, slightly mischievous smile in return.

The Chinese man more near Arseniy's age turned back to him after a moment. "Are you ready?"

With a huff, he pushed himself upright.

He'd been waiting on the other man, asking if he was ready was a bit superfluous.

(Sunday the 26th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"I'm fine." Sonya insisted in Fong's face irritably, glaring at the man as Zhōng entered the now familiar holding cell where hostage meetings took place. "Will you stop asking? It's more annoying than helpful at this point."

"It is a valid question, you've invalidated your only other method of taking the edge off in helping us with the less than stellar security." Responded the Storm Flame user calmly, spreading his hands in a gesture of peace. "I am willing to help you figure out ways to counter the irritation, if you want."

"And how the hell do you expect to do that?" Arseniy demanded shortly as he came through the doorway himself, a bite to his tone that suggested whatever the younger man was thinking it had
better not be what he was thinking.

"…clearing a section of the space we have been allotted to spar in?"

The father snorted, glancing first to his daughter then suspiciously at the martial artist, before slowly continuing with closing the door behind him and taking a seat. "...I see what you mean now."

"You're participating in a martial arts tournament Fong, picking a fight with me is not in your best interests." Shot back the thief exasperatedly without acknowledging that comment, accepting the boxed food from Zhōng with an appreciative nod. "Thank you... Mountain Master. Hello Arseniy."

"I do have to agree with her, Fong. Maybe promise her a fight after the tournament instead?" He offered as they seated themselves around the table.

It wouldn't be too much of a hardship to find a decently abandoned rural arena, so long as spectators could bear witness it might help some of the disgruntlement in his Triad over the limited tickets for the official underworld tournament.

Sonya unwrapped the box and selected something for herself before shoving the care package from his Sun cook over to the Storm using enforcer. The head of the Wo Hop To Triad raised an eyebrow at his fellow Chinese man.

"They only have to kill me to send Sonya away." Fong explained simply enough, plucking something for himself and the extra set of steel chopstick packed in if the Storm-Cloud woman bit through her own pair yet again. "I figured discretion would be prudent."

The Soviets both looked at him strangely, or rather Arseniy hadn't stopped glaring since he arrived and his daughter only just glanced at him sideways.

"...how long has it been since you last ate?"

"I only thought about it this morning, actually." Admitted the Storm a bit sheepishly as he dug into the food. "But I did eat what was provided yesterday..."

"...probably safe enough. Things did shift rather abruptly which might've removed access to any would-be killer." Mused the thief thoughtfully around a piece of shrimp. "How much longer is this shit supposed to go on?"

"It is scheduled to end Tuesday." Zhōng informed her thoughtfully. It wasn't the first time she swore in front of him, but she did seem to have an even shorter temper right now. "The last day will be a full-day affair..."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "What aren't you saying?"

"What isn't done by then will be finished the last day, in case of unexpected losses or if anything... interesting comes to light. By whatever means necessary."

"There were forty fights that first night..."

"Six fights had to be finished the next day." Fong interjected helpfully.

"...so, there's about ninety competitors?" Finished Sonya thoughtfully, frowning suspiciously. "...wait. Are there always six more fights that have to be done the next day? I wasn't keeping count after I realized the losers had to fight other losers."
"No, they solved the scheduling issues by starting an hour earlier."

Grey eyes flicked to him, and it took a few more moments for her to swallow before she continued. "How many are in contention for the winner?"

"Eleven, I believe."

"Twelve." Zhōng corrected Fong, as he had a better view of things when not trying to psych out his probable opponents or getting ready for his next bout. "One didn't fight yesterday."

"So six tonight, one tomorrow, and one more the night after? How is the by figured out?"

"A bidding war."

Arseniy snorted, which nearly surprised the older Chinese man as he had almost forgotten the burly Russian's silent presence.

"Typical." Agreed his daughter equally as sardonically.

"A bidding war done by the spectators. We're not allowed to bid ourselves." Clarified Zhōng in amusement. "Although I will admit we initially had the same reaction, so I believe what we ended up with was a hasty correction."

"…actually, that's sort of creative. Even if it was a split-second change." Allowed Sonya thoughtfully around her chopsticks. "What's happening Tuesday, then?"

"I am… unsure."

The bouts should be finished Monday night where both a winner and an ultimate loser would be found out, unless there would be another event like the banquet that kicked it off. The Mountain Master of the Wo Hop To Triad had no information on what was to happen, and after her actions the last few nights he doubted he'd get any insights if he merely asked.

The Russian vor grunted, centering attention on him almost effortlessly in a way Zhōng was envious of. "When you're done here, I've got a bit of information for you."

"Found out who was being naughty?" The smirk that crept over her lips was a semi-frightening mirror of her old man's, and a few of the stress lines pulled taught he hadn't noticed suddenly relaxed at the news. "…fantastic."

"I'll remain just long enough for you to get free again." Offered the oldest man in the room calmly, unbothered by the sudden rather blood-thirsty edge to his daughter. "Then you can do what you want."

"Um… Sonya, is that wise?" Fong inquired, actually putting his boxed dish down. "I don't mean… erm, just…"

"…I know my warning signs." Dismissed the Cloud woman neutrally before taking a bite of her shrimp lo mein in the pause. "If I do nothing, my anxiousness will continue to build up until something else kicks things off and I put another burning hole in some street corner in a mindless fit of rage. So, either an uninvolved party or those responsible… I don't have many other options right now."

Zhōng and his Storm exchanged a look. Slowly, the martial artist went back to eating when he didn't indicate anything he had to do.
Knowing the man's methods as he did, he'd likely exhaust trying to talk the woman out of her immediate plans with the time they had left here first.

As the Mountain Master of the Wo Hop To Triad, he had no agreements nor arrangements with the ones trying to murder his Triad's hostage. A bit of ill-will, as the woman had freely dispensed advice and tips to his Flame users as long as the questioner matched her standards not to mention gave them a miscellaneous question to nibble at. Her connections had proven interesting already, which likely resulted in her being the most highly valuable hostage currently being held who wasn't as safe as her fellows.

Dropping a word or two in the ear of the responsible party might be interesting… but too likely to be traced back to him. He had no reason to do anything but wait and watch.

In other words, it wasn't worth it to bar her way. From what little he had seen of her work, and the destruction she could do even unintentionally, he was interested to see how she'd deal with the situation.

The Soviet Storm-Cloud looked to her father instead of acknowledging the exchange between the Chinese men, although Zhōng was aware both Russians had made note of it and just didn't comment.

"You don't have to stay longer if you want."

"I'm a bit concerned over that 'homesick' thing."

Sonya hummed to buy herself a moment. "I believe it's the constraints. I keep circling back to things I should check up on, but I can't leave the area I'm restricted to. Hopefully I'll settle once I'm released but if not, I'll follow you back shortly after. Some violence might just help… but I'll need some support…"

"Want me to send your Mist pair down?" Asked the vor curiously.

"Umm…" Considering the question, the thief nibbled one of her last few shrimps in half while inspecting Zhōng's features. "…how many Flame users do they have?"

"More than enough for you to operate freely instead of tasking one to sit on hostages if you ask for more help." Arseniy answered before the Mountain Master could assemble his thoughts.

"…do you mind a minor Soviet invasion, Zhōng? The Mist duo are fairly inoffensive to host, but if I call any of the older students down to give them some operational experience…"

Her father leaned forward, highly interested. "Who were you thinking?"

"Andrei for one, he's likely to just remain where he is instead of spread out." Sonya mused aloud slowly, naming someone neither Chinese man knew given the blank look on Fong's face. "Then any of the other section's older students that don't mind a field trip…"

"I will not mind providing a location to meet up within, as long as you practice some discretion." He'd greatly rather not have to embroil himself in a turf war with the remaining branches of the offending Triad, merely bolster a faction in becoming the 'main' branch once the dust settled. "You do realize you will not likely take all of them out in short order? There will be… groups that will not be local and will hold a grudge against you if you should meet up with them in the future."

"I'm aware, and don't care." Announced the woman shortly, her eye coloring bleeding the purple that signified a Cloud Flame user. "If they're going to be upset their 'leader' poked me enough to earn some personal attention, they're too suicidal and stupid to be bothered with."
Zhōng stroked the seamed scar on the side of his face thoughtfully. "...interesting."

In the interests of diplomatic truce keeping, he should spread the word over how annoying the multiple assassination attempts had been and the reason why she would be going after them once things had been finished.

"I have a fairly green Lightning, pun not intended, I would appreciate being seasoned a small bit."

"Sure... I suppose I should pull Galina, if she thinks she can be spared. She's our main Lightning instructor." Continued the woman, discarding her empty box for a new one and instantly sliding herself to the far end of the table away from Fong once she saw what was inside it. "Hopefully it'll give the greener younger students some time to figure out what to do when given some leeway."

"Of course, you do realize that we are being eavesdropped upon."

"Of course." Grunted the older Russian sarcastically, echoed by the brusque nod from his daughter.

"Obviously." She agreed once she finished her bite of dumpling.

The martial artist blinked, only just realizing what she had taken from Huang's care package. The thief slid even further over, until she was nearly hip-to-hip with her father and practically dumped the box of soup dumplings into the older man's lap.

Fong pouted at her as he drew out something else to eat, merely earning himself two dubious Russian looks in return.

…well, at least the important parts had been discussed before things devolved into less dignified antics. Perhaps he should drop a word to the Sun he had two people to provide for, it might prevent another of these incidents...

No, he had done enough.

The free show, unwanted thought it might be, was somewhat amusing...

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 26th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Apparently, the losers fought first.

Understandable, really. Get the green and the inexperienced out of the way quickly, because it wasn't likely their bouts would continue for long. It would also help for the draw, getting the higher volume of fights that could be resolved quickly for the spectator's enjoyment and give them more for even a partial stay if they had other things to do later on or could only catch part of the tournament.

Sonya actually brought her knitting needles, freshly cleaned of their own sappy coating of dubiousness, and her yarn... but they found less use than she liked. She at least wasn't antsy enough to pace this night, but she also wasn't settled enough to sit in a corner again. Instead, she took up position at the pillars to watch the goings on.

Even if they weren't very much more than fifteen-minute scuffles, they were something to mindlessly watch and pick up some tips from.

Mostly, at the moment, of what not to do.
Either way, it was slightly instructive.

So far, she witnessed three foolish moves that broke the performer's own limbs instead of gaining them some advantage and seven stupid tactical decisions that lost six separate matches with one lucky s.o.b. who managed to do so twice before his luck ran out. A few interesting tricks, one who seemed to have actual combat experience but was playing lame for some reason, a Mist masquerading as a fighter, one fighter that seemed to have done something preemptive to his opponent, and a few other interesting characters to keep an eye on.

If tomorrow was the semi-finals… or was tonight supposed to figure that out?

Someone would get the pass, she had no doubt Fong would probably get one of the remaining two slots… who would be his second-to-last opponent?

Ballsy toddler boy, apparently unwilling to miss another night's sleep in her lap, had hold of her pants leg and was half hiding himself behind her skirt panel. He refused to go off with the other kids, and she was kind of tempted to see how long he'd stubbornly linger at her side before being forced to go and join the puppy pile of kid-sleepiness with the others.

He was nodding a bit, and was more leaning on her leg than standing upright, but so far he seemed perfectly content to somewhat stand with her.

With the kid so passive, she was almost taken by surprise by his sudden lunge to the railing. It took a bit of fancy footwork to hook her heel around his slightly pudgy belly before he took a header off their perch.

"Bàba." Ballsy toddler boy pointed out to her, as if she couldn't see that was his father in the ring. Pointed child-sized finger and all.

"Noted." Sonya drawled wryly, still pulling him back with one leg as she nodded in a method of communication he could understand before standing upright again. "But that's one hell of a drop, kid."

Unconcerned over her observation, the now wide-awake kid at least kept one fist twinned into her skirt but leaned out as far as the fabric would allow to watch his dad taking the measure of his opponent before the bout was started.

She had wondered how the kid's father was handling himself, she'd already seen the knitting old granny's son scrape out a win against that kid with the insane luck simply by being cautious. Likely the broken nose had made the lady's son be more cautious…or the two loses that netted him a mid-tier slot instead of the one-lost and the no-lost fighters did it.

Brat's dad was another of those cautious ones, letting his opponent pick the moment the engagement began. It didn't help him nearly as much as the less skilled or unlucky fighters, it put him on the back foot and the defensive against an aggressive rush from a man who had a broken arm and a couple of semi-familiar burns.

…Sonya was pretty sure that was one of Fong's former opponents.

A broken arm didn't hamper the guy too badly, his style seemed to rely more on kicks than punches. It did limit him to right-handed maneuvers only, which gave brat's dad momentary advantages when he could predict another more complicated maneuver.

That stalemate continued, a rather brutal and random scuffle until the guy with the broken arm over-
extended a touch too far and ballsy toddler boy's dad managed a knee-strike to the jaw which took his opponent down.

A bit… rag-doll like.

Sonya cocked an eyebrow, hoping the guy was just unconscious and not dead. To be fair insensible people acted just like dead ones, and frankly she had expected more death in this thing than had happened in this so far, but killing in front of your own kid was probably a bad thing.

While he was waiting the count, the only conscious man happened to glance up to the audience and thankfully caught sight of her and his son. The toddler waved frantically, as if being missed would be a terrible blow to him. He earned a slightly sheepish wave back, a quick one that hopefully wouldn't advertise their location to anyone that shouldn't know.

Deeming their location compromised, the thief snatched the kid up and turned away from the arena. The kid kept waving over her shoulder even as they left the limited pool of light that let those in the arena spot the hostages under the balcony the Triad heads were position upon.

She'd be on guard for visitors the rest of the night as well as tomorrow, but if anyone caught ballsy toddler boy's father's covert wave it'd be tomorrow they'd try something with that information. Hopefully most would think he was just behaving slightly foolishly to his Triad head instead of his hostage.

Hopefully the kid would fall asleep quickly as it was rather late, but the fights were getting into the less damaged and more skilled rounds that she really had wanted to see.

Knitting old granny held her knitting supplied safe with her, and she was polite enough not to laugh outright at Sonya's current burden while she was situating the toddler and her sort of but not really broken leg out so she could sit comfortably.

If she missed Fong's fight…

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 26th of October, 1969 continued. Budapest, Hungarian People's Republic.)

Cherep teetered on the edge of the rooftop Viper had picked out for them ever so grudgingly, curiously peering down at the highly nervous Spaniard Rain man waiting on his contact.

After the last couple days, in which his Misty friend demanded for 'covert observation' before actually approaching their target, the immortal stuntman was feeling rather impatient to get things over with so he could leave the city already.

"You could have left by now, mou… had you not insisted on this." Viper observed tartly from further back on the roof.

Pointedly counting out the money he'd handed over through the last few days to placate his very touchy friend to help him out with this.

"Yeah well… I'm not that mean." He shot back cheerfully, glancing down the narrow alleyway curiously to see if he could spot the men one Mauricio Sebastián Ciceron was waiting on.

How the little wanna-be Master Liam had managed to scrape together the money he needed to pay off his debts was beyond him… but not beyond Viper's grasp of fiscal things. The explanation was a bit boring, but it boiled down to a side-business in something or another with generous amounts of
scamming a few people of pocket change.

…no, he didn't pay a lick of attention. Not because he found the subject boring, he did… but because he suspected Viper had made the subject matter he was speaking of deliberately boring and used a droning tone to punish him even if he had wanted to pay attention.

To say the Mist was not a fan of this idea was putting it shortly. Cherep was interested in how Mauricio had managed to wiggle out of his situation, but as his twisty friend was unwilling to be helpful the only one he had to ask was the Rain man.

Hopefully this whole meeting thing went off without a hitch, otherwise they'd have to try 'intimidation'. He… didn't do intimidation too well, probably the lack of actual hostility he could work up.

Then again, he could be the cuddly little plush toy zebra he got for Valera and with Viper's help… anything could look suitably intimidating to anyone with enough Mist Flames behind it.

It was a very nice afternoon, he'd much rather be on the road with his lovely American built motorcycle driving to some other location than loitering on a rooftop. He did owe Viper dinner somewhere nice again, but they could probably find something just as good in Bratislava or Vienna as what Budapest had to offer that they hadn't frequented yet.

Cherep did have to hunch a little against the nip in the air, which said fall was only a month from being over. Alas… he'd have to either find a storage unit for his bike or winterize Diana, so she'd survive Russian roads…

…probably would be best to put her up with Cleo the junkyard bike.

He was going to retire somewhere tropical and non-icy. Didn't really care where, so long as there were long roads nearby and a decent garage.

"Ciceron!" The undying stuntman blinked, taking a step backwards to get out of their line of sight of the individuals that joined the Spaniard in his half-hidden little nook.

"I'm hiding us, moron. Mou… they can't see you even if you waltzed right up to them and poked a few in the face." Viper observed tartly from behind him, taking a few steps to see what was going on himself.

"Right… I knew that." Cherep stepped back up to the edge to see what was going on better.

The people they were spying upon hadn't waited for them to sort a few things out, Mauricio was presenting his payment proudly… with only a bit of nervous sweat making his forehead rather shiny.

"-humbly present the funds I have borrowed from your coffers, my good business partners. With my ample and heartfelt appreciation for the credit given in my time of need."

A thin-faced middle-aged man examined the bills neatly wrapped in sets within the canvas bag, taking the proffered tote and slinging it into the guts of one of his thugs. "I haven't the faintest idea what the fuck you just said."

"Ah… well, the pursuit of improved articulation is its own reward… erm." Mauricio trailed off when he finally took note of the highly unimpressed looks aimed at him from all four of the people cornering him. He coughed a little uncomfortably, rocking on his heels a little before trying for a non-offensive smile. "I trust this concludes our association, does it not?"
"Yeah... no. There's been a couple very interesting rumors about you, Ciceron..." The first thug-man commented almost casually if it wasn't for the nasty smirk on his face. "...rumors that you can do a few interesting little tricks."

The short Spaniard coughed again, which didn't do anything for the pallor he suddenly had. "Well... ah, gentlemen...? I ah... am a simple stage magician... I am unclear of what anecdotes you may have overheard of my humble labors... however."

"Cut the crap." Harshly interrupted the thin-faced man, shoving roughly at the self-claimed magician's chest to physically cut off his words. "We know what you are... Rain. And... as much as this is... you still owe us interest."

Mauricio spluttered. "No! I have... I mean, I've gathered more than enough to cover any reasonable fees."

"Extra charge for lying to us." Drawled the man nastily, taking a full fistful of the Spaniard's rather colorful coat to haul the poor man forward. "Flame users are a hot commodity, didn't you know?"

Cherep bent his knees, aiming to drop close enough to snag the poor Rain man away from his assaulter. He didn't have the chance to formulate anything more of a plan than that, Viper ripped him away from the edge with a tentacle formed from his cloak and then practically melted away into some kind of evil-looking fog monster to do the rescue.

The slightly portly Spaniard ended up flung to the rooftop with a really funny sounding squeal of surprise, making the Cloud Flame user scramble to catch the man before the Mist's temper snapped and the guy ended up a wet splat on the bricked alleyway below.

He didn't bother looking to see what Viper was doing to the men trying to shake the poor Rain down, merely hauling his rescued carnie farther away from the edge. "You are damn lucky I was in town."

The utterly flabbergasted man spluttered instead of answer, scrambling to get his feet under him again and a bit too wide-eyed and breathing a bit raggedly for Cherep's peace of mind.

"Hey... you okay?"

"...I need that fog-thing. If I had that..."

"Yeah, but. Out of your price range. Was nearly out of mine as well." Drawled the stuntman wryly, planting his rescued man squarely on his feet in the middle of the flat-topped roof. "Look, seriously. You need to keep your head down more. You can't rely on luck, because it was pure chance I overheard your situation and Viper decided to visit."

He got a speculative glance in return, topped by a wary look to the edge of the roof where something Viper was doing was giving at least two of the thugs panic attacks, and then the Spaniard absentely pressed down the lapels of his colorful jacket to ensure he was in one piece. "...can I assume, then, you and this 'Viper' are others?"

The Cloud user smiled wryly.

Notably, the man didn't ask if they were other Rains or a different Flame type. He might not know the full extent of the Dying Will phenomena, and he just knew Viper would give him an earful if he said anything that stupid to a relative unknown they already knew was a bit shifty.

"You've been helped by others before? Don't you think then maybe you're doing something..."
Mauricio frowned, casting another glance to the far end of the rooftop as he nervously fidgeted in place. "I will admit there might've been a slight miscalculation on my end..."

"Slight?" Viper drawled out sarcastically as he reformed at the stuntman's side, the sneer visible despite the cowl of his cloak. "Slight would be if you had a glancing scuffle with the local crime syndicate, mou. That was not. That was pure stupidity."

"Not all of us can bow reality itself to our will." Pointed out the Rain tiredly, smoothing a neat dagger beard on his chin down and practically radiated angst and doom. "In truth, it really seems to be only a matter of time before my luck runs out."

Cherep and Viper exchanged a look.

The Rain suddenly cleared his throat sheepishly, fixing a very fake smile to his face. "I mean... um, my gallant rescuers! Many thanks, indeed, for your timely intervention. Alas, I have nothing to reward your heroic actions-

"Mou... no need." Suddenly interjected the Mist flatly, pulling the tote bag out from nowhere and bending his hooded visage over it to look over his prize. "I have more than enough here for bothering with your stupidity."

Mauricio spluttered, wide eyed. He glanced to the edge of the rooftop where his assailters were and then tried to bolt. He was dragged back with a string-thin lace of his cloak without so much as looking up from their new money bundles.

Sighing heavily, the stuntman raked a hand through his hair. "Look, man. Staying put isn't actually a good idea. Especially with your act, we caught it by the way. The mirrors and glass you made from Tranquilized ice were interesting... but way too much of a calling card."

"Well... it's not as if I can remain here now." Agreed the Rain a touch bitterly, glaring up at the Mist dragging them back to the Cloud.

He grudgingly picked himself up off the roof, brushing the dust and grime off his colorful jacket. ...did he stitch that himself out of wildly colorful scarves or something?

It was awesome.

"I meant in general." Cherep corrected with a bit of amusement. He was generally Viper's favorite target, it was nice to not be the one paying through the nose for once. "Unless you've got the backing of the local syndicate, sitting tight just encourages someone to try picking you up."

"I suppose, since my hasty exit was prevented, you have an alternate arrangement in mind?"

"For the short term, at least."

How much would it take for Viper to dump the man on Sonya?

Probably more than he was comfortable paying out, so... Mafia Land, probably. Maybe Bjørn wouldn't mind sitting on the carnie for a bit. The stuntman sighed, not particularly willing to go back there but...

Actually... how did one reach the island?
He actually… didn't know. Arseniy, and Sonya, had handled the tickets the two times he went there.

…shit, Mauricio had to come with him didn't he?

"I did not think this through fully…"

"Why do you think I objected to your plan to help this idiot?" Viper asked sarcastically, evaporating the bag of cash to wherever he kept things and rounding on him. "Seriously Cherep? Mou… yes, he's saved for the short-term… but now he has to leave the city. And, given your stupidly self-sacrificing habits, you're going to help him… aren't you? Which means if this syndicate was banking on this idiot Rain… now you're at risk."

"…you're not very nice, Vipes." Yeah… his sisters were not going to be pleased. Cherep scratched at his slow growing stubble sheepishly, reconsidering his only half-assed plans for the guy. "He's safe now… that's good. We can build off that."

The Mist stared at him flatly for a long, slightly awkward moment. "…yay."

Snorting back the laugh, the stuntman held out a hand to the Rain now suspiciously eying the both of them. "So, hi. My name's Cherep Bazanov. Part time mechanic with a traveling Russian circus, otherwise known as Skull de Mort… the immortal stuntman."

Gingerly, the shorter Spaniard shook the proffered hand. "Mauricio Sebastian Ciceron, stage magician. A… pleasure?"

"You get him caught… and not even death will spare you from my ire." Viper snapped instead of introducing himself, turning sharply on a heel to stalk away. "You still owe me dinner, Cherep."

"Ignore Viper, he's been grumpy all week." Ignoring the now owlishly blinking Rain main, he guided him on their own way off the rooftop now that the Mist had decided to leave them. "Let's get your things and get out of the city, we'll have more than enough time to get to know each other once we're out of here."

Cherep would be keeping an eye on the man at least for the first week, or however long it would take for Sonya to arrange a meeting with him with a mostly unknown Flame user. Hopefully she'd take him, but maybe he should start thinking about what to do if his little sister didn't need a Rain like Mauricio.

…maybe he should plan on talking a bit with Master Liam about his little mini-me instead.

Viper didn't like the guy… would a thief see him differently?
"The fuck, Fong?" Sonya groggily peered over the bed towards the door, glaring at the martial artist meditating with his back to the sliding panel that was the only entrance to their cupboard-like bedroom.

"…what?"

She thumped her head back down, drawing the bed covers higher up the bed. "It's colder without you."

The unhelpful asshole hummed but didn't move back to the bed. The thief could tell even when not looking at him because the bed didn't dip under his weight.

She tried curling up to minimize her profile, but the lack of extra body heat she was semi-sure had woken her up kept her awake as things got cooler in bed.

Irked, she pushed herself upright and glared over at her delinquent bed-mate. "The hell are you doing?"

"Meditation." Fong answered her peacefully, not opening his eyes even as he answered her question. "I find it helpful."

Sonya had just found it incredibly boring herself. "I tried meditation once."

"Oh?"

"I failed… I think."

Fong did finally crack an eye open to peer over at her in amusement. "I wasn't aware it was possible to fail in meditation."

"I think way too much." She hadn't gotten to any peaceful state of mind, merely ended up chasing the tails of her thoughts around in circles.

It had been useful when she had been younger for that aspect alone even if 'centering oneself' was seemingly beyond her grasp, but now she had too many things to do and rather than just ponder on them she'd rather be doing something about it all.

Besides, she did most of her thinking in between heist planning and actually pulling the robberies off.

"That isn't necessarily a problem, more a minor obstacle." Observed the Storm user thoughtfully, closing his eye again to continue his meditation.

Sonya frowned at him, not really feeling up to getting vertical for the day but also not willing to go back to sleep even if she was a bit tired still. Not alone, anyways. Instead, she curled back up in the bed covers and merely mused on what the fuck she felt like doing.

…a whole lot of nothing. She didn't feel like doing anything in this place.
Not good.

She ran her fingers through the thin cotton of the sheets provided absently, restlessly.

Fuck, this had taken so much less time than her irritation with her clan…to go from fed up to marginally pissed off with the situation. It was probably the whole being shut in thing, even in Moscow she could occasionally get out of the office now and again then break off for long stretches.

Also the clan was somewhat intertwined with her family, so there was that she had to burn through first.

So, the question was… would this 'end' be an explosive give up or a sudden snap of indifference?

The thief knew perfectly well she'd be no match alone against a full Triad outfit, especially not if it was an entrenched one in their home ground. If she couldn't wait long enough for Usov and Anna to come down… trying anything violent on her lonesome would be suicidal. Mists could be relied on to contain a lot of things, and if she was pressed to be honest she was looking forward to hunting a few Flame users and seeing the difference between a borderline civilian outfit and a full criminal one.

Disturbingly, even knowing she'd likely die trying to solo a criminal syndicate… it didn't make a dent in her eagerness to get on with things. It would at least be something different, and at the moment different was very damn attractive.

Apparently, four or five days was her limit for staying put in limited spaces.

"…Fong?"

"Yes?"

"Either get in bed or start talking. I need a distraction, fast."

The man snapped his head up, giving her an odd look for a long moment before heaving a sigh and apparently giving up on his meditation since he didn't immediately close his eyes again. "What would you like to discuss?"

"Chinese history. I've been meaning to ask… but I don't speak Cantonese and the people here are a bit… annoying." It didn't take a whole lot of effort to maneuver herself in a better position to see him more easily, but it did basically turn her sideways on the bed. Which required a bit of adjustment that irked her more. "Preferably recent history, if you would."

"…that's a bit painful, for me." Admitted the Storm with a touch of bitterness, crossing his arms into the spare pair of his outfit he had gotten delivered sometime after they had been moved in here. "I take it you mean this Cultural Revolution thing…"

"If you'd rather, start from the turn of the century and go backwards instead." She really didn't have a feeling on it either way, but if he did she could ask someone else for recent happenings.

Old man Yaozu, maybe.

Fong considered it, then started off a bit slowly. "Turn of the century would likely start with the Xinchou Treaty. Otherwise known as the Yihequan Movement, or the Boxer Rebellion to the English speakers involved, it was an anti-imperialist uprising against foreign powers trying to expand into our country. Most involved were eventually executed when the Eight-Nation Alliance saved their people, a mix of businessmen and Christian missionaries, besieged in the Legation Quarter of Beijing."
…Sonya would hunt down a history book for why the hell China's turn of the century started with a rebellion later. Right now, she was going to just listen and try to remember this for later.

"The Eight Nations were the Empire of Japan, the Russian Empire, the British Empire, the French Third Republic, the United States, the German Empire, the Kingdom of Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Initially, the Empress Dowager Cixi supported the Boxer Rebellion… but once we lost the Battle of Beijing she immediately reversed that policy and turned to sponsoring the reformations that opened Imperial China up to foreign imperialists." Pausing, the martial artist glanced over at her thoughtfully. "This was long after the hidden societies that later became what is more known as the Triads of now reluctantly agreed to no longer influence any rebellions or uprisings after they grew out of what local grassroots they started in."

"Understandable…" There was also that Vindice Law about military service to account for, but the suggestion that some of China's history before this Boxer Rebellion was directly influenced by Flame users was interesting to ponder. It did raise the question if Flame users could only not be paid military personnel, and if volunteering one's service for free counted in any way. "...but why? I mean, what influenced that decision? Just ending up on opposite sides of the conflict or what?"

Fong bit his lower lip, casting a glance upwards as he dredged his memory to answer her query. "From what little I know, we... I mean the Triads, interfered successfully in the first of the Opium War conflicts. We ousted a large part of the opium trade for a short while, remaining control of a small part of it ourselves... but that was the start of the end for China's imperial dynasty. Our interference meant the inequality between the modern industrial-level invading forces and the lower quality of our manufactured military gear wasn't recognized... and in the Second Opium War..."

She remained silent, letting him gather his thoughts. She had a bad feeling about what had happened then, given she knew how indigenous and less 'modernized' people tended to see invaders from Europe.

Usually rightfully so, if she was pressed to be honest.

"...the Vindice put a stop to any efforts of ours to help in the next conflict. By then it had gone beyond just ousting an invasion and entered military territory, as by Omertà we're not allowed to interfere with that level of warfare. If it isn't local only in scope, we are barred from joining. The Arrow War, the second of the Opium Wars, was between more than just a rural Chinese rebellion against outsiders and was a war between the Qing Dynasty and both the British and French Empires." The Storm's tone picked up a large measure of bitterness, more so than when he commented on his distaste for current events. "Without the assistance of the criminal factions' Flame users in critical points of the war, we were decimated in short order. That non-involvement wasn't entirely a conclusion drawn by ourselves..."

A few questions occurred to her, but until the Chinese native gave her his attention she wouldn't pose them. He was kind of doing her a favor as it was, she could wait for him to feel ready.

If the man had such feelings now, it probably had been worse when he realized his fiery Flame skills had meant that for whatever reason his countrymen with the same skills had not helped with mitigating a national embarrassment on the world stage. Learning the reason why may or may not have helped him all that much.

The thief wondered if there was a similar incident in Soviet Russia's past… well, aside World War Two and Stalin.

"They, the Vindice I mean, disappeared an entire Triad and all the branch gangs connected to them before we listened... we still don't know what happened to them. Those missing were supposed to
interfere with the Battle of Canton that same day, such as it was, to oust the invading British and French forces. Their absence meant the hostile takeover of the city was embarrassingly quick and final for us."

"...probably means there's a centralized intelligence behind the Vindice. If they're doing more tactical than just enforcement where their... wraiths, are," Sonya offered neutrally, slightly glad to have confirmation for that suspicion but a bit unhappy that this wasn't something Fong seemed to enjoy. "Therefore, you might be able to ask and get the information from a Vindice Officer that wasn't present."

He glanced at her, his expression slightly hard for her to read.

"Just saying. I've talked to them once."

"...you'll forgive us if I and other Triads don't do the same, I'd rather never see them."

"I'll ask the next time I see one, if you'd like."

Fong hummed noncommittally first, then merely shrugged with an impressively straight face.

"Alright... so if you don't want to continue to current day, what happened before the Opium Wars?"

"A few things happened between the Opium Wars and the Unequal Treaties, the Xinchou Treaty in particular." Corrected the man thoughtfully, apparently not even considering going up through the end of the Qing Dynasty to the formation of the People's Republic. "There was the Taiping Rebellion, Punti–Hakka Clan Wars, Nian Rebellion, Dungan Revolt, Panthay Rebellion, and the Self-Strengthening Movement..."

Holy fuck, no wonder Jiayi claimed her people had a lot of strife and war in their recent past.

She had kind of actually been understating the issue to her way back when. "...start from the more recent and work your way back?"

"Or I could start from the start and go to the end of the Qing Dynasty..." Fong suggested slowly. "...as long as you don't mind I only know what was taught in school and not the criminal underpinnings the farther back we go."

"It's fine. It's something else to focus on, rather than what I'd like to do if only I wasn't confined to a few square meters of space." Like bail entirely and go visit Tatiana, or Master Liam, or Lisa and Valera. Basically, to be anywhere but here. "Besides... my education was pretty lacking when it comes to contemporary history, anything you'd like to share will merely improve it."

The man quirked a wry smile for her. "The pursuit of one's education is an admirable goal... even if a lot of my countrymen will not share that exact view on it right this moment."

"I'd share some of Soviet Russia's history in exchange, but at the moment I don't actually know a lot of that either."

"It is fine..." Insisted the Storm neutrally with a one-shoulder shrug. "You can share it with me later."

With a snort, the Storm-Cloud grabbed one of their pillows to support her head and made herself more comfortable. "Fine then, keep talking."
When Sonya fell asleep again, sometime when listening to him detail the origin of the conflict between the Punti natives and the Hakka guest families in the Perl River Delta which boiled over during the period of time the sea ban had been in effect well before the Qing Dynasty's later version of the Canton System that replaced it, Fong left her to her nap and headed out of their dorm room.

She could insist she was fine all she wanted, it was pretty obvious at least to him that the longer she willingly stayed captive the more stressed she became.

Someone who only recently made her acquaintance probably wouldn't notice due to her nominal self-control rendering her mainly neutral on general principles. However, he had known her for a while and the difference between her usual reserved silence, unless being addressed, and this stressed closed-mouth behavior was vast.

Perhaps she wouldn't mind learning a new style of combat… it would hopefully stop the demands to join her in bed. Not that he would mind, if she was really offering, but he actual doubted she knew what she was asking for.

The thief would likely inform him in her usual blunt way if he was being overly exacting in any instruction, which would just help him as much as it might help her.

Before he could offer instruction, he should probably ensure it was possible in this place.

Additionally, he should look into getting his broken fingers splintered. A miss-timed block at the wrong moment likely cracked the bone of his ring and small fingers of his right, but it didn't hurt nearly enough for him to have gotten it bound before seeking some rest.

Absently running questing fingers along the sore parts of his opposite hand, Fong made for the shared common-room to see what there was to work with. He knew approximately what the dimensions were but taking another look with an eye to instruct someone might help.

Sonya had done her own instruction in the corner next to the main door, which was the easier spot to corral a numerous amount of easily distracted children within and two walls to limit the area of exposure to something controllable.

From where others had spread out into… maybe the middle of the room would be wise.

There were a few cushioned chairs, mostly taken by the elderly trading amusements between them to whittle away the time they had left here. A bare table with only the remains of the breakfast banquet was left to the other side of the only door from their prison, and the few smokers they had between them had monopolized the windows to help vent their chosen poison from the rooms.

"Looking for something, Fēng?"

"Fong." Corrected the Storm absently, glancing over at his former fellow student of Yaozu. "How's your leg?"

"Bad, but I'll live." Xinyue admitted wryly, gingerly keeping his weight off it as he limped closer. "Not sure why I expected anything different, given I've fought you before way back when. Your fingers?"

"Sore, but not significantly impairing."
"Lucky you." As the other man had been the one to attempt to break them only to break a leg in the process, Fong found the smirk hard to suppress. His former fellow student rolled his eyes, pulling up against him a bit painfully from his expression. "Do you know Lu Shui?"

"...who?"

"Another of your fellow 'Flame users'." He jerked a thumb down the other corridor, the one the Storm didn't currently reside down. "The... uh, green? One?"

"The Lightning." Well... he had a name now.

A pointed look was given instead of confirmation. "Speaking of, when the hell did you end up one of them? How?"

"It wasn't too long after you left for the city, if I must be honest." With a shrug, Fong went back to wondering where he might be able to instruct another in a style of martial arts. "I had to leave the village shortly afterwards myself. Storm Flames tend to be the more destructive of the types. I put a hole in the dojo wall..."

Xinyue winced, scratching at the back of his head with a grimace that had nothing to do with pain on his face. "I can imagine Sifu Yaozu wasn't pleased."

"Ah... he gave me an earful. And a few whacks upside the head with a walking stick for the crime of denying my involvement only to learn I lied later on."

The other man snorted sardonically, leaning against the wall with a sigh. "...that doesn't really say anything about how."

"...how do I have Storm Flames? I do not know, I merely do." He had to admit honestly with a shrug. "You could ask Sonya."

"Who?"

"My hostage. A Soviet expert in Dying Will Flames."

He earned a pointed look. "Anyone that asks her something about Flames gets brushed off."

"Were those that asked her about Flames also the ones gossiping behind her back earlier?" At the thoughtful look his question earned, Fong shrugged. "She is not here because she is an expert, but for my behalf. She has no responsibility here but that which she takes on herself... and for her type, she's done a lot."

"The kids, right?"

"And a few security issues." Confirmed the Storm absently as he watched their fellows go about their time-wasting activities. "I believe she also knows several ways to evacuate us all if it comes down to it, or all the hostages from where they are hidden depending. I haven't asked, admittedly... but she is a professional thief. I can imagine a few ways she could do so now, just through the skills I know she has."

"Hmm... is she awake?"

"Ah... no. She decided to take a nap. Give it long enough and she might be awake."

Xinyue snickered, outright laughing at his eye roll.
"It isn't like that."

"I'm sure." Nodding a few times, his fellow former student of Master Yaozu nonetheless didn't wipe the smirk off his face. "Let me know when she wakes up, okay?"

"I make no promises. It might just be easier to check in every now and again."

Eventually, only sometime after Fong concluded the middle of the sitting room would have to do, he got a gentle prod to the side from the other man's elbow. "What type does she have? I know of Storms, Lightnings now, and Rains... don't ask."

"Suns, Skies, Mists, and Clouds. There are a few others participating as well, but Sonya is the only Cloud Flame user present." A particularly stressed Cloud woman, but maybe a semi-interested person to instruct might be slightly distracting for her. "I must ask you don't irritate her more than she already is, we don't have the room to contain her if she decides to murder a large swath of people."

From the stare he got, the other man didn't understand. "...she's a woman."

"That can crush the very bones of your hand with one of her own effortlessly." Fong agreed with a wry smile. "I've seen her do it. She's also kicked me through a wall, shattered a large stretch of dock under our feet to dump me in the sea, and outran me once."

"...of course, you would pick a fight with her if she could." Xinyue shook his head, running a hand through his short dark hair. "I am unsure why I'd expected something different."

He hummed innocently, turning back to his shared dorm room to see if the thief was awake yet. "I have no idea what you may mean."

"You haven't changed a bit, Fong."

"Did you expect me to?"

"I could've held out some hope you would gain a bit more patience. Which you did. It just wasn't a... um, whole lot..." Fong endured the friendly punch to the shoulder with amusement, shrugging instead of verbally respond to a statement of what was pretty much correct as far as he could judge it. "Before you go... do you know what happened to sifu? I went to check on him just before the tournament, but his dojo is empty and a bit... broken into."

"I have him with me, for most of the last week actually. The village turned... less than ideal for him to wait out the current situation."

For the moment anyways, but the other man should expect things to change eventually.

Especially with how their elder viewed their less than upstanding lives, which he had made a point of when they were both still young and his students. In a rural township that held little to no strife before things turned sour, little to nothing would change drastically without outside interference.

"I have plans to go... visit a few of our former fellows." Commented the Storm placidly, side-eyeing his slightly hobbled man thoughtfully. "In the interest of reminding them that there is a reason to respect a man of sifu's years and experience."

Xinyue blinked a few times, likely putting the pieces together enough to guess at why Fong had gone back for the elderly man even if their former master held dim views on their way of living. "That would be interesting. If we survive, you can count on my attendance."
Humming thoughtfully, Fong inspected their accommodations one last time before giving the other man a nod farewell and pressing on to find something to bind his aching fingers with.

"Good luck, Fong. Not that you really need it."

"To you as well, Xinyue."

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 27th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"I need a new pipe."

"Did you kill someone else with the new one?"

"...did I kill that first guy? Whoops." The thief considered the situation for a moment, before shaking her head and drawing the tube of brass from her lap to show him. "No, I sort of gnawed a few holes into it and bent it in half this time. Didn't even notice until I couldn't pull on it anymore. I'd still use it even so but trying to straighten it out left it a bit... crimped, in the wrong spot."

"...I..." Zhōng trailed off as the woman set the very battered brass pipe on the table. "...see."

Teeth marks in metal. He was somehow surprised to see it.

"Um... are you okay, Miss Sonya?"

"I? Am banning that question." Sonya answered the younger of the Sōng siblings pointedly as he picked up the much-abused cylinder of metal to inspect, shooting an equally disgruntled glare at the elder. "Regardless of what I may seem or look like, being repeatedly asked that is annoying. I will live, and that's going to have to be enough."

Fong proffered a box from Huang’s care package with a serene smile instead of answering the complaint she was leveling at him in a roundabout manner.

The young Rain he had brought along per her request to see her brother, mostly to see if her presence impacted the twosome's behavior in any way once things devolved near the end, kept eyeing the woman intently even as she was solidly ignored by her target. Even the books she had been holding onto for the thief, belatedly placed on the table between them all for the other, only earned her a brief look.

"How are things, Mingxia?"

"It's going alright, big brother..."

"Madam Huizhong visited us briefly." Interjected the Mountain Master of the Wo Hop To Triad evenly as he ran curious fingers over the blunted gouges in the metal, much to the consternation on the girl's behalf. "According to the door guards, she left rather annoyed."

Confused over the weight that suddenly appeared over a few of their limited number, the Soviet woman accidentally bit through the tip of her chopsticks but didn't do more than just pull the metal out of her mouth as she waited for what was to happen.

"...ah." Fong managed after a long pause. "That is... little sister?"
The Rain nervously fidgeted with her fingers under the Storm's concerned stare. "She just wanted to confirm some things..."

"What things?" Sonya prompted when her patience ran out, in a short amount of time watching the staring contest going on between the siblings.

"If I can't, um..." Mingxia looked upwards to the unimpressed woman's features, pulled a little frown, and then focused on her brother. "...she wanted to know when I could start."

"Were you not going to ask-?"

"Yes. But..."

After flipping around her chopsticks to even out the bitten off parts, the Russian thief went back to eating.

Zhōng wondered if she actually knew what the younger of the Sōng siblings wanted from her and was ignoring it or if she was unaware of the entire undercurrent.

He supposed the answer would become apparent in a short moment.

The Cloud woman blinked back blankly when both Fong and Mingxia shifted their attentions and looked to her. "...what?"

The Storm glanced at his little sister. "Ask now."

"I don't have my things!"

"Adapt to the situation, not everything will always go to plan."

"How am I to formulate the argument for me if I cannot provide the information!"

"Generalize, prove it later."

"That's not how it works, big brother." A bit exasperated, the young Rain glanced back to the thief politely trying to give the siblings some privacy even if that wasn't possible restricted to this room as they all were. "Selling oneself generally depends greatly on what skills one can bring to the table, of which I have nearly none. What I might bring depends on my plan for the education and what I would do in return for the imposition."

"Ming... I cannot guarantee anything beyond these few days, she has her own plans for afterwards."

"She did promise to hear me out. Afterwards."

As he had been specifically watching for it, Zhōng knew the moment their Russian guest cottoned on to who, exactly, was being discussed. It wasn't very much longer before the rest of his people realized the same.

She bit through the already gnawed chopsticks with a ringing snap and set the halves that remained in her hands with enough force they embedded themselves long-ways into the table before digging out the parts she bit off.

Both of the Sōng siblings glanced at her as she drew out the much-abused metal first before speaking.

"Am I the last one to know who she intended to ask?"
"...your Lackey even gave me some tips?" Admitted the Rain after a sheepish pause. "Um... I didn't realize you didn't mean to... ah. I promised Madame Huizhong that if nothing else would come up, I would go to work for her. She wanted to move up when I started working for her, but I don't."

"Stop." Pressing a few fingers to her left temple, Sonya rubbed at the skin there. "From the beginning. Who the hell is Madame Huizhong and why does she want you?"

Mingxia glanced at her brother, which was more than enough of an answer for the older woman's second question.

"Right, so... who is she?"

"She runs, an... escort service?" Hastening beyond that point, needlessly from the non-reaction the Russian had, the younger girl shifted in her chair to face her squarely. "If... I work for her until I am sixteen, she has promised to at least consider if she would want a lawyer at that time."

"...consider." Repeated Sonya flatly, leaning back in her chair as she settled in for the conversation and even ignoring the food. "You're going to work for a pushy, conniving mistress of a whore house for the possibility she's going to just say no in order to keep you under her thumb and a lever over your brother."

"I... could save up and go my own way eventually, but... yes. I don't have many possibilities. The Mountain Master has done more than enough in providing for me on my brother's behalf, but he sees no need for more lawyers than he already has... especially not with the unrest currently going on." Nodding absently in recognition to him, Mingxia clasped her hands together. "For what I want, there will have to be risks."

"Those 'risks' seem a bit stupid. Even I can see it's a dead end, how the hell do you think that's worth it?"

"It's not ideal, I'll admit. It is the best I have at the moment."

Sonya glanced sideways at the so far silent Storm before turning back to the Rain. "Do you need an answer now?"

"...it would help declining Madame Huizhong's offer without issuing insult. I know this is awkward, and I am really sorry... I had flyers and the basics of a plan I would've-"

"I don't want more people!"

"I can cook! Some things," amended the younger girl sheepishly, "and clean, mostly I know housework. Well, Chinese housework... maybe they do things differently in Russia? But I swear I'll pay you back for this! If you-"

"Can you teach me Cantonese?" Interrupted the Cloud woman shortly.

"...if you want?"

"How about Japanese?"

"Not currently... I can learn, though."

Scowling considerably, the Cloud woman took a moment to ponder the situation.

Mingxia bit her lip, watching the woman's slightest movement worriedly. Even her brother waited
for the answer, paused in the action of eating with his own chopsticks balancing some sautéed vegetable halfway to his mouth.

"…you talked to Bjørn, did he give you his office number?"

"Um… I have it written down, yes. Back at-"

"Good. Call him up and pass on that I need Galina. Even if she can only do a short visit." Leveling an entirely unimpressed look on the girl, the thief eventually dropped it with a sigh. "Teach me Cantonese while you start looking into Japanese, and I will get you into a Russian school I control with room and board included. Get the grades a lawyer student needs while you do so, and I will make arrangements for you to study law in a semi-progressive country that won't be so difficult for a girl… or anyone, to learn law. Deal?"

"Deal! Thank you, so much."

"Get your shit together quickly, you'll leave with Galina and she'll make the arrangements for your move and what you need for living in a different country. You're a bit late to be joining the classes already going on, I expect you to catch up quickly." With a heavy sigh, she snatched the box of food Fong had been eating out of from his hands and then made a copy of his chopsticks with her own lavender Flames. "Fuck's sake, Fong."

"What?"

"A word that you little sister was looking for a patron would've been appreciated." Starting in on the food she had commandeered from him irritable, the Cloud woman sat back to chew on the noodles as if it had insulted her.

"She is the one that wanted something from you, I left it up to her to handle it." Professed the martial artist simply, electing to take something else to eat instead of contest the snatching. "I got you here and in range for her to speak to, it is her quality of life that she wants to change on her own merits."

"You all are just lucky I started looking into how to support yet another dependent recently."

"We appreciate it, Sonya." Fong informed her honestly, merely earning himself an annoyed huff.

"A lot, really. Thank you, Miss Sonya." Echoed his younger sister solemnly on the heels of his comment. "Is there anything specific I should pack?"

"…warmer clothes. Russia gets cold in winter. Galina will handle it if you have nothing suitable, but pack as if you're not coming back." Pausing to chew harder on a bit of vegetable, the thief eyed what the girl was dressed in sourly. "Because I can't guarantee you will anytime soon. Your studies should take precedence over everything else, but then again moving countries even for a short while is a hassle you might not want to interrupt things with."

While she had been speaking, in rather clipped tones, the martial artist had dug through the box of food to see what else had been packed for them. Drawing out the container of the dumplings, which he had a fondness for no matter what kind they were, he hesitated before nudging the thief to see if she wanted any for herself.

Sonya eyed him sourly, stabbed two with her copied chopsticks to take for herself, and then started ignoring him

…so, there wasn’t going to be a ridiculous argument this afternoon?
Zhōng felt slightly cheated.

He had grown used to it, slightly. As one would grow use to stepping on stinging nettle every morning, or to a particularly annoying pet nipping one's ear at every opportunity.

"Do not."

"I'm not doing anything."

"Then remain not shoving your pointy elbow in my ribs. Thank you." Snapped the thief irritably, shoving her seat over a good half a meter away from the man. "I have enough issues with rude parts of yours in bed."

…he stood corrected. Well, sat corrected.

Mingxia's eyebrows flew upwards, shooting her brother a disbelieving look he immediately shook his head at.

"It's not like that." Fong hastily interjected to his little sister, before shooting the unapologetic woman at his distant side a look of her own. "There just are limited beds available, and we picked one to share."

"We?" She waggled a finger at the man. "I. I picked our room out, you were half-dead. After the kids and the elderly, there were mostly single or double occupancy rooms left open."

Squeaking in shock, the Rain clasped both hands over her mouth and examined her brother intently for any obvious injuries besides the bandaged fingers on his right.

"I am fine, Ming. Sonya, please. It's just-"

"Half-dead from exhaustion. Excuse me, half brain dead."

Casting a glance at the ceiling at the second interruption so far, he turned to regard the woman nibbling on the remains of the stir-fry she had snatched from his hands. "Anything else you would like to state right now?"

"…maybe." Allowed the Russian idly around her chopsticks. "Your hair gets everywhere, twice so far it's ended up in my mouth."

"It's braided."

"Your hair has the texture of corn silk. Trust me when I say it gets everywhere."

Sighing heavily, the man rubbed one side of his face in exasperation. "Noted."

"You give nice hugs, though."

Fong paused, mouth open, for a full second as he processed the sudden change in tone.

Mingxia nodded sagely. "He does."

"And at least there are beds now." She continued thoughtfully, slowly, heedless to the odd looks. As if she was searching for any good points to state. "At first we just had these stupidly comfortable pillows and the floor."

Zhōng raised an eyebrow at her, interested in the possibility she would start critiquing her stay as a
hostage so far. Anything that could be gotten out of the woman might be interesting points to use in future arrangements of this nature.

"That sounds awkward." Observed the Rain girl slowly.

"In a large, three-sliding rooms in one kind of room. It was easier to teach the brats the starting maneuvers of tumbling on the pillows though. And they were really comfortable... but that was obviously a last-minute fix thing." Pausing to gnaw on one oddly resilient chopstick, she visibly thought about her next point before posing it. "It is also incredibly boring. There's nearly nothing to do that we had not brought in ourselves. Which wasn't really a lot given most didn't take anything they'd regret losing in with them."

"Any other points you'd like to raise?" Inquired the head of a Triad present in the room curiously.

"...they need better lines of communication. I get we're hostages, willing ones mind you, but the utter lack of any idea what is going on in respects to our involvement in the tournament was irritating." Stabbing her chopsticks into the remains of her meal, she sniffed. "Knowing a general idea of when to be ready to move or whatever would've been nice to have, aside that few hours' notice you got us."

Well... interesting. Possibly useful, depending on who tried to claim what once things were fully over with.

"Also, the beds are not nearly big enough." Fong planted his face in his hand as the woman wound her chopstick in the air a few times. "With both Fong and me in the same one? Tight quarters does not even begin to describe it."

Eventually, after the moment of shocked staring, Mingxia started giggling. Nearly surprising herself with it as well.

Zhōng sighed. Apparently, a set of younger ears about did nothing to curb the thief's blunt mouth. At this point, he half expected the woman to be doing it on purpose in order to get reactions.

Thankfully, there was only one more of these little visits to do before it would be over.

If only for the year, as long as she didn't consent to return for the inevitable next one.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 27th of October, 1969. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Sonya was not entirely settled enough to knit tonight, but she could sit still at least.

Even if the delivery of books by Mingxia included a few old favorites, it wasn't what occupied her attention this night.

Ballsy toddler boy promptly occupied her lap the moment she sat down, but the thief's attention was drawn more to what little of the audience she could see from their low spectator's box than the fights, the kid, or the book in her hands.

After several days of this, she had thought she got down the usual behavior of a spectating crowd. They were weirdly quiet this night, there were less bets being called over the general noise and a few more fist-fights.
As she had no access to local news right now, the cause for that behavior could be anything.

No matter the cause it was out of several, it resulted in the same thing. A nervous, criminally inclined crowd that would turn ugly at the slightest provocation.

She was more interested in seeing if she could spot the start of it than watching the fights she couldn't join in on or her various amusements.

…and even if she hadn't brought in her pipe for the spectating part of her hostage career the last few days, the lack of the option was irritating in that she thought about it more due to it being not available.

Instead of dwell on her issues currently, which she suspected might be half her problem at the moment, Sonya idly petted a toddler's back as she kept as good of an eye on the crowd as was possible for her spot. There was a very limited field of view, but that just meant she should keep a sharper eye out. Sight wasn't the only way to catch something shifty going on.

Blinking when something nudged her arm, she turned and reflexively accepted a… picture book?

"The little one might like it to play with."

"…I highly doubt he can read." Sonya informed the knitting old granny dubiously, cracking open the book and glancing over the content within.

"He won't need to."

No he wouldn't, as it was just a collection of slightly grimy pictures… or rather disturbing comics.

Some gangly caricature of a kid witnessing a whole lot of death and something about a horse and a few military looking men. Turning near the beginning netted her the same child with three 'hairs', probably depicting his hair, witnessing some boat-man getting shot while he was on the same boat in the middle of a river.

What the hell is this?

SanMao! according to the half-scratched off title on the cover. The imprint of where the ink had been stamped with some printing press allowed her to figure out the Chinese characters eventually, even if she had to hold the book still against grabby hands.

Ballsy toddler boy didn't care that the subject matter was rather horrific, he latched onto the book gleefully and thumped his head back against her sternum to page through it. From the rate he did so, she'd bet he had seen it before and was just turning to his favorite parts first.

The Russian turned semi-disbelieving eyes to the old lady, who apparently didn't realize there was something she found a bit off. She had returned herself to the wall without so much as a backwards look.

Apparently, this was another of those cultural differences she kept stubbing her metaphorical toes on.

If she was pressed to be honest, it probably wasn't all that different from the Grimm Fairy Tales she let Shamal borrow off her. However, reading the Brothers Grimm's legends required a certain level of education and maturity to even comprehend the contents… this was just pictures anyone could look at without even needing to read one's native language.

Sonya would admit to getting a bit engrossed in the picture book, looking over the toddler's dark
head at what he paused at and getting only brief looks at other pages.

It was... educational?

A lot of things children on their own might end up involved with, if slightly taken to the extreme end of possibility once on their own, so if China had a bit of an orphan problem then she could maybe understand why this was considered appropriate reading material for an extremely young child.

It was still morbid as hell.

The main lights, normally turned off in favor of a spotlight type thing aimed over the arena the fighters were scuffling about in, suddenly flicked on.

Blinking owlishly so her eyes could adjust even as she reacted immediately to the sudden change, Sonya dumped the brat to one side with his book and pushed him further into the room to hopefully end up nearer the wall and under someone else's eye. Putting her body between him and the opened balcony area that was the supposedly only unsecured entrance to their holding cell.

Rolling up to the balls of her feet, the thief stole forward to get a better eye on what was going on.

Cautiously, because if their position wasn't compromised she saw no reason to attract attention to where they were.

...a riot, apparently.

Some kind of fighting was getting more than a bit out of hand higher in the spectator's benches, there was no organization to it she could see so probably just some argument or insult that just rubbed someone the wrong way.

But... why the lights?

It wouldn't be the underworld if they were polite and upstanding citizens of the world, this wasn't the first fist-fight that occurred outside of the scheduled bouts. A big one, maybe... but not a first.

An ear-splitting snap and pop was probably the announcing system either giving up what ghost it had or being specifically sabotaged so nothing would be broadcasted.

Sonya turned from the balcony, deeming it too risky to remain in semi-view of any casual or not so casual glance. Her fellow hostages had gathered up against the far wall, at least. Kids and the elderly in the middle, the few young adults peppered through it or at either ends if they felt brave enough.

Dismissing that from concern, she turned to inspect the only doorway in or out of this room.

It had been assaulted and broken open once before, did this incident have anything to do with the previous one and if so would it be attempted again?

Planting herself right in the path, but clear of the door even if it was knocked off its hinges again, the Russian pulled her Cloud Flames to her hands and eagerly awaited anyone stupid enough to try it.

This attempt seemed better organized and more effective than the last one, and she wanted a piece of the action. Sitting around while others had all the fun was not her preferred leisure activity.

...unfortunately, she couldn't see a reason to leave the other hostages. There was probably that Mist around, who was likely providing the 'Triad heads' sound-proofing and had visited her a few times before, and the possible Lightning guardsmen. However, as much as she highly distrusted the
security they were under there was no reas-

Her thoughts were cut short at the sound of gunfire.

Not from the greater open arena to her right, but from somewhere to her left. A bit muffled as well, as it was beyond several walls from her position.

Greatly better organized and equipped than the first attempt, and probably not all that concerned with taking people gently or alive at all.

Obviously the Triads would and could use guns, but as she hadn't seen a whole lot of them here it was entirely possible this might be an actual military operation instead.

Automatic weaponry would require some different tactics than just melee attackers.

Sonya was likely to get shot if she didn't move soon. The quarters were too tight for anything else, and she had limited options for cover in here.

There wasn't much for it. She wasn't going to hide behind her fellow hostages, as for some Mist help from someone she didn't know the temperament of, and if they got to her with guns then things really were screwed up.

Bleeding her readied Flames into the full-sized variant of her Bec de Corbin, the thief hefted it so the pick end was in front and eyed the door expectantly as she strained her ears.

After that ear-splitting pop over the intercom system, her hearing was shot as it was. The brawl going on wasn't exactly silent either, and the sudden change of circumstances had startled the kids she was held with into fussing about noisily. Her summoning a weapon to hand had cut it down significantly, but not nearly enough to be described as silently.

Even expecting the noise, the sudden rattle of gunfire not more than a few meters away still made her jump.

They were coming down their corridor.

…if she died here, she'd be pissed.

Yeah, she got nearly as far as Rachel had… almost into her twenties. However the irony would be bitter, even with all she knew now and the combat she had already seen she'd die just a bit before her last life because of idiotic and armed criminals.

Already pissed off, mostly from the scare of the sudden gunfire closer than she liked, the thief flinched again when the lock on the door was crudely shot off and the door kicked open.

She buried the pick of her weapon into that moron's head the moment he barged through the door.

Wrenching the Cloud Flame metal free, she used the butt end to toss the corpse off the edge of the balcony in a sweep and actually paused to see if she should let her weapon's Construction go or summon something else.

Olive green uniforms, military?

She couldn't see a red armband, so there was that…

Shocked by her sudden violence or not, the second man who had apparently been the one to fire his rifle did haul it up to give her a few holes in her guts before she fully recovered. She abused her
strength to escape the momentum of her weapon to smash his head in with the hammer end.

Then the age of her now dead opponent finally occurred to her.

He wasn't her age, from his bone structure she glimpsed a second before rendering his face into a bloody smear of paste. Not exactly much older than that kid stuck on her for translation duties, but not entirely an adult either. Somewhere between, and as far as she knew the Chinese Army wasn't taking children conscripts right now.

More than likely, Red Guard agents without the armbands.

Why?

…too little information to make any assumptions.

Glancing down the corridor as her mind raced, and dismissing the two now dead guardsmen as worse than useless for her, the Soviet Storm-Cloud took a step back and glanced at her fellow hostages. "I'm deeming this location now compromised. Get into a line and follow me if you'd like to live. Mist man? Is the beach to the south clear?"

"That is not known." Asshole didn't even have the decency to give her an indication of where or what to talk to.

"Then we're headed for the beach, if not the mountains over this compound." She decided after a moment of trying to calm her racing thoughts enough to understand what the hell was wrong. "Send someone when you clean up this mess."

The young man she basically decapitated was old enough, if not really…

She did to that kid what Rachel had done to her.

Sonya paused momentarily mid-step as she realized that. The situation wasn't entirely similar, he was somewhere he shouldn't have been, and her last life had been ended in a public alleyway. However, enough was similar that she was not happy with it.

Angry, still somewhat startled from the scare, and now a bit disgusted with herself, the thief dismissed the broken doorway and turned to the far wall on the opposite side of the room.

Needless to say, the two equally green-clad men on the other side of the wall had not been expecting her, or anyone probably, to go through the wall instead of down the corridor.

A shot whizzed past her nose before she registered the sound of a gun's report close by, and she hurled a hammer down the probable path in response. Forced to pause and remain in place, because the hostages behind her had only two ways to go and one of them meant going it alone or letting her power a path, the Storm-Cloud glared down the hallway almost willing someone to be stupid enough to shoot her.

Once the dust settled from her hammer nicking and caving in the painted concrete wall, she could make out an arm and no movement.

Well, she knew that way probably had more people and the other was unknown.

Option C then.

Sonya summoned another hammer from her garter belt full of them, a double-handed maul this time
instead of a war hammer, and started in on the wall across from the hole she had already made. Hopefully that would be a room, into which she could move the people behind her while she sought a way out of here.

It'd be really obvious what way they were moving, and where they'd be once things were over with, but all she was really concerned with was getting the kids and the elderly somewhere she could defend reasonably well.

On the plus side for her 'force a way' method, startled people made a lot of noise.

If she broke through into someone else's secured position, she'd know it before stepping inside like an idiot.

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(Tuesday the 28th of October, 1969. Budapest, Hungarian People's Republic.)

"I must refuse."

"Dude, I don't know if you've looked around lately-

The tiny, and a bit portly, lightly tanned Spaniard sighed exasperatedly at him as they sat around a tiny inn room waiting on a Mist to report back to them about his pursuers. "My good man, although you have my profuse thanks in the timely... if costly, rescue, I have a few sundry responsibilities I cannot abandon upon anyone's whims, much less my own. Vienna is too far to go just for myself."

Cherep pinned the man with a look of his own, itching to move on already and probably not as patient as he should be with the guy. "Whatever it is, is it worth your life?"

"...that would be understating things." The Rain known as Mauricio Sebastian Ciceron informed him tartly, smoothing a hand almost compulsively down his coat stitched together from multiple silk scarfs that had definitely seen better days. "Part of the reason I have been raising funds admittedly a bit desperately was just for that reason. As I might have gotten in over my head, your assistance will be forever remembered fondly... but if I leave? Then there will be no more aid for them."

"And how well did that work out for you?" Asked the stuntman a bit tiredly. "And how well do you think you'll do trying again?"

"Obviously not well." Returned the stage magician sarcastically, before clearing his throat a bit awkwardly. "I mean... I... hell's fire. Look, not many like to be seen helping out a freak show. Finding a money lender that wouldn't ask questions about our ability to pay the loan back had seemed a Godsend. If I don't return with the money, they're going to have to default to begging for the cash to get a doctor to look at the snake-man. Trying to cut my losses and attempt something else... well, you saw how that ended."

Cherep blinked at him blankly. "You got an outfit? An entire one?"

"Such as it is."

...well, fuck.

Biting down hard on his lower lip, the Cloud Flame user ran an exasperated hand through his hair in frustration. He didn't even like sideshows and how... shifty it all was, and he probably belonged in one due to the whole undying thing.
This wasn't supposed to be that involved. Save the Rain from his own stupidity, bounce out of the country in short order, then go on his own way once he gave the guy a phone number to call and get caught up under his sister's guard.

"Is it that dire?"

"We do not know, Aziz has been coughing blood for at least a week now and hasn't been able to move around much due to some kind of pain in his stomach."

Cherep wondered, a bit desperately, if Tatiana did house-calls. Maybe if he begged… "I know a nurse trying to get her doctor's license. If she visits, would you please get out of the country for a short while?"

"And why should I trust you with their safety? I barely know you."

"Do you really have a better plan?"

Mauricio paused and thought hard, nervously smoothing the side of one thumb with the fingers of his other hand.

"Once Viper gets back and gives us the all-clear, give me somewhere to send the nurse and you can meet back up with them in London, England. Next year, early." It would be a pain to have the guy with him on a world tour, but as he involved himself he was technically held accountable for his further actions in respects to Omertà.

Everyone in the family, except maybe Valera, would have something to say about it if he didn't at least ensure his involvement was covered as thoroughly as possible. Which meant giving the man the full Vindice Laws, as that was kind of what he was supposed to do with Flame users not inducted into it.

Which he didn't remember. They had mostly pertained to criminal stuff, some military, and some government things. None of which he was all that interested in, so the remainder that he did know was 'do not draw attention to yourself' and 'pass it on'.

Sonya would not be impressed at all…

For that matter, neither would Lisa. As a matter of fact, his mother would be rather exasperated with his lack of forethought before jumping in completely blind and the entire situation after the fact.

He should've listened to Viper.

No, fuck that.

He, Cherep, wasn't an asshole. Skull might be, but this guy wasn't a criminal. Mauricio didn't deserve to be impressed into a mafia syndicate just because of what he was. The Tranquility ice thing was pretty awesome as it was, just because he could do that didn't mean he had to be basically taken hostage for it.

So what if this was getting more involved than he liked?

Being a halfway decent person to another shouldn't be a great imposition, and it wouldn't be. The guy might've made some bad business decisions, but that was about it. Apparently on someone else's behalf, so he wasn't an asshole either.

"Okay, so… medical professional. Where do I call her?" Hopefully Tatiana wouldn't mind a short
He'd promise her some shopping on his dime, even if that would start cutting rather hard into his finances. Two or three illegal races, especially if Viper would handle his bets for him in exchange for sixty percent, and he'd be fine until the world tour thing next year.

Unless something else happened…

"If you can get a doctor to Aziz, then yes. I can be convinced to leave the country." The words were reluctantly dragged out of the magician after maybe a touch too long to think about it. "That being said, I do not see myself performing any illegal actions even if I am grateful for your aid."

"Yeah, neither do I."

Mauricio blinked at him blankly.

"I did say I was a stuntman, didn't I?" Cherep pointed out a bit tiredly, but at least with some amusement. "Someone did this for me, I'm going to pass it on. We'll figure out payment later. Much later."

Seriously, he didn't appreciate his little sister and his foster father nearly enough. How the hell had they kept his nosy, mainly civilian, nose out of trouble way back when?

Sonya took the 'Flame expert' position she hated being shoved back into to cover his Cloud Flame use from anyone too curious, and mostly because she was a curious sort and wanted to know enough to understand, and Arseniy had practically hand-guided him through the shallowest parts of the Russian Mafiya to get him out the other side without issue.

They were practically saints. He adored the both of them.

…did he pick anything up for his foster parents?

Shit.

He didn't. Well, something to keep an eye out for.

"Did you ever get a rundown of what the Vindice Laws are?"

Frowning, the Rain regarded him suspiciously. "The what?"

"I... have to get a copy... oh wait, no. Vipes should know them." That was that problem solved, now for the next one. The actual part he had to do to keep out of freaky mafia police custody. "So, you are a user of Dying Will Flame of Rain. I'm of Cloud, Vipe's of Mist."

The look he got in return for the admittedly random topic change was at first skeptical, then when he lit up a finger with his bright purple Flames changed to stunned.

…maybe that was why Sonya picked up instructing others in their Flames here and there?

The expressions were kind of fun.

"You can do it too." Prompted the Cloud after a while, stretching out his long legs the best he could without nudging the stage magician out of his perch in a corner. "There's seven types, Rain, Clouds, Mists, Storms, Lightnings, Suns, and Skies. I'll go over them later, but Rains are generally
peacekeepers. The ability you have is Tranquility."

Generally. Hopefully, very far from Moscow and far away from the little cult-thing the Zolotov Rains had started up, Mauricio would develop into a decent one. Cherep good give it as good of a crack at it as possible, maybe it would help him.

"The nurse I mentioned? She's a Sun. Activation. They make damn good healers, but they also make really good killers." They could skip Clouds for now, the stuntman was pretty sure his type-cast generalization would just confuse the guy. "Equally, Rains might make good peacekeepers but also can argue fantastically well if they want. It's all sorts of calming situations down, see?"

"You are… not very good at this."

"Yeah well… so? Vipe's going to charge you through the nose to do it instead." Oh fuck… he still had to pay the miser of a Mist for the scouting too. Cherep wondered where the nearest racing circuit was, and exactly how much Viper's surcharge for not having the cash on him now would be. "So right now, it's either me or them."

…he needed cheaper friends. Between the Mist and his elder sister, he was going to be broke in short order.
Chapter 87

(Tuesday the 28th of October, 1969 continued. Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"...I cannot find the bullets."

"That's fine." Sonya informed her temporary 'doctor' as blandly as she could, placing a hand over the two bullet holes in her lower belly.

Her Storm Flames probably took care of the physical bullets before long, but that didn't necessarily mean anything beyond the obstructions were gone and she had been bleeding freely for some time. She wasn't sure what the dust left behind by Disintegration actually was comprised of, if Storm Flames just reduced something to the atomic building blocks or to a specific set of compounds or what, which would likely be Scruffy's first academic question from her if he felt up to it.

She had a list of those, didn't she?

No, wait, some of those were for Verde.

Summoning up her Cloud Flames to her hands was an old if easy trick, then the thief placed them over her bare stomach and closed her eyes to focus on rejecting the injuries again.

…this was a hell of a lot easier when there was some reason to be uninjured. As in she had a job to do, rather than a small amount of down-time to wait out. However, blood loss was its own danger. One she had already experienced once before in a life before this one.

She still didn't want to die again. That kind of helped a little.

Gritting her teeth against the sandpaper like sensation of replicated Cloud flesh as it ate it's way from the very depth of her guts to the sensitive skin covering it, or not as the case may be, she waited for the worse of it to die down before swinging her legs off the rocky outcropping they were using as a makeshift surgery table to get up.

The highly stressed young lady, who had been the only one of the hostages to admit to some medical knowledge, gasped and scrambled backwards first. Then she paused, all but visibly straining to think about her actions and what the lone blonde might or might not appreciate.

With an irritable twitch, the Russian ignored her reaction and smoothed the fresh and some clotted blood off her stomach as she returned to the little beach-party thing they had going on. Pulling down the flimsy tank-top thing she had worn under the tunic-like dress thing, ruined now because of the holes and the blood, she debated on if getting dressed again or not would be useless.

Both articles of clothing were holey, and blood covered, but it was cold enough as it was and her skin was tacky with slowly drying blood.

…eh, it was almost morning. She could wait.

In the interest of stealth, the fire pit was nearly buried into a rocky stretch and bigger stones shifted to ensure it wasn't obvious from a mile away unless you had the elevation on them. The bonus from that was that the rocks were reflecting the heat back, so the kids and old people snuggled down for sleep around it were nice and toasty even if it was a late fall night.
Needing something to do, partially from a medical standpoint and partially because she hated leaving something as half-finished as she had the fight while getting the other hostages out of danger, she picked to 'patrol' their little encampment instead of take a seat near the fire and get some of the fish they were grilling.

The temperature difference alone made her irritable, on top of the pain in her gut and her general ill-feelings from recent realizations.

Oddly, her broken-but-not-really leg was no longer aching. She kind of wanted to get it checked out by Doctor Kappel sometime soon, which was the first thing she had to do once she left China.

The gods alone knew Tatiana would give her an earful for ignoring it, but right now was not a good time to be injured.

Instead of dwell on her already bitter-tinged thoughts or pay attention to her general aches and pains, she occupied herself with checking an ever-widening perimeter to get away from the staring.

Because she went through several walls, and killed about five handfuls of people, apparently she was now terrifying. Again.

This wasn't the rumor-shit that irritated her, but it was noticeable where those that hadn't hesitated in front of her before did so now. Even the grumpy grandpa guy and knitting old granny were both a bit more… hesitant, to her.

Depressingly, she was also now used to this reaction to her getting violent. It didn't irritate her nearly as much anymore.

She wondered if she was possibly jaded to it now, or just numb.

…and this was still thinking about her issues, wasn't it?

A misplaced rustle in the near-dead twilight, nothing non-human should be rustling for food this early, attracted her attention. Especially for what direction it came from, as that was more than a little concerning.

Having immediately extracted her fellow hostages instead of embroiling herself in the mess of a minor turf war going on, the Storm-Cloud had gotten a few glancing fights already. There were those that attempted to barge in on them, and the kid she was resolutely not thinking about, but also a few more beyond them. Two 'patrols' she startled the hell out of, and an entire section of a cordon she removed from the land of the living in order to finish her extraction.

Sonya would be a lot more hesitant over the killing if they, the Red Guard-like people, hadn't been trying to specifically target her and her fellow hostages. Every damn time she ended up running into a patrol, they radioed in her position and requested backup.

All total, the Soviet woman had netted herself three outright brawls of her own and one mini-slaughter.

Her Cloud side was utterly glutted on all the violence, the only sour pangs were the literal ones in her guts and a few other almost-near-misses that stung or still bled a bit. It made all the stress, irritation, and the weirdly dead-ish feeling she had since the start of the Underworld Martial Arts Tournament drain away. If she could stop tripping over her own thoughts, then maybe she could enjoy the little camp-out thing going on.

As her injuries were really rather minor, or she was forcing it to be for the moment, it allowed her the
range to pick out and 'remove' the military-like patrols either sent after them or just posted around in
different ways.

In other news, she had a set of radios that let her and the other hostages listen in on the utter unholy
mess the 'invaders' were suffering through. Several uniforms that were gleefully pitched into their
little bonfire by her elderly, some non-regulation apparel ripped up for various uses, a number of
tools and random pocket-sized things that were appropriated to help establish and maintain the little
campsite.

And the tobacco. Bless the smokers for the tobacco.

In other, other news… trees significantly off the beaten track seemed to have sprouted several naked
bodies, all of them alive but unable to remove the rope tethering them to their own branches.

It was in the shadow of one of her 'corpse' trees that she found something interesting. Not one of the
prisoners getting loose as she had suspected, but ballsy toddler boy's dad was eyeing her handiwork
nervously. Alone.

While a full-scale invasion attempt on an underworld hotspot was going on.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when she slunk down to ground-level next to him. "Lost?"

"…in a manner of speaking." The guy admitted, sheepishly but with something under that… that
 pinged off her bullshit-o-meter.

…she didn't care. Someone else could figure out what he was lying about. Right now, she needed
the adult hands for the kiddy corraling back at her makeshift base.

As long as he was ballsy toddler boy's dad. She should probably make sure.

No reason to be sloppy, after all.

Sonya summoned a palm-full of bloody fire to one hand, tossing it negligently at the base of her
'corpse' tree. Her Storm Flames immediately started eating up the bark, drawing several screams of
terror and quite a few shouts of protest.

As they now saw her fully, not to mention the Flame use, she was unwilling to let them live.

Bonus, the light the now burning tree gave off let her inspect the man's face before she led him to
where she had her fellow hostages set up.

"…what did you do?"

"I didn't do anything." Refuted the man, a bit too quickly.

It might've been the tree burning people alive, or just him naturally.

Honestly speaking, she didn't know him that well to figure it out.

She also wasn't that cruel. The tree was burning with her Storm Flames, it would kill the guys tied to
it in short order once it got high enough. They might be a bit uncomfortably warm, alright near-
boiled alive, until it reached their level… and be utterly terrified as they watched their fellows die…

…wow. She was kind of a bitch, wasn't she?

Snapping her fingers had the entire tree going up in an instant, even if she hadn't wanted to waste
that much Flames on something that was inevitable. The blinding *flare* and the sudden cut-off of her ruby Flames had the man blinking wildly as he took in the now empty divot where a tree once stood.

"...*what did your Triad do, then?*"

That got her a much different reaction.

...or it was the sudden dark, and the fact she had found him in it when he probably hadn't expected her to had already unnerved the man.

Sonya's night vision couldn't be that much better than his, the burning tree had screwed with that even if she closed her eyes for the sudden immolation. With a slight amount of Cloud Flames behind her eyes, it was a tiny bit better than nothing.

Not nearly as good as her natural night vision, and using the trick seemed to make regaining that take longer, but good enough for sudden things or reading.

It probably contributed to his not-so-hidden terror, too. She shut it off, to be considerate, even if that did functionally blind her.

"*I didn't do anything.*" Ballsy toddler boy's dad repeated firmly, backing up and nearly tripping over some of the roots and litter underfoot from the sound of it.

"*You didn't. They did.*" That was... kind of actually a bit cheap.

Was he divorcing his syndicate like she had?

Would be doing, excuse her.

Sonya had paced around to be more on the man's right, just in case there was going to be another unexpected happening like... say the man would be armed with a gun and not be ballsy toddler boy's dad.

She had enough gunshot wounds, thank you.

Frankly, the Russian was really only mildly curious what was bothering the guy. This wasn't her territory, they had their own ways to deal with in-fighting, she was *trying* to make conversation.

Putting him at ease, hopefully. Which, it seemed she failed at. Not unusual but depressing too.

He flinched away from her new position, finally fully tripped on that root, and hit the ground rather hard for a martial artist.

Pausing, and trying to fruitlessly recall where any other hazards might be, the thief sighed and re-activated her night-vision hack. "*What did they do?*"

The scream in her face was entirely *not appreciated.*

(ooo0000oo)

(Tuesday the 28th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Fong ducked the bayonet thrust, taking possession of his opponent's arms and impaling the man on some of the broken rubble leftover from some Cloud's very pointed and contained arrow-straight rampage. Pressing down firmly had the impaled Red Guardsman screaming invectives against his
lineage, but also ensured he would not be able to remove himself without aid before dying.

Kicking the jammed rifle had it bent in half without the Storm Flames needed to render it inoperable, so no one would be able to pick it up and shoot him in the back.

Taking a moment to regain his breath, he examined the on-going brawl he was still in the middle of.

There would be a large number of dead once things were over with, but that was not surprising. The Red Guard branch that somehow found them had been fully armed, most of the Triads had ensured any and all guns would be left behind in their respective territories while this was ongoing.

As they had interrupted two Flame users in the middle of a bout, there would be no survivors left alive. They couldn't afford that.

He only marginally ducked the sudden spike of Lightning Flames tossed negligently in his direction, earning Lu Shui the Lightning an irritable glare. "Will you stop?"

"Whatever seems to be the problem, Sōng?" Purred the assassin all but gleefully, flinging another of his paper-thin blades into a throat.

A very ragged group's leader suddenly pitched forward, sans his head, meaning the 'reinforcements' to their section of the arena were stymied in their forward charge into the criminal ranks not breaking as they seemed to have expected.

There were a lot of things the invaders hadn't expected, Dying Will Flames being one of the more major bits.

The Storm just had a slight issue with all the 'near' misses happening around him.

Very telling about the Lightning's control and aim or not, it still was not pleasant to be forced to watch the man supposedly covering his left for any overt sabotage.

With an irritable huff, Fong drew upon his Storm Flames and threw a double handful straight into the milling mess before their opponents could sort themselves out. Flash frying the lot of them into useless ash and taking out the weaponry that might prove inconvenient if any of their opponents came upon the site.

His future opponent took the opportunity to use his Flame's electrical nature to overload the lights down one hallway and identify another knot of opponents for them attempting a stealth flank.

Hooking a foot under a nearby section of concrete, he pressed as much Storm Flames as the fake rock could hold before kicking it down the corridor. Whoever it was that survived a glancing brush with a Disintegrating rock wouldn't last long, given the slightly echoing sobs.

A prissy little huff of his own, Shui flung a number of his little blades over the Storm's shoulder to not only nick the other Triad member's braid but also kill someone attempting to sneak up behind him.

Fong glared, the Lightning merely smirked.

Tucking the longish length now loose behind an ear, the Storm opted to try ignoring the other man.

The few fights still ongoing were dying down, the holes all the Flame users had punched through the invading Red Guard branch to reach their 'fallback' position and eliminate them before a retreat could be called had badly disorganized the 'invaders'.
A certain Storm-Cloud's brute-strength extraction had caused no few moments of terror in and of itself, meaning it was likely his hostage was at least feeling better if not entirely happy. Hopefully the fresh air would reduce some of the stress Sonya had been going through.

Now they just had to… sweep up the remains, and hopefully transfer to the secondary location without incident.

Fong was keenly looking forward to pounding Shui's face into the dirt.

It wasn't so much the opportunity to test his skills against another Flame user anymore, he was well and truly aggravated with the other man. Even if the tournament would be called short, he would be fighting the Lightning sometime soon.

"I wonder where your lovely little dragoness got to?" Queried the assassin now dogging his heels, apparently trying to incite a brawl before their bout came up in official channels.

He paused for half a second, pulling himself out of a near-haze of sheer Stormy-irritation.

…it was entirely likely the Lightning was trying to pick a fight with him. The penalties for doing so while the tournament was still 'ongoing' would ensure Zhōng would be displeased with him if he did so.

The forfeit on the other hand…

"I dare you to try." Fong dismissed with an amused smirk that was not what the Lightning assassin had expected.

There were rules against entrants fighting one another outside the ring for while the tournament was still being held, and rules against harming another fighter's hostage as long as you could prove it without a doubt, but there were none about what the hostages could do to a fighter.

If Shui tried anything and Sonya decided she disliked it, she was perfectly entitled to rip the man's arms off.

It would reduce how much fun he would have smashing the Lightning's face into the dirt later, but… it would probably be worth it.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 28th of October, 1969 continued. Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"So. They hatched?"

"They eat each other, and the mother, if not separated." Anna responded pleasantly, lifting the one in her hands so the woman that allowed her to take possession of her new pet could see it clearly. "This was the only survivor from the experimental batches. He almost got into the control batch too, the scamp."

The Mist Flame imbued orb weaver spider lifted a needle-like foreleg and placed it down delicately, inching forward in a very deliberate manner in the bright morning sunlight. The fact it was now the size of a small bird only a few days old aside, the Mirror Lady adored her new pet still exploring her hands.

The blue, green, and yellow patterns on his bulbous thorax stood out vividly against the drab stone
they were seated upon, and the yellow and brown banded legs made him look downright dangerous, but it was his beady black eyes she adored.

He was still a baby, who knew how big he'd get or how long he would live.

Anna was very tempted to name him pavuchky, after the old Christmas fable of spiders in a pauper's tree decorating it for them.

Sonya eyed the spider tiredly, a hand pressed to the very obvious injuries in her belly to catch any leaking blood, and shrugged. "Did you remember to feed them right after they hatched? All newborns are hungry... I think..."

"I dropped three live crickets in each jar, boss lady. The moment there was more spider silk than the moms could account for." Admitted the Mist, bringing her fingers up and around Pavuchky. He froze, seemed to ponder the change of situation, and nibbled on her fingertips for the lack of anything to do. "I don't think young Shamal understood spiders lay clutches, actually. The moms tried, but there were only two or three eggs in each silk sac. They're just as big as an adult should be hours after hatching, and if they had required a lot more protein than I gave them? It is entirely possible I didn't feed them enough to prevent it."

She still had to train her baby, letting him roam freely would not be a good idea.

Even in an encampment her boss lady was running. They all had been most put out when she pulled her little man from his pet-box in the plane's cargo hold to her hands while standing on the beach.

Letting him wander around on the three-meter-tall rocks spiked around the little campsite in a makeshift wall were another thing, however. Both women were perched in a natural divot one had, which gave them a decent view over the hostages Sonya sourly claimed she was responsible for before suggesting their bird-high view of things.

"...I don't think it's cannibalism if he's not really the same as the others." Allowed the Storm-Cloud thoughtfully, even if she really looked tired and a bit cranky to go along with the tiny nicks in both flesh and cloth. "So aside his siblings, I guess he was just hunting for more food?"

Anna elected not to mention the cage of crickets, which Pavuchky would've gotten into so much easier than the glass jar holding the control group or the equally as secured jars holding the other experimental batches, had been left entirely alone.

"Can you do anything with him? I'm aware he's only a few days old... but..."

The Mist lit a finger with her Flames, her pet pouncing on the energy source lightning-quick and sucking it up with his cute little pedipalps. A bit over-stuffed, it was how she got him to be so passive in her hands, Pavuchky's thorax patterns started to shift and change.

Then her smart little darling wove them a spider silk square of cloth. Encouraged by the structure she gave her aimless Construction, but it really was only a slight encouragement.

The older blonde took the offered near-transparent scrap of cloth curiously, directly from her little baby's legs, with a courteous nod of appreciation for the dear.

Sonya attempted to lite it a-Flame, tear it in half with her finger strength, and just overall damage the little square of silk. Her Storm did in fact eat slowly into it, her Cloud merely replicated a corner, and while she could almost tear the delicate seeming material apart... it didn't want to go easily.

"...huh. Interesting. Can he take another dose, or should we wait?" Asked the thief as she gave
back the slightly damaged square to her pet.

Pavuchky was not happy over the damages, he started to repair them without any additional Flames or encouragement from her.

Anna stoked his thorax thoughtfully as she allowed him more space to work. "I don't know? I would say not, but he uses up a lot of what Flames he's given doing even that small amount. He might actually need another bit shortly."

The Mist Flame orb weaver suddenly dropped from her fingertips, making his delicate if deliberate way over to the Storm-Cloud. He didn't go far, just far enough to reach Sonya's hand. Then he tapped on her fingers with both forelegs until she moved them.

Not even waiting for anything like permission, Pavuchky fitted his scrap of silk to the holes in her breezy looking tunic-top. Weaving the broken strands into his patch, somehow the delicate if undyed strands acquired the purple the normal silk had. Once that was finished, he started feeling out the lacey parts and how the strands wove together in order to fix them too.

"...I have a sudden impression of a very fussy tailor from him." Sonya remarked blandly to her.

Anna giggled, beaming at her ever so clever baby.

There was nothing that could be done about the rusty trails of old blood, or even the tiny dots of new blood where whatever her boss lady was doing didn't quite reach all the way. Her little man took a few rusty crusts the older woman was flecked with to experimentally nibble upon, and almost managed to wander away from her once he deemed himself done.

Scooping Pavuchky back up, even if he nibbled at her fingers again, the Mirror Lady examined her boss lady. "You seem very... tired."

"Nearly been a full twenty-four hours for me, Mirror Lady." Admitted Sonya frankly. "Did you defang him?"

"Nothing so cruel. I merely... have the suggestion that he can't bite through human skin going on." Anna sniffed in mock offense. "He can't reach his back to remove or eat the dot of Mist Flames."

"Anna, you are aware some people have phobias about spiders... right?" At her slightly insulted look, the thief gestured lazily downward. "My fellow hostages nearly had a collective panic attack when you popped in with him."

Of course, having said that, her boss lady lit a finger with her Cloud Flames and offered Pavuchky a taste.

He went still at the very different Flames, moving glacially slowly up her hands until he was about at the same level as the thief's lavender will-fire covered fingertip. A vibrantly striped leg delicately reached out and poked the mass of Cloud Flames, and then another, using his Flame-resistant chitin to gather up a few wisps he examined it intently with all forward-facing eyes first and then brought a Flame-burning leg closer to his mouth.

The spider sipped a bit, paused, sipped more. He then scraped every last bit of Flame off her fingers to stuff himself silly with.

"Well... that's their problem." Insisted the Mirror Lady as her darling gorged himself, the pattern changes along his thorax proving rather interesting with an added streak of vivid purple growing darker as he ate.
...and then the spider grew about two sizes all of a sudden, sprawled legs shifting from her palms to her fingers and wrists to support his sudden resize, but that was ignored. He had been doing a lot of growing the last few days, and with Cloud Flame's property of Propagation that really should've been expected.

At least there was no shed skin to worry about this time.

"Pavuchky is a very well-behaved spider."

"Anna, he's trying to eat your fingers."

"He's just playing."

Sonya did not look remotely sold on that. "If he startles anyone, and they smash him, it will be your fault."

She pouted, earning her not even a blink from the thief, and brought her significantly bigger pet in close to her. "Well… fine. I get to defend him then."

"Noted… are you really calling him 'little spiders'?"

"He was the smallest of the group… until he ate his sisters." Anna lifted her head, listening in a Misty way to Usov's far-away words, and sighed slightly. "Boss lady, the plane is landing. Any orders for us?"

"I'm not going to be immediately available, so if Arseniy wants you all to do something that's fine. Try not to cause an international incident until I am, please." The thief snatched a dragonfly out of the air and offered the bug to her darling. "Otherwise just bide your time. If it's not the Wo Hop To Triad, ignore anyone else."

Pavuchky all but leapt to the Storm-Clouds fingers to take possession of the dragonfly, wrapping the squirming thing in enough silk to pin his victim in place.

Sonya allowed her to take back her pet thoughtfully. "...since spiders are hunters, and we just added an unnatural part to his natural makeup, he might've needed Flame imbued bugs to eat and not just normal ones. Especially if he can survive eating wildly different Flame types."

Anna made a dismayed sound as she followed along with the older woman's line of thought.

No wonder her baby ate his siblings and the other batches, he must have been starving before she let him nibble on her Flames. It would also explain why he went after the control group, the same type as his fellow experiments but without the Flames. He might've thought they would had some more for him.

"Additionally, before the next test group, we need to ensure we're not dumping an entirely invasive experimental species into the wild." Continued her ever so thoughtful leader slowly. "If your little pet got loose to eat his fellows and tried to eat more of his non-altered species, then we need both a stable 'prey' type for them to eat and maybe even Flame-imbued plant life for the prey to consume. Somehow, without risking the wider world's ecology."

"This is getting rather involved." Anna commented neutrally, massaging Pavuchky's bulbous thorax as he masticated his dragonfly treat.

He was now almost bigger than her fist, her little man was going so fast.
"All things worth doing right are." Sonya deadpanned, giving her a pointed look.

The Mist woman smiled at the reminder that she was part of a 'do it right' thing for the older blonde.

"I have to leave you to it, our plane landed." Anna regretfully admitted to the only one that hadn't screamed, swore, or otherwise reacted negatively to her little baby. "I'll see you in a few hours or days, boss lady."

"I certainly will not object to a visit or two before that, even." Remarked the Storm-Cloud evenly. "Don't get too attached to him, Anna. If I recall correctly, common web-spinners like him don't live all that long. It's why I had this started on his type."

She pouted, cradling her massive baby to her chest. "Don't say that, boss lady."

"Just as a warning."

"I'll keep it in mind." Relented the Mist woman sadly, quirking the baby spider a wry smile for him nibbling on her fingertips again.

That was Mist, Rain, Lightning, Sun, and now Cloud. She wondered how much she had to scare those two with the rest of the group for them to release a bit of Storm Flames for her baby.

The trick would be to find a Sky for Pavuchky to nibble on.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 28th of October, 1969 continued. Undisclosed underground complex half a mile from Sham Wan Beach, Pok Liu Chau Island, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"I may or may not have been shot in the stomach. Twice."

Fong about spluttered his drink of water all over the floor. The young man who was helping various Triad fighters recover from their midnight counter-raid was unimpressed entirely, giving the Storm another ladleful of water before skirting around their little group for another.

Zhōng blinked at the Russian woman, eyeing her blood splattered outfit suspiciously. There were spots of fresh blood on the skirt and great streaks of rusty blood in others, equally fresh dots on the front panel of her borrowed áo dài to confirm her words, but not obvious holes in the garment.

"Additionally, if you have a phobia of spiders, I do apologize about what the Mirror Lady brought with her from Russia." Continued Sonya Bazanova idly, not remotely sounding sorry at all or even slightly in pain from her claimed injuries. "But frankly, it's her pet and I've had enough people screaming in my ear about it."

…one of her inbound Mist minions contacted her, meaning they likely didn't have any support from the Triad that was supposed to have protected the hostages. Not even secretly via another Mist, who could possibly have been identified by her own.

The Mountain Master of the Wo Hop To Triad nodded firmly to show he understood the less obvious message in her words, raising a hand for one of the Sun medics inspecting the rest of the curiously unmarred hostages for anything they might use against the Russian thief.

Her abrupt decision to evacuate the hostages from the Triad that had possession of them was a rather large snub, even if they had been mostly murdered off by then. Then again, given how many times she had to interfere in their security arrangements before even last night, he was sure very few would
really be all that offended.

Expect the ones that should’ve been responsible, that is. Then possibly their nominal allies, as long as they had a hand in whatever was tried with the hostages. That would be interesting to feel out in however many days.

Ignoring the squabble the Storm and Cloud suddenly got into, over her injuries and 'this is why you brought me along, right? I'm fine' that he was getting curiously immune to them pulling, Zhōng wondered what to do with the information.

Obviously, he would be signing off on her contract the moment he got back to his headquarters. With her injuries and the fact she had taken on the responsibilities one of the other Triads should've been doing instead of her taken into account, she had more than fulfilled it sans the date part. He would also make an honest attempt to get the hostages disbanded, the moment the Triad Heads gathered to work out the penalties for what had gone on and the branch that aided the Red Guard in finding them.

It wasn't really required anymore, aside the illegal arena and tournament in the forbidden martial arts they were holding… they were now all complicit in the murder of an entire Red Guard branch.

Besides which, he was fairly certain that with all the effort poured into making this arena impressive the secondary location only barely had enough facilities to hold the fighters and an audience. If they could also take and support a large group of dependents in any measure of security… well, he for one would be doubtful.

Either way, there would be a few days of time before things could resume, if they would resume. That would exceed her contracted length of time either way, and hence he should do something before he was required to pay Mafia Land for overtime.

Fong may not be pleased if the tournament was disbanded, either indefinitely or until next year, so removing part of the more problematic mechanics of the event might help things continue.

"One last thing. Sonya called before he could move off and leave her at the mercy of both Fong and the Sun medics. "Ballsy toddler boy… never really got his name, but it was his dad I caught? The kid… I think he's Flame blind."

Zhōng turned back to her curiously. "I've never heard of that before."

"Neither have I. But when the Mirror Lady did her astral-projection thing and made a Construction of herself to talk to me, ballsy toddler boy couldn't see or hear her." She jerked a thumb over a shoulder to a toddler-aged young child remained in the arms of the Wo On Lok's elderly hostage, the one that promised to teach her to knit. "He did see the utter monstrosity of a spider Anna pulled from her Flames, but not her. So… a little more experimentation while you were all catching up to us, and I think he's Flame blind."

"What does that mean?" Fong asked, even as he chivvied her backwards onto a broken part of masonry so the medics could tend to her.

He earned a dirty look, mainly for the fussing if the Mountain Master observing them was pressed to guess, before the woman submitted with ill-grace. "Depends. Either a kid that is a liability when it comes to interacting with Flame users, or a kid that will grow up to be the only one you can be sure is never affected by Mist-things, Tranquility, or any other such Flame bullshit."

The Storm-Cloud glanced to the Suns fussing about her skirt, then looked back up to give Zhōng a
pointed look.

"I'll be very interested in the answer, if at all possible."

"I will… see about it."

(Wednesday the 29th of October, 1969. Wo Hop To Triad Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Sonya ended up with ballsy toddler boy for the meantime, because of course.

She was injured and disinclined to go anywhere, had some kind of vested interest in the kid's wellbeing, and wasn't a traitor. Admittedly she wasn't exactly alright with what amounted to kidnapping the kid from whatever family he might still have, even if his dad and originating Triad were… in a serious amount of trouble.

A serious amount of trouble that just might become a bit more than bloody in the end.

The Tai Huen Chai, the Big Circle Boys, were… apparently former Red Guardsmen themselves. Or the same people that created and/or enabled the utterly baffling premise of students waging war on everything that had been Chinese just because, just a few decades removed. They did take in a lot of the ex-Red Guardsmen and affiliated people when they became disillusioned with their causes, so it was a more or less a paramilitary Triad with a lot of lawyers instead of a local gang that grew in influence.

As back in the nineteen-fifties, the 'ultra-left' faction of the Communist Party of China were 'purged' from the government. Not just kicked out of office or chased from their homes, a large number of them were shot in their sleep.

Sonya would very much like to know what was 'ultra-left' in a communist state like the People's Republic of China, and why the fuck it had mattered at all at the time.

Oh, wait. Fanatics, right.

Regardless, there were survivors. Of course there were, and the survivors of that atrocity were all not happy people. Who, as they were barred from legal ways of living, turned to criminal ways.

And they were very good at it.

A whole lot of scorned bureaucrats and disgraced military types?

Of course they were good at getting through the loopholes and grey areas set forth by the very people that tried to have them killed. Then managing laws and supply lines to support whatever the hell they were up to, under the noses of their once-fellows that may or may not have contributed to their disgrace.

The 'Big Circle' apparently came from part of how they survived… or something about their time in the internment camps. She couldn't quite tell, but something like 'their safe-spots/mark of their imprisonments were marked by a large red circle'.

It was really subjective and changed depending on who she asked out of boredom. Especially with the little factoid that a splinter cell of their Triad were the ones to lead the now defunct Red Guard
branch to the underworld tournament in hopes of ‘proving their worth’ via a mass arrest of criminal types.

Any way it happened, it did and those survivors of the ‘ultra-left’ went underground with their aims like a ‘proper’ Triad organization. Built up a reputation, got into a whole lot of murder and social engineering projects, and the like.

Fast forward to today, where large factions of their old ‘coworkers’ were being kicked and sometimes arrested and sent back to the country because they were getting… a bit too fanatic for the people in charge.

Someone overheard someone else talking about the underworld martial arts tournament, probably thought ‘we can use that to get back into such-and-such's good graces', and shit snowballed from there.

Which left ballsy toddler boy and his dad.

Ren Guo, the dad, and Ren Cai, the kid. The Tai Huen Chai's fighter and his hostage.

Daddy dearest was in a shit-ton of trouble because he not only knew a faction of his Triad was up to no good, but he also helped them get in. Hence, how he ended up under one of her corpse trees without getting somewhat beat up while the rest of the Triads and their assorted fighters were still dealing with the invasion.

They weren't the ones that were trying to get Sonya killed, from what Arseniy had said, which for one would've been too easy and for another the repeated attempts on her life had made her suspicious of everything in general. Even to the Triad that should've been the ones to do hostage security.

The reason why she was pretty much on her lonesome for her extraction?

Most of the Big Circle Boys present that night had been dead before someone barged in on her and aerated her guts for her. Especially all the guards that were supposed to be on site.

Cai, being Flame blind and the Russian thief admitting to some curiosity verbally over how he'd grow up, got handed over to a neutral third-party while his 'originating syndicate' did some housecleaning and the other Triads decided what to do about them.

If the dad was alive now or not, she wasn't prepared to guess. Admitting in a public setting the kid might be one of the rare few that could do utterly neutral negotiations between Flame users hadn't been the best plan, but it gave the kid a unique sort of position. In being possibly an asset to hold onto even if his dad was a… dick.

She didn't like how kids were treated here, and that was with loving or at least invested parents. She didn't really want to contemplate how a kid with a disgraced dad would be treated. The 'possibly more than useful' thing was the best she could manage for the kid to hide behind.

His life was probably going to suck as it was, and unless she stole ballsy toddler boy…

…which she couldn't do.

Sonya was not equipped to handle the sudden influx of a toddler, who was not grieving now but might just be doing so in as few as a couple days when and if his dad did a no-show. Which made her rather appreciate how utterly out of the blue Renato getting Shamal dropped on him must have felt on the hitman's side of the equation.
Mingxia would be taking up the tiny surplus of cash she had right now, Galina was off getting her paperwork straightened out and her wardrobe fixed to survive a Russian winter. Beyond that, she didn't have the time for a toddler.

She could stick him under Scruffy, worse comes to worse, but from what the Lightning had informed her of last night about the Sun's mental state and his slow to heal from it issue that might not be the best idea. Alright, that wasn't his fault but she was a little sour over the belated realization she had done nothing for it either.

Scruffy needed to speak up more.

Fong was off with his Triad head doing the renegotiations either the continuations of the tournament needed or just the recent mess' cleanup. Arseniy had done her a minor favor taking old man Yaozu in for his traveling papers, he really only needed a temporary one for right now, and was sitting on the two Rains brought in from Moscow while he did so.

Mirror Lady Anna, Usov, and the Mist girl's utterly monstrous pet were off stalking for the information she needed to press home a… complaint about the number of attempts on her life.

Avdotya had given her the most unimpressed look for her gut shots, but as she wasn't a Sun she took a back step to Huang and instead did a highly painful inspection to ensure she didn't need to burn something out of her injuries for the fourth Sun that had a look at her to heal up. Like an infection or a ruptured length of intestine.

Her stomach was still twinging painfully when she shifted a touch too much.

There were three of Galina's Lightnings, basically sitting outside her 'sickroom' door and being obstructions to even Xiasheng. Andrei and one of his fellow Suns were apparently back where the Moscow contingent were being housed, basically making sure none of their shit was tampered with.

That left one loose Storm user from Moscow. Tasked to be Sonya's hands because she was 'bedridden for observation', on orders from the nurse.

Which she was only tolerating because the Sōng siblings were fussy hens. "I know you, don't I?" Because she was pretty shit at names, to be honest.

…and faces, if she really had to be truthful.

The Storm kid pressed a set of spectacles up his nose, probably for the lack of anything to do with his hands. "Well… not really, Miss Bazanova. When you visited us, I merely asked if you had two Flames didn't that mean you were weaker than Mikhail."

The thief dredged her memory. "…the kid that got punched by that girl?"

She earned a wry grin. "Zoyka does that a fair bit, yes. She did punch me when I asked you the question."

"Huh… so you are?"

"Milanko Ugljanin."

…it was a 50-50 split if she'd ever recall that.

She had been actually intending to ask him some of what had been going on in the Storm section,
right up until the door opened without the three Lightnings guarding it kicking up a fuss.

Which meant Galina had returned with a surprisingly timid Mingxia.

The Storm brat in the corner perked up, the Lightning ignored him, and the little Rain slunk to the floor next to Sonya's bedside and just curled up there.

"Beat it, find something to do." Her assistant informed her 'hands' shortly, taking a moment to express a bit of dissatisfaction with the lack of seating options and electing to sit on Sonya's bed instead of the floor. "I had to borrow the Mirror Lady to get things done in a reasonable timeframe, hope you don't mind."

"Not really." Admitted the thief idly, petting downy toddler hair as the kid woke up from his nap at the sudden increase in volume. "The Storm's...?"

"...he likes praise. Got caught up trying to earn the entirety of the Storm section's approval." Admitted the brunette shortly in Russian instead of a language the teenaged Rain could understand. "I've removed him from that the best I can, but it doesn't mean he's magically fixed. If given nothing to do, like now, he's likely to return to the other Storm brat and try to gain his approval."

Mingxia eyed the admittedly forthright woman's profile a bit nervously. "That's not likely to happen?"

"They know it's what he's after and they're a bunch of perverse, contrary, stupidly stiff-necked bunch of idiots. Especially in volume." Galina offered blandly, as if that couldn't also apply to her 'boss'. "The school isn't really helping him, just broadening his social circle might make him more spastic."

Frankly, if it was positive and widespread social acceptance the kid was after, nothing would help him.

Sonya hummed to show she heard but swung her legs off the side of her bed and sat up instead of speaking right away. Much to ballsy toddler boy's irritation when he lost what he was hiding behind to avoid all the new people. "There's nothing to do but watch him, then. Rather strange of a fixation..."

"We didn't give them anything to fixate upon. They found their own methods, and a whole lot of them are goals they'll never be able to achieve." Tossing her head impatiently, the Lightning held out a hand for the Rain girl to take. "Few of them have your drive to find something, instead they get stuck with whatever their prepubescent preteen or teenaged angst gets hung up on."

Mingxia looked highly surprised to be pulled up to the bedspread instead of left on the floor. "So, boss lady." Galina switched to Mandarin Chinese, so the girl could understand them again. "What did you call us all down for?"

"A distraction, to be honest." Admitted the thief slowly, stretching out her much-abused abs carefully to be sure the sore feeling of 'scrubbed with steel wool' feeling of another Storm's disinfection methods and the sandpapery feeling of Cloud 'voodoo' had actually faded and just wasn't numb. "If nothing goes to plan, maybe a bit of combat experience for the kids. Mainly, though, I need hands."

"For what?" Asked the young Rain softly when all the Lightning did was arch an eyebrow.

"I have this... thing, about people sent to kill me." Admitted the Storm-Cloud wryly, pushing up to her full height to check her range of movement. Then picking up ballsy toddler boy since he didn't
appreciate being left behind with strange women. "I rather dislike the hassle, after all."

(Friday the 31th of October, 1969. Budapest, Hungarian People's Republic.)

Tatiana gingerly prodded the stomach of the heavily tattooed guy, when that didn't earn her a discontented twitch of pain she graduated to actually pressing down with splayed fingers. He was breathing much to shallowly, but that might just be because he was trying not to cough up a lung and splatter his sheets with even more blood.

Eventually, the nurse sat back on her heels. "Well... good news is you don't have a hernia or ulcers. Those were the two rather major causes that would've required surgery. Admittedly one would've had you bleeding from the other end, but it was possible."

Aziz the 'Snake man' eyed her warily, scooting backwards away from the flame-haired nurse.

"So, what does that leave us with?" Asked the stuntman behind her, running fingers through his already rather spiky purple hair.

"Practically everything else. Hemoptysis is generally a symptom, not the problem." She wished she had access to an x-ray machine, or even a bronchoscope. "But, as it's not the major culprits... or at least I don't think so, it's either his lungs or his throat."

Which... might let them not break into a hospital around here just to be sure. Had the individuals been even remotely criminal she would've insisted, but...

...these were entirely her dork of a brother's kind of people.

There was a 'bearded lady', which she highly suspected was actually a guy even if he was prettier than her if he'd shave the beard, watching her every move suspiciously. S/he had some kind of nurse experience, but not the medical instruction the Sun user had to her, and had gotten the Snake man rather comfortable if it wasn't for the whole coughing blood issue.

Also... the corset thing was ew. Why did they do that?

Did he and/or she know what that did to her organs and rib cage?

Aziz had filed his teeth into fangs and tattooed himself all over with snake scales, and she did mean all over. His 'sick-bed' was situated near a few tanks filled with a knot of pythons and two vipers, which she was assuming were his pets/partners. The guy also hadn't said a word yet, merely kind of cringed away from her as much as he could get away with.

Tatiana was being gentle, damn it all. Yeah, she smacked her brother upside the head as a greeting but that was for not picking her up from the airport.

There was the Rain guy Cherep picked up, something-or-another Ciceron, wringing his hands in a corner. Rather portly man with swarthy skin, she was going to try to hound him into a diet or something the moment she was done with the snake man.

A couple handful more, but those were all being shy and hiding away from her.

Not that it would help them, she intended to go over all of them with a fine-tooth comb.
Her utterly too sweet of a brother would get crushed if any of them came to harm, directly or indirectly stemming from what he was trying to do with baby-Rain-face over there. He had to hide their boss man for his own protection, for whatever reason she was taking on faith since he hadn't gone over the details with her yet, and since he deemed Ciceron as a bad gatekeeper for Omertà…

Well, Mafia Land was right out. Even if they could afford it, which they couldn't on multiple levels.

Rummaging around in the first-aid kit she had at least thought to bring with her, Tatiana pulled a small flashlight out of its depth. "Okay, Aziz. I need to see your throat. If whatever's wrong isn't there, we're going to have to get… creative."

She did bring a stethoscope with her, but that wouldn't tell them anything aside if his breathing was rattling suspiciously or not. Which may or may not be the issue he was having.

Aziz glanced warily from her, the flashlight, to behind her where his boss was standing with her brother, and back again before budging from his cower against the crates that made up his comfy little spot. The Sun waited with faked patience while he maneuvered himself, categorizing the higher likelihood the guy was extremely double-jointed from how odd a few of those movements appeared.

Snapping at the guy for taking his time would do nothing but make him jumpy, the others in this little backwater slum thing hate her, and just generally impact how successful she'd be nattering them all into a checkup of their own.

Patience was its own reward, even if by nature she hated it with a passion.

Asides which, Aziz had fangs.

If he bit her with those?

Tatiana smiled encouragingly at the guy. "Smile, and open wide."

…he had no molar teeth, okay.

Hopefully he was getting some kind of dietary supplements aside what he could rip apart with those pointy pearly whites, they and his gums seemed healthy enough at first glance.

She wasn't a dentist. They were there, not swollen or irritated, good enough for her.

Clicking on the little flashlight, the nurse attempted to peer down his esophagus as far as physically possible without the actual tools for such a thing. She really should take control of the guy's lower jaw, but that might also give her more trouble than it was worth given how wary he was already.

"…do you swallow swords, Aziz?"

"Why does that matter?" Demanded the bearded man-lady before snake-guy could even hum an answer for her.

"Nojan, let us not alienate the lady of medicine." Soothed the Rainy dude a touch hastily.

"She doesn't have to do this." Cherep tacked on a bit more defensively.

…because he really was a sweet dork.

The Sun user gave a small laugh. "Because our baby sister learned the process to do it too, and had a few interesting things to say about the art that I was interested in. Like the very real possibility of 'nicking' one's cricopharyngeal sphincter if you tried to rush learning. Or tearing it or stressing it.
He's got a bruise at the back of his throat and eliminating that as the cause might help a small bit finding out what's wrong."

A bit paraphrased, Sonya didn't know the medical terminology, but true enough.

Nojan the bearded one exchanged a look with her Rainy boss. "...family of carnies?"

"You could say that. Not entirely, though. I didn't join the circus, to say the least." Tatiana dismissed with a wave. She gave the less wary and now more interested snake-man an encouraging smile. "I also got how to breathe fire out of her, if you'd like some tips."

If he was trying to learn alone, without the help of someone that knew how to do all those show tricks, she was going to punch someone.

Unless you were trying to kill, sharp implements did not belong near someone's throat.

Alas, the guy gave a shake of his head.

Not sword swallowing, although he still looked rather interested in her so that was still progress.

"So... now what?" Cherep asked of her as he helped her back to her feet.

She gave him a grin, there was no reason for him to back up like that. "Well... I need a getaway driver. We're going to have to... liberate some medical supplies from a nearby hospital. However, I'd like to make sure Aziz isn't the only one that needs a bit of help first."

Her stethoscope hadn't even made it into her kit, it was looped loosely around the handle. Plucking that up, Tatiana warmed it between her palms and a tiny bit of Sun Flames added to ensure it remained that way.

Steel, as a byproduct of iron, being a Sun Flame metal for the win.

Perching her pert ass on the snake-guy's bed, she gave him a slight smirk. "Breathe, as you would normally then deeply. As deep as you can go, even if you cough."

Tatiana listened intently, to the guy's lungs not the sudden conversation that struck up the moment she was 'otherwise occupied'. He was breathing too quickly, and his breath was rattling in his lungs, which meant mainly that they were filled with fluid that could or could not be blood.

…the guy's wariness might not be because she was a stranger. Confusion was possible, meaning it wasn't the words he was listening to but her tone. That shake from before could've been an 'I don't understand' kind of motion and not a 'no' one.

Confusion was generally a symptom of oxygen deprivation or head trauma. No contusions on his shaved head, the pretty patterns made it hard to see if there was bruising, but she was pretty sure 'he got whacked in the head' would have been told to her if that had happened.

Breathing problems then. A severe one.

Pneumonia or an upper/lower respiratory issue?

Cancer was a possibility, so were cysts.

Aziz about jumped out of his very colorful skin when she plastered a hand to his forehead, toeing her kit closer so she could grab a thermometer out of it while he adjusted. As the tattoos kind of made it hard to tell if he was turning blue or anything, she unwrapped her thermometer from the sterile plastic
case and handed him it instead of jam it under his tongue as she wanted.

His nails were turning blue.

"Tats?"

"More than likely, pneumonia." Coughing blood with flu-like symptoms. Possibly, honestly, the more likely of the options.

There were what?

Three?

Four. Ish. Major causes for pneumonia, and a handful more reasons why he developed it when he was a healthy… ish, young man. Might've been anything from his snakes slithering through something not quite healthy to those tattoos he had. It could even be a side-effect of something else he had that wasn't so pesky.

She needed a lab and she needed a toxicology specialist before she could start treating him beyond just general antibiotics. That wasn't really a great idea, because if whatever caused the pneumonia wasn't susceptible to whatever he had it would just build up an immunity to the antibiotics that couldn't kill it. Which might help it kill what should be killing it when she found his treatment.

The major problem right now was that Aziz wasn't getting enough air, which made him lethargic and confused to the point of being dazed and slow to respond. Or if it wasn't an issue of enough air then he wasn't getting it past whatever was building up in his lungs. She'd put him on pure oxygen if possible, but there were no tanks of it here.

Carefully not showing the face she wanted to pull, Tatiana turned to her brother. "I need an ambulance at the least. It would have… most, of the general supplies I need right now."

Cherep pulled the face she wasn't doing. "Just an ambulance?"

"Please." Thankfully, she could get around the whole 'Aziz couldn't get enough air' issue on her lonesome right now.

Lightly pushing the snake-man back so he was laying down again, Tatiana lit her fingers with her sparky yellow Flames and Activated his oxygen absorption rate. With her other she took the thermometer from his mouth and pouted at the fever his shirtless-ness was probably concealing.

The ambulance should have the supplies to take cultures with, and she'd have to break into a clinic or lab herself to run a few tests. Maybe, if she caught him on a good hour, Doctor Kappel wouldn't mind conveying some questions to the labs in Saint Julian's for her.

Like what to treat whichever strain of pneumonia Aziz had, and if whichever virus or bacterial infection was the cause could be symptoms of a worse or direr illness.

With one hand rather firmly occupied in raising the guy's blood-oxygen saturation level back to a survivable amount, Tatiana inspected the two she had been left with. "Anything either of you can think of that needs immediate treatment while I'm here?"

The little crate-city slums they were in was not hygienic, and there was the great possibility just moving them from here would clear up a lot of the minor shit that could be bothering them. She really should cordon off Aziz's sick-room type affair, but she suspected these people had been trading off tending the guy so they were all exposed to whatever he had already.
Baby sister was sometimes a little idiot, but Tatiana had figured out how to use her 'immunity' trick even if she had no Storm Flames. As long as she wasn't infected by something, because viruses eventually became part of oneself in their drive to make someone sick.

Still, one's Flames did not harm oneself. As long as that remained true, the nurse could pull her Flames to about skin-level and remain uninfected. It was a hell of a lot easier with Storm Flames, and even just keeping it up for a full hour was draining as hell, but possible.

The trick would be to test it, and that was… iffy.

Nojan the bearded one was gawking at her Sun Flames, which Ciceron was doing on a much lesser scale but with a measure of fascination normally found in the tetchy trainee brats just realizing there was more than their version of inner Flames around. Aziz's frame relaxed a touch that she hadn't even been aware was there, his above-normal flexibility making his boneless state a lot looser than she was comfortable with.

Possibly, being able to pull in enough air and process what was going on was the cause.

"Aside a few old injuries."

"Let me cut you off there." Tatiana interrupted a tiny bit shortly, turning back to the two and pinning the chatty dude with a no-nonsense look. "The price for my help is a hug, which my brother paid. He's a big ass softy, so if any of your minions up and croak while he's off hiding you from whatever, he's going to be pouty and mopey and generally too wet all over. I, and various others in my family, are not the type of people you want to piss off. You make my brother sad, I will make your life a living hell."

"…you sure you're a nurse?" Asked the highly caustic man-she.

"Sweetie, I am a criminal nurse. I patch up killers for my day job. Now, start talking little Rain. Before I burn you."
(Saturday the 1st of November, 1969. Wo Hop To Triad Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Sonya eyed the child she had dubbed 'ballsy toddler boy' thoughtfully as he fidgeted in the mid-morning light next to her.

It was a rather silent consideration, until the girl pouring her tea finally looked up and seemingly broached the topic occupying her mind for most of the morning. "…Miss Sonya?"

The blonde Russian, and that did now need a qualifier for there were easily another dozen or so with varying features scurrying around at her bidding, tilted her head towards Mingxia but didn't look away from the child taking refuge in her lap instead of play in the open air. "Something you need?"

Fong had maybe a few more minutes to wait for the Wo Hop To's Mountain Master and had picked to spend them in the courtyard with his lingering guests. Two were due to leave shortly, one was not averse to remain due to the expressed issue now pulling at her clothing, and it was possible more of her minions might peek in for a few short moments.

Watching her deal with various other, young, Flame users was still fascinating. The Storm that had invited her here unfortunately didn't get to see a whole lot of that, due to the meetings he was a bit tied up within, he mostly heard through second-hand accounts from his fellows about how that went.

"Exactly… when are we leaving?" Mingxia inquired softly as she stuck her fidgeting hands into her wide blue sleeves, looking more than a bit conflicted. "You said I would be leaving with Miss Galina, right? Is… something wrong?"

"Aside the fact we're still waiting on traveling papers, so you can do this legally and transfer the eventual scholastic credits to another school for further education, there is the issue about those trying to kill me." Explained the thief evenly without so much as looking up from the child in her guard. "The others are also on a school trip, for real-world experience in applying their trades with a sort of safety catch. You'll leave with the other kids about when Galina decides there's nothing else for her brats to do."

"Can I inquire about what they're doing?" Fong prodded after a beat, within which it seemed the woman deemed that more than enough to answer his little sister's nervousness.

"As I have a… slight complication of the child kind, they're getting the footwork of what I want to do done with." A shoulder lifted up in an absent shrug, but that was the most he received for the question before she changed the topic. "Why, politically speaking, was I stuck with the kid? I'm foreign."

"Perhaps, but you are also a Cloud." One that had a very new, and semi-disturbing, reputation for mass property damage and understandable wide-scale manslaughter within the Triads.

"Is that a tradition here?" She questioned warily, finally looking away from the toddler stroking the tangled threads of yarn that was part of whatever the Storm-Cloud had been knitting before the child got involved with it.

"Well… no. There have never been all that many of your type to use like that. But you are a respectable deterrent to any seeking alternative rearrangements before anything is decided."
Especially considering what she had done at the tournament's hopefully temporary end.

They were still digging rubble out of there in hopes of reclaiming some of what went into building it, and her 'corpse trees' had been more than a little disturbing to deal with.

Given more than half of the arena's south façade had collapsed because a Cloud had thoughtlessly destroyed two load bearing walls on her way out… and the remains of whatever patrols that ran afoul of her were still being stumbled upon by curious civilians and Triad cleanup crews alike.

He really shouldn't complain. The hostages had been fine in the end, most that got caught up in the collapse were not his opponents, and they had to abandon the location anyways.

…but he had been right about it not surviving the woman's temper. She would've outclassed what damage the Red Guardsmen had done to the Triads involved had those trying to arrest them not been the ones to suffer most of the losses.

Master Yaozu snorted harshly, eyeing the child that didn't seem to like any but the thief he had taken refuge with. "He seems fine with you."

"We're criminals, if that was actually taken into account while the decision was being made I'd be highly surprised." Pointed out the woman pragmatically, allowing the child his way when he decided to hide under her shirt and merely pulled a face as that likely meant he was touching her sensitive stomach. "I should reiterate that I don't mind, for now, it's just… odd. New, in another way."

Fong very carefully did not grimace. Unfortunately, both his little sister and former martial arts master knew him very well, and knew he knew something from that non-reaction alone.

The Triads, or more to the point one Triad organization in particular convinced enough of the others to follow their thoughts on the matter, had placed the child she brought up as 'possibly interesting' with her in the hopes she'd become attached. Then, equally as hopefully, it would be possible to control the Cloud woman through controlling the child and tie her down somewhere locally. If nothing like that happened then nothing would happen, but the suggestion alone was enough to have most allowing it to continue.

Which… containing her had been tried once before, by the Wo Hop To Triad with a bit of aid from their allies.

On a mere fluke, they realized the same little Storm that aided the Triads with the pre-tournament preparation of wiping most if not all criminal records the police held on entrants was with a civilian traveling circus and had tried to head her off before she left China again. Before anyone else realized it and thought to poach her first. The ending to that chase had been a little more than pricy to smooth over and could've been so much worse in terms of sanctions from Mafia Land given what and how things were arranged before they caught up to her again.

He and Zhōng both tried to derail this attempt with limited success, and they were the ones in the direct line of fire if the Soviet Storm-Cloud decided she was not amused. Again.

They were rather fond of this building. It was a nice building, convenient and while not entirely in a main-street part of Hong Kong it was close enough that it was easily in range for most if not all of what their various branches and subordinate groups might want to get up to.

He intended to tell her, just… not somewhere that Duyi would be annoyed if she destroyed said somewhere.

Thankfully, if they could manage a majority in another day or so, there might be a way to evade the
outright hazards of informing the woman anything about the politics behind her current 'task'.

Mingxia didn't have the self-control training the two fighters did, and vor Bazanov realized he knew more than he was saying from her glancing at him. Before he could say anything, his daughter heaved a sigh.

"Well, whatever. We're still waiting on the paperwork for the both of you, I suppose I don't really have anything better to do right now."

"You owe the Long Triad group a visit, and there is what the rest of us are on." Interrupted a new voice, her ruthlessly efficient Lightning assistant, as she entered via the compound's gates. Probably, the green-eyed brunette had arrived for any new marching orders from their 'boss lady'. "You have plenty to do."

"You all should still be doing prep, and I'll visit the Long Triad before I leave not before." Countered Sonya a touch dryly, scooping the child out of her garments and giving him an odd look for his behavior. "I tried doing a mid-visit meeting once. It didn't work out."

Fong flinched, driving a Storm-wreathed fist through one of the veranda's pillars and the violently colored spider crawling down it… which popped into wisps of Mist Flames.

Ah… he was unlucky.

"Did you just try to kill my Pavuchky?" A young woman that hadn't been there until that moment demanded shortly, two more of the bulbous monstrosities inching their way up her skirts as she placed her hands on her hips and stood as bold as brass in the middle of the courtyard. "How rude."

"Yeah, Fong. How rude." Mimicked the thief wickedly, absently keeping the child in her lap from reaching out to poke another copy of the grotesque spider.

This one had three of its' vibrantly banded legs perched on her knee like some kind of twisted parody of a dog trying to see what she was protecting.

His little sister whimpered, all but folding herself into Master Yaozu's side to get away from the Mirror Lady's nightmarish pets.

"My apologies." Offered the martial artist blandly, only really sorry he had failed to kill the thing before it could startle Mingxia, as he extracted his fist from the shattered and now smoldering wood. "I didn't see what I was hitting until too late."

Someone had put a hefty bounty on the monster's death. He would not be all that sorry to collect on that either.

Kicking the burning parts of the former wooden pillar off the wooden veranda to prevent the entire building from going up in Flames, Fong missed some of what Sonya then informed Mingxia and Yaozu.

He did hear '-but it's your reactions that encourage it.'

Probably, 'Pavuchky's' owner was a Mist.

The young woman who would also go by the name Anna flounced over to collect the violently colored spider now perched deadly still on the thief's knee, meaning that one was… well, it was a fifty percent chance it was the real one. Fong eyed it suspiciously, wondering if he could kill it before the Storm-Cloud found the protests against the thing's inclusion in whatever she was doing less than
amusing.
…they all looked identical sans the patterns on the bulbous part, the possibility there was more than one 'real' one was…

Mists were a headache, decided the Storm sourly.

Positioning the third copy on the crown of her dark head, the Mirror Lady sunk into a perfectly poised kneel in front of the Storm-Cloud. "We're ready, boss lady."

"Are you. And the rest?"

"…might want to give it a day." Demurred the Mist woman pleasantly, ignoring her pet as it crawled down her face in its deliberate way.

The two copies of the massive spider that had been on her skirts skittered off in different directions, another sticking its vibrantly banded legs out from under her hair and crawling up to a shoulder, and the one that had been on her head dropped delicately into her lap without leaving a silver thread of silk behind in her dark tresses.

Eying the pack of spiders, it was really a rather demented shell-game the Mist woman was playing with them, the Storm settled himself into a stance that would let him react quickly if at all possible.

He might be holding a grudge, because his little sister was not a fan of creepy things and never failed to become upset in the face of the monster's mirrored visage.

If he got to grips with it, the real one, it was going to die.

"Anna, enough. I don't mind if you use him to terrify others, but not our own."

She blinked innocent blue eyes back at the older woman, but the spiders all disappeared with a quiet ripple.

Even the one in her lap, which Fong would've said was probably the real one.

Mingxia didn't really seem to care if they were out of sight, she remained all but welded into Master Yaozu's side. The old man huffed in response to the monstrosity disappearing, appearing slightly long-suffering rather than unnerved if it wasn't the more relaxed bent to his still disciplined form.

"In reality, about two more days." Galina corrected when no one else seemed to want to comment, waving one green-tipped hand to dismiss the Mist woman's previous comment. "Then we can see about… your little idea, Sonya. We're still on the issue of where to put it all."

"Right, well… in the meantime, this Triad has a little Lightning they want you to look at." Offered the Storm-Cloud idly, reflexively patting the toddler on the head when he decided to babble everything he thought about their Misty spider visitor to her. "Classical, kind of peppy, purveyor of pipes."

Lifting her new bamboo and brass pipe from the tea tray still holding the untouched cup of tea that Huang gave her earlier that morning, the thief lazily flicked it around her fingers not occupied reassuring a child and just watched the play of light off the polished wood and metal.

The Lightning arched a delicate eyebrow but shrugged. "Alright, I suppose the brats can have today to fuck up within. That might mean tomorrow will be a bit more involved than you'd like."
"I rarely like working with others, Galina. The last time anyone actually managed to make themselves useful on one of my jobs was your group." Professed the blonde Russian dryly, keeping her pipe away from childish fingers easily. "And you cheated by having my own sister with you."

When the toddler found that distasteful, he yanked on the front of her shirt. Earning himself a highly unimpressed look.

The woman in question getting up with him bodily tucked under an arm. "I think it's someone's naptime anyways."

"Sonya." Arseniy called, rooting attention to himself near effortlessly as he didn't really tend to interrupt or even speak much. "I'm heading back."

"Alright, thanks Arseniy." His daughter gave him a sharp smile. "I shouldn't be too far behind you."

(Saturday the 1st of November, 1969 continued. Wo Hop To Triad Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"No one in their right mind uses a Classical Lightning as a decoy." Galina informed Xiasheng pointedly. "Hey kid, who sent you here?"

"The Faithful Alliance Society." One Shao Xieren promptly replied, a bit confused on why she was demanding information from him but obedient to the directions previously given by a senior member of this syndicate to answer any question she posed.

Zhōngshí Liánméng Shèhuì was not a Triad she knew of. It didn't really mean much, rumors abounded that there were hundreds of Triad branches. Some more interconnected to the 'main' branches in odd ways than others, and then there were all the baby branches feeling their way to standing on their own feet.

However, if it was more of a fringe-group than a main-power one… why did they give up a Flame user?

There was safety in having a limited few, meaning you could go under the 'radar' of a larger group according to the Vindice Laws. That kind of arrangement was… dicey, even so.

With anyone semi-intelligent it would really only mean a larger group could only task so many of their own Flame users to destroy the smaller one, and there were all those non-Flame users to be put to any task that wouldn't be counted, so it was still a gamble. One that might pay dividends, but a risk even so.

"Why?" Asked the female Lightning bluntly, not because she was curious but just to see if he could articulate anything.

It earned her a shrug and the spread of his hands as he failed to come up with anything to say.

"What did they say when they told you to come here?" Asked the Russian woman next, more than sure the kid knew what it was they wanted to know but hadn't actually pondered the situation enough to realize it for himself.

All Flame users had their little ideocracies, shared across their types. While they weren't totally universal, you could generally rely on certain little things to be the same the world over. Said ideocracies were generally of the same categories, and just only differed by how one put it into
practice or if it was an internal or external matter.

Lightnings, especially types like the kid in front of her, tended to only vaguely pay attention if it didn't directly have to do with him or it wasn't attention-grabbing enough. Point in fact, that was still paying attention even if they didn't greatly care about it. Depending, if he was on a slide of Classical but slightly more middle than on the extreme end of it, it was possible he remembered.

No matter how long ago it was. Lightnings tended to have very good memories.

If they put it to use or not was another question.

"That the Wo Group Triads would have the resources to handle me and what I needed." Responded the dark haired and eyed kid, earning a puzzled scowl of a type from the hawkish eyed man next to her. "...and I don't think I was supposed to hear it, but they also made mention of being 'able to use it'."

"So a distraction, with the possibility of being a decoy, but not intentionally so." Galina concluded with a nod of thanks to the kid. "Good work."

The kid, and she was aware he wasn't all that much younger than her but after dealing with the Lightning section of the Zolotov clan she tended to think of all inexperienced Lightnings no matter their age like that, blinked at her in a puzzled fashion but accepted the praise with a shrug.

Xiasheng rubbed fingers on the faint scars that cut through one side of his face, pondering the situation heavily as Xieren decided that he was finished reporting to them and wandered off as his attention span waned.

"If you're paying him the bulk of your suspicions, what haven't you been paying attention to?"

Narrowing his hawkish yellow eyes at her, the Storm folded his arms into his sleeves and just scowled for a moment before he strode off. "I have a fairly good idea of what. Please excuse me, Miss Galina."

"That's not to say they're not going to try anything with him, mind you." Flicking her fingers at the man's back in a half-assed farewell gesture, they both probably had more than enough to go on when it came to the kid as it was, she wandered off to find out where her boss lady had retreated to.

While the bulk of the Zolotov Flame users had a floor of a rather decent bunkhouse to use for their own purposes, Sonya had remained in the room the Triads had cleared for her during the tournament while the baby-thing was going on. Galina only vaguely knew where it was, and that was depending on if she had memorized the way correctly or if a Triad Mist was 'doctoring' the layout of their headquarters for visitors.

Luck seemed to be with her, Sonya was stretched out on the same bed as last night and still staring at the ceiling in a thoughtful fashion. It wasn't a particularly wealthy room, a bit bare even for Soviet sensibilities, but it had a decent window overlooking one side of the courtyard and one wouldn't be immediately apparent from street-level if you stood in front of it.

That and the bed were the really only decent selling points to it.

Equally as similarly as the last time she was here, there was a toddler using the lazing Storm-Cloud as his personal body pillow again. "...Sonya, the kid's probably Triad. Or at least, they're going to bitch if you make off with him."

"I'm aware of that." Responded the thief a touch slowly as she dredged her scattered attention from
whatever she was pondering back on the here-and-now.

Galina planted a hand on her hip while standing in the doorway. "Don't you have more than enough kids?"

Grey eyes flicked over to her, long before the woman that owned them gave her an answer. "Honestly… I never thought about having kids, or a family."

"What does that make-

"Galina." Pushing herself to at least clearly see the Lightning loitering in her doorway instead of remaining flat on her back, Sonya pulled herself up enough half-recline against the wall containing the only window in her temporary room. "Aside that, which was unexpected and entirely without thought on my end but not anything I regret, I don't… know if I would ever want start one. I didn't… really like kids. Still don't, generally."

She pursed her lips, considering the blonde thoughtfully for a moment before fully entering the room and sliding the door shut behind her for the flimsy security. "For a woman that doesn't like kids, you're surprisingly adept at taking care of them."

The flat look she got made the brunette smirk.

"More seriously, if you keep picking up other people's kids you won't ever have to really miss the whole 'family' thing yourself." Glancing at the child that had a significant amount of the other woman's sweater in hand and was happily drooling away while he slept, Galina looked back at the other woman and arched an eyebrow. "What brings this up?"

"...I may or may not be seriously considering just stealing the kid." Admitted Sonya a touch wryly.

"Do we even have the funds for that? The time?"

"No and no. Which is why it's still a 'considering' and not an 'intend'."

That was a… interesting complication to their current aims. "Why?"

"I can't rationally think of a good and solid reason for why not."

"Didn't you just say we don't have the money or the time?"

Sonya sighed heavily, yet softly enough to prevent waking the toddler, and tipped her head back to stare at the ceiling more. "I don't have the time, money is transitory and easily accrued if I need more. If I want the kid, I need at least another set of hands at the very least. Everyone else is tasked with something or are needed on the school project for now."

She wished things were that easy for her. The thief might as well be a budding criminal mastermind in the making, waylaid by personal things that kept cropping up, but given she handed her funds over to another person entirely it was greatly possible the Storm-Cloud had a very skewed sense of monetary value.

Then again, they all did once you got deep enough. Inflation in the criminal world was hellish.

Although, the Lightning wasn't sure what she would want to do if she was anywhere on Sonya's level. "What happens if I find someone? Or the Mirror Lady?"

"...is there a reason why anything would change?"
"So if either I or Anna suddenly split from you, because we found someone and decided to become homemakers to pop out our own brats, you'd let us?"

Blinking at her slowly, the Storm-Cloud frowned faintly. "Well... yes. I appreciate the help, Galina, but I am fairly certain that while inconvenient and it's probably unlikely I'll find anyone as efficient as you to keep things I'm involved in on task, I could survive fairly decently on my own. I did it before you, after all."

It would be 'inconvenient' to lose her.

Galina eyed her underboss suspiciously for a long moment, decided on being appreciated as the feeling that statement gave her, and sighed as she sat down on the bed for what looked to be a fairly interesting conversation. "I would like to make it a point that you stated you'd allow us to make our own families away from you."

"I never said that." Stressed Sonya a bit pointedly, and a touch quickly. "Merely that if you wanted to leave my 'service' you could."

There was something else the blonde might've tacked onto that, had she not quickly rethought her words before uttering them to the brunette.

...but a Cloud like her wouldn't accept any distance forced on her very well, if what her brother claimed was true.

"...playing hostage is not good for me." Muttered the thief wryly to herself, then pinning the Lightning with a stern look. "I would... greatly, appreciate it... if you and Anna would remain somewhere I can easily check. If you leave."

Galina blinked twice.

"...please." Sonya tacked on, ever so grudgingly.

"Easily done." She reassured the other woman simply, because with what she had done for them that was rather paltry to agree to as a limitation. "But then, if you'd allow us this, why not allow yourself the same?"

"I have a kid." Pointed out the blonde simply with a flick of her wrist. "And if I didn't work, who'd pay you?"

"With the amount of time you had to waste sitting in an office at the beck and call of the Zolotovs, I'm pretty sure you could manage a husband and kid on the side." Countered her assistant with a flick of her own fingers. "Once you're clear of them, even better."

"While I'm not at risk for stupidity involving... certain things, now at least, that doesn't mean anyone I associate with are as safe or things will continue to be so down the line." Shifting to check on the toddler curled up around her hip pointedly, the other woman ran her fingers through disordered blonde locks distractedly. "So if I do anything like that, it's either going to have to be on the sly or with someone that can... deal with it."

Which would mean that Italian hitman or... Galina thought about the men here. More specifically, the people they were picking up here and whom they were connected to. Fong wasn't all that objectionable personality-wise, but bit of a smug asshole... and there was also Xiasheng, who it appeared as if the thief got along with decently well.

There was also the possibility there were others that could withstand the kind of attention Sonya
would eventually earn herself, just through being her usual self. Not to mention all the 'extras' being a Flame user heaped on top.

It didn't really sound as if the Storm-Cloud was really considering the option for herself, just puzzling over the logistical complications aloud as she had asked her about it.

The Lightning had some options herself, admittedly. It wouldn't be hard to scrounge up a man, but that might just get in the way of her work for the time being.

Galina, queerly, thought of Scruffy's situation next. She should get him a girlfriend or something for the moral support he had been seeking from her, but that begged the question of who might be able to handle an ex-prisoner of a diamond cartel without breaking him in so many, varied, horrible ways.

"Regardless." Sonya interrupted her thoughts before she could decide why she was thinking of the foundling Sun and another woman sourly, considering the dark eyes that peered groggily up at her before the toddler rolled over to get more sleep. "I don't know the kid's history, if he's got more family alive or what. His dad's fucked, but he might have a mom."

"So. Wait and see?"

"Pretty much."

(Sunday the 2nd of November, 1969. The second level of a bunkhouse on Mok Cheong Street, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Stiffening as another odd and sharp throb of pain went through her rather badly abused guts, Sonya pursed her lips while pretending she didn't see the winces around their 'planning table' caused by her apparent 'disapproval' of what was splayed out before them.

No offense intended to Huang, or to Avdotya, but the minute she got back to Mafia Land she was going to have a long visit with Doctor Kappel. Something was obviously wrong internally, on top of the leg that was really broken but not anymore, but as nothing was bleeding or impairing her movements all that much it could wait.

It was just a tiny bit annoying, the occasional pangs of sharp pain in her belly contrasting with the lack of it in her leg. Going slow enough for a toddler to use her as a safety blanket didn't normally cause the sore ache in her guts, but from time to time there were pangs that didn't seem to have any cause.

Other than the fact she had been shot in the gut a few days ago. She wasn't sure if it was hard to recall she was actually injured or if it was a sign her control on whatever 'Cloud Voodoo' she had was slipping.

To distract herself, the Storm-Cloud took a more leisurely glance through the various bits of information scribbled down on scraps of repurposed paper tacked onto a massive map of Hong Kong via questionable looking 'pins'. Which might actually be Mist-made, actually.

What she was looking at wasn't really bad, per say. Elementary maybe, something almost straight out one of Arseniy's lectures of what to do in such-and-such situation, rather obvious methods used to distract watchers from what they were supposed to be watching. As close as it could be to textbook Soviet tactics given they didn't have books for this particular subject.
Nothing remotely like what she had done in the last... two?

Three-ish, years.

Or ever, really.

As a solo-thief, she preferred straight out stealth more than distraction tactics. She could use them, but her distractions tended to be obvious and missing the cause of.

However, it would work if those this was for were not entirely all that bright.

Galina wasn't kidding when she said 'a bit more involved' than she liked. There were a lot of untried students filed into the cramped room fidgeting with eagerness to get on with things, obviously similar to her own restless habits. Whispered conversations and restless movements abounded around the floor around them.

The Three Suns Gang was, supposedly, the ones attempting to poison a Soviet Storm-Cloud.

Arseniy had tripped over the rumors that 'someone survived ingesting Activated venom, what could do that?' and traced them back to the source. The one rumor aside, the vor had been unable to corroborate the rumors with fact or confessions until Zhōng extracted confirmation from one of the poor unfortunates that he had been masking his intelligence gathering under before whatever he did was done. Releasing the prisoners or death, she didn't greatly care enough to ask.

Under whose order was unknown still, for what purposes was another, but that was partly what they were going to find out shortly.

That Triad publicly had 'three' Flame using Suns, officially anyways. Sonya suspected each of those Suns had at least one apprentice or aid that may or may not be Flame active themselves to do their various biddings, and there was the possibility any of them might have a secondary Flame to worry about. The only other bit of information they had, courtesy of Anna's mirror walking habits, was that the Three Suns Gang had an interesting history of being in places where others tended to die horribly.

Which, given what was normally assumed Suns did, was... interesting. Renato made it work, regardless or in spite of his own Sun Flames, so it wasn't something to rule out of hand for those that knew the Italian.

Were these professional assassins, or just hired murders when opportunity knocked?

Intentional path or just fortuitous happenstance?

Depending on which, it would influence what overall tactic they would go with.

Thus, her dilemma. Send in the green Flame users first, or get the confirmation via the more experienced?

"Mix it up?" Galina suggested easily, making Sonya realize she had spoken that question aloud.

"...can we refrain from taking care of everything ourselves? I do not work well with others."

Tossing the brats out in the cold hard world without so much as backup was nigh on impossible given they had Mists, much less two competent ones like Usov and Anna. Overwhelming the Mists with too much to watch was more likely, but that also left more than enough time for retribution to be launched via suitably informed opponents if anything happened.
There were more points of interest than they had 'agents' for, especially since they really did need a kind of oversight as this shouldn't be a 'sink or swim' situation but a closely watched one by their instructors.

Sonya herself, Galina for sure, perhaps Anna since Usov would need the experience working with others more than the Mirror Lady did. If things were managed just right, they could spend most of a night observing the kids as they attempted to take care of things themselves.

It would allow them to know everything going on, while also being available to keep things from going lethally wrong.

Sonya sighed heavily, wondering where the hell she was going to stick ballsy toddler boy during that. "Tomorrow night, groups no more than four but with only one of each Flame type. You and Anna with me, we'll ensure no one gets in over their heads."

"Should I make up the teams?" Inquired the Lightning idly, ignoring the various others in the dormitory-like floor they had been given to use by the Wo Hop To Triad shifting a bit restlessly around them and the new whispered conversations starting up.

"...they can do it." Dismissed the thief shortly. "Get some rest, Galina. We're going to have a long night."

The expression that passed over the brunette's face was wry and just a shade of tartly exasperated, nothing of which Sonya knew the cause for. Dismissing it as mostly inconsequential to the point at hand, the Storm-Cloud carefully rose from her spot in the tiny cramped bunkhouse floor to leave.

Her room in the Wo Hop To Triad's headquarters might be a bit bare, but at least she had it to herself sans toddlers of questionable living situation. There were two rows of ten hammocks stacked on each side of this dorm room and, from what little she knew of Hong Kong's housing situation, this was actually rather roomy for unattached laborers or migrant workers visiting the city for whatever reason.

Incredibly depressing, too. Even in Moscow one could reasonably expect a sectioned off room with roommates or actual beds in a dorm arrangement for those that needed to rent places to sleep.

Eh, different countries meant different standards of living.

Sonya came to a slow stop at the base of the ground floor's stairwell, idly inspecting Mingxia's perfectly serene expression. "...you could've come up, you know."

"I thought this was a meeting about why they're all here?" Asked the Rain as she quickly gathered toddler things into a blanket said toddler had been rolling around on, folding the corners in some mysterious way to contain it all for transporting.

Ballsy toddler boy had been rather bored-looking sitting next to her, while yet more talking and the confiscation of his stuff was happening.

"...did you want to do something with them?"

Fong's little sister blankly stared at her as tiny fingers wound themselves into the material covering Sonya's kneecap. "Can I?"

"I could've sworn I said I'd get you into a school I control. They're here for a school trip from said school I control. Ergo, if you wanted an early start or just something to do, you could pitch in until they're ready to leave."
"Aa." Looking bewildered, Mingxia clutched her blanket package until the folded edges were pressed to her blue-clad stomach. "I… didn't think about that."

Sonya probably didn't help by not really speaking up either but then again, she had pointed Galina out as their ‘lead Lightning’. Frowning faintly, she wondered if that was a social or personal thing.

Shamal had no issues bugging others for tips and tricks, once he designed to actually talk to another person, or finding other things to do while occupied with his schooling.

Maybe it was a stability thing?

Or expectations?

The brat knew perfectly well what he had gotten into with her and Renato as godparents, or at least put forth the appearance he had it. Perhaps she should sit the bratty Mist down and go over everything with him at least once… on the other hand, the kid was a Mist and probably caught more than a little of their rather precarious situation from the hitman's elbow.

Regardless, she made a mental note the Chinese Rain required a firmer set of instructions.

…that might, in fact, be the Soviet Rains’ whole issue in a nutshell actually. They had floundered in place instead of spreading out with the lack of hard rules or expectations to guide them into being self-sufficient Flame users of use on their own.

Blowing out a sigh, she snatched the baby brat up from the floor to sit on a hip before gesturing for the girl to lead them out of the building.

She had to talk to Larion the Rain about that, the moment she got to grips with him, Why did this always happen when she

Where were all the people?

Hong Kong was not a small port city for all that it encompassed both a mid-sized island and a stretch of the mainland coast. Even still, it had a shit ton of people crammed inside the city limits where the Russian had ventured to date. Worst of all, it was evening and not the middle of the night so there should still be people either on their way to dinner or going home for the night.

Even Mingxia stalled in her first five steps outside of the bunkhouse the Zolotov trainees were housed within, looking as confused as the thief behind her at the utterly deserted street.

Sonya glanced around disinterestedly at the cobblestone lane and the darkened windows overhead. The only ones lit were the ones she just left, and maybe a scattering of handful farther and higher than two stories down the street.

Same tactic as Shanghai, then. Was it a wide-spread Triad habit, or were the civilians that conditioned?

Any Mists involved, or just learned behavior?

"Miss Sonya?"

"Get behind me."

The young girl did so, taking the toddler when the thief glanced down questionably at the kid.

Whatever street-light Hong Kong had without the addition of building lighting was miserable and
dreary, paired with the one street in the whole city that was completely deserted made for a highly suspicious situation.

"...do you think you can take care of the kid for a little while?" Sonya inquired softly, tucking her hands into her charcoal colored slack's pockets for the lack of something to do with them.

"What? Why?"

Sighing, the thief glanced backwards at the both of them. "Can you?"

"Aa... sure?" Mingxia blinked wide red eyes at her suspiciously as she juggled the slightly grumpy toddler in her arms. "Now can you say why?"

"Inform Fong, when he gets back, I've gone for a... run. If he looks too confused, add on 'it's similar to the first time we met.'" Avoided the Russian simply, swinging her gaze back to the seemingly deserted side street. "Usov, do see them back safely."

"Miss Sonya-eEP!"

 Falling through the ground, in the boy-Russian's favored trick to transport himself about, got the noncombatants out of her way rather neatly. Mingxia probably would be rather sore with her for a while, but at least it wasn't Anna and her mirror-verse version. ...was it the mirrors or the spider the little Rain didn't like?

"A run?" Asked Anna from a convenient lacquered symbol painted on the grainy concreate making up the foundation of the bunkhouse that did give a slight reflection.

"Mmm... I'm not nearly as patient as my father." Nothing seemed to be moving on the street, not even stray cats or some of the rats that pestered all sorts of docksides. "There are puddles, why pick something like paint?"

"...I have standards, boss lady." Insisted the Mist shortly. "At least take a Pavuchky with you."

"Fine." Sonya didn't greatly care all that much, and she ignored the gigantic spider that slid from the reflective surface and jumped to her 'Mao Jacket' thing. "Tell Galina to get started now and contact me if there's even a momentary upset. I'm not sure if this was triggered by the students or another incident entirely, so play it safe and get them out of here as quickly as you can."

"Of course."

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 2nd of November, 1969 continued. Wo Hop To Triad Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Mingxia landed or arrived or was dumped a touch hard on her knees, getting one disorientated moment to take in the garden strip of the Wo Hop To Triad's front courtyard before her brother was practically at her side and helping her up to her feet without spilling the toddler from her arms. "Little sister?"

"I don't know what happened." The Rain confessed with a measure of confusion, clutching the child that really didn't seem to appreciate the occurrence of a Mist teleporting them elsewhere even if that meant the child-safe things clattered to the dirt. "Miss Sonya said to inform you she is taking a 'run'."
"Was that it?" Yaozu asked, apparently dismissing the rearrangement of reality for a second as not that important.

"…and 'it is similar to the first time we met' if brother is still confused."

Fong then uttered a rather nasty curse.

"Young Miss Mingxia, old man Yaozu." The faintly new voice, the Mist their 'boss' had relocate her without so much as a concern given to if the Rain or toddler would appreciate it, drew attention back to the young Russian boy that had done it. "I'd advise you both to prepare for a hasty exit. Given our boss lady's habits, the minute we're done with what she demanded we'll be leaving."

"Who tried to corner Sonya?" Demanded the Storm a touch irritably.

"I don't…" Cocking his head, the Mist frowned slightly. "…they're claiming Golden Rascal Dragons. If that's true or not is something we're not able to tell."

"Lu Shui." All but snarled the Storm, releasing his little sister to fully face the young boy. "Where is she?"

"The Mirror Lady would know better than I." Dismissed Usov airily with a bat of the hand. "I'm on logistical support right now, the boss lady's got her on tracking everyone we need accountability on. We were near the dockside… but it's likely Miss Galina has decided it's compromised and we're now moving a full day ahead of schedule. If you wish to catch up, do so quickly."

Fong glanced from the courtyard gates, to her and the child, to his old master, and then back at the building their Mountain Master was likely within for the night.

"Go. I can take a message as well as anyone else." Demanded the old man shortly. "If the young miss needs help-"

"That is not really the issue, sifu." Corrected the Storm dryly, flicking red eyes over the top of their compound's walls suspiciously. "The issue is how much property damage Sonya will end up doing before they stop trying to bother her. She destroyed a good section of dockside and a stretch of road the last time something along these lines happened to her, and we backed off after the second time."

A difference of opinion on anything between a Lightning assassin and a Storm-Cloud thief… especially if it happens to be something the Lightning was trying to use the Storm-Cloud for in order to coax something out of a Storm over.

Mingxia bit her lower lip hard.

That was not going to end well.

(Monday the 3rd of November, 1969. Budapest, Hungarian People's Republic.)

"You realize this means I'm not going to be home for Christmas, right?"

Cherep winced guilty, scraping the side of one of his heavy motorcycle boots against the ground before leaving it to haul himself up on his 'acquired' ambulance her supplies had mostly come from.

"I know. I'll make it up to you, Tats."
The nurse gave him a wry smile as she held Aziz's wrist in order to count his pulse. "It would be different if we hadn't taken so much time off already this year, but between 'syndicate' business and Nya's fall concert thing... I don't have any more vacation time left for the rest of the year and some of next."

Her brother gave her a sulky pout, looking really, really sorry indeed before he bent to get back to work.

"I might be able to fudge a bit of the 'school nurse' thing around with Avdotya, but even then that'll mean I'll be working through most of what we had normally taken off just for family things."

"...what if we hire you for it?"

Tatiana blinked up at him blankly, scowling when she realized she had forgotten a beat in her count and started over. "Like for what?"

"Just... general nurse things? We can do that, right?" Smoothing a hand over his jawline, the stuntman puzzled over his suggestion or the mess he was currently inspecting to disassemble. "Hiring a 'nurse on standby' for an event or a party or something? Surely there's something like that... from what I know, it's possible to hire Nya specifically so why can't we hire you?"

"Because our little sister and I work for entirely separate factions of that place." Countered the Sun dryly, not missing that several of her dorky brother's newfound 'underlings' were trying to painfully and ineptly eavesdrop on their slightly loud conversation. "While yeah you can hire her for certain things... it can't be done with specific nurses. Nya is expected to take care of herself, the hospital staff aren't."

"What are you two talking about?"

"Nothing you'll be getting into, No-joy."

"It's Nojan."

Tatiana glanced up at the bearded lady, smirking with amusement at the flat expression on the other's face. Cherep snickered at the pun, the purpose for mispronouncing the other's name with an English twist had succeeded. "Aside which, it's really something you'll likely never have to deal with. Pointless to try to explain as it is, and a side order of deadly if the wrong ears overhear. I'd rather leave it as 'unspoken' if you don't mind."

"Is everything you do possibly or likely deadly?" Asked the carnie of uncertain gender a bit exasperatedly as they placed a pitcher of recently boiled water down on the snake-man's 'side table' of crates, having calmed a lot of the hostility to them the more Aziz recovered under the Sun user's sparkling yellow Flames. "Because it's starting to sound like it."

"Just if you're stupid."

"Or a halfway decent person." Deadpanned the Cloud Flame user as he bent to his work. "Or even marginally considerate to your fellow humans. Or-"

"Shut up, Cherep." He really was a dork sometimes.

"Erm... lovely lady of medicine... would I...?"

"Cherep is your gatekeeper. You're not going anywhere near the level you'd need to be at in order to learn what I'm talking about, simply because he says no." Dismissed the nurse, finally letting the
heavily tattooed carnie go as she was satisfied with his blood pressure with the latest round of medication. "Which, honestly now that I know you Mauricio, is a good thing. Just be really, really happy my dork of a brother picked you up first."

Ciceron fidgeted with his really eye watering coat, being interrupted in stitching a few more wildly clashing scarves to it while their 'troupe' was recovering from the desperate slog of trying to raise the funds to get their snake-man professionally looked at before he croaked. "I am unsure if I want to learn myself or not."

"Go with 'no'." Advised the stuntman as he unscrewed the emergency lights off the stolen ambulance to hand down to the Texan cowboy the group somehow picked up. "It's not really necessary and won't do much for anyone if you learn. Not even yourself."

"Right. Aziz is recovering decently well, getting you lot out of here and even back on the road will just help all over." Tatiana still didn't know how the man contracted pneumonia, but if shifting locations didn't do it then he likely had a newly developed allergy to his own snakes and that would be rather damming for the snake-man's whole 'act'. It could be anything from the damp and likely rotting surroundings, to something the snakes picked up, to even just an ill-timed cough by one of their 'customers'. "Give the cowboy a few more days of his pills, and his issues will likely clear up in a few as well. I need to send Cherep something special for Nahum, but the witchdoctor should not be surprised he picked up internal parasites drinking that sludge of his."

Said cowboy gunslinger flushed a bit sheepishly, and it really was a pity the American man contracted something that gave him a bit of an unsightly rash somewhere sensitive. It had nothing on the glower the 'witchdoctor' shot her, especially as he was the one to complain the most about seeing a medical professional about his issues.

Especially as Nahum had insisted he could take care of his own issues, and yet got all but yanked about by his dangly earlobes by the bearded one and yelled at for he had the same damn 'issue' for nearly a full year now and getting checked out by the nurse was costing them nothing.

It was either the chicken bone he thrust through the septum of his nose or that 'medicinal' sludge he kept nearly on the boil for who knew how long. Tatiana was betting on that utterly disgusting sludge, however the African shaman claimed it was 'herbal' and not a toxic slurry of pulped plants.

Aside the Spanish Rain and the bearded one that looked to be a native anywhere from the Greek islands to the Indian peninsula, there was a German 'midget' who really didn't want to rub elbows with any medical practitioner at all and so contented himself with cooking instead very far away from her. The rest that had belonged to this group had abandoned the rest when Aziz grew too sick to keep traveling.

Not really maliciously from the sounds of it, just through sheer practically. Cherep wasn't buying it, but Tatiana could see the reasoning well enough. If they let themselves get bogged down trying to help one of their number through his sickness, it made it harder to pick up and continue before winter set in and killed them all that way.

These slums were not somewhere you wanted to stay more than a day or so.

"So, you lot are finally cleared on a medical point." Finished the Sun with audible amusement she didn't do anything about, repacking her first aid kit with all the tools she had been using the last few days. "Cherep give Viper my appreciation, and the bribe I left with you for his help. Please."

"He took it already."
Of course the Mist had, it was money for him and so the nurse was utterly unsurprised it was already gone. "Then just thank him for me, brother. I'll see you... probably next year."

"Is that safe, ma'am?" Questioned the cowboy, who really couldn't pronounce a lot of the Hungarian that seemed to be the underlying 'common' language for this group so he defaulted to English which only half the troupe could pronounce or understand themselves. "I thought we were sticking close for a reason?"

"You're all sticking close to one area because it's not safe outside it, if any of you get 'kidnapped' and a ransom demanded it's not likely anyone sans our little sister would be able to 'steal' you back without losing parts. And Nya's on a job right now so we can't get her help for it either." Corrected Tatiana as she stood up with her medical supplies clutched under an arm. "I'm not nearly so nice, nor safe to 'kidnap' as the rest of you."

"Still won't mean they'll abstain from trying." Chipped in the Cloud user refitting the stolen ambulance to help with moving his new 'minions' elsewhere. Cherep peered over the roof of the hatchback station wagon with a cocked eyebrow. "Just... be careful, Tats. Please."

"You should take your own advice, Cherep." With a wave of a hand, the nurse pulled her favored pistol from the small of her back and cocked it before walking off to the 'exit' of this part of the slums. "Take care, you all! I'd greatly appreciate it if this is the last time we need to see each other!"

(Monday the 3rd of November, 1969 continued. Budapest, Hungarian People's Republic.)

"...that really should not be as hot as it is. Busty nurse with a gun..."

"That is my sister, Glen."

"You have a hot sister." Defended their gunslinger in exasperation, taking his very battered hat off to run some gloved fingers through his hair a few times. "Feisty little-"

"Shut up." Nojan bit in his face, clicking around the half-stripped ambulance in three-inch-heels to see the stuntman that interfered with the magician's 'impressment'. "Cherep? Now what? Are you... are you taking Mauricio now?"

"Now? Well... a few things." Admitted the purple haired and eyed Russian a touch uneasily, seating himself on the roof of the car he was stripping almost as a matter of fact than uncertainly as if he didn't know what he was doing. "You might want to gather up everyone, there's a couple things you guys have to hear so you can use if it you need to."

Aziz almost slunk off his 'sick bed' to do such gathering up, shrank back when their bearded one glared at him, and ended up simply twiddling his thumbs instead as the witchdoctor went off to retrieve their last member.

Mauricio tried rather hard not to sigh, because Aziz was alive and looking to make a full recovery now.

It was more than what he had hoped for when he stopped with almost more than half of his 'group'. In spite of what he was sure the stuntman had assumed the magician had been well aware stopping like this was nearly suicidal for him.

It just... without a member of the troupe able to masquerade as 'normal', raising the funds to help their snake-man was less than realistically possible.
A bearded lady, a dwarf, or a man that fit piercings with boiled and bleached chicken bones were not what most thought of as 'respectable' individuals. No respectable bank would hear them out without altering their appearances in ways that might not help them continue with their acts after this, and indeed the few bank branches around here hadn't even bothered to hear the 'Rain' out either once the situation was known. Glen their gun slinging cowboy from the States could've maybe managed to look respectable himself with a little polish they couldn't afford to give him, but without a lot more practice in Hungarian he wouldn't exactly have been understandable.

Having vowed to pay whatever it would cost to keep their snake-man alive meant Mauricio was fully accepting that this was the last time he would be able to help his friends, but it didn't make the looming split any easier.

"I have to take Mauricio with me, Nojan." Continued Cherep in their closest shared language once Nahum returned leading their cook and 'little person' Lothar in tow. "It's actually pretty impressive he knew of his ability and yet remained free and clear as long as he did without knowing how to avoid those that want him for that ability, probably helped along because those… groups don't really like sharing information. Leaving him around here to leave with you all will… just start that either intentionally or not. He might not get caught here, but almost anywhere in the coming stops he'll be cornered as rumor and hearsay outstrips what you can realistically outpace and that's it for him."

"How are you not risking what he does?" Demanded their most outspoken member shortly, hands on both hips. "From the sounds of things, you share the ability and as do your sisters. Yet while they are you're not."

"They were pretty much involved before it became known we were, and they kept me out of it." Shrugging, the stuntman pushed himself off the roof of the vehicle to land heavily on the ground next to her. "It was mainly luck, and the fact my foster family enabled it, that I'm not also trapped in something I don't want to do. I can't do for him what they did for me, I don't have the reputation or the ability to hide it behind something or someone else. I have a plan to keep me out of it, and that involves getting the reputation and spotlight being a minor or greater celebrity will give. I can hide Mauricio in that, maybe. And this is assuming everything goes perfectly."

"My… dear friend… could I just not use the ice mirrors?" Tried the Spaniard hesitantly, anticipating the negative the Cloud Flame user gave with a shake of his head.

"There are ways around admitting what one of us are, and I don't know how just that it is possible. You already used it, noticeably, and the news that one of your type have given these people the slip will spread and make you more 'noticeable'. It's more than likely someone will trace that back to your group, and then... well..." Cherep trailed off a bit uncomfortably, looking between the five that had remained to try and help Aziz. "Even if you stop, and I highly suggest you do so, it's already too late on that end. Look, it's not forever. Or rather... Mauricio needs to be seen elsewhere to keep the rest of you safe. Seen somewhere too public, and too noticeable, for him to disappear without a furor raised over it. That kind of thing is really off-putting for those we're trying to duck, eventually they'll write him off as a loss instead of try risking the attention for him."

"Where?" Asked Lothar, distracted from poking more of the bowl of soup into their snake-man's hands because the one thing he actually agreed with the nurse about was keeping the man fed with hearty soups while he was still ill. "Not many like sideshows, stuntman. Worse yet, few like actually paying attention to the workers of a freak-show."

"I've got a world tour as a stuntman next year." With a half-bow to the dwarf, the Russian cracked a slightly wry smirk. "As Skull de Mort, the Immortal Stuntman. A 'manager' or some kind of press agent isn't entirely out of the question, but I can't swing a whole group on my lonesome just yet. Give
Nojan pulled on her beard for a long moment. "I would highly recommend you set him up as a press man. Mauricio is horrible with funds, but he can spin a pretty tale."

Said Rain squawked with offended dignity, which had their witchdoctor actually give a few brassy chuckles.

"You do." Aziz finally spoke up, a touch softly for even if the nurse was gone her brother was still slightly unknown for all the aide he had given them. "Better stick with what you're good at, Ciceron."

Drawing himself up in said offended dignity, the magician sniffed and gave a flourishing turn to where his things were already assembled for him to leave.

"You guys can take the car, try and catch up with your fellows if you have to or a new group to travel with if you can. I've got another way out." Cherep informed the rest of his troupe easily, patting the stripped ambulance a few times before heavy boot falls started up. "Remember, you bought it this way and if you get pulled over you don't know where it came from before that. The alterations I did should last a few years yet, until someone actually runs the plates and vin number to realize they don't match up. Don't sell it or get it fixed when it breaks down, just scrap it when you're done getting to where you're going."

"...are we ever going to see you two again? I mean in person, not on billboards or advertisements."

There was a pause before the Russian joined him near the broken opening his elder sister used to leave the section of the slums as well. "...it's possible. There isn't any kind of... sanctuary place for those like us, so it'll probably have to be glancing things in-between other events. Or at least... there isn't one yet."

Mauricio peered over a shoulder, but Cherep was already shaking his head.

"I don't mean to get your hopes up. If that ever comes to be, it'll be dangerous and deadly and all sorts of difficult to keep as a sanctuary. But... it might be possible. Until then, however..."

Nojan smiled wryly. "Take care, Mauricio."
Chapter 89

(Tuesday the 4th of November, 1969. Wo Hop To Triad Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Duyi Zhōng eyed the massive heap of household goods and random personal effects sitting in the open courtyard of his headquarters. "…Miss… Galina? Might I ask what… all this is?"

Half the improbable pile somehow transferred to his front lawn without becoming apparent to anyone before this very moment looked to be general furniture, a few light fixtures, a detached stone sink of all things, at least three Western-styled beds with the covers still attached, and… what had to be the contents of at least three if not more armoires owned by ladies of questionable virtue stacked on top of the less questionable personal clothing and trinkets of what seemed to be more than fifty other individuals.

"We kind of don't have anywhere to put it all right now." The neatly put together Soviet Lightning woman informed him pleasantly, as if it was really just a small matter of logistical issues and not the off-loading of what seemed to be several thieves' worth of work in looting their target to the bedrock for anything which could be sold off for even a pittance. "We had intended to get a shipping container or something, but given our current… difficulties, we decided to see if you would like to ransom it all back to our… ah, victims, before we sold it all off for what would likely be a fraction of whatever it's worth to intermediaries."

"…do I want to know how you managed this?"

"Oh, it was very educational." Galina insisted brightly for him, glancing backwards and dropping the smirk for a scowl. "Wasn't it, Mihajlo?"

One of the young men behind her shuffled slightly in place but didn't respond.

With a huff, the brunette turned back to him and picked up that sly smirk again. "If you rather not pick through it, we can always sell it ourselves…? If someone wouldn't mind pointing out the nearest local fence for us, that is."

"I think… I will not mind handling the ransoming part of your efforts. However much it all amounts to that you have not already made away with." Mused the Mountain Master of the Wo Hop To Triad thoughtfully as he eyed the entire eclectic collection, as this was a lot better than he had feared when their Storm-Cloud leader suddenly went missing as she had. "I wasn't impressed with the attacks against our picked hostage at all myself, however… interesting it was to watch the inevitable fallout."

"We really only started things, Sonya and her Mists took care of the rest when we inevitably got 'caught' at it." With a dismissive shrug, the instructor of the Soviet Lightnings glanced back over her line of students then past Zhōng's form to Sōng Mingxia and the old martial arts master Yazou. "We all have an afternoon flight out, so ensure you both have everything packed before noon. I'll be back to pick you two up in a few hours."

"Already?" Asked the young Rain, startled.

"No real point in lingering anymore, we've done what we were after and your paperwork can always catch up later," Galina's green eyes fell to the generally sulky child in her arms. "…I'm not sure what you should do with the kid, Sonya's half torn on just nabbing him to take along herself."
"Let us not do that." Interjected Duyi wryly, smoothing fingers up one side of his jawline. "The child has a mother seeking to reclaim her child yet."

"Hmm... you do realize, since you invited her to take care of him, she's going to repeatedly return just to ensure the kid's doing fine, right?"

...served the idiots that would not listen to him right and would keep the woman with the semi-rare Flame type interested in his homeland for at least another decade or so. "I see no reason to object to such a thing. When is Miss Bazanova returning Fong?"

"He's refusing to stop following her until he gets to grip with the 'rogue' element being a pain in the ass, what's his face... the Lightning from the tournament that's been trying to pick a fight with him?"

Not any time soon, then.

(ooo000000)

(Tuesday the 4th of November, 1969 continued. Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"It's basically the conservation of momentum and effort." Sonya pointed out to her currently slightly clingy ex-bed mate blandly, accepting her half of 'breakfast' with a bemused huff. "Since he's committed to this now and cut off from anything smacking of 'official' support with it if your 'Mountain Master' has been able to register a complaint or something, I'm actually easier to go after than your little sister with what support he has at hand or can influence."

Fong very pointedly looked down the five stories where the morning traffic clogged street-level of Hong Kong lingered below their feet, seating himself in a neat tailor fashion to eat what would be his morning meal with her. On a rooftop, because she hadn't felt like risking getting a meal interrupted by the police or the men hunting her this early in the morning or anything else along those lines.

Besides which, the Hong Kong police had more than enough work to do scraping the 'Three Suns Gang' off the various walls and floors Sonya had thrown them once they caught on to the robbery in progress last night.

Random naked men tied up or otherwise contained in various positions and/or locations unable to extract themselves without either more embarrassment or property damage made for very stressed policemen. Especially when obvious if non-related Triad members kept running into them trying to find a tiny blonde thief none of the police had noticed anywhere near their 'crime scenes'. Anna hadn't even needed to help, aside getting her in place before Galina's students got too roughed up.

It was also easier to hold a conversation at normal tones this high up without having to resort to shouting over the noise of the opening markets and pedestrian traffic.

"...just because it means I can run around as I want now actually has little to do with it."

"I implied nothing of the sort."

"You did by looking, asshole."

The Storm took the supposed 'high road', opting to just bite into his food instead of continuing the conversation.

Sonya then actually noticed he hadn't got them yet more steamed buns, rather some kind of pan-fried dumpling instead. Now even more bemused, she nibbled the half-fried pastry experimentally.
Frankly, she had way too much of China's variant of 'finger foods' to last her a while. Then again, getting a bowl of something easily spilled or a plate of something heavier than this would not really do much for their 'on the run' thing.

"The Mirror Lady will inform us when Galina's got Mingxia out of the country, which will be sign I'll be safe to leave myself. Then you can do whatever you want to your little Lightning issue."

"It's not my-"

"Fong, I told you to do something about him."

Frowning, likely at the subject matter rather than the interruption because he had gotten used to her doing so rather quickly, the martial artist huffed a sigh and turned to her instead of eating while looking out over the streets below. "Would doing anything have prevented this? We were not allowed to do any fighting outside the official bouts without severe consequences I had thought neither of us was willing to risk."

"Trying to convince a Lightning that what they want can't be obtained isn't easy but staving them off a few days is entirely possible." Pointed out the thief flatly with her nibbled upon dumpling to help with the pointing. "I've done it, with an even more powerful Lightning than your current irritant."

Fong bit her dumpling in half, going back to his Stormy sulking thing with an irritable huff.

Sonya tossed that one over her shoulder, flatly glaring at his profile. "What would you have done had he gotten his hands on Mingxia as he probably planned? You're aware he's trying to wrench your 'Storm nature' around until you behave as badly as he is or worse, right? That way he gets what he wants, and you might've ended up in as much trouble as he is now. Which, with Lightnings, would've made it worth it for him."

"I am aware, Sonya."

"It's not the first time someone else has tried to use my 'Cloud nature' against me, and if it's the first time someone's trying to use your own against you I'll stop stealing for a living."

She didn't get an answer this time.

Rolling her eyes, she actually started making progress in bolting down at least some of her 'breakfast' before they had to move yet again. She didn't get more than a third of the way through before her copy of Anna's pet spider started creeping down her back in response to someone getting closer than they should.

Immolating the rest of her snack with her own Storm Flames, the thief rocked back up to her feet and turned to eye the nearby buildings for which route to take to leave their little perch. "So, any suggestion for where to go next?"

"Are you insisting to continue your 'tourist' sightseeing instead of keep to heavily populated areas?"

"The point is to keep the Lightning on my case, not for him to eventually decide it would be easier to try to corner Mingxia before Galina can arrange for her extraction. Keeping things just on the side of 'risky' helps with that."

"…there is the Wong Tai Sin Temple? Several temples that we could visit." Offered the martial artist reluctantly, rising to his own feet and taking care of his own papery basket of leftover grease the same way she rid herself of her own 'leftovers'. "Or we could leave Hong Kong island itself and see what the other islands have to offer in order to amuse you."
Sonya rolled her eyes hard enough for it to hurt. "Are you really complaining about me refraining from sinking half the nearby islands into the sea? This is all sea level, I start knocking down buildings and parts of it might start flooding."

"Well, no... but..." He puzzled over if it would be worth it to continue that part of the conversation or not, then merely sighed heavily as he turned to her. "...there are a few markets still open to this day, however they are shallow echoes of what they once were. Right now is not the best time to gain an appreciation of Hong Kong as a city."

"Obviously not, but right now is all I have and am willing to spend for even a general idea." Pointed out the Russian a touch sarcastically, ignoring the doorway behind them that tried to bang open only to be foiled by the Mist Flame generated spider webbing holding the roof access shut. "When things get less... politically back-ass-wards I might try again, but for now this is it."

Fong damn near outright sulked for a long moment.

She palmed her face in exasperation.

Sleep deprivation and Storms didn't really mix all that well in the first place, making the already normally high-strung types become even more so and those with some kind of grip on their fanatical habits loosen them to something approaching their flightier fellows. Chipped on top of a Cloud's disinclination to follow 'expected' patterns and get manipulated into doing something quite like shooting herself in the foot, and it made Sonya into a contrary Russian with a large desire to avoid dealing with those she didn't have to right now.

He wasn't exactly someone she needed to deal with, he was just along because and keeping from taking out that irritability on him was somewhat difficult to keep in mind.

With Fong sleep deprivation just burned through his cheerful serenity bullshit to leave behind the very ornery martial artist that entirely would pick a fight with just about anyone, so he at least had something to punch repeatedly in the face for the stress relief. He was equally trying to keep it in mind and not take out his ill humors on her, but then again they were both Storms.

On the other hand with Lightnings, especially the type one 'Lu Shui' of the Golden Rascal Dragons seemed to be, sleep deprivation made them even more likely to fall into 'tunnel vision' to the point they were likely to get themselves killed by doing something stupidly reckless. Tricking one into a nearly mindless manhunt that could stretch even longer than twenty-four hours had probably reduced that usually wide if not lingering attention span their type was known for into a blinding narrow focus that did not give much room for anything beyond the short term.

It also just meant it was a waiting game now.

The Storm she was with might not really appreciate the manipulations to counter what was tried against her, as he wanted to beat the snot out of the Lightning himself. However, if Sonya was to avoid dealing out mass property damage trying to fight an assassin more than likely a touch more skilled than she could ever hope to be at the moment, it was either this keep-away game or letting herself get 'kidnapped' for whatever the fuck was supposed to be going on.

She really did not feel like being held hostage again.

The door behind them suddenly started getting rather insistent about being opened causing the thief to regard it warily for a moment, wondering how strong a Mist copy of Pavuchky's web strands could be. "...we should probably leave the city behind. While it won't be our fault if Lu does something... visible, cleaning up his mess will be."
Fong tisked, examining each of the buildings near them and the few streets he could see from here. "Then follow me, Sonya."

He dropped the story needed to get to the lower roof section of this split-level thing, or maybe the lower roof of a building built right next to this one, causing her to huff disgustedly and scramble to keep up.

At least she was getting a good idea of what was humanly realistic to survive when it came to drops from certain heights, even if the Storm had decided to take the fact she could jump up inhuman heights as some kind of personal affront to his skills.

"Is there a 'walled city' somewhere nearby?"

Pausing on the lip of the next rooftop, her guide glanced back at her in confusion. "A what?"

"No? Maybe I'm mixing that up with something else…"

Maybe it was more something in Singapore or Korea than something in China?

What was she trying to remember?

Whatever it was, she could ponder it later.

It didn’t take them more than fifteen minutes to descend from the rooftop perch she had paused at and walking through busy streets being stalked by a highly intent and really frustrated Lightning was a… experience she could probably do without. Sonya ended up squished almost into Fong's side when they caught some kind of trolley thing to leave downtown, as it was packed with probably more people than what it was rated safe to move at any one time.

It was nice to be moving and all, as far or as long as she wanted, but the press of early morning Hong Kong was a bit… annoying. Admittedly she was starting to find damn near everything annoying, but at least the Lightning asshole had to give miss to their trolley car because he got to the half-assed 'station' thing a touch too late.

Which at least meant getting off wouldn't be a matter of dodging electric green razor death.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 4th of November, 1969 continued. Hong Kong International Airport, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

"How, exactly, do you see getting us through customs without passports?" Yaozu inquired blandly of the 'Lightning' personal assistant of his new… patron.

"Are you sure Miss Sonya will not be mad we left young Cai to be returned to his mother?" Mingxia asked on the heels of his own statement, sounding rather worried indeed.

Galina rolled her green eyes at the both of them, watching the rest of her various students getting processed through security for a flight bound outside of the People's Republic. "Such faith, the both of you. No, Sonya will not be mad we left the brat for his mom. She in fact was half skeptical of taking the brat because of that very issue. She might be annoyed she'd have to come back if she wanted him for anything, but that's it. And you, old man, you have passports."

Under his utterly unconvinced eye, because it took longer than just a handful of days to apply for and receive such things no matter how much one would pay out in a bribe, the brunette woman suddenly
fanned a pair of matching booklets under his nose.

Which she had not been holding prior to their sudden existence nearly in his face and seemed suspiciously shiny. The red covers had not one crease, and the gold lettering seemed freshly pressed. Flipping one of the booklets open had Yaozu confronted with young Mingxia's personal details.

Sliding that one closed and giving it to the girl at his side, the martial arts master warily inspected his and lowered his tone so only the two females near him would hear. "...it's fake."

"Of course it is. It's a professionally done such, which will be retroactively handled as we are on a bit of a time crunch." Scoffed the woman, recounting heads to ensure she hadn't lost one or two of her students while they were getting processed to leave the country. "Do you really expect the people we just left to do everything like everyone else?"

Well... he'd have a lot less issues if the criminal ranks would just behave themselves like everyone else. Then again, the subject he taught was currently outlawed and even his own profession was borderline illegal at the moment. Which was partially the reason why Fēng had returned for him, to get him something not illegal to do with the rest of his life.

Yaozu was not often forced to confront his own hypocrisy, and he was finding it to be a bit vexing.

He respected the rules, the tenets and laws of his native land and his masters before him. Of which one fundamental tenets of his lifestyle was integrity. To do what was right, even if one's actions could be judged or not. Bending even just that much, for his own life or for the life of his students, lied a slippery slope he did not really wish to contemplate.

Which he had to, now that he was very obviously taking part in something illegal and yet...

Obviously, the right thing to do according to his past masters and the rules he had lived by up to these uncertain days was to admit the entire group of Russians were not merely students on some sightseeing trip. That they were all mainly thieves and that the paperwork they were in the process of submitting was forged at best if not outright flimsy fakes.

...that would likely get the entire gaggle of children, and none of them were remotely mature enough to be considered young adults aside the Lightning woman to his immediate right, killed if not imprisoned in something quite like a torture cell or prison camp.

How to resolve one's personal integrity and taking advantage of illegal behavior?

Which... he was only illegal for reasoning he did not support. Yet that did not change the laws of his native land outlawing martial arts and the instruction of. Yaozu was illegally going to teach more of his art to students, admittedly in a different country to evade that law breaking by the technicality of not being illegal there.

He should've spoken to Fong more. His former student had obviously somehow settled the issue in a specific way if the younger man seemed so at peace with his new internal conflict.

Handing the not-so-obviously forged passport over with his paperwork detailing his legal residency of China to the white gloved customs agent, Yaozu folded his hands behind his back while they were eyed equally as hard as the rest of the group.

Only with a highly suspicious dark blue gleam to this agent's normally black eyes.

More Mist-managing, he could assume.
The young Mist boy had not entirely left even if he was not obviously present, as far as he could tell. Which was actually highly doubtful, he did not have a lot of exposure to everything a 'Mist' could do or everything they could affect.

If the child could affect another while entirely removed from a situation was something he did not entirely know of. At the moment, ruling it out would do him no favors in his goal of learning how to not be manipulated against his will by these 'Dying Will Flame users'.

Accepting his paperwork back with a straight face, Yazou tucked the documents away into a sleeve while Mingxia offered her own copies for verification. "When is Bazanova returning?"

"Whenever she can. Either she'll catch the flight with us, or she'll meet us when we land there."

...somehow evading not having her personal effects which included her own passport and identification, and some various volumes of different texts.

How?

Half the reason their 'aims' were delayed so long was to allow the time for him and the young Rain Sōng sibling time for their paperwork to be processed legally, but apparently that was not a barrier to these kinds of people. Did that mean there were other ways to evade customs of a certain country than to just forge the paperwork one required?

(Wednesday the 5th of November, 1969. Thieves' Guild Hall, Mafia Land.)

The next Storm Arcobaleno and what was possibly one half of the next Cloud Arcobalenos were bickering not entirely under their breath in the middle of a line for some sort of. Just… in the open, utterly unconcerned by anyone they might be inconveniencing, and standing in line like just about any other average criminal types would to have their work processed here.

Luce could only blink at the sudden and surprising display she had not thought would ever occur in front of her before she formally met the individuals. An utterly banal event and seemingly one that just happens occasionally, long before that very fact would become something to notice or stare at instead of being annoyed by as it seemed most of those around the two felt about the situation.

Well, one was Sonya de Mort. Which explained what they were present to do on this island and in this building, apparently she was exchanging whatever contract she had been on for either confirmation she was done or for a new one.

That didn't entirely explain Fon's presence, although she was aware the free-lance Russian thief and the Triad's assassin did know each other before they would formally meet as the next 'Strongest of the Era'.

Apparently, she had not looked hard enough to know exactly how well. Assuming the fact would not be something she would be allowed to 'foresee' or otherwise know before she learned it after meeting them herself.

Admittedly, the Sky of the Giglio Nero had little idea how the internal workings of Mafia Land's contracted thieves got around to their work. Just that submitting a request for them to steal or otherwise locate certain items was something that could be done. Depending on who or for what the
contract Sonya was turning in was for, it might explain why an agent of the Chinese Triads was so obviously 'escorting' her about.

Aside foreseeing that this was the best route to have her heirloom tea set's cups replaced by within a reasonable amount of time, she hadn't been all that interested by what would happen this trip out of her famiglia's territory so long as it would not be lethal to anyone important to her. Apparently that had been a bit remiss of her, given the display going on.

Perfectly aware she was probably making the start of a scene by staring so much at the unexpected visages of her future co-workers, the Sky eventually pulled most of her attention to the greeting desk affair and the lady seated there awaiting her business. Being a Boss of a moderately sized criminal family did at least mean she didn't have to find her tongue while in the same room as some of the people she would be sacrificing in order to place her 'request', one of her bodyguards did it for her.

She kept the bulk of her attention on the process, mildly more interested now that she had the reminder shoved in her face of how the 'World's Greatest Thief' managed to get so far before others finally noticed she was such. However part of her attention, no matter how 'rude' or impolite it was from a Sky like herself to individuals she had no 'knowledge' of nor had been introduced to, was rooted on the world's most powerful Storm user speaking to the world's most powerful Cloud user's little sister and twinned Guardian Prospect.

…well, they were more arguing than speaking in anything approaching a calm manner.

Knowing how they would behave in another year and a half was one thing, to see them still smoothing out their relationship from what was gossiped to be a 'rocky' start was interesting. More than was probably safe, Sonya's shoulders suddenly snapped taught and the woman swung a wildly annoyed purple glare around the lobby. "...son of a bitch, there's a Sky."

Fon blinked down at her blankly for the abrupt subject change. "What?"

"There's a Sky in the room." Repeated the thief in her native Russian, not entirely quietly but not pitched to carry all that far, narrowing her gaze in irritation and ignoring everyone either scrambling out of her sight or torn between getting closer to hear what she was saying about a Sky. "I hate the feeling they give me, when they're being Skies and not just people."

Luce turned her gaze back to the process of her paperwork being accepted before the Russian locked eyes with her, thoughtful. Preventing any of her bodyguards from going after the thief in some suicidal attempt to 'object' to the blunt announcement of her presence, and therefore confirming that there was a Sky present to those that had never noticed the pull of one before. All of whom would probably attempt something equally suicidal if she reacted at all to the title to give away she was indeed a Sky.

As she had no intention of speaking with or interacting with the World's Greatest Martial Artist nor the World's Greatest Thief just yet, it was likely she had skipped over foreseeing this event as it was admittedly so minor it wasn't even worth it to speak of later on when they became the legends they needed to be.

Admittedly, there was a kind of 'air' a Sky could give off they all pretty much learned to do instinctively. A magnetic pull of sorts, to remind all those in the vicinity to behave or disappoint and irritate the Sky observing. With two of the World's Strongest in the room with her and a few handfuls of non-Flame using criminals with a dotting of other types about, she had been trying to nudge the two tired and stressed looking most powerful Flame users in the world to ensure things wouldn't end up in a surprise spar that could destroy half or more of the building they were in.
Luce had actually never really thought what it would be like to be a 'free' Element on the other end of such a pull… and she was the 'Strongest' Sky user alive, so it was likely even worse for someone that had no other Sky's influence to help center themselves. To the point even a half-blind Flame user such as one half of a Dual Guardian Prospect could feel it halfway across a wide lobby.

No one had ever complained in her hearing before, which… actually probably didn't mean it was a unique stance of the subject the brutally blunt thief had to herself as the issue might just be no one wanting to annoy her further by objecting to her methods.

Well… this would explain some of the sheepish feeling she would have upon 'formally' meeting the woman for the 'first' time. She had thought it was about Reborn and their shared godchild's situation after she stabbed them all in the back, not something more unrelated to their situation as this.

Likely, the inevitable conclusion she could then seek out for confirmation would support the Russian's words rather than reassurance to herself there wasn't anything too objectionable to the technique.

How would she confirm such an observation?

The only Skies she could ask and not be forced to explain every detail of why she would want to know was the Vongola Skies. However, simply dropping in on either the Eighth or Ninth Skies of Vongola was something she was not prepared to do just yet and Tyr was… not really a sociable one. She could try to attend next year's various Balls, but the amount of interest current rumors was generating in any hoping to 'snag' themselves a Sky like herself would make everything but the Christmas Ball this year a touch too risky.

She'd be somewhat busy or pregnant next year, and thus venturing out of her territory for anything but what was required to keep the future on track was distasteful. The Giglio Nero Sky would still be pregnant by the time the World's Greatest and Strongest of the Era were gathered up, but she kind of had to be otherwise she'd get Aria's birth out of the way early.

If Sonya didn't attend this year's Vongola Christmas Ball, then Luce couldn't either. Nono Vongola would also never track down the assailters for his own revenge if so distracted by a visiting allied and unattached Sky of her quality being remotely nearby and under his guard, again assuming the Soviet Storm-Cloud wasn't present to do her aspect's nominal 'guarding' for him however unwillingly.

Fixated Skies pulling hard on their Lightning and Mist aspects were a trial to deal with, and the Eighth Sky of the Giglio Nero famiglia had really more issues to bother with than just a single murder among the many that occurred around them.

If Luce did not confirm her attendance before the same month the Ball was to be held upon, it would be frightfully rude of her… or she could somehow get word to Ottavia Vongola that she would be attending just without confirming anything 'officially' for 'security reasons'. Too much bother and fuss over a social event would drive off the Storm-Cloud from attending herself, but if the Russian didn't know another Sky would be added to the various Flame users Nono generally had attending his social events…

This was assuming Sonya would be attending herself at all, and the future would not be one of the possible misses given for her own reasons.

Luce sighed, aware she had been neglecting her immediate future for the distant possibilities so beyond her. Which, after the issue she had to seek the World's Greatest Hitman and Strongest Sun user's help for solving as she would fail trying to do so herself in time… really was not something
she should still be doing.

How many times did she need to be confronted by it before she learned her lesson?

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 5th of November, 1969 continued. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

"You… what?"

"Got shot in the stomach. Twice." Sonya repeated in her face as if that was not shocking nor concerning, seemingly unbothered by the nurse gaping at her. "And now I have these pangs of pain when I move a touch too fast, I can't decide if they were healed wrong or if it's something else."

Tasty Muscles gave her a mildly embarrassed smile for glaring at him. "I had requested your little sister because I did not believe the situation was safe."

Tatiana jabbed a fingertip into those mouthwatering muscles. "I am not impressed. Out, Nya's got to strip for the doc."

The Chinese Triad member outright bolted the minute 'stripping' was mentioned, which did indeed get him out of the hospital examination room's doors before the thief could decide to get a head start on any stripping required. Interesting reaction she very much wanted the story behind, but right now it was related to 'eventually' than 'right now'.

"…huh. I've been trying to do that for a whole day now." Remarked her little sister idly, tugging her weird and utterly unflattering bag of a charcoal grey jacket off and just letting it drop to the floor dismissively.

"Seriously, Nya. How the hell did you get shot in the stomach?"

"By a gun." Deadpanned the thief flatly. "It, the tournament thingy I was held hostage for, was invaded in the end. They got most of the way through it, though…"

"Hooray." Bit back the Sun Flame nurse, kicking up the jacket and getting her tank top actually handed over as she progressed in the stripping. "Can I request you avoid any further 'hostage' contracts? This is…"

"It would've been a young, slightly just preteen, Rain girl if not me. His little sister, in fact."

Okay, Fong had a very good reason. That didn't quite take Tatiana's irritation down to just a mild level rather than 'I want to shoot him' levels.

"Your slacks as well, little sister. Then the papery gown. I'll get the doc."

Sonya's merely considering look probably meant the hospital gown would not in fact be worn by the time Kappel could be located to take a look at her abused guts, but Tatiana honestly didn't care. There were only so many times you could be shocked by her utter disinclination to behave 'modestly' in mixed company before you got used to it. If her baby sister wanted to be naked aside her underclothing with or without boots, she was perfectly entitled to be so.

It wasn't like there were 'decency' laws here she had to obey.

Huffing with a bit of amusement, she left her little sister to wiggling out of her equally drab slacks without removing her boots to get the emergency room's front desk to page the only doctor that had
the balls to agree to be on call if the only Cloud resident of Mafia Land ever required their services.

Doctor Kappel had been utterly unimpressed that such a thing actually required paperwork absolving the hospital of liability in the eventuality the Cloud decided the pain was just too much and splattered him across the floor or something. Admittedly Tatiana hadn't been at all impressed either, but she did at least know some of why Sonya kept getting slighted like that.

They would… probably require more than just x-rays, depending on what would show up on them. Maybe a diagnostic sonogram?

Tatiana going to the obstetrician wing to borrow something like ultrasound equipment for however long would make waves of rumors… especially as Fong had been so stupid to 'escort' her baby sister in to the emergency room.

…eh. Served her baby sister right for this stupid shit.

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 5th of November, 1969 continued. Saint Julian’s Hospital, Mafia Land.)

"You have a cyst."

…the fuck?

"How?" Demanded Sonya shortly, irritated by the announcement.

"Who knows. It's fully present, if on the small side, for it to have been something you gained in recent weeks. This isn't the first time we've inspected your abdominal region, so how it got there without notice is… something." Kappel deadpanned shortly back, jabbing the gel-covered ultrasound wand harder into her sensitive guts and ignoring the wince such an action elected. "As you reported various Suns checked over the bullet holes, one or two might not have been nearly as well trained as Nurse Primakova… ah, you in fact have more than one cyst. Three, in fact. Hepatic, liver if you must, cysts."

Disturbed slightly and unable to decide if it was maliciously caused or not, the thief glanced at her very utterly blanked faced sister. Then back to the doctor examining his ultrasound screen as he studied her current affliction. "So… now what?"

There had to be a fair number of Chinese Suns that had decided to dislike her very existence given what she had been up to the last two weeks, and at least three that might not have warm or fuzzy feelings about Russians had the access to her enough to allow sabotage. Assuming Huang held a very good poker face and didn't appreciate the bribe of tea she got him for bothering him so much by trying to break Fong.

Either just naturally occurring, Sun induced, or a side effect of Storm Flames melting bullets in her guts then things being healed up around them. It did not help her decide if she was pissed off or not, but probably would mean she'd start avoiding Suns to heal her if she didn't know their allegiances.

"You require surgery if these aren't benign." Advised the doctor nearly absently, shifting the utensil in his hand yet again and earning yet another wince he seemed mildly annoyed by. "You said it was painful? What activities cause pain? On a scale of one to ten, how painful?"

"…that is an utterly stupid scale, what is the range supposed to even be?" Announced the Storm-Cloud flatly, trying to think of how such a scale should be rated in order to not lie to her physician. Which, she was pretty sure, was a bad idea all around. "If breaking my foot was a ten, then these
are... threes. I guess. It is not entirely just movement or the odd contortion, sometimes laying on my stomach might cause pangs which linger, which are annoying and not entirely something I can keep in mind before I cause them in my line of work."

"...what if being shot is the 'ten', Miss Bazanova?"

"Then a one."

"One should be a minor injury like a papercut."

"Thereabouts, sure. Unless you poke them, which would end up being a bit more of a two."

Kappel stared at her skeptically, then cocked a dark brow over his half-moon spectacles perched half off his hooked nose. "And then applying the same standard of 'shot' being the 'ten', what is 'breaking a bone' range as?"

Sonya thought about it. "A six?"

The dour German doctor eventually blinked at her after another long moment of staring without inflection, then glanced at the nurse standing by for anything he might need. "This was contractual injury-issue, correct?"

"Yes, doctor."

"Right," sniffing, the man started packing away his tools and handing them over for Tatiana to start cleaning them up, "then do finally finish changing into the hospital gown, Miss Bazanova. I'll have you slated for surgery as soon as I can, might as well remove them if they are causing you noticeable pain. Perhaps this afternoon even if I have to conduct it myself. This is assuming if you can keep from immolating the anesthesia from your bloodstream."

"I have been able to get myself tipsy again, I think it will not be an issue anymore as long as I concentrate." Admitted the Storm-Cloud slowly, not really at the point she was supremely confident she could do that but not really having enough of a point to object because it was entirely possible she could.

Hopefully once she was out of it she would not unconsciously try to clear her system of anything foreign.

"Well then, with your own sister's assistance as I don't think I can stop her, you'll be out of here before nightfall and free to continue your life as it is." Kappel informed her blandly, rising and kicking his rolling stool back to the far wall to be out of his way and somewhat near where he pulled it over from. "Have you found any new allergies, concerns, and other injuries to report before I go?"

"...not as far as I am aware." She offered after a beat.

Kappel took her at her word, snagging a clipboard they were keeping track of her 'hospital bill' on so the island could reimburse her once she lived through it on his way out to order her surgery to rid herself of the nagging pangs in her guts.

"And I can't even yell at you for letting unknown Suns take a look at you, because gunshot wounds. In the gut." Deadpanned Tatiana in a very offended tone, palming her face now she didn't have to be professional. "Just... why?"

"...Avdotya did not see 'cysts' when she took a look..."
"Nya, honey... the liver is literally a dark blood-red organ which may or may not have been covered in blood when Avdotya checked you over. If she had seen anything at all just peering at the hopefully closed skin and not... ya know... open gunshot wounds...?"

"It wasn't entirely healed after that first Sun checked me out." Admitted the thief a bit wryly, taking a moment to adjust to the pain instead of immediately moving around and probably making the pangs in her gut worse. "I was not the only one that needed healing, and while the deep tissue was knitted somewhat the skin was left open for a few hours."

Tatiana smoothed a palm over her mouth, giving her little sister an utterly flat look over what was likely a scowl.

Even with the 're'-emergence of Dying Will Flame users all over the world, more for certain countries than others honestly, the odds that Sonya could've found a competent and fully trained Sun for healing was still pretty remote while out and about in the world. Setting the cyst issue aside, as it was possibly not entirely a malicious bit of sabotage in nature and just an accident or unintentional, all in all it was mostly just naturally happenstance she needed a bit of help right now.

...mostly.

"...oh, and I broke my leg. But now it is not broken." Hastening beyond that point, because the redhead looked perfectly willing to start yelling as she had just told the doctor that there weren’t any injuries to report, she picked up the papery gown thing she had not entirely gotten on and yet had to remove anyways so Kappel could get at her stomach. "I also have nineteen heists done for the island, a handful more this month and then we'll be set to apply for an apartment together."

The Sun visibly thought about it, not remotely looking happy as she slowly got on the issue of cleaning up the ultrasound equipment. "Okay. I'm healing that damn leg the minute you're done in here. Aside that, if you want to experiment with the Cloud Voodoo... I'm demanding you do so in a clinical test. Not a recorded one if that's an issue, and it might be, so I'll help you avoid that because I understand why, but no broken legs."

"...it's how he figured out what he was doing?"

"And that's fucking wretched, but there's safer ways to learn the same thing." Tatiana refuted irritably, waving a gel covered wand of sound generation under her nose. "We'll have, what? A month of time before you go visit bambino? Part of that should be getting you through your three years of missing immunizations, but we can also do a bit of clinical testing of Cloud-abilities."

...did the inclusion of a nurse on stand-by make cutting herself to figure out how to mimic Cherep's undying skill more or less of a 'self-harm' issue?

Sonya wasn't entirely sure, and frankly with how many issues she might have already and was likely in the process of developing she really didn't need a new one. Her sense of how much pain was too much was already a touch wonky, she didn't need Kappel staring at her oddly to realize it.

Then again, few had the experience of being shanked in a dark alleyway then actually dying from the shock and blood loss behind them. Kind of put things into a strange perspective once you've lived, or not, through such things.

"Are you going to be assisting with my surgery?" Questioned the younger Russian, accepting some kind of alcohol-based wipe for the gel stuck to her stomach and appreciating Tatiana didn't try to do it herself after so much touching by the doctor. "Or can I ask you to pass on a message?"
"Maybe. He's been bugging me to spend some time in a surgery theater recently. It'll be a few hours, at least. Even if Kappel gets you a late afternoon surgery slot." With a shrug, the nurse hip-bumped the cart the ultrasound equipment was set in to so it would roll to the door of the exam room. "Why?"

"Can you take a message to my Lackey for me? I didn't manage to check in with him without Fong breathing down my neck."

"Hmm?"

"Tell him to get on the housing issue, now. I'm going to be living with you... mainly when the brat doesn't need me at hand, but Galina and Peter and the rest of the minions I have somehow acquired need someplace to live."

...Galina might appreciate an immediate target to fuss towards, Mingxia would need a list of law schools once a level of education was figured out for her, she should at least ask Yaozu if Russia was where he wanted to practice his martial arts or if he would be interested in moving farther to Italy with them, Scruffy might've actually gotten something else done she needed to keep hidden done, Anna should probably have a permanent 'lair' to occupy with her pet spider, and...

How the hell did she end up with so many people?

Furthermore, why the fuck was she intending to cluck after them?

Most were fully grown and did not need some kind of asshole-ish young woman poking her nose into their business. However much she could probably solve their issues or keep an eye out for their safety.

...did Galina grab Ballsy Toddler Boy or was the kid left behind for his mom or something?

Sonya blinked at the ceiling a few times, scowling as she basically ran in mental circles for a while trying to untangle her thoughts from her bewildering sudden social impulses to tend to a flock of dependents she swore she didn't have not too long ago.

If the Lightning had left the kid in China, she'd be visiting Fong's home country again a lot sooner than she had figured on. At least it wasn't a Shamal issue... yet.

The Storm-Cloud would have to watch herself around that, so it wouldn't turn into a new young son-type. Even if the kid didn't have a mother anymore, frankly she had way too much to do for the prospect of adding yet another child to her 'household' to be palpable.

...and given Shamal had been not impressed by her baby brother, a toddler aged kid would not qualify for that 'baby brother' he kept demanding.

"Nya? Everything okay?"

"...how the fuck did I end up with an entourage?"

"You're reliable. And competent. The price of being so is acquiring others that want you to be reliable and competent in looking after them. Or at least to keep an eye on them so others don't take advantage or otherwise inconvenience them." Tatiana announced cheerfully, probably sadistically taking enjoyment out of her exasperation and current irritation. The nurse opened the examination room's door to push the borrowed equipment out and return it to wherever she had gotten it from, glancing back at her before she left the room fully. "Might've been a bit too good there, little sister."

The thief snorted as she was left alone to basically wait for others to have the time to bother with her
current 'injury'.

With her thoughts. That didn't exactly help her any right now.

…fuck.

(Friday the 7th of November, 1969. Ottavia Vongola's Tea Parlor, the Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"I take it this is Bazanova's young Lackey Bjørn, Nilda?"

The Icelandic teenager didn't frown, although it was a near thing to obey Viper's non-expression impulses and not his natural inclination to shift a bit warily under the eye of the elderly Sky woman, as he was led to a rather sedately appointed lounge-affair kind of room within a building he had no intents to visit yet again in a part of the country he had been avoiding.

This whole 'meeting' stank a bit of meddling, and his Lady would not be pleased if so. She had advised him to avoid entangling himself in Vongola affairs after her surgery and before he left Mafia Land, and he was pretty sure this was 'involving himself' at the least.

Not even the wide-open windows letting in both sunlight and breezes, nor the random few in the room tending to their own various amusements while keeping a discreet eye on both the elderly lady and his own movements, put Bjørn off being suspicious as a matter of fact.

No one in Mafia Land had tried to risk a Cloud's retribution in return for messing with her handpicked assistant, but apparently that wasn't a universal thing the world over. Disappointing, but best to learn quickly than be surprised by the fact later on.

Having missed the expected and likely delivered confirmation the Rain lady that sought him out nearly the same day he arrived in her native country, the Lightning-Storm Lackey of a Soviet Storm-Cloud glanced from the elderly woman gazing expectantly at him to the silver haired Rain that would not take a 'I'm busy' as an answer.

As far as he was aware, he had done nothing wrong yet by visiting the country for such a civilian reason as sourcing properties his lady might like to purchase for them all to call home. Therefore, he should not be on the 'defensive' in this… interview. Even if he had no idea why he was 'invited' so insistently and escorted to this meeting with an armored car.

He had a couple guesses, as Sinclair was pretty transparent with how he got the estate listings he had handed over for Sonya to spend the money to acquire. Given how much his patron had blown off in aims of separating herself from her native syndicate, Bjørn could guess his lady would not be in any great rush to join up with a new one.

It was his first interaction with a Sky, however. He was still… somewhat… curious. Even if he knew this was probably a bad idea.

Daniella the Eighth Sky of the Vongola Famiglia was a surprisingly spry fifty-five-year-old woman, obviously more skilled in social interactions than the Icelandic could muster himself even with a generous amount of Mist aid. With a full complement of Guardians, and a few handfuls of other obvious Flame users that looked to her if couldn't be Guardians as she had a set of Elements lingering around her anyways. Some silver touched her dark hair, the flower tattoo under her eye
was a bit creased by just time and general age, and even if she was over the hill in terms of age for a criminal-type it did nothing to cut how sharp the previous war-time leader of Vongola's gaze was nor her straightly posed spine set in her red pantsuit outfit.

The elderly lady's smirk grew the longer the silence stretched on, instead of becoming annoyed the still standing Lackey was not playing her game. "You are delightfully so much like your patron, young man."

"She did save me." Björn dismissed blandly, stumbling a touch over the Italian he had to learn through Viper's ill-humored Mist Flames. A few months of time was not nearly enough to provide the linguistic mastery over the spoken word as much as he could read or understand it. "May I know why you have interfered with my Dama's orders for this... meeting? As far as I am aware, Ottavia Vongola, my duties have little to do with your syndicate as of right now."

The language was not one of the 'business languages' the Mist had deemed important for him to know, that arrangement had to come out of his own pocket and had been exorbitantly expensive. On the assumption of her godchild being Italian then knowing the native language might just help eventually, which did become truth as he thought it would be given enough time.

"Your lady Cloud moving into the region does cause a stir, no matter how discreetly you try to act." The Sky informed him pleasantly, fussing around with the tea service to fix herself something to drink. "A credit to you, I don't think anyone else has caught on whose behalf you work for just yet. I am just... a touch more interested in simple things these days. Which sometimes to turn out not so simple, sometimes."

...actually not tea, a coffee tray. He might've thought it was black tea on sight, but the scent rising off the steaming black liquid was unmistakably coffee and not something more sharply herbal.

Well... this was Italy.

"Given you are not only looking at castles but are in the middle of negotiations with a very... local service to match caretakers of a large estate home, I must express a tiny bit of interest. We do not allow just anyone to move in almost next door, mind you."

"As where I was before your... agent found me, I feel I should point out that where my Dama intends us to live for the next decade is a fair bit more north than your 'holdings'!" Countered Björn only a touch dryly, unable to stuff his hands into his pockets as he wanted because his tutor in finances was a slave driver about appearances. "Meaning you are not the neighbors we will be concerned with."

"The Cavallone Famiglia are our allies."

"Which would be a concern if I was looking to purchase an island off your west coast for my Dama only."

"As is the Cervello Organization."

"France it is, then. Not really all that disappointing, at least my Dama will like the beaches."

Throwing her head back the Sky laughed at him, ignoring how her Guardians bristled around her at his flat tone. "Oh dear, you are utterly alike to your patron in so many amusing ways. I am not objecting, young man. Indeed, if your ever so Cloudy lady intends to live and guard her minions in Italia we would be delighted to have her and you all. You just will have to put up with a bit of good-natured nosing about, especially as Dying Will Flame users relocating themselves so far away from their native lands is always an interesting happening. Especially ones that can establish their own
famiglia from the looks of things."

Three Lightnings, four Rains, at least two if not more Suns. One Storm, equally so only one Cloud. He couldn't spot the Mists just yet to count them either. More might be lingering behind him, so at best that was a half-count of how many 'guards' this woman had. "I can assure you, my Dama has little to no interests with Italian affairs."

"Be that as it may, we are interested in her." Daniella countered herself a touch cheerfully and with a measure of steel to her tone that raked against the Icelander's nerves. "Really, dear boy. I am not asking you to betray your lovely lady's confidences. I merely wish to know if I could be of assistance to your relocation efforts."

The Lightning-Storm Lackey huffed near silently. "No, thank you ma'am."

"Nothing?"

"I am merely checking up on the listings I have for more inclusive details than what is supplied to possible buyers and taking estimates for how much refurbishing or other fixes they would require before the various locations are habitable. There is nothing I require help with just yet." A moment of visible consideration, which was utterly grudging on his end in more ways than one, and he sighed as softly as he could. "The expected servants such estates will require… I might need some aid in picking through possibilities."

Best to know who they would be attempting to 'insert' into his lady's household before they got somewhat useful to her, and the prickly Storm-Cloud started bothering to learn their names. Bjørn might not be a match to a Sky of massive and war-trained experience's machinations, but then again Mists could pretty much run rings around everyone and might not need to match his 'opponent's' level of cunning.

On the odds, he'd bet if Viper would not give a look over them self then he might be able to enlist the aid of one of the two other Mists that lingered near his patron enough for her to refer to them by nicknames or somewhat fondly for her.

A delicately but still dark brow arched at him, and the Eighth Sky of the Vongola Famiglia considered things and him thoughtfully for a silent moment. "…a split-Flame like your lovely lady? You seem to be a Lightning, and indeed act the part. That, however, is very much not something a Lightning would've plotted out around any malicious aims in his way."

…there was a Mist in his head.

The Lightning-Storm pulled hard on the ruby red side of his Flames, blinking twice because he felt nothing like when Viper messed with his head for various lessons or imparted bits of knowledge to have been tipped off by such meddling. "You do realize I will be reporting this meeting to my Dama, and she will not be best pleased by this."

"Of course, but that also means she must return to… complain." A few sharp teeth crept into the Sky's smile, utterly satisfied with what he had pointed out and entirely unconcerned with showing it. "Frankly, as I believe her opinion of us can't really get much lower, so long as you survive I can merely use what fallout there will be to snag your lovely lady's attention."

"She could try to murder you." Pointed out the Icelander repressively, likely unwisely to a woman this connected but it did have to be said before someone found out the hard way his patron had very little patience left for stupid shit. "She was not all that far from murdering off her originating syndicate and ruining her own work, hence why she has left them to avoid that. This stress will not
help any of us at all."

Daniella blinked in surprise. "Was she that badly handled back home? Oh... my, that does change a few things..."

Glancing at the silver haired Rain lady that looked a touch apprehensive at something, the Sky set her coffee cup down firmly.

"Well then, I suppose tweaking her last nerve before she has time to settle is not in anyone's best interests. I apologize, young man. My interests in your lady is not intended to be her demise." Before he could decide if that was actually honest or just sweet words with little real feeling behind them, the elderly woman gestured to her agent. "Take Nilda with you, she will ensure there will be less stressful interactions your patron will have to deal with to finish off your house hunting efforts. As well as insure most that know of our... interests, that you are approved to be in our country for your own reasons."

That was such obviously a trap Bjørn blinked blankly at the Sky.

"Dear Nilda and your lady Cloud met last Christmas, young man." Explained the elderly woman in amusement, and something tiny that was utterly not. "As far as I am aware, she has her own motivations for seeking your lovely patron's attentions. She tried to use my meddling to insert herself, and while yes I am meddling to give Guerra a better excuse... I will eventually become insulted if you insist to regard me so suspiciously. There is only so far you can press your Cloud's utter irrelevance to social behavior in your favor, Lackey."

"You have not stated that my suspicions are ill founded, Vongola."

Daniella smiled sharply at him as she leaned back in her couch with arms folded across her chest, queerly approving of his statement even if it was more than a touch rude. "Because they are not. You are merely being smart, which is a refreshing thing to come from a Lightning of your quality. Rudeness in the face of prudence is entirely forgivable."
"Do you have anything left to do this year besides one or so more contracts?"

"I have to go talk to the Long Triad, but we arranged for it to happen here." Sonya absently replied, mostly aimed at her own knees but also pitched so the nurse guiding her through her post-surgery physical therapy could hear. "Because Fong got this Lightning assassin man on his case to the point we had to bolt from the country and I probably shouldn't go back until that is taken care of."

Tatiana paused in leafing through the sheets of recommended exercises to build up any damaged muscles after an abdominal surgery to look up and give the blonde thief a flat look. "…what."

Her little sister twisted, against recommended movement for this exercise, and gave her a faintly curious look now that she could peer up at her. "What?"

A moment to think about it, she was utterly unsurprised Sonya wasn't all that greatly concerned over an assassin that might be after her. Frankly, given the situation back home, it was entirely likely the Lightning assassin from China wasn't the only one after her pretty little head.

With a sigh, the Sun Flame user discarded the paperwork and gestured for the other woman to get up. "Never mind. Up, baby sister. Still no pain?"

"…no."

A hard look only earned her a shrug, which made Tatiana assume there really wasn't any noticeable lingering pain from being cut open to remove pockets of matter that shouldn't have been in her liver. As she had gone over the surgery wounds herself with her Sun Flames, and there were a few more tests in ultrasounds and a few x-rays just to check, the nurse couldn't decide if she was happy to hear it or not.

Either it really was just a slight complication of a Storm Flame user being shot then healed by a Sun user without the injury being adequately cleaned out, or it was intentionally caused.

Sonya had gotten her injuries healed when they were actually lethal if left alone, which was fantastic in the face of her trying out their brother's Cloud Voodoo to do it all for her with the whole broken-but-not-really leg thing. The fact her prudence when it came to normally lethal injuries was possibly used to harm her more was not.

"I have to touch your stomach, try not to jerk away from me." Announced the Sun next, giving the thief a moment to brace herself before smoothing her fingerling onto and occasionally into the taught skin of the other Russian's stomach. "…Nya."

"It is unconscious movement. I am not trying to do this." The Storm-Cloud almost snapped back at her, already discomfited by so much access being had to her abdominal region for various people to poke and prod.

Tatiana forgave her little sister for that, both the jerky movements as her muscles tried to pull the skin away from the Sun nurse's fingertips and that snippy comment defending herself. She had known it would happen, and the Storm-Cloud was really doing so well in putting up with both her and Kappel
poking something she really preferred no one touch.

"Okay, all done. No more touching." Taking a step backwards from the uncomfortable Russian, the nurse wiggled her ever so scary fingers in the air instead of in her overly sensitive guts. "You're clear to abscond from the hospital if you would like."

Rubbing her oh-so-abused guts Sonya eyed her warily. "Really? I thought this would take longer."

"Sun Flames, you basically cheated out of the recovery stage because of my fabulous self." Boasted the nurse wickedly, grinning at her very pleased looking little sister. "I'm sorry I couldn't do this for you before…"

"Tats, it is fine. We knew you could do it, and you did it now." Dismissed the Storm-Cloud, tapping the toes of her left leg on the mat placed for those in recovery from various injuries or operations underfoot. "So, what if it is this injury and not another? You still did it."

With a wry grin, because of course that would be Sonya's opinion on the whole issue that had been a sticking point for her for years, the redhead shook her head and gestured to the door of this room. "Either way, you can abscond with yourself free 'n clear and go finish off what you need to do. I do ask you come back somewhere near the start of December with our dork of a brother, so we can straighten out your vaccinations."

"…joy." Deadpanned the blonde sourly, snagging her boots to put on for her walk to wherever she was heading next. "It is not that far into November, I could likely manage two or three contracts. More if Björn was still here, but as he's off finding Galina and the others a house I have to find my own contracts again. I will be rather occupied for this month, was there anything you wanted me to do?"

"If you can, go check up on Adrik? Not if it'll impact Verde's learning experience, but… that whole situation gives me a bad feeling." Tatiana lifted a shoulder in a shrug when her little sister stared back at her skeptically. "I know, green-man really needs the experience as fast as we can give him it… but that's an entire childhood's worth of lessons and experience we got that we're trying to cram into half a year, against those that earned the lessons and skills fairly through entirely crooked lives?"

"If I can." Sonya promised slowly, visibly thinking it over to the point her hands slowed in the act of loosening the laces of her boots. "I am not sure if it will be possible, if no one can track them down they are all the safer and if I do so…"

"Yeah, no news is good news for the two of them. But then again, the both of them were in here too not too long ago." Waving the whole issue off because there really was little they could do about it for the now, the Sun user snagged her little sister's physical therapy regime guidelines and handed it over to her. "Do these if you notice any odd pulling sensations or stiffness. You will need to sign out of the hospital officially, at the front desk, but other than that you can go back to globe-trotting and stealing to your heart's content."

As soon as her baby sister cleared out of the medical sector, then she and Kappel had to submit the paperwork to get the thief cleared of paying for her emergency room visit and surgery. The 'recovery' time was on her, but Sonya had more than enough from a bonus the Triads gave her for getting injured on their time doing what she had been hired for.

Tatiana wondered if being hired out on the merit of her Cloud Flames would kick-start her sister's reputation or hurt it.

Frankly, aside being a thief you could hire out of Mafia Land's various contractual groups, Sonya
didn't actually have one for her thief skills in the international stage. No one quite knew of her other than as 'the Mafia Land Cloud', or perhaps as 'that hitman Sinclair's friend', both of which were not reputations based off her skills instead of just who she was. Good ones, in a way of 'scary' or 'intimidating', but not for her criminal skills. Which had seemingly suited the tiny blonde and grey-eyed thief perfectly well so far.

It would be interesting to see where things would go from here.

…right after she saw where the rumors she had somewhat co-opted with Fong's unknowing help about the Cloud's physical condition finally ran their course. Right now, the rumors were mostly contained to very gossipy nurses and a few highly unnerved doctors in the obstetrician wing of St. Julian's. It would only be a matter of time before they started leeching out into the streets, and the nurse almost couldn't wait for it to get there.

She might've sworn to no longer use her sister's obliviousness for laughs, but nothing said she couldn't use Tasty Muscle's and her baby sister's irrelevance for gossip to get a laugh or three.

"Thanks, Tats." Sonya spoke rather absently, reading the paperwork through instead of finish lacing up her boots because she really was that much of a bookworm to read everything that she touched.

"Mhmm."

(Monday the 10th of November, 1969. Thieves' Guild Hall, Mafia Land.)

Sonya spent all of five minutes Sunday wondering if she should at least be at the school for Mingxia's first official day, before dismissing it.

The girl would have that elderly guy to fuss over her, and from the sound of it he had some kind of hand in raising her so she'd probably appreciate him more than someone she only recently met. Besides which, she really didn't want to go back to see where the Zolotovs were now for anything until she couldn't avoid it anymore.

Going to the school would probably nail her down with administrative duties until sometime next year, and the moment Galina got a hold of her…

Of course that meant she had to instead first suffer through an entirely awkward 'meet and greet' with the Long Triad for whatever the fuck it was they had wanted and then do her own paperwork for picking up the last contract she needed this year, with whatever else she would be picking up to round it all off and waste time with until she had to be somewhere again.

Frankly, even after the meeting with yet another Triad group she still had no idea what the hell they had wanted to meet her for. There was a lot said, but very little which had any meaning whatsoever. At the very least they had bought her dinner and a decent amount of liquor, so while confused she at least didn't greatly mind all that much as it was something to do that wasn't 'required' of her.

As it had been longer than a year since she last had to arrange her own jobs, and Sonya had kind of forgotten how much a pain in the ass it was to hunt through the damn near reams of shitty contracts for what wouldn't be utterly mind-numbing to do, she commandeered a room to leisurely pick over things and re-learn the ropes she had half-forgotten.

The second level of the office building the Mafia Land Thieves' Hall held various rooms used for picking contracts, as well as a few personal offices of the various clerks of note in the building. It
wasn't somewhere she had visited since that time Bjørn fucked up on her and nearly got them killed, when she was still mildly annoyed with her own Lackey.

In a medium-sized room that looked as if it should've been a conference room, as a matter of fact it might as well be for entire teams of thieves to discuss logistics than for one lone solo-thief, the Russian had three piles of contracts set out to pick through on the massive table taking up most of the room.

One was the 'discard' pile, those that weren't even worth the paper they were printed upon because it would amount to absolutely nothing aside a number for her end of year total. Various home invasions, specific robberies in random countries for trinkets she didn't mind taking in-between bigger jobs but were basically a waste of money to travel for specifically because it wouldn't pay out all that much, and the miscellaneous 'milk runs' against civilian run outfits. She kept them out because if she could fit a few into what she would do this month then fine, but they were secondary to what she was aiming for.

The second pile were not entirely much better. More military installation infiltrations for various top secret plans or weaponry, a few requests against government branches for more various secrets, contracts against minor mafia syndicates for their secrets or valuables, and general harder contracts to complete because massive targets or tighter controls on how or when things were stolen. Most of what she had been doing the last year, actually.

On the other hand, the last pile was the contracts she only just qualified to do after a full year of steady work at it and almost twenty contracts to her number this year. They were complicated, and she had done one before in the chandelier heist back in Wisconsin, but actually contemplating taking one specifically required a lot of prior thought.

Gently nibbling on the brass and bamboo pipe, so she wouldn't bite through it as she lost her second one, Sonya puzzled over the suggested heists and if it would be possible or not.

Just because someone ordered it, didn't mean it was realistically possible to pull off. Some of them were outright impossible.

…that was excluding Mist thieves of course, or anyone else with skills not entirely humanly possible to replicate. Actually, she could see how she might do one or two… would it be a bad idea to take one, then?

On the other hand, it might be possible those improbable contracts were bait for any Flame users starting to become reckless about their skills. Failing a contract could either be possibly lethal or expensive, depending on what kind of penalties the one that wanted the contract detailed in case someone was that stupid or overconfident. If someone succeeded with the weirder contracts, then they could be sought after in alternate ways once their contractual ID number was known.

Comparing the four she knew for a fact were not humanly possible, if only because she had a vague idea from comparing her physical condition to Lisa's and more recently Fong's unaugment abilities, the thief spent a rather boring few minutes taking note of the details provided.

There were never a lot of those supplied, it was really something you had to accept a contract for to get the actual situation as far as the one placing the contract was aware. Given the time that could pass between the offer and someone's acceptance, the nitty gritty details to even where the target was might change anywhere from minutely to majorly.

Newspapers from around the world generally tended to help a lot for this part, assuming one could read the native languages they were printed in. Half the cabinets were stuffed with current issues
from around the world, some of which were just utter gossip rags to The New York Times and The Independent to even current issues of the Financial Times.

Lacking the current issue of the Bild, a German tabloid with a conservative bent which would provide more background information some aspects of celebrity German lifestyles for the more likely of the heists she was contemplating, the Russian thief reluctantly glanced between the piled of her work and the door of the room she was occupying.

Obviously, leaving the contracted heists out where just anyone could poke through them was not a particularly good idea. She really didn't feel like putting it all away only to come back in five minutes with the missing issue, nor juggling several files worth of contracts while she hunted down what she needed in order to figure out if she should take them or not.

Annoyed, Sonya opened the door to her conference room to see if she could snag one of the various associates that worked here to find what she needed instead of do it herself.

Bjørn could not get back fast enough.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 10th of November, 1969 continued. Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Cherep staggered forward a step under the weight that impacted his back, blinking back at his fellow Cloud who came out of nowhere in surprise only to 'jump' him. "What is this for?"

"Now you don't have to hug me." His brat of a little sister informed him smugly, shifting a bit higher up his back so she was riding piggyback in a more comfortable position for the both of them and wrapping her arms around his neck. "Because this counts. I'm technically hugging you."

"Does it? I suppose… maybe. This time, I guess." Looping his arms up under her thighs and hitching her as high as she seemed to want as she refused to tighten her legs around his waist, her fellow Cloud kept walking along the freezing cold and snowy street she had successfully ambushed him upon. "So, what's the occasion? I wasn't expecting to see you for another month, honestly."

"I'm playing hooky by not officially being back in Moscow, mainly." Sonya informed him blandly, curiously eyeing Mauricio's colorful coat which really wasn't made with Russian winters in mind for a moment but then dismissing the man from any importance from the feel of her arms shifting in her heavy wool coat around his neck. "But Lisa said you were home, so first I've got someone for you to meet really quick before I go back to work."

"Really?"

"Aikido is the martial art discipline of using another's force to evade violence offered in one's direction. I found a master of such, he's at least agreed to meet you to see if you'd like the art and if he'll teach you." She informed him, a bit more of that smug tone creeping into her tone. "So you can be a complete pacifist if you'd like, yet not be entirely fucked if someone won't let you avoid them in other ways. You can tire them out instead, you never had an issue tiring me out when we were kids."

"Huh..." That... was actually pretty cool of her.

He'd be reserving judgment on whoever it was she wanted him to meet, and if he'd try learning what could be something interesting yet wouldn't go against his very nature and preferred outlook. However, the fact Sonya went so far out of her way to respect his personal views and yet find him
something so he wouldn't be easily taken advantage of if someone wanted to pick a fight?

He wasn't an *entire* slouch on the whole 'avoidance' part himself, thank you very much... but it was pretty likely he was equally as lucky as he was able to talk fast when put on the spot.

"...*why are you really on my back?*"

"*I spent about a week being held hostage for a stupid event in China. I got horribly homesick... and then you were here. It was just a perfect opportunity.*"

She wanted a hug but didn't want to actually ask for it or risk her disinclination for touching not enduring what he liked to give her, so now he was giving her a surprise piggyback ride.

Mafia logic, at its finest.

At least she was keeping his neck warm, and his hands, so he really didn't mind. Plus, more of the childishness he could really only occasionally coax out of her and had been completely rare in their childhood was always something he'd encourage if he could. *"Aww... missed you too, sis."*

"*Shut up.*" Giving it was rather more muttered into his shoulder than actually spoken so everyone could hear her denial, either Sonya didn't feel like arguing about that or she was letting it stand with only a token protest. *"Go to Aleksandr's."*

Cherep obediently crossed the street their foster parents lived on to reach the other side where the ancient *vor* lived, ignoring the few odd looks he got for piggybacking his little sister around. *"So, guy to my left is Mauricio Sebastian Ciceron. He's one of the... umm... drizzle types."

"*Purely?*" Questioned the only real Flame expert he knew of, leaning away from his back to fully see the Spaniard that hadn't quite yet stopped gaping at her in a rather decent subtle way. *"...*huh. Why'd you bring him here?"

"*Kind of had to, it's... just for a bit.*" Verbally sidestepped the stuntman before he had to admit the slightly messed up and ill-thought out plan that left him with a 'minion' type. *"I need a press agent anyways and Mauricio's got a silver tongue as well, so it works out. Bit like Master Liam, really."

By the hum, Sonya wasn't sold on that being all that was to the story.

Yeah, he was going to be slapped upside the head once someone got that story out of him. With a huff of a laugh, her fellow Cloud came to a stop on the at least ice-free path leading to Aleksandr’s home. *"Want to knock for me?"

*"They should be home, it's late enough."

"...*they?*" Echoed Cherep, trying to crane his neck around to see her but she was apparently still staring down his new friend instead.

Sonya tugged her thighs from his grip, sliding down his back when he let her go and rounding him to basically barge in on the old grumpy guy that once taught him to dodge and get out of someone else's grip.

Admittedly, the Inverted Cloud *might* still be holding a grudge against the guy for starting the strings that were holding his fellow if more Classical Cloud down in Moscow against her will and... Aleksandr didn't live here anymore. Cocking his head to the side curiously, Cherep eyed the shoe rack his little sister was for some reason using for her own boots when before visiting for either combat lessons or for the Flame gem investigation had never earned the consideration of removing
her footwear in someone else's home.

That wasn't the only new thing in the entranceway he had passed through several times even these years, the Chinese scroll with some of their spikey characters was utterly new to him yet looked pretty old if well cared for.

"Ah… Cherep?"

"You're going to need her help in this area, at least for a few weeks." Confessed the confused stuntman in German to the magician still following him even if this all really was far outside what he was used to as he warily entered the house behind his fellow Cloud, hopefully to get him inside and stop letting out the heat because Russia got freezing cold in winter. "She, and a few others I was taking you to, pretty much run things here when it comes to our abilities. But, she also kept me out of things I didn't want to do so there's that. You also seriously need some different skills, as interesting as the mirrors are…"

Trailing off, the undying stuntman peered back at the little girl with wine red eyes warily watching him around a corner as he accomplished that herding.

…the heck?

The thief spoke something utterly outside of his linguistic skills to decipher, wrenching off her slightly snowy left boot and tossing it to sit with the other one already off next to the low shelf for them. Gesturing for him to do the same, Sonya brazenly walked into the apparently repurposed house as if she wasn't a guest of some kind.

Did Aleksandr die or something?

If so, he was honestly sorry to hear it. He might not have liked the guy, but his little sister had somewhat. At least, she'd pester the old guy about various questions relating to combat or her staves easily enough.

Whatever it was she had asked of the young school girl apparently had an answer in the kitchen, so Sonya promptly wandered off on him instead of actually introduce the girl to her brother and tagalong. Huffing, mostly to hide an amused smirk at her truly awful social skills, Cherep gave up trying to understand what was going on before it was explained to him and just focused on pulling off his motorcycle boots.

He couldn't do any introductions if he didn't speak a related language, which meant that wasn't getting fixed anytime soon unless the girl tried to speak to them in everyone she knew.

"Why are you still here?" A coat-less Sonya suddenly demanded shortly, likely coming back to grab him for lingering too long when she wanted him elsewhere, glaring at his new minion hesitating in the closed doorway.

"I was taking him to Lisa, and through her the others of your Rain group." Cherep spoke up for Mauricio, the Rain was pretty taken aback at the borderline rude question in another language suddenly shot at him and it really wouldn't help if he somehow annoyed his little sister before getting a few Rain Flame tips. "He's kind of following me."

His irritable little sister huffed, then pointed at the living room where the girl had escaped to. "Then go sit over there until we're done here. Shoo."

With a roll of his eyes, the stuntman obediently repeated the order in a language Ciceron actually understood. With a prissily little sniff of her own, his little sister then promptly dragged him off with
a hand fisted in his jacket.

He hoped she didn't put more permanent creases in his jacket again. It was kind of a pain when she did things like that because the leather broke along those creases, and he really rather liked this jacket.

Tiny Usov was already present, along with a really old Chinese guy with steel silvered hair and a rather ferocious scowl on his face, and the Sun guy called 'Scruffy'. They were all sitting around a kitchen table, a rather familiar one that still had the burns from Tatiana's iron-Sun Flame investigation scored into the surface.

Hmm… interesting.

"Cherep, this is sifu Yaozu. Old man, this is my brother. Peter's the other one. Usov's just here to supply translations for everyone until you all figure out a common language. Yes, everyone here is aware of Dying Will Flame use."

The 'old man' blinked dark eyes once at her, shot a skeptical look at the young Mist in the room, then swung his highly skeptical gaze back to the former Czechoslovakian runaway.

"The more you become suspicious of them, the more they'll try to fuck with your head."

Offered Cherep a touch blandly, gesturing to the kid then flicking his wrist to include the rest of his type in general. "Try ignoring it, they'll deem you boring and leave you alone or get even more insistent on somehow prompting a reaction but will be a bit more predictable then."

A silvered eyebrow arched.

"I've got a Mist for a best friend."

"I will try to keep it in mind." Yaozu spoke a touch repressively, more for the wickedly grinning Usov who would likely take that second option than the first but it was pretty much unavoidable as the old guy had already been suspicious of him from the start. "Miss Bazanova has informed me you are a pacifist."

The undying stuntman shrugged easily. "There's not really much of a point in yet more violence to answer violence. We have way too much in this world as it is. Also, hurting someone else for pretty much any reason is kind of… being an asshole for little reason. There are other ways if you really want something that bad. While I'm okay with being an asshole sometimes, not with my fists or any other weapon."

When the other eyebrow joined the other one on the guy's slightly wrinkled face, he could only shrug again.

Scruffy, or 'Peter' apparently, held up his hands well before Yaozu focused on him. "I have no idea why I'm here."

"Because the doctor I had you see recommended 'moderate physical activity' to rebuild what you lost being imprisoned against your will for damn near a decade." Sonya shot at him irritably.

"Which you haven't been getting. As I can't let you go without that imprisonment repeating or you getting yourself killed in likely horrible ways, learning some way to defend yourself in a pinch isn't a bad option to get such. Especially under the eye of someone that knows the limits of the human body and hopefully how to build it up in a safe manner."

"That much I can agree with." Yaozu mused aloud after a moment of contemplation, where the Sun stared a bit blankly at his nominal boss and Cherep just felt a tiny bit weird about being present for
the guy's past history and his medical advice being referenced so bluntly when he didn't really need to know. "...however I would like to know why you seem to feel as if someone threatening you is a non-issue entirely, Bazanov. You have to be aware of the lifestyle your sister is neck deep in, yet you seem unconcerned by anyone taking you hostage to use against her."

As the older Cloud in the room had never actually talked to or knew remotely what made a 'martial artist' different from another brawler type, or if that was a question he should answer at all, he first glanced to his little sister for some help.

Who looked pretty blank and entirely unwilling to say anything for or against answering that.

"Why?" He asked instead back, not anything more than merely curious as to the reasoning that might help him any in deciding what to say.

"I may be forced to compromise some of my values for my very life and survival against a regime that outlawed my very lifestyle in my native lands, to the point I will allow criminal activity around me now I am also one... I refuse to do so when it comes to what I can teach." Announced the old Chinese martial arts master bluntly, which the stuntman rather appreciated really. "I can teach another how to break someone in the most efficient manner possible, if you have no respect for another's life or for your own you might end up doing more harm than preventing it with what I can teach you."

Cherep rocked back on his sock clad heels, then exchanged another look with his still utterly unhelpful fellow Cloud. "...are we going to trust him?"

"It's your life, Cherep." Sonya informed him instead of answering that question, digging out a new long pipe out of her purse instead to fiddle with. "That's entirely up to you."

"You know him better than I do."

"Not by much. I know a... friend... of mine respects the hell out of him even when the old man disapproved of his very existence, to the point he was rather grateful for the excuse to badger the old man into talking to him again even if he is a criminal nowadays. I know perfectly well he'll help Mingxia, the girl in the other room with your Rain, however he can without reservations because my friend is and has tried his best to keep her out of the mafia or Triads or whatever partially because of the views he installed in him. That's pretty much it."

A new friend. Probably not the Italian 'R' guy, Chinese Triads instead. She really needed more friends, and his newest one wasn't all that 'civilian' either so he couldn't really say much about that.

Fuck. It was that 'Fow'-guy, wasn't it?

Little sister that ducked around saying hi to him had his coloring, so probably.

Returning his eyes to the 'old man' rather patiently waiting out their discussion of him, he held up a finger. "Can I take a rain check on answering that right now? I don't mean to be rude or anything, but I barely know you and that's.... been taken advantage of before."

Sonya hunched her shoulders, looking a bit pissed off now as she fiddled with the brass and bamboo pipe in her hands.

"I can almost guarantee you it's worse than what you're thinking." Announced the stuntman to all the other males gathered in a kitchen with him, only a touch wryly. "Point is I'm fine now and not there anymore, Nya. I also know how to pick locks, you and Vipes will be highly unamused by it, and I can always run instead."
The thief made a dismissive huff, and Cherep could almost hear her growling or something under her breath at his future plans which she didn't really seem to hold much faith in. She didn't get any less tense but did slow her fidgeting with that pipe.

"Trust must start somewhere, so I will allow this." Yazou spoke up, once it was apparent that the younger Cloud wasn't going to do much more than fidget and the older one was unwilling to elaborate more. "It will take longer, until I can get a feel of who you are under the surface I will not be teaching you, but we have going over what you do know of martial arts to accomplish before anything can be taught as it is."

"Awesome." Rather nice of the guy, given it seemed to be a big deal for him or his lifestyle choices. "I really only have winters and maybe a bit of both early spring and late fall unspoken for already, though."

"You all will also be moving to Italy in a few months, unless Yaozu feels as if Russia is where he wishes to reside either for the rest of his life or until his country becomes less retarded." Sonya announced bluntly before anything else could be said. "Speaking of which, I might need you to go pick up the deed sometime soon. Probably sometime next spring."

"Noted." A more European home base would be nice, getting past the Iron Curtain even as an entertainer was starting to become a rather dicey proposition. "Thanks for this, Nya."

"Nothing's been agreed to yet, you're just introduced." Sonya reminded him a touch pointedly, pressing a thumb into the little brass bowl on the end of her pipe already packed with shredded tobacco.

"But you're still respecting my desire not to hurt anyone, even if you think it's stupid."

"It is stupid but part of what makes you into you, so I'll live with it."

Cherep slung an arm around her shoulders before she could dart away with or without her coat and gave her the hug she had tried to dodge. "Love you too, sis."

"Stop touching me."

(Thursday the 13th of November, 1969. Museum Island, Mitte District, East Berlin, German Democratic Republic.)

Stealing art wasn't exactly a new one for Sonya, but to actually steal it from a museum on a contract was. A 'partially open' one was actually honestly interesting to break into, in the holy fuck the Allied Powers in WWII did a shit ton of damage kind of way.

Frankly, she wasn't a fan of the art trade. While it was very much a criminal route for money laundering as well as an elitist snobbish thing rich people did, actually getting solid number values on the various pieces was a nightmare of guesswork. Mostly dependent on how 'popular' or well-known an artist was, and who might be interested in acquiring it, alone rather than the content of the art piece itself or if it was even remotely pleasant to look at.

The Russian greatly preferred dealing with antiques instead. Easier to keep track of the value, at least.

On the northern part of Museum Island situated on the Spree River was a complex of about four or
five different museums. Most of which had been pretty much bombed out by the Allied air raids in World War II and were still somewhat damaged because the Soviet Block was not really all that interested in rebuilding them for the German people.

The *Alte Nationalgalerie* was a building that would not have looked out of place in ancient Greece, except it looked as if something had shot up the center façade of the building and some minor amounts of rubble still spilled down half of its front staircase. The almost cathedral-looking building with a bombed-out dome was likely the Bode Museum, which made a rather stark image against the wintry skies. The building that looked as if it had come from Ancient Egypt looked even worse in terms of the surroundings being bombed out, which she was taking to be the *Pergamon Museum*. Ironically, the sturdier built building using newer building techniques at the turn of the century she was pretty sure was called the *Neues Museum* looked to be a complete ruin rather than a half-opened museum building from several direct hits by bombs. The *Altes Museum* was the one she was actually targeting, which wasn't really all that much better than the surrounding museums pretty much left to rot around it, looked as if something not-bomb-level exploded right in front of the building.

All of them were located around a wide-open plaza of paved ground, which was utterly unhelpful for her.

While the *Neues Museum*'s more stable wings were being used to store some of the remaining art exhibit pieces from the unstable parts of the complex, the *Alte Nationalgalerie* was partially open, the Bode Museum was technically being rebuilt and not, and at least half of the *Pergamon Museum*'s exhibits were in West Germany, the *Altes Museum* was surprisingly structurally sound for being a recognizable place the Nazi Regime once held massive rallies in front of.

Unfortunately, the Spree River was a not particularly good smuggling route to get out of East Berlin. Even if most of Museum Island was guarded for the reduced number of artworks they stored and displayed a portion of, the river still held a number of patrol boats and barricades which were manned around the clock and even more guards patrolled the northern tip of Museum Island to spot anyone trying to go underwater.

Even in the middle of winter. When the river froze over. To the point they sunk chain-link fences to catch such things.

…and allowed little kids to drown because those from the Eastern Bloc weren't allowed to rescue them out of the water.

Okay, the Soviets could be complete and utter *dicks* sometimes. Sonya wouldn't be the one to try arguing otherwise, perfectly aware of what evils both her native lands were capable of. Every 'modern' government had such a side, but the kid-killing bit kind of stuck under her skin a little.

With the ice covering the Spree River kind of questionable and likely only recently frozen, meaning fragile enough to break halfway across the few parts it spanned where the swifter and deeper current was, it ruled out a water-route to the museum she was targeting. Even if she could probably get herself a thermal wetsuit and a tank of air still if she cheated via Storm/Sun Flame internal heat regulation. As Museum Island was or had been a semi popular place to visit there were several roads that spanned the water as well, all of which were patrolled for yet more people trying to cross the Berlin Wall using the river.

*And* there was an entire flotilla of patrol boats making some kind of barricade across the open if icy water a bit west of the northern half of the island. Which were still manned, even if ice was starting to lock them into their positions for the winter.

A *lot* of eyes that might spot her, professional ones for all they were mainly military and a few
specifically trained guardsmen.

While using the river was out, as was just strolling down a bridge in full view, it 
did leave under the bridges as a possibility.

To get there. Getting out with at least five or so of the 'Old Master' Paintings while scrutiny was heightened would be a bitch.

However, while stealing shit from where they should be did normally get attention in a fast hurry nothing said it had to be removed from the island the same night. Given how slowly if at all there was any rebuilding of the destroyed parts of the museums was going, there were a lot of hiding places. With a lot of construction equipment, which would hide anything she did to conceal her work until it was safer to retrieve.

Asides which, this wasn't her only Berlin contract. Sonya could and would just pick up her first heist's work after her second, when immediate attention shifted to that one in response.

Hence why this particular contract was one of the 'stupidly suicidal' ones. The buildings weren't heavily guarded for museums, but the island was kind of a choke point for the Berlin Wall's really risky illegal water access crossing and did have the higher concentration of heavily armed guards around.

One either had to have an entire crew of people to pull off both a distraction and the heist or be a moderately reckless Flame user. Preferably more than one.

As it seemed physical thievery was something most Mists disregarded as either banal or way too easy, preferring mental twisting and fucking with people while they were present just to enjoy the reactions from the look of things, that left about five other types as she had never heard of a Sky thief ever.

The Russian probably cheated a little herself in having more than one Flame type, which was not the norm as her first ever actual book on Dying Will Flames suggested. In Moscow, there were about six with multiple Flame types to them including herself out of the now over a hundred Flame users they knew of.

A Storm thief, as well as probably a Sun user, could go under the water even if it was freezing. Being able to regulate one's internal temperature tended to be more of a Storm/Sun thing than Rains, Mists, or Lightnings were capable of by the looks of it. As that might just be an assumption of it being a 'Storm or Sun' thing instead of actuality, it was still pending confirmation.

Conversely, a Rain might just walk across the streets in broad daylight and emit their Tranquility to prevent triggering anyone's suspicions or aggression to be noted doing so. As a type they were all pretty damn slippery, except when they got in large concentrations and tended to morph into some sort of heedless current follower kind of thing.

Sonya, trying to do the job via purely human limits just to fuck with someone's shitty plans in hunting freelance Flame users by submitting semi-impossible contracts, was kind of forced to use her Cloud Flames to begin with. It really did make up the bulk of her physical strength and turning it off seemed to be utterly impossible this far into being a Cloud using such a thing.

Her left gloved hand slipped off icy steel, again. As she was keeping at least three contact points on the underside of the Mühlendamm's northern bridge to Museum Island, the wider side of the Spree River around the island and therefore the less patrolled one as the other side would be easier in so many ways, because gripping too hard would leave behind handprints such an event was not
deliberating. The Russian paused a moment to heat the leather a bit more using her Flames without burning the thin garment off her hands or putting more holes into it.

Frankly, the undersides of most bridges were disgusting. In spades. She had burned off the tip of her pointer right and left pointer finger tips of the gloves already, to remove the utter nests of spider webs and insect husks in her way without just shouldering through instead.

It still left bird nests, the occasional perch for such feathery menaces practically caked with new and old droppings, and the random piece of trash that blew up into the bridge's supports or somehow worked its way down from the topside.

Blowing out a sigh, the upside-down thief started picking up her pace before the next patrol was scheduled to go beneath this bridge and someone lucked out with an awkwardly timed glance up.

Scaling back up to ground level once she was on Museum Island, and then picking out both a waiting area for the next day and someplace to hide the paintings for a few more needed to be done before the sun rose and she could mingle with the public either helping with the reconstruction efforts or just to see what was left of the displays. Then locating her targets, if they were displayed or in storage yet somewhere, could be done in the daylight if she was careful enough. Easy enough for her, and nothing really new.

After that, she had to repeat this stupid bridge crossing to get out without being noticed in the area by the patrols.

Coming back to pick up her loot after everything was said and done would maybe mark her down as suspicious if anyone was watching and noting who came or left the island, but there was the southern half of the island she could use then. If she stuck to it her second visit, hopefully any note of her presence would get lost in the press of people that worked or detoured through here for work.

The precaution of going under the bridges and notice of anyone watching or counting visitors was possibly unneeded, equally as likely as it was just prudence for a thief to do. Sonya would just like to err on the side of caution before she ended up screwed without knowing it.

Besides, she was still a tiny bit restless from China. As disgusting as it was, the bridge crossing was suitably cathartic in its own way.

(Saturday the 15th of November, 1969. German Democratic Republic.)

Ampelmännchen were the figures on the pedestrian lights, who had little hats instead of being utterly generic people-figures signifying if it was safe to cross a street or not.

…okay.

Unscrewing five of the traffic lights from various light poles to send to whoever the hell wanted them took about a few hours of a late night, and probably would really fuck with whoever would try to back tract her work in Berlin, so Sonya didn't honestly care all that much. Slightly ridiculous minor contract done with to pad out her final count for the year, Sonya lingered in flea market for a bit just to see what was for sale before moving on.

She was mildly curious what Tatiana and her group did in East Germany to get Ziven and Nicolai arrested, but she could always ask instead of trying to get arrested herself.
Then the Russian immediately left East Berlin for Wandlitz, or rather a complex just immediately outside the town. The Waldsiedlung was where the senior party of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany lived.

Noticably outside of the split capital city of Germany. In a double-fenced section of forest, with tall walls patrolled by soldiers. In a compound with about twenty other homes, a market and internal amusements, far removed and protected from the East German rioters that might inconvenience them to see objecting to a few of the recent policies they’ve put in place.

Sonya was not really all that impressed.

It was where the current Chairman of the National Defense Council of the German Democratic Republic currently lived with his wife, and she was to liberate a 'Hans Beimler Medal' from the man's effects due to someone apparently thinking he didn't deserve it.

Some Spanish war medal?

She really didn't know that much about it, just that the details included said it had to be obviously seen one night and be missing the next. Meaning the thief had to be in the house with them, ensure the guy knew his medal was where he stored it, then take it and leave without alerting any guards whatsoever.

Stalking old people. Yay.

That was literally everything she did yesterday, and it was looking as if nothing would change this night either. Old bitter guy who didn't appreciate his efforts and attempts to reengineer a new economy for East Germany wasn't really appreciated enough to eclipse the disaster that was the Berlin Wall's construction on both an economic and public relations front. Equally somewhat sour old lady who did his speech writing and listening to him bitch about their disowned foster daughter's horrible choice in men and a great liking for booze.

Sonya was helping herself to their books, because if she had to put up with listening to them they owed her something.

There were more Communist books than she had expected, and a copy of 'Who are these Friends of the People, and how they fight against the Social-Democrats'… written by Vladimir Lenin. His first 'book', actually, of which she had never seen an original copy of before. As in an unedited copy of the work.

Keeping her nose out of the book while not being spotted haunting somewhere a Russian really had no good 'legal' reason to hang about was rather hard, so she stuck it somewhere easy to grab but not entirely 'out of sight' of the real owners she would be liberating it from.

As a matter of fact, a few volumes got relocated by her for later stealing.

There wasn't really a reason not to, as long as she only occasionally stole books it would be fine. Disguising the robbery with other items would just help, probably.

It was in the middle of relocating yet another book to a high shelf for later stealing that the old man stormed back into his house, startling both the thief loitering about and his wife. Immediately scrambling out of any kind of sight, as Ulbricht started dictating something new he needed to speak of immediately, Sonya ducked out of the back-kitchen window and immediately dove for the crawlspace under the house.

Hopefully, if there was to be some kind of speech next week or preferably Monday, the medal she
was to steal would be put on something he would wear for it and she could get this job over with.

Creeping slowly through the surprisingly clean and apparently well service access for the seventh time on this job, the Russian shuffled silently to where the master bedroom should be. She'd hear it when they started to head for bed, and then could check everything over before and after they would settle in bed to see if she could make off with her loot or not.

She already knew the old guy didn't always check over his various trinkets and military/political decorations every day, or at least hadn't on Friday when the work week was over with and things were normally stored or cleaned for the next.

If she could finish this job sometime soon, she might be able to pick up a new contract for France and see if she could find Adrik or Verde. There weren't any good ones while she had been in Mafia Land checking them over, it was possible a new one had been submitted during the… week she had been gone.

…she missed Björn slotting contracts for her. If he was back, she could just place a call and get a new one somewhere nearby instead of going back to Mafia Land directly and waste a few more days finding herself a new contract or two.

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(Wednesday the 19th of November, 1969. Mafia Land.)

Renato was well aware he was neglecting a few things. Kind of an unavoidable complication when you were trying to not only set up for your own hopefully temporary death and keep anyone from remotely suspecting him of doing anything like that.

Defaulting out of Mafia Land contracts, and yes even the employee contracts counted as terminally-enforced, was more than lethal. The hitman would greatly appreciate ducking suspicion on that end, he had nothing that could counter the island's network of spies and crooks spread across the globe if even a hint of his survival leaked outside of his control.

His upcoming death was supposed to be temporary, at least for himself personally if not for the name 'Renato Sinclair' and almost everything attached to it.

Making up the guise of being stretched a touch too far to contribute to how Renato was going to die included actually being that stretched, because he knew at least three hitmen and seven assassins that might look into it and not be fooled by a faked air without a direct or indirect cause. Which was laughably easy to work up between the brat, hitman contracts, and Nono's willingly supplied 'help' in that quarter. All he really had to do was start looking at amassing enough money this year to put into an account, so Sonya would have a little help paying for their godchild's education until he could get back and he was already up over his head.

As long as he did the two 'contractually obligated' hits next year, his death wouldn't be greatly looked into. Theoretically. His 'contractual' years would be up, and he would need to renegotiate them next year if he was going to keep working here, so there was some ducking of obligations he was about to commit. Doing more than the bare minimum would only just help, and for now he was still racking up enough to not only keep his apartment but increase his 'death benefits'.

A firefight on the island in the middle of the Hudson River was not an appreciated complication right now.
Smart place to fuck off to, especially for a lone gun dealer that ran afoul of the local American Dons, but utterly annoying to have to get into just to kill the wire-thin jackass. Who had been armed with seven grenade launchers.

The Russian thief herself would take one look at him and probably deem him 'too grumpy to speak to'.

Fair enough of a snap judgement, Renato really didn't feel like talking to anyone so if the woman had been on the island in the first place he wouldn't have sought her out for a now rather rare moment of peace.

He checked already and ensured she or someone else more lethal and less pleasant to interact with weren't waiting to ambush him in his own apartment. Mostly so he could change his suit and get in a shower, because the reek of smoke from an old building going up in flames was almost nauseatingly cloying.

The hitman still had to ask the Russian sisters if they would hold onto a few things for both him and the brat, if he didn't catch Sonya before the end of the month he'd have to ask Tatiana if she'd do it instead to keep the 'last minute' changes to a minimum. Altering the details of one's accounts wasn't entirely odd to do when things had to be shifted or changed anyways when contracts were re-negotiated.

…or maybe not?

There were quite a few different 'fiscal' years, and while Mafia Land went with the majority of them that started on January a couple countries had different ideas what such a period of time should cover. Italia had only changed their fiscal year to match suit not too long ago, before that it went from the first of July to the last day of June. With how 'stressed' he had made himself the last few months, being a touch late for a half-forgotten date-limit wouldn't be too out of character for someone in his position.

Fuck, he should've thought of that sooner. Way too late to make use of that, and it would've been a good 'detail' to distract any investigators with.

Renato smoothed a hand up the side of his jaw, checking to ensure his shower had removed any of the ash or charcoal that might've stuck to his exposed skin and to at least ensure he didn't have a five 'o clock shadow to match to how haggard he felt already.

Another two months of this, and he wouldn't be too surprised if he croaked embarrassingly on a hit.

Stalking into one of the various and many little dive bars on the west side of Mafia Land that were surprisingly not complete dumps, which he couldn't visit again once he was safely dead until he had separated whoever he'll become as far as possible from who he was now, the Italian hitman didn't even have to ask before a bottle of whisky and a tumbler was handed over by the stout bartender.

Thankful, he just slapped the money on the counter and walked off to a back table so he could put something solid at his back for however long he could.

Having almost completely gone out of his way to advertise the fact he really didn't want to talk to anyone, which clearly a few smart people had caught on to, Renato also did not appreciate some suicidal wet-behind-the-ears sot immediately taking a seat across from him.

The highly unamused look he shot the interloper just bounced off the idiot's false sense of bravery, unfortunately. "…what?"
"Rumor has it your little Russian lady's pregnant. Her own sister tried to keep it quiet, but some Triad guy took her to the hospital and bolted from her before they borrowed a few things from the maternity wing."

Renato almost inhaled his first swallow of whisky.

…he thought Sonya wasn't getting herself pregnant as Shamal kept asking because she didn't want a kid just yet or for some time at least. It wasn't really all that long ago she had claimed such to his face, and there had been none of the minor hints she was hiding something from him during those weeks in Moscow.

Dubious after the shock wore off, because he knew her opinion on the subject and Storm women were not the type someone could impregnate without their complete consent, the Sun user rolled his eyes and poured himself a new shot of whisky.

"…nothing to say?"

"Why does everyone seem to think we're dating?" Shot back the hitman sourly, plucking up the refilled tumbler just to glare at the moron over it. "Furthermore, has anyone gone back to ask Nurse Primakova if it's remotely true or not?"

From the sound of it, he highly doubted it. A… few coincidental happenings did not truth make, even if he already had plans to ask the thief the next time he saw her if it was or not. Even if he couldn't think of what equipment from that section of the hospital would be useful for to diagnose.

Besides which, if she had decided to get it out of the way or something along those lines, his not telling her straight out he'd like to date her himself was just on him.

…which he couldn't fix even if it wasn't true, because he was more than committed to the whole 'kill myself off' plan already.

Given his luck, of course now would be around the time Sonya belatedly realized sex was something she could explore for some experience instead of just doubt the benefits of.

Probably a pregnancy scare, hopefully. There was a lot of stupid shit claimed about the act of procreation and the 'consequences' of than truth out there, enough so that a trained nurse sister might not catch all of it before the younger woman started wondering a bit after the fact.

Well… given her opinion on those sharing her bed and what condition she would prefer them in, perhaps someone else she nagged into getting their health checked out for STDs. Utterly galling visit to the hospital to clear his health just to get her doctor to shut up about it or not, at least knowing his hard childhood on the streets didn't impart some kind of incurable complications for the rest of his life was grudgingly appreciated.

"You're starting to annoy me." Renato informed the suicidal idiot trying to provoke him for some reason, flatly to ensure his lack of patience right now was blatantly clear. "Either get lost or risk being target practice."

The young scut wouldn't amount to more than that, Lightning of indeterminate origins or no. Hopefully he wouldn't have to prove to all and sundry that he could burn a hole through a Lightning user's personal use of Hardening, just so it would be less risky if he ever had to do so in the coming years on his own.

If the idiot pressed further for a reaction, well… at least there was a warning given.
…on second thought, occasionally it 

wasn’t rare for a syndicate to get one of their people hired by 

Mafia Land just to pick a fight with and get killed by certain freelancers so the island would put forth 

the effort in removing those becoming a pain in someone's hide. The fallout of that happening 

ensured it was rarely tried, but it still happened because of course it was an option if you couldn't 

muster the men or firepower on your own. 

Another person or group he had pissed off might be hunting him again. 

Well, he now had a list of those to work through… didn't he? 

If someone was trying this bullshit against him, he should probably take the pains to ensure they 

wouldn't think to go after the thief instead when he was no longer an option to express their 

displeasure against. Especially if she was possibly pregnant, or at least rumored to be so.
Mingxia could honestly say Moscow was a sharp contrast to Hong Kong, and even farther removed from her small home village of Gang Jiao. It wasn't just the very controlled and regimented buildings lining the wider streets that made it easy to become turned around, nor only the moderately spacious home she now lived in with Master Yaozu until such time as Miss Sonya relocated them again to where she wanted them, even how freezing cold and snowy it was outside wasn't the bewildering point.

The 'police' were the enemy here, to more than just the vory. Not just a faction that dealt with criminal behavior, or a political movement given military power, the literal police on the streets were often not there to help the people they were hired to protect from the criminals around them. More often than not, in the bare two weeks the Rain had been in Moscow, it seemed it was the local criminal presence protecting people from the police shaking them down for 'protection money' or other so-called rights to their livelihood they felt they deserved.

For a price, and occasionally the vory just turn around and do the same thing to the people they were protecting, but… it was somehow not horrifying.

Someone was protecting those that had no combat abilities to defend themselves or their homes, the fact the terms used to describe them had flipped meant very little in the end. The Russian civilians also seemed perfectly fine with going to criminals instead of those hired to protect them by the government, and there was a quality of life under either lifestyle… but the police were really little better than the networked criminal groups and everyone seemed to accept that as a fact of life and not strange.

In another part of the city it might be different… maybe, but she had little to no desire to wander that far from any implied protection from such she enjoyed right now.

Vor Bazanov rather grumpily escorted the students of their neighborhood to school in the morning, his lover and the woman that raised her new patron from a young girl to the woman she was these days walking along because she also taught at the school and generally answered various questions posed about schoolwork. More often than not a young child rode on the vor's shoulders for the walk, Primakova's second son and fourth child, turning the whole thing into a strange extended family walk kind of affair.

She could honestly say ballet was not something she ever contemplated learning before, a completely unrelated luxury in learning something that had no combat or eventual career orientated reason to seek out. Master Yaozu was actually greatly surprised and pleased to hear that was part of Mingxia's daily life now, more than he had been to see how life worked in Soviet Russia.

Classes after ballet training weren't exactly as the young Rain had imagine them to be, having never actually attended formal schooling before the social upsets in China made school environments slightly more hostile than both the martial artist who was her brother and the martial arts master who did raise her for a few years felt safe in letting her attend. Not exactly what she expected, but in ways both better and worse than she had assumed.

Mingxia had an embarrassing lack of idea what the world's geography looked like, as well as little idea of what natural or otherwise sciences could be used for. Miss Galina, who taught the geography
classes and related lessons as well as accounting related mathematics for those that wanted it, and the
teacher merely called 'Scruffy', who taught basic sciences and their applications, both didn't seem to
mind helping her by assigning extra work so she could catch up quickly to the rest of her classmates.

They looked a bit bemused at her wiliness for extra work but did help her by pointing out what
focusing upon would catch her up quickly.

As her decent mathematical skills, the fact she knew more of Chinese history than Russian was
excusable due to her nationality, and she could thankfully exceed the competence Primakova would
like to see in her students for home economics, those were the only two subjects she had to work at
hard to catch up with. Rifle practice and gun range time were also actual classes, which were
government requirements so even if Master Yaozu wasn't a fan of that part of her day he didn't do
more than grumble, which she felt little to nothing about taking.

The fact she was better with a rifle than a handgun was just interesting to know, as was ballet.

After classes was Flame user practice, a benefit of criminal flavored schooling the Rain had not
expected at all. While she had been tempted to give miss to it so she could work on evening out the
gaps in her education with the teachers' help, the draw of actually learning more about her Flame
type in a completely no-strings-attached way was a touch too much for her.

That was also the part of the day Mingxia got a front-row seat to how… strange Moscow life was.
For her anyways, and Master Yaozu who could spot a few things himself waiting on his students to
finish their duties and come back for more lessons or help, but no one else seemed to think it was odd
or even something to wonder over.

Until further notice all Flame user training was done off-site, for an internal issue that was pending
correction by the librarian and founder of the school. Actually not having been aware Miss Sonya
actually had the entire thing built and staffed instead of have an 'in' because her mother taught there,
nor that she had a role in it herself, the young Chinese teenager merely looked to where the 'Rain
section' trained instead of wonder why.

One of the teachers, the math instructor Irinei, came with them but wasn't in charge of training Rains
and kept to the watch/guide part vor Bazanov did for them in the mornings. Structuring the Rain
Flame instruction fell to a boy even younger than her, who was merely known as 'Larion the Rain'.
Who took a kind of headcount, compared it to a list he received and gave back to the teacher to
ensure they all were Rains and not an unaware student queuing up for whatever reason, then they all
walked back through several streets and part of the 'home territory' to the other side of the Zolotov
territory where the 'Rain Bar' was.

During those walks Mingxia had personally watched six groups of police try to spread their influence
into Zolotov territory, and end up in full out fights with the local thieves' clan various members
toothing them out. Three residents of the area seeking a Zolotov vor for some kind of issue ranging
from a leaking roof to reporting an 'unsanctioned' murder. After even the Rain Flame instruction she
once had been very gruffly but firmly redirected back into the neighborhood she was living in before
she wandered too far out of Zolotov territory because she got lost.

The vor that took her home that day wasn't remotely polite or kind in nature, but he did step in before
she got hurt being out of their defended territory or wandered too far away and encountering
someone not inclined to her protection. Master Yaozu forcing himself to thank the man was rather
embarrassing, but at least Bazanov inquired if she'd like him to go pick her up until she learned the
way back herself.

He took his friend Ciceron to the lessons anyways, and the Spaniard Rain had a different place to go
home' to so waiting for her to leave would not be an imposition. He was demonstrating what he did know of combat to the martial arts master and they were just generally getting to know each other, and the elderly man had gratefully given leave to take a break and be late for that.

The non-criminal Bazanov. Miss Sonya's brother, who was shockingly nice for a Russian man in this part of Moscow by all appearances.

After Larion released them to do as they would, and she got a bit of personal tutoring in the varied ways other Russian Rains had figured out they could apply their Flames to for various effects and the drawbacks to several of them, Mingxia usually immediately left the group so Cherep didn't have to wait too long for her.

The stuntman didn't seem at all annoyed no matter how long she took to find him, generally waiting for her by ordering himself beer until she was ready to leave, but she could linger for more practice after she was confident on the way home and the man didn't need to guide her back.

"I've really got nothing better to do this month, little Miss Mingxia." Reassured the man when she apologized for the imposition again because she got a slight bit waylaid by the possible discovery of how to compound a Rain's Tranquility with another's and the mechanics of the apparently tricky application, and the plans to test it out to be sure. "Trust me, I once moved here from somewhere else too and know how confusing the streets can be. It's just experience you have to get by getting lost a few times, or at least wandering around with someone that knows the area."

"It's really different." The Rain confessed a bit warily while peering down one of the snowy streets in this intersection, trying to recall which the right way was so they wouldn't end up leaving Zolotov territory and possibly meet someone not inclined to their safety.

In Russian, because if she couldn't understand the lessons then attending school would be pointless so the Mist lead Usov gave her the understanding of his native language with the warning it was the only one they would be helping her obtain without orders. Meaning she should probably work on learning Italian herself, as she already knew Miss Sonya would be relocating them again there sometime around the end of the school year to prevent upsetting too much of the school's normal functions.

The very purple colored Cherep huffed a bit with amusement at her side, hands in his jean pockets and just wandering after her as she tried to guide them home herself today. "Just… a great amount, yeah. Honestly, I've been up and down the entirety of Europe and a fair bit of both Asia and Africa. The only places that are anything like Moscow or even a large part of the Soviet Union I know of are some of the African Countries right now. And they're mostly at war."

"…isn't the Soviet Union at war?"

"Sort of?" Scratching the back of his head before putting his hand back in his pocket, the stuntman shrugged when she peered over and up at him. "There's a Cold War, and the Vietnam thing. But there's no army looking to take over our government or change our way of life by force."

Mingxia blinked at him a few times, not understanding the difference between war and a 'Cold' war. Cherep merely shrugged again. "Soviet Russia's… unique. Let's leave it at that."

With a shake of her head, merely to hide the smile, she glanced down the three street options she had and pointed to their left. "This way?"

"It's not the way we usually go, but a way back yes." Holding out a hand for her he swung her over a
rather large patch of ice to the more plowed street, so she wouldn't have to wobble over the slippery stuff just to cross the street. "I'll take us from here, you've not gone this route yet. Still a good idea to know, if say a fight breaks out on your usual way and you need a detour."

Mingxia wasn't entirely sure how useful knowing how to walk on ice would be for her, but it was really something she hoped she got the hang of sometime soon. Slipping on it was a horrible, and sometimes painful, event. The stuntman had no issues walking on the crackling material, but then again he grew up around here and trained professionally with acrobats.

…and wore heavy boots with deep treads. Which she intended to inquire for the moment someone asked if she had everything she needed.

She had actually slightly doubted Miss Galina when the woman specifically hunted through everything for sale in Hong Kong to find her thick woolen clothing, unprepared for and entirely unsuspecting the absolute frigid winter temperatures here. Snow stacking up to almost waist height of a full-grown adult near her brother's size and sometimes reaching Cherep's shoulder height was… about as bewildering to her as the local balances of power.

New, not entirely something she was sure she liked, but very much a Russian thing in it was pushed to the side as they basically ignored the building snow walls boxing them in.

It would melt come spring, after all.

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(Sunday the 23rd of November, 1969. Museum Island, Mitte District, East Berlin, German Democratic Republic.)

Rather annoyed now, having to spend an extra week stalking the squeaky old German guy who was the First Secretary of the central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany and the Chairman of the State Council of the German Democratic Republic and the Chairman of the National Defense Council of the German Democratic Republic, Sonya literally robbed him of everything he was worth the very damn moment she had the leave to do so.

Walter Ulbricht and his wife Lottie were not really pleasant people to stalk.

Well not everything, she had no use for more than half of his things. Aside the Hans Beimler Medal he finally checked on, which she had to take, and a few books… the Russian robbed the house of everything remotely 'gaudy' as well as half their kitchen and their complete wine stock. The food she dropped off on random doorsteps, the wine was for her mainly, and the rest of the junk was sent on to Mafia Land to make use of.

She left them a few pieces of clothing each, a few pairs of shoes, and their heavy furniture… and a blanket.

Everything else, as long as she could pack it up somehow for transporting, was taken.

Including their damn annoying grandfather clock. Which she broke and burned to complete ash the moment she didn't need stealth anymore.

That did force Sonya to go out of her way to hire a pickup truck to help her transport things without drawing attention, but that was relatively simple enough as she found a semi-abandoned house a few kilometers away from her home burglary and left her loot there then explained it all away as a
moving day with a bit of a shipping shortage.

…still worth it.

Breaking into the home of and robbing the current head of the German Democratic Republic was a hell of a lot more attention grabbing than someone stealing a few paintings no one but a few museums not even open owned, and a lot more of a fuss was kicked up that drew attention off the first 'big' robbery.

Still, Sonya went through the effort of temporarily changing her hair color and picking up her 'librarian' persona again and added in the corrections to her documentation needed to reflect that change. Even if she had a party to attend at the end of next month.

Pausing, the thief pulled a loose hank of her currently light brown hair and eyed how far it reached. She also probably needed a cut, but she'd do that before going back to Moscow for the start of next year. It was easier to put up if it was a touch longer.

Tucking the hair back behind an ear, adjusting her fake glasses as that shifted the thin planes of glass a bit awkwardly to the point light glinted off them and temporarily blinded her, the Russian kept walking to double check her hidden stolen paintings were still where she put them before ordering something to conceal what she would be getting shipped out.

Because she had to wait another full week for old and squeaky to check on his contested medal, she now couldn't pick up a new contract. There wasn't enough time, Sonya had to get her vaccinations redone and then run about getting her dress and assorted accessories for the Vongola Ball.

At least fashions had rediscovered that humans had a thing called a waist and it was occasionally something to show, even if the current popular 'look' was form fitting up top or sweater and baggy loose pants legs. The precursor to bell-bottoms, slacks that suggested one had skirts attached to their knees. At least they didn't look like a tent, and her sister was a fan of the look, so it was an improvement.

Sonya kept musing on her issues with current fashion, even while being redirected away from the northern half of the island rather firmly by the border guards conducting some kind of meter by meter search. As she had to go south anyways it wasn't a problem, but it was likely she had to move the paintings before the search was widened to include the other half of Museum Island.

Somehow. Without getting caught by the heightened patrols and the search effort with several stolen Old Master Paintings.

…not helpful.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 23rd of November, 1969 continued. Museum Island, Mitte District, East Berlin, German Democratic Republic.)

"Miss! Young miss!"

The tiny brunette woman muscling around a bewildering amount of wood paused, carefully twisting around to see if someone was calling her. "Um… hello?"

"How the in the world are you carrying that?" Kevin Hössler asked incredulously as he carefully jogged over the snow-crusted streets to her, the young woman couldn't be much older than him and
yet was carrying around a massive wooden crate as if it contained nothing but air.

"It's empty." She confessed easily, proving his thoughts correct and balancing the awkward container with one hand as she bent to drop it rather absently to the ground. Just to gesture at the empty interior and the lid that sat sideways within it. "We need the wood for a temporary repair at home, and I asked if I could have a crate from the hotel. They said I may…?"

A quick glance, it really was an empty wooden box with solid sides to protect the contents it might be shipped containing, and the East German Grenzauflklärungszug gave the bespectacled woman a second longer look. "Forgive me for asking, but you don't sound like a native."

"Russian." With a shrug, she took the opportunity to blow warmer air hard over her exposed hands while he clicked a few pictures of her empty crate and one of her that made her blink owlishly back at him but otherwise suffer without question or upset. "Do you want my papers?"

"Please." A quick check, because she wasn't trying to cross the border or get in the way and had been rather accommodating to him but it always paid to double-check, he handed back her passport and work visa. "Thank you for your cooperation, Miss Bunina."

'Steshda Bunina' shrugged it off and picked up her unwieldy prize to balance on a shoulder again. "Not a problem. Figured I would have to stop a few times, this probably doesn't look good. If we didn't really need something solid but lightweight... I wouldn't be out here this late."

Probably a broken window fix, it looked about the right size to be used to block a drafty or broken windowsill. Smart of her to ask around the more profitable business if she could make off with something they would likely only see as trash to be removed, especially if wherever or whomever she lived with didn't have the money or time to fix the window even in the middle of winter. "It did look pretty interesting."

"I'm sure." Carefully balancing the wood for a moment, the pretty young brunette started walking on again once she was sure it wouldn't fall. "Have a good evening."

"Good night, miss."

Tracing her steps back, at least a little way, did reveal her footprints circled the nearby hotel on the island and not much further in from what he could see by the waning sunlight. Of course, as the sky was rapidly darkening, he could really assume she went only there but at least it seemed to be true. Some of the other buildings would've already been closed had she been asking around even an hour earlier than this.

She hadn't looked freezing, just a touch chilled, for her to have been out too long in only a heavy wool coat and no gloves or hat.

Russians. She might be pretty, if a bit airheaded to be out so lightly dressed in the middle of winter, but it was a pity her work visa was almost up and he'd probably never see her again.

As that was probably the more interesting part of his night over with, Hössler started to walk back to the rest of his patrol for expanding search for some idiot thief that had the balls to steal some of the remaining artwork in the museums from them. In broad daylight, the ass, then made a fool out of all of them by leaving little to no trace of their presence to answer how it happened or even who it was.

His superiors were less than pleased, and demanding results that would take several grueling hours in the dark to procure. If there was anything to find.

Which they were likely to stomp on first before realizing it might help a search for a slippery thief.
At least they weren't the only ones getting reamed for the oversight of not catching a thief.

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**Tuesday the 25th of November, 1969. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.**

**Kappel** blinked slowly at his usual nurse. "...I beg your pardon?"

"Just keep it in mind, doctor." Tatiana informed him absently, as if what she had just informed him of wasn't unusual or utterly strange, sorting the three vials of vaccinations in her hands to match the order they would be giving them. "Nya-err... Miss Bazanova doesn't believe it, but we had to scramble the last time and I don't feel like doing that again."

He stared at her hard, but the nurse seemed vaguely confused than understanding of his own bemusement. "I shall take your word for it, then."

She smiled wryly, then opened the waiting room where her siblings had been set to wait for them waving the inoculations in her hand. "Nya! I got your shots!"

"Try not to take glee out of giving them for once, Tats." Deadpanned the blonde already seated on the exam table, a jacket and what appeared to be several lengths of chain folded in the violently purple man's hold, sitting with arms barred and appearing bored. "If you could."

"Where's the fun in that?" Asked the nurse brightly, slotting the little glass bottles into a specific order on the counter before pulling a drawer open to retrieve the syringes and disposable hypodermic needles they would need.

"If you have no more business with me," Kappel drawled from the doorway, "I will continue with my rounds and see you when you're done, Nurse Primakova."

"Sure you can trust her with the needles?" Bazanova inquired mildly over her sister's bowed and fire-red head.

"I believe everyone feels safer with her giving shots than with me."

The brother he had not yet met in truth rocked back on his heels, glancing from between his sisters and then to him warily. "...I'm probably going to regret this... but, why?"

"Nazi." Sonya informed him dismissively, not looking away from the needles in the nurse's hands.

"Former." Countered said redhead, sticking the first prepared syringe into one of the three bottles' wax stopper to extract the recommended dosage of the influenza vaccine. "Defected, even."

She raised one shoulder in a shrug to dismiss that, ignoring the dirty look for moving while the Sun user was trying to judge where best to stab her with the needle.

Their brother looked utterly unimpressed with any of their words. "...Nazi. And... you two are fine with that?"

The former Nazi doctor in question heaved a tired sigh through his nose. "Yes I was a member of the National Socialist German Students' League, a subdivision of the National Socialist German Worker's Party. The Nazi Party, for short. I was a medical student during the Third Reich, of the 'Greater Aryan Race' as demanded of by the Nazi regime for students of such skilled professions, with demanded mandatory service in the Sturmabteilung and a requirement to assist with the
"That makes nothing any better." Pointed out the younger man flatly, freeing a hand just to point at him. "You're a Nazi doctor, as a matter of fact it makes it worse."

"Does it?" Inquired the Storm-Cloud Dying Will Flame user curiously, glancing away from the needle perhaps a touch too soon because that was when the nurse quickly jabbed her with the vaccination and made her little sister flinch. "The SS doctors were a bunch of quacks, admittedly… but if he's here and still alive then he has to have some kind of skill."

"Kappel is a perfectly decent doctor." Tatiana insisted, discarding her used equipment for a new sterile set and picking up the next inoculation Bazanova was overdue for. "No, I wouldn't suggest you take his advice for what kind of people to associate with or ask him about the topic of race. Frankly he doesn't volunteer that kind of thing anyways, and I've never heard him so much as mention the propaganda of the Nazis before."

"Because one could go from a 'proper Aryan German' to an 'undesirable inferior influence' by asking the wrong question at the wrong second." Kappel interjected for himself, bitterly but he wasn't able to help that. "It is hard to continue believing in the same ideology when it is proven that one's 'genetic superiority' really did not save one from the same fate as those they tried labeling as 'subhuman'. Which made the difference not something genetic as they tried to claim but decided by another on whims."

Sonya glanced over, blankly but in a forced way that meant she would not ask even if it occurred to her to do so. His usual nurse hesitated, giving him a questioning look because he had never really spoken on the topic before with or around her. On the other hand, their brother rocked backwards slightly again and regarded him in a puzzled manner.

"So… okay." Bazanov offered after a long moment of wary staring. "Still don't like him."

"I do not believe you have to." His younger and blonde sister informed him simply, sighing instead of flinching when another needle was stuck in her arm again. "From the sounds of it, I do not believe he likes it."

The German doctor rolled his eyes and actually entered the examination room instead of lingering in the doorway for this discussion. "What is there to like? The mass brainwashing? Being force-fed propaganda and elitist drivel until I honestly believed the tripe, before I had the truth of it rubbed in my face? Being told we were so special and so important to the success of the Reich, then to see one of those 'so special and important' Germans as a 'political prisoner' on the wrong end of a labor camp?"

"That sounds like a story." Primakova commented a touch hopefully, giving a wry smile when he shot her a look over his glasses.

"'Kappel' was a man I shared the first year of medical studies with." The doctor that had assumed the name now eventually gave in with, dryly because while this wasn't the worst of the things he had been involved with it was a rather steep lesson he didn't particularly want her to experience for herself. "I last saw him as a fellow medical student when our class broke for SA training, then when we reconvened no one quite knew where he had gone. Eventually, in my second year as a medical student assisting with the labor camps, I saw him again. Across the prison yard, just before they shoved his broken body into the furnaces with the rest of the ill or unable to work 'undesirables'."

"Why did you take his name, then?" Asked the nurse, not bothering with the third and final shot her sister needed in favor of badgering him for ancient history.
"Because he started it." The former Nazi bit out with a sharp flick of one hand. "They never bothered to supply us with an excuse for why he was removed from class, and as I was part of the staff at that labor camp it was simple for me to acquire the lists of prisoners and why they were incarcerated. I knew the man, Kappel was no more a 'political dissident and spy' than I was. We had the same grade of 'pure genetics' they obsessed over, raised in nearly similar 'small town' environments, we differed in what we appreciated or liked to do outside our study of medicine but that was to be expected. Yet somehow, for all his 'desirable' traits, he was slaughtered with as much thought as anything was put into in those days."

He plucked his glasses off, cleaning the lenses with a square of cloth he kept in his vest pocket.

"So… I gave them what they wanted Kappel to be."

"If that was all it took, why didn't more Nazis 'defect' like you did?" Demanded the sisters' brother, bluntly but not nearly as hostile as most were when they learned of his former status.

"In the heart of the Third Reich? In a section of society they likely inspected routinely for just that kind of 'anti-patriotic' thoughts?" Sonya answered before the man using the name Kappel could, sounding highly skeptical and just a tad sardonic. "After all that bloody 'work' was already put into trying to justify themselves? Under the watch of the SS, and their very fellow citizens, who would report each other just in case? Really Cherep, any and all that knew or suspected the Nazis were blowing hot air out of their asses had little to no way to 'divorce' themselves from their very government. It was everywhere, and well entrenched in even daily life when the façade started cracking. Think of how hard it would be to announce you favor capitalist ways and all the reasons why in the middle of the Red Square, worse yet how hard it would be to survive that."

Tatiana turned back to her sister, sticking a finger up in her face just to waggle it under her nose. "We're nothing like the Nazis."

"Are we not?" Countered the younger sister dryly, batting away the offensive hand. "It started with silencing opposition because they're 'wrong' or 'not-patriotic'. Then it turned to 'we are better because of such and such reasoning', and anyone that says otherwise are disruptive and should be scorned silent. Beaten for it. Killed. Or otherwise arrested and removed from being able to influence anything with such 'non-loyalist', 'wrong', or just 'illegal' viewpoints. Sometimes in secret. Who am I describing, the Nazis or the Soviet Union's KGB?"

"Yes." Confirmed the only one who had lived through the rise and fall of his former homeland, resettling his spectacles on the bridge of his nose. "You may not be party to the attempted extermination of entire schools of thought or races… yet. But without a counterpoint to balance against, without dissent picking over everything to ensure it, you deafen yourself to anyone that might say 'is this wrong?' Then you may just end up repeating what we Nazis started. Just in a slightly different way, against a different group. These 'capitalists' you strive to be 'better than', for instance."

"That is how it always goes." Sonya continued in a bland tone, nudging her sister's stool with a boot to get the nurse back on the subject of giving her the last shot. "The argument of 'we are better than them', that 'they do not deserve such and such' item or land or what have you, or worse yet 'they are different and not the same as us' so fuck them and who cares if they die off? Or even better yet 'let's take their shit, they do not deserve it for' insert reasons here. Men against women, the Roman Empire against pretty much everyone before it's fall, the several 'Crusades' of Christians against the Muslims and Jews, the Muslims and the Israelis, this king against that king, the 'peasants' against the 'nobles', civil wars, revolutions, this religious justification against another, 'natives' taking back their countries from conquerors, witch hunts, the Spanish Inquisition, the genocide and systematic 're-education and
conversion' of the Native American people into proper 'God-fearing Christians'. The Nazis were just the latest example, and one that was shockingly effective with their hate in this 'enlightened age of reason and science'."

"War is not an answer," Cherep chimed in, waving a hand to dismiss that, "which is pretty obvious given history."

"Says who? There were millions dead from such conflicts true, but calling the method worthless or useless or wrong would actually piss off those soldiers and some great measure of the victims. You are calling their hopes for freedom, from oppression, from being able to stand and say 'this is not right, we reject this from our lives' as wrong? Sometimes it is the only option they had, when that was the only tool they had because the other side had no reason nor desire to listen to why they were 'evil' or 'oppressive', and those that fought paid for such freedoms and rights for their fellow countrymen or fellow 'whatever' with their lives. By saying it was all as bad as any other you are actually hurting a lot of causes that tried to correct injustices and crimes against humanity. Slave revolts, refusals to follow mad or otherwise unfit leaders in their 'birth-or-otherwise right to rule', the denial of Empirical colonization of 'lesser' countries and the damage their 'civilization process' did to the native residents of those lands."

Her brother scowled at her. "Must you?"

"Yes. The very minute you deny or refuse the idea we might be or possibly can be just as bad or worse than the Nazi regime is the very minute you open the door to yet another equally horrifying 'ethnic' or ideological cleansing of the 'undesired'." Snapped back the thief just as irritably. "The same minute you go 'we are more enlightened and that will never happen again', you cement the possibility of a repeat in the near or far future. Obviously we are not all that enlightened just yet, you just have to actually take a look around at current history to see that. China, the African Border Wars, Vietnam, the entire Cold War. Where one side will willingly and with full awareness advocate and commit the oppression or slaughter of the 'other side'. The moment you stop listening to counter arguments, from hearing your opposition, when you surround yourself with only others that share your own views… you fail."

"There are those already decrying the Holocaust as faked." Kappel helpfully informed the younger man in a dry tone of voice, flicking his reading glasses back up his nose. "That it's some Zionist plot against the Nazi Party to discredit it and falsely persecute their so call 'oppressors', that there is no way such a high number of people could have been murdered because 'where are the bodies and records'? Ignoring the possibility and reality of the destruction of both the evidence and any records of the 'Final Solution' just for that very damn reason. History is written by the victors, but some refuse to learn it due to various reasoning both good and ill. It 'isn't possible to kill that many in a short amount of time', for 'no one is that evil for no reason', that 'it couldn't happen without everyone knowing it happened'."

"I know you do not like harming others, Cherep. Along with war and most violent conflicts. But… you are part of a tiny minority." Sonya turned to the man, a slightly regretful half-scowl on her own lips. "For most of the rest of the world, if they had both the opportunity and the 'right' justification, 'murder' and 'war' very much are the answer they would reach for first."

"This isn't supposed to be that hard." Deadpanned Cherep, loosening an arm from the bundle of cloth and steel chain just to pinch the bridge of his nose. "He's a Nazi. A Nazi doctor. They're supposed to be evil and… and not doctors just being doctors."

"You realize, for how much we 'decry' Nazis… no one caught very many of them." Admitted his youngest sister tonelessly, kicking her elder's borrowed stool a touch harder to get her back on the
subject of the last inoculation she was present to receive. "The last rough estimate I saw was speculating? We 'lost' a good several thousand of them, most through South America but a good several handfuls of them in other ways could've gotten all over the world by now. Free of the 'Nazi' label, clear of any suspicion of their crimes, able to continue-"

"Thank you, yes. I get it."

Tatiana rose to her feet, stabbing the last shot for guarding against tenuous deep into her little sister's bicep to reach the muscle. "We are not the next Nazi Party."

"Probably not. The Soviet Union is already staggering, they have to rely on the bratva to keep public order or any sense of daily life going as it is. Odds are it will fall before that could happen... but may I point out the KGB and the SS have similar methods and end-goals. No one really do know how many have been arrested, or what happened to all of them. In either case."

Lifting his face from the hand he had been cradling it in, the brother eyed their little sister oddly. "Are you saying the capitalists have it right, then?"

"Hell no. It is ideology, theories. There is no 'right' answer, just what becomes history and what does not in the end." Sonya scoffed, snagging the chain first to loop around her non-inked up arm and fasten. "According to the original Marxism theories, capitalism is just a phase. Like 'serfdom' and 'the rights of nobility', a step in the evolution of society from where we started from to where we're developing to. Right now it works, because that is what society needs while industry develops to a higher level. Communism, when the proletariat overthrow the bourgeoisie and everything changes from laborers working for owners and money to no owners and personal right to a decent status of living for all just because they are alive and deserve that, actually doesn't exist as The Communist Manifesto speculates."

She held up a finger between her siblings before either could speak their thoughts.

"Allow me to repeat that, speculates. We Soviets are 'communists', but not the type that were called for nearly a century ago now. We are still a state-owned capitalist society, because no matter how you look at it there are still owners and laborers getting paid with and working for a currency. A half-step, at best. It was a guess, by some likely smart people postulating where to go next, a stab in the dark to what would come after the current way of life. Russia skipped the capitalist phase, it should not be a surprise we stumbled. Frankly there should not be a conflict between capitalists and communism at all, but a succession via a revolution once industry outstrips the ability of monetary trade to keep up with and pay for."

Cherep made a face, pointing at her with his freed arm and tucking the other away in a pocket as she took back her jacket. "Wouldn't that put you out of work?"

"Greed is an eternal human vice, along with Wrath and Lust. Someone will always want what they do not have, or just what his neighbor has, or just dead and no longer bothering them. I will admit to some curiosity to how I would be paid in that eventuality but do realize this is decades if not another century or so off." Sonya shrugged into her jacket, then leaned back against the wall instead of immediately get up to leave as it seemed she always wanted to do when she had to visit the hospital for any reason. "May we get back to the point?"

"Right, Kappel's not evil and..." Tatiana trailed off, disposing of the last hypodermic needle and used syringe in the container supplied for that exact purpose, before turning back to the doctor in question. "...sorry, but he did work with and somewhat support utterly stupid and evil shit when he was young."
"…how does that story end?" Asked the brother wearily, turning back to the man that started the entire conversation on philosophy and the pitfalls of blind faith by way of his former allegiance. "The one with… uh…"

"My former classmate."

"…right, him."

"Well… during my second round of assisting with the Reichsarbeitsdienst, the prisoners of the concentration camp I was assigned to somehow ended up with the parts for a short-wave radio and a small generator." The Kappel of now drawled out blandly, flicking his cleaned half-moon reading glasses back up the bridge of his nose again. "Heaven knows how they assembled it and actually managed to use them, when they were watched and observed around the clock by at least staff if not a number of guards. Or a Sturmabteilung trained army doctor doing 'secret' observation of the prisoners. A real mystery, in the end."

Tatiana snorted inelegantly, and a purpled eyebrow cocked up.

"I defected to the Americans when they came to liberate the concentration camp, they returned the favor in ensuring I was not… still brainwashed with Nazi idealism without the counterpoints to the arguments that made it more than disgusting to hold." Continued the former Nazi doctor, after a moment trying not to remember what else the Americans had done for a perpetrator of the crimes against the prisoners of that camp. "I assisted them for some time as both a native guide and fully trained army medic until the Nuremberg Trials started, then I was told 'you have three days, doctor, I'd suggest you run'. So, I did."

Kappel also had no issue selling out the members of Operation Werwolf he knew of, which bought him clemency from the Allied Power's higher military ranks when the bounties started piling up for any and all former Nazi officers. After it became more than apparent not all of them had either fought to their death or run for it, some were lingering to take the German people hostage even if they no longer supported the Nazi views, his knowledge of them and their recruitment measures proved more valuable than his death would have been to certain people.

It was rather impressive what some of the more fanatical would overlook, when seeking medical help from a supposedly loyal Nazi doctor while he had still been forced to help the Third Reich's various operations, even when he no longer believed in their politically whitewashed nonsense.

Pure luck alone some of the prisoners he had assisted in Buchenwald kept him in mind when they returned to their various countries, and a number of the French inmates had involved themselves with rebuilding their country to the point they rose high enough in rank to notice him when he was caught there. It was really thanks to them and the remains of the French Resistance Kappel ever reached Mafia Land, due to their return help and his unwillingness to connect them to ever helping even a defected Nazi he would never leave.

As Bazanova had obliquely referenced near the start of their distraction, he was a known Nazi in Mafia Land. However defected or former or as estranged from the ideology as he was, that did not dismiss the war crimes against humanity he was charged with committing in absentia. Any number of criminal types had already made it apparent the moment Kappel was no longer 'useful' to them, or tried to continue the work of the Third Reich, or even sneezed wrong they would likely lynch him from the street lamps. Gleefully.

He honestly couldn't say he held it against them.

"I still don't like you." Cherep informed him bluntly. "I don't like Nazis or even the idea of racist
hating someone due to the color of their skin or where they were descended from."

Sonya sighed heavily as she got up to join him for the walk out of the hospital. "You realize he was brainwashed with several generations of Germans, yes? Told, taught, and had the ideology repeated to his face as facts for decades before he came to the realization his life was based on lies. It is easy, outside the situation and far from the society that such festering thoughts created, to say it is wrong and no one should have believed it. Or that he should have done something against everything he ever thought he knew, when in reality that would have just killed him as easily as most the victims he could have 'saved' would have been. I will not overlook his actions, nor forget what he was part of, but I do not hold him entirely responsible."

"Some people just get dealt really shitty hands in their lives." Tatiana chimed in a touch wryly, snagging the three slightly depleted bottles of inoculation to return to Pathology. "I'm with Nya. Don't forget, and maybe giving the benefit of doubt about ideology and race is kind of pushing it, but don't do what the Nazis started. Don't hate just because of a title or ideology."

"I don't hate him, I just don't like him." Their brother insisted.

Kappel shrugged that off. "Fair enough. Is your concern over your sisters learning from and being treated by a former Nazi at least put to rest?"

The younger man eyed him warily, then just scowled. "Barely."

(Thursday the 27th of November, 1969. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)

"We always do the weirdest of shit when I visit this place." Cherep muttered, mostly to himself but just loud enough for Sonya to hear perfectly well. "It's a black market, the black market. For murderers and thieves and all sorts of things of ill-repute to sell their ill-gotten gains and services. First we came here for medical records and shots, then for Lisa's pregnancy, now for... more shots. I declare this a logical fallacy."

In English, so yes she was supposed to pick up on that.

She merely tossed the issue of Vanity Fair she had been flipping through into his face. "Is that an objection? Because if it is, we could-"

"Ha, no." He deadpanned, picking the magazine up off his lap and slouching down the other side of the couch to actually read the dratted thing.

"Ha, no."

She merely tossed the issue of Vanity Fair she had been flipping through into his face. "Is that an objection? Because if it is, we could."

"I was about to say 'go shopping', because this is an international island and it has stores that may not be 'listed' in any directory but are stocked with what is currently 'in' to own or wear or what have you." She continued in a deliberate tone of voice, picking up Tatiana's latest issue of Cosmopolitan and eyeing the yellow background behind a yellow dressed model suspiciously.

The first tag line was 'Would you rather be his wife or his mistress? Read here before deciding'.

Discarding that without even cracking open the cover, she sorted through the other 'fashion' magazines Tatiana wanted her to look through before going dress shopping with her.

Given she already felt kind of ill, and she had another four or five more shots waiting once this round was done with, Sonya was basically looking forward to a rather miserable month of December. The end, when she got to steal the bratty Mist and make off with him back up to Moscow for Christmas,
would be nice but right now the blonde just really did not want to move.

She had a jersey knit blanket helping her keep warm, some half a pot of tea left, and her brother on the other side of the room. It would be rather nice... if she didn't have the sniffles.

"Eh... maybe next week."

In Cherep-speak, that was a 'I don't want to, but you might be able to drag me along because that sounds interesting'.

Sonya discarded hunting through the magazines for a tissue, hoping she didn't rip this one in half too.

Her brother blinked when her sneeze rocked the couch they were sitting on back a bit, not tipping over because he counterbalanced her occasional attempts at knocking herself over, looking up at her for a moment as she grimaced over the mess she had just made. "So... soup? Lunch? Things of that nature?"

"Urg." The best use she had for tissues was mopping up the snot off her fingers, mainly.

Involuntary didn't entirely mean unconscious reflexes, as they had learned in Kappel's first lesson of 'Cloud Flame users are really destructive so don't fuck with their reflexes without adequate room'. While the Soviet Storm-Cloud didn't break anything in her sleep, her bed or the people she slept with, if she was awake and tried half of that shit...

Sonya tried to refrain from sneezing while sitting down, or leaning against anything, for this very reason.

Stupid super-strength bullshit.

Thankfully she only had so much air to forcefully expel, and the range for a sneeze was short, otherwise she'd never be able to go outside during the spring or fall seasons. Standing upright also tended to help a lot, as apparently she somehow countered her own forces when using that ability already.

Hence how she could pick up more than humanly possible without breaking her knees or back. It was a reflex to her as much as breathing was, thankfully. That part she really didn't want to screw around with and somehow mess up, so what was just was and that was it.

"You need to eat. Doctor's, or rather nurse's in this case, order. Soups, liquids, whatever solids you feel like you can keep down."

"I am not that sick." Protested the thief irritably, snagging another two tissues in the vain hope she could clean up her hands enough to not feel gross picking anything up with her fingers. "I just do not feel like eating anything."

"Soup it is." Cherep informed her snootily, tossing the magazine back and getting up. "I'm hungry, so you should be hungry."

First he readjusted the couch's position, given it had slid back a full foot from where it had been when they took opposite ends. Then he wandered off to see what was in the fridge.

Sonya suffered through it rather gracefully in her own opinion, mainly because it put her back in range of the wastebasket moved just so she could dump used and mainly ripped up tissues into it. "There are some hopefully no longer dried beans soaking in the pot on the stove, Tats had the idea of putting on a kettle of pork and bean soup to leave warm overnight for however long it lasts. She's
starting to get called in emergency cases, most of which seem to happen in the middle of the damn night."

"Sure, sounds good. What's left to do?"

"The pork stock, there's some bones thawing in the fridge's bottom drawers."

The stuntman paused while looking at the bones, scratching the back of his head. "Erm... she left it a bit late, that part."

"You can start it for her. I was going to do it... but I think I should avoid the kitchen right now."

"Sound plan. I like it." With that shot at her current condition, or more likely her cooking skills, given he bent to gather up the bones and some vegetables out of the crisper drawer. "Still need something to eat now, though."

"Order up something. Or go fetch it."

"I think not." Dismissed her brother quickly, hunting through what the nurse had stocked the fridge with curiously. Glancing through what was in the freezer, he quickly shut that and hunted through the back ranks of what was available by sticking half of himself into the fridge. "What's the half-full jar of red stuff?"

"Kvass."

"Borscht it is."

Sonya frowned at his back, because with what Tatiana had left of the stuff making enough for two would mean they had to make more fermented beet liquid soon. Then she had to sigh and stand up, staggering a little because her lower body was pretty much mummified in her blanket and she didn't want to rip up her sister's favorite covering, as she waited for the next sneeze to happen.

"You could ask me to come over there and weigh down the couch." Cherep informed her, ordering his vegetables and snagging a knife for them then hunting around the cupboards for a pan to roast the bones a bit before boiling. "Just saying."

"You will be running back and forth every five minutes."

"I, little sister, am here for you. Nursing things, again. You're my second Flame user this year. Seriously, I should start charging for this." Pausing, the stuntman eyed the hallway that lead to the two rooms this suite had and the bathroom. "Or we could borrow one of your bookcases and that could pull duty as 'counterbalance'."

"Do not."

"It was a suggestion." He teased, finally digging a pan and another pot out of the bottom cabinets for his soup making efforts. "I really don't mind being here if you need me, Nya."

"I do, you have better things to do than babysit me."

Like deal with his 'new' minion Rain guy or prepare for his world tour. Maybe line up a set of bikes, because while Master Liam would insist on him taking a break after every spill another 'ring leader' might not be that generous. Investigate safety equipment and any new breakthroughs in that area, plot out what to do and say in various stops because not all of it would be in countries where his undying abilities could be fudged with a little by rumor alone.
His first minion should've been a Mist. They were downright invaluable as an aide, and helped so much in keeping things unnoti-

Interrupted by the expected yet still surprising sneeze, Sonya basically whimpered as her abused sinuses protested the renewed strain. Eyes watering as she held a hand over her stinging nose, she sniffed weakly and glared down at the mess of magazines that were now all over the damn floor.
"...fuck."

"Why not try laying down?"

"I already sneezed my bedside lamp off my end table."

"I meant on the couch, silly." Cherep offered lightly, waving a slotted spoon over the shoulder at her as he arranged the bones to roast in the oven with his other hand and kept an eye on the base stock of the soup they would be having. "On your back, aim somewhat up or at least away from anything breakable."

"What do you think I have been doing?"

"Aiming at me."

A snort of a laugh turned into a cough, so the thief tried his suggestion. A nap sounded perfect anyways. "Wake me up when there is soup."

Oddly, he turned fully to eye her now. "We're not expecting anyone, right? No visitors, no one you've been meaning to talk too?"

"...not as far as I am aware." Sonya responded a bit slowly, confused, as she lowered herself to sit on the middle of the couch instead of lying down as she had intended. "Maybe Bjørn, but I am not expecting him any time soon."

"Good. Just asking."

"...possibly Renato? Erm… we do tend to at least coordinate what we get the brat for Christmas, but the kid gave up mine for a school club function thing and he might not know that." Continued the thief in a puzzled manner, now eyeing his slightly tense back. "Fong might actually come and ask about old man Yaozu and his little sister Mingxia, if he returns anytime soon."

A wary purple eye stared back at her for a moment. "...right. Let me go write that all down.

"For what?"

"Messages? In case you're sleepy and not up to talking?" Cherep indirectly lied to her face brightly, suddenly abandoning his soups to bounce over and raid the furniture for the pad of paper and pen she had been using to note down current fashions she wouldn't mind for Tatiana to look over when she was off shift. "You're kind of a bear when we wake you up before you feel ready to be."

Sometimes the nurse got back at weird hours, so notes were now sometimes the best way to continue a conversation with the Sun user. Sonya did help him sort of reorder the magazines back on the coffee table to help, what she could reach from the middle of the couch, as she wondered if she wanted to know what he was lying to her about.

He'd tell her if it was that important, right?

Maybe it was just the fact she did talk to other criminal types he wasn't really a fan of?
Triad assassins and Italian *Mafiosi* were not his ideal criminals, from the look of things. As she couldn't blame him, she really only liked two from each group right now, the thief let it go.

**(Friday the 28th of November, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)**

*Shamal* eyed his *mamma*'s Lackey oddly as he slipped up the seat across from the guy to see what he needed him for. "*Why?*"

*"Because it is for you she's moving to Italy, and that means if you do not like where you live she will not be happy with me."* Björn informed him helpfully, laying out five thick folders on the low table positioned between the Italian Mist and the Icelandic Lightning-Storm. "*I would rather keep my Dama happy, if at all possible. So, if you prefer one over the other I would like to know to keep her that way when using her money for something this big.*"

A fair enough series of assumptions to draw, so the younger boy did pick up the first file and glance at the picture clipped to the inner part. Then he slapped it closed and flicked wide brown eyes back up at the older guy. "...*it's a castle.*"

"...*yes?*" Björn helpfully gestured to all the folders, including the ones the Mist had not yet picked up. "*They all are, actually. There's another pile of mansions, but I am less sure one of those may suit.*"

He thought his *mamma* had meant a *small* house in Italy's countryside, not a *castle.*

Trying *not* to let his imagination run wild on himself, Shamal peeled the first one open and looked over the other pictures included with the thick stack of papers. There were ten polaroids included with descriptions and the date taken scribbled on the bottom border, of the rather run down but still gigantic stone building and the included courtyards. Plural.

...this one had a *stable* on the grounds. His godfather would *not* be able to say learning horseback riding with the club sampler was a waste of time if they got horses.

Far be it for a *Mist* to inform another that he expected something smaller and less grandiose. If there was the possibility of a stable, they were getting a stable.

With horses.

*"Who all will live here?"* It would be really empty and lonely if it would just be him and *mamma,* and *castles* had staff and maids and stuff. That was really way too much for just a godmother and godchild.

The Lackey sighed heavily, reaching into his suit jacket to pull a much-creased list out and open it up for him to see the list of names.

Whatever it was wasn't entirely in Italian, English, or Cyrillic. Some were complicated spiky figures, and a few others looked like stylized houses at first glance. More or less unreadable without a bit of help, but... there were *nineteen* names. Some with question marks added afterwards and at least one pair of names together. "...*all of them?*"

*"This is all family and friends, who may or may not visit or otherwise require a semi-dedicated room if not a guest one."* Deadpanned the blond man simply. *"This does not include whomever else might attach themselves to Dama's staff, at least three have joined in the last half a year, as well as*
excludes the staff the upkeep of any such building able to hold them all would require. These are merely how many rooms may be required that I know of right now."

Shamal held out a hand, getting the list passed over so he could make it make sense.

His godmother, himself, her three siblings, her parents, the Lackey across from him, Miss Galina, Mister Scruffy, Usov with the possibility of his parents depending, Miss Anna, someone named 'Mingxia', a… master? Yaozu, possibly the boy called Larion and his parents if so, Mister Renato, a guy called 'Fong', someone named Green, the greatly unlikely requirement of a 'Viper', a possibility someone named 'Ren Cai' with the less likely requirement of a set of parents or just a mother, a suit of rooms to be left for a Sky and associated Guardians if one visited or it was needed, at least five to ten guest rooms. Then the staff, whatever they might require.

...twenty-five or so names, on nineteen lines. In all actuality at least thirty or so 'semi-dedicated' or outright claimed rooms to live in. Just rooms. Not a living room, or parlor, or a library, or anything else that would be needed to live comfortably.

They'd need a butler guy, like here. At least five or so footmen, to help with cleaning the heavier things or just be hands to help a whole fleet of maids keep order. A kitchen staff, a garage maybe?

So… about twice that in assorted staff-people who might live there and need their own rooms or part of the castle to live in. Twenty to forty, depending on what else a castle came with.

Like stables, with horses.

Shamal pulled the Constructed understanding of the people listed off the paper and into the air, settling in to match what they would like and what was available to the files between the two of them. "Mamma will appreciate it if it's not just me who likes it, but I don't know some of these names. Help?"

"Of course." Bjørn reached into his case of files for yet another one, this one a much amended and heavily Mist warded that made the younger Mist sit up straight.

...that was fantastic. Shamal wanted to learn to do that. He didn't know what it was, but the mere fact it made the hairs on his arms stand up on end like they did when Miss Anna took him through her mirrors made it interesting.

"I don't know more than the basics for some of them, but I do at least know where most are from and what they consider 'modest' living… Shamal? Something wrong?"

"Nope." He made a grabbing motion for the file, getting it and carefully poking the mass of hostile Mist Flames to understand what they would do.

Immediately forgetting what he was holding likely meant whoever it was would not be nice about whatever lay under that 'forgetfulness' layer. A Constructed understanding he stored in the floating list of names reminded him what he was doing and what it was for, but also made him a lot more cautious of the file.

...of course, that also meant he was a lot more curious about it.

If he did something stupid, both his godparents would not be amused. "Who made this?"

"I did?"

"I meant the Mist Flames protecting it." Shamal clarified his question a touch exasperatedly.
"Ah… Viper did."

There was a 'Viper' on the list to have a room dedicated to him or her.

Doing the 'smart' thing would be asking or pestering the originator about how and what it did, no matter how tempted he was to just poke more at the Mist Flames leaching out of the file. His godparents would be highly unamused if he risked himself without a good solid reason for it for stupidly investigating something he knew was out of his class.

Curiosity didn't seem to be one such reason to poke at it.

Reluctantly, the younger Mist set the file down and actually looked at what it contained. "Okay, well… Mister Renato would probably like a firing range."

Bjørn snorted slightly. "Dama would likely like a big library, and maybe some hidden rooms to hold stolen books."

"Think Scruffy would like a work room? He didn't really like bending over his work on a couch, he said his back hurt doing that."

The Lackey pulled a fresh sheet of paper to make notes upon and a pen from his vest pocket, even if he had a Constructed list going already. "Him and Verde both, likely. Perhaps a few extra rooms to turn into a laboratory?"

Shamal looked at the first summary of what was included in the first castle. "...could a 'remodeled' dungeon work?"

Blinking as he pulled his head up from his list, and eyeing what the Mist had on his as 'stables' were already on that one, the man then looked at him blankly. "...good question, I don't know."
"You're being called, Nurse Tats." Cherep informed Tatiana, waving the receiver of the suite's phone at the redhead when a head popped up from the nest of blankets that migrated to the floor of the living room due to the 'sneeze danger'.

The nurse in question eyed him suspiciously for a long moment, returning her gaze downward where their rather sick little sister was curled up in a ball half on her. "So rude... why is she only cuddly when she's ill or sleeping?"

"It fits her general sense of irony."

"...hey, Cherep? Want to go into work for me?"

He eyed his older sister suspiciously himself for a long moment. "No, not really."

The Sun user pouted, batting wide blue eyes up at him. "Please...?"

"No." He refused again with a huff of a laugh, crossing the room to instead give her a hand with rearranging things so the blonde woman wouldn't startle and do her whole suspiciously-half-awake thing for an hour or so. "Come on, up lazy bones. My turn to get cuddles."

Tatiana made a rude sound as he pulled her up to her feet. "I see your dastardly plan now, you're just after the warm spot I leave behind. That way Nya clings because you're warmer than she thinks she is."

Cherep snickered, because Sonya had already stolen that 'warm spot' and shifting her out of that for himself was a fight he wasn't going to win ever. "Something like that, sure. I don't think I can do your job anyways, no Sun Flames."

Stretching now that she was off the admittedly well-padded floor, the redhead sighed heavily as she dropped her arms. "Sun Flames make up like... a tenth of what I do these days. All you'd have to do is wander after Doctor Kappel for a few hours, writing down or doing what he says and general nurse things you do perfectly well from the look of things."

"Yeah... I kind of specifically learned how to fix my own 'injuries' before they could 'heal' wrong on me." Admitted the stuntman wryly, turning his attention to how he would manage at least touch if not sight on their very grumpy and sick little sister. "Also, no. I don't like your doctor."

It would really only take one person she didn't know and feel safe near to startle the thief into taking off for somewhere else. They weren't sure if she would abandon the condo for another part of the island to seek out the 'safety' of her other friends or whoever it was she looked for when it happened, as when she curled up to Arseniy that one time. Hopefully not but then again... Sonya wasn't exactly thinking straight right now.

If she could string together a coherent thought right now, much less communicate it, he'd be pleasantly surprised.

"I'm starting to hate Cloud Voodoo, even more than I used to." Tatiana groaned out, then started actually moving to reassemble herself to leave for the hospital. "Nya did her leg some time ago, and two bullet holes. Kept her walking and her blood inside of her in a pinch, but we're not sure if the
cysts she ended up with were from what cause. Her using Cloud Flames to replicate her own flesh, Storm Flames eating the bullets then the remains getting healed over, a hostile Sun healing under duress or just a tired one, or what."

Blinking at that news, the stuntman turned to eye the nurse's profile. "Cysts?"

"Slightly painful ones. So, hopefully, you've not caused yourself them if it's Cloud Flames doing it. I haven't mentioned that part to her, because belief is a stupidly tricky thing to work around sometimes." She smiled a bit weakly at him, taking a seat on the abandoned and slightly lower than normal couch that had been stripped of its' cushions to pull on a pair of loafers. "Really will appreciate it if you can stand another checkup, but I won't ask you get it done here if you don't want to. Just... somewhere. Soon please."

"Sure." Cherep promised her, because what she asked was really open to where and he was slightly curious about the answer himself. "I'll do it..."

...he wasn't entirely sure where was safe enough if not here where his medical records were something he could walk out with. He had a few crashes the last couple of years, and they did know it was somewhat easy to spot the old damage from his 'Voodoo'. A full medical check was probably overdue, but if he went to a 'civilian' doctor...

Sighing heavily, he rubbed a hand over his face. "I don't want even a 'former' Nazi to look me over, Tats. That's just too far out of my comfort zone. Someone else?"

"The doctor you first saw is still here." Tatiana volunteered easily, as if he wasn't slighting the guy she apparently learned most of her stuff from.

Which made him feel kind of like a heel, an unapologetic heel because even so he wasn't going to change his view of Nazis and anything related to that no matter what point his sisters had but he was not comfortable with the idea, so he was going to avoid anything to do with his sisters' usual doctor. "Any ladies yet?"

"Erm... one I'm pretty sure is also a practicing assassin who usually works in the maternity ward in-between kills?" Cherep pulled a face at her, the redhead just shrugged. "Sorry, slim pickings here if you want a few specific traits in your doc."

"Can you do it yet?"

The nurse pursed her lips thoughtfully, sliding a finger under her heel to slot her foot into her shoe and finish getting ready to leave. "...maybe? Let me check that out, and the procedure requirements here. They're a bit of a mess of international regulations, so it might take me a few days."

He jerked a thumb at the ball of blankets and thief that was their very sick little sister. "I have the time."

"I might have to get Kappel to sign off on it." Tatiana warned him as she snagged her sweater jacket and her purse, smiling a bit wanly when he just shrugged. "Alright then, I'll set you up for next week if possible."

"Thanks." Drawled the Cloud wryly as she left him to 'keeping the thief in place' duties, returning to contemplating how to shift his little sister so she wouldn't squirm out of his hold and 'retreat' even farther into weirder places.

The floor wasn't really all that odd, with how hard Sonya could sneeze when she was awake it was probably a better idea than a piece of furniture she had already broken the legs of sometime last
During the first time, when they had an equally sick but much younger thief, the second time she got startled by the clan’s neighborhood nurse coming around for more vaccinations and updating records… Sonya somehow out-snuck Lisa and ended up sleeping in a cabinet under the kitchen sink for a few hours before they could find her again. Cherep wasn’t up for a game of hide-n-seek with everywhere the Storm-Cloud could stuff herself comfortably, so the floor it was.

His fellow Cloud coughed weakly a few times, ending with a sneeze that wasn’t nearly earth-shaking but painful enough she flinched away from that direction for a moment as if that would help. Quickly, he dropped half on Tatiana’s abandoned spot so Sonya would end up curled into his side as she sought out her warmer previous position once the pain in her sinuses died down.

A slitted purple eye cracked open to regard him suspiciously for a long moment, meaning that unfortunately the phone ringing had woken her up somewhat and the relatively calm discussion afterwards had probably not helped to put her back to sleep.

As long as no one knocked on the door, or more stupidly entered when Tatiana had informed the vory she would greatly appreciate it if they took care of any injuries themselves and keep visitors away for the next few days, hopefully the thief wouldn’t decide to relocate herself.

Cherep thumped his head on the ground with a sigh, as Sonya squirmed closer to go back to sleep as warm as she could get with a Cloud and not a Sun providing extra body heat to leech off of.

It was almost guaranteed they would startle the thief too much eventually, trying to keep the Storm-Cloud contentedly napping through her illness was practically impossible. Especially here, with a phone connection and people his little sister didn't trust down the main hall of this half of the building.

His wonderings would probably be put to better use in figuring out where she would bolt to if someone she didn't know entered the suite.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 29th of November, 1969 continued. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

"You have a call, Primakova. From someone named Bazanov."

Oh shit.

The nurse palmed her face with the hand not holding the receiver of the phone built into the nurse's station she had been asked to check in with over the PA system, hoping it wasn't about a disappearing thief. "...right, patch it through. Syndicate related."

"Noted, one second."

(Sunday the 30th of November, 1969. Renato's Apartment, Mafia Land.)

As he had specifically invested in a few security measures that couldn't be seen from outside his windows or disabled without setting them off, Renato had not expected company as he took a brief break before catching the last few hits he would do this year.
Not that it was bad company, a snuggling and leggy Russian female in his bed was a pleasant surprise to wake to, but this was not the next meeting he had expected between them.

The blonde woman contentedly napping half on him, under the covers of his bed, also proved he either needed to update his security or figure out how the fuck she got in quickly. As well as a wonder to puzzle over how he hadn't woken up to her crawling in beside him and note the fact he was probably overdue for a little distraction of the female persuasion if he had unconsciously no problem with one joining him in his bed.

Running a few fingers of his free hand through his messy hair, the hitman wondered if he was annoyed or just surprised. Or annoyed he was surprised.

He had asked she leave the brat out of it if she ever crawled into his bed, and Sonya was frank enough to take that as an open invitation from the look of things. Technically she had the permission to do this, but he would really like to know why she was in his bed at all… possibly pregnant or not.

She coughed weakly into his sheets, curling up tighter against him as a shiver racked up her spine. The cough was probably explainable, she smoked rather frequently when she was bored or irritated and that lifestyle choice did hold obvious drawbacks. Shivering, on a tropical island curled up to a user of Dying Will Flames of the Sun, should be fucking impossible.

As a matter of fact, Renato was a bit overheated right now and he was practically buck naked. "Little dragon lady," a few pokes to her bare left arm, lacking even the chains she normally set her jewelry weaponry upon, earned him a cracked open violently light purple eye, "…okay then."

Apparently, he would be sleeping in today.

There was nothing coherent in the Soviet Storm-Cloud's thoughts, aside a mild annoyance and some vague recognition. An ache was starting up, likely she had a headache or something and he was now picking up on it as she recognized the feeling and sort of acknowledged it, but other than all that there was only a dragging tired feeling and a nearly sensual appreciation for heat he gave off.

Already half closed to start with, the thief merely shut her eye and shoved her face into his chest to go back to sleep without a word.

He'd seen sick Clouds before, while the general irritability and the utter reluctance to do anything but get comfortable and sleep it out was pretty much par for the course with them… being sociable while so ill wasn't in their natures. Self-indulgence was the order of the cure for them and getting them to share even a blanket from their little nests would be like pulling a dragon's tooth.

Pun fully intended.

Sonya had a Sun user to cuddle with if she wanted in her odd ways. Her sister, who may or may not be working. While missing that kind of shared body heat was understandable if the other Sun felt charitable about her ill sister's condition, it didn't explain why the younger woman walked half the island in the middle of the night to find him for more if she wanted it.

Without even a miniaturized polearm on her for the protection.

Without anything on her from the looks of it, and barefoot from what he could feel. A tank top and hopefully a pair of form-fitting shorts was not what one should wear out and about in the middle of the night around here… or the early morning hours.
Sick Storms weren't all that much better than Clouds in being grumpy and a pain in the ass, but they generally tried staying awake if miserable for the entire time they were ill and ensured everyone around them felt equally as bad as they did. If they would admit it getting into the way of their lives. Being ill usually screwed with whatever they were fanatical about and made them more and more bitchy as they oh so sourly waited out the sickness until they could get back to it.

Obviously, she was pulling hard on the more Cloud side of her Flames than her Storm right now… but there was something else going on for this sneak-cuddle session to happen.

Frankly, social cuddling when sick was more a thing he would've expected out of a decently powerful Sun user. About half of his Flame type overly Activated whatever it was making them ill as well as their own immune systems, leaving off the internal energy burning that normally kept them at higher than 'normal' base temperatures and so active. Even minor colds tended to become exaggerated for a shorter period of time most other were sick with the same, and it made them uncomfortably cold after so long being overly warm…

No wonder Sonya was all over the charts in behavior. A Hard Cloud, bit of Soft Storm, and likely with a touch of Hard or Soft Sun to top it off. A powerful loner that liked strong things and scorned the weak or useless, with obsessive traits over 'her' few things, that could be sociable more than normal.

The woman was a Flame user's mutt. Currently a sick mutt, who would be both self-indulgent and utterly unrepentant about cuddling whomever she wanted right now.

…who might or might not be pregnant and sick.

The hitman knew perfectly well she didn't use her third Flame type, ever. He'd been looking for years if she had, and she had to seek out his or her sister's help for injuries still. Wouldn't matter how apparently strong or weak those secondary types showed up as, as long as she could use one the rest were actually that strong as well.

Equally a strong Sun as she was a Cloud or Storm would explain this sneak-attack-cuddle thing. Unwilling to verbalize a weakness for another's presence but ornery enough to take it anyways, only for the people she liked and sought out for socialization when the whim hit her. Likely a Soft Sun like him then, if it wasn't a facet of her Hard Cloud Flames messing with any assumptions that could be drawn about it.

That would also explain why she kept wearing gold jewelry to the Balls. A touch of Sun Flames, a touch of gold on top of her dress color.

Renato slapped his free hand over his face, irritated she had slid that under his nose for two years now. She hadn't even been coy about it, blatantly wearing all her 'allowed' colors and letting others think what they would about how she color-coordinated herself. Gold jewelry with purple stones paired with a red dress the first time, similarly gold jewelry with red stones worn with a purple dress the next.

His front door opened not too much longer later after that exasperating realization, setting off the clatter of a bell he had nailed just over the lip of the doorway to ring if anyone opened it even an inch. Which made Sonya start, those still purple eyes opening up again to fix unerringly on the bedroom door suspiciously.

Voices speaking Russian, a male asking if it was really okay to just break into a hitman's apartment like this and a more recognizable response from the Sun using nurse who claimed the woman in his arm as a sister dismissing the issue as long as they were smart about it, at least meant he likely didn't
"need the gun tucked away between the bed frame and the wall. "Tatiana, did you happen to lose someone?"

"…oh good, she's here. And we're not going to get shot."

"…yay."

"Oh shut up, Cherep. It could've been worse, she could've ended up under a bar table somewhere else on the island." Tatiana snipped back at the other voice, loudly walking through the apartment and opening the bedroom door with a flourish just to give her little sister a highly unamused look. "I'm severely tempted to let her wake up here, then maybe she'll start believing us when we say she wanders when sick and someone she doesn't know enters where she's at."

"…this is a new one to me too." Renato admitted blandly, glancing from the woman in his bed to the one framed in his doorway and regretting the situation if not the utterly lovely view. Redheaded nurse in her work uniform heading to his bed, barely dressed thief… more interested in his body heat than his body but he'll take what he could get from that corner. Unfortunately spoiled by the highly unimpressed scowl worn by the brother as he followed his older sister into the hitman's bedroom.

The Italian Mafioso was well acquainted with his luck, but sometimes it was equally as shitty as it was a blessing and that needed a moment of thought occasionally. "Does this happen often, then?"

"Not really. This is like… the third time ever she's bolted while sick." His fellow Sun informed him with a tired smile. "I didn't know you were back, tall, dark, and snarky. Otherwise I would've caught you for a word about this. Thank you for not shooting her either."

"So… not often enough to have a general idea what she's doing." Concluded the still prone man thoughtfully, ignoring the implied 'did you catch her at it' question, rubbing Sonya's back to lull her back into a nap or something with the hand attached to the arm she was laying on. "How did it happen if you, if not she, was aware it is a possibility?"

"The condo has maids, they do a twice a year deep clean of the place even if we're there or not."

"Sloppy."

"I'm aware, thank you." Tatiana sniffed, nettled at the criticism, as she sat on the edge of his bed to check over the thief still not napping anymore but getting there if a bit more time was spent with nothing happening. "Someone moved out, they were early this year and with the normal schedule they should've been another day or two before reaching our floor."

Depending on the security and how easy or hard it would be to know if anyone sold their quarter, half, or full floor of their condo building it was an easily understandable mistake. Renato hadn't been able to get Tatiana's floor or the name of her syndicate while stalking her before they had been introduced, so the hitman let that slide. "How long until she's… less sick?"

"Erm, about a day or more? She should stop being so zombie-like soon, but she'll still fall asleep if you let her for probably a day after even that." As a less powerful Sun, the nurse could and did take a general temperature by hand. She frowned prettily, looking thoughtful as she then felt up the neck right under little sister's jawline. "Her fever broke, so likely a few more hours before she starts actually recognizing people. Maybe half a day to graduate to half-assed responses to anything spoken in her direction."

The older Russian sister was wondered why her little sister did this kind of thing, in sheer
exasperation.

Well, as he could relieve her mind a little, he informed her the usual responses and what her mutt of a little sister's Flame types modified the 'usual' behaviors for miserably sick Dying Will Flame users into.

"I haven't noticed that. The over Activation." Mused the busty nurse thoughtfully, petting her sister's hair once before withdrawing her hand. "I knew you were stronger than me… maybe Avdotya's run into it by now, but I didn't think she was stronger than me. She's never gotten the hang of her Sun Flames."

"That really matters little with split-Flames. It all comes from the same pool of willpower, as long as one Flame type is 'that' strong the rest are too. She's a damn good Cloud user, so while not as strong as say… me, she's really a more powerful Sun than you are."

Soviet methods for Flame development seemed more geared to getting the weaker users up to a moderately useful level across the board, rather than focusing on the standout examples and what they could develop further into. Different than the European standards, where if you weren't exceptional it was almost mundane to have Flames than anything to boast of. A different method than an encouragement for baby or weak Sun Flame users might help Sonya more than trying to repeat what works for the mass majority, and Renato fairly itched to help her develop her own Sun Flames a little.

"Well, if she could only use it maybe we wouldn't have the same issue as we did earlier this month." Not remotely insulted to hear it or even sour over being out-performed by her little sister in her own Flame type, just wryly exasperated which meant there was likely an interesting story behind that, Tatiana leaned back while still having her ass perched on his bed to give him a very promising smile. "Can you spare us a day, tall, dark, and snarky? We probably really should ensure she knows she does this kind of thing, and you're probably the best evidence we can give her."

"What happened earlier this month?" Asked the hitman instead of buy the bait in her smirk, well aware what his fellow Sun was angling for in that and not biting.

"I'm pretty sure," interrupted Cherep a bit blandly, shooting his older sister a look, "that abandoning her in a man's bed she's not expecting to wake up in is not something we should be doing. Because we specifically told her I was here to keep her from breaking or otherwise burning things while sick, while also trying to keep this kind of thing from happening."

The Italian Mafioso snorted. "Already failed a bit there, didn't you?"

A glare shot at him through naturally purple eyes was about as adorable as a fully-grown cat's reproachful look for spooking it, and not intimidating in the least. "I was trying to get her a glass of water so she's not so achy waking up after nearly twenty-four hours of straight sleep. If you don't have sight or touch on her and she decides where she is isn't as safe as she likes, she disappears in a blink. You try catching a thief of her skill level before she can bolt from you."

Ah… unlucky for him.

Rolling his eyes, because he had tried that very thing and knew how hard it was to catch her when she didn't want to be and was feeling perfectly fine, he looked back at the sister simply sitting by as that digression occurred. "I can spare a day, I have some maintenance to do anyways before I pick up a few more hits to do. I rather wanted to speak to her myself sometime soon, but that can certainly wait a few weeks if she doesn't wake up by then."
"I'll leave you Cherep to run errands." That warning given, Tatiana shot him a smirk and stood up to face her utterly unhappy brother. "Sorry, little brother. But really something she should learn before catching something out and about in the world instead of near family."

"Yeah… but does it have to be the hitman?"

"Could be an assassin instead." Pointed out the nurse pragmatically, earning an even more disgusted look for the point. "Or she could stuff herself under her favorite bar's countertop and surprise the hell out of some poor bartender."

Renato snorted with amusement. "Am I the best of bad options, then?"

"Pretty much." Tossed his fellow Sun user over a shoulder brightly, waving a hand as she left the room. "Play nice, boys. I've got to work until about seven, we'll move her back around then if she doesn't wake up even halfway."

The hitman and the stuntman eyed each other as she left the apartment, re-locking the door without the key. "Wallet's on the dresser. There's a corner convenience store about two streets south of us, I don't have anything for someone sick."

Eyeing the folded billfold of leather, he shrugged instead and turned on a heel. "I'll get it, we were running low anyways."

Eh, it got the man out of his apartment. Renato kind of needed a pair of pants before he was getting out of bed when he had company over.

…although, getting out of bed when he had a still shivering thief clutching weakly at his rib cage would be interesting. Sonya was also still half-aware, meaning he let go and it was possible she’d decide to bolt on him too.

Hmm… issues.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 30th of November, 1969 continued. Renato's Apartment, Mafia Land.)

"…there is a branch of theology actually devoted to just that. Jus ad bellum and jus in bello, the 'right to go to war' and the other 'right conduct within war' which is less important for your question." Renato's voice drawled somewhat far away but still audibly, making Sonya wonder what the hell the Mafioso was doing in a drowsy way. "With Christianity and the Mafia's 'soldier' ranks, most things were taken from that first one. It goes all the way back to ancient Rome, got clarified through at least two major Saints if not countless more minor ones, and clearly states what we Catholic Christians should keep in mind when it comes to committing violence and the conduct we take with it."

"But you're mafia. Criminals. You're not going to war, you're just killing people." Cherep pointed out, honestly confused to the point just anyone would be able to pick up on it so he was either being honestly curious and trying not to piss someone off or just being polite.

The dork.

Her sinuses were clogged, and her head felt stuffed of cotton, pressing the heel of her hand against the very top of the bridge of her nose slightly did relieve some of internal pressure.

"For the purpose of your question, the illegality of criminals overall isn't really the issue. That there
is a proper authority making the calls for violence is, and that would be the Dons and the few other organizations' heads. If we were to take that criminal and unlawful behavior as the only criteria to be concerned with, we'd end up in another Mafia War before long. Which, thankfully, isn't the point of jus ad bellum."

"So, what is?"

The thief cracked an eye open, then shut it hurriedly. Too bright, and it made her headache worse.

"That violence, as long as it is directed by a recognized authority for more than just personal gains and preferably to protect the lives they are responsible for, is not against Christian doctrine. 'Thou shalt not kill' is a mistranslation of the original verses made by King James. It should really translate more to 'you shall not murder', where 'murder' means the deliberate and willful taking of innocent human life by the usage of the term that far back." Continued the hitman in an honestly not entirely prissy manner but certainly a lecturing tone of voice, the clatter of something metal on something not sounding only just loud enough to be heard through walls and whatever distance. "No one in the Mafia can be called 'innocent', so that really doesn't pertain to us. The phrase 'old Testament' is a reference for harsh things for a reason. Christianity has an entire list of violent punishments and retributions allowed by it for various crimes, not to mention how often someone's killed in the Bible for various wrong doings."

"Okay… I have another possibly insulting question."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. Now what?"

"How is a 'hit' not for personal gain?"

Blinking a few times warily, Sonya finally got the idea it was sort of late afternoon and that really was not her ceiling as she adjusted to the light streaming through the window.

Pausing, she tried to peer at the very different than expected feature through an eye that felt gritty and sore.

…why was it not her ceiling?

"…because I am not the one ordering these hits for any 'beneficial' reason, while I do get paid for it that would apply even to a 'legal' executioner. The limit of my personal responsibility is to ensure the innocent civilians are not unduly bothered by my work, and that I do not willfully engage in violence for just my own gains in territory or personal power. Beyond that, it's over my pay grade to bother about. I don't have the scope, often I don't know the situation or people involved, I have to take it on faith the ones ordering a hit on someone else have a reason beyond the obvious 'wanting someone dead' part."

"What if they're not guilty?"

"What if they really good at hiding their attraction to and abduction of young school girls?" Countered Renato in a bitingly sarcastic tone. "If I was unable to validate that on the surface, or even with a passive glance through a target's usual daily life, and let him live instead of kill him because I doubt my orders…?"

Cherep made an aggravated noise that ended in a heavy sigh. "Okay, discounting the actual crimes. Hitmen take hits on actual members of the mafia, if you were to get a hit for one person of note of another organization who is an 'upstanding' Mafioso just in someone's way, then what?"

"Hitmen are not people you hire lightly for frivolous reasons, especially not Catholic ones." Pointed
out the man who was suffering through his entire job description and his religion being questioned rather patiently for his type of Flame user, causing the listening thief to also start wondering why the two of them were wasting some time talking about this. "Discounting any personal responsibility I have to ensure I am hired for an actual reason aside the money, and yes sometimes doing one's job well is just enough of a reason to have a hit placed on you, doing that would invite a hostile Don to spread the news so that first one is 'condemned' for the waste of life for selfish reasons. There's nothing deeper than criminal ranks, no way to 'get around' that kind of shunning or slight, so if you waste the lives you're responsible for or someone else is responsible for like that you won't be getting more and it's more likely you'll lose the ones you do have. Pointless territorial war for the aim of gain is against Christian doctrine when it comes to violence, and more would help that second Don and abandon the first if that happens. And I do mean when it happens, it's not entirely out of the question to be hired to help out a little in those situations. Against 'evil' is a whole different kettle of fish, but depending on the situation we are that evil."

There was a pause, longer than just for speaking naturally, which allowed the Storm-Cloud to investigate and conclude it really wasn't her ceiling because this wasn't her room. It was Renato's, which did explain what the hitman was doing talking with her brother about Christian theology and being mafia at the same time… but… why?

Why was she here, and why were they talking about it?

Well, no. There was a why they'd talk about it, but the asshole puts her off to speak with a mafia priest but will answer her brother's questions?

"...so, in terms of Shamal, murder isn't against your Bible or religion and if he follows your path to become a hitman there won't be a crisis of faith we're going to have to somehow deal with?"

Oh.

...he was still an asshole.

"There is a lot of murder in the good book, for various reasons. If we went by the Biblical laws alone blasphemy, sex out of marriage, and even picking up sticks on Sunday is something punished by the death sentence. The point of being both a Catholic Christian and a killer is not as divorced as most these days seem to think. Christianity has been around for nearly two thousand years now through a lot of war and various ages, and if Shamal decides to become a hitman as well the values of a Catholic really do not shift all that far for him. He will no longer be an 'innocent civilian' and required to be well aware of the consequences of his actions taken even on behalf of those he does not know of in positions of authority, but there are not any major issues reconciling the two states that you or your sisters need to be aware of."

A nearly silent creak, probably her brother leaning against something not entirely solid because Renato preferred walls or entirely solid things for his hanging about, and a clink of something not metal on something equally as hard. "Good to know… I guess."

"That's it? I thought you were a pacifist. Shouldn't you be yelping about how that's not 'right'?

"I am a pacifist, who has two absolutely shameless and murderous sisters and a Soviet Russian vor for a foster father. That's not touching my foster mother, the others I grew up with, or my siblings' own contacts. I also know several other criminal types not from Russia as well as had a short stint in your lifestyle myself." Cherep countered a touch tartly. "I dislike violence, I hate it in fact. You're a lot of hard headed, often times arrogant, and entirely convinced the way you work is the way you need to work kind of people. 'Mafia' diplomacy is probably the hardest subject to wrap one's head around, especially when the 'other side' refuses to listen to any points you might have without something"
either sharp or just deadly aimed at their heads. I may not like it, but it is and what's around me. Ignoring that would hurt a lot of people, not just me."

…aw, he listened to her even if he didn't like what she said.

Sonya explored if she could get up without falling to the floor of the hitman's bedroom, because she felt as if she deserved a hug for that minor feat of convincing argument making. Mostly because she just felt like getting one, but a little bit for getting him to not dismiss all violence as all generally 'bad' and at least consider why people reached for it.

As it turned out, no. She wasn't up for standing just yet.

"Ho? Arrogant, am I?"

"Aren't you?"

"…point." Something heavier than whatever he was fussing with before was set down on something also hard and able to make noise, and someone started moving around more than they had before. "I believe your sister is now awake."

Cherep didn't bother with keeping his steps silent, he knew how but it wasn't something he practiced often. Heavy footfalls started growing louder, so the thief just perched on the edge of Renato's bed.

Sonya, still with one eye closed and terribly confused why they were here, gave her brother a fuzzy look as he entered the room. "…um."

The smirk that crawled across his face was both good and bad. Good in that it was fond, but bad in that it was a tiny touch wry on the wrong end to be a positive expression. "Good afternoon to you too, Nya. Not really a fan of where you picked to recover, but I guess he's not that bad."

Where she…?

"You should probably also say 'hi' to your host," continued the stuntman in an overly patient tone, "as well as apologize for crawling into his bed… while he was still in it."

The thief thought about it.

Hug, and be forced to deal with that before she could get her mind to work at least halfway, or sleep, and be able to ignore whatever he wanted her to think about for at least a couple more hours. She glanced from him to the hitman's pillow and back again, trying to judge how much she could possibly get away with before he got that prickly annoyed with her.

"Oh no you don't. You've slept through almost two days now, or really a day and a half but who's counting? You need to get up and at least eat something." Putting motion to his words, her utterly unfair brother caught her arm and shoved a hand under her still entangled knees to pull her up to his arms.

Annoyed, Sonya figured a hug and a nap on him would work perfectly well.

"That's not going to work either." He informed her brightly enough to make her cringe, tugging the sheets she was tangled up in off the bed so she had something to keep warm with then waltzing right out the bedroom he invaded so abruptly. "Look who's awake!"

Renato cocked an utterly unimpressed eyebrow at the man as he fixed himself something she still couldn't scent yet with a blocked nose. More than likely coffee, given who it was. "Oh dear, I
...could she get some of that?

Cherep rudely dropped her on the middle of the couch, sheet and all. After the first bounce she immediately fell over because she hadn't expected that, and the thief blinked blankly back up at him as soon as the world stopped spinning.

Which revealed nothing because her fellow Cloud didn't even have the decency to remain still for her to muster up the willpower to glare at.

Sonya contemplated if he would up his level of annoying-ness if she tried to curl up and nap some more.

Probably, but did she care?

"Please eat something." Tried her brother when she finally managed to pin a glare on him, holding something bowl-shaped with a colorful film wrapped around it as he stepped back into view. "Please? For me?"

"I just wanted a hug."

...holy fuck did it sound like something died in her throat.

It did make Cherep pause, looking between whatever was in his hands and back at her. "Fine. I want you to eat, you want a hug. I propose a trade... you eat, and I'll hug you while you do so."

Hmm... as long as she got something down he'd still hug her, the softy. Holding out a limp hand was all she really needed to do to signify her 'agreement', and not really having the energy to do more than that made even eating something sound strenuous.

The stuntman disappeared to handle the... whatever he was doing, and Renato peered over the back of the couch and eyed her suspiciously. "So... alive yet?"

"...ow."

"I bet." With an amused huff, the asshole she called a friend looked up and over some ways. "How long until she's coherently awake enough to hold a conversation?"

"Eh... that'll take a few more hours. We thought this part was the end, but it was really the point she decided she didn't like being checked up on by a local nurse and stuffed herself under the kitchen sink for a few more hours of uninterrupted sleep."

"...Renato? When did you get here?"

"I live here, little dragon lady." Drewled the casually dressed hitman a touch sarcastically, ignoring her real question of when he got back on the island, flicking a wrist at something she probably had to turn her head to see so that wasn't going to be done. He eyed her with more amusement, now smirking rather broadly. "Lazy little thing, aren't you?"

"...ow." Sonya repeated a touch huffily, somehow mustering a bit of elbow grease to at least pull herself up the couch and recline on a conveniently placed couch arm.

Even her lungs hurt, to go with a headache that might be caused by dehydration, and her sinuses were in the process of draining. If she sneezed his coffee into his face, served him right.
Renato sharply pulled away from her, cradling his mug suspiciously far outside of her sight.

"I stole some of your coffee." Cherep announced as if that wasn't damn near impossible to do…

...wait, there was probably a pot of it made so he wasn't talking about the mug in the other man's hand.

Said brother also fussed with the things around her, to the point she badly lost track of what was going on. Somehow that ended up with Sonya wrapped in the sheet and sitting sideways on his lap, with something hot pressed into her hands. As that hot something was coffee by the look of things, she didn't greatly care about anything else.

"Do me a favor?" When a disinterested hum sounded the man she was sitting on who had her wrapped up in a hug as promised continued. "Sit on the other end. If Nya sneezes like this, it's likely she'll break your couch."

"...please tell me you're joking."

"Nope. Think about it. As strong as she can be, a volume of air forcibly pushed out a small opening with basically a seizure of her diaphragm…? Her getting hiccups is a riot of laughs too, especially when she's the size to comfortably fit under someone's chin."

There was a beat of silence, then the Sun user being talked to rounded the couch and sat on the requested end of the furniture. With an expression that was likely translated to mean pained amusement, slouched over the other couch arm to protect his coffee mug, and warily eyeing the both of them. "If this wasn't so God-damned amusing I'd probably be horrified."

Sonya literally could not care. There was coffee, her brother, a hug, and the likelihood of a nap on him if the hitman kept distracting her seat. Everything else could go fuck off for a couple more hours.

...coffee was a stimulant. Cherep was probably counting on it to keep her awake long enough to force whatever was in that bowl down her throat.

Fuck.

"Not the sharpest tack in the morning, is she?"

"Nope."

She mulishly glared at the both of them over her cup of coffee and milk.

(Monday the 1st of December, 1969. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)

"It's at least a little funny."

"Shut up, Tats."

Ignoring her grouchy little sister, because being still somewhat sick and forced to accept the admittedly slightly bewildering habit of running off while sick to cuddle really strong men it was entirely understandable why she was so, the nurse shoved a likely candidate for a dress style across the kitchen table.
Sonya glanced at it, winced, and went back to her own magazine. "That looks more like she is wearing half a hardware store, no."

Well, if it was the metal she was objecting to...

Tatiana flipped the pages back a way and showed her little sister a different dress. One that admittedly was made out of normally not worn materials and had an interesting gap in a few… broad sections. Including most of the upper body.

"While you may be able to pull that off, I do not have your chest." Pointed out the groggy and grumpy Storm-Cloud, ignoring the fact you could pretty much see the model's entire upper body sans a diamond shape keeping her 'cleft' concealed… and nothing else. "Please no."

Her only complaint about it was not having the chest to pull the dress off, not that it was about the same as going topless.

Really. Poor tall, dark, and snarky.

If that was fashionable this year, she kind of dreaded where 'shocking' fashion trends would go in the near future when and if it coincided with her little sister's idea of acceptable fashions. "Okay, but most seems to be of the order of 'shapeless bags' or 'eye gouging' colors. Or worse yet, your category of 'that material should not be composing a dress'."

The grey eyed blonde shot her a sour look, then another unhappier look at the glossy papers they were bent over. "Why, exactly, am I pandering to the ideas of what other people consider fashionable? I do not share their tastes, obviously."

"Because." Shot back the redhead. "Most of this will change in like, a season. Try something new for once."

Admittedly, not the best argument for getting a touchy and more often than not irreverent Storm-Cloud to go along with something she didn't like. It was the best Tatiana could come up with right now, because some of these were admittedly a touch strange.

"Norell put out a new dress?"

Sonya, already disgruntled, grumpy, and not happy at all, did glance over. The disgusted look was expected.

A sequined bodice and sleeves would never get even a grudging acceptance from her picky little sister. Which was kind of understandable, the thief would probably shed or rip those sequence off over the course of the night without knowing it.

"You might have to just commission a dress, at this rate." Tatiana offered idly. Flipping through the amassed fashion magazines to find something without feathers, beads, metal plates, plastic discs, large amounts of fur, or anything else her sister would veto at a glance was always hard. "How about this?"

"...that is a bathrobe." Pointed out the Storm-Cloud slowly.

"It is not..." Trailing off after a second good look at the dress, the Sun had to admit she could see why the other woman made the conclusion she had. "...it just looks like a bathrobe."

A black-and-white image of a white dress made it hard to tell.
"Okay, well. If you don't want to just buy something, then what you're left with is... pantsuits, I guess. Long sleeves, short knee-length skirt if not pants, and the more fabric the better."

Sonya eyed her, then the pile of magazines, then sighed and basically tipped over to ignore the entire mess. "No, then I have a better idea than what is currently 'fashionable.'"

"Oh really?" Challenged the older sister curiously.

"I was in China not too long ago." The younger sister informed the couch cushions in a bland tone, not bothering to right herself. "I wore a Vietnamese áo dài for that, which basically fits your criteria. A few alterations to the 'traditional' dress, and I can wear one of those instead of hunt through European fashions for something that will not irritate me."

"What's a áo dài?"

"...do you know what a qípáo is?"

"Not a clue." Tatiana admitted brightly, settling in to hear what facet of fashion she hadn't known of before.

Sonya actually moved her head to give her a look, telling her non-verbally that the Storm-Cloud suspected she was pulling her leg. "Fong wears a changshan, okay? Jacket and pants kind of thing?"

"Right."

"A female's equivalent is known as a cheongsam, or a qípáo. Think more form fitting without pants, and long enough to count as a long cocktail dress. Knee or calf length. Generally, as far as I have seen them in the styles worn lately, they do not have sleeves either. Maybe something just long enough to work as a capped sleeve, but that is it."

"Sounds cute."

"An áo dài is similar, except they have form fitting long sleeves and have a split in their floor length or likewise skirt up to the waist. Because of that, loose and baggy pants are worn underneath."

"...pretty sure I'm not doing your explanation justice." Admitted the Sun using nurse wryly, tossing her magazine to the coffee table to join the piles of 'rejected' fashions. "Can you sketch it? Actually, can you draw?"

Her little sister looked equally as confused as Tatiana was curious. "...I have no idea. I can draw lines, and copy things, but I do not think I can draw without something to copy. I almost tried with my left hand, but my right healed up before I could get to that."

"Can't hurt to try." She declared grandly, because it was something to do and if the Storm-Cloud could then they'd have a sketch to show a seamstress to make into reality tomorrow. "Stay there, I'll get some paper and pencils."

"Ha, ha." Sonya deadpanned bitchily, scowling after her as she wandered off to find them something to work with.

She'd have to run out to find some, she knew perfectly well she didn't have anything suitable anymore now her 'classes' were over and she had the international equivalent of a GED or O-Level certificate. Cherep had taken the opportunity to nap in their little sister's room, recovering from the panic the disappearing sick Storm-Cloud had caused them and the rush to figure out where she went before someone not particularly nice stumbled upon her, and while the thief was good for paper... not
so much for pencils.

At least her little sister finally accepted the fact she did run off if spooked while sick, which may or may not put any kind of dent on her future wanderings.

She should write a note and stick it to Sonya's back after the next round of vaccinations.

...or get her little sister a collar and identification tags inscribed with a phone number to call if she wasn't really responsive enough to explain herself. Maybe with a bell.

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(Wednesday the 10th of December, 1969. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

Cherep smirked wryly at the deadpan look his little sister shot him. "Now, remember. No pulling your collar off."

"This is unnecessary." Sonya hissed irritably, touching the length of leather then removing her hand before their older sister could slap at it.

"You failed to come up with a better idea, sucks to be you." Tatiana announced bluntly, ordering her two bottles of liquid on a desk next to the needles she would be using.

The littlest Russian in the room outright sulked, ripping the third bell they had attached to her 'sick collar' and tossing it none too gently into the wastebasket. It lodged into the painted brick walls instead, right behind the wire frame of the basket.

"It could be worse." The stuntman pointed out wryly. "We could try chaining you to a bed."

"I could immediately head back to Moscow." Sonya tossed back huffily, shooting her elder sister a seething look for the first of two jabs she had to get to finally catch up on her vaccinations.

"Do so. Then we'll know you'll head immediately to Arseniy instead."

Cherep and Tatiana exchanged a set of amused looks as a tiny tinge of red suddenly spread across the bridge of their little sister's nose.

Sonya dropped her face into her hands. "...fuck."

"Yes, yes you really did ambush him on the couch and decide that was where you wanted to spend a few good hours napping. Practically half hugging his hip." The nurse informed her gleefully, extracting the second dose of the inoculations to give next. "Scared the hell out of Lisa when you weren't where you should be."

"Of course, the second time you decided to take a nap under the kitchen sink. We spent four hours looking for you." Tacked on the stuntman dryly, ignoring the dirty look the thief was trying to give the both of them to shut them up. "Lisa fretted about you running off into the night and everything, Arseniy even checked the attic and was in the middle of planning to get the other vory out looking for you when Tats tried to go for more dish soap... then you rolled out from the cabinet under it instead."

"You both are not helping." Announced the thief flatly.

"Hopefully," Tatiana offered in a less amused tone fiddling with the used needles to disassemble and
throw away, "it's the flu shot. That's twice now it's made you… wander off. Which probably means you should always get a shot every year. If that's your reaction to a weakened form of the influenza virus, I'd hate to see what happens when you get the full-blown flu."

"So, what are these?"

"Pretty sure your Polio and pneumococcal vaccines are still good, you got a new dose of DTP and the new MMR for combination coverage of various others the last round with the flu shot. This is a new meningococcal vaccine and the inoculation against chickenpox, and now you're all caught up."

"Joy." Deadpanned the blonde flatly.

(Saturday the 13th of December, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Upon noticing that his usual ways were blocked by the mansion-wide cleaning efforts, Tyr made a detour he took less often to get to Daniella's parlor.

The Head of the Varia Independent Assassination Squad took it less often because it made him more noticeable to general traffic and made it possible to hail him by the Ninth’s Guardians.

Not that he had any issue with the Ninth Generation of Vongola, he just preferred the Eighth and the teams they had survived the Mafia Wars as well as a World War with, and a partial invasion.

Hard to create that kind of bond with another when there wasn't a war or three going on to provide the fires to be tempered within.

Contemplating how to avoid another such blockade in the future, perhaps dropping a word to housekeeping to stagger their cleaning efforts a small bit, Tyr passed three groups of maids and two footmen. Causing two pails of dirty water to be dropped and a young man to fumble his broom.

The other reason the assassin avoided the more 'accessible' parts of Vongola's Iron Fort, the unintended delays and scares his presence caused others. Having cultivated a reputation of being the very last thing quite a number of people saw ensured his time was not wasted often for petty reasons but did somewhat impact the reception he received by those less confident in themselves.

...and the Stupid.

"Tyr! Whoa, whoops. Sorry!" Jogging with a bit more haste than called for indoors, Ganauche slipped on the water spilled on hardwood floors and nearly crashed into a wall on his blind side.

Scrambling to catch up with the politely paused Sword Emperor, the Lightning huffed and puffed to show more than enough of the side effects of not doing his physical conditioning. As that might still be medically involved, due to his eye and the coordination moving with one eye being more of a cause of concern yet still, Tyr didn't point out how unfit the Lightning Guardian was becoming.

He thought it though, taking it into account for the upcoming Christmas Ball and what amendments security would need to account for a less than fit Guardian if there would be three Skies attending. Four, if rumors were true.

"So… do you know when that Lackey guy's going to clear off?" Ganauche inquired a bit breathlessly.

Well, it was security-related and certainly something to check into. The assassin nodded shortly as he
continued on his way with a distraction at hand to reassure the help he was not there to kill them. "Young Lackey Björn will remain only long enough to confirm his orders with his patron before leaving us. As Sinclair will be escorting her to the Ball again, this might be the best possible place to await her arrival."

"Possible?"

Pausing, Tyr glanced to the side to see if the Lightning really was that blind. "...she might decide to scorn Vongola hospitality again for a local hotel instead."

Ganauche blinked back at him with his lone remaining eye. "Tyr, the hotels are all booked."

"That is assuming the Lackey did not reserve one for her already, under different or assumed names for privacy we do not know of."

"He's currently sleeping in a bed and breakfast, not someplace you put someone you frequently refer to as 'my lady'... who's also buying a castle for her godchild in a native land not her own."

"That," pointed out the assassin patiently, "does not give any credence to the argument if he reserved a hotel room for her or not. Just that he saw no reason to rent and live out of one himself."

The Lightning paused mid-stride to wrap his mind around that.

Tyr was forced to follow suit again and suffer yet another delay to his day.

He almost couldn't wait to see what Soviet Lightnings were like. The Icelandic Lackey a particularly interesting specimen of a Soviet Storm-Cloud caught hold of was an equally interesting mix of Storm and Lightning behaviors, without the irritating habit of baseless assumptions and targeted blindness.

Hopefully, 'shocking' examples of Flame users without a few of the bad habits of their types excused for various reasons would improve the quality of what was native to Italia.

Lightnings that got distracted and investigated whatever caught their attentions thoroughly were all fine enough, Lightnings specifically trained to annoy their targets into attacking or killing them was just Stupid. That was not a sign of ultimate guilt, but a sign of limited patience, and a waste of a… person.

"So… you have no idea when he's leaving?"

The Head of the Varia gave the man a pointed look that seemed to have no impact whatsoever. "The twenty-first. Following their usual habits, Sinclair and Nikishina will be present in Italia the weekend preceding the Ball. Which will be the twentieth this year, if not the twenty-first due to traveling delays. Young Lackey Björn only requires an hour at most of her time and plans to finish his duties in country immediately afterwards."

"Is that a guess or a fact?" Wondered Ganauche.

Tyr regarded him for a long moment, then strode on without the Lightning Guardian.

Perhaps the point was annoying details out of a target more than trying to implicate another in the murder of a Lightning belonging to someone else.

If so, the Lightnings of Europe were even worse off than he had believed.

Leaving his distraction behind did create two more hazards to be cleaned up, his unexpected arrival
nearly tripping up a footman balancing on a ladder attempting to string garlands through the main reception hall's chandelier and his fellow more sensibly doing the decoration of the staircases' banisters alone. One merely accidentally kicked a box of decorations, the other nearly fell to his death.

Catching the wobbling ladder before it could tip over, Tyr waited just long enough for his supposed spotter cheating his fellow out of support in favor of haste in their duties to gather his wits and replace him.

By then, he was already more than ten minutes late for his appointment with Lady Daniella.

Glaring at the foolish footman would likely not help anyone but strand him more until the one mounted on a ladder could descend, so he merely made note to report the hasty one as such.

Not three hallways later, he ran into the Ninth Generation Rain Guardian. Schnitten Brabanters was probably trying to assist the decoration efforts yet was making more of a nuisance of himself in the end.

Glass wax window decorations were something they recently imported from the American States and seemed perfectly suitable to decorate the large ceiling to floor windows of the ground floor with. As it was a general cleaner that just appeared and remained white for days, but the Rain was having some issues getting his stenciled images to his satisfaction.

The maids he was working with had already finished most of the hallway windows and were waiting on him as he had monopolized half of their equipment.

Tyr cleared his throat loudly, catching attention of the Guardian on the lawn. "Schnitten. I believe the ladies are waiting on you."

The Rain blinked, looking through the unopened window he was decorating at him blankly then to the maids waiting for him with the rest of their supplies. "Oh, good morning Master Tyr."

"If you insist." Looking pointedly at the other completed and already dried decorations finally got Schnitten to stop holding up the maids tasked with decorating the windows.

Thankfully the Rain Guardian did take the hint, even if he didn't appear satisfied with his work.

By the time he arrived for his appointment, he was unforgivably late and annoyed he was so.

Daniella had moved rooms by then, and Tyr followed Vongola Ottavia's normal schedule to the various offices she circled through. It took him three tries to find the right one, and the young man seeking employment the Sky wanted to know if he would like first choice of.

"Tyr, finally." The retired Eighth Sky of Vongola greeted with a touch of amusement and a bit of wry censure for keeping her waiting, seated behind the desk of her blue office. "Is there really that much going on to delay you?"

"Unfortunately. I have some reports to pass on already."

"This young man is... ah, let us call him Ottavio. A young Cloud, in fact." Gesturing to the young bespectacled boy across a desk from her, the elderly lady leaned back and smirked up at him. "I have one, myself. So as you yet have an opening, I would like to know if you two would suit."

Tyr glanced at the young Cloud, then back to Daniella.
"...you're not going to catch her anytime soon, dear Tyr." She reminded him amusedly. "Not without her brother, and that young man made his opinion on the subject rather clear by being so willing to leave even when a Sky gave him personal attention."

"Perhaps not, that does not mean the chase will not be worth it." Besides which, Nikishina deciding her brother was at risk in Vongola territory was not his issue if he moved the Varia Independent Assassination Squads off-site somewhere. "Coaxing an already trained thief to kill would be easier than training a young boy to become an assassin, her brother seems permissive enough as long as it is her."

"You get the pair or neither, not one or the other."

"I am aware."

Ottavia heaved a small sigh. "I take it you're going to be stubborn about her."

Tyr merely waited out the older Sky's attempts at meddling patiently, well used to her tries to fill out his ranks of Guardians.

"Train him anyways, if you would?" Daniella asked instead of more attempts to discourage him, leaning back in her office chair to see the both of them standing before her desk fully. "If you two don't suit, then fine. Having a Cloud at hand with your role would still help you aid my son, even if it is not your preferred Cloud. At worst, he can just be one more assassin."
Chapter 93

(Sunday the 14th of December, 1969. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)

The bell really didn't help much.

Cherep carefully pulled the blanket out from under his younger sister, which earned him a grumpy huff of irritableness, but covering her up with the material so she was tucked into bed with him seemed to earn him forgiveness. Of course now was when the little bell, that he had bought an entire packet of out of a bulk warehouse kind of store with Tatiana when she picked up an actual blanket for their less than miserably sick little sister, thought to ring a warning the thief had wandered again.

A pain in the ass when she left like leaving, but still adorably cuddly the rest of the time she was sick. At least he still counted somewhat for whatever she sought out like this, even if he wasn't 'dangerous' as some of the other men in her life.

Apparently they could add 'chicken pox' to the list of illnesses that didn't agree with slightly Sunny Storm-Clouds, or whatever 'meningococcal' was supposed to protect from. If it was the former and not the latter there was a bit of concern because chickenpox was harsher on those fully grown rather than the younger victims.

The itching was also a bit of a concern, because Sonya could and did easily tear through her own skin with just nails pretty quickly without noticing. Their older sister had been quick to pounce on the first few drops of blood, but there was only really so much of his own sisters he was willing to slather with lotion to help them when the nurse wasn't awake or present to do it.

At least this was the last round for the year, next year would be interesting.

Hopefully then they could do this in a different place than Mafia Land from here on out.

Yeah, it had a hospital… so did most of the developed world at this point. 'International' could describe a few of the bigger trading capitals, if his sisters wanted to shop as well then there were several cities he could name off the top of his head.

Making polite conversation with hitmen was hard. Sonya's friend had been entirely unimpressed with him trying to be polite, and frankly Cherep hadn't really had any idea how to talk to the guy. He was a lot different than Viper, and while if he said something wrong to the Mist he'd be charged some money… saying something wrong to the Italian guy got him a lecture.

Getting through that without actually admitting he still didn't know the guy's name was also tricky. Pretty sure he failed, too.

Getting lectured on the religious views of Catholic hitmen while the guy had been cleaning three guns had been an experience. A sort of useful one, sure… but weird. "…the shit I do because I love you."

"Oh, shut up." Sonya muttered into his shoulder, gripping his wrist for a moment probably because she itched and knew it was a bad idea to scratch at it. "I do crap for you because I love you too, consider it your comeuppance."

"Awake now?"

"Eh..."
Good enough given the past two weeks, really. "So… can we not come back here again?"

"…sure? Bjørn's looking for a place as we speak," admitted his fellow Cloud tiredly, not budging from where he tugged her but sounding pretty miserable anyways, "I suppose we can do family things either there or back in Moscow instead once we have that."

"I know the two of you like this place, but it's really fucking weird. I can't get over the weaponry people walk around with and frequently use." Cherep confessed, ignoring it when Sonya dug her hands behind his back so she wouldn't give in to itching whatever was bugging her right now. "I keep thinking I'm going to do something wrong and get you two into trouble or something. Or get shanked for blinking wrong one of these days."

"It's not so much like it's safer for us here. No laws to be broken, no police to duck." Corrected the thief sourly into his shoulder. "I do not mean to make light or dismiss your concerns, because they're fucking true, but this is safer than even the Soviet Union for me and Tats. We don't have to be on guard against the government and the police here, guard our words or thoughts, or just even care if we end up in a confrontation in broad daylight."

He eyed the blonde hair of his little sister, the only part of her he could see right now, warily for a moment. "Safer for whom?"

She adjusted herself finally just to look disgustedly back up at him, eyes no longer glowing purple but somewhat suspiciously shiny anyways. "For everyone. You don't fuck around with those you don't know here, and that carries less risks with it. If we go away from the civilians, there's no collateral we have to guard for if they trip into us. Without laws, we can get the bulk of our business done quickly instead risk governments demanding their taxes or cuts and getting pissy if we don't pay them legally. No police means no shifty requirements in hiring or bribing a small space for breathing room to plan your next step."

"What happens when someone does try fucking with those they don't know here? You had to meet that Italian hitman guy somehow…" "I need to borrow you right after Christmas, or before it. Depending how quick purchasing a property will take. The paperwork might be couriered instead, so… keep an eye out unless I call."

…notice how she didn't even bother to address that question. "Right, I get to hold the title of whatever property you're ending up with… even if you could give it to Bjørn now."

"I made my plans without him, adding in my Lackey afterwards does not change them." Sonya snapped irritably, squirming slightly then thumping her forehead into his shoulder as she stopped straining herself to keep eye contact. "The plan always was you'd hold the deed to my library, suffer."

Cherep snorted, a smirk pulling at his mouth. It was always about the books, apparently the fact she'd be raising her godson there had little to do with it. "What does 'Lackey' mean, anyways?"

Given the noise she made, the thief did not appreciate him making her think right now. "A footman, more of a servant, someone that runs errands or does menial tasks for someone else. Here? More the last than anything else, Bjørn's considered to be a minor extension of myself."

"So… someone calling Bjørn 'Lackey' is basically calling him an office gofer."

"I don't really like the title either, but Bjørn specifically went after it for himself." Sonya tried rubbing the side of her face against the shirt he was wearing to bed, because they had suspected she'd do
some bed hopping in the end even if this round hadn't made her as ill as the first round of inoculations, and seemed entirely unsatisfied with the results of her actions. "Lackeys also have a kind of protection for themselves they share, because if you fuck with a Lackey here you can pretty much count that at least three others that have one will fuck your shit up so you can't go after their own. It's not worth it, and they are technically of Mafia Land employees with the complications messing with them that entails."

"So, for his own protection? Huh." Hopefully Björn knew what he was getting into, but as the stuntman didn't really know the guy beyond being his little sister's first assistant type he couldn't really pass judgement.

The few times Cherep and the Lackey in question met, both before and after the blond teen became such to her, he seemed rather intense and focused. The first time around he had been working on his Russian enough to sell himself to Sonya as an assistant, the next few were through phone calls that always seemed a bit brusque. Viper didn't really say much about the guy either but given his miserly best friend's habits that might be a mark of merit or something like a mark of irritation.

"...I think you might need a bath."

"I've had three today." Bit out the thief in protest, tightening her arms around him but not enough to cut off his breath. "I reek of oatmeal, I do not need another bath."

"But you're starting to itch again, and if you take a bath then you can rub oatmeal on the itchy spots and hopefully get back to sleep afterwards." Pointed out her fellow Cloud cheerfully, wheezing a little when arms tightened a touch too hard before she quickly dialed back on her strength and put less stress on his rib cage. "I will walk into the shower fully dressed with you and turn on the cold water. Try me."

"How about in an hour, if I don't fall back to sleep by then." Countered Sonya flatly, unamused by his plan.

"Okay, but if you try ignoring me to fake being asleep I reserve the right to dump you in the tub fully clothed anyways."

She made an angry growl sound, which meant she totally was going to try to do that in an hour if she didn't drift off and hated that he was calling her out on it before she could.

It was still a totally weird place, full of Mafiosi and Nazis and other criminal types he didn't look to hard at out of fear of the weaponry they walked around in broad daylight with. Also, because he didn't want to be one of those many people beaten up or dragged off to likely be shot in the gritty corners if you looked around hard enough.

Faking as if he belonged was decent practice in fooling those that read body language or intents as if their survival depended upon it, and it frequently did, but flimsy of a defense without his sisters at hand or their foster father pulling more than his fair share of attention for his foster son's comfort.

He could still be picked out as the weakest of the three of them, not easily but often enough even if Sonya's reputation as the 'Mafia Land Cloud' kept people far out of her sight. Cherep didn't like feeling as a liability to his own sisters, especially when they were asking for his help not to paint a target on their backs.

"You spent the last fifteen years passively aggressively ignoring shit you hate," Sonya interrupted his thoughts shortly, jabbing him in the ribs none too gently to make him realize he had tensed up on her, "now you decide to fret over things?"
"I'm not the only one that does that." The stuntman shot back with a huff.

"We're twinned, that means we're similar in ways."

"Does it? I feel just like myself, not different or off."

The Storm-Cloud sighed heavily, thumping her forehead on his shoulder a few times. "Cherep, it's well done with. A Sky could tell at a glance, meaning we had everything a set of twinned Flame users would exhibit. If there was anything to notice, it would've been back when we were kids. Before I got to grips with my strength, maybe even before you moved in."

Well... admittedly he was a lot different than he was as a kid. So was she, she hadn't punched him in the arm for doing something she deemed stupid since they were about ten or so. "How much is that just growing up and how much is the Flames twinning on us?"

"Who the fuck knows." She muttered sourly, freeing a hand to rub her apparently itchy face before digging it back under his back. "I can give a guess if you want, but that's based a lot on the generalized bullshit taken second-hand rather than fact we've managed to piece back together."

"No thanks." Cherep wasn't sure what he'd do with the information anyways. "I'd rather know what's on your side, actually."

"Aside the violence?"

"And the territory thing."

"...I'm not really sure." Admitted his little sister after giving it some serious thought for him. "There's a lot of questions I have about how far just pure human physiology can explain some of the 'habits' certain Flame types have. If it has any effect on what type one possesses or how they behave originally under their Flame type. Do Classical Clouds start off as psychotic, or is it a learned behavior after a certain amount of time? How about Suns, and if a naturally high metabolism to start with encourages or changes the influences one's Flames have on the body? There's... little actual data aside hearsay, and old stories that may or may not have background details we'll never know this far away from them."

"...psychotic?"

"I literally have no issue with murder, aside knowing it's not something I should do lightly and trying to keep that in mind." She admitted to blandly, which didn't exactly surprise him to hear confusingly. "I used to? I think it was knowing it was against everything society is supposed to stand for, or maybe it was the situation I was involved in by my own choice before I wanted to be. Maybe learned indifference from how we grew up? Then... I didn't, in fact I felt better afterwards then just made myself guilty for being so. So... either I had an engraved socially learned aversion to murder I got over, or I never had that, and it was just the surprise outside of my control that upset me."

"Let's go with the first one." Weighed in her fellow Cloud dryly. "Not that if that's the way you want to look at things is that bad, but the first one sounds... healthier? Less like you're writing yourself off as an aberration. Criminals do have a sense of responsibility and some kind of honor, even in this society there's no mass murdering serial killers going about without some kind of control on them."

Sonya hummed thoughtfully. "Depending anyways. Given my 'usual' reception these days, it might actually be the second for most of 'my type'. We seem to generally be a bunch of fucking assholes."

Cherep snorted, laughing a bit when she gave him a huffy glare for that bouncing of her head rest.
"And I am technically one of those mass murderers."

"I said 'mass murdering serial killers'. Which you are not."

"Depending on how you want to look at it." She dismissed without an inflection to her tone to give him a hint what she really felt about the topic.

"Well, I want to look at it as you trying to keep in mind that people are people and just because they can be annoying isn't a reason to kill them." He offered sort of brightly, a bit concerned where this was going now. "I'm annoying sometimes, you can be somewhat annoying too. I really appreciate it you try to accommodate my views into your life, but you don't have to. It's probably dangerous to try. We have different lives, have different standards for such lives, and dealing with your lifestyle with my views is… probably impossible."

His fellow Cloud dug her pointy chin into his shoulder, tilting her head back up to look at him. "...even if I'm a 'mass murdering serial killer'?"

"Your life and mine are different enough I won't pass judgement on what you do." He just hoped she had a really good reason for considering herself one, and it wasn't just her being extremely hard on herself because she feared what he'd think of her. "I'm not deaf, I've heard what everyone seems to expect from you back home. The fact it was only a bunch of assholes targeting girls like you for… bullshit, who ran afoul of your temper then specifically poked you in a few sore spots more so far, is actually entirely understandable. Like you said, I'm part of a minority."

"I didn't mean to marginalize you by saying that." Sonya protested quietly. "You have a point, oftentimes a lot of issues can be resolved perfectly fine with talking it out, it's just not many naturally see that as you did from the start of their lives and are willing to listen."

"Not many having my views and forgetting that means I can come off as a horribly elitist, holier-than-everyone, snobbish asshole sometimes. While I don't mind being an asshole, passing judgement on things wholesale without bothering to take the background details in mind that might make violence the 'distasteful but only solution' is… I'll leave that for Skull."

"Everyone can be horribly elitist, holier-than-everyone, snobbish assholes sometimes." She eyed him suspiciously for a long moment. "...but okay, I don't really like him anyways."

Cherep laughed, hugging her back hard for an equally long moment. "That's the point, little sister. He's supposed to be an unlikable asshole."

"You're going to get punched in the face playing him." She muttered grumpily into his chest.

"No, I won't. I'm too loveable."

"Bet you five ruble you will."

He had probably been hanging out with Viper too long if a bet had him hesitating and rethinking his claims seriously.

"...sure you don't want that bath?"

Sonya outright hissed at him, digging her hands out from behind his back so she could roll over and give him a cold shoulder. Stuffing her hands under her arms in a vain hope of controlling her fidgeting.

"But I love you, little sister." He got a grumpy huff instead of a response when he followed and gave
her a strong hug, mostly to help pin those hands down. "Don't you love me too?"

"...for some stupid reason, apparently so."

(Monday the 15th of December, 1969. Zolotov Condo, Mafia Land.)

Cherep might allow them to pull him out of the 'safe' places to go shopping, but he would not leave designated places with them just to hit up a bar or restaurant. Sonya was mildly impressed they got him to go shopping at all with them, without resorting to tricks or bribes the stuntman would not appreciate, so she had no issues with Tatiana getting some takeaway and a whole lot of booze for their brother's last night in helping them out.

Besides which, it was rather nice to spend days catching up with each other. The whole being sick part she could have dealt without, but one couldn't have everything sometimes.

"So, for this world tour thing? Where are you going to go?" Tatiana asked, being a Sun meant she recovered from her normally draining work schedule with just a whole cup of bisque soup and three of the croque-monsieur sandwiches their order had come with.

"Starts in England. Cambridge to Bristol to Manchester." Pausing to bolt the rest of his cheesy sandwich, their brother also downed the last of his soup so he could move on to the tarte flambé too. "Then Glasgow, Dublin, and then two stops in Iceland, three in Greenland, and then the Canadian and American stops by... uh, summer? The rest of the schedule's kind of left open, depending on how long it takes to work through Canada and the States of America."

"...that's about half a world." Pointed out the nurse, taking a break from eating with the hard liquors any French chef would've been appalled they were drinking instead of wine or champagne. "That's only if we count the UK as just 'Europe'."

"We'll be moving pretty damn fast." Cherep countered a little wryly, sitting back with his third of the cheese and onion pizza thing. "Maybe less than a week in each place? The stops that we're already confirmed for and set up to perform in are all within about two months. Then... well, Canada shouldn't be too hard to work through since a lot of it is uninhabited... but the States...?"

"I suppose the plan is to hit most and not all of them."

He tossed her an amused look. "Given they've got fifty of them, Nya? Nope, we're just going to hit the highlights there. Most of the summer for sure, maybe even leave sort of near fall to do the fall and winter months somewhere more sunny than the Communist states."

"Be careful there." Sonya reminded him a touch pointedly, then nibbling cheese off her pointer finger. "They might be over their 'Red Scare', but we're still at war and we all look pretty Russian at first glance."

The nurse stopped drinking to give her an odd look. "Wasn't that over a decade ago?"

"And the resort they reached for was declared unconstitutional and therefore illegal, after another couple of years, but the real question is what did they learn from that?" Waving that off with her own bottle of vodka, the thief took a quick swallow and glanced back to their brother. "My point being, people in large groups are stupid. Even 'civilians' in large groups. Try not to give them a reason to hate you."
"Other than my nationality? I'm touring as 'Skull de Mort', not Cherep Bazanov." Wagging a finger at her while getting in a quick bite, the stuntman shrugged. "French/something-or-another loudmouth idiot and not the Czechoslovakian turned Russian boy from the scary Communist Bloc."

Sonya gave his still weird hair coloring a pointed look. "They do not have many of the reds or purples in France, brother."

"I dye my hair, obviously." He sniffed in response, flipping a hand through his short and spiky hair which might or might not be covered in cheese grease. "Which will be why there's a measure of bleach and peroxide in my traveling gear, not just for cleaning myself up after nasty spills."

Tatiana made a disgusted huff of her own, eyeing them both sourly. "...stupid Cloud Voodoo, new subject. I don't want to talk about that crap."

Both Clouds gave her a look, then shared one between them.

"There's the oil from the food in your hair." Sonya obediently pointed out, which made Cherep blink at her blankly twice before a wry kind of frown settled on his face and he glared at his offending fingertips.

Their older sister snorted, which meant it counted. "Nya, do you really think the Soviet Union's going to fall?"

"...it might? Really depends on if anyone notices or cares that the mafia's holding up their interior public works or not." With a shrug, the blonde picked her plate back up with her second serving of the oddly pork tasting pizza-thing. "If they ignore it, and the further breakdown of services, then it's a high possibility the people will grow upset enough to overthrow or defect from the Union more and more until it collapses."

"That would be... really fucking odd." Cherep offered a touch absently, trying to clean his hair with a napkin.

"It's stable right now only because several factions of the bratva are deeply involved with and heavily integrated as the civilian's support structure, but that's... not really a good thing. For us maybe, but not for the longevity of a nation." Bolting her last bite of their dinner the thief discarded her plate, so her siblings knew they could have the rest of it if they were still hungry. "It would really only take one government idiot to piss off a vor in high enough rank, then we might have a lot of internal breakdowns to deal with as a people rather than as criminal support and the involved civilians deciding they'd rather deal with us than the government."

Her brother looked over at her, a tiny bit sideways given his current preoccupation. "Then what?"

"Then what, what?"

"What happens if the Soviet Union falls?"

"Who knows, but given that we have control over public services in wide swaths?" Sonya shrugged again. "Then that point of vory not owning property might come back to bite us in the ass. Then again, Vindice Laws refuse allowing Flame users and the Mafia in 'government' positions... although there are the Mists back home..."

"...hey, Italian criminal types own property, right? Why are you giving me the deed to whatever place you get?"

"Because I'm Russian, not Italian."
"Do Russians outside of the Soviet Union follow those same rules?" Cherep wondered mostly idly, finishing up his impromptu hair care and returning to his dinner.

The Storm-Cloud merely shrugged for a third time, more interested in her bottle of vodka than answering a question she didn't know even a possible answer to.

"Maybe you'll figure that out before we do." Tatiana offered brightly much to their brother's exasperation.

(Saturday the 20th of December, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Mamma! You're on time!"

"How much did Renato pay you to say that?" Sonya inquired mildly as she joined them in a parlor room somewhat removed from the holiday foot traffic, sounding honestly curious rather than annoyed.

"A thousand lira." Tattled the young Mist shamelessly, scrounging the banknote note out of a pocket to show her.

She flicked a glance at the hitman ignoring them behind a copy of the local paper, then got distracted by one of the news articles.

Renato found himself holding air as the woman then plucked the newspaper out of his hands to read the part that caught her attention, which by the looks of things Shamal was highly amused by as his godmother took the seat next to them on the couch.

She was getting damn good about evading him picking up her thoughts or intents.

"…which moron did this?" Sonya inquired of him, shaking the part of the paper he hadn't yet gotten to in his direction.

Snatching the damn thing back, Renato glanced over the article detailing the theft of the Nativity with St Francis and St Lawrence from a church in Palermo, Sicily. "I wouldn't know, why?"

"Because they probably ruined that painting, that's why." The professional thief informed him wryly, settling back because Shamal wanted to be fussed over and obediently letting the kid hug her. "I hate dealing in art, but even I know better than that."

Giving her an odd look encouraged a bit of clarification.

"You even put a pin hole in the paints of old art, and 'collectors' will collectively shit themselves to not only tell you what a travesty it is but also knock anywhere from fifteen to about seventy-five percent of its value down." She informed him blandly, sifting her fingers through the bratty Mist's hair. "I dismantle them from the frames if I need to store them somewhere, most other art thieves do too. Cutting something out of the frame? About... no one will buy it now. The traceable damage makes it impossible to claim it's a copy too, which is the only way it could've been displayed at all after being stolen."

Right now, the Russian looked perfectly content with things even if he knew she was starting to hate Vongola and most things related to their Skies.
"What are we waiting for?"

"Your Lackey to come by." Renato informed her, taking a second look over the piece that she criticized his fellow Italian criminals over. "You asked to deal with him first, after all."

…she might have a point. Might. He never really stole anything without first killing the previous owner, so he couldn't say with any certainty how difficult or easy the job would've been while trying not to harm or alarm the priests or attendants of the Oratori di San Lorenzo. Using a knife to cut out a painting in a church did seem a touch unnecessary, and if she was right about the value now… it was a rather pointless job.

"Did you and Björn come to an agreement as to where you want to grow up?" Sonya inquired of the brat idly, still playing with the kid's hair.

"Yeah." Brat practically radiating smugness, he tipped over into the woman's lap fully even if that meant he was no longer sitting properly on the damn couch. "He's got the details in his files, and we tried to match up to what everyone wanted."

"…everyone?" Echoed the Russian after a moment.

"Like Miss Galina wanted it near the beach," Shamal informed her brightly, squinting under her hand to peer up at her face, "and the garage you asked for."

"Ah." Ruffling his hair, she then turned her attention to the Mafioso. "So, when does Björn usually show up?"

"I wouldn't know." He informed her, flicking the kid on the forehead to get him to sit up properly. Shamal scowled but did at least pull himself upright. "I just got here myself."

"I thought you were helping him with locating something nearby where the brat's going to school?"

"I did." Renato informed her blandly, folding the paper to discard. "I gave him a list of properties and a range of cities to somewhat remain within, so the brat can be home every night or weekend."

Sonya eyed him for a moment, a hand still in the brat's hair. "Really. Do I get to know where this place is?"

"Once the brat starts attending." Although… it was a good question to answer before he 'abandoned' her to raising the brat alone, he wouldn't put it past a few individuals to try and invalidate Shamal's spot in Mafia School just because the woman raising him was Russian. "…I'll ensure things are confirmed on that end before you have to head to American for Don Bergamaschi."

She tisked, stretching out her legs and pulling her purse up from the floor to rummage around. "That's going to have to wait until sometime in February, after the brat's birthday. I've got a thing with a Mist about the KGB first thing next year."

"I'll let Nono know." Renato promised her with a smirk as her Lackey was finally shown into the room they were occupying, giving the platinum blonde following the younger man a narrower one. "Well now, what's this?"

"Dama, Miss Guerra." Björn the Lightning-Storm Lackey introduced one of Daniella's hatchet women almost a touch short to really be politely. "She's been… assisting me."

"We could be neighbors." Nilda offered to excuse her involvement with a sharp smile. "There's a
property right next to my famiglia's territory, that your Lackey's trying not to show me he thinks is best for you and your people."

"…ah." Sonya eventually answered, drawing a complete blank on why the Rain wanted to 'assist' her Lackey with his house shopping. She glanced down at the kid it was for, back up to the Icelander doing it on her behalf, then over to the hitman in confusion. Eventually she turned back to the two of them. "…okay?"

"It is a good property, Dama."

"Fine then." Dismissed the thief blandly, finally pulling her fingers out of Shamal's hair and but merely glancing at the file her Lackey attempted to give her. "As longs as it fits the requirements, I honestly don't care what it looks like as long as it's where we need to be. If I really dislike it, I'll have it renovated until I do."

"Neighbors then." Observed the Rain with honest delight, snatching the so far scorned file to actually look at the details it contained. "…I might just have to earn myself an open invitation to visit whenever I want."

She eyed the other woman warily, confused as to why she would want to earn herself that kind of consideration. Still not sure if she should be concerned or not as well, which made her less likely to ignore that. "…right. Go buy it, Bjørn."

The Lackey hesitated, then snatched the file from Daniella's hatchet woman. "Some renovation is required to be habitable, Dama."

"I'll go check it once we're done here." Sonya promised the young man, the bulk of her attention on the platinum blonde woman. "Do you at least have a list of contractors we can hire for that?"

"…Vongola is allowing us to make use of their construction company."

"No." Refuted the woman flatly, highly unamused by the suggestion and visibly so.

"Then I will also arrange a few estimates from more local companies." Allowed the dirtier blonde Icelander, pulling a pen out to mark down some lines of a code on the file in his hands.

"The CEDEF aren't all that bad at construction work." Guerra commented almost idly, placing a hand on her hip and eyeing the thief with interest.

"No." Repeated the Russian as her Lackey glanced between them but bowed himself out of the conversation and the room rather quickly. "I really don't care how good they are, I'd rather not invite unknown Mafiosi to work on where I want Shamal to grow up in."

The Rain glancing at him earned her a mockingly amused look. Renato wasn't the one buying a castle, if Sonya wanted to pour that money into the local infrastructure instead of Vongola's coffers he had no intention of trying to change her mind. Even if the Outside Advisory branch of Vongola could use the cash or the legal work to help cover them.

Besides which, being foreign would be enough of a hurdle for her. If her pouring an absolutely ridiculous amount of money into the local economy bought her even a little goodwill to ease past that 'not a Catholic' bump, it was more than worth it.

"Well… it is a cover business." Allowed Nilda after a moment.

"Why do you care?"
"I was 'loaned' to be a local introduction for your young man." Confessed the other woman brightly, with a smile that was more sharp than polite. "To keep people from refusing to sell you property because you're not Italian. I'm keeping in mind the likely local responses to you moving in."

Utter. Fucking. Lies.

The hitman didn't even have to look at her for Sonya to know that, her highly unimpressed expression said it all and more.

"You need to brush up on your lying skills." Announced the Russian instead of directly call the other out on it. "If you were really trying to do that, then finding local contractors for any job I need wouldn't be so 'surprising'. Besides which, Bjørn does not require having his hand held."

"I know." Guerra informed the Storm-Cloud simply.

Sonya stared at her flatly for a long moment. "…so, you're my Vongola informant?"

"Pretty much, and the Alliance agent. I don't work for Nono Vongola."

"Ottavia?"

"More often, yes. But for those that she really wants removed somehow or shifted off their… duties." She informed her fellow blonde, rather bluntly. "I need a different job. My marriage is being negotiated so I won't be able to continue that as easily anymore. I'm being shuffled around into things, so if you don't like me just say so and someone else will be offered."

"Why?" Asked the Russian equally bluntly.

"Why what?"

"Why do I need one, and why the fuck would I want one, and to top it off why the hell should I put up with you?"

"To prevent 'he said she said' incidents from getting out of hand, to cut down on the amount of bullshit you're going to have to deal with moving in next door to about three different families that might or might not be pleased to see you settling on their fringes, and that's what this is all about. To see if you can."

Renato lifted a shoulder in a shrug when the thief glanced at him skeptically. He hadn't had to deal with a Vongola Alliance informant in his time as a Don, he in fact fobbed the entire thing off to pay off a debt to Timoteo Vongola, so he wasn't sure what they really did in return for being allowed to linger around.

"It doesn't have to be a hostile arrangement." Nilda coaxed after a moment when it was more than apparent the Russian was not really a fan of the very idea. "Obviously, you're going to have little to nothing to do with anything the Vongola Alliance will want. You can think of me as a local you can ask any kind of question about Italian life instead."

"But that's not all you are." Sonya countered flatly. "I wouldn't mind a friend. An informant is a bit too much for me to feel comfortable with near my responsibilities."

"Okay. I'll let you know when a new agent is available."

Suspicious, the Russian thief inspected the Italian hatchet woman for a long moment. "That's it?"
"I have a lot of things to be doing, I can easily duck out of this." Nilda promised with a flick of a hand aimed at a window. "I stepped in because I didn't think you'd like the 'usual' ways this is handled. Which is usually to not inform someone they've got a CEDEF plant in their household."

"Why, exactly, is the house I'm getting to raise Shamal in his native country so damn interesting?"

"Because you either are the or the about to retire head of a Mafia School, an example of a Soviet criminal and Dying Will Flame expert, have access to an interesting gem-Flame matching service, a Cloud user, and a known thief." Listed off the Rain blandly, listing off the points on one hand just to hammer her point home. "This isn't including Sinclair being a freelance hitman of some note, young Shamal being a rather powerful little Mist in his own right and what he might grow into eventually, anyone you might happen to relocate here or what kind of threats they might be."

Renato wondered if he was insulted to be tacked on to Sonya's list of accomplishments or not, with the brat and the rest of her various minions. Admittedly he'd taken a hell of a back step, with Nono's permission, in being a visible hitman in Italia...

"Am I allowed to kill these people if they do stupid shit? Otherwise I'm firing them the minute I or any of my two Mists find them."

"...you can, as long as there's a reason." Spoke the Rain after a glance downward, probably assuming Shamal was one of her 'two Mists' and contemplating if the kid was up to the task of spotting plants in his mamma's household. "Might be best to ensure someone of the Alliance knows they're behaving stupidly the first few times. Or just tell me, I'll remove them for you."

Not entirely unexpected as an assumption, but a few people were going to get a shock when Anna the Mirror Lady was introduced around. Both of Sonya's Mists had an unhealthy tracking addiction on the thief's person, to the point anyone but an extremely accepting Sky or apparently Storm-Cloud would be a tad bit unnerved. Usov deciding he had enough of lingering in Moscow without Sonya would be equally as unnerving for a few people.

"If they don't work, I'm not putting up with them." Warned the thief in a disgusted tone, suddenly getting up from her spot and crooking a finger at Shamal. "Come on, brat. I need a break from people, and there's a few things I was asked to pass on to you."

"Figure out what we're doing this week." Renato chipped in before they got too far, since there were several days until the Ball they had to fill somehow.

More than likely with parks and a film, which he had to think up excuses to not attend himself. He didn't have a problem with Shamal burning off energy someplace built specifically for children to do so or being silent for an entire hour, but the kid was just shy of being able to do all that unescorted by an adult.

"...that was risky."

"You know some moron would've tried to be cute about their orders since she's 'a communist' Russian and gotten themselves killed by her for trying it. Then we would've had to deal with that." Nilda informed him quietly, arms crossed under her modest chest in something that wasn't defensive but certainly a delayed reaction to dealing with a displeased Cloud. "My job is to prevent such hiccups."

"You could've done the same thing in about a five minute aside." Drawled out the hitman slowly.

"Would she take the complications seriously, or just plan some on the spot murder?"
Admittedly not knowing the answer to that made him shrug. Seeing 'her' people in action in a Russian thieves' clan could certainly be different to how they would operate in another country, he wasn't allowed to see how they dealt with betrayal or anything along those lines as a 'guest'.

"Don't expect her to be 'gracious' about those invites." Renato warned instead, rising to his own feet to find himself some footman for a decent cup of coffee. "Getting her to attend the Balls will also be as hard as pulling teeth, and I don't expect her to be all that amused at the idea of maybe throwing one herself."

"You managed to bring her along for three years."

"After several years of knowing the woman and using the brat as bait."

Nilda contemplated the idea for a moment. "Maybe she will accept if it's Tyr asking?"

The Mafioso paused, shot the woman a highly unamused look, and continued.

He also had to ask if she was pregnant. Hopefully when she wouldn't mind answering that kind of personal question to him, or at least wouldn't hide if she was or not out of some sense of pique.

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(Tuesday the 23rd of December, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Renato being perfectly willing to take a list of requests to a local hardware store in trade for not having to attend a showing of On Her Majesty's Secret Service at least meant he didn't hear Shamal asking if James Bond was based off the hitman.

Sonya actually didn't know if the Mafioso had influenced things in film, but at least could inform the Mist it was probably unlikely enough to not ask the man if he was ever mistaken for a spy as 'James Bond' as a character was a touch too old to be their hitman. She knew it existed in a variation of a world without him but Mafia Land employees were pretty international, so it was possible someone caught sight of him and made assumptions to draw details from.

Halfway into a lesson with the provided locks and doorknobs mounted on a plank of wood on how to pick them using a pair of bent bobby pins, even if the kid could pick them easier with Mist Flames and her teaching him was just for the rare occasions he might be too drained to muster up even that kind of minor effort, the thief got a touch… distracted.

More than she liked to be, so with a sigh the Russian set the bent bobby pins down. "Who is that?"

Renato, who had buried himself behind a current newspaper once he got the gist of the trick as men didn't really have a convenient excuse to carry bobby pins around, bent a corner and peered in the direction she was looking. "…damned if I know. Why?"

"He's a Cloud." Shamal reported blandly before digging back into his lesson and trying to copy the thief's opened locks using the method she demonstrated for him. "He's Jacopo, but they're calling him 'Ottavio' now he's a known Cloud user."

"The brat you got into a fight with your first year here?" Sonya questioned skeptically, inching the pile of keys out of the Mist's view so he couldn't keep cheating by making copies instead of pick open the locks. "The one that nailed you good in the face?"

"I got him back." The brat protested in a wounded tone, pouting at her for either needing the
clarification or for moving the keys. "…but yeah, mamma. That's him."

She wondered how to ask 'did you or he start it' without earning herself more pouts.

"Did you start it?" Renato asked for her behind his paper, sounding entirely disinterested in the answer.

"No." Insisted the Mist disgustedly, giving up on his lock picking practice for a pout over his folded arms even if the Mafioso wasn't looking to appreciate it. "I used a bit more of the art supplies for a moment, I just needed some of the yellows he had three of."

…so, he had. Rather, he had committed an offence a Classical Cloud would probably get into a childish brawl for doing. Valera was equally unwilling to share absolutely anything that was 'his', no matter the bribery or arguments tried, and frankly Sonya wasn't really all that willing to share her personal things with just anyone either.

Which meant the distraction she had was the one of what she was calling 'infringement'.

…who was the brat other than an old opponent Shamal once had, and another Cloud of her polarization?

Was it worth the effort to discover if there was a way to get two 'feral' Clouds to co-exist even temporarily using the kid?

Said kid was either blind as a bat, other than what he needed those glasses for, or not a very good Cloud. He didn't seem to notice her at all, when the last two times she 'infringed' on other Clouds they noticed right the fuck away and went after her as the threat she was to them.

….or ignoring her.

Sonya considered it, for about half a second.

Frankly, she'd rather follow up on the Wolfpack Gang's Cloud brat. Hopefully the dent they made in the 'normal' reactions two Clouds had upon meeting could be extended somehow with more help or assistance from the older Cloud for the younger one. She couldn't raise the kid, he was well established in his territory and she didn't know what removing a Cloud from a territory they were 'claiming' did to them.

"Renato? Can you remove the kid from the room? I'm not going to be able to focus with him nearby."

"What if he's needed in here, little dragon lady?"

"He's reading an atlas. He can do that outside." Dismissed the Storm-Cloud, trying to refocus back on the brat's lock picking efforts but finding her attention drifting to the Cloud instead. "And I really don't want to kill him or needlessly scare the kid, so I can't do it."

"Actually," the hitman offered after a moment of studying the young man she was objecting to, "he's hiding behind that atlas."

Blinking, the Storm-Cloud twisted around to see if he was being honest in that report.

...so he was.

"I still don't care. In fact, I care less than that now." Seriously, other Clouds attacked her either
physically or verbally even when they knew they had no chance against her... and this one hides? "Get rid of him, or I will."

"Will do."

Shamal peered up at her curiously. "He's training under Master Tyr, last I heard."

"Tyr needs a better apprentice." Sonya deadpanned flatly. "I've never heard of a meek assassin before."

A Cloud assassin was a contradiction in terms, right?

Well... admittedly a Cloud thief was also a contradiction in terms, criminal terms, so there was that. As was a Cloud stuntman, but Cherep was different.

Her trying to reserve judgement was apparently an impossible thing when it came to other Clouds. Pity.

(Thursday the 25th of December, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Fiorella Vongola pressed a last kiss to Massimo's downy head, giving a smile to the nurserymaid on night duty as she left the toddler's nursery room. Evading Enrico's latest attempt to ruin her gown so she could afford the time to read him a story, then stepping around Federico's attempts to control his younger brother with a laugh, she finally got to the end of the children's wing.

"Behave, boys. Please." She tried to entreat before leaving them to their roughhousing, more than aware enough only Federico heard a word she said. "Just for tonight."

It was Christmas day, the children would be a touch too wild from all the sweets and presents to really focus too much on their manners. Having missed the last three years of Balls her husband threw meant she was sorely out of touch with current events among his friends' and the politicians' wives, and as fun as raising her three boys could be Fiorella really wanted to finally get back to something that didn't involve how much dirt they could convince each other to eat or the 'name that bug' game.

Apparently she had gotten pregnant at just the wrong time, some new woman was making a bit of a headache for her husband's peace of mind. As she had never met a Russian in person, it would be at least interesting.

She couldn't regret Massimo's birth, but the timing perhaps could've been better.

Giving Visconti a smile, she hastened on with him dogging her steps to where her husband was likely finishing up a bit of the family business before it had to be put mostly aside for the Ball.

Not being a particularly dense woman, Fiorella knew perfectly well 'Vongola' was not just a family business that happened to be a touch international. However hard her husband tried to convince her of it.

She got kept out of a lot of 'it', as she wasn't 'Vongola' through birth or association but simply marriage. Tiny things tended to stack up however, the footmen all being armed and trained in the use of firearms with a good portion of the maids, the three racks of knives in the kitchen not for culinary use, even Timoteo's bodyguards matching somewhat with his mother's six main guards in some kind
of type.

Not being sure what it all meant in the end made confronting her husband with it pointless, as well as a fight she wasn't even certain was all that important. No one seemed all that upset or uncomfortable with whatever was going on, so she could just wait for an opportunity when she knew more.

Sometimes, watching them trying to hide things from her was mildly amusing.

"Fiorella, dear." Daniella called down a hallway, straightening the lapels of her crushed velvet suit. Instead of the usual red it was a burnt orange color, only a touch too light to be called a deep red or dark brown. "Not even a hello for your mother-in-law?"

"Oh, Daniella. I wasn't aware you would be attending tonight." Fiorella smiled at the elderly woman, as Visconti gave Solothurn a short nod before carrying on in the direction they had been headed in without her. "I thought you disliked these things?"

"I'm too old to keep standing around all night chatting." Corrected Timoteo's mother blandly, a wry smile curving her lips enough to crease the tiny flower tattoo at the corner of her eye. "This year we have a couple guests that have raised the usual interest in the Balls to almost ridiculous levels. Consider me your backup tonight, m'dear."

"The Russian woman?"

"Nikishina's one of them, yes. But she's been attending the last few Christmas Balls so the majority of interest in her is waning. The lady head of the Giglio Nero is emerging from her little enclave finally, to be honest I can't wait for the two of them to meet." Admitted the elderly woman thoughtfully, tapping a cane her Bodeo had been holding for her on the ground before walking without needing it to the top of the only staircase that led to the family level of the mansion. "Fetch my son and hurry up, Fiorella. Don't leave me to the sharks too long."

"Leave you to the sharks, or leave them with a shark?" She questioned dryly, earning herself a bark of a laugh from her mother-in-law. "Very sorry, Solothurn. Two minutes."

Daniella's equally as closed-mouth bodyguard as Visconti merely gave her a short nod, finishing the escort to where her husband was and 'trading off' with the other silent man.

Fiorella wasn't sure why she needed guarding, obviously it was in response to something that had once happened they didn't want a repeat of, but she didn't really mind. There were a lot of people here over the holidays and putting up with a bit of bother with bodyguards during such times at least kept the worry of her sons wandering off on her and getting lost down.

Lord knew if it was possible, Enrico would find a way to do it.

She lived in a massive mansion, with almost everything already taken care of by servants, and all she had to do was raise her sons. Complaining about the security because her husband was a man of note and powerful with his wealth would be a touch ungrateful.

One last man seeking her husband's aid or support for something or another, five more minutes on top of that delay after Coyote Nougat escorted him out of the wing, and Timoteo stepped out of his personal office with a mildly tired sigh and Ganauche following at his heels. "And now, on to the floor show."

"Your mother is already down there." Fiorella reported so Visconti could imitate a statue as he wished, fussing with her husband's tie so it would lie flat and straightening his collar for him. "The boys are either tearing up the playroom again or have finally settled down without me there to
distract them for Caterina to read them a story to. Massimo is at least sleeping."

"Odds on if me going in there to settle them down working if they're not already?"

"Poor." She informed him wickedly. "Papa coming to play? You'll never get out of there with your suit intact."

Timoteo studied her expression closely. "They got another handful of mud pass the maids?"

"Somehow. I think they keep it as pockets full of dirt, then just add water, the scamps. I suspect Federico is helping his brother yet letting Enrico take all the blame."

The face her husband pulled was mildly annoyed. "Now why did I think of that?"

"You didn't have brothers, Timoteo." Ganauche reminded him, self-consciously adjusting his eyepatch for the nth time by the look of his hair. "Coyote might've counted as your first...ah, friend, but not by the time you were old enough to know better than smuggling mud into the mansion."

Fiorella pulled a comb out of a decorative vase and handed it to the younger man. "You look fine, Ganauche. The less you think of it the less it will bother you."

The one-eyed man dressed in a very green suit grimaced, taking the comb from her gratefully. "It'd help if people would stop staring."

"They're probably imagining what heroic battle you earned that badge of honor from." Insisted the woman pointedly, gesturing to the vase again when he tried to give the comb back after straightening out his hair. "I had the maids hide combs everywhere, so I could fix the boys' hair when they tried to mess it up before anything 'adult-y'. Like the summer picnic and the family pictures."

"You're indispensable." Her husband informed her warmly, then took a bracing breath and faced the hallway. "Let us now brave the hordes, before my mother finds something to complain about."

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 25th of December, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"She's abandoned her… well, Sinclair." Daniella pointed out for her, as Fiorella took a brief pause in the dancing with her mother-in-law in order to get something wet and cool. "With dear Tyr on the floor, kind of noticeable given the poor man has so few friends."

"...what does Tyr do again?" Asked the wife of Timoteo Vongola politely, committing the ash blonde woman's face in her memory. "It seems to change every time I look around these days."

She didn't know what Nikishina was wearing, but she wanted the tailor's name to get herself one. It looked delightfully breezy if a touch form fitting, especially in even a large ballroom packed with nearly five hundred other people mostly in non-breathing clothing.

Very modest even if it was exotically interesting too, wrist to ankle were covered yet there was almost a scandalously high split up the sides of her skirt to the point of requiring a set of loose pants to cover her sometimes exposed hips and her legs down to the strappy silver stilettos on her feet.

Purple jacket ending in red near the sleeves and skirt, and soft yellow pants. Somehow, even when the 'norm' was only one 'main' solid color to the point both Daniella and Timoteo always wore orange or some shade of it and their guards always picked the same shade from the rest of the rainbow, Nikishina got away with three of them in her outfit, without being asked politely to change
into something else.

"He's the head of a new external security branch." Her mother-in-law informed her. "Dear Tyr joined me a touch late to also retire with my generation, so I let him pass to your husband to help out a little."

Ash grey eyes suddenly flicked in their direction, for only a brief moment she caught the other woman's eyes before Tyr spun the woman around again.

Fiorella shivered, for some reason she couldn't put a finger on.

"Russians are delightfully blunt and intense." Daniella informed her pleasantly, a smirk a touch too sharp to be really fond crossing her lips. "She's moving here, not exactly locally but near enough. Now… ah, Ottavia of the Giglio Nero. Dear Luce, over there near Sinclair. The fellow with a yellow dress shirt and tie, and that yellow band around his fedora. With the curly sideburns? Right next to him is Luce of the Giglio Nero."

Obediently, Fiorella gazed in that direction and eventually found Timoteo's newest friend Sinclair speaking with a dark Italian beauty with short hair and a puffy looking hat.

Her color seemed to be either black or white, or orange.

Delicately frowning, she glanced at her mother-in-law's dark orange pantsuit to the new woman's mainly white dress. Just with orange highlights.

There were few others that wore orange, mostly among her husband's key associates as well as himself and his mother. More recently, she had found a trend of orange in her eldest son's formal clothing. Mostly men, and one elderly woman.

No one seemed to be asking the young woman wearing the color to change to match the dress code either.

However, at this angle, Fiorella could see that Luce had a tattoo of a flower near the same place Daniella’s. Not nearly as wide as the elderly woman's, and more modest as well in that it didn't take up half a cheekbone, but certainly enough to explain why her mother-in-law declared the other woman 'dear'.

Flattery included mimicry.

"Why didn't I see Luce of the Giglio Nero in the greeting line, Daniella?"

"We're trying to keep her from being overwhelmed with applications to join her company." Answered the elderly Italian easily, always with a plausible answer that just seemed a touch off somehow. "Dear Luce and her company deals with tracking information, not entirely glamorous but occasionally risky depending on what kind of information you're after and where it might be. She's got openings, and this is the first Vongola hosted event she's attended after taking over for her poor father."

Asking her mother-in-law would probably not get her what happened for Daniella to call a man she had never once heard of as 'poor' and asking the younger woman in question would probably be a touch tasteless.

"Thank you." Fiorella informed the woman instead of asking a question she doubted would be answered, taking a moment to sip more of the champagne she had in her hand. "I terribly missed these events. Not to say I would trade being able to tend to Massimo's first few years for anything,
but I am horribly behind in keeping up with the changes to my social circle."

"I certainly haven't." Daniella informed her a touch tartly, keeping an eye on the younger Italian woman and the group around her which contained three of her own bodyguards and two of her son's. "Way too many self-important idiots too full of themselves to realize they're making fools of themselves once a pretty lady is around or enough alcohol gets into them."

"Timoteo probably knows more of that than I do." She reminded her mother-in-law a bit wryly. "I instead get their pretty and airheaded girlfriends and a few trophy wives to 'subtly' discourage from harassing the help, if it wasn't for the rare few handfuls of sensible wives..."

A rather out-of-place grunt of surprise she couldn't put a name to distracted her from finishing that comment, a fleck of something hot and wet splashing across her face had Fiorella turning as she touched a pad of a finger to the hot liquid.

A silver and now slightly bloody heel lowered, and Nikishina eyed the heavy knife now sticking half out of her foot as she slid down Tyr's form to stand on the floor again. "...well fuck. That hurt."
Chapter 94

(Friday the 26th of December, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Tyr didn't exactly let Sonya reach the floor. The hand that had been at her waist suddenly disappeared and instead his arm caught her under her ass, the hand gripping hers let go just so the assassin could grip the back of her right leg and inspect the heavy knife sticking out of her foot.

Then the man turned around in the direction the weapon had come from, frowning rather heavily.

"I didn't see who threw it." She informed him a touch apologetically, as the band suddenly came to a jarring stop as they had the height on a stage to clearly see the crowd and other people started to realize something was wrong through that. "Just that it was there."

Admittedly, trying to catch a knife with her foot was also a really stupid idea. She hadn't wanted to rip her right out of the Sword Emperor's hand, because that probably would've broken a few of his finger bones, so instead she leapt up the guy's form and stuck out her heel instead.

The Russian was a circus trained knife thrower, she knew perfectly well sharp things in the air with this many people around was a bad thing. She just wanted to get it out of the air, then figure out who was being stupid.

…she also dug one of her stabby looking heels into Tyr's back for the balance, hopefully he didn't hold that against her.

"I believe, in this case, you are forgiven for the oversight." He informed her simply, which required a moment of thought to realize he was talking about not catching whoever threw the knife and not her digging a silver heel into the small of his back, shifting her to sit on his forearm for a second just to release her leg and catch the blonde woman into a bridal carry.

Someone screamed, with her stabbed foot probably in full view of anyone glancing around, which started a rapid evacuation of the ballroom's open dance floor and a rise in volume overall as other people started reacting to the reaction and others reacted to that.

Sonya was not amused by her current position or the noise. "I can walk."

She was also now dripping blood on the floor, keeping people from tracking through it before everyone realized the hazard was there was probably a thing to do… but he really could do that without her, really.

"On a knife?" He questioned a touch sardonically just loud enough for her to hear, which was probably the most life she'd seen out of him since last year's minor surprise. "A good fourth of the guests this night is unaware of why the dress code includes certain colors for certain people, as well as somewhat inhuman feats. Some are politicians, a few European celebrities, two are the local and regional police chiefs and their wives."

…fuck. She hadn't known that.

Renato was going to bitch, and the brat would probably not let her go anywhere without him for a couple days at least. She was probably not going to be allowed to 'walk' it off, and her brother's Cloud Voodoo would probably not help right now.

Tyr didn't go far, thankfully. He set her pert ass on the banquet table, right next to Daniella Vongola
already doctoring some poor socialite's bloody face, then gave her a courteous little nod as if they had finished their round on the dance floor instead of her jumping him and getting a knife through the foot. "Miss Sonya, thank you."

"...right. Sure." Her foot really kind of hurt now and being thanked for doing something stupid was kind of embarrassing.

Hopefully it was more for their discussion on baby Cloud territory forming, not being a touch airheaded around sharp and shiny things.

At least there was a half-complete bulwark of Guardian Elements keeping the press of panicky people away from their Sky and the two other ladies allowed in their guard, making a little pocket of breathing room where no one else was likely to get themselves stabbed by the sharp implement sticking out of her skin.

"Well," observed the Eighth Sky of Vongola a touch wryly as the master assassin left to likely go hunting, still dabbing around the younger Italian woman's makeup to remove a good portion... of... Sonya's blood, "not the best introduction, but Fiorella? Dear, this is Nikishina. Nikishina, my son's wife Fiorella Vongola."

"My name is Bazanova. I had it legally changed several years ago." The thief pointed out blandly, inspecting her right foot and wondering what the knife was cutting into to make it hurt so much. "My biological father's a jackass, I really don't like him much."

Daniella paused in her work to give her a measured look. "He's alive?"

"Castrated." Sonya countered flatly. "There are some things you just can't get away with in Russia."

"Hmm... ruthless." Announced the Sky pleasantly, sounding perfectly fine with that.

"I thought your eyes were grey." Fiorella eventually managed weakly over the noise in the ballroom as things were sorted out and her husband started trying to corral the masses, still white as a sheet under her blush and eyeshadow... and the streaks of blood that had yet to be carefully cleaned off.

"They are."

"Ah... Miss Bazanova, she doesn't know." Daniella informed her a touch of what was probably supposed to be apologetically, moving a step farther from her just so her Sun Guardian could get next to her and lay out the medical kit to tend to the thief's injury in some kind of peace. "And... you are a tiny touch... very purple right now."

"Very sorry." Sonya bit out sarcastically, unable to really help it in the face of constant pain and a Sun she really didn't like or know well dumping some kind of disinfectant around the length of sharpened steel in her foot. How he got it was something she was chalking up to mysterious magical medical things, her sister had the same damn habit. "Also, how the fuck does she not know?"

"Timoteo really should've informed her after their Federico was born but he insisted she didn't need to know, and it would just complicate her life unnecessarily." Daniella announced in a conversational tone, licking a new corner of the mostly snowy white but now blood-soaked handkerchief in her hands to continue removing the blood from the lady in question. "If you just happen to spill a bit, I will not mind. I don't think even Timoteo could really protest, as that knife was really aimed at dear Fiorella if she was the one splattered with your blood when you caught it for us."

"Do I need to know?" Countered the wife of a Sky instead of pounce on that admission from her mother-in-law, an admirable adjustment even in the face of a near-assassination attempt and either the
realization or confirmation she was being left in the dark about something.

…probably very minor Rain or Lightning.

No, wait. There went the paleness as she finally understood she was the target tonight, not the Russian. Probably not a minor Rain then, or at least not as much as she might be a Lightning.

Sonya thought about it, and the various meetings she and Galina did with various parents trying to understand what their kids could do. Lisa did tend to do that more than most of the actual Flame users, so she really only had a small sample size to draw from. Larion's mother, mainly.

"I suppose... Nono might have a point." Offered the thief after a moment, reaching down to remove her left heel because she really didn't want to hop on it if she needed to move while in full view. "A minor one if at all. The concerns can be addressed perfectly well and given his type... you should really know to have a say in how your boys are brought up as they likely share it. Italians of that particular breed seem to all be arrogant sots."

"Arrogant, am I?" Daniella observed idly, finishing up with her daughter-in-law's face the best a piece of moist cloth could do.

"Aren't you?"

"Comes with the territory, doesn't it? We all are."

"How many of my type do you have already?" Sonya countered with a huff, wincing as the right heel was laboriously cut off her foot and pulled from around the knife stuck it in. "I don't want one, thank you. Neither does my brother."

"Everyone wants one."

She pinned the elderly lady with an unamused look. "I don't want one. Neither does my brother."

"Did you only convinced yourself of that, or are you like Sinclair? Too strong to draw in?" Daniella countered bluntly, a hand on her violently dark orange hip and a frown on her lips. "You seem to be protesting a touch much to really feel that way."

The thief snorted. "My point. I wouldn't have minded Tyr, but my brother doesn't like him. As we are... well, what we are, without his agreement not having it isn't really all that much of a point of contention between us. I don't mind he doesn't want it, and your special status does nothing for either of us. Yet you insist, because you really know better than we know ourselves... right?"

The elderly Sky pursed her lips, a few of her wrinkles around her eyes deepening as she at least considered it.

Sonya glanced at the terribly confused and a little scared wife of a mafia Don watching that conversation, then sighed heavily. "Lady Vongola, you don't need to know. I don't honestly think you'll harm anything not knowing. However, a couple things will then make more sense if you know, therefore ask your husband. He really should've been the one to tell you, and you can use my unconscious reactions as an excuse if you'd like."

"I don't suppose you mean your eye coloring." Daniella butted it a touch wryly when her daughter-in-law just stared at her blankly.

The Storm-Cloud released the edge of the banquet table, and the impressions her fingers had left behind in solid wood as the Sun Guardian fussed with her aching foot. "Not really."
Fiorella then stared at the highly polished and now dented wood, wide-eyed.

"Miss… Bazanova." Revelli spoke up from the floor, gripping both her right ankle and the hilt of the knife stuck in her. "Brace yourself."

The Russian put her hands back, and accidentally crushed the edges she was gripping when the knife was sharply yanked out.

…fuck that hurt. "…ow."

The bloody thing was also handed off to someone that immediately left the group, probably so the weapon could be used in various tracking efforts to find whomever it was that was throwing knives even if no one was allowed to carry weapons around.

"That is a touch hard to explain, admittedly." Observed the Sun's Sky in a deadpan. "Not exactly what I asked, but more than enough for my purposes. Glisenti, be a dear and cover that up from view for now."

She sniffed irritably, relocating her hands to a new position to not mess up the Mist Flames being applied as the Sun dragged out a set of suturing needles and thread from a medical kit he took from somewhere. "…thank you for the distraction."

"Would you like another one?" Daniella inquired politely, patting Fiorella on the shoulder as the stunned younger woman was subtly guided into a chair by Brow Nie to recover her nerves in. "A bit of a strange deviation, arguing instead of fighting, but a delightful one even if you do still cost a bit of property damage."

"…Renato's almost worked his way through the crowd, he'll have one for me." Sonya informed her blankly, giving Revelli a look when he glanced up with his threaded needled ready to start piecing together her ripped flesh. "You might want to move, too."

The salt-n-pepper bearded Sun sniffed himself in insulted dignity as he repositioned her foot to where he had better light to see what he would be doing. "That young rascal can certainly wait a moment, you need stitches to help keep this shut until we can move you to the medical wing."

She eyed the blood on the floor and covering the man's hands, considering. Probably a pint if at all, most from ripping the knife out, but she should keep an eye out for any light-headedness. "…joy."

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 26th of December, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Sonya waved off any painkillers, which meant she didn't have to answer if she was pregnant or not. Which meant he still had to find a way to ask her outright and get a truthful answer.

Renato glowered at her 'injured' foot as if it was mocking him, because it really kind of was.

"I think," the thief spoke up after a moment of oddly staring at him for the insulted expression on his face, "I'm done with Balls for a while."

"Good." He shot back shortly, especially as that meant she wouldn't attend any more without him or get distracted more by random Skies to the point she got injured.

Fucking Tyr didn't even bother to catch the asshole throwing sharp things around, leaving the dragon lady with a Sky she didn't like and the civilian wife of Nono's. There was still a man-hunt going on,
all the guests were being politely but firmly re-inspected for any possible way to sneak a heavy hunting knife into the Iron Fort.

The hitman had done it once before, as did the Russian. The only reason why they weren't at the top of the suspect list was because the knife had been thrown at Fiorella yet caught by the thief. Sonya also had no possible way to make a knife and stab herself with it with a heel in the air and her hands occupied with the Sword Emperor, as well as the whole 'saving Timoteo's wife by sheer accident' issue. He had managed to pluck her out of Revelli's grips once he was done stitching her injury up and head straight to the medical wing just to remove them.

Sonya didn't really appreciate being hefted around, Renato didn't really appreciate leaving her injured even for appearances' sake. The muscles were mainly healed, and the skin was now lacking the stitching holding the injury shut, but even for Flame users things could remain sore if the body was left with an injury too long.

"...so," tried the bored thief after a moment, "have you told Shamal yet?"

He shot her a look. "It's four in the morning."

"He's almost seven. It's entirely possible he can finally manage staying up all night, even if he shouldn't."

She was also slightly depressed the brat was nearly seven, because he was now too big for her to easily get away with carting him around as she might like. The Mist brat finally grew into his proportions, more a miniature adult than a child with a child's smaller and easily carried form.

Not that it would stop her from hefting around the brat if she wanted, but not something she could do in public anymore without attracting undue attention.

The Mafioso's head hurt as he tried to follow her logic. "...I thought you didn't want to deal with babies."

"I don't." Confirmed the thief flatly.

"...are you pregnant?" Renato tried bluntly, more than tired of trying to find a quiet moment and the right way to ask.

She gave him a strange look, drawing a blank why he was asking.

"There's a rumor back in Mafia Land-"

"Renato, this year there was a rumor you impregnated half the fucking island's female population and the reason you were gone so much was so you couldn't be nailed with paternity issues." Sonya helpfully reminded him a touch flatly, utterly unamused. "Why are you listening to it?"

"This started in the hospital." Muttered the hitman a touch sourly, irked at that rumor being dug up again to be shoved in his face by this particular woman. "And for the record, I didn't."

"Obviously." Snarled the Storm-Cloud, now officially irked at him. "And-"

Whatever she was going to say, even the thoughts still forming in her mind to be spoken, were interrupted by the medical wing's doors being pushed open a touch roughly. Fiorella Vongola blinked a touch rapidly as she stood just inside the large hall, then noticed the two of them watching her.
"...oh, my apologies." Hesitating as Renato threw himself back in his seat as it became obvious he wasn't going to get an answer now and the thief rolled her eyes at his 'dramatics', the Italian lady glanced between them. "Am... I interrupting anything?"

"Yes."

"No." Countered Sonya flatly, gesturing the woman over. "Did he tell you?"

"Dying Will Flames of the Sky." Confirmed the lady warily, eventually allowing herself to be beckoned over by the Russian to join their little circle so he couldn't dredge up their previous conversation. "Timoteo admitted he should've told me sooner, he just... didn't want to."

"You're kind of... blank. Ish." Admitted the Russian in what probably should be a helpful tone, which utterly missed the mark given the other woman's reaction. "A Lightning if at all, frankly. Might be a Rain, but it's really hard to tell with you. You don't have enough to make it obvious, I could only catch it by how you deal with shocks, so the possibility you'll ever pull on it and use it is low. But being able to pit it on others, like me as a Stormy Cloud or Renato over there as a Sun, means you can sort of plot around us. With your... erm, rank? You really should've known about us well before this as you probably deal with a lot of our number. And your kids, that probably the more important part really."

"But... you can shatter wood. With your fingers." Fiorella announced blankly as she sunk into the seat the Mafioso scorned for having it's back to the doors, as if it was impressive not the Storm-Cloud really dialing back her strength the best she could in the face of her own distress. "Some of you can pull things into reality using your minds. Why... why me?"

"...it makes a bit of sense, there's really no female Skies around your general age range." Sonya offered after a moment of serious consideration on her behalf. "Vongola's known for their Skies. Without a strong influence on the mother's side, the more dominant Flame type on the father's would breed true. I guess. I don't deal with bloodlines much, so I am rather unsure about the logistics of that assumption."

"That's not particularly reassuring for her." Renato chipped in for the lovely wife of a good friend, before her sense could be overwhelmed by her current worries.

"It should." She stated flatly, then actually looked at the other woman's face. "Oh... no, Lady Vongola. I meant there was no 'breeding' considerations with you. Nono probably went after you because he liked you, not that you had a special trait you didn't know of and he made the decision based off that. As you don't have it... it was likely more merit than our... Flame stuff."

Sonya warily leaned back away from the wife of the Sky she was trying to badly reassure, uncertain what she was saying wrong as the woman about a half a decade older than her teared up.

The Mafioso caught Fiorella's hand before she embedded her nails into her skin through sheer upset and smoothed the faint stressed nail marks already present out with a touch of Sun Flames. "Lady Vongola, your mother-in-law would have the side of your relationship from your husband's point of view. The little dragon lady's a touch dense, Lady Daniella would be more suited to answering any concerns you might have about any kind of 'suitability' Timoteo would look for in you before your marriage."

"Hey." Protested the woman half-reclined on a medical berth irritably, nettled by his words. "I am not 'dense'. I am slightly socially impaired."

"Same thing." Renato shot back, releasing the married woman's hands once she seemed a touch
more settled and politely pretending interests in her healed hands. "You're oblivious."

"I am-" She cut her denial off in a bit of surprise when he shot to his feet and loomed over her.

"Are you pregnant?" Demanded the hitman shortly, finally getting a negative out of her head. "Do you want to be? Because I can certainly help you out with that if you'd like, little dragon lady."

It took a second for things to click together on her end. "...are you flirting with me?"

"My point. You're dense, as a brick." He insisted hotly, snatching his hat off of the foot of her berth and shoving it on before turning on a heel to go check on their godchild. "We've been dating several months now!"

"When the fuck did you ask!" Shot the thief back at him, sounding rather upset now herself.

Renato turned back just so he could see her face for this part. "Right outside of Babylon, remember?"

Sonya didn't for a full moment, then the irritation on her slid off for something quite like surprise mixed with realization and a touch of sheepishness. "...the 'you'll look back and feel foolish' conversation?"

He gave her a pointed look as he shouldered the doors separating the medical wing from a guarded hall opening up to a greater section of the Iron Fort, because he had been right.

Fiorella giggled weakly, grinning wryly when the Soviet Storm-Cloud gave her a mildly irritated look as the hitman left them to womanly discussions of Flame users and the impacts of such.

Hopefully the two of them could bond a little. Then Timoteo wouldn't be quite so screwed trying to repay back a woman, who quietly loathed him due to her brother's harm in his territory, in her semi-unintentional action that saved his wife's life. He'd eventually tell someone Fiorella was with Sonya, probably around the time the thief's irritation with him died down to survivable levels.

...that was going to be a mildly uncomfortable conversation. The Russian knew full well he was going to 'kill' himself off, and this was... probably not timed very well.

Hopefully, he hadn't just shot himself in the foot tossing that in her face like this.

(Saturday the 27th of December, 1969. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Suffering through a cast on her right foot, which wasn't anything but a prop right now, and a few words with the local police as Vongola 'obviously' handed over the investigation of the assault and attempted murder to the police when the knife thrower wasn't found wasn't too annoying.

Omertà was a consideration, after all.

Sonya privately betted the criminal famiglia already had the asshole in custody. They better have him.

Otherwise screw Shamal's schooling, the kid was coming with her.

This was the second time she landed herself in the Vongola medical wing, and she was heartily sick of the place.
"Keep the cast for at least a day or so." Revelli asked of her as he wrote up a page of a medical report she could give to her sister to stick in her medical file, as she laced up her left boot to leave. "Paparazzi at the gates is an expected complication from events such as last night, especially as we opened it up to the locals this year, using a false name might not help you evade them if they report on you and your details don't match up to what the police have."

"I didn't use a fake name." Sonya informed him bluntly, accepting the file to stick in her purse. "The name is one of my aliases, the more civilian one, which has a background available to be researched and nailed down in any investigation."

The elderly Sun hummed appreciatively as he started marking out a suitably doctored report to give the civilian law enforcement agencies, including her alias wholesale. "That simplifies things nicely, thank you."

Sonya slid off the berth, balancing awkwardly on the thick plaster caked around her foot and reluctantly accepting a crutch from one of the Sun nurses that aided the Guardian Suns in their work here. "Sure… I'm cleared to go, right?"

"Of course, Miss 'de Mort.'" Lightly teased the bearded man, a bit wry and surprisingly amused instead of calculatingly reserved with her now. "Have a good day."

"...right." Using crutches wasn't that hard, and she really only needed one to pole vault herself around if need be. The Russian ignored the other crutch offered by a nurse and awkwardly hopped her way out of the wing.

Having to hold a foot immobile because she'd break the cast if she forgot for even a moment was a bit of a pain, but then again… Omertà.

Renato was waiting with Shamal, already packed for at least a week and some days long visit to Moscow, in the waiting room just off the medical wing. Surprisingly, Fiorella was also present with a box in hand and patiently waiting.

"Little dragon lady," the hitman she was apparently dating greeted, attracting attention of the other two she knew of in the little padded chairs with him, "done?"

…they needed to have a really long talk. Preferably without the brat and an innocent in the same room. "For now."

Lady Vongola got to her feet, the box cradled in her hands. "Miss Bazanova, Sonya, thank you."

"I really honestly didn't know you were behind me." She protested a touch slowly, rebalancing on her left leg and resting her right on the ground.

"Either way, I am uninjured when you are." The woman corrected her simply, prying the lid off the box and showing her the contents. "I had Ganauche visit more than six stores, and seven shoe outlets, to find a pale copy of the heels you lost removing a sharp object aimed at me last night. I'm sorry they're not exactly the same."

"...oh, thank you." She still had a free hand, taking the box and inspecting the slightly different style of silver heels tucked away inside made her smirk. "At least this way my sister can't bitch at me for ruining them, even if she can't steal my shoes as she's not the same size."

"Ganauche bought several of them, as he wasn't sure what size you were." Fiorella informed her brightly. "I'm sure at least one of them could be sent to your sister if you'd like."
...seriously, *was* he defective or something?

Why didn't he grab either the cut-up heel, or the still intact one if he didn't want awkward questions asked about the blood, and use that as a guide?

"I think my sister would appreciate that, if it's possible." Admitted the Russian after a moment of wonder spent over what might be wrong with the Ninth Generation Lightning Guardian. "You didn't have to do this."

"I appreciate being alive." Lady Vongola stated with a small smile. "I also appreciate you for your help in staying that way, however 'accidental' it was."

Sonya froze, eyes widening, when the woman stepped closer and gave her a hug. She was still a bit too surprised to react when Fiorella pressed a kiss to both cheeks and stepped back.

"Thank you." Fiorella repeated with a squeeze of her shoulders, before turning and leaving the waiting room.

Renato waited a beat even after the lady's heels stopped echoing back to them, then lazily stood from the seat he had taken. "Nono would appreciate you waiting just long enough for him to have a word with you, but other than that we're ready to leave."

She shot him a dark look over her… 'gratitude' present.

Shamal heaved a tired sigh as he slid off his seat. "*You're in trouble* again?"

Shooting the kid a look of his own, the hitman sniffed and straightened the lay of his suit jacket and his cuffs. "*Of course not, the little dragon lady's merely-*"

"*Yes.*" Cut off the thief flatly. "*You're in trouble. Consent is a thing, Renato.*"

"*Of course it is. And, may I point out, I was waiting on that.*" Countered the Mafioso shortly. "*Which, if you've failed to notice, I haven't done anything without your complete consent to it.*"

…he might have a point there. Sonya still didn't appreciate finding herself in a relationship without even knowing if she wanted it, the man was complicated enough to have as a friend without trying to also figure out how to be a girlfriend on the fly.

"*You can date someone without being in a relationship.*" Renato pointed out for her simply, quietly enough that unless a Mist was specifically trying to eavesdrop on any conversations in this room it would remain between them. "*However long you take to decide is how long it will take. I know better than to pressure a lady into anything.*"

"*You'll be waiting a while.*" She informed him bluntly, working on the entire 'leave the Iron Fort' thing with the use of only one leg.

She still didn't know what if anything she was sexually attracted to. He had the aesthetic her brother thought she liked, so Cherep was probably right about that part as she was really mostly annoyed at the whole 'lack of asking' part than the 'we're dating' one.

Admittedly, that lack of asking was more her failing to understand the subtext in a conversation she really had thought was just about criminal behavior in his dating life…

…foolish indeed.
He snorted behind her, easily overtaking her slower progress and oh so helpfully holding the swinging doors that led deeper into the Iron Fort open so she didn't have to figure out how to get through them.

She pointedly ignored him in favor of seeing where their godchild was at.

Shamal glanced between them, then sighed heavily. "Mamma... you introduced yourself to me as Mister Renato's 'lady friend'. Lying is a sin."

"Am I not a lady?" Sonya inquired sourly. "I am female and yes I am his friend. Therefore, 'lady friend' is still correct. Significant other is a fair bit different, brat. And I do not believe in 'sin'."

The brat blinked up at her. "Then how do you know what you're supposed to do or not to be a good person?"

"It's called 'don't be an asshole'."

Looking as if she just told him a fundamental secret to how the universe worked, Shamal wandered after his godfather in a bit of a daze. "...hey, wait. What happens if you are an 'asshole'?"

"Then I need to realize it and try better." Deadpanned the thief, awkwardly hopping along after him. "Fucking up is inevitable, we're human. We just fail sometimes in various things. Accepting that is shockingly difficult occasionally, but sometimes it's only through mistakes that we learn those kinds of things about ourselves."

"...there's a smoking lounge about two hallways away." Renato offered after a moment, as she was passing him. "I'm pretty sure Revelli wouldn't let you smoke in there, and the brat and I can wait in the parlor right across the hall."

"We still need to talk, Renato."

"Yeah, I'm aware of that."

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(Saturday the 27th of December, 1969 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"I'm... sorry, who are you?"

"I'm Galina." The sharply attired and sensibly dressed woman repeated in almost perfect Italian with the marks of being Mist-learned, with a smile that could probably cut steel effortlessly. "Sonya's personal assistant. As well as the head expert in the Soviet Union on Lightning Flames. You wouldn't happen to know where my boss lady is right now, would you?"

That was... what Nilda thought the woman said.

"She's currently in a meeting with Nono Vongola," offered the Rain a touch blankly, fully appreciating why one of the maids rather desperately and nearly ran her over to handle this particular visitor, "I can take you there, if you think it needs to be interrupted?"

"Oh no, I can wait." The brunette Lightning insisted pleasantly, yet somehow seemed entirely unamused and a touch deadly all at the same time. "She's not going to be happy to see me, after all."

"We can wait outside the room, they're in a side parlor right now."

"...delightful." Galina assured her, that sharp smile not wavering a touch. "Please."
Well, in a way, it made sense a Cloud would take a Lightning on as an assistant. Those with emerald green Flames were pretty indestructible at times but taking advantage of that feature seemed entirely outside of Sonya's behavioral patterns noted to date. Then again, her Lackey had Lightning Flames too.

Thinking that way seemed almost discourteous to the thief's very nature, but Nilda wasn't valued as an agent by Ottavia for being shy of investigating that kind of thing. It was an assumption, not proof of anything but a surprising fondness for Lightnings right now.

…just an idea to keep in mind.

The Soft Rain couldn't exactly stop looking backwards at the woman clicking along in her wake but Lightnings could be pretty hard to read and the only thing Galina's body language suggested was glee. Pure, utter, glee.

Thankfully, that did spike a lot of her previous conclusions. If she was about to be punched through a wall or three for whatever bad news she was here to deliver, the woman wouldn't be this excited.

Well, she wouldn't be this excited if it was a bad outcome that was possible. It might be a good one to her, Nilda didn't quite know this new woman's personality or outlook that well to call it either way.

Russians. Why couldn't they just make sense?

Then again, if they made sense then she and several others wouldn't be so entertained by them.

Croquant Bouche and Ganauche were 'guarding' the door their Sky was through, probably getting a few choice words of his internal security thrown his way by a highly unamused Soviet Storm-Cloud he was trying to both placate and thank for saving his wife's life. Gesturing to the wall opposite of the door to the parlor, where a tiny young Shamal was idly waiting and amusing himself with his Flames, the Rain was utterly surprised and not the Lightning merely greeted the godchild of her boss and took up a position next to him to wait too.

"Hey, Miss Galina." Shamal curiously looked up at the woman suspiciously. "Why are you here?"

"Because." The named woman informed him simply. "Let's just say Sonya's forgotten a few things, and I'm here to both remind her and provide a bit of entertainment."

"Entertainment for who?" The kid questioned suspiciously.

"Myself of course." Galina informed him brightly, that same sense of unease and danger that came with realizing a live wire was loose and hanging about one's head nearly pouring off her again. "Why else would I do anything this far from where we're supposed to be?"

"So... not only is Mister Renato in trouble with her, she's in trouble with you?"

"She's not in trouble with me." Countered the Lightning with a thoughtful frown, tapping a deep green nail against her red lips. "But I'm not surprised that asshole is in trouble with her."

Nilda now would not be parted from whatever the hell this was supposed to be for love nor money. The Ninth Generation Lightning Guardian was already shamelessly staring, with the dark-skinned Mist it was harder to tell anything about him so it was entirely possible he was too.

Shamal puffed out his cheeks at the insult to his godfather, but let it go surprisingly quickly for a slight spoken about a Mafioso he practically idolized. "...is Miss Anna with you?"
"Unfortunately, the Mirror Lady is needed back home." Admitted the Russian, a wry smile for the pout aimed up at her. "I know, I didn't really like leaving her behind as it is. I have a bit of something for you, about that project the two of you are co-opting. Just tell me when you want it, or I'll give it to you on the trip."

Who was 'the Mirror Lady'?

Well, if there was something 'co-opted' between Shamal and another… a Mist?

Assumptions again, but the Rain really couldn't help it. There was almost nothing else to draw from but the words the two of them were using and finding out the truth would be entirely fascinating. "Miss Galina, do you need anything?"

She got a green glance from the brunette, and a dismissive wave after another second. "No, dear. I'm fine."

With a Lightning, Nilda was probably already made as an informant and someone not to trust. Lingering around was probably not putting that to rest at all.

It didn't greatly bother her, Sonya already knew and was aware of it. What the Lightning did with that information would be telling of how her nature expressed herself, but with a Hard Lightning to compare to not more than a meter away it was pretty obvious the woman was a Soft Lightning.

Soft Lightnings weren't really all that desired in Italia, they tended to be a lot more stubborn than it was worth to bend them to certain tasks outside their interests. Then again, with Hard Lightnings it was almost impossible to get to buckle down and focus hard on something for longer than three hours.

Nilda and Galina, as well as young Shamal, didn't have much longer to wait. Which was good, because the tiny Mist had nothing else to say to the Lightning woman and she seemed entirely fine with that. Nothing more to take into account to make an accurate judge of the new Russian with.

Renato was the one opening the doors, and Sonya froze when she realized her assistant was standing with her godchild across the hallway.

Outright froze, to the point even those with Timoteo inside the room still realized there was something up and became curious.

"Why are you here?" Demanded the Storm-Cloud flatly, barely using the crutch she was provided to help conceal how not injured she was to anyone outside the Iron Fort waiting to snag a picture of the guests leaving the mansion so they could speculate more about the disastrous Ball's fallout. "I left you a shit ton of things to do."

Galina merely smirked, which made her 'boss lady' lean backwards away from her. …this was not the relationship Nilda had expected.

"...what?"

"I said 'stop leaving me behind', boss lady." Observed the Lightning woman idly, flicking her nails and checking the coat of polish on it for imperfections. "Which, you noticeably have failed to do."

Grey eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What did you do?"

The smirk turned wicked, the owner utterly unafraid of the Cloud entirely not happy with her
presence. "I have a car waiting, and directions. If you would, Sonya?"

"...son of a fucking bitch." Growled out the highly unamused Soviet blonde, awkwardly hopping the short distance she needed to not hit anyone with her crutch or break the fragile cast around her right foot and providing the image they needed her to present for at least a couple days. "Fine, let's get this over with."

"Of course, boss lady." Agreed the Lightning brightly.

Sinclair looked just about as nonplussed at the interaction as Croquant did, which was at least a lot better than the utterly baffled expression on Ganauche's. Shamal, on the other hand, accepted it as a fact of life not worth note and trotted after his godmother with the Lightning.

"...I thought she was a pure Lightning." Observed the hitman after a beat, watching the Russians' somewhat slow progress even if the thief was pretty acrobatic even on one leg and a stick to vault herself along on.

"She is." Nilda confirmed simply, still rather fascinated by the two women's relationship.

Visconti very skeptically glanced at his fellow Guardian who had Lightning Flames, then snorted dismissively.

(ooo00000)

(Saturday the 27th of December, 1969 continued. Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Sonya eyed the six-story tall building she was apparently the proud owner of, utterly unamused. "It's... a castle."

"Yes, yes it is."

She considered it, but eventually had to admit defeat as to figuring out why her Lackey bought the damn thing. "...why is it a castle?"

"Well," Galina offered from her side just shy of politely, "aside Peter and I, and your godchild, there are Mingxia and Yaozu to think about. The Mirror Lady, Usov who might just snag his parents, anyone else from the Soviet Bloc you might wish to make away with. Your siblings and your parents, Bjørn, that asshole behind you, Fong if he wishes to visit his little sister, Verde and Adrik when they resurface. Even discounting how many would be temporary guests at best, that's still about ten rooms if they all don't visit at once. Twenty if they do. For about... the next ten years."

The Lightning paused just to take an audible breath.

"Then, of course this is depending on if you keep this longer than that decade, Shamal's future friends or significant other. Your possible future significant other. Mine, the Mirror Lady's, your Lackey's, anyone else's I've already named and the kids of such pairings if we eventually have any. Any friend you make in the future, and any more people you make away with."

Renato was already cracking up behind her rather loudly, leaning against the car and just about at the point of nearly wheezing to get enough air to continue with. Shamal was off exploring the grounds of the castle and running off his energy after a near day long trip by car to get here. It was a gated property on top of a hill, so she wasn't greatly concerned just a touch wary of where her brat was because she had yet to inspect such fencing keeping things out.
Björn awkwardly fidgeted with the file she should've probably actually even just glanced at before this, keys to the gate still in his hands and puffing a bit from rushing down the rather long driveway and back without a car to drive himself around on. "There's twenty-six rooms here, Dama. Bedrooms, not counting... any other rooms. Also, about three acres of land here as well as some of the surrounding countryside. In case we might need an apartment complex or something along those lines built later."

"Of course," continued her Lightning ruthlessly, gesturing around at the slightly overgrown lawn and the plant life slowly taking over the gardens, "there's also the upkeep to think about. Maids, gardeners, maybe some guards? We're pretty close to the local village, so it's possible some will come from there... but for a head housekeeper or just a butler to keep things on track to be neat and orderly?"

Sonya rubbed her temple. "...Galina, how did you do this?"

"I did nothing." The woman sniffed in insulted dignity. "Karma is a bitch, boss lady."

"What's next? First you stick me with a school, now a fucking castle?"

Brushing imaginary dust or lint off her smart blazer jacket sleeve, she shrugged. "I'd say a zoo, but you're already halfway to collecting one yourself."

She merely blinked in the face of the glare she shot her.

"There's only so long you can scare me, boss lady. I've gotten used to it, and I know perfectly well you're not going to hurt me." The Lightning pointed out pleasantly. "Again, stop leaving me behind."

"I can't bring you along yet." Sonya shot back irritably. "Björn has the excuse of being my handler, I add you as some kind of secretary and I won't be able to wiggle under the radar as a lone woman traveling rather than an improbably strong thief. Us together would be more suspicious."

"I visited China. That was fine." Galina countered pointedly, a hand on her hip and gesturing with her other hand. "Then you immediately fucked off, leaving me to answer very awkward questions of where our founder was to the rest of the school. The first school year is half over, you really need to put some kind of facetime in with your damn employees."

"I can't." Repeated the thief a touch desperately, not really able to keep the emotion in her voice out and sighing when the hitman behind her suddenly stopped laughing. "I can't go back, Galina. I'd end up murdering Gedeon in seconds of him opening his mouth, probably old man Zolotov right afterwards, and that's... worse than suicidal. The vory would get involved then, and I can really only take on so many opponents at once. I'd rather not do that to Arseniy and Lisa, or my siblings."

"I'll help you avoid our clan's idiotic heir." Promised the Lightning a lot more seriously than she had been treating the entire conversation. "I've taken over your office for now, Dmitriy's almost done with his prison sentence, and I'm certain your mother will help us. The rest of us will help keep him away if that's what you need."

"I need to leave, but I promised."

The other Russian flicked a green tipped hand to the slightly neglected castle they were standing outside of. "And you're leaving. You're gone for long stretches of time, just be gone in Moscow for a few days every month."

"That's playing with fire." Sonya informed her flatly. "I don't know if I can control myself, Galina. I
"You're a Cloud." Renato spoke up, sauntering over to them now he was finished laughing at her. "For a Cloud, you're perfectly controlled. Try to be more Storm than Cloud, if you're that worried."

…she should not immediately fantasize about throwing handfuls of Storm Flames at a particular Sun user she found annoying.

He snorted back another huff of laughter. "Not what I meant, but sure."

"May I add you still count?"

Galina blinked in a completely lost way, reminding her that other people were not aware of what the Italian Sun could do and that was suspiciously lacking context for anyone else to know what was being discussed in what way.

"The obvious, Galina. He's also a Sun user I find annoying right now."

The Lightning pursed her lips. "Do you two need a moment?"

…well, this was probably as far from possible eavesdroppers as she might be able to get. "Go find my brat, would you? Ensure he's not getting into anything too dangerous?"

Sonya darted up the front steps using the railings instead of the stupid crutch and tested the doorknob to ensure she didn't have to pick it to look over what needed to be done to restore the place and make it habitable while she had a much-delayed talk with her best friend.

Björn hesitated but slipped the key ring he had back into his pocket when she pushed open the front door without needing a key. "I'll... just wait with the car then. We do outright own all of this, paid for in full. I was able to sign as a proxy, so I just have to sign it over to your brother for things to be set as you want it, Dama."

"Wait, one last question." Turning around, the thief gestured to the entire plot of land situated on a hill right outside of a resort town by the name of Moneglia on the Ligurian Sea's coast. "How did we afford all of this?"

"...Dama, you put thirteen bars of gold aside for clan dues." Her Lackey pointed out a touch warily.

"Before you say anything," chimed in Galina in a flat tone, "may I add they were four hundred ounces? Each. Four hundred troy ounces of solid, nearly pure, gold. The kind banks use to trade money around in bulk."

Sonya blankly stared at the both of them. She sort of vaguely recalled robbing a minting office attached to a bank for most of that, then the more recent bank in France added four more because she could easily grab them. "...and?"

Renato very nearly slipped off the stoop-stairway thing, staggering a step instead and gripping some rusty wrought iron a touch hard to the point he got rust smeared on both palms instead of just one like her.

The Lightning put her carefully made up face in her hands, the Lightning-Storm shifted a touch sheepishly.

"Dama, a bar was more than enough to pay the clan for all of us. Actually, it was slightly a touch much. By... more than half of the bar." Her Lackey informed her helpfully, and still a touch warily
but more confident in answering this question. "Actually, by standard conversation rates, gold is sold by the ounce at about thirty-six, thirty-seven, euros. You had over five thousand ounces in storage. Even after taking out some money to pay clan dues for all of us, you had more than enough to purchase this place outright at the lower end of the asking price. Which we didn't pay for all of this, but it was possible."

…and she didn't really have to worry about paying Galina's, Anna's, maybe even Usov's, fees next year or ever anymore. Hopefully there was enough to cover her and Björn's dues next year, or equally hopefully he already paid it.

"...so, how much money do I have?"

"How do you not know?" Demanded the hitman hotly, looking torn between being angry and being entirely incredulous with a touch of exasperation added in almost as an afterthought.

Sonya blinked at him, then wordlessly gestured to her Lackey and the castle until she figured out how to actually phrase that. "It's a thief-thing. We all are really bad keeping track of money and how much we're worth. I gave the job to someone else for a reason, mind you."

"She's got a point." Galina offered after a moment of thought. "What we steal and its price then, and what we can actually sell it for, do fluctuate a lot. Depending on a lot of factors."

"She forgot she had thirteen bars of fucking gold." Renato countered, apparently settling on being exasperated from his tone. "Heavy bars of gold."

"It's easy to do." Dismissed Sonya flatly. "They probably weren't the only ones I have... the rest are... somewhere."

The Lightning-Storm held up a finger. "The deposit box you had me rent back in Switzerland? I think you stashed a few smaller ingots there too, Dama."

"I think there might also be another deposit box in... erm, France?" Tried the Storm-Cloud slowly, trying to recall if it was France or somewhere in Spain. "Whatever, one of the accounts gets charged upkeep so the address is somewhere too."

Staring at her flatly for a long moment, the hitman glanced at the rusty brown smears on both palms and then tilted his head back so he could fully see the sky over the six story tall castle and below the brim of his fedora. "You. You, little dragon lady, are a headache."

Having said his piece, the hitman stepped past her and into the slightly dusty entrance hall behind her.

"Forgetting thirteen bars of gold is a bit much, boss lady." Allowed the Lightning fairly, stepping off the dirt driveway path even in her impractical heels to investigate exactly where Shamal had darted off to.

The thief shot her Lackey a look. "Did you forget I had it?"

"...Dama, I found it." Björn clarified for her. "I just knew it was the gold you had stored for dues, not how much you had or what it all was worth. I didn't know until I did a full audit on your accounts this summer to figure out how much there was and how much I had to remove to pay our dues and what I could set aside for your desired home here."

"So therefore no one forgot about it." Sonya insisted loudly, shooting the Mafioso inspecting the marble floors and cracked paint behind her a look. "Or at least, the one that should've known about
it did."

"Whatever you say, little dragon lady. Any more stashes of insane amounts of money stored away for a rainy day you can think of off the top of your head?"

…did the stones in the school count?

She didn't know how much money that represented, nor if they were going to count it as 'hers' or just something she might actually be able to access for emergency funds.

…in that vein, the Zolotov Clan's obshchak funds might still count as money she could tap. Depending on what the Sovintnik decided upon if asked, anyways. Or the clan's derzhatel obschaka, the bookkeeper guy actually in charge of paying out of the obshchak when a member needed the assistance. She didn't know who the fuck that was for the Zolotovs, having never needed that kind of help.

She was still a member, at least for another year.

Renato gave her a pointed look. "Now then, does your Lackey have track of those too?"

"...shut up." Snarled the Storm-Cloud, staggering through what was her brand new but somewhat old front door on one leg and trying not to break her flimsy cast-thing in ways most humans couldn't. She slammed the door behind her, just because she now could slam her own damn front door. "Furthermore, I'm not the ridiculous one here."

"Are you not?" Inquired the man absently, testing a slightly creaky door that apparently led into a walk-in closet affair.

It really needed a scrub down, preferably with bleach. The hinges needed oil, or outright replacement, and the window frame's wood was cracking so either a good sanding or new windows all over.

…how did one take care of marble floors, anyways?

"No, I'm not." Yanking her attention from the multicolored stone under her left boot, the thief slightly hobbled carefully beyond the greatly open foyer and to see what the other door right across from the closet-room opened up to. "You don't do exes, Renato."

"...and?"

"What am I supposed to do when my best friend suddenly decides he's had enough of dating me?" Sonya demanded a touch testily, because that was really a big point to why she wasn't a fan of this idea. "I like you as a friend. You're a really good one for me, I don't want to lose that."

"Well, that's not insulting at all." Renato drawled a touch dryly as he came up behind her and peered into an empty but bigger room that didn't look like a really expansive closet. "And, in fact, I have two exes. Both of... well, one of whom you can still find in Mafia Land. The other is more than likely dead, not someone I don't talk to."

She leaned backwards just far enough to give him a searching look. "And how long did these relationships last?"

"My first ex-girlfriend? We were together two years." He informed her bluntly. "We were sixteen, not too shabby for a teenage fling. Broke up mutually just before I even knew you existed, because we were going in different directions and the effort to just stay together didn't outweigh the benefits."
Natalina still works in Mafia Land, I'll introduce you two if you want."

"The other?"

The hitman simply shrugged. "Less mutual, but I was apparently not what she wanted in a man. She broke up with me, about three years ago. I don't know where Irene is anymore. She used to work the hitwoman's trade with me, but she doesn't anymore. Odds are that she's dead or went back to her originating pocket of the mafia for the rest of her life and failed to tell me."

"And how long did that one last?" Questioned the thief suspiciously, leaving that room to see what was around the corner and likely down a hallway.

"...three months." He allowed slowly, a rather disgruntled frown aimed at her now. "Can I point out you've never had a relationship along these lines?"

"Exactly." She shot back shortly, using the wall to keep weight off her right foot. "Frankly, Renato? I have no fucking idea what if anything I'm attracted to. You may be it, or I might actually prefer women."

"Want some help figuring it out?" The Mafioso called after her hopefully, holding up his still somewhat rusty hands when she gave him the look that deserved. "Just saying. Wouldn't mind in the least, little dragon lady."

"How about I figure it out, and we'll talk about it when you get back from killing yourself off?"

Renato sighed a touch heavily at her tossing his upcoming 'death' back at him, which after Shamal threw an entire bitch fit at him earlier this summer her heaping more on top of that was probably equally as bitchy of her, inspecting his palm rather than look at her. "Yeah, that was pretty much what I expected."

"I'm not saying no." Sonya clarified warily, pausing a touch just to wait until he looked back up. "I'm saying check back in a bit. Like a year or two, or more probably three."

"...I'll take it." He informed her wryly, pulling a handkerchief from a pocket to clean his hands on. "I'm going to go see what the upper floors need, yell if you need help."

(Sunday the 28th of December, 1969. Mafia Land.)

Fong paused for a moment, wary over the admittedly strange amount of attention being paid to his person. It was unusual, even for his first day here when he made a few painful blunders that more than showcased how new he had been to anything not styled the same way as his native land.

He didn't think the rumors or tales of the First Underworld Martial Arts Tournament had spread ahead of him that much, as it was only a few weeks from finally being finished.

The fact he won it, even after the unexpected and unscheduled interruption via the Red Guard and a highly unamused Russian Storm-Cloud's brute force extraction of the hostages, should not be widely known yet in any exact detail. Not that he found the conclusion all that impressive, several weeks of a pause enforced due to renegotiations needed to start it up again meant it wasn't a continuous fight to set them all on the same level in the end.

At least he ensured Lu Shui paid for his targeting of the Wo Hop To Triad's hostage. Probably best
his little sister had not been present in the country to witness that bout, as while he had a few new scars the Lightning he faced in the end would likely require a fair bit of time and a Sun's help to ever see again.

They would have to see if that fixed the man's fixation or not, or if more 'severe' consequences were needed.

"...is that him? Or one of the others?"

"Who knows? They all look kind of alike to me."

Eyeing the two he could overhear got him nothing, the two men speaking French immediately left his field of sight with visible haste.

…not a positive rumor, then. At least, not one anyone wanted to discuss with whomever fit a description.

Amending his plan for what to do first now he was finally 'exiled' to Mafia Land again, mainly for his own protection from the current unrest but it was still an exile, the martial artist aimed a general wander in the direction of the minor 'Chinatown' slice of the center residential district of the island.

One of the more permanent residents should know what was currently being bandied about in the gossip network.

Strangely, the subtle or not attention aimed his way got worse when he entered the district more of his fellow Chinese natives were likely located. Therefore, he did match whatever description was being gossiped about more than two French speaking individuals could identify.

Warily, Fong sought out the teahouse his Triad had connections to. It would be best to get to the root of the problem and solve it quickly, rumors such as what he seemed to be the target of could mutate in unpredictable ways given the international and multilingual society that made use of Mafia Land.

He didn't really have long to wait, before the tea he ordered was even served someone nonverbally requested to seat himself on the opposite side of the table.

Not someone he knew by sight, but someone he intended to learn the name of rather quickly as he likely had several more years of exile ahead of him and someone readily available to inform him of what had gone on when he was gone was likely smart. The invitation to join him for the tea was accepted politely.

"So..." Wondered the older man curiously as Fong took his first sip. "...did you get the Mafia Land Cloud pregnant?"

The Storm spat out the tea rather quickly, coughing a touch hard as the liquid got into his lungs and hiding it behind his left sleeve as he recovered his breath. "...what?"
(Thursday the 1st of January, 1970. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Timoteo Vongola blinked blankly at his Lightning and Storm Guardians, who had returned to just drown whatever was now bothering them in copious amounts of alcohol. While Ganauche doing something like this was not particularly rare but such incidents didn't normally last very long, and Coyote Nougat joining him without at least reporting in to their Sky first was particularly rare and reserved for incidents that beggared belief entirely.

…given how this entire holiday had gone, he wasn't sure if he wanted to know at all right now. He swallowed that down and squared his shoulders, because if something else was going wrong he should probably know quickly.

The two of them had been chasing a lead, of some type they were not certain would pan out. Something he knew had come from Sinclair, but not the details of as he had been dealing with a very upset wife and managing the security review with Visconti when they left in such a tearing rush.

"Coyote?" Prompted the Ninth head of Vongola warily.

"...your wife's assassin was killed in the process of being apprehended," started the Storm slowly, slurred a touch more than normal which at least meant he had been working on drowning something for a while before the Sky had sought out his newly returned and so bothered Guardians to see what was wrong, "which... Tyr was not pleased about. Neither were the rest of us, honestly."

Frowning, because he had known that already, Timoteo stepped off the only staircase leading to the family floor and further into the sitting room that opened up to his Guardian's various bedrooms and personal studies. "Yes, I was informed of that..."

Ganauche held up the bottle of wine in lieu of a finger to request a moment, as both of his hands were occupied by either said bottle or his own forehead resting on the arm of a couch. "Sinclair gave a tip, just before he left here with his brat and thief and her Lightning girl, that being killed might not entirely be a dead end anymore. We just had to ask Nik-erm, Bazanova, for permission. So, we grabbed the body and went to catch up with them to ask her because we were pretty much at a dead end with it."

"...did she say no?" Asked the Sky warily, more than half expecting a confirmation. No matter how much the Russian in question seemed to not mind his mostly civilian wife, she had not been all that thrilled with anything coming from him for most of a year now.

"Oh no. She said we could this once, and if we got the people involved killed she'd kill us as the one in question is still her clansman and under her protection. She'd do it brutally and cheerfully." Corrected the Lightning depressively. "That's still not the problem, Timoteo."

"There's a Sun in Mafia Land, or more accurately a Sun in the morgue of Mafia Land's hospital." Continued his Storm in a thoughtful manner caught halfway between disbelief and a kind of wondering tone as he rolled his tumbler of whisky around idly. "They call him 'Rasputin', hailing from the same Zolotov Thieves Clan that Bazanova does."

"He does dead people." Ganauche tacked on in a bitterly dry tone, pausing to swallow a generous amount of his wine and nearly emptying it from the sound of the liquid left sloshing around. "Like... bringing heads back to life. Disembodied heads, to something approaching living even if the head's..."
a couple days dead. So, you can ask questions and maybe get an answer if you’re quick enough. Outright zombies, being raised in a morgue… in pieces thankfully."

"Rasputin informed us that the quicker we can get the dead bodies to him, or just severed heads, the better his 'talents' work." Coyote then added for the clarification, plastering a hand across his face too in order to rub at his tired eyes. "Our dead body's head couldn't really answer what his name was or most anything about his life, but we certainly got what seemed to be an alias out of it and Tyr's working on it as we speak."

"The dead can now talk." Timoteo tried to place the new information into his world view, petting his bristly mustache as he tried to work pass the unsettled feeling that gave him. "That is… I don't suppose Bazanova will allow us to take possession of the young Sun for… protection, will she?"

His Guardians didn't answer that question, because the answer was likely going to be either a blunt no or an even more pointed diatribe on how bad Vongola security had seemed to become over the years. He even really couldn't protest such, as he owed his wife's very life to an utter outsider that had very pointed words with him about his security's lack of effectiveness.

There were about six different ways that Rasputin might harm Vongola that he could think off the top of his head, most involving freshly killed agents that might keep their mouths shut while alive yet never be able to keep their secrets once safely dead. Depending on how closely associated the Sun in question was to the Soviet Flame Expert, they were going to have to court his good opinion somehow… even when more than likely his possible patron or current guardian outright hated him.

"How did his existence get pass us all? I thought the CEDEF had security there well in hand, including starting dossiers on the various Flame users that call the place home or pass through regularly?"

"Rasputin doesn't advertise what he does and getting him to admit it is… difficult." The Storm informed him slowly, dragging the hand covering his eyes down his face just to rub at his slightly scruffy jawline that desperately needed a shave. "In fact, even with the letter we had from Bazanova telling him we had permission to ask him for help… he had his assistant 'Igor' Mist-verify it came from her twice and who else might've handled it before even so much as glancing at the body we had for him."

…it was only known by a select number of people, and likely because it was security-related and for the protection of a mostly civilian woman she seemed to not mind that Sonya even entertained the thought of allowing them to make use of the Sun she knew of to get them around a dead end. Silver linings, even if Timoteo hated the thought of involving his lovely Fiorella in somehow capping off or improving his bad standing with the Russian woman that had the influence with the Sun in question.

Who might negatively impact Rasputin's opinion of Vongola and the Sky that led them, rendering any good-will courting useless for a time.

"Treated us to a whole list of questions he would not be seeking answers for, including if the guy had family or the family of anyone he knew. Which does not mean his famiglia, apparently… but the head was too dead to know that answer anyways."

He attempted to smooth down his bristly mustache, still feeling uneasy of such an available option around 'dead men tell no tales' being loose and non-controllable. "I would like to know what he finds 'unacceptable' for his work, Ganauche."

"I wrote a list." Drawing a much-crinkled piece of paper out of the suit he had apparently not bothered to change out of while rushing their dead would-be-assassin to Mafia Land and then
rushing back with enough information the ones that hired him could still be found before they concealed their involvement, his Lightning sent a shock of his Flames through the paper to smooth it out and wave in the air. "Figured Tyr would demand it, actually... but he was more interested in what we did get out of the body more than questioning the method of how after he understood who we had to go through to get just a possible handle the guy worked under."

Likely because the Sword Emperor, as a master assassin himself, was aware of what a limited window he had to find the true masterminds of the disastrous assassination attempt before enough doubt or concealment could happen. More than enough time had passed for at least some if not all of those involved could wiggle out of being suspected by establishing alibis or ridding themselves of incriminating evidence. At least having suspicions would be better than having nothing at all.

Timoteo considered taking a nip out of his Storm's poison of choice as he accepted the paper from his Lightning to look over later, but... Fiorella would be highly unamused if she scented anything alcoholic on him or his breath. As Vongola hoisted Christmas Balls, they tried to keep the New Year celebrations to the Famiglia or just family mainly so they'd have some time together during the busy holiday season.

His wife was already mostly upset with him for the Dying Will Flame lies as it was, especially as Federico was a now known Sky just like his father and that was something she was scrambling to understand and help him with if he ever needed it. Daniella seemed only excuseed because his mother had advised to tell her some time ago and arranged the proof he couldn't explain away with a Storm-Cloud's likely absentely given assistance.

"...Timoteo, there's a fucking necromancer in Mafia Land." Ganauche announced flatly into the air, a slightly too sloppy gesture of a wine bottle following that nearly tipped some of the red liquid onto the carpeted floors. "A... Russian necromancer, by the name Rasputin."

The Sky flattened his mustache with the palm of a hand. "...it's not the same Rasputin as the story those Russians have, right?"

Coyote glanced up at him warily. "...he was kind of young to be the same Rasputin as that one from the turn of the century, Timoteo."

"...yeah, because Suns age so predictably." Scoffed his Lightning Guardian bitterly. "Counting Igor? I don't think we can rule it out."

"Well, given Bazanova's split-Flame maybe not being the exception to the norm for Soviet Flame users, Igor might not actually be a Mist in his own right." Countered the Storm after a moment of thought and half his current glass of whisky. "Perhaps Rasputin's a Sun-Mist mix and just splits it off to make his own assistant?"

"Stop trying to help, Coyote." Demanded the one-eyed Lightning shortly. "That's not helping."

"Hopefully," Timoteo interjected before his Guardians could start bickering drunkenly with each other, "as it's Rasputin and Igor, they are just two... or the same, Flame users making use of the historic reputation to hamper or delay any looking to control them. Him. Whichever."

"Because assumptions when it comes to Russians have worked out so well for us so far." Ganauche chipped in bitterly, causing his Sky to wince. "I... don't know who to report the guy to. The CEDEF? Just the Guardians? Should we tell the Vongola Alliance?"

"...perhaps not right now." If anything about Rasputin got out to the wrong people, just because Bazanova relented a touch in her dislike to help him keep his civilian wife safe... and the Sun died...
The Ninth Head of the Vongola rubbed the knuckles of his right hand thoughtfully, twisting the ring he wore as the Vongola Sky he wore on his left thoughtfully.

"I think… we need to find Primo's descendants." Timoteo started slowly, earning himself two equally surprised looks from his Guardians. "Or any other bastard offshoots from the former Vongola Heads. It is… more than apparent we are in need of either fresh blood or a shake-up. Something has slipped too far from my mother's time as Donna, and I find myself less than pleased with the results."

(Friday the 2nd of January, 1970. Arnseiy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"...why are you injured?"

"I'm not, really." Her younger foster daughter informed her wryly, suddenly flexing her right foot and shattering the slightly grungy cast. Working the limb probably specifically held still for a couple days now given the dusty and odd streaks of dirt on white plaster, Sonya somewhat limped a few steps with one bare and one shod foot before her gait straightened out. "Got injured somewhere with civilians, so I had to fake it for a few days."

"Right… you're taking the guest beds for at least tonight, I want to hear this. Your brother apparently brought his… unspecified friend around and they're currently bunking in your hotel suite." Lisa informed her simply, smiling fondly when Shamal stepped around his godmother and held up a bouquet of paper and silk flowers. "Why thank you, young man. I…"

…they were handmade. Not professionally created, with the minor or ignorable flaws a machine would leave behind churning out massive numbers of the same item, childishly crafted with honest care and made with intent.

Purple bellflowers, the color she associated with both her middle children due to Cherep's natural coloring and Sonya's occasional eye coloring shifts, with Canterbury bell sprigs in a shade a 'Mist' could summon to hand. Filling out the edges and spaces between were Cosmos flowers in blue, purple, red, and yellows. Just a handful of gratitude with the joy in love and life, shaded the same colors as her children identified with and her first grandchild's.

"...I think I want to put this in my bedroom, actually." Lisa hadn't ever gotten anything handmade before, not as a gift from family.

Tatiana was more likely to fuss over her, Cherep would try his hardest with Arseniy to ensure she had nothing to worry about over them, Sonya would give the spoils of her work to show she had nothing to worry about over her, and her father wasn't exactly a warm man. Valera was still oh so sourly parting out his toys if he must show any kind of gratitude…

Her foster mother had been a touch warmer personally, but the woman had shown her love through cooking and had been gone for a few decades now.

Renato Sinclair gave the godchild he shared with her younger daughter a pointed look. "That, brat, proves my point."

Sonya shot him a strange look, but the man ignored it.

Shamal scuffed his shoe against the floorboards when the two women turned to him for an
explanation. "We made them in school, and Mister Renato said it would be fine if I gave them to you. But I thought you liked flowers that were alive, nonna?"

"Temporarily, yes. Keeping a vase full of them even for a few weeks is a touch tricky because they die so quickly." Taking another, longer, look over the fistful of handmade flowers it was apparent the child learned to make them on the many flat cosmos blooms. They had tiny imperfections which made it all the more charming, whereas the bigger and more intricate cupped and bell flowers had nearly none.

Obviously, someone cheated trying to make his grandmother a 'perfect' gift the best he could. She was very amused as she picked up more on the marks that meant the child before her had labored over the gift himself, including the very glue encrusted centers which seemed to be repurposed buttons.

Lisa was still ridiculously fond of the mass of glued paper and silk in her hand for a gift she had just been given. "But this? This can last, and I love it."

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 2nd of January, 1970 continued. Arseniy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"-and this is my nephew." Cherep breezed past introducing the hitman friend of his little sister's, because he seriously did not recall the guy's name at all, by hefting up said nephew to face the older Mist rather crankily following him around. "Shamal, meet Viper. Vipes, Shamal."

"Charmed." Viper flatly deadpanned in his standard greeting for just about everyone ever.

Shamal curiously peered up into the hooded face staring back at him blankly, hanging from his uncle's hand rather peacefully for a Mist user. "...are you the same 'Viper' mamma's Lackey knows?"

"Mou, I see my reputation precedes me." The older Mist sniffed blandly, tugging the edges of his cloak a touch more because he was that uncomfortable in the stuntman's childhood home even when he had no reason to be. "Perhaps, why do you want to know?"

"Bjørn had a folder dripping with Mist Flames." The brunette child informed the hooded man easily enough. "I wanted to know what it did, but it was way too strong for me. So I didn't poke it, even if I was curious."

"...a Mist with a sense of moderation?" Drawled Viper slowly, tilting his head to the side as he eyed the child. "Fascinating, mou."

"He's lying." The Sun user interjected shortly, giving his godchild a highly unimpressed look over one of Arseniy's newspapers. "He poked it."

"...what?" Sonya asked, now actually interested in this conversation more than she didn't want their baby brother pouting and scowling at her for ignoring him stacking things on her.

"Only once! And that was just a forgetfulness layer!" Shamal hastened to defend himself with, waving both arms in a kind of windmill motion as if that would help any. "I didn't know what it was until I surface-poked it, and I left it alone after that!"

"...next time don't poke things that are not yours." Viper informed the child flatly.

The thief twisted around now, to actually see her own brother holding her brat and the older Mist he
was introducing the kid to. "What's under that 'forgetfulness' layer?"

"…mou, be thankful he didn't 'poke' that part."

Sonya gave Shamal an equally unimpressed look his godfather was already wearing.

"I left it alone, mamma." The younger Mist insisted with a pout. "Even if I didn't want to."

The Italian guy and his little sister exchanged a look. He eventually huffed a sort of sour sigh.
"Technically, I suppose he did the correct thing. Afterwards."

From the flattened lips on her, she didn't entirely see it the same way. "Why are you bringing this up, Shamal?"

"…I still want to know what it was, and how to do it."

"No." Viper deadpanned flatly, ignoring the pout that swung in his direction and the skeptical look the eldest Cloud in the room shot him for refusing something that might protect his highly curious nephew from his own curiosity.

Sonya sighed heavily, incurring Valera's irritation for rocking up to her knees and spilling off his toys stacked in her lap just to dig through a jeans pocket. Sliding out two bars of some silvery metal, the thief sat back on her ass so their little brother could restack her and held them up. "These now to teach him, more after Shamal has what will prevent another such incident that puts him at risk in the future."

It didn't even take a blink, suddenly the bars were in the older Mist's hands and being inspected closely. He yanked off his hood and suddenly Cherep wasn't holding up his nephew anymore, the younger Mist was floating after the older one as he selected the cushy armchair for himself. Shamal was directed to a spot right in front of Viper as the other Mist took a seat.

"Gather your Flames, child. I want that money quickly, so learn fast."

The older Italian in the room blinked slowly at the twosome Mists quickly getting into the logistics of Mist-things, then shot a strange look at his fellow godparent.

"Vipes is a bit of a…"

"Miser." Sonya finished for him when he paused to figure out a polite way to phrase it. "Viper is a miserly Mist."

"…yeah, pretty much." Cherep confirmed a touch wryly, rubbing the back of his head. "But at least he's easy to shop for."

"Shop? I didn't bother, I put a bow on a bar of gold and called that good."

Viper immediately got distracted from giving a lesson or three on Mist Flame investigation techniques, eyeing the pile of gifts stacked already in the corner for giving out in a couple days for any gleam of gold.

Cherep assumed that meant the Mist was greatly in favor of being gifted money, if he had to be here at all. Well… he got his friend an actual gift, and that was that. His sister was entirely allowed to be lazy about it, he hadn't actually expected her to give his friend anything but her tolerance.

The Italian hitman guy released the paper to lay across his lap and instead rubbed his face. "Is this
from the tiny stash of small ingots you recovered from an entirely forgotten pit in East Germany on our way out here, or the store of four-hundred-ounce gold bars you forgot you had?"

"I didn't forget!" Sonya snapped back heatedly, outright sulking to go with the glare she was shooting him. "And I'm fucking picking them up again, you ass. Since you insisted I should consolidate what I have somewhere central."

"Hide them around the world for all I care, but at least get some idea of what you've got stashed in little bolt holds across the damn continent."

As his best friend looked torn between scandalized and greedy, and entirely not paying attention to the child rather exasperatedly waiting out the argument to get what he wanted, Cherep left his best friend to have his sensibilities destroyed for once by his little sister's sometimes mind-boggling habits.

He… still had to explain Viper's gender-fluid-ness to Lisa. Hopefully Tats' standby of 'if you can't tell, go with male' would not entirely shock his foster mother beyond her sensibilities.

…Russia did things really differently. Being vague on one's true gender was not something they did, it wasn't even a thing some might do for the stuntman before his sister oh-so-blandly pointed out general guidelines for him, but hopefully Lisa's time in Mafia Land had gotten her past a lot of those social stumbling blocks when it came to lifestyle choices.

Explaining things to Arseniy was going to be… well, he had a bottle of vodka stuck in the kitchen for that one.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 2nd of January, 1970 continued. Arnseiy & Lisa's home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"If you want a free place to stay, you're bunking with my brother."

"Sonya, sweetie… four adults and a child in a suite with two beds?" Lisa asked a touch wryly, passing a basket of rolls down the table for the younger Mist in the room to grab a new one. "And one bathroom between you all… it might not be impossible, but maybe a bit cramped tomorrow?"

"And a couch. Someone can sleep there I guess." Allowed the thief thoughtfully around her spoon, nodding to her mother simply as if that corrected everything wrong with that scenario. "I suppose I could? Or the brat…"

"I can entirely sleep on the floor." Cherep chipped in utterly dryly, with a bemused little smirk as he waved his fork in the air. "In fact, I insist. You take a couch, hitman takes a bed, and Vipes can have the other."

"I'll take the damn couch, the little dragon lady deserves a bed if she's taking the brat."

"Or we could sleep on the couch, I'm pretty sure we both can fit if the brat can curl into the armchair." Tried the Storm-Cloud thoughtfully.

Which might be aimed to either the Italian Mafioso or her brother, it was a little hard to tell from just context and she wasn't looking at anyone for the clue of who she meant. The vor overseeing dinner did not want to know if she was referring to the Sun user at her side or not in that statement.

Viper hesitated, apparently his frugal side warring with his sensibilities to the point it was nearly visible in how he paused with half a spoon of ruby red soup hanging in the air.
Arseniy yawned tiredly at the head of the table, blinking a couple times blearily as he inspected the utter *menagerie* his foster children had dragged home with them this year. A Mist of indeterminate gender, a younger Mist child, and a Sun using hitman.

…*f*uck knew what was coming next year.

The only one *not* concerned or wary or even remotely suspicious of even one other person in the kitchen was Valera, and the kid had *no* fear of anyone he might not know even now with his sister at hand and him nearby.

…he wasn't sure if he was thankful Tatiana had to give a miss to the holidays due to work-related issues or not yet.

"*More beer, Arseniy?*" Lisa inquired in a tone that meant his lover was having a *blast* presiding over dinner that included her children's various entangled relationships with foreign born criminals. Even if that made their food bill a bit ridiculous to outright *thieves*.

Admittedly, the *Mafioso* had a streak of honor to him that made him not *that* objectionable and the miser was kind of some financial genius of a type helping both the adult Cloud children with managing their money. He didn't greatly care one didn't want to conform to one gender and switched at apparent will, Viper could do whatever Viper wanted to do and Arseniy did not honestly care all that much as he didn't have to live with it.

They weren't *bad*… just… not Russian.

…he should introduce Sonya to a *vor* that *wasn't* positioned nor inclined to immediately piss her off.

Fuck knew if he didn't actually take *that* in hand no one would poke the bear she could be to even introduce themselves, and while she seemed entirely willing to return to them for the important family gatherings… with her leaving the clan as she was it *would* put her at some risk when she visited them without immediate good-will with the *vory*. Her Flame using brats might be more or less respectful of her, but that really depending on *what* type they were and what benefit she had enabled for them.

"*You lot are a fucking headache.*"

"*We love you too, Arseniy.*" Sonya informed him absently, probably still pondering logistics of sleeping arrangements with what was available. "*Can Shamal and I stay over for a few more nights? Other than this one, I mean.*"

"…*yes.*" He ignored the smirk his lover tossed his way as she returned to the table with three new ice-cold beers for him.

"*I get the couch, then.*" Cherep finished the topic in a pleased tone, turning to his guest. "*And you don't have to pay a kopeck.*"

"…*mou.*" Viper immediately returned to eating, flatly ignoring the smugly pleased stuntman and the slightly wary hitman giving them both looks from across the table.

"*Viper, can I ask what 'mou' means?*" Lisa inquired curiously, as it seemed they needed a new dinner topic.

"…*in most languages, it is the acronym of a memorandum of understanding, 'M.O.U.' In fact, in most Romantic languages which use the same general style of script.*" Clarified the Mist reluctantly, earning himself a few skeptical glances. "*A verbal and oft non-binding agreement of understandings,*
between at least two if not more parties about responsibilities or duties each hold."

Huh…

"You turned it into a verbal tick?" Sonya questioned skeptically in a confused tone. "Why?"

"Because it is a good reminder that such agreements can and will often be broken, mou."

"…but you said it was a memorandum of 'understanding'." Cherep chimed in next, sounding honestly curious and a touch politer than he would be to just anyone. "If it's an understanding, why would it be broken?"

Viper gave him a flat stare over the spoon in his mouth.

"Well, with what we are?" Sinclair offered after a beat while the stuntman pouted. "It's a decent reminder to have at hand."

"It reminds me to check for lies before getting into any arrangements." Revealed the Mist flatly, in a tone that would close that topic down.

Lisa turned expectantly to Sonya, who paused with half a roll stuck in her mouth.

The hitman snorted at her attempt to avoid suggesting any new topics. "Lisa, you might want to have a word with your daughter about losing thirteen bars of gold, and her new castle."

From the look the tiny thief shot him, she was not amused by his 'help'.

"Wait." Cherep interrupted before anyone could respond to that or his sister could swallow her mouthful of bread. "We got a castle? I thought you wanted a library?"

"Sweetie, how did you afford that?" Lisa asked warily.

Still with a full mouth, Sonya pointed at Viper to pass off the blame she expected from the look on her face.

"No, your brother's friend had nothing to do with you losing thirteen bricks of fucking gold." Renato chipped in sarcastically. "Four hundred troy ounces each."

Viper made a scandalized noise, outright glaring at the woman in question.

The thief slammed a fist on the table as she managed to swallow, thankfully not through it, and turned a less than pleased glare on her own friend. "For the last fucking time, Renato, I did not lose them. They were in a safety deposit box, and Bjørn knew it was for paying clan dues. Someone knew they were there, they were not lost."

"And can you say with any certainty there's no more hidden away somewhere? From before you acquired your Lackey?"

From the expression she was wearing now, she couldn't.

Lisa blinked rapidly, adjusting to the thought their daughter lost that much in hard currency pretty much accepted everywhere. Arseniy was caught on the proof she hadn't actually wanted to leave the Zolotov clan until very recently, because that was a lot of money to store away for the clan to take a cut from, than worried she was losing easily tradable items in bulk.
"Father Luka?" Shamal asked politely when the man acknowledged them waiting for him to take a break, towing Sonya after him for the crime of not knowing the answer to his question before he could ask it. "Why do Russians celebrate Christmas on the seventh of January instead the twenty-fifth of December?"

The Catholic priest that they met last summer blinked down at the child he probably only faintly recalled, running a few of the beads of his wooden rosary through his fingers as they joined him on the mostly empty church steps he was shoveling clear of fresh snow. "Well, young man, currently celebrating Christmas is banned in the Soviet Union and as a law-abiding resident of Moscow I would hope no one observes a Christian Christmas. However, if pressed to guess why we historically celebrated Christmas on the sixth of this month instead of another date…"

"…I didn't know it was outlawed." Commented the thief blankly, which really had no impact whatsoever on her plans nor did she think it would impact Lisa's. It might explain why Arseniy wasn't really a fan of the whole idea, other than the 'gathering up to check in with him and getting presents' bit.

"It's a religious holiday." With a shrug, the fur hatted young man gave the child still peering up at him in confusion a wry smile that didn't correlate at all to how briefly they each knew one another. "The birthdate of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is actually a strange thing, no one really knows the true date he was born. In fact, several possible birth dates were suggested and discussed about two hundred years after the event would have taken place and certainly well after anyone could just ask or write it down."

The Mist stared at the man blankly, which earned him a small but bright laugh. "Two more notable dates, the twenty-fifth of December and the sixth of January, eventually won out with those that carried Christian faith from those early days onward. There are… some, who suggest the dates were picked because of the old pagan winter solstice and the Roman Saturnalia festival fall within the range. However, the proximity to the turning of the calendar year should also be taken into account for both dates as well. It is equally as likely it was merely added to the end of the year to offset the New Year's celebrations, or just because that was a celebration to hold at the same time as others, so Christians were not left out of any holiday considerations as any other explanation."

Luka pondered the original proposed question for a silent moment, as godchild and godparent exchanged a set of looks, then continued in a more thoughtful tone. "If it is a family gathering on the seventh, well… then we're not celebrating the banned holiday of Christmas, are we? Giving thanks to one's parents and siblings, as well as the rest of the family you might rarely see, is just something everyone does at family gatherings. As well as exchange belated birthday gifts."

Shamal snickered, stuffing a mittened hand into his mouth to hide it. The priest winked at the kid. "I thought you might like that."

…so, he did remember them at least enough to have assumptions of their general character or was assuming all children would delight in sneaking around laws. Not… really something Soviet citizens made assumptions about, which gave the former theory more weight than the latter.
"Entirely unrelated question… Father. Are there Catholic Christian services on the seventh?"
Inquired the Storm-Cloud blankly, the real question she had come with the brat to answer when they already did Sunday Mass with Renato that same morning. "Since we're here and everything and is again not remotely related to this discussion. We just want to know if it's an option to do that day."

Getting home to only turn back around and head here again hadn't been her idea, but Renato had 'connections' things to do so she couldn't rely on the hitman to do it himself. If the Italian really wanted to expand, or at least make notes on who to start with once he returned as someone else, his informant network here it wasn't her business.

"Ah... we're always open." Luka temporized with an amused smirk for her, bending back to his work shoveling the paved paths of the church grounds. "$I cannot say what may or may not be on sermon that day, but it is entirely possible we will be touching on the usual things most Catholics turn their mind to around this time of the year. By popular demand, not because of any other considerations."

"How the hell have you stayed open?" She tried next, more than a touch confused about how a church survived the current political climate in Soviet Russia.

Especially like this, the guy wasn't remotely concerned if she was an undercover KGB agent or something that would report him for anything he was telling her. Benefit of doubt was not something internal Soviet security agents held in mind.

"It hasn't been easy. The government isn't really a fan of us or in belief structures entirely. A number of our brothers and sisters were in fact thrown out of their churches and monasteries already... and a number of the buildings demolished behind them." With a sigh, the priest quirked another smaller smile when Shamal darted off to his salt bucket to help him prevent the stone steps from freezing behind him and becoming a hazard to slip upon. "But we remain faithful and have a faithful flock. That's really all we honestly need to remain and tend to them as we were called forth to do."

Sonya eyed him suspiciously, not entirely sure how he could live like that. She'd be a paranoid wreck… but maybe he was just used to it and didn't dwell on the possibilities. After a point you just got used to pressure or strain your lifestyle pressed down on you, or what others thought about it and might do in response.

…or you broke into pieces and became a shallow mockery of oneself.

"We went to go see the Miracle of Lanciano, Father Luka." Shamal reported to him, shaking a plastic scoop of salt on the cleared sections of stone for the man. "$It was exactly where you said it would be."

"…actually, there are two bloody churches in Lanciano proper, more on the outskirts. We were just lucky to catch mass in the right one without having to go across the damn street to the other one or hunt through the countryside." Corrected the thief blandly, adjusting how much of her Storm Flames she was using to keep warm when her breath misted more than it should given the priest's own puffs of semi-exertion.

Luka tried to hide the smirk by ducking his head, but utterly failed in the face of someone trained for catching deception than he was in giving it. "Ah... my apologies?"

She snorted, unimpressed.

"We can help Father Luka for a bit, right mamma?" Asked her brat curiously, gesturing with the empty scoop to the pathway they had walked up to get in speaking distance to the man in question.
Considering it, and not coming up with a reason why not aside 'didn't feel like it', Sonya glanced back down the footprints left in the snow then to the surprised priest. "…whatever. Got an extra shovel?"

She did a lot of things she didn't want to do, and as it was her godson asking… she could put up with an hour of menial work.

"You don't have to." Luka pointed out slowly.

"I mean this in the 'nicest' way possible." Sonya informed him flatly, holding out her leather covered hands for his shovel. "Go find a pair of damn gloves before you come back out here."

The smile that then crossed the priest's face was amused and wry. "Ah… of course."

…why was he so damn amused with the both of them?

(ooo0000oo)

(Sunday the 4th of January, 1970 continued. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

"Now what?" Cherep asked mostly idly, preparing his couch-bed arrangement so hopefully he wouldn't get a draft down his spine tonight.

Viper was categorizing Sonya's mysteriously multiplying book-furniture, apparently not able to really help but price everything around herself. As long as she put everything back, his sister probably wouldn't care… but he did have a word with his best friend about the hazards of stealing from thieves before letting her into the apartment suite.

The dusty end-table of books affair was the latest stack of paper-turned-furniture to be picked apart and a list made of the contents, and the Mist currently had her face in both hands as such list floated in the air next to her.

"…this is… Cherep, I don't think I can do this…"

"You steal my sister's books, she'll take your hands in revenge when getting them back." The stuntman warned warily, flopping down on his bed to give his best friend a look over. "Or more probably your spine and turn it into a bookmark or something, but hands seem to be her go-to option for lesser infractions so… depends on what she sees 'stealing my books' as. I'm guessing a bit higher than 'annoying her', she didn't even like loaning them to us as kids."

Gesturing nearly violently at the stacks of carefully floating texts that had made up the end table before Viper disappeared everything on it to ensure the dust lining the edges of the books weren't bothered, she wordlessly mouthed something but eventually just settled into a vicious scowl instead.

"It can't be that bad."

"These! These are priceless." Shoving said 'priceless' books in his face, the Mist then gestured to the coffee table that was more book than wood now and waved a hand to include the building piles in the far corner of the sitting room. "I could sell these for a small fortune to any collector interested in the art of the Russian people before the Tsars' fall, some of the others to collectors of rare and out of print books and… they're making an end-table. Or just stacked in a pile. She won't miss it."
Snagging two of the tomes, the stuntman paged through a few of the 'Antiquities of the Russian State' just to see it was a book full of paintings. "Yeah… then she'd murder you in cold blood. Probably. Please don't piss off my little sister, Vipes. There's an entire bar of gold in the end for you if you don't, on top the bribe she paid you to teach Shamal to be careful in Mist ways."

She made an outraged sound for his dismissive flipping, snatching the volumes back quick enough he got a papercut.

Cherep stuck his bleeding finger in his mouth and gave his friend a pointed look, then extracted the digit and inspect the non-papercut marred skin thoughtfully. "I'm sorry she's ridiculous?"

There was a loud snort from behind him, the guy with the curly sideburns wandering into the sitting room on his way to the kitchenette. "Ridiculous is putting it mildly."

Viper suddenly wasn't female anymore, for the entire 'skirt' of the tunic he seemed to prefer wearing to bed suggested he was, fast enough the hitman didn't even blink an eye at the change.

…maybe he caught the switch, the stuntman was not betting on that. "So… I didn't really get the story of the castle yet…?"

"Do I need to start wearing a Goddamned name-tag for you?"

"Might help, yeah." Cherep informed the guy a touch sheepishly.

"Renato Sinclair." Viper volunteered, waving a hand and reassembling the end-table while also calling back the table lamp that had been perched there but for some reason not the glass ashtray. "Mou… his name, Cherep."

"…right."

"One lovely Miss Galina deemed the little dragon lady remiss in her boss duties, more specifically for leaving her behind." Drawled the Italian tonelessly, pulling some kind of beast of a machine out of the lower cupboards and hauling it to the counter. "Apparently continuing some kind of in-joke between them, which started with a school house? Galina failed to report the change of 'a house in the countryside' to 'a bloody castle' her Lackey deemed would be just enough to fit all her followers or varied dependents, then went to ensure her complaint was felt in full using said castle."

From the growling noise the Mist was making, Cherep privately bet Bjørn had some explaining to do when it came to his tutor about where that kind of cash had come from.

"…so now we've got a castle." That he signed his name to, because he got to hold the deed to his sister's library.

Tax season was going to be… interesting. He didn't quite know how it went in Italy, or in any capitalist country, so learning should be… something. At least he was promised help, and that the thief he was holding an entire castle for would pay the taxes on the property for him.

"That she's likely to turn into a library, even if it's six stories tall and has more than enough space to comfortably house twenty-six people within." Renato confirmed blandly, now messing with the sink.

"Which would mean the little dragon lady will become aware of any theft of her books shortly."

Viper made a face, sulking as he pulled himself upright from the floor.

"I'm not sure if Sonya would sell them." The stuntman informed the Mist that slunk to the couch next to him grumpily. "So… asking her to have them since she'd done reading them might not be an
The hitman behind him snorted again, waiting for his machinery to start working.

"Personal experience?" Cherep asked brightly, because as much as a terror his little sister had been as a child about her books, she had to have gotten worse over the paper when it came to those outside her family.

"Nearly lost a couple fingers trying to see what she was just finished reading once."

"Is that coffee?" Viper interrupted before he could get the details out of the Mafioso, warily peering over the back of the couch. "Do us both a favor, keep it away from Cherep."

"Ho?"

"I'm not that bad, Vipes."

"Yes, yes you are." The Mist shot back, already grumpy about the wealth he couldn't touch around them and finding an outlet such as this meant he couldn't derail this before stories got told. "Sinclair, do not give him any. Mou, Clouds on a caffeine kick are impossible and I don't feel like dealing with that again."

"Worse than Mists on a sugar rush?"

"Yes."

The Italian very pointedly clicked off the apparent coffee maker now he had a cup of the black stuff. "Noted."

Cherep stuck out his bottom lip at the Mist, getting an entirely uncalled for suspicious eyeballing in return.

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(Wednesday the 7th of January, 1970. Arseniy & Lisa's Home, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Right, everyone get to the couch." Lisa dictated like the tiny dictator she was, pointing helpfully just in case the guests had forgotten the way there.

Sonya pointedly rolled her eyes at her brother, getting something small and hard pelted at her blonde head in revenge. Probably a nut, from the bowl of shelled walnuts that had been provided as a before dinner snack if anyone was that hungry.

Renato politely waited for the women to pass him, even the Mist of questionable gender, snagging Shamal by the back of his sweater before he got underfoot with this many people in a surprisingly reasonable-sized house given Soviet sensibilities.

'Packed in like sardines' wasn't entirely out of the question, depending on what part of the city you were in. This house was in a neighborhood on an outside 'ring' of the city, more rural than downtown Moscow and thankfully less cramped with it.

He'd greatly rather stick with the Storm-Cloud than with her male family members, but he couldn't justify getting in Lisa's way as she spent pretty much the entire day cooking enough to feed nearly a
dozen people. If he was being polite to one woman, it wasn't in him to snub the rest as it was.

Even gender-questionable, possible ladies.

Tatiana nearly brutally hip checked the front door open, scrambling inside on slippery boots and puffing hard from her haste. "I'm not late!"

Cherep let her run into him with a fond grin, preventing the Sun nurse any damage to either herself or anyone else that happened to be using the hallway. "Sure you're not, sis."

"She's not. We're still waiting on one more." Confirmed their foster mother simply, inspecting her camera for any damage it might've suffered over the year as the rest of the people crammed in her home filed into the room obediently to her orders. "Siblings first. You all know the drill."

"...nonna?"

"Pictures." Lisa informed Shamal simply. "I have one from each of the years they spent under my roof, and as long as they're coming back they can be in Valera's. Anyone else want some while I have the camera out?"

"Not particularly, but if you can get the brat at least once I'd appreciate it." Shamal did have a childhood picture album that somehow survived the house his father raised him in burning down, he should dig it out and give it to Sonya with any other pictures he could finesse out of the Vongola maids. Some of them were armed with cameras as a matter of fact, half to help document the young years of their next generation of Skies and half because a picture was oftentimes worth a thousand words in any kind of report.

Sonya hummed her agreement as she allowed her knee to be used as a kind of stepping stone for her younger brother to climb up on the couch with. "One for me too, Lisa."

Viper very pointedly was not in the room anymore, somehow while also being close enough for him to pick up a wonder of where his and/or her gold bar was and how much they could get for it. The vor of the little family was both scowling and suspicious of the Mist's disappearance, which was probably not doing that guest any favors.

Renato rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Christmas, or at least the 'Russian' variant of the holiday, was almost over. A month or so, then he'd pick the thief back up to do Shamal's First Communion.

Then he'd be abandoning Sonya for a good two or some odd years to raise the brat the rest of the way herself. A good three months at most before he cut himself off from anyone that remotely knew who 'Renato Sinclair' ever was, and he'd never have to suffer through semi-awkward situations with the family of a woman he was interested in but wasn't interested in him or anyone yet.

He had most of a plan hammered out, as long as he could stop recalling little bits he really had to get out of the way sometime before 'killing' himself off. At least a photo album wouldn't be too odd to pass off near or at a holiday people did take family pictures on.

The camera's flash had him looking up again, as the siblings resorted themselves off and Arseniy deemed the entire spectacle over with enough to risk heading for the nearest end of the couch.

"Right." Turning suddenly to catch Shamal off-guard, Lisa clicked a picture of him without a flash and then actually started disassembling her camera. "I'm not sure how the rest of you do Christmas, but we're thieves. You get it to it and it's for you, open it."
"Finding it's half the fun." Arseniy chipped in wryly as he stretched out to not participate at all yet got about four bottles of various different liquors immediately placed within his reach by his foster children.

"But... Mists." Cherep chipped in, pointing to the older one in the room with a solid chunk of gold in hand already. The 'bow' held on with twine, but it was a good amount of the precious metal. "My point, right there."

It wasn't actually a gold bar, but a gold tael. A boat-shaped chunk of gold from the Far East. Still more than what even he could hold in the palm of his hand.

…Sonya then had stashes in the Orient as well, or at least started on one recently.

"Cheat, why don't you."

"Okay. Shamal, sort them out for us? Everything in the house and not already in someone's hands." Sonya asked, slipping a hand into her jacket pocket seemingly to ensure the things in there were still there given she retracted them without anything visibly in them.

Renato cocked an eyebrow at her, because as far as he knew she didn't smoke in her mother's home and her pipe was in the other pocket of her greater wool overcoat.

The thief obligingly slid whatever it was in her hand in his pocket rather smoothly, once the brat had a pile of things in various states of being 'wrapped' on the floor in front of them all to distract everyone with. He didn't particularly like the habit of standing around with one's hands in slack pockets, but he made an exception this once.

…from the feel of it, something very much like a knobby necklace or a string of beads. With a cross attached.

A crucifix?

On a rosary.

He blinked at her blankly. She pointedly paid attention to their godchild instead, who was pulling something that looked as if it would match what she just gave him out of a small bag too.

The hitman was also pretty sure the one being investigated was made out of nearly solid turquoise most of Vongola would not be happy he had. Silver fittings and strung together on string, not chain as the one in his pocket felt like.

Sonya then very pointedly and loudly thought that if no one saw him with a yellow jade and moonstone variant of the rosary in their godchild's hands, then he didn't have to ever admit it was part of a matched set. Then promptly wandering off to get her presents, leaving him with an unseen but matched item of Catholic Christian worship he didn't have to 'lose'.

Renato had to give up, or at least had in storage with Tatiana already, nearly everything he owned or could put a claim to. He'd even be switching which guns he used, as well as the moonstone strips in the grip of his holdout pistol and the fedora the two of them gave him two years ago. Basically, anything and everything 'Renato' was known to have or make use of.

While he honestly did not expect to get most or all of it back at all, excluding the things the thieves weren't storing obviously for his godchild and not him now the godmother had a native address the brat was moving to, some few pieces might be salvageable after enough time passed.
It would be entirely understandable why an Italian hitman had a rosary, as long as he took specific care with the thing to ensure no one saw it in the next few months he could keep it with him. Better than an easily incriminating picture, or anything known to be 'gifted' to him already, would be as a reminder of why he was doing it at all.

As long as no one saw him with it before he 'died', and with a touch of care that would be easy enough to accomplish. As long as no one in a room full of thieves noticed her slip him it, which… actually seemed to be the situation.

Of course, it came from the woman had admitted she had no blessed clue nor interest in their religion but would go along with parts of it as long as they wanted to.

The already battered front door opening yet again gave an obvious reason to pull his hands out of his pockets, and the Mafioso leaned back against the living room wall to clearly see the elderly man that was very reluctantly knocking snow off his boots before stepping inside the house.

Pyotr the Zolotov Sovintnik glanced at him skeptically, then slowly wandered his way over to stand in the hallway right outside the main sitting room of the house.

Lisa had been more than prepared, snapping a picture of the man she was apparently the daughter of even as he glowered at her disapprovingly. "Well finally, father. I was wondering if you'd wait until just before midnight to claim you did arrive on time or something."

All three of the man's grandchildren stopped what they were doing to give both their foster mother and grandfather skeptical looks, even if Sonya had to interrupt her glaring match with Valerian about if the zebra plushie he had been gifted deserved a spot of honor in the middle of her lap instead of the handwritten journal she had been trying to read already.

Tatiana sniffed not entirely hostilely, returning to the pictures taking up her lap and sharing them with Lisa. Cherep blinked a few times but went back to sorting out a socket set easily enough. Sonya was the only holdout, ignoring her baby brother taking advantage of her distraction by piling more of his gifts into her lap for safe keeping.

"April." Pyotr informed the woman simply, then turned right around and went to the kitchen for something suitably alcoholic.

"What's happening in April?" Shamal asked of his godmother, already wearing his rosary and halfway into a rather dusty and old book Viper was outright glaring at in some kind of outrage.

"...I haven't the faintest." Sonya informed him blankly.

"The Pakhan is retiring." Lisa supplied helpfully from the couch between her eldest child and her lover.

"Oh, that means I'm done with the Zolotov Clan in April." Amended the Storm-Cloud thoughtfully.

"Why does he only do that with you?" Cherep asked of his sister before anyone not of the Zolotov Clan could ask how she was accomplishing that nor what the still current members that made up her family viewed that, nodding to their little brother for the identity of 'him'.

"I was stupid and protested getting stacked on." She informed him blandly. "Now he's mostly proving a point."

"You're never getting rid of us, baby sis." Tatiana informed her brightly in an agreeing tone, sorting the pictures she had in her hands back into the envelope they had been gifted in. "Also, we're moved
into our place already. You and Bjørn just have to sort out your things from the condo and my old apartment. But now, I've got to run to get back to my shift tomorrow morning."

"Good luck sleeping well on the plane." Sonya tossed behind her, rather grumpily unmoving when the redhead lunged forward to engulf her in a hug that included being smothered from behind by a significant portion of her generous chest.

"Brat."

Cherep gleefully returned his hug, Valerian ignored the Sun pressing a kiss to the side of his head, Shamal blinked when one was pressed to the top of his head, but thankfully the nurse stuck to a simple wave for Renato.

"Bye Gramps, I saw you, Viper! Did you see the vase yet?" Tatiana called down the hallway as she left nearly as abruptly as she arrived.

The older and active Cloud Flame user gave the one he was twinned to a strange look.

"Viper's been training Bjørn in Mafia Land. Of course they've met." Offered the thief slowly. "I wonder which vase she's talking about, though."

"...probably the one in the corner there, Nya. That Viper's been pointedly and entirely blinding himself to the entire week." The stuntman pointed behind him with a thumb to an ancient vessel of white and blue painted porcelain, a wry smile on his face when that didn't seem to make much of a difference to her confusion. "You should've heard Viper gripe about the books you've got in the hotel suite."

"Silence." Said Mist demanded shortly, walking through the wall just to pin their friend with a glare under that hooded cowl.

"Speaking of, would you ever sell a book you own?" Cherep continued without so much as glancing at the other or taking in the highly unamused expression aimed in his direction.

Sonya blinked at him slowly. "...sell?"

"What people do with books they dislike." Prompted the man after a beat when that was all she had to say about it. "Or have no use for. Or I suppose 'donate', to either a second-hand book store or a charity auction or just someone else that might like it."

The thief continued to stare at him blankly.

"...I'll take that as a 'no'!" Concluded the stuntman after another long moment, scuffing a hand through his ill-shaved jawline. "You know, eventually, you're going to fill that castle up with books. What are you going to do then?"

"Build an actual library on the property we already own." Dismissed the Storm-Cloud shortly. "We've got more than enough space. Why?"

"Just checking to ensure my nephew won't die by book avalanche."

"That only happened once."

"To you, then once more to Tats." He corrected cheerfully.

Renato palmed his face in exasperation. Apparently ensuring she bought more than enough
If she had any idea of how many books she had right now, he'd eat his hat.

(Thursday the 8th of January, 1970. The Morgue, Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

Edik blinked, turning to warily inspect the far corner of the ill-used viewing room that made up his usual work station. Waiting a few long moments, the Sun eventually went back to documenting his work today and what was left to do for the next shift to finish off.

He could've sworn he saw someone watching him from there, and as far as he knew no one really wanted to inspect any of the bodies currently on ice.

Well… not yet anyways. There was one slightly younger than twenty that his originating syndicate might want investigated, in fact the papers in his hands were probably going to be copied and sent out to them so he was double checking he had everything filled out according to Mafia Land's policies.

Snapping his head up suddenly, not waiting for another flash of something out of place to inform him there was something off, earned him… nothing. Either he was being paranoid, or someone was specifically screwing with his head.

"…Igor. Am I seeing things?" He tried next, prompting Sergej to set aside whatever he did when Edik was working and start leeching his Mist Flames more actively into the morgue's various nooks and crannies.

Mist Flames made everything even more chilly down here, but they were Russians. They could take the cold better than most, even if most of a year in a tropical climate had adjusted their tolerances rather more towards warmer temperatures.

The Mist popping into existence right next to him meant nothing good. "…there's a stronger Mist than me in the room, Rasputin."

Edik gave his assigned support, and a decent friend as much as any Mist liked having a friend they had to guard, a wary look in turn. "Was it because we helped…?"

"I don't know." Sergej commented after a moment, still focused on something only he could see that the Sun couldn't. "It's… not entirely hostile. I think we're being investigated."

"…for?"

"Our allegiance, apparently." Allowed the Mist slowly, not remotely sounding confident in that. "And what we deem acceptable to assist in."

"Nothing, if this is what we earn doing anything." Insisted the Sun sourly, shooting a skeptical glance to where he had spotted someone studying him from a far corner of the morgue.

"…apparently, that's a bad idea. According to the other Mist." Sergei refuted neutrally, even if his Flames took on a frostier edge in response to whatever communications the two were having. "…Rasputin?"

"What?"
"Excuse me for a second."

Edik blinked, and suddenly wasn't in the morgue anymore.

Primakova and Kappel both looked a bit nonplussed at his sudden arrival in the doctor's cramped personal office. Which was fair, the Sun mortician was equally as surprised and as confused as they were for a moment.

"I think someone's attacking my Mist." Edik informed Tatiana slowly in English, running his fingers nervously over the file of paperwork in his hands as he tried not to stumble over the still unfamiliar language he didn't really practice as much as he apparently should've. "Another Mist is, I mean. One Igor said was stronger than him."

His fellow if rather exhausted looking Sun wrenched a phone off the cradle, dialing for the island's internal security and reporting the attack on a bodyguard of one of the employees the moment she seemed to have a connection. The doctor that most of the Russians preferred getting their duties set through pulled a snub-nosed revolver out of a desk drawer and checked the bullets loaded into it.

"Why," Kappel asked the moment he was armed and waiting for what would happen next, "is a mortician Sun being attacked?"

Tatiana hung up the phone once the more important details were conveyed, pulling her own gun out of a holster at the small of her back to then check over. "Aside the usual 'Suns should be healing the living and not dead' complaint we continually get about Rasputin, to the point we changed his name to lessen the paperwork?"

"I have a rather… interesting ability." 'Rasputin' answered for himself a touch dryly, regretting that he never picked up a personal weapon as he had Sergej normally at hand to do anything violent required. "One I feel is not in my best interest to share right now, nor ever, if admitting to it once incurs this kind of attention."

Given the initial reaction to his ability, obviously admitting what he could do would never be greeted with any kind of interest or approval. Edik had known it was a bad idea to help Vongola with their dead body, whatever the Lightning guy tried to claim about not getting him killed for helping. Hopefully, Sergej would be okay and they could go on denying there was any reason for a Classical Sun to be haunting a morgue.

If not, he would need to have a word with Bazanova about what kind of attention she aimed in his direction.
"You have got to be kidding me."

"...why do you like them again?"

"Current evidence to the contrary, they're not actually incompetent." Renato informed her a bit sarcastically, tossing his hat to the coffee table she was semi-sure was newly bought instead of the old one her Lackey used to have. "Shamal survived, didn't he?"

Sonya glanced over to the child in question, who didn't understand English and was currently nose deep in an encyclopedia of lizards studying his Cape Dwarf Chameleon Luigi and his and/or her biology.

"Yeah, well... I would kind of hope so, given he's living in the dead center of their territory." Tatiana mocked back, rubbing her temple and just generally looking miserably tired. "Igor's not woken up yet, thankfully the clan's got his hospital bills since he was injured in the defense of another clansman on our time. Kappel and I have been trading off being on duty at all times, the CEDEF have this interesting assumption of outright owning Rasputin even if we keep saying 'hell no'."

"There is a phone in here, right?" Inquired the thief curiously, getting a wary nod from her sister. "Right. Renato, you have fifteen minutes to make a call before I head to the hospital and deal with any more kidnapping attempts in the same way I dealt with sex traffickers."

The hitman bolted off the couch, changing direction almost mid-step when his fellow Sun directed him to the kitchen.

"I do not think I want to return the brat to the Iron Fort anymore."

"You don't exactly have anywhere for him right now." Pointed out the redhead, slouching down more in an armchair she was certain had come out of Bjorn's old apartment. "I mean, I understand why... but you share godparenting duties. And it is the largest criminal syndicate in Italy he specifically asked for help from and got. Whatever the price it cost him, it's worked so far."

"They seemed to have gone downhill rather quickly." Mused Sonya sourly, drumming her fingers on the arm of the brand-new couch she was sitting on. "Admittedly, international efforts are kind of a new thing for them given the headache of the Second World War and the two heads they had to go through until they could look beyond Italy's borders again... but this is getting... beyond infuriating."

It was something to at least keep in mind. Timoteo was probably horribly unprepared in dealing with foreign interests as Vongola went back to being a stable criminal power, and Daniella would have only rarely dealt with anyone peaceful not from Italy for most if not all of her years. The Mafia Wars did occur before World War Two, meaning even the Eighth Sky of Vongola's time as Donna would've spent fighting against her own countrymen and later directing criminal war efforts in ways the Vindice would not object to.

Their efforts on home ground would probably be a hell of a lot better than their international efforts and aided more by their very long history as the top dog in that corner of the world.
Tatiana, in all her nurse/older sister wisdom, merely shrugged.

"Does Rasputin want to stay, or go home to Moscow?" Eventually asked the younger sister curiously, wondering how the young Sun was taking being such a target for his abilities.

Admittedly, no one really had liked Edik's ability with dead things and Activations right off the bat. Sonya might've but then again, she was more admiring of the new aspect that Sun Flames could be applied to than focused on the whole 'zombie' part.

"I have no idea, he's sticking close to Igor's recovery room or the morgue when he feels up to it."

Mist brat suddenly scrambled off the floor, adjusting Luigi back to his shoulder before the chameleon could fall off him, and dragged the heavy book over to the thief. "Mamma, what is this word?"

The encyclopedia was probably over Shamal's reading level, so Sonya glanced over the passage he was pointing out to her while balancing the book on her lap. "...vivipara? Um... good question. Give me a second, there should be a dictionary around here somewhere."

Apparently, it was over her reading level too.

"All your books are stuck in the room that's going to be yours. I got the master's, just because it has its own bathroom and that way I won't always wake up you or your Lackey trying to get ready for a midnight shift in the hospital." Tatiana helpfully volunteered, smirking wickedly over at the both of them. "Also, because the both of you have left me to move us in and I'm demanding recompense."

The blonde rolled her eyes at her sister. "Whatever, Tats. I have a fucking castle so you're welcome to the master room in the apartment."

"...when did you get a castle?" Wondered the older Russian in pure surprise.

"I'll tell you later. But it involves Galina's bitchiness." Ignoring the brat snickering as he hefted the encyclopedia to his thin chest again, so she had the room to get up and help him, the younger Russian raked a hand through her hair. "Are you done for the day?"

"If you're now here to handle Rasputin? Yeah. I'm going to go knock out." The Sun nurse reconsidered things after a jaw-cracking yawn and a heavy sigh. "Well... I'm going to head to the hospital first and let Kappel know, then probably wait for you to get there and deal with the worse of the attention Rasputin's drawn, then I'm heading to bed."

"Glad I can entertain you." Sonya shot back dryly.

Ten minutes was more than enough time to find a dictionary, translate 'vivipara' into 'viviparous', and then from there to the definition of 'propagation via live birth'.

Shamal's Luigi gave birth instead of laid eggs.

"Okay, now we need a food source." Sonya informed the kid quietly, slipping the English-Italian dictionary shut and setting it on her forlorn and unmade bed which also looked brand new. "It is possible to have them eat pure Flames, as Anna found out... but that might not be the best idea for a main food source given what Renato's going to be doing shortly. He might not have that to spare, brat."

"...a few of Luigi's beetles are imported." He observed slowly, ghosting fingers across the glossy pages of his encyclopedia. "What if... what if they eat Flames? And Luigi's baby can eat them? Then the beatles can go out and find Flames, then come back and be eaten."
Not a bad idea, but why would they come back to Luigi's baby and not just get into the wild and live there? We need to be sure we don't introduce an invasive species to the world, kiddo. That might do a lot of harm that way…"

"Because…" Looking around a bare and half-assembled bedroom for inspiration, Shamal shifted his lizard to his wavy brown hair to free both hands in order to flip through the book of lizards again. "…because they need Luigi's baby to make more beetles? Like they need to be eaten by a Flame-lizard to hatch their eggs, and Luigi's baby is the only one around anywhere?"

The brat suddenly looked excited at the prospect as he thought it over more.

"…that is actually a really good idea." With Renato's abilities, he might just be able to keep an eye or several million on his surroundings then. Tying the new creatures together, ensuring they couldn't reproduce wildly out of hand, did keep things neat and ensured there would never be more than the baby or adult chameleon could or would eat. "But this does mean we need to research Luigi's beetles then."

"…I don't remember what they're called, mamma."

"That's fine. I'll get an encyclopedia of Africa's insects, you can look it up once you can get a beetle to study. You can probably start on Luigi's baby right away, and the beetles just before you hand the pregnant chameleon over, as long as you keep in mind what they're all for. We only have so many more months, brat."

Shamal pulled his pet off his head, frowning as he stroked the lizard's half a foot-long body which was… mostly tail. "…I'm going to miss him."

Sonya couldn't suppress the wry smile. "I know, but it won't be forever. He'll be back, eventually."

The little pouty face he shot her should not be that amusing.

"I need to go do a bit of work. Will you be fine here alone, or should I ask Renato to linger a bit until Tats gets back?"

"I'll be fine, mamma." The almost seven-year-old brat informed her sadly, scratching at what looked to be a dry patch on Luigi's skin much to the lizard's delight. He hauled himself up her bed, snagging the encyclopedia and her dictionary too in order to keep flipping through the both of them. "I'm just going to stay here and read."

"Try not to dwell, brat." Ruffling his hair, and exchanging wary looks with his chameleon, the thief got up and left him in her room.

The hitman standing outside her room looked a cross between confused and a touch guilty. He did follow her a couple steps away from the door, before speaking up. "What's this about 'Luigi's baby'?"

"Act surprised when he tells you, he wanted to do it himself." Sonya sighed, not surprised they were unable to keep him in the dark the entire time but mildly impressed it was this late before Renato caught on. "And if you're sticking me with a dog, then you're not getting away with only a year or so of lizard."

"…ho?" He eventually picked to be amused, given the wry smirk crawling across his face. "I'll be sure to get you a mutt instead of a purebred one, just so you'll have just as much difficulty looking up any health risks."
"Fuck you too, Renato."

"Oh my god, stop flirting unless you're going to do something about it!"

"Well I would, but your sister-"

"Shut. Up."

Tatiana popped her head around the hallway, looking faintly excited. "Really? Finally?"

"What the hell do you mean 'finally'?" Demanded the thief, then only honestly thought about it after the words had left her mouth and just palmed her face instead of looking at either of them. "No, never mind Tats."

Ignoring her, the nurse gleefully turned her attention to the Mafioso. "So... how long did it take to clue Nya in?"

"Several months, a pregnancy rumor, and her getting a knife through the foot." Renato listed off dryly, stepping out of easy retribution range just a touch too fast to be really nonchalant about it. "I eventually got fed up and flat out informed her we were dating when she insisted she wasn't that dense."

"You have some impressive patience."

"I know." Drawled the hitman smugly, buffing his nails on his lapel.

"We're leaving now." Sonya interjected shortly, seizing her sister by the wrist and starting off first. "Brat's in my room, stay if you want, we'll... or she'll, be back in a bit."

It was a bit tricky to not break the Sun nurse's wrist and accomplish the leaving she really fucking wanted to do, but eventually the Storm-Cloud's strength won out over the redhead's desire to gossip.

"Well... if you want advice that bad-"

"Tats, shut up."

(Sunday the 11th of January, 1970. CEDEF Security Center, Mafia Land.)

"Well, no one's dead... right?" Ganauche questioned, rubbing at his temple that was throbbing from a mix of irritating situations and a red-eye flight to get out here again fast enough to help handle the situation. "Bruises and a broken bone aren't really enough to murder her for."

"Sir, you have-"

"She's a fucking Cloud. What did you expect in return for trying to 'poach' her students? A dismissive shrug and a 'fare thee well'?” Interrupted the Vongola Lightning Guardian exasperatedly, raking the hand through his hair before he ended up speaking into his palm instead of seeing the face of the man he was talking to. "She had cause, one you weren't all that transparent about, and we can't deny motive anymore to protest 'uncalled violence'. You tried to do something stupid, she beat your guys up. It's allowed here. Please, for the love of fuck, stop being stupid. We can't do the same things here as we can in Italia."

"That makes nothing sound better."
Nearly jumping straight out of his own skin, he almost tripped over himself turning around and facing the specific Cloud in question that dealt a fair bit of damage to the CEDEF forces keeping Mafia Land more or less contained. "Jesus fuck, Bazanova. Wear a bell or something."

The expression that crossed her face said nothing good for this little interaction, or the possibility he could get through it without hurting Vongola's reputation even more.

"Okay... they're idiots. We're kind of use to being the only option to go to if a Flame user's in trouble, in several places. They were just following old guidelines that weren't updated, your complaint has been heard and I'm fixing it." Ganauche helpfully waved in the face of the man he had been talking to, who was slowly backing up from the highly unimpressed blonde woman.

…if Cristiano really left him here to deal with a tiny Russian woman on his lonesome, he was going to get the guy transferred somewhere a hell of a lot less cushy.

Sonya Bazanova eyed the other man thoughtfully, more the spectacular bruise she had given him just last night he was trying to get her killed over. "You. Fuck off."

Admittedly, he couldn't really bitch one of the most senior of the CEDEF security team leaders immediately left him on his lonesome when she told him to. Said tiny Russian had already handed the other man his ass, that was probably emasculating enough to only really want to go through once per lifetime.

Ganauche was still going to get Cristiano's ass transferred somewhere else the moment he got home. This was a measure of fucked up.

"You, and the rest of Vongola, stay away from Rasputin." The thief demanded shortly. "I don't mind people fucking up with me, Ganauche. I'm an adult and can be an ornery fuck sometimes. I really mind when it's a thirteen-year-old medical student I am obligated to mind the safety of."

"...that'd be a little hard as we do have secu-"

"Rasputin's may or may not be going back to Moscow." She cut him off, still short and irritated but now also slightly sardonic sounding. "If he is then this might've been a pointless conversation to have, but if he isn't the clan will handle his security. Which would also mean, in the end, he's not staying here for long as the clan will likely want him back in Moscow to handle a morgue there. Then my order will have some validity, but the point remains if you do not stay away from the mortician I will be piking your people's heads on various desks until I find the right one to make it stop."

"...I thought you told Guerra you didn't rip people's heads off?"

"I ran out of fucks to give."

…okay then. Mildly terrifying thought, and while Tyr might be highly interested in how she'd do that the Lightning Guardian didn't want to see that. Ever.

"I'll pass it on...?"

"And no, I don't mean if Rasputin stays you can speak to him without me finding out and murdering someone for it." The thief continued in a bitingly dry way. "I mean if you do not fucking stop harassing my sister and our usual doctor about Rasputin's 'security' I will start immediately, today. With whoever tries next, and the desk of whichever idiot is in charge here. Even if that's you."

Ganauche thought about the implications for a moment. "…how did you get in here?"
Sonya gave him a flat stare down. Standing as bold as brass in the middle of the operations room the CEDEF were given when they took over for the Turkish criminal syndicate as Mafia Land’s security, three floors under surface level just anyone was allowed to wander through, pass any number of security checkpoints and guards posted to catch people not allowed down here before they got into anything sensitive.

Stealthily enough everyone was taken by surprise by her abrupt arrival. The CEDEF also probably needed new security measures, even if Timoteo and the rest of them had thought those here were some of the better agents.

"…point taken."

"If I cannot leave here without worrying someone’s going to fuck around and try to take Rasputin against his will, so I can take my brat back home in…" Pointedly looking at her bare left wrist, the Storm-Cloud looked back up at him just as pointedly. "Five hours, I will put someone else's head in a bucket of ice to leave on Don Vongola's desk the next opportunity I have to visit my brat. Next month. If it's rotten by then, it's your fault."

He blinked at her blankly. "I'm not sure that's how it works."

"You can have whatever argument you'd like about it with my ax blade." She suddenly pulled out one of those axes, full sized and just as gold plated as the last time she threatened him with one. "Go right ahead."

"I'll pass, thank you." Insisted the Lightning hurriedly, backing away from the heavy bladed edge shoved nearly into his remaining eye. "Isn't that a touch harsh, Bazanova? I mean, we didn't inten-"

"Thirteen, year, old, Sun."

"Okay, we did seriously screw up somehow…"

"His equally young Mist bodyguard is still unconscious, several days after the fact."

"And yes, that doesn't really look all that good…?"

"Because I pointed you in his direction to help keep Fiorella Vongola safe."

"We'll find who did it! Eventually."

Sonya hefted her stupidly impossible ax over a shoulder, left hand on her hip and an utterly unimpressed look plastered across her face. "The only reason I’m letting Renato return Shamal to the Iron Fort without a fucking argument is because somehow… you’ve yet to fuck up with keeping him safe. If it's the whole 'Russian' thing, you could've just said so."

…her brother, herself, and then her students. All of who did come out of the Iron Curtain, so it wasn’t that far out there of an assumption to make…

"Yeah… no, that's not an issue." Ganauche insisted, ignoring the weird looks the two of them were now getting because the shock of the thief appearing out of nowhere somewhere she should’ve be had worn off for most of everyone else present. "It's just different, okay? You're probably the farthest contact anyone in Italy has, and you're not something we're used to."

"How does that make anything alright?"

"Look, being different is perfectly okay… but that means you have to give someone else a little time
to adjust to it and you haven't." He insisted, almost disbelieving it when the damn Storm-Cloud actually looked mildly thoughtful. "We're ironing out the kinks, but you are the first Russian to make it into Italia since World War Two... and even for the CEDEF? Adjusting regulations that work there for here is going to take a little time and maybe a fuck up or two in order to realize they need updating."

She blinked at him twice. "How about no?"

...well, fuck.

"I will no longer tolerate Vongola incompetence. The very fucking last person I have at risk in your security is a six, nearly seven, year old Mist that was placed with you without any agreement on my end. If he even gets a papercut from someone trying to kill him too, I will dedicate my life to making yours and your Sky's very existence as a living fucking hell however I can."

"If we keep your brat safe...? Now, just listen to me woman." The Lightning lurched backwards when that ax got significantly less gold-plated and more long-and-pointy in a flair of lavender tinted fire, acknowledging that descriptor had probably been the worst one he could've picked in his hopes of being neutral sounding. "Sorry, just... please. If we don't 'fuck up' with your brat, can we speak to anyone you have who's an adult?"

"They're adults, they can make their own damn decisions."

"So... as soon as Rasputin's sixteen- HOLY FUCK! I WAS JOKING!"

Kicking a solid metal desk out of her way hard enough it impacted the far wall on the other side of a fucking massive operations room, Bazanova hefted that spiky and long weapon around to where he had been standing hard enough it crumpled the steel plating underfoot like rice paper. Ganauche was already three desks away, regretting the fact he was aiming to keep her attention in the direction with less squishy humans in it which left him everywhere but an emergency exit to run to.

"I MEANT GALINA. YOUR LIGHTNING LADY! I WANTED TO TALK TO HER!" Slamming to a halt before the next desk pulped him against the wall in his way, he frantically ran through everything he might do to survive a hit from something like her. "SHE'S ABOUT YOUR AGE, RIGHT? FULLY ADULT?"

Before he could decide which direction to go in, Ganauche found himself hauled up off his feet and slammed into a steel wall. A hand masquerading as a steel trap seized him around the throat and kept him pinned a few full millimeters off the ground, enabling him to get a full view and new appreciation of the narrow blazing purple glare he was getting.

...thank fuck she was so damn short.

"I don't find child endangerment funny, Ganauche." Bazanova informed him flatly, the weapon in her hand now a full out hammer instead of the poky-thing. "At all. No Russian of my generation would."

"Noted. Okay. Ow?" Having his throat crushed was a surprisingly painful experience he never wanted to go through again, that he could still breathe enough to speak was some grace he wasn't going to question right now. "Your brat, will be... fine. Or else. Got... it...?"

He hadn't expected the fall to hurt, the woman was shorter than him and couldn't hold people up that high. Landing on his feet wouldn't be too out of the question had she just let him go. Getting tossed over a shoulder like so much refuse was surprising, and also a lot more painful.
Wheezing again when a booted if dainty foot suddenly slammed down on his chest, he warily peered up at the Storm-Cloud tossing him about like a cat would bat a toy.

"Outside of your native country, Vongola's just the word for 'clam'." Sonya helpfully informed him a touch flatly, bending over just to lock eye with him. "I didn't want to deal with your syndicate for several reasons at first, mainly because you're massive and the little operations tend to get crushed under such things due to just bloated momentum. Renato insisted you are one of the best, even now he keeps trying to tell me you're really not that incompetent and you're probably the better of the syndicates from your home territory. I don't see it."

Ouch.

"No. Not even when Rasputin's sixteen. You had your chance, you fucked it up, live with it."

"You just said we're massive. That's a lot of people, Bazanova. Who you're writing off or fucking over because their murderers might also die instead of be taken alive and we lose that source of information to chase down threats." For someone that could hit hard, the woman was stupidly light. Even with her standing full on his chest, he wasn't having a whole lot of issue breathing and could probably throw her off if he needed to. "How about observed meetings? Can we just send Rasputin a head instead? Throw us a bone, lady."

"Why do you think I care? I don't, I'm not a humanitarian nor do I care for your people or their issues right now." Apparently, the weaponry she made did have a weight and her massive mauls weighed a ton. "I'm a thief, Ganauche. I steal shit, charge other people through the nose to make use of it or have it, then I move on."

"If we get you something really shiny and expensive?"

She had the perfect angle to smash his head like a rotted pumpkin, the Lightning felt it was perfectly excusable to be intimidated right now.

"...are you trying to buy one of my students?"

"No! Just some small measure of tolerance to glance at one!"

"You want to know what would buy my 'tolerance'? Stop fucking up."

"Okay! Then can we talk about this?" Ganauche would pay someone out of his own pocket to watch every interaction anyone from Vongola had with the woman, just so nothing else happened. Timoteo wanted access to the Sun mortician, his Sky would probably refund the cost if it came down to it.

The smile that overtook her face was not a nice one, nor did it mean anything good. "Properly."

Properly? Like they hadn't...

Oh.

"Hey, Bazanova. I heard some of your students have really interesting skills...?"

"No." Stepping off him, the thief let her weapon go and started walking out of the normally busy office room.
The Lightning Guardian just lay there, rubbing his face tiredly.

Bribing themselves back into a thief's good graces was going to be expensive as hell, and maybe even pointless in the end. If Rasputin decided to never venture outside Moscow ever again…

"Hey, you didn't answer if we could just send heads!"

"You can, doesn't mean you'll get anything out of it." She tossed back negligently as she left him alone in the CEDEF's operations room.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 11th of January, 1970 continued. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

"Igor's not woken up since. We're not entirely certain what's wrong, it could be anything from the other Mist breaking his mind to just exhaustion of a sort we're not familiar with."

"…depending on what kind of Mist he tangled with, that might be entirely understandable."

"We need a few Mist nurses, Nya." Tatiana informed her sister simply, running a hand over her fiery red braided bun worriedly as they looked over the still unconscious Mist. "I honestly didn't think about what kind of damage two Mists could do to one another that might not be physical, until Igor wound up in the ICU."

Sonya glanced backwards and down when the brat tugged on her skirt, kneeling down when Shamal gestured worriedly for her to do so. She froze stock still at whatever their godson was telling her, making Renato unfold himself from the wall and reach for his gun and alerting the nurse herself something was shifty.

"Fuck, your project. I forgot." Getting up but pointedly holding onto the kid's hand in her own, the blonde turned to him and stepped closer. "Renato, can you do me a favor?"

The hitman gave her a pointedly disbelieving look, until she stepped close enough for him to pick up on what Shamal told her out of her head.

Another Mist was overshadowing the Mist on the berth.

Sonya very much wanted their brat out of the way, or more importantly very fucking far from the hospital, as soon as inhumanly possible before the Mist caught on to being made and either picked a fight or tried to find a new body to take hostage. Renato fully understood, but really did not want to leave her alone to deal with that with only her nurse Sun sister at hand. "Depending on what I get out of it, maybe."

"Well... you keep insisting so, I should probably at least try it." Sonya did seriously wonder what he thought of doing for an actual date but figured that was suitably vague enough if the Mist overshadowing another Mist was listening in they wouldn't think much of 'it'. "Please."

...he was holding her to that promise. "So long as I can dump the brat off at your apartment after I fetch the parts for his school project. And you wait for me before your next meeting, I want in on that."

Then he was coming straight back, after alerting Mafia Land security and probably Ganauche the one to attack Rasputin had been located.
"Fine." Considering things, because she had committed to a flirty cover for getting close enough to him, the Storm-Cloud lightly tugged on his tie so he would bend down far enough for her to reach up and kiss both cheeks.

Recalling that Fiorella had done it to her, and figuring it was the politest 'flirt' she could get away with while also giving him enough cover to explain why he knew the situation to Shamal. All without actually thinking through the process using even mental constructs of any words.

Renato was actually impressed. If he hadn't been this close to her, he wouldn't have picked up that kind of detail. It explained how the hell she had been managing to keep some of her own thoughts to herself.

"What does the brat need?"

"An encyclopedia for African bugs, more specifically southern Africa."

…ah, that project. "Right. Come on, brat. Let's get you sorted out."

"Rasputin should be back in an hour or so, right Tats?"

"...yeah, as far as I know." Agreed her sister slowly, arching an eyebrow at the younger Russian. "Why?"

"We might as well talk to him about what he wants to do now when he gets back. Want to go grab some lunch with me until he's here?" Sonya very specifically tilted her head to the door Renato was escorting the semi-wary Shamal through, and he caught the thoughtful nod the nurse did.

"...sure. Sounds good."

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 11th of January, 1970 continued. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

Renato very pointedly slotted bullets into a clip, then slammed it home in the butt of his gun and checked the breech of it as a bullet was loaded into it.

Sonya puffed on her brass and bamboo pipe, lighting the resulting smoke with threads of red Flames before anyone could complain about her doing it in a hospital corridor.

"I get it." Ganauche informed the both of them just as pointedly, a metal rod affair that looked like it could conduct any electricity he summoned to hand tapping against his pants leg.

Tatiana was kind of sorry she didn't have a personalized weapon for intimidation herself. Tall, dark, and snarky had cornered the market on guns from the look of it... and her sister had weaponized her tobacco smoke. The Lightning guy could probably scare the shit out of someone just by jabbing the nightstick affair into someone's side, or by making it crackle with his Flames too.

From the look of things, Rasputin was not impressed at all at the muscle amassed to help his usual bodyguard. Probably more for the belated identification of his attacker not leaving his friend alone after the fact, and less for the massed firepower readied to deal with it in a very final way if need be.

The preteen was getting pretty good at dealing with others even if his job description was mostly 'working with dead people'.

"We ready then?" Asked the nurse brightly in the hospital's common language, patting her fellow if
glum Sun on the shoulder.

The Lightning turned to the people he brought with him, waving his little rod at them so he would have their attention. "Remember, do not hurt the younger Mist if things become less contained."

Her baby sister snorted out another puff of ashy smoke as the Mist detailed to be the one to 'prod' whatever was overshadowing Igor stepped past her gingerly. "It is a hostage situation, not a raid."

"I'd rather not give you more ammunition." Ganauche shot back a touch flatly, rolling both shoulders that seemed a bit stiff already.

The smile that graced the thief's features was not kind as she pulled the pipe out from between her teeth and started moving herself. "I am sure. Come along, Rasputin. Let us see about this attacker of yours."

Tatiana let them go on without her, having limited combat uses made her more support in these kinds of incidents than someone in the thick of it. The Vongola Lightning Guardian grumbled under his breath on the other side of the hallway from her, going back to tapping his weapon against a thigh in some kind of nervous tick.

…was he really a Lightning?

"Yes, damn it. I am really a Lightning." He informed her a touch bitterly. "I don't know what you feed yours, but I am a Hard Lightning user."

"Potatoes and vodka, but Hard... means Classical, right?" Questioned the nurse slowly. "You're a Classic Lightning. Okay... well, that does explain a few things."

The one-eyed man palmed his face with the hand not holding a possible electricity conductor. "...really?"

"Galina's our benchmark when it comes to Lightnings still, and she's Inverted." Confessed Tatiana simply with a shrug. "I think you people call it 'Soft'?"

"Why is a twenty-something year old Lightning your benchmark for all of us?"

"Flame users in the Soviet Union went extinct for a while."

She got one wide-eye eyeballing her for a moment. "Oh, really?"

"According to our mom, anyways. Yeah." The Sun glanced at the door between them and the recovery room Igor had been placed in to be sure nothing was happening yet by the lights seeping out under it, then back to him. "For about... thirty or some years no one had Flames. About all the old timers that used to have it died off well before my baby sis popped with hers and the ball started rolling again.

"...huh."

"Your eye is really kind of bothering me." She informed him after a moment, hastening on because she was perfectly aware that was horribly insulting now she heard the words aloud. "You want us to do something about that?"

"There's just scar tissue left." Ganauche informed her after a moment of suspicious and insulted disbelief, pressing the heel of his free hand to his ruined eye socket.
Tatiana meant more making a copy of his right eye with Cloud Flames and transplanting that after she made the cells divide a few times to be real than to Activate what was left of his eye to replace what was lost. Her siblings replaced themselves with Cloud Voodoo as it was, surely that couldn't be so hard. "I still might be able to do something about it. Might, it's a thought anyways."

"What can you do our Suns haven't already thought of?"

"You'd be surprised." She was pretty sure no other Sun was the elder sibling to a pair of possibly functionally immortal Clouds, nor knew some of how they did it to wonder. "Do you mind if I research the possibility? I'm sure in reality it'll be a lot harder than I think it will be, and there's just one tiny thing you'd have to do first..."

"To replace my eye? Lady, point out who you want dead and they're gone."

"Real cute. No, you have to make up with my baby sis or my brother and somehow get their agreement to help." Tatiana smirked wryly at the face he pulled at her. "Yeah, tall order I know. But I think they've got half the solution to your little problem."

She would not be doing jack shit without permission, because that might possibly tip someone off to how Cherep could survive his work. Sonya would know better than she would, so the thief could make that call instead of her.

Ganauche made a throwing away gesture. "Nurse, your sister hates us. There's no way in hell she'd let her brother have anything to do with us right now."

"Take it from her older sister, you're not entirely written off yet. Fuck knows why, but somehow you're not." Seriously, anyone else screwing around with her as much as Vongola did and Sonya would probably cut out the middle man to murder them all herself instead of just pointedly mark out territory. "I got to this point with her myself once, the frosty bitch mode thing."

Admittedly, she got to it when the younger thief hadn't been a full Cloud Flame user and dug herself out also before she got good at using Flames. It was still possible to get out of that pit, Tatiana would know. She had needed Cherep's willing and freely offered help, but it was entirely within the realm of possibility.

Maybe.

"You don't ask for easy things, do you?"

"I'm talking about replacing an eye that looks, from the scar pattern around your eyepatch, to have been burned out."

The Lightning huffed, running his hand through some interestingly soft looking wavy hair as he thought about it.

"My name's Primakova, by the way. Tatiana Primakova, not just 'nurse'."

He flushed lightly under his light tan, noticeably. "I knew that."

"Mmhmm, sure you did." Something was happening in that room now, Tatiana gave up being confident those crammed in the room would be able to deal with the situation and pulled her own gun from the small of her back. "I totally believe you."

Ganauche was a dear and stepped forward, so anything coming through the door would have to get pass him first but leaving a clear sightline for her to shoot over his shoulder if need be.
Five painted cinder blocks suddenly being shoved out of alignment meant they had readied themselves just in time, Tatiana pursed her lips and wondered if Sonya was somehow not really pissed off or something.

She would normally throw a hammer clear through concrete, so why not now?

…because that was facing further into the hospital, and the Sun nurse that was her sister was standing in the hallway right outside the room. Having answered her own question with a bit of thought, she almost didn't turn back to the doorway in time to catch what happened next.

Igor, or whomever was puppeting Igor, came out of the recovery room backwards without bothering about the little detail of a closed heavy slab of wood masquerading as a door. Ganauche whacked the kid upside the head with his sparkling green stick, but it passed right through the Mist without connecting physically.

The arcs of Lightning Flames on the man's weapon didn't really care what was or wasn't solid, it spread anyways.

The young Mist fell to the floor like a puppet whose strings had been cut, twitching muscles jerking in protest of whatever Ganauche did.

Tall, dark, and snarky raised an eyebrow as he opened the door a bit quickly. Toeing the body a few times with a leather and rubber soled shoe instead of risk skin contact, then looking up at the Lightning Guardian who was patiently waiting for people to get their acts together and finish up.

"Ganauche got him!" Tatiana called into the room behind the two Mafiosi, earning a snort from her unseen sister.

"You mean someone from Vongola actually did something? Color me surprised."

"Um… I can understand you." The poor guy offered in their native Russian, the consonants and vowels slightly pulled out oddly in the marks of Mist-learnt languages.

"And?" Demanded Sonya shortly, ducking under her Italian stud's arm to look at Igor's insensible body. "It's the first useful thing you and your lot have ever done for me in… three years."

Stepping away from the body, and allowing the nurse in at it, the thief turned fully around and peered around the taller Inverted Sun user's form. "Hey, Misty Miss Tweets. Is the other one gone yet or not?"

"Must you?" Spoke up the lady from suddenly behind Tatiana and not in the room she had entered. "And yes, as far as I can tell there's nothing shadowing Igor's form."

Sonya shrugged. "I do not recall your name."

"It's Rosabella."

"…sure."

"She's not going to recall that either." Tatiana helpfully informed the group rubbernecking in the hallway, glancing up to the tallest Italian stud still waiting for an all-clear. "Tall, dark, and snarky? Haul him to bed, please?"

She earned herself an amused look for batting her eyelashes with her request, but the man did put his gun away and bend to do her hauling for her. Even still held out a hand to pull her back to her feet
like a gentleman with a body slung over a shoulder for her already.

Glancing sourly at the Lightning that did manage to take down whatever it was trying to steal Igor's body for whatever reason, the Storm-Cloud huffed irritably as Rasputin slunk around everyone in the way to put her between himself and the rest of the Vongola people. "Fine, whatever. You send Rasputin heads, I will not object to him sending back information. If he wants to. Anything like this shit happens again, I will take him back to Moscow even if he protests and no one outside the clan will be able to make use of his ability."

Guanche glanced at her on her way past him, to her baby sister, then just nodded. "Thank you."

"I still object to anyone even remotely Vongola allied near Rasputin for any reason." Sonya insisted shortly, pressing the teenaged Sun on down the hallway and away from the influences she was objecting to as she spoke. "And my threat stands. I will start piking heads if I feel the terms are not held to."

"I'll still take it." Returned the Lightning patiently. "We are really sorry, Bazanova."

"Tell that to Igor, if he ever wakes up from this shit."

"I'll do it personally." Promised the man, entirely seriously.

Yep, entirely a Lightning.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 11th of January, 1970 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Timoteo let the receiver of the phone he had accepted click back into the rest mounted on the phone's base with a thankful sigh.

"Good news?"

Mustering up a wry smile for his wife, the Sky accepted the book he had been reading from her back. "A mixed bag, really."

Fiorella's expression turned a touch flat. "Can I know, or are you going to claim business even if you accepted a call during time set aside expressly for family?"

It was criminal in nature, having taken place on an island for such, but he might be able to strip it of questionable details so she wouldn't become aggravated with yet more secrets being kept from her. "Ah... I believe I can tell you this. Bazanova has a group of Flame using medical exchange students, one of them was attacked. The individual was caught, but no one really knows if the Mist culprit was really dealt with or if the individual that did it is still at large."

"Sonya has students?" She repeated in surprise, lowering her book and frowning over at Federico's sly attempts to not do his homework even if that was what he was told to do. "I didn't know that..."

"She is the head of a Soviet Academy for Flame users." Which... was a fine excuse for why she was invited to the social events they held. Someone should introduce the thief to her Italian contemporary, perhaps someone that hadn't had the opportunity to piss her off yet. "She loaned out one of them to us, he had an interesting skill set and it would help us tracking down who breached security during the Ball. He was subsequently attacked a few days later, in turn, presumably because of her lending his ability out to us."
Fiorella was distracted enough by that news to allow their eldest son's mischief to slide. "Oh... dear. I take it she was not happy about that."

"To put it lightly, my dear." Confirmed Timoteo sourly, giving Federico a wink for suddenly getting back on track on his work without being scolded by his mother for it. "She's still not happy, but Ganauche negotiated a bit of leeway and his help in apprehending the suspect bought us more tolerance from what he reported."

"This is another thing you can't go to the police about?"

"The Mist overshadowed and occupied the body of his victim instead of leave or try hiding in more mundane places, Fiorella. The police would have been of no assistance." If there even had been such a thing as civilian police in Mafia Land in the first place, that is. "Unfortunately, sometimes we must instead police ourselves."

"But why do you hide so?" Questioned his wife tiredly, settling back with her own book and a worried frown. "Your Sun Flame users would be a blessing to have in the medical field, or even just in places with less than reliable clinics. Storms in construction, or more specifically deconstruction of hazards, and Lightnings in a similar field helping to supply power without the need of massive and dirty amounts of burning coal or the like."

"I... do not recall the exact reasoning, myself." Timoteo prevaricated slowly. With no intent to introduce his wife into the Mafia nor the Vindice he wasn't aware how to answer that question. "I merely know it is now a law we all hold to, as well as 'police ourselves'."

From the look his lovely wife gave him, she did not find that logic all that helpful. "Timoteo, perhaps someone should look into that."

"Perhaps. I will add it to what we are currently looking for in the family's archives, as well as ask some of the more history focused of our number."

"Perhaps Sonya might know?" Suggested Fiorella thoughtfully, and a tiny bit wickedly for all it gave the Sky indigestion to think of his lovely civilian wife seeking the company of a Soviet Union thief and Storm-Cloud that was not even remotely friendly with him. "You did just say she ran a school."

"It is... possible." Timoteo had to allow, because they might actually recall the true reason the Vindice had ruled that way while they in Europe forgot. "I believe it will be another month or so until you can ask."

"Oh?"

"Her godson's seventh birthday, and his First Communion, is early February."

"Delightful, I wonder if she would mind Federico getting a preview of the event..."

"...are you going to insist on this, Fiorella?"

"Is there a reason why I shouldn't become friends with the woman that saved my life, Timoteo?"

Countered his wife a touch suspiciously, which likely meant she knew full well he didn't want her to but didn't see any 'good' reasoning herself. "Sonya was utterly honest and truthful to me even in the face of something she could've used for influence or a reward, right now I find that behavior a touch refreshing and something I would like in my social circle."

Smoothing a hand down and over his mouth and mustache, the Ninth head of Vongola sighed through his nose. "If that is what you would like, Fiorella dear, then by all means become her friend."
I think... she might actually appreciate having one like you before she even moves countries to raise her godchild."

He didn't want to put his wife in that position, where the best route to the thief was through his lovely civilian wife as Sinclair was about to do a bit of personal reputation erasing. It also opened up the risk Bazanova would say the wrong thing at the wrong moment, revealing the criminal influences Fiorella might not be open-minded enough to accept in her own husband and as their children's future.

Someone else needed to go with her...

"For the trips the two of you might take to either each other's homes or abroad, can I ask you select a female bodyguard to include? For my peace of mind, my dear."

Fiorella's frown got progressively less pointed as she recalled that as a wife of a man with political power she wasn't entirely safe outside their home and a possible reason why he was not pleased with the idea. "You... think something she might do would put me at harm?"

"Obviously not, in fact you and the children would probably safer with her as a bodyguard." Not that he had any intent of allowing such a situation occur, he owed the woman enough as it was. "No, I am more concerned for she has selected and purchased a home much further north than us and that is a bit of a trip if you wish to call upon her. With some unfortunate happening on the way that might necessitate an unexpected stop and might leave you open if anyone hates me enough, Fiorella."

Timoteo had enough 'close calls' with his wife, he would much rather annoy her with too much protection than risk another assassin possibly sliding past the Storm-Cloud that hadn't even been on guard for such a thing.

"...do you have a suggestion?"

Guerra, maybe, but the woman was getting married and had 'retired' from being his mother's main and favored hatchet woman. "It's your life, you can make the selection of a guard you might be making into a friend. I only ask you go through my mother for possible candidates, please."

The Rain might just end up part of that in the end, given her personal and unapologetically transparent crusade to become the thief's friend. More moderating influences would be nice... just in case.

"Oh... I can do that."

"Thank you."

Maybe allowing Bazanova's assault on Ganauche slide would be enough of a 'favor' to somewhat redress the balance with the incoming Russian quarter. There was arranging an introduction to the Italia's Mafia School, and possible exchange programs between them that would require some political finessing, possibly helping her Lackey find non-objectionable staff that knew of Dying Will Flames, and... Timoteo really didn't want the woman so near without someone from the Alliance overlooking what she might be doing with her fellow Russians.

He stared mostly unseeing at the opened book in his right hand as his wife settled back with her own, mostly thankful he had navigated that discussion without risking too much of Fiorella's anger.

...perhaps she might like assisting Bazanova's Lackey with finding the proper staff for her new residence. Arranging for Fiorella to overhear any discussion of the topic would be simple enough
with a word to his mother, possibly a bit hard to acquire the Icelander's agreement but that would be fairly distracting enough for her to afford him time to see if anyone did know why the Vindice had the laws they did.

(Thursday the 22nd of January, 1970. Lubyanka Building, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"...actually, it might not be against Vindice Laws."

Usov peered at the cramped lettering of the file in his hands thoughtfully, then looked back up to the thief guiding him through this. "Are you sure about that?"

Sonya Bazanova lifted a shoulder in a shrug, prying the bottle cap off without needing a tool for it or a convenient ledge. "Vindice Laws said to avoid scrutiny and police after yourself; but not what is to be done if the governments we are to avoid figure it out in other ways."

Looking back at the pile of files he and the Storm-Cloud had stolen from the KGB scurrying around below their feet, because while Mist Flames were hard to resist if you didn't know they were there... with enough focus the results could be certainly spotted quickly even against a Mist's will, he ran a few fingers over the coded list of 'suspects'.

Of Dying Will Flame use. It wasn't named such, even in any of the codes the Mist had cheated his way through, but they were 'inhuman feats of interests' the KGB were on the lookout for. A handful of names, a longer list of possible locations of said acts, and what seemed to be three generalized lists of what such a feat might be able to accomplish from all available information.

Noticeably, the KGB were now missing six different headquarters worth of copies of such reports. Thirteen agents were dead or otherwise mind-wiped to know nothing, seven boxes of files in no particular order were now missing, and they were only now realizing it below.

The pair of thieves just had to wait a bit longer, to check on anyone checking any further redundant backups they might want to help themselves to.

"Were those laws for the normal criminals or for all? Including syndicate-level responsibilities?"

She looked thoughtful at the question he posed wonderingly, sipping from a bottle of beer stolen wonderingly, sipping from a bottle of beer stolen from one of the break rooms they had discovered while someone below called out a certain sector they might be lingering in as cleared. "That's an interesting question I don't know the answer to."

"Can I get one?"

"How old are you again?" She countered dryly, pulling her booted feet back from the constructed platform they were sitting upon to double-check they had everything they wanted before leaving. "What, like eleven? ...thirteen?"

"Somewhere around there, yes."

Grey eyes narrowed on the files in her hand, then those eyes flicked up to him. "No, wait. You were... six? When we met and Shamal was three at the end of that year. He's six now, you're either ten at best or nine."

...whoops.
"Usov."

"You kept leaving me out of things!"

"You're fucking nine."

"Ten!"

"Whatever." Insisted the woman flatly, pointing at him with the opened bottle of beer. "Fuck, kid. I was working by nine. I don't care about the whole... being in charge shit. The murder on the other hand..."

That's what he meant!

She was utterly unimpressed with his pouting. "Damn it all to hell and back, kid. You shouldn't do shit like that, or this, at your age. A night or there staying up, sure whatever. It's your life. You do more than an occasional night or two at your age and you'll fuck your growth up. Do you want to be shorter than me?"

"...is it really the late nights you're not happy about?"

"I started working at your age, and I've lied about my real age for a number of years." Sonya informed him blandly, pausing to drain the bottle and then speculatively peer at the label stuck to the glass. "No, I can't do anything but bitch that you might be starting a bit too early. You helping me kill Fadei, on the other hand..."

"You were in Mafia Land by eleven."

"Yeah, a few months from my twelfth birthday... not nine or ten. I didn't kill anyone until I was fourteen." She countered pointedly, leaning over the misty blue platform of nothing to see what kind of panic was going on below them now. "I know it seems stupid and pointless, because you are a Mist and your lot all seem ready and raring to go from the start, but a couple years does make a difference later on. Like when you're twenty and wondering why the fuck you're half an insomniac."

"I am perfectly mature enough to weigh the potential impacts to my health fro-"

"Obviously not, or you wouldn't be doing this kind of shit." Scoffed the older thief, groping her other side for another bottle of beer. "Just... fuck, Usov. What the hell was so damn important?"

"You were protecting me! Again! I wanted to show you I don't need it!"

"You're mine. Fuck what you do or don't need, if I can do it for you I want to."

Usov huffed irritably. "That's the point, boss lady."

Sonya paused in twisting off another beer cap, giving him a suspicious eyeing. "...what?"

"If you're going to be this way, I don't feel like explaining." He, admittedly, pouted snottily.

Of course, she didn't let it go. The files they had been over several times already got tossed into the floating box of them, the other beers were pointedly stuck into a satchel she had originally stolen them in, and the thief in question turned to face him instead of sitting sideways on the platform. "Usov."

Nope, not even her 'tending my flock' tone would get him to spill.
"You're a Mist. I barely understand your type, for all I deal with your lot a fair bit. Explain this to me so the slow and apparently socially incompetent Cloud Flame user can understand."

"I don't want to."

"Do it anyways." She countered pleasantly. "Before I end up with yet another Mist hanger-on, who has their own 'reasons' why they want to follow me. Since I have three now, and while the lot of you seem fine together I know yet more would upset all sorts of things."

Usov scowled, irked at the oblique reminder of her godchild who stole his spot. "How about I tell you later."

"How about now?"

"Aren't we in the middle of something?"

"You fucking Mists cheat, there's nearly nothing for me to actually do but point out targets you might not have thought of." Sonya countered blandly, pausing for another draw of her new beer. "Seriously, this is the most boring infiltration I've ever been on of any government building. Even that time in an African palace pales in comparison."

…admittedly, this was less exciting than he had counted on. "There's no sport to it, they can't exactly fight back or make it interesting."

"Probably a good thing, or Mist thieves would put me out of work." Agreed the professional thief. "Now then, Usov. Your reasoning, please."

He pouted again, earning not even a blink from the woman sipping beer, before sighing heavily. "You didn't want to help me. Originally. I was kind of that annoying little snot of a brat you made yourself help because it was what you were supposed to do."

"…okay, and?"

Ouch, boss lady. Not even going to try and claim he wasn't annoying?

"You stuck by me for eight days, doing things you found boring and distasteful. Letting me practically crawl over you and dictate what we were going to do each day." Usov pointed out dryly, wagging a finger at the older woman giving him an unimpressed look over her bottle. "At the time I didn't really think a whole lot about it. It was your job for that week and a bit."

"It was." Sonya confirmed dryly around the neck of her beer.

"No, it wasn't. You could've figured out a way to shove it off on Dmitriy, and his Flames did work. Not as well, but they did. You didn't, because I wanted to bother you for the annoyance you treated me as."

"First of all, you are annoying. Secondly, we had other shit to do that week. You weren't the only thing happening."

"You are not helping your cause here, boss lady."

The beer lowered, and she gave him a confused stare. "…what?"

"I am your little annoying Mist hanger-on." Insisted the Mist pointedly, waving a hand in the air. "That is what I wanted to be. You didn't have to help me, you could've, and indeed did once I was
'stabilized', shoved me off on the Rain man you were nudging into your rightful spot."

Now looking fairly confused entirely, the Storm-Cloud lowered her opened bottle to her lap and tapped her nails on the glass. "I'm lost."

"Fairly often, yes. We've noticed."

That earned him a sour glare.

"Live with it." He insisted, glancing over the platform they were seated on for if she could move yet or not. "How much longer, do you think?"

Sonya glanced downward herself, and at the milling less hostile office workers that staffed the KGB's main office building. Under guard by their more trained and armed fellows who would all probably shoot said other fellows if ordered to. "Another hour, at least. Do you want me to grab your parents before I leave Moscow officially?"

"Please. Thank you." Agreed the Mist brightly, deciding he was bored of this place of office-worker containment now.

It took two seconds to feel out the Mist-soaked marker she had placed for him, having done most of the hard work of their infiltrations over the last week and a half once she returned from dealing with the Edik and Sergej situation. All the thief had to do was plant a few small trinkets donated by several Mists in hard to reach spots, and even if Usov had never visited a location before in his existence he could instantly displace them near said markers dripping with Mist Flames easily enough.

The riskier aspect of this job would be collecting the markers again before anyone stumbled upon them. Which Sonya had refused him helping with, just in case they needed to scramble back to somewhere a day to a full week after the fact. She'd pick them up again, as she planted them in the first place.

"The Vindice didn't show up."

"We're not breaking any laws." Pointed out the disgruntled Storm-Cloud, adjusting to their sudden and likely disorientating sudden scene shift with ill-grace. "There should be a way to summon an officer, I just don't know how."

"Hmmm..." Usov eyed the bald head directly beneath them thoughtfully. "Got an empty spare bottle?"

The guy was getting really red in the face, to the point the shiny patch of skin peeking out from a circle of hair was turning pink. Maybe he needed some beer too?

"Usov, we need them to calm down. Not rile them up for another few hours." Sonya glanced at her second-to-last beer in her hands with a sneer. "If you do something, I'm going to need more liquor."

The Mist blinked, looking up from dropping a half-empty beer bottle she had been drinking out of on top of the really tempting bald guy below them hard enough it would shatter and cool him off. "What was that?"

"I'm perfectly aware you heard me… now get me some fucking vodka." She informed him flatly. "And no, you may not have any of that either. Stop handing out my rightfully stolen liquor, it's mine damn it all."
"So, what does it mean when a Mist decides they want to be the 'annoying one'??"

Cherep glanced up and over at his sister curiously, letting the engineering textbook on aerodynamics fall to his chest. "You're going to have to give me a lot more detail there, Nya."

"Usov. Decided he was 'my annoying hanger-on'. Because my job was calming him the fuck down, way back when before we went off to 'run away to the circus'." She explained simply, leaning over the couch to at least be able to see him clearly rather than just a purple eye peeking around stuffed furniture. "And that's somehow the reason why he's so obsessed?"

"With you." He checked first, looking thoughtful when she nodded. "Anything else?"

"That I could've shoved the work off on Dmitriy, and did in the end, but didn't for a bit longer than week."

"Sounds plausible."

"...what?"

"Confused?"

"Very."

"Mists are obsessive." Pointed out the stuntman helpfully, re-stacking his booted feet on the far end of the couch's' arm and discarding the text to the coffee table where it immediately blended in with the others. "Like... the same way Storms are fanatic. It really has to only make sense to them, and Usov was tetchy when he started. So like what, a six-year-old's sense of entitlement paired with a Mist's developing obsessiveness? Seriously, are you at all surprised?"

"I just kept popping his Constructions with a Storm's Disintegration, which was pretty much the only thing I could do that seemed to help. That really shouldn't earn me an obsessive fan boy. " Refuted the Storm-Cloud sourly, setting her chin on her folded arms. "We also had to talk to his parents that whole fucking week, and old man Zolotov wanted to review the whole mess for who to stick in charge. I had to be there anyways."

"Usov probably doesn't know nor care about that. You helped him, when he needed help, when you had options to not do it." Waving a hand between them to dismiss her points through logic she didn't really get, Cherep just tilted his head in order to keep eye contact. "Again, what you might take from one incident is not always what someone else might. Think Björn, and why he followed after you."

"But Usov wanted to be my very annoying Mist hanger-on, and he got all pouty and mad at me for asking why. This also has some kind of relation to why he's faking his age, the brat's really fucking ten and not eleven or thirteen or... at some age remotely starting puberty."

"...puberty is a very bad measure of maturity. Just look at the both of us."

She glared at him. "I am perfectly mature and responsible, thank you."
Her fellow Cloud just shrugged, stretching out a touch before getting up from the couch. "Look, aside the circumstances for the both of you and what else was going on, and what you or he thinks about it, the whole thing boils down to another 'base facts' situation. He needed help, you gave said help, resulting in he's really obsessed with something about you or just paying you back for what you didn't have to give him."

Sonya huffed at him but took his view on it into consideration anyways.

"Does it bother you? That he's obsessed with something about you?"

"Not really."

Running a hand through his hair, her brother shrugged it off. "Then don't worry about it. Either he'll eventual decide he's paid you back, dedicate his life to annoying you until he gets bored, or never really go away even after you're fed up with dealing with him."

That was utterly unhelpful. "…maybe I should ask Viper or Shamal…"

"You can, they're going to tell you the same thing. And I don't think you would like being charged for Vipes to answer the question." Cherep reached over the couch to pat her on the head before wandering away from her. "It doesn't really matter much in the end, does it?"

"It ties into why Usov's lying about his age." Sonya repeated the pertinent fact again, a touch flatly. "And why he's doing things way too young, like helping me with…"

"…with?"

"…putting down a Sky Rejected Rain, who went batshit crazy from the stress on his Flames or something related to Discordant Flame symptoms, fuck knows he wasn't exactly thinking straight by the end of that."

Turning around rather sharply, the man frowned at her. "What?"

"I've lied about my age, that I was older than I really was. I don't really care about that or the whole 'let's haunt Bazanova/boss lady thing' going on, they're sort of useful now and again. It's… he's pretending he's at the age where some of the vory won't quite always shoo him away from the bloody stuff anymore."

Raking his hand through violently purple strands, her brother scowled. "Oh, no. Okay then. He's being impatient. Skipping a few years because you'll either sideline him or refuse his help with the things he wants to help you with. Don't leave him behind, and he won't skate around your or the 'social rules' or 'culturally acceptable' limitations on him."

"…fuck. I already did."

"Then what he's doing is in response to that. Ease back whatever it is or task him with something else suitably distracting, and he'll stop getting into things he shouldn't."

"I can't take him away from his parents." Sonya protested, shoving both hands through her own hair to clutch the back of it. "They're perfectly supportive… I think. Or at least they're not complaining."

"With a Mist? It might entirely be because Usov sees no reason for them to complain. How sure are you of that?"

…she should probably meet them at least once before kidnapping them all to head to Italy with the
rest of 'her' people.

She had made no arrangements that included people or said people's people. Why was this now a thing?

They weren't even her parents!

The thief let her hair go with a sigh but rubbed the back of her neck instead of drop her arms.
"…what the hell are you doing, anyways?"

"It's almost lunch time. Lunch? Food? Things of an edible nature?"

"…is there any reason why you've suddenly started feeding me?" She had been in and out the entire month, helping Usov and the Mist section set up and execute the KGB raid to add the information to what they had already pulled from various law enforcement headquarters.

He had been really good about the odd hour visitations and keeping something warm to bolt down between infiltrations, enough so that the Storm-Cloud was actually really looking forward to 'Skull de Mort's' off-time with all of them just living together somewhere else with her brat and maybe visits from Tatiana now and again.

"I'm still scared of your cooking." Cherep tossed over a shoulder brightly, pulling open the rather old-fashioned fridge this place had come furnished with. "Even if I could survive eating it, I don't want to risk it. So, I'm cooking."

Sonya huffed irritably, stalking around the couch to steal his spot and book… even if it was a math textbook. "I will never get better without someone to practice on."

"I love you sis, but not that much." He shot back without missing a beat. "Do us all a favor, practice on Arseniy until Lisa decides it's alright."

Even if she didn't really like math textbooks, she was keeping this one. Hers now, he could find something else to read. Of course, she didn't want to fucking read it either so instead she glanced around the hotel suite they were sharing.

Of this set of hotel rooms, which she had made the final payment to keep it rented for another half a year just in case old man Yaozu or Mingxia needed a place to crash after she left the Zolotovs, the only thing that was 'hers' was some of the artwork on the wall, her clothing, almost everything in the kitchen that wasn't an appliance, and the knickknacks.

This place had to be packed up in another month or so, but she had after February and Shamal's Christian religious ritual thing to do that in. She also had to go to the school and finally deal with the likely massive pile of paperwork there and hiring of new or different teachers to replace everyone she was yanking or otherwise reassigning… but she didn't feel like it.

Galina got her licks in, hopefully that would buy her a little more time before round two and that zoo.

Sonya was just really avoiding anything that smacked of Zolotov influence right now. She didn't want to deal with Gedeon, or anything to do with him, or even old man Zolotov either. Arseniy and Lisa were probably already suspicious of her avoidance of anything clan related…

Maybe she could stretch visiting Italy halfway through February before coming back, pretend to be occupied with searching out new teachers for March, and then leave for Mafia Land as soon as it turned April.
Sonya very pointedly moved the book away from her brother's hands, when he wandered back to put his things away for the day since he was moving on to something else. "Mine now."

"Oh come on, do you know how hard it was to find an aerodynamic engineering text for motorized vehicles? Which includes motorcycles?"

She reconsidered actually stealing the book from him, for about two seconds. "Nope, but I'm sure you're going to tell me."

Cherep hung over the back of the couch, half on her in hopes of grabbing the paper she immediately dropped to the floor out of his reach. "You don't even like math."

"It's a book, your argument is invalid."

Her fellow Cloud huffed, giving up and just laying draped over her shoulder in what was probably a sulk but she couldn't see his face to check. "Can I at least copy a few things out of there first? Before you make away with my book?"

"Mine now." Repeated the thief, sliding out from under him and seizing the contested text before he could lunge for it in response to her moving. "But yes, I will give you a copy of anything relevant in the book. But it's mine, not your book."

He lifted the entire couch before she got off it instead of the expected scramble, tilting it backwards a little so she'd end up safely in the crook between the cushions and the back rather than on the floor. "What if I want to contest this 'mine now' policy for everything you get your hands on?"

Sonya contemplated her options for a long moment.

Cherep squawked in offence as she used his shoulders as a stepping stone to reach the light fixture that was positioned more for the 'hallway' than the 'sitting room', using it to guide her jump somewhat further into the suite and well away from his hands even if could free them in a split second.

Rolling as she landed, she bolted off with the contested book when the floor shook a little as her brother discarded the couch to scramble and catch up with her. Taking two turns, once into her bedroom and the other to face the window looking out to a side street and not the main, the thief only just managed to wrench open the window and wiggle through it before the stuntman could snag any part of her.

"The hell, Nya? Come back in here, you're not wearing a coat! You don't even have boots on!"

"I'll live." Tossed back the thief, tucking the text under an arm and quickly scaling the brickwork before someone glanced out a window and spotted her. "Don't wait up!"

Now, where to hide it?

…preferably before her toes froze off in the snow.

Bad plan, next time she'd just play keep away with her brother inside her apartment.

(Tuesday the 27th of January, 1970. Voykovsky District, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)
Glancing at the number and address written on her hand, then to the plaque with the same letters and numbers in the same order she was looking for, Sonya glanced between them a few more times just to be triply sure.

…it was entirely possible she might have the wrong address. Maybe.

Stranger things could happen. Usov was a Mist, there were probably uncountable ways he could protect his parents from unwanted solicitors that she would never dream up even if she had Mist Flames.

"...Miss... Bazanova?" Asked someone behind her, causing the Storm-Cloud to blink twice before turning to see who it was calling her name here. "Oh, I haven't seen you in years. Usov tells me you're doing well these days, I can see that it's true. You look wonderful, dear."

"...thank you?" Sonya informed the lady she only hazily thought she might know, or at least might've passed on the streets a few minutes ago, a bit woodenly. Wincing at her own utter fail at social interactions hammering that 'incompetent' idea home that much further, the thief returned the little folded scrap of paper she stole out of her own office while hiding her brother's book to her coat pocket and tried for a smile. "Um... I don't mean to pry..."

"We don't mind living here." The slightly worn looking and green-eyed brunette inform her pleasantly, shifting what seemed to be her produce allotment for the day to another arm. "Your... clan? Offered to put us up somewhere else... but this is where Usov's lived his entire life and we're a bit attached."

In a single-roomed apartment, the size of a matchbox. In an apartment building, which had eight four-or-more families living in the five apartments around this one she was standing in front of. More than a few kilometers outside of clan territory.

"Okay." Agreed the blonde a bit blankly. "Well... I... wanted to know if the both of you, you and your husband that is, would mind... listening to a job offer."

She blinked at her this time. "Um... sure? I mean... now?"

"...if now would work then I guess?"

The slow smile that bloomed across her face took several years' worth of age and stress off her, making her seem less around Lisa's age and a touch closer to Tatiana's. "...I see Usov's descriptions of your social skills are completely correct."

Sonya rolled her eyes and sighed, already feeling a bit of a heat spread across the bridge of her nose in a fucking blush. She hated feeling stupid. "I'm sorry. I'm fucking this up, aren't I?"

Talking to complete utter random people over the phone, no issues. Dealing with people she vaguely knew from working near or at the same place for years, fine. Try to talk to someone even marginally important to her people, apparently she failed utterly trying not to be as abrasive as she could be.

"No! Oh no, not at all. I'm just surprised, he's got a bit of an imagination... yet if anything he understated things from the looks of it."

Rubbing the bridge of her nose, hopefully to hide the worse of her blush, the Storm-Cloud just shrugged. "I suck at people. Can we... skip my awkwardness?"

"Sure, just let me fetch Max." Pulling a set of keys out of her coat pocket, the lady didn't even get to unlock the apartment door before a thinner male than she was used to seeing pulled it open.
"Maksim, it's okay. Nikishina, who changed her name to Bazanova? Usov's friend from the Zolotovs? She was the… um, the reddish one?"

…this probably wasn't a good part of the city, but even still she didn't really care for being regarded as the criminal she really was from someone like Usov's father. "Hi."

"Zina, are you sure?"

"Usov said no one intending us harm could even approach the doorway and she did."

Sonya coughed a touch pointedly. "We're… really not supposed to talk about that just anywhere."

"...will he get in trouble if we do?"

"I'm honestly not sure yet. We're working on clarifying those kind of things... but it's slow going."

Hedged the thief slowly, rubbing the back of her neck for a lack of anything to do with her hands. "So... um. Lunch? I'll pay, for dragging you both out to listen to me. But there's going to be a couple changes with the whole... thing Usov works on for us and I promised him..."

"I thought you said this was a job offer?"

"It is." Confirmed the younger woman simply.

'Zina' blinked at her, and she really had to get the mom's name somehow or outright admit she didn't know it, then glanced to her husband. Maximillian shrugged and plucked the bags out of her arms to set inside the apartment, before stepping out warily and plucking a slightly worn leather jacket from somewhere near the door to throw over his shoulders. As she had the keys out already, she locked it while her husband straightened out his coat.

Given the bloodshot eyes and the time, Usov's dad probably worked second or even third shift and had likely just woken up.

Sonya pressed her lips together, wondering which moron had been in charge of the young Mist's recruitment into the clan and who the fuck she had to punch through a couple walls to get them better jobs and an actual fucking apartment. This was beyond the pale in ungratefulness, given what Lisa got when Tatiana went into becoming a nurse and Sonya ended up subbing in for Dmitriy.

Not to mention what their foster mother got for her daughters saving the Pahkan's life.

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 27th of January, 1970 continued. Voykovsky District, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Samuil Zinaida gingerly seated herself in the somewhat surprisingly clean booth, sliding over for her husband to sit down as well.

A bar was not something she had expected when young Miss Bazanova invited them out to lunch, but as the other woman was paying for a meal neither of them had to cook she really couldn't complain too much.

She really lucked out on recalling the young woman's changed surname after a moment of surprised shock to see a well-dressed if slightly lost looking vaguely familiar person standing in front of their small home. Hopefully, Usov would do the popping into reality thing and remind her what the young woman's first name was before she was forced to admit she didn't recall it.
It had been a few years, and she had grown a small bit. Filled out as well, but it did change some of her features slightly as she lost the childish edge of padding for a sharper adult look to her face. "So, a job offer Miss Bazanova?"

"Call me Sonya." Glancing sharply at the bartender earned her a nod for some reason, and the older 'Flame user' rubbed her forehead before squarely looking back at the both of them. "How much has Usov informed the both of you about things going on in the clan?"

"To be honest... we really don't feel comfortable with your clan." Max informed the young woman simply. "Not for... what you are, or in spite of what you have extended to help us, we are just not those that want to make use of something we didn't earn fairly for ourselves."

Bazanova blinked slowly at him, then hummed for a second. "Ah... that makes more sense, really. Entirely respectable stance to take. This offer I have for you both is because your son is who he is but it's more for his and your comfort, and to simplify the situation, than for any other reason."

The woman really was blunt, wasn't she?

Zinaida leaned over the table slightly, earning herself the bulk of the attention while Max absorbed that. "Then what is this about, Sonya?"

"I'm leaving the clan, myself. I've got a godchild, and his godfather wants him to grow up in their native country, so I'm leaving to go do that for a good number of years." Bazanova drew out a brass and bamboo pipe from an inner pocket of the coat she finally drew off, apparently just to play with instead of puff on as she set the mass of wool to one side. "That being the case, a few number of the Flame users I've been involved with training or otherwise helping have decided to follow me due to various personal reasons themselves. Usov's among them."

"Usov is ten."

"I'm aware. But, as a Mist user, it is almost impossible to contain him if he doesn't want to be without the help of a stronger Mist. Which I don't think we have. I would rather ensure he does any international travel with me than on his own, instead of in some fit of rebellious teenage mischief."

She and her husband exchanged faintly worried glances.

"...is there any way to turn 'off' Flames?"

"This question again?" The, really likely, criminal across the booth frowned faintly. "As far as I am aware, not as of yet. There might be a possibility I know of yet can't do, but as Flame use has a strong connection to personality, trying to turn it 'off' would likely erase or otherwise compromise our very sense of self."

Max had an arm around her before she even finished flinching back from the blandly delivered words, squeezing her slightly before letting go so to keep up the composed face they were presenting.

"Usov will likely remain with you both until he decides he no longer needs to be watched over by parents. However, he's already fudging exactly how old he is to me and several others. I'd rather he grows up slowly than too fast, and part of my crusade involves keeping you both close to where he wants to be."

"How do we do that?" Her husband asked simply, faintly frowning at the woman.

"As I said, I'm moving. With a... substantial number of people. I need staff to keep up the property I
purchased in Italy."

"…Italy?" Repeated Zinaida blankly. "You're... going to Europe."

"I am." Confirmed the younger woman simply.

"That is... far."

"It won't happen until April. You both have enough time to discuss it, and with your son, before I need to know if you'll take the offer."

She sighed a bit heavily, not expecting to have a few possible long-term consequences about her son's unique ability pointed out to her along with a far-flung job offer. "…does he really mostly teach?"

"Yes, actually. Usov's in charge of the Mist section, teaching and ensuring most of the Mists that contact us for help get it." Confirmed Bazanova simply, running the pipe in her hands through her fingers a few times. "His day to day work is mainly running after equally as stubborn, confusing, creative people that share his talents and ensuring everyone knows and heeds their limitations."

"He's... ten." Her husband pointed out again, slowly.

"And the most experienced Mist we have." The woman shrugged that off, tapping her pipe on the table. "Usov does a fair few things for the clan, mainly in looking after his fellows, which was why I was so surprised at where you live. I thought we would have expressed our appreciation for his work, but as it might be slightly illegal aid…"

"It's... on our son's merit?"

"He lives with you, you are the ones that brought him up to be the young man he is. It's to your household, as that is where he lives, on his merit. Yes."

Zina glanced to Max, who looked equally confused if she was reading her husband right.

…they hadn't known that.

"So, as to why I've come to you both with a job offer." Setting the pipe down firmly, Bazanova folded her hands and placed them on the table. "I need everyone that would be of use to maintain and keep a castle orderly."

"A castle?"

"Not my idea, but yes."

"You want us to give up everything we have here, to move to Italy and help with the upkeep of a castle." Maximillian asked just to clarify the situation, earning a nod. "Aside staying close to Usov before he could decide to... leave, what else would we get for this?"

"As you're a married couple, probably a house built on the land surrounding it for your own use so long as we live there." Sonya informed them both dryly. "The castle will house a few dozen people, but to be honest I have a fair few rooms worth of just pure books to also think about. I'm probably going to have to hire locally for maids and whatnot, I just really don't feel comfortable leaving the 'head' staff positions so open to people I have no idea about. I know you through your son, as mischievous and as headache inducing as Usov is he is a sensible boy who works hard at what jobs he's given. I'd rather take a more calculated risk on the both of you than some complete unknown."
Straightening up maybe a touch too quickly, she ignored the dry look he shot her in order to ask her question. "How much land are we talking about?"

"...three thousand acres?"

That was a lot of land… "Ever think of having an apiary, Sonya?"

"A what?"

"Beehives." Zinaida helpfully corrected herself, excited now. "I do a bit of… brewing. Of mead."

She blinked slowly at her, confused grey staring unashamedly. "Mead."

"Yes."

"Zina."

"Shush, Maksim." Smiling brightly at the confused woman across the table after Max's half-exasperated bid to derail it, she patted down her pockets for some kind of paper and to see if she had a pen. "With a good selection of beehives, and some control of what flora is around them, I could brew mead in bulk batches? So long as we get a small bit ourselves, of course. You could sell it?"

"...mead it is, then." Sonya hesitantly confirmed, still looking faintly bewildered as she groped for her own purse. "I didn't know it was still a thing to brew it."

"Oh, well… it's an old family hobby."

"I'm not complaining. I like mead, I just haven't seen it in… years."

The woman wasn't that old, either in her late teens or early twenties but certainly younger than her. When did she last see a honey-based alcoholic drink?

A heavily abused pad of paper was drawn out of her purse, and a bit more digging netted the other a pen as well. A paged was torn from the pad, and then both paper and pen were slid across the table for her.

"Well… if you're sure about that list down what you're going to need, and I'll see it's gathered up before April."

Max sighed, well aware he lost this battle even if he wanted to oppose it. "I am a factory worker, Miss Bazanova."

"Okay?"

"I can do only basic housework aside assembly line work." He continued a touch less confidently.

"Can you track numbers? Like costs and deducting it from a set balance?" Prodded the woman, shrugging again when he nodded in confusion. "Well then, someone keeping track of household expenses would be nice. You can then manage the fund your wife's mead brings in to help keep things tidy."

They probably shouldn't have caught the 'fuck knows I need the help' she tacked on under her breath as she tucked away her pipe into the purse and set it aside, earning a certain Mist his father's ire.

"Usov, I believe we spoke about this kind of thing."
"Sorry, father." Usov popped into existence right next to Sonya, beaming at them even if Max frowned heavily for his rude behavior. "Sorry I missed most of this, the Mirror Lady didn't tell me until you agreed."

Bazanova looked at him, at the faintly exasperated look on her husband's face, and slid out of the booth with her coat and purse. "Right. You're all on my tab, order what you'd like. Usov, I believe you should be in school right now."

"I'm not missing anything. There's a me attending class."

The woman blinked twice. "…sure. Okay. Then I'm going to… go."

"Thank you, Sonya."

She shrugged awkwardly. "You asked."

"Well, technically, you asked. I just confirmed I would appreciate it."

The look he earned himself for that comment proved she did know their son rather well indeed.

"Usov." Zina called for his attention as the other woman left them, Max giving the bartender and his three menus a fairly suspicious look until he left as well. "Lying about your age?"

"I didn't lie! I just allowed a few assumptions to stand without correction."

Her husband sighed as he looked over the supplied menu warily. "That is lying by omission, Usov."

Their son pouted outrageously, mainly to make her smile. "Sonya already yelled at me for doing it, and all the reasons why it was a bad idea. I'm sorry."

"She seems… just as nice as the last time we saw her."

"She was drinking beer at the time." Reported their son cheerfully, waving a hand to call back the bartender who apparently also doubled as a waiter. "And then told me to go fetch her vodka, apparently I was causing her a headache."

Max considered it, probably also the fact the woman was a criminal, then shrugged. "At the moment, I think I can fully understand why she asked for that."

(Thursday the 29th of January, 1970. Sonya's hotel suite, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"I am not late, there's a whole two days before you asked me to be on the island and I have a flight out tonight."

"I'm perfectly aware of this. But," Renato shot a glance at the thief's brother, who was also giving him a fairly annoyed look from deeper inside the hotel apartment, "you owe me something. You promised."

Sonya blinked at him, stepping back and letting him in. "A date, right? But… we'd have enough time to do 'date' things in either Mafia Land or Italy…?"

Not if he was 'murdering' himself off. The hitman wanted nothing about their new dating situation to
get out beyond his control, because a dead friend being replaced was a lot less gossip worthy than a boyfriend or lover being replaced with someone that looked suspiciously and exactly like a dead ex.

This, and Shamal, were the two things he desperately wanted to pick back up the very fucking moment he could. Not asking her to wait on him left him at a bit of an uncomfortable ledge with her, because it was entirely possible someone else might slide in while he was otherwise gone and he'd either have to out wait that fucker or kill him without pissing off the thief.

"…aw fuck." Muttered the brother sourly, returning to a few pages of some calculations reluctantly. "Did you have to catch on?"

"You knew?"

"Since last summer." Confirmed the other Cloud she was twinned to dryly, lowering the pages again. "He told me. Since you went on that opera-dinner date, when Tats was babysitting my nephew for you two."

There was an utterly blank moment on the Storm-Cloud's end as she rethought some of their previous interactions. The sigh she heaved once things made sense to her was delightful. "For fuck's sake."

"Yes, you are that dense."

"Excuse you, did you want that date or not?"

"Shutting up." Promised the Mafioso agreeably.

Cherep's boots hitting the floor made a surprisingly solid single thunk, and he set aside whatever he was working on quickly. "Sonya… do you want to date him?"

"I apparently already am."

"No, Nya. It's do you want to. Not what seems to be the case." Her brother insisted. "Ignoring him for a moment, what do you want?"

"I don't know!" Declared the woman shortly, throwing both hands in the air. "I'm trying to figure that out."

Blinking purple eyes a few times as he absorbed that, the man then eventually nodded slowly as he got up from his seat. "Okay. Go pack, shoo. You've got bambino's religious cult-thing to go participate in, don't you?"

Sonya gave him a pointedly annoyed look, a snort for the helpful hand shooing motions he then did in response and wandered off to do so.

…religious cult-thing?

"You." Cherep turned to Renato the moment she was out of sight and probably earshot and pointed a finger right in his face. "I hear even a minor complaint about your behavior or any kind of fucked up pressure to get her to go beyond what she's comfortable with… I'll inform our father. Who will be utterly unimpressed with such bullshit and rip out your guts with a rusty fork."

"Frankly, boy, you need to work on your intimidation."

"I am not enough to intimidate you, will probably never be enough to even scratch you, so no. I only
have one baby sister," drawled back the younger man pointedly, "my other half to my Flames. I just need to be the one she liked to sound out her problems to. I have an Arseniy to help me keep her safe, so I don't need to be intimidating."

The heavily tattooed and muscled mass of a Russian man and the equivalent to one of Italia's Mafioso… a high ranking one near or about near a Sky's Guardian in influence. Fair point.

"I don't intend to hurt her."

"Intents and what happens sometimes don't entirely correlate all that well." Cherep countered simply over a shoulder, stepping away and wandering back to his abandoned work on the book covered coffee table. "I'd rather just cover my bases, if I can. You've been threatened, so now you can't bullshit an excuse of I didn't know/mean to' when Arseniy comes after you if you ever make my baby sister cry."

…rather conniving for someone that entertained for a living. Not really something he had expected from this quarter, more from the nurse that hadn't actually had another 'word' with him about Sonya's state of happiness.

Then again, he was a Cloud. It had to show up at some time, and his literal Flame related other half was a fairly obvious thing to be territorial about.

Good lord, he wanted to be there when Sonya got it in her head to threaten off her brother's possible serious girlfriends. That would be hilarious to watch.

Renato heaved a sigh, seating his fedora down lower on his brow. Yet again another thing he was putting up with for her sake, more family related bullshit and he wasn't even sleeping with her. "Noted. Are you done?"

"Sure, whatever. Have fun." Pointedly glaring over the top of the papers, the stuntman smiled toothily. "Just remember, I'm watching."

"You have no fucking idea what my name is, do you?"

"...nope."

Eh, the brother wasn't slated to remember who he was anyways.

Sonya poked her head out of the room that seemed to be her usual one, cocking an eyebrow at the both of them. "Are you two done being manly men and staking claims out?"

"This place does have wonderful acoustics." Cherep agreed brightly.

"Why did you leave to pack?“ He questioned in the next second, slightly disgruntled she wasn't even upset over her fellow Cloud's very pointed reminder of who all would be lining up to murder him if he upset her.

The damn woman just shrugged as she stepped out of her room. "Renato, my flight out of Moscow is tonight. I've been packed for most of the day so far."

"Exactly."

"Cherep wanted to, and I like him best." Dismissed the thief simply, leaving them yet again. Presumably to fetch said already packed luggage.
…did not knowing his name but just as 'my sister's friend' make it easier or harder for a Mist to track down and erase the memories of anyone that knew him?

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 29th of January, 1970 continued. A passenger train car, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"…are you joking?"

"You did promise." Renato informed her cheerfully, flicking a wrist at the scenery passing by their train window. "I'm holding you to it."

"And that's going to be our 'date'?" Questioned the thief warily, a bit confused.

If that was what he wanted to do for it, then alright. But that was kind of weird, still.

"No, our 'date' is going to be somewhere else. Preferably on the other side." Corrected the Italian pointedly. "This is just our 'night out', which said we could do 'at a later date'."

Sonya blew out a sigh, leaning back against the train bench she was seated on. "You made me refund a plane ticket, to buy a train ticket instead, just for a 'suitable' crossing?"

Fucking hell, getting through Berlin's section of the border was going to be a logistical nightmare. Especially last second like this.

…screw it, Bjorn could sit on their more 'necessary' luggage. The moment they switched trains, she was getting a few things shipped instead.

"I'm running out of time." Renato informed her less happily and more seriously. "I'd like an expert show me how to do it, at least the quick and dirty way, before I ever need the information."

"Part of why I'm not complaining, just… you could've said so." She countered him pointedly. "I'm aware, so yes I'll take you through. Twice or more if you'd like at different spots… after Shamal's whole… thing."

"Speaking of, religious cult-thing?"

"Isn't it?" She questioned dryly, stretching out her left leg on the bench which had been so conveniently empty but for the Mafioso when she boarded with paper he asked for and had yet to read. "I get you're Catholic, his father was probably one as well, and you want him to be respectful of what kind of life he came from… but this really smacks of peer pressure and 'but everyone does it' kind of shit to railroad children into your religion whether or not they want to be."

Renato blinked at her blankly. Not the I'm faking it, tell me what the hell is going on' blank, but an utter 'what the hell?' kind of blank she tended to get more from other people than from him.

Sonya simply shrugged in return. "It's how I see it."

"…there is a reason we do it at seven years of age." He informed her, still blankly. "Damned if I can remember it right now off the top of my head, but there is one. Not an 'indoctrinate the brats' kind of thing."

"Still kind of shifty."
That made the man crack a smirk, because they were by *nature* shifty people.

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, so what's after that?"

"A surprise." He promised glibly, waving off that topic. "Leave it up to me, little dragon lady. You'll like it, I promise."

Humming, and frankly unconvinced of that due to her sheer unfamiliarity of ‘dating’ and everything that entailed, the thief tried not to wonder and pretty much failed.

"Sonya, you don't have to do anything but go along and enjoy yourself."

She held up a finger, backing up her mental train to figure out what topic he was on. "Wait… this is supposed to be a two-way street. Right? Shouldn't there also be me taking you on a date?"

"Which this is going to be, at least the first event." Countered the hitman smoothly after a rather long beat of silence and a blink. "While… yes, with most relationships one putting forth all the effort and the other not makes for some lopsided and unstable situations. This isn't. We already had a stable relationship, we're just going to add something."

"I would hope it's stable, we've got the brat…" Sonya trailed off as they went over some kind of harsh bump, steadying herself against the wall of their train car as the whole assembly suddenly started screeching to a halt and knocked some of her luggage out of their spot under her bench. "…the fuck?"

"Good question." He straightened up from his slouched lounging, glancing downwards to her disordered stuff and reached for one of Crina's cards laying from where they had spilled out. "…little dragon lady… what does this one mean?"

"The King of Wands. Traditionally representing a dynamic and classic conquering hero; fairness, honor, problem solving, and the like." She gathered up the antique cards carefully, annoyed with herself for forgetting them in such an easily unsecured place as the outside pocket of her traveling luggage. "Reversed, as you're holding it, means conceitedness or that there are unrealistic goals you've set. Mainly? As a general advice card, it's saying to not be so hard on yourself or so harsh on others."

Sorting through the fragile and old painted paper in her hands, she hoped she got them all and there wouldn't be a missing Major or Minor Arcana card she would have to hunt for on her hands and knees. Sonya looked back up to take back the King of Wands to include in her impending count, but got distracted by the look the hitman was giving it. "…Renato?"

"…curious." Spoke the *Mafioso*, flicking the card to her and getting up.

Probably to go ask a conductor what the hell was going on, and why they were coming to a very loud stop.

Inspecting the tarot card for any damage, the thief started sorting it in neat piles on his bench while she waited starting with the King of Wands.

Mostly just to assure herself they were all here and hadn't come to harm from her forgetting Crina's last gift to her.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 29th of January, 1970 continued. A passenger train car, Russian Soviet)
"Someone shoved someone else right onto the tracks as the train was passing through. We hit the poor sucker."

"...you have got to be fucking with me. People still do that kind of shit?"

"Apparently so." Drawled the hitman tightly, a bit annoyed at the unexpected bump in their plans. Too much so to be amused at the utterly bizarre method of execution, which was her main reaction. "Now that our train is some lazy moron's murder weapon, we've got to disembark on the next station. We'll be rerouted to another line and compensated for the inconvenience... but it'll still be a day or so long delay."

Sonya paused in shuffling her tarot cards, giving him a strange look, before looking back down and continuing her absent shuffling. "That's not... entirely damning for what you wanted to do."

"Ho?"

She shrugged, tapping the edges of her tarot cards against the wall of their train car to even out the freshly shuffled cards. "I know the better ways through, and you asked for 'quick and dirty'. At worse, twelve hours of work to pass through it. It won't be easy, and I'm never doing that again even if you're helping, but possible."

Eying the stiff painted paper she was fiddling with, Renato reseated himself across from her. There was little else to do but wait to be redirected, so at the moment he was interested in her antique tarot cards. "Where did you get those?"

"A friend."

"You've said that before." Renato prompted curiously. Much to his surprise, he got a very contemplative look instead of an equally as absent but more elaborating answer. "...little dragon lady?"

She considered it, reminded herself that her friend was dead, and still didn't want to talk about it. "So... a friend." He backtracked slowly, unsure why she was all of a sudden closed mouth about it but if said friend was dead then it was not a needed detail. "Where did you learn to use them?"

Sonya blinked at him, wondering if he was trying to be circumspect in asking or something. 'Trying', so still part of what she was reluctant to talk about.

"Her name was Crina." She informed him before he could figure out what he was digging for she didn't want to speak of, slowly and reluctantly as she dropped her attention back to the cards in her hands and her sour thoughts about her forgetfulness that left them in a pocket of her luggage. "She was a Romanian gypsy woman, playing up her heritage as those stereotypical fortune tellers that tend to belong to any circus. With a nauseating amount of incense, to boot."

Renato had no idea what that had to do with what information she was being so bitterly stingy over. He did recognize there was something about this subject she was defensive over, and therefore he wouldn't be asking for more than what she would be willing to talk about.

Sonya utterly did not want to discuss it and was confused herself over her own feelings on the topic. Which made her more stubborn to discuss it, even in spite of her feelings on the matter.
Because she was of the opinion it didn't matter anymore, the woman in question was dead and gone.

…and the Storm-Cloud was still defensively protective of what she had left of the other woman and didn't want to share much.

"You're allowed to grieve for those gone." He tried, which made absolutely no impact on her feelings of the matter. "…or not?"

"She's gone, I've accepted that. There's no longer a point of not talking about it." Dismissed the thief irritably. "Crina was my master of mysticism, while I was with Cherep in the circus."

"Where you learned to breathe fire, juggle knives, and all sorts of acrobatic maneuvers." What she had been doing when the bulk of his network of contacts had been gutted. Renato was actually highly thankful she had been off doing something so strange for something like them, fuck knew what he'd done without her help right afterwards for Shamal. "She taught you and gave you the cards?"

"Right before… Crina died of liver cancer." Sonya dragged out of herself, rolling her shoulders uncomfortably as she smoothed out her deck so it would stack neatly. "I… might've helped. The old bat was an alcoholic, and I shared my liquor with her while with them. Didn't stop once I knew she was dying, as well."

She wasn't sorry about it, cancer was equated with something quite like slow torture in her mind. It was the old woman's death that upset the thief, which she deemed selfish and stupid.

"…your territory is people." He concluded slowly.

"It's what my brother thinks." Allowed the woman.

"No, little dragon lady. Your territory is people, other people. You're acting like a… well, what you mainly are, who got part or all of their territory damaged from something."

Sonya blinked at him blankly. "I've never seen it."

"It's…" Trailing off, the hitman removed his hat to rake a hand through his hair in bewilderment. "…nasty. Even scheduled demolition work in such areas… it's like your equivalence to visiting the dentist for a root canal. Might be necessary, but those like you loathe it almost to the point of unreasonableness."

By the expression that crossed her face, she was not happy he was weighing in on that side of the theory.

"Theory?"

"Theory." Dismissed the Russian flatly. "Renato, seriously? You've managed to piss me off-"

Oh, son of a bitch. No wonder she had basically gone ballistic on him for infringing on her siblings' privacy. For half a fucking year, which… wasn't remotely out of the category of what other Clouds would do if their claimed territory was infringed similarly.

What was he, blind?

"-before, doing this stereotyping shit. It seems to be an Italian thing, assumptions… that infected Gedeon, who never left Moscow… hmm…."
"There's… underlying facts that are easy to make assumptions about." He refuted, a bit annoyed at her bringing that up again whatever her mood. "Like, for instance, your territory being other people."

How did she shift from physical territory to people territory?

Even when there were more than one or two Clouds in any one family, they tended to just share instead of find something else to fixate upon guarding. Visconti's own family was notorious for it, thankfully they resided near Rome and therefore not much would be changing so close to the Vatican to limit what that family of Clouds did in revenge for even public works demolitions taking place.

Sonya just huffed, crossing her arms over her chest and slouching back against the front of the train car her bench was set against. "I'm not sold."

"You once almost ripped Coyote's arm off, to smack him with the wet end a few dozen times, for the ever so serious crime of picking Shamal up." Renato pointed out, with a tone that was both sardonic and dry. "You very nearly did the same to me, when I accidentally got that glimpse of your siblings' past history."

By the flat glare he was getting, she still wasn't sold.

"Sonya, think about your friend. This Crina lady. Why are you so bitter over it? Because she picked to die on you, to go somewhere you couldn't follow." Pressed on the Mafioso, finally getting somewhere when she frowned rather than keep glaring. "You're so pissed off and bitter, and don't want to acknowledge the fact a piece of your territory basically abandoned."

She blinked when he cut himself off, but he was a bit more concerned by the sudden connection he dearly hoped was not something he was unknowingly gambling on.

'He wanted to' being the reason why Sonya was so permissive over Shamal's actions with her, probably meant the tetchy Mist had somehow also become part of her territory. Put in that perspective, Renato wasn't remotely surprised she was blowing off her up and coming syndicate and helping them develop their influence and power more in order to just play house for a brat.

While her syndicate was in what most would think was her territory, Shamal was actually the part that needed development or 'guarding' the most. The brat, unlike a full-fledged Russian vor down to her own baby brother who had said vor to guard him, needed her the most.

…that drastically reduced the likelihood anyone would get past the thief to hurt their godchild, she wouldn't leave him until she was utterly certain he was more than protected enough and even then would make surprise and frequent visits to check on the situation.

Made her continued allowance for Vongola protecting the kid continue when she was so utterly unimpressed with the Famiglia a bit strange.

…which also made the 'my brother bled' complaint Sonya had with them equally all the stranger. Her brother, and twinned Cloud Flame user, was also territory to her given her reaction when he had met the purple colored stuntman.

Why the fuck was she still allowing Vongola even temporary oversight on part of her territory when another part had already come to harm under their watch?

Several parts, given the Sun kid working the morgue of Mafia Land she outright brutalized a few CEDEF agents over…
"I'm not trying to do the same thing." He informed her hastily, earning yet another blink "I'm not trying to abandon or leave you."

"...okay?"

"No, seriously. I'm not. I'll be back."

Renato eyed her suspiciously as she continued to draw a blank at what point he was trying to stress, recalling a few sour snips from this quarter over his future plans. Almost equally about the same time the brat had started bitching.

Knowing his luck, he'd come back and yes. Surprise. The hitman had been part of her territory or might be in the process of becoming part of it, but then he outright left her too long and whoever he'd be next wasn't included or wanted because she was either wary of the repeated 'abandonment' or not wanting to take another such risk on him since he'd possibly leave again.

Hopefully, he wouldn't be giving her trust issues on top of abandonment ones when it came to those making up her 'people territory'. Smoothing his hand across his mouth, he wondered just how the hell she ended up this way.

…and what, if anything, he could do about it.

"So... more than just being highly social for your type, you the... ultimate people-one."

"Do shut up." Sonya requested irritably. "I thought you wanted to know about Crina?"

"I want to know about your cards, actually." Renato corrected dryly.

They had passed a minor kind of factory town not too long ago, it was entirely possible for very disgruntled and annoyed passengers to demand a refund and hoof it with their possessions back to that station to await a new train or arrange a different method of transport. As a matter of fact, while the Mafioso had been too bewildered over the strange act of murder that was delaying them as they had to scrape up the body and allow local law enforcement the time to process the scene before the train could move on to contemplate the same, a couple passengers had picked that very option. Had they waited, just a bare couple of minutes for one of the conductors to run for the nearest public phone box then return, they would've gotten the offer for a transfer to a different line entirely on the train owner's behalf. This wouldn't be very good for their reputation, at least locally for a couple months, so placating their customers and hopefully soothing any upset caused by the significant delay was understandable.

Adding to the embarrassment of the train's main conductor or biding his time for what options would be available. The hitman had picked the latter through sheer lack of the first, by accident.

If required, and it wasn't really likely for the two of them, all the passengers that needed it would be put up at a hotel for a night or two until a replacement train was ready to take over this route.

'Don't be so harsh on others', indeed.

Sonya studied the thick stack of painted tarot cards in response to his question. "What about them?"

"How many retroactively 'proven' readings have you given with those?"

She shrugged, tucking the tarot deck back into her purse instead of back into the pocket of her luggage they had fallen out of. "How the hell would I know?"
Renato entertained himself, for about two seconds, of the thief in her 'gypsy' garb and tending a crystal ball and rattling off a prediction in her bored deadpan. Then he snorted, tossing his fedora to the seat next to him just raked a hand through his hair. "You, little dragon lady, are lucky you're so damn useful."

"You, are fucking annoying today. You're lucky you're my friend."

"Touché."

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(Saturday the 31st of January, 1970. Dijon, Bourgogne, French Republic.)

Verde waited, slightly impatiently, for Adrik to catch up to him. Lingering in an alleyway just off Rue des Péjoces, the Lightning kept one wary eye on the street traffic and tried not to wonder what anyone thought of him doing so.

A touch late in the evening, when it was more than chilly enough to necessitate some sturdily protective and decently insulating outerwear.

He was not built, or had the mentality, for criminal 'footwork'. He had tried it, and had a moderate success rate, but it was not something he particularly liked nor excelled in all that well.

Thankfully, he did not need to be.

"What are we watching for?" Adrik inquired curiously from a step behind him, causing the Frenchman to sigh and turn to him with a wryly amused smile. "…what?"

"Again?"

"If you're not going to pay attention, being taken by surprise is all your damn fault." The wiry and yet buffer Russian informed him yet again, stuffing both hands into the fleece lined pockets his coat possessed. "You need the practice, anyways."

"I am sufficiently armored to the point."

"Your sparkly green stuff doesn't work if you're taken off-guard." Adrik interrupted a small measure pointedly, strolling on pass the other man in a manner that suggested boredom and some amount of impatience. "You might have four eyes, Verde my man, but you don't have eyes in the back of your head. Yet."

The Lightning refrained from pulling a childish face at the man's back as he followed him out of the alleyway, well aware the 'yet' implied another impending 'lesson' on necessary or desired criminal behavioral patterns for one's continued and comfortable existence.

Of which, he was grateful to receive. Mostly. After the fact.

At least to acquire the lessons without the implied errors that necessitated them in the first place was something he was grateful for. Learning from the process via an experienced individual's advice, or at least a significantly tutored one, in any practical application was always preferable. Acquiring the 'habits' such information was contributing to, was another thing.

Mainly due to the fact they required a fair bit of 'practical applications' of their own to learn.
Adrik's last 'practical' lesson had involved ice cold handfuls of mud and Verde's face, preferably at randomized and sometimes bewildering times of the day. In hopes of enabling the more scientifically inclined of them to be able to catch shifty or human-sized motion out of the corner of his eyes in spite of his general poor far sight, by recognizing the blurry human shapes around him as doing certain actions in his direction.

While there were perceivable results, and the scientist had been somewhat successful in catching sight and then subsequently dodging some of the mud, he had not yet mastered the exercise given his ratio of three mud balls dodged out of ten.

"…did the meeting go as expected?"

"Nope." Admitted the Russian bluntly, rolling his head to loosen up the muscles of his neck. "We're… um… screwed. For about, a good half of this city. We need to move. Again."

Verde sighed again, pinching the bridge of his nose under his glasses firmly for a moment to ward off a headache. "Again."

"Yeah well… are you at all surprised?"

"I've gotten the point." He refuted blandly as he reseated the rounded glasses.

Six different cities, five different smaller towns, and now an even dozen 'failed' attempts to remain under the notice of any established criminal syndicate while they built up a reputation as weapon dealers. Hopefully there remained enough time to secure their more sensitive equipment, or he would be forced to remake their 'assets' from scratch elsewhere.

The Lighting was utterly bored of melting off the serial numbers of different firearms to remove the easiest tracking methods, of replicating parts of them through the use of hand tools and the odd grinder, the manufacture of new ones of his own from noted measurements, and otherwise making up various solutions for others to do the same in 'the field' so to say. Although the practical experience in manufacturing safety equipment with makeshift parts was appreciated, frequently repeated and simple drudge work they really sold to the powers they were attempting to coax a give-and-take relationship with had been difficult to remain focused upon.

More than a few days he allowed Adrik to hassle him off his work way too easily or get distracted with some of the various texts he could pick up in secondhand stores. His friend did at least ensure he wouldn't nag him about eating or realistic measures of rest when there was a deadline of a sort to meet, but still…

With his refusal to start manufacturing more than the odd painkiller or the less easily abused drugs on very specific occasions, which seemed to be the 'main' use anyone that had ever approached either them about wanted more than a weaponsmith, it limited them in the scope of their efforts even further. No one, apparently, wished for a 'freelance' weapons manufacturer to remain so. Worse, he had the scientific know how to become a drug designer for specific causes and effects, and his disinclination had proved a sticking point a time or twice.

All those facts made for frequent relocations and even more work through middle-men 'mediators' that required a cut of any profits, and equally as many eventual 'betrayals' the Russian had to very carefully navigate Verde through without getting them both killed escaping.

Without a reputation in any area which they could not forge hastily, anyone that would negotiate on their behalf nominally had pre-existing allegiances they would honor more than two relatively unknown men. As the Lightning did not wish to risk another close call using the other as his
negotiator to established syndicates, the last time they were in a big enough city had very nearly ended in Adrik's death when he refused a time too many to lead a few individuals back to 'meet' Verde…

"...it is almost February."

"And tomorrow, once we're somewhere else, we'll start trying to head back." Agreed the Russian slowly, glancing at the scientist over his shoulder. "But you realize, this next part's the harder one."

"More difficult than remaining under the 'radar' and yet with a comfortable enough stable income to live off of?"

"Yes." He sighed heavily, pausing so Verde could walk beside him instead of behind. "This part? I don't know how to do. Evading the notice of bigger groups was something any of our clan was taught to do as a matter of fact, because when we're out and about very often 'no thanks' doesn't really work."

"You were unsurprised by where you were going, when Bazanova... retrieved us."

"I know of it, but personally? That was the first time I visited on my own merit than because someone else was dragging me along." Adrik informed him simply with a shrug of his shoulders. "Getting there is almost impossible on one's own without someone else that already knows the method taking you with, I was more or less covered because my clan maintains a presence there and she works for them. It's... the island's phenomenally useful for us to sell things through, so the moment one of our number reached there the head of our... order had a number of things done. Including buying real estate there we normally almost never use."

Verde considered those facts, and their new aim on the morrow. "...then, we should focus more upon those who also would appreciate such a venue rather than seeking the approval of a differently oriented group who would be able to afford the manpower to inconvenience us."

He earned himself a blink and a thoughtful hum. "Probably a sound place to start. But then again... those specific operations don't always have 'customer privacy' at the top of their services."

"We have... had, a measure of excess in our funds." The Frenchman had little to no idea how to 'bribe' a member of this criminal world in safety but, as with 'negotiation tactics' and 'practical survival skills', he suspected he was in for an emergency crash course in the near future. "Some of that could be repurposed in the aims of finding a method rather than setting up a new forge."

"Verde, my man. How would we replace said funds if one or two attempts doesn't work, if you don't continue working to bring in more?"

"How then are we to focus efforts upon..." ...oh. "...this is nearly impossible to accomplish alone, is it not?"

"Alone? It's going to be hellishly tricky to do with just us two." Adrik agreed sourly as they left a main road for a less well traveled path towards their current 'bolt hole'. "You, right now, are insanely lucky the boss lady's not forcibly recalled me to do her petty errands for a pittance and has instead allowed me to fuck around out here teaching you a few things. Technically, with how much I owe her, I shouldn't be doing anything but her dredge work to possibly get out of her debt. A few years if she's nice about it, a few decades if she's not."

Verde blinked at him blankly. "...Adrik?"

"I owe her not only an old favor, but also my life and a significant chunk of cash." Announced the
Russian dryly, glancing back the way they came suspiciously for a long moment before continuing to walk. "Any one of those things could be used to… probably make my life a living hell, depending. No one would help me if she decides to call any one of those due. I'm… not really sure why she's not done anything with it yet."

"You are an old childhood friend, are you not?"

"Acquaintance, maybe." Corrected the man sourly. "Sonya didn't really have friends as a child. She mainly had contacts, even that far back."

That… did not entirely correlate. "Then why did she provide you the aid at all?"

"The girls asked her. Galina got her to come out and fetch us, using a favor which we don't owe her anything for. The extraction, I mean. Tatiana asked she cover the cost of the hospital, for 'he'll pay you back, eventually'. Therefore, she pretty much owns me until I can pay her back." Adrik puffed out a slightly condensation loaded sigh of his own, then looked over at him again. "And, also, we're being followed."

"...do I owe her for the hospital work?"

"Eh… it's different. You're aiming to become a… well, one of her minions. You'd be entitled to her protection and aid in the aims of keeping you alive, if you do it." The man waggled a finger nearly under Verde's nose. "If you fuck up, on the other hand, yes. You'd still be beholden to her for that price. Which she might use to knock some of the money-grant-thing you bargained for if she's really annoyed."

"Why is my situation and yours not similar?"

"Intents. I don't want to be one of the boss lady's minions. You do. If you owe her something, it'd just be par for the course of being her minion and getting her protection. You'd do your science thing to repay her, but if you ever want to break away then things get sticky because everything needs to be accounted for and balanced out. Things are already sticky for me, and I don't want to have her protection."

"Why not?"

Adrik paused and looked at him questioningly. "Because my gang leader gets out of jail in a couple months to maybe another year. Then I'm going back with Nicolai and Ziven, probably not the girls, to continue my actual life's work. I was playing hooky when we met, Verde. The other guys had to get out of jail eventually."

"That is…" Profoundly dissatisfying. The Lightning also paused and considered it further. "…will we remain in contact?"

"Pretty sure, yeah. We can easily go through the sisters for most things, and I don't believe Nicolai intends to remain back in Moscow for very long before getting out and about again. So, I might visit. If the boss lady lets me go."

Verde probably had more than enough to worry about in the short term, catching sight of something vaguely smudged and blurry in the reflection of his spectacles cast by an oncoming car. Probably not another pedestrian as there were none on this street, giving Adrik's claim of being followed even more weight.

He very much took the adage 'forewarned is to be forearmed' seriously, especially with the 'combat' use of his Flames. Being physically impervious to everything was a useful skill, and while he might
owe a blonde Russian thief some gratitude for the quick development into something he could control… he was going to remember her punting him in the face a few times through a couple walls probably until he died.

"I suppose we should split up here."

"Divide and conquer. But just remember, they're probably banking on the idea too."
Chapter 98

(Sunday the 1st of February, 1970. Ganymed Brasserie, East Berlin, German Democratic Republic.)

"The group at the back, under the painting." Sonya pointed out to her dinner companion lowly, taking a sip of her white wine as the hitman glanced in that direction. "Old and thin is Heiner Faulstich, fat and greedy is Ryhor Janučkievič, the man between them is Raphael Blücher, and the last guy on the end is… I think he's Elias Ocean. Any one of them but the last guy would be what you're looking for."

"And they're all eating dinner together…"

"Are you surprised?"

"No, this is exactly what I thought we would have to deal with the first time around."

Snorting, the thief set her glass down and gave him an unimpressed look. "With the brat? I wouldn't have risked him that way. It was known as 'Tunnel Fifty-Seven' for a very specific reason, it wasn't the first nor will be the last."

Renato gave her a half-smirk of amusement, turning his head back one last time to consider the men before facing her fully. "Alright. Who are they, individually, and what would be best in your opinion."

"Faulstich is a physician. As long as you can amass the price for his 'non-general medical advice', an off-the-books consultation that is, you can receive a prescription for some ill that must be filled in West Berlin. His way is a touch slower, you need paperwork that will not trip anyone off as faked, and he will report patients that match whatever 'most wanted' lists the GDR is currently looking for. Not the one you want to rush through, piss him off enough and he'll likely still report us to make up for the number of patients that 'mysteriously' disappear after getting his help. I will… probably trip off an internal investigation, I recently did a few things around here that I might be still 'wanted for questioning' for."

As the doctor was mostly in it for the money, really did not care what happened to his 'outside' patients in the end, it was possible the 'a murder, a betrayal, and getting robbed' requirements might be fulfilled through him. However, that involved a lot of government attention she hoped he didn't want to court. Otherwise she might have to leave the split country alone for a good long while.

"Janučkievič is less hands-off and government involved, think of someone a lot less powerful than Nono or even old man Milos but in the same general rank of influence around here. Lisa told me flat out to avoid anything to do with him so he's moderately unfamiliar to me, but from several years of passing through here I do know he's more of the type that will rob his 'customers' on occasion as long as it suits him. He controls the territory near the Bornholmer Straße border crossing, and generally does usual things around there. Which might include unregistered and illegal crossings, he's probably your best bet even if I don't know how he'd react to a 'sudden' request from outsiders."

The Belarusian native was… well, a typical criminal with a decent amount of power behind him. His 'job' was mostly to increase his power and wealth with any means available, and he did so with meticulous care. The fact it fucked a few handfuls of people over was probably something he didn't care about nor paid a whole lot of attention to. Per usual in their line of work, to be honest.
Sonya actually didn't know why her foster mother informed her to have nothing to do with him, just that she had. As such she was leery of disobeying Lisa's recommendation, but not so much she'd rule him out as a matter of fact if he was anything like what the *Mafioso* was looking forward to.

"...think she might've had dealings with him that went sour?"

"How would he connect me to her? I didn't take her name."

"That cook on the other side, Maddie? Knew you were Lisa's girl."

"Because I told her." Sonya refuted slowly.

Renato waggled a hand from side to side as he took another glance at the man she was speaking of in a way that seemed more a scan around the room than specifically to gawk at the man she had pointed out. "Who apparently has sons and therefore the information is out there around here. If something happened, between him and your mother, and he belatedly connects the two of you...?"

Sighing, the Storm-Cloud rubbed at her temple. "Okay, so maybe not him."

"The other two?"

"Equally less likely to have the possible backstab you are looking for. Blücher's one of Hasso Herschel's people, the guy who dug out Tunnel Fifty-Seven? They've got... other methods now. Expensive, not likely to be fraught with hiccups or upsets. More business with the civilians than... our side of the tracks. Ocean... I don't know enough about. I think he's another thief, but I could be wrong if he's branched out since Lisa last saw him."

"So Janučkievič it is."

"We could take a day or two and hunt around for anyone else you might think will work." She allowed slowly, because while the fat guy was the first one she thought of as 'risky' when he first made mention of this kind of outing they didn't have to go along with what little she did know of these parts.

"We don't have that kind of time, not if we're going to be early to help the brat for 'bambino's' First Communion." Refused the Italian gently as he glanced to her. "Unless you think you'd rather respect your mother's recommendations."

Nibbling on her last mussel of the *Moules Marinièrer* she ordered to use the time to ponder, the thief eventually set down her fork and shrugged. "While I would normally heed Lisa's orders, she said not to deal with him alone. Right now, I'm not alone."

"She probably expected you to ask for some help to deal with him, then."

"It's been almost fifteen years for her," Sonya mused slowly, "I'm not sure anything my mother has to say about the man will impact our movements much unless we want to try a different section of the barrier."

Renato considered that, then gave a one shoulder shrug as he returned to polishing off his dinner. "Then that part's up to you, little dragon lady."

(Monday the 2nd of February, 1970. Schivelbeiner Street, East Berlin, German Democratic
As it was entirely possible Sonya's previous connections might actually end up being a major part of their expected eventual 'betrayal' in the near future, Renato headed off to do the initial negotiations with their picked ticket across the Berlin Wall the moment they agreed on the target and what limitations they were willing to live with for said negotiations.

The thief was actually rather upset she was set on the sidelines for that, she wanted to see the Mafioso in his element and how he worked. Especially when it came to enticing a neutral underworld power into humoring his request. There were all sorts of things she could learn from a professional about the component elements of his side of the lifestyle, even without actually asking him for clarification on why he'd do this or that thing over another.

However, she had… been involved around here for several years.

Aside the latest round of thievery, with the Eastern Soviet leader of the country and other random contracted jobs, there was Lisa's old contacts and her use of their services as well as her own previous movements through the area when she was younger and knew less of how to get around on her own.

If her foster mother's previous history with Janučkievič really was hostile, or at least not cordial to pretending indifference to each other's extended auxiliaries, then the moment it was apparent Renato was involved with Lisa's daughter things would end up that apparently 'desired betrayal' that this was supposed to go through.

Possibly.

Both she and the hitman were skeptical of operating under the assumption they would be double-crossed expressly for that alone, if it would happen. For the time being, they were going to go along with things as if they didn't expect any issues yet keep the complications in mind so they weren't surprised if it did happen.

She did really wonder what kind of price the local slum lord would demand in return for the service.

Renato had better come back and pick her up for it, instead of doing it on his own. Even if it was a hit, because while Sonya didn't remotely like the idea of being told to kill someone… she could at least play lookout while he did his thing.

"Excuse me, miss…"

"Not interested."

"Actually, I rather think you are."

Turning slightly to tell whomever it was to take a hike in a more forthright manner, Sonya's intents abruptly derailed when she realized whomever it was now walking aside her wasn't actually who she was talking to. Instead the thief came to a sudden and flat halt, because the last time she was around some Mist overshadowing another person was Sergej.

"Do you have a death wish?" Inquired the Soviet Storm-Cloud with honest curiosity, contemplating the power and range of this particular Mist.

She had yet to ask any of her own people what kind of limits were apparent on their astral projecting trick, much less how long it would take for a disembodied Mist to recover after being shocked out of a borrowed body by a Lightning.
The smirk that scrawled itself across 'his' face was ill-fitting, an expression that was just a touch too exaggerated and made by muscles that weren't entirely responsive in the method that expression would require if it was an oft-used one as it suggested. "Interesting question, but not as you seem to think."

In broad daylight and on a semi-occupied pedestrian street with civilians and innocents, much less involved with something that could possibly be called 'delicate' in nature so Renato had the tools he needed to get across the Iron Curtain without the island's backing in the near future, there were limits on what Sonya could do.

A couple creative work-arounds, of which she was at least aware of shoving ten pounds of sharpened ax through his head was not one of them much to her regret, but there were things she could do.

In fact, she started on them even if the idea was flimsy and the control needed to not attract attention would be hellish.

It didn't mean the Mist would know that.

"You see," the other continued in a pleasantly affable tone as a pair of middle-edged women passed them by, as if they were friends meeting up after a long period of absence instead of semi-hostile Flame users, "I have this… interest, my dear. Of which, you are interfering in. I… don't appreciate it."

"Pity." Deadpanned the thief flatly, pulling the brass and bamboo pipe out of one coat pocket and checking to ensure the tobacco packed into the bowl hadn't fallen out since she last checked it. Deciding it was fit enough for what she intended, she reached into another pocket for the ill-used matches she was carrying around due to civilian sensibilities while traveling. "For you see, I have these rather stubborn responsibilities of my own. Which don't include allowing anyone to impede or otherwise inconvenience my students, wherever they happen to be."

"Hmm… yes, that is part of my complaint against you." Continued the Mist in his really fucking annoying understanding tone, looking fairly amused but still in that ill-fitting way as she lit her pipe with a few experimental puffs. "My interests lay a tiny bit more… far afield. It's remotely involved, I will admit, but not the current issue we seem to have."

"We?" She echoed flatly, snorting out enough ashy grey smoke that the physical form the other was wearing tried to cough at but the Mist puppeting it hadn't expected him too so they both ended up rather jarred in a seemingly painful way. "Oh no. There's no real issue. There's just this…"

Blowing out yet another lungful of smoke-tainted air, Sonya extracted her left hand from the pocket she had tucked the match box back into and then held them up between the two of them.

The other had kept his borrowed form, smartly, outside of her range. She wouldn't be able to shove her hand through his chest, however much she might want to in spite of the fair number of people that would highly disapprove of such a thing being around.

However…

The tobacco smoke she had practically wreathed the Mist's borrowed form in had been given no such attention, and the Russian allowed a spark of her Storm Flames to jump from her finger and burn through the smoke to scorch a little burn mark on his flannel clad chest to show the Flame user he had not thought through confronting her fully.
They were close enough, it was more covert than flashy as if someone blinked they would've missed the entire action hidden by their forms and the general levels of light around. She wouldn't be able to give him more than second-degree burns without risking more attention than she wanted, and maybe catch his clothing a-Flame, but that might actually be just enough.

Sudden and spontaneous self-immolation had its own folklore about it the civilians would connect it to than something as esoteric as Dying Will Flame use, it happening here in the middle of a pedestrian street wouldn't be all that unusual besides another part of a statistic if a finally 'confirmed' phenomena via eyewitnesses. It would be inconvenient to be noted nearby, especially with the purpose for her presence here and her previous actions, but entirely possible she could either kill his host or less likely possibly the Mist itself.

Her threat delivered, because she was at least half-sure even if he abandoned the meat puppet something about his Misty astral projection bullshit would still catch a-Flame, the thief barred her teeth in the mockery of a pleasant smile as she slipped her hand back into her pocket casually. "If you ever try anything with another of my students, for whichever aim or whatever purposes, I WILL MURDER whatever it is you think you hold dear until you BEG me to kill you too. Okay?"

The eyes, which she was assuming weren't naturally a dark and almost unearthly blue, widened momentarily then narrowed almost… appreciatively. "Very cruel of you, my dear."

"I'm not your anything."

"We'll see about that." Dismissed the Mist arrogantly, batting a hand to conjure an ill-disguised harsh breeze to blow away the insubstantial trap Sonya laced him in.

Any attention she might've attracted by the locals on the same street side also evaporated as they lost all interest in the two of them, way too quickly for that to have been natural.

Forced to take another two steps back before the young and very tired man that likely worked third-shift from the look of him trudged right into her, and attracting all the wrong attention for someone suddenly seeing her when she hadn't been there in his opinion, Sonya nearly missed the man she had been speaking to suddenly requiring the control of his body.

Nearly.

The Storm-Cloud didn't chase after the man, even if she really wanted to the possibility he knew anything about his uninvited or otherwise guest was minimal given Mist temperaments and how they tended to view their victims, and instead ran her mind back over that 'confrontation'.

Did Vongola have any long-range Mist assets getting too big for their britches?

Frankly, it was the general Italian's brand of over-confident arrogance all over this. In assuming that if a Mist kept a Storm further than arm's reach and did whatever confrontation in broad daylight with innocents around, it would prevent said Storm from being able to do anything in retaliation.

Then again, Italy wasn't the only place that could breed overconfidence.

Sonya had more than one medium-long distance Storm trick, thankfully. If the Mist ever got to grips with her again, she'd just breathe straight Disintegration at him instead next time. Even if it might get her arrested or noted, she'd just have to work something out with the Mirror Lady.

She'd have to invest in a hip-flask of liquor too, but that wasn't a great imposition if she was honest. Then there was actually acquiring another Storm Flame seed jewel to keep on her, which was
actually more likely for her to try next just simply to keep the other unbalanced trying to deal with her.

Let him assume a breeze would prevent her from reaching him again, she'd pick her time and wait until she could get more than just some poor sap caught in the crossfire and not the moron she was pissed with. If it went suitably remote enough, she could also just chuck an ax-blade through his next meat-puppet.

"There you are. Do you know how long I've been-" Renato suddenly sprouted from the alleyway behind her, cocking an eyebrow and likely lifting the entire situation from her head as she wasn't really in the mood for the effort to conceal it from him as he approached her at a casual saunter. "...as far as I'm aware, no. I'll certainly double-check, but most of their assets had been recalled and more interested in their native land well before the thing on the island. The first one I mean, also before the brat was even new to the both of us."

Mafia Land was in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean right now, on the part of the loop that hit colder waters for the half-bullshitted 'winter' season for something mainly tropical in nature. Something done so the foliage was more or less synced on a seasonal schedule, especially for easy maintenance when it came time for things to grow fast-rotting fruits or burst open pollen pouches, and so the critters that lived there had a sense of what time was passing and when to breed to restock the prey species.

That was about four thousand kilometers of distance to traverse in less than three weeks, also including what kind of recovery the Mist had to go through after getting shocked out of Igor's body by Ganauche the defective might reduce it yet more.

"...it does sound like it, more and more." Allowed the hitman, sliding a hand around the small of her back and gripping a hip to turn her in the apparent way they needed to go. "The range would certainly be suggesting somewhere in Europe as an origin point to cross so much space in a realistic amount of time, but the distance and the ability would've been at least noted down somewhere. Mayhap an official inquiry first, before-"

"It doesn't have to be a 'recognized' one, not even one expressly remotely connected." Sonya interrupted a touch shortly as she followed his direction blindly while she fiddled with her still burning pipe, but her metaphorical hackles were still rather ruffled and calming herself down after being forced to allow her prey to escape her due to a bad situation to safely murder it off in was a touch difficult. "With that kind of weather phenomenon, it could be entirely possible they only think they are without anyone else being at all the wiser."

"Even more curious." Decided the Sun softly as his eyes narrowed on the street ahead of them, his thumb making entirely distracting circles on the jut of her hip bone she was weirdly and keenly aware of right now.

He ignored the look she shot at his... well, jaw. The thumb stopped rubbing the strip of skin between her slacks and the blouse she was wearing today when the man apparently decided on something.

"I'm... not entirely certain it's the first time I've heard about this individual." Renato informed her slowly, tilting the brim of his hat in another direction so she would shift that way with him so they could move on from that specific street. "Or at the very least, I am unsure if this is the first time I've heard of their handiwork. It doesn't tickle a memory, but more like a piece of gossip I once heard and gave little thought to."

Catching her look this time, he merely gave a shrug that pulled at the arm around her hips and dipped a few fingertips into the waist of her pants.
"This was way back when, little dragon lady. I mean back when I was about Shamal's age."

That didn't necessarily mean anything, aside there might be a copycat running around. Mists were fully willing to fuck with everything, including their physical ages and up to their very form as well as the impression everyone else had about said features.

Otherwise it was a very old Mist for their line of work, which meant a lot of experience she should at least account for now s/he wasn't going to be assuming quite so much about how lethal she could possibly be to him/her.

"Unless he, or she, pops up again I think we should move this to the back-burner until we have more information." He announced after a few more semi-companionable moments of silence. "The man you pointed me to has a job for us. For tomorrow."

"Of course." Dryly returned the thief before busying herself with her tobacco, utterly unsurprised.

So much for her 'twelve hours' thing but then again, she should've accounted for ornery syndicate bosses in the first place. Ah well... maybe their next go around.

"More my side of the tracks than yours." Continued the hitman, his tone touched with a bit of sarcasm. "I wasn't sure if you wanted in on it or not."

"Not, really." For one, she had issues with people that thought they could give her those kinds of orders, and for another it would probably be really unfair. As much as she thought Mist thieves might be. "That doesn't mean I'm not up for pulling watch or guarding your back, but I should probably stay out of the professional's way while you work."

"You just want to watch." Renato dismissed with a smirk.

"Possibly." Sonya shot back around the brass in her mouth blandly with a tiny smirk of her own, finally reaching a point the bulk of her unease with letting that Mist go wouldn't bore a hole through her thoughts. "Are you complaining?"

"A lovely lady admiring my work? Absolutely not."

She'd get the arrogant Mist eventually, it would just take some patience that she was well used to putting into practice. Until then, she not only had things to do but more things to plot for in the near or far future that were more interesting than contemplating something that had unfortunately removed itself from her reach for the time being.

The Mafioso, obviously dipping into her thoughts shamelessly with how close he seemed to want her, chuckled darkly.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 2nd of February, 1970 continued. Ipswitch, Suffolk, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.)

Skull managed to hide his jaw-cracking yawn, mostly by smothering it in his beer he ordered when they showed up to this little British pub with the man of the hour. Safe and sound, and about desperately happy to see the troupe he left behind in fear of their safety.

Mauricio, who had willingly enough slogged his way through the Moscow Rain Bar for the control and minor uses of their Flames without actually picking up any of the mindless minnow habits the last couple months, was having probably the most fun he had in a while regaling the partial outfit he
had stopped in Budapest with to try saving one of their number with his watered-down yet still somehow exaggerated adventures in Soviet Russia.

It was probably a mark of how much he had expected to be fucked over that the man had somehow no complaints about where he was sent to learn a few Rain tricks or how bare the accommodations had to have been with the *Großes Volksfest's* winter lodgings.

Glen the Texan gunslinger was appropriately fascinated by practically everything Mauricio could tell him of icy Moscow, but the magician's words were occasionally challenged by Nojan the Joyless bearded wonder with a bit of heckling by Lothar when something that could be described as 'shifty' was brought up. Mainly so the Spaniard wouldn't admit to anything that might get the stuntman in trouble, but also just to be a bit of a bitch and a little shit from the sound of it.

The Rain had suffered through the culture shock fairly well, put his charisma into evading around his fellow Flame types without admitting anything possibly incriminating to either himself or Cherep, and generally had been an industrious little bee trying to find out how to hide his nature from anyone that wouldn't have his well-being in mind. Some of those antics he was expounding upon now were things the Cloud hadn't heard of while waiting on the Rain to decide he had enough tricks or skills to forge onward again outside the Zolotov Clan's Misty information blockade.

He really didn't have much else to do just yet, both of his motorcycles were being shipped across the Channel to await the start of his world-tour with a few numbers of other acts… and Viper very pointedly pushed him out of the room when they went in to both report in to the man bankrolling the whole tour as present. Mainly to do the negotiations for who owed who what and how much would be made for whom, which yeah the Mist would probably be the best idea to do it.

Especially as… it wasn't just Cherep that needed to live off the payout now.

Reminded of the whole 'sanctuary' idea, which collided with the reminder of a big chunk of property he was holding onto for his baby sister, Skull wondered… exactly how hard it would be to make a civilian-friendly Flame user's enclave?

Obviously it was possible, Mafia Land was such an enclave that few around the world could access or even get to with enough effort. He might not know all the rules and what safety measures were put in place to keep it that way, but it existed. Mostly for criminals.

It was really shitty that people like him, or Mauricio and tiny little Mingxia, had to play by mafia rules when they had little to no interests in that lifestyle. Even still, there were all the Flame users that weren't lucky enough to find a moderating Cloud to interfere on their behalf or had a Flame-friendly family that enabled the hell out of their avoidance. Shamal was… well, with who his godfather was probably more than sold on where his life was probably going to go, but his adorable nephew probably was one of the next generation of criminals even before his little sister decided to mother the hell out of him.

"Heavy thoughts, stuntman?"

Blinking a bit blankly, Skull looked up at the African shaman who was sharing a side table with him. "Oh… something like that."

"Many hands make for a lighter load." Nahum offered wisely in his deep brassy voice, which was kind of an awesome vocal range that probably made for an equally awesome singer.

Which probably tied into his entire act, that voice could likely be hypnotic used the right way and even with absolute nonsense much less African chants it was attention grabbing.
The chicken bones through his nose and earlobes were a bit ick, on the other hand.

"Well… to be honest, I was kind of wondering how hard it would be to buy an island." Admitted the Cloud a bit sheepishly, because to anyone that didn't know Mafia Land was a thing it was probably a bit out there.

Oops, and the whole 'Flame sanctuary' thing and how that tied into the wonder. Which were not things they could speak of in a civilian-friendly place like this.

After giving him a heavy stare, probably because thieves plus money equaled a headache for everyone else and he might've been infected with it given Viper's miserly habits being a drain on his own and the frankly illegal methods he had to recoup that by, the ebony skinned and completely bald shaman tapped long fingers against his glass of straight rum. "And what would you do with it then?"

"There are places for those like my sisters and Vipes, but not for those like me and Mauricio." Skull informed him simply enough. "I was wondering how much of a headache actually carving something like that out might be."

Not that the stuntman really wanted to start contesting the 'right' or 'obvious' use of Flame users with the worldwide mafia ranks. That was a bloody, dirty war he didn't remotely believe he was ever going to be happy dealing with. Not to mention the utter headache keeping such a sanctuary free and clear of both…

…were there any 'Vindice' Laws against a government knowing about Flames?

It might be against Omertà, but Skull didn't swear to the Vow of Silence. The only thing he might hurt doing that would be his own siblings, not to mention the Zolotov Clan itself as his 'originating' syndicate catching flack for not 'reining' him in when he was younger.

Still way too many drawbacks and questions, not enough benefits. "I don't think it's going to be me to make such a thing but getting the information for someone else to build off of might be something to do."

"Pity." Hissed out Aziz in German, spooking the fuck out of the Cloud stuntman who had almost forgotten the snake charmer was also at their table and listening in.

"Damn it, man. Squeak every now and again or something."

He got a tongue stuck out at him before the heavily tattooed man finally took a sip of his cider.

The newsboy cap the snake charmer was wearing did nothing to soften the really wild image the very colorful man had, but the whole vest and buttoned shirt thing kind of did give him a kind of factory worker look. It was bizarre, especially paired with the guy's ability to hold himself still enough to imitate a statue. Even after you noted he was sitting there and got used to how he looked, Aziz could still surprise people when he picked to move.

"About this… idea of yours." Nahum started in what could possibly be described as delicate if it wasn't for the semi-thoughtful frown on the man's face. "Why an island, specifically?"

"There is already an island, but that's… a touch murderous to start with." Confessed Skull vaguely, rubbing at his chest and giving the heavily tattooed of their number a dirty look. "It was really more just a wonder about how hard it would be to mock up something similar."

"So, an island may not be the best idea."
"There's three main… points? I think, that any such place would have to conform to in order to be… left alone by a few… factions." The stuntman allowed before his next swallow of beer, which he was aware was of no help to the two listening to him but were rather important anyways. "There's the Laws, there's the more obvious Vows that might not apply depending on the how, and then there's the whole secrecy aspect. No government office, no military service, and just general 'look after your own mess' kind of things."

Tapping his fingers now on the table between them, the African shaman obviously mulled over the bits of information Skull could tell him. "Honestly speaking, stuntman… why not just take over a small country instead?"

"Okay… I'm not sure how you went from 'island' to 'country'."

Aziz, now that he was specifically keeping the snake-man in his sights, also looked fairly confused himself.

"There are island-nations, some of which would be easier to control those seeking entrance into, and if you are not allowed 'government office' then finding someone else to hold it for you…"

"Ah… no. Not me." Skull denied flatly, raising his arms in a cross before his chest before the man could really get going. "Besides which, pacifist. I am not the one you want to be talking these kinds of things over with."

"Who would that be, then?" Nahum countered in a curious tone, now fingering his bones in a method that made him want to shudder.

"My baby sister, maybe. But she'd be as unamused as I am at the suggestion." When the shaman actually had the gall to look thoughtful, the stuntman planted his face in his hand. "Seriously unamused. And while we're both halves of the same coin, she's not nice. I love her dearly, but even to me she's more of a sweetly tempered grouch than an inherently nice person."

Admittedly, Viper could also be called a sweetly tempered grouch to him too. Then again, criminals and being nice probably worked out as well as trying to mix oil and water. Someone somewhere would try to take advantage of it, and while he was safe enough as a complete pacifist…

Cherep had tried to help, ended up with his first… minion, and really didn't want much more. At least until he had a better idea of what he could realistically do. Mauricio worked out, kind of… or he could be useful and all not-infringing helper it this worked out.

Hopefully this wouldn't… balloon out into something like his baby sister's growing enclave of minions.

He lost count of that sometime recently.

Skull shot the African shaman a suspicious look, which Nahum merely smirked in return for. "Just something to ponder then, yes?"

Aziz heaved a sigh, apparently making a gallant effort in drowning himself in his cider in spite of how little was left in his tankard.

(Tuesday the 3rd of February, 1970. Courthouse of the Pankow/Weißensee Districts, East Berlin, German Democratic Republic.)
Renato was obviously very good at his job, even if you only took it on merit for how long he had been at it and being more or less fully intact still. There was also the fact he wasn't horribly scarred up by his lifestyle, which was another marker of either his skills or his Sun Flames. That may or may not be applicable because while Sun Flames helped healing… it didn't prevent a whole lot of scarring.

It wasn't even him trying to boast or anything foolish like that, there were scores of equally criminally inclined gutter-brats that crawled out of the same slum-hole he did. Out of all of them, he only knew three survived it.

One lost a damn leg and retired back to their shared 'hometown', such as it was, to carve fishbone trinkets for the rest of his life. Another picked up cooking and assassinations and was cheerfully murdering his way through any and all five-star restaurants he could still get into barred from at least ten separate countries and a list of warrants for his arrest at least as tall as he was.

The last was… well, himself.

Having pissed off a fair number of criminal famiglias on his own meant he was never very sure how much was just insane luck and how much was just skill, as not even Renato had managed to scrape out of his meager beginnings entirely unscathed from the comparative 'step down' in quality anyone from that branch of life suffered under.

Relatively, maybe. The hitman was alive and all that.

Even could be considered 'with a wife and kid' if you tilted your head to the side and squinted hard… and ignored the dubiously legal claim he didn't have on either except in the world of fantasy-based rumors.

It was something he had accounted for and planned out for his next 'try', mocking together at least a rumored ‘beginning’ that wouldn't immediately equate who he would become as 'was once gutter trash' to see if there was a significant or at least appreciable difference. A semi-decent syndicate would have to go belly up for it, but out of the three he knew for a fact were chasing him for their own reasons… he at least had the opportunity to pick a good one.

He might even spend the effort to maybe gain a civilian mastery over something to account for 'missing' years he didn't have the foreknowledge to prep, if he was that bored in the coming years.

Having the opportunity to show off a little skill to a contemporary and good friend before he had to leave her of course meant nothing would go smoothly or neatly in this little 'favor'.

Especially because it was a hostage exchange.

Renato could spot three things majorly wrong with the whole picture, and that was just with both sides showing up for him to moderate this little occasion as a neutral third-party to call the shots then wildly aiming various caliber weaponry around everywhere suspiciously.

There was an unaccounted for possible sniper or interfering busybody on the same roof he had set Sonya on, the hostage was likely wearing a highly suspicious looking belt of probably explosives that either had a fuse or a timer to account for, and he was mostly sure whatever was in that briefcase for the 'price' was mostly or completely not what was asked for given how green the man holding it so desperately looked.

…right.

Hopefully the Russian thief's desire to stay out of his way while he was working would also translate
to getting the innocents out of the crossfire if it came down to it. While Renato had no intention of harming the lady being exchanged that didn't mean everyone else out here was of a similar mind, and he was also kind of forced to ensure the men trying to get said lady back remained mostly whole. As they were Janučkievič's men, and that favor they were angling for falling through would cut an unexpected day or two delay to their timetable which was already getting tight.

"Gentlemen, if you're all quite done sizing each other up?" Drawled out the hitman as he crossed the shadowed parking lot to where he assumed and indeed would be the 'middle ground' of this meeting would be, in a pool of light cast by two offset streetlamps.

Ignoring the guns that immediately swung in his direction, more from the 'hostile' side than the men he was somewhat aligned with due to reasons, he glanced first from the goon with the briefcase to the lady hostage with the burlap sack over her head.

Because of course they were going that clichéd.

"In the interests of ensuring no one twitches wrong and gets shot in the back," or the front but he was being tactful, "and possibly inconvenience someone important, I have been asked to ensure this deal goes through. As such, state your terms."

A few, either from the reassurance his not being armed should not give anyone or the tone he was taking with both sides, of those hostile gun barrels lowered. Not entirely on the side that at least should've known he was going to show up, which was really a value of 'not good' of its own.

"Who the hell sent-

"How do we even know that's even the girl we're here for?"

Renato, and most of Janučkievič's men, looked to the opposing side of the exchange rather pointedly. The poor dear probably couldn't see very well, and the lady tripping would delay everything even more. Furthermore, the expressed concern was a valid one. Swapping the real target out for a fake was always a good tactic.

"Because I said it was. How do we know you-"

"No, no that's not how this is going to go." Interrupted the Mafioso a bit pointedly, which left all the guns on his right side lowering even as a few more on the right to refocus on him. "If you refuse to show your side of this arrangement is as requested, they do not have to show their side of the agreement is as you asked."

Shooting the small caliber gun out of the other man's hand before he could fully free it from his jacket and train it on him then evading the slightly wild retaliation shots by taking a few steps to the side before it became apparent the grunt was still alive, the Sun user re-aimed and allowed the barrel of his gun to start glowing yellow. Just enough for the warier of the men out there to suspect something was off, but not a whole lot to cast suspiciously strong golden-yellow tones into the near-dark surroundings.

"Pick. One."

The current spokesperson on that side of the parking lot made the rookie mistake of looking at someone else for guidance over the hand he was babying, and a slightly older man positioned as the hostage's main guardsman sighed slightly angrily before ripping the burlap sack off the girl's head none too gently.
Obviously, they had gone to the precaution of also gagging their hostage. If she was wearing something explosive and knew it, she wouldn't be able to warn someone of it until too late.

Lowering the pistol still simmering with his Sun Flames, Renato first glanced over at the side he was temporarily on for the mook with the suitcase to obligingly pop it open and show at least the first rank of East German Marks neatly stacked and available to be seen. The stack of obviously cut paper behind it only showed a few too-strongly colored edges before the movement made everything stack up behind the real money it was padding out.

Minor blessings.

Glancing back, mostly for show to ensure no one over there had any major nitpicks that might make this entire thing go sour before it had to, the hitman let his eyes get caught by the slightly terrified and majorly desperate hostage's. Who glanced downward the best she could, then back up to him with wide eyes, not remotely comforted by his shallowly inclined head to show he got her message.

…so, the assumption of explosives was probably spot on. At least, she was desperately scared of something about herself. Or something underground possibly.

Or under her own skirts.

_Fucking_ wonderful.

"Right. Two of you, one with your side of this exchange and someone to guard you while your hands are busy, come over here so we can get this over with."

_How the fuck was-

The manhole cover almost under his right toe shifted somewhat unnaturally for having nearly fourteen stones of pure human standing half-on it. Almost too easily, and nearly forcing him to slip backwards as things under that foot wrenched sideways all of a sudden.

_Sonya._ Either the thief intended to steal the explosives to deal with in a Storm's disregard for heavy ordinance, or the hostage outright if something went majorly wrong. Anyway it went down, Renato was _entirely_ alright with that kind of meddling.

It left that possible interfering busybody or equally likely sniper at his back, but the hitman could deal with that if he wasn't going to be forced to protect someone in the middle of a firefight with little to no cover available.

He slid backwards and a touch to the side as casually as he could, while both sides gravitated to where they'd have a clear sight down the parking lot _and_ unobstructed fields of fire from each other masking his movements as just shifting to accommodate a new 'center ground'. If they forced the girl to just move forward, and didn't pull her to either side to be escorted by someone _other_ than what seemed to be the more senior veteran over there…

It would put his back to where that possible sniper was lingering the last he caught sight of a roughly man-shaped shadow _and_ would ensure the girl would end up just short of the manhole cover for the handover. Her skirts would at least conceal most of what was going on down there but then again, he hadn't asked the thief to do this and she deserved a bit more cover for volunteering herself to solve a bit of a sticky situation.

Gratified when that side of things worked out as he wanted it, the _Mafioso_ slid his gaze to the side he was forced to support but he wasn't very appreciative of to insure his intents would not be anticipated by anyone decently smart. Green-tinged and money-man shuffled forward almost as if he was
equally as much a hostage as the lady being exchanged, clutching the briefcase full of money and fakes to his chest and just generally looking unwilling to be there.

…he was also wearing jeans. Something even his Soviet best friend didn't do in her homeland unless somewhere she deemed safe enough from government observation, as apparently jeans were somehow considered a luxury and not something good Soviet citizens wore out and about.

Foreign?

What the hell was the man doing here, much less in the middle of a hostage exchange?

Renato rapidly ran his mind over all the details Sonya had given him, paired it up with a few tidbits he learned on his way in and out of Janučkievič’s place, and discarded a couple of the less likely options.

The Storm-Cloud had been somewhat surprised 'Elias Ocean' was dealing with the slumlord of this sector of the Iron Curtain…

…hmm. What was the girl's name, again?

If it turned out to be Ocean's daughter, or wife or what have you, the hitman was going to shoot someone. It meant it was possible the busybody that might be a sniper was the older thief as well, and if it wasn't nearly impossible to directly copy Sonya's innate strength in less inhuman manners he'd be suspicious that person under the manhole cover wasn't the Storm-Cloud.

Or otherwise, Ocean had been forced to get local muscle backup to regain the girl and sent another of his 'crew' with some and not all of the money required to get her back. Then it was possible money-man was so green under his dusky skin because Janučkievič’s men assumed it was all there and it being revealed to be a bit of cash with a lot of padding was going to piss off both sides in short order.

…and he was stuck in the middle.

Obviously, all four of the people doing the actual handover slowed down when they got within a few feet of each other. The Mafioso had to beckon them forward a few times so things wouldn't have to be thrown and possibly busted wide open as the farce it was, and so the Russian thief could have the best possible position to deal with whatever was upsetting the hostage.

"The terms for this arrangement was, as far as I am aware, that the girl was to be unharmed and returned for a set price." Turning to the girl in question and ignoring the sliding manhole cover as it offset itself a little to allow a slim person to maneuver around it without it becoming obvious someone was doing such, the hitman eyed her general condition. "You can obviously still nod or shake your head, so I ask you to confirm that is the case and you are unharmed from your captivity."

Honey brown eyes widened momentarily, and something obviously equally as feminine and slim in size shifted her drab wool skirts a touch before the girl's elbows were forced to pinch tight to her waist as the belt holding the bulky containers slightly slackened. Showing some admirable courage, she nodded firmly once and didn't glance downward.

Approvingly, Renato shifted without giving anything away himself so he could look at the man possibly screwing them all over and shift the bulk of the attention away from whatever Sonya was doing. "That being the case, I then ask you to set down the briefcase at your feet. I will count to three. When the hostage steps forward, you slide the money over and we all go home."

Slowly, obviously unwilling to get on with things which could be excused through any number of
reasons but *did not help right now*, the case was set delicately on the pavement as asked.

Taking two steps backwards himself now that the girl's mysterious and suspect belt was MIA somehow if only from the front, although there were two big burn spots in the fabric covering her stomach that were suggestive in their own right, the hitman moderating this exchange very loudly counted to three.

Three things happened. The girl stepped forward to show the manhole cover completely back into position and nothing suspicious about it left on the ground she had been standing on, the case was kicked but it skidded a touch *too* far to be easily recovered, and the damn thing popped open.

What the Italian Sun user could see at half the distance was finally apparent to the hostage takers, and the immediate outrage was very predictable and the few really jumpy men opened fire on the six individuals in the middle who may or may not be aligned with either side. Mostly due to the sudden excitement making a few trigger fingers slip before things were ready, and counter shots equally as sloppily done on the returning side.

The sudden decision of the solid metal manhole cover to *eject* itself into the atmosphere was a touch momentum arresting for a split moment before the heavier calibers could come into play, the lack of smoke at least suggested it wasn't because of an explosive going off, and Sonya bodily lunged out of the sewers to snag hold of the girl's left ankle then the back of her skirt and pull her bodily into the ground to remove the innocent from the field.

The possible foreigner-born man scrambled in after them and only took a shallow glancing hit on the inside of a knee as someone tried and failed to kill the hostage before she was sprung from the situation scot free, leaving Renato in the middle of a two-possibly-three-way firefight and caught neatly in the crosshairs of both sides.

The first volley was obviously badly aimed, as most of the men brought up or zeroed in their sights on specific targets and the rest wrestled against their surprise and the various methods of concealed carry to bring their own firepower to bear. Two badly wide shots hummed passed the hitman, proving someone on either side had been tasked with keeping the unknown in their sights as was prudent but whomever it was sucked horribly, and one more caught mostly fabric as the Italian shifted and wove for some distance from the entire debacle.

Taking advantage of the residue from his first shot of the night he unloaded a full Sun Flame shot straight into concrete some few feet away between *both* sides, and hopefully in the direction others were aiming in to blind the unwary, then started picking off the heavier caliber guns on *both* sides as far as his memory stretched.

Obviously he hit a few mooks, pity that but even his memory in the dark of specific placements and even trying to account for flinches or repositions was impossible when there was a sudden scramble like this.

"*If I may point something out,*" drawled the hitman sarcastically as loudly as he could into the ringing silence his flash of Dying Will Flames caused everyone with two brain cells to rub together, cocking his holdout pistol in his left hand in hopefully unneeded preparation if the gunshots picked up again, "*it seems someone has stolen both the money man and the hostage. Shooting each other will not help anything.*"

Sonya was surprisingly good at the whole 'stealing people' bit for something he hadn't been aware she did, hopefully the thief had encouraged the hostage and the tagalong to move on further away from any possible violence in case someone went after them.
Hmm… the other man might be bleeding. He was unsure if he wanted the guy to be left behind or not.

"What the fuck was that?"

"I'd almost say a Mist Flame user." Renato confessed blandly when no one else had anything to offer the man, the veteran guy who was badly unnerved and already twitchy, rubbing wary fingers on the hole in his suit jacket and calculating out exactly which moron did it. "If it wasn't for the mostly human figure that grabbed the hostage. If it was a Mist, then whatever did the grabbing would've been entirely inhuman."

Already shifty and jittery from the near-firefight they all had already glancing gotten into already, no one else moved or spoke for a tense moment.

"…you're another one, right?"

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Mocked the hitman a touch sourly to cut the tensions down a bit more, already fully aware the veteran was one himself but no one else was.

Kind of obvious when he knew for a fact he shot a bullet the man's way to remove that assault rifle out of his hands… but the gun and the man holding it was completely unmarked. A touch winded, but without major injury.

Lightning, obviously.

"Right, you three. Go back, tell the boss what happened." The veteran and possible Lightning ordered shortly, eyeing Renato's mainly unmarred frame warily even as the Sun Flame user reseated the secondary gun back in the holster secured to the small of his back. "You, you're coming with us. So, if the girl's damaged or whatever from this bullshit we won't be held responsible."

Eyeing the man curiously for a moment and glancing back at Janučkièveč's men only once to ensure they really were mainly intact, the Italian inclined his head in what could be mistaken for agreement.

Really, it was to hide his satisfaction with how surprisingly well this worked out for how much had looked to be going wrong at the start.

His and Sonya's end of the bargain with the master of the Bornholmer border crossings was just to keep the men behind him alive, hostage optional. In close quarters, and with a fully aware and possibly protective Cloud lurking below… even if Renato went first as it seemed the other man wanted the remaining three were likely about to die horribly.

Including he who seemed to have shot a hole through not only his suit but a skimming mar into his skin, which meant easy revenge to boot.

Getting a jump on things before the veteran if possibly painfully new Lightning could try ordering him about and reestablish the authority he'd already undercut to prevent the likely clash of personalities between different criminal outfits trying to cooperate, the Mafioso followed along Sonya's path and entered some interestingly broad pair of brickwork tunnels that had a secondary channel to the side which thankfully contained the actual sewage from this part of Berlin.

Removing his Sun Flames from his main pistol got the slightly yellowish glow to fade, and instead Renato lit a hand in a method of light-giving the Storm-Cloud showed him. It allowed him more than enough illumination to pin down tiny drops of fresh blood, and to orientate himself to where Sonya had retreated to with her unexpected extra.
Humming pleasantly, the hitman then waited patiently for the mooks he was going to led into a lethal trap to catch up.

The story behind this entire farce would be moderately interesting, and exactly who he was going to send his tailoring bill too would be whichever moron had decided to stiff a large number of moderately armed men he had been tasked to moderate between.

(Wednesday the 4th of February, 1970. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

"I won't be available for… most of next year." Tatiana dismissed easily as she double-checked the list on her clipboard as mostly done so wasting a bit of time wouldn't get her on the bad side of her current resident doctor, because as cute and as soft as the guy's hair was there were plans being carried out.

Besides which, if that resulted in her picking the next round of Mist for the hospital… maybe they wouldn't immediately fuck off for parts unknown.

The busty redhead was fully aware those few possible-but-not-really Mist nurse trainees already sent to the hospital before hadn't actually been there for medical lessons. They had been part of Usov's Mist net of informants, which was still horribly green and working out the kinks in multinational information networks before going back to Moscow and ensuring the Soviet sensibility of burying their heads behind an iron curtain of 'fuck you, we're perfectly fine over here' wouldn't harm them all in the end.

Green Mists weren't really a risk in and of themselves, they were initially creative little buggers and of all the Flame types Mists were the ones that hit the ground running from the start. Unfortunately, that didn't mean all Mists would be able to skate by without adequate medical care.

As seen with Sergej, who was still unconscious after being beaten up and taken over by a hostile Mist. Hopefully he'd recover, or one of the incoming Mist nurses would be able to draw him out of his own head, otherwise she was fairly certain Edik would end up a very bitter mortician haunting the morgue on his own. The teen could work perfectly well as such, but the bitterness kind of impacted his quality of life.

Avdotya, with an entire school year of chasing after stubborn and willful brats empowered in the most obstinate ways imaginable when they got hurt, would hopefully end up better equipped to be Kappel's main nurse aide in the Sun's place. Instead of getting sidetracked so often with minor issues she hadn't needed to involve herself with, hopefully she had learned to delegate.

At the very least, school children shouldn't be all that removed from the headaches a hospital staff could generate.

"Not even a weekend retreat here or there?" Ganauche faux-pouted at her, which worked really well for him even with the eyepatch. Gave him a kind of roguish air, kind of a modern-day pirate aesthetic. Bit of a foppish one in a three-piece suit, but that wasn't entirely objectionable.

Obviously, the guy was trying his best to charm her. Equally obviously, Tatiana was not going to help him with the irritation his whole outfit had caused her baby sister. They had to apply the elbow grease, in the direction they damaged, by themselves.

That didn't mean there was no reason to humor the guy. Aside the whole charming eye candy he
represented while he tried sweet talking her, there were the other benefit to allowing the guy to 'court' her. Which included dinners and the occasional shiny thing.

So sue her, she liked the glitter. Right now it was cheap trinkets she might've lingered over while he was getting the CEDEF up to scratch or the occasional bunch of flowers that looked freshly picked around the island instead of professionally grown and cut, but it had the possibility of getting better in quality the longer she allowed the 'line of communication' to remain open without shutting it down.

Free glitter, which she didn't have to steal or source herself. The possible rumor gathering she might be able to do if it got far enough was also attractive.

"Maybe now or again, but not often." Allowed the nurse brightly, actually more thinking of scoping out her baby sister's castle and seeing how suitable that would be for an occasional beachside retreat. "I've got a term in the Soviet Mafiya Academy, being the main nurse on staff. So... a bit removed entirely I will be."

Both eyebrows, which showed how ill-used the Lightning Guardian was to the whole missing eye situation so likely something that happened recently, rose up almost against the guy's will. "You're going to work there."

"Nya founded the dratted thing. And, even with the Zolotov Clan's fully willing permission, getting it stable and more importantly unfettered from obvious influences so all the dratted Flame-ing brats will coagulate there for the bits they need to know is a bit of an effort. We all pitched in a bit." Shrugging, as if it wasn't a great big deal as it seemed to be to anyone even remotely outside of the Soviet Union, she flashed him a smirk. "Sorry."

Unfortunately with Lightnings, it was kind of hard to know if you surprised them if they were on their best 'public' persona. Ganauche might be putting his all into charming her, but this was also an information gathering exercise on his own end.

"Founded." A one-word comment about nothing that had a wealth of possibility but little avenue of confirmation, and the man changed the subject. "Little sister's got you on a short leash then?"

"More like I'm one of the few that specifically looked into Flame natures and how that might ricochet into health problems if we over think something." Tatiana confessed easily enough, not addressing if Sonya had any say or influence over her working hours because he didn't have to know that. "Doctor Kappel and I have been a bit occupied logging the possibilities, which tend to show up in some interesting results."

"But... Flames don't harm the Flame user?"

"As long as that specific Flame user is aware of that and doesn't think themselves into logical fallacies." Corrected the nurse as she hugged her clipboard to her ample chest, shaking her head over that 'golden' rule which tended to be full of pitfalls of its own. "Take Storms. Taken to the furthest logical point, that should mean Storms can burn off anything not 'them'. However, that leaves open the possibility they cannot take anything 'not them', up to and including food or water. Dying off via starvation or dehydration instead of illness or poison."

The expression that scrawled across the Mafioso's face was a study in bemused confusion.

"Then, of course, you have to think of all those tetchy brats that don't know 'Flames won't harm the user as long as you believe so'. They pop on fire, assume they really are on fire, and burn themselves alive with their own Flames." She considered the man standing in a hospital corridor talking to her, then shrugged. "Or electrocute themselves, given present company. We lost a pair of Storm twins.
that way, they weren't aware of that little feature."

"Huh... hey, do you all know why the Vindice have the Laws they do?" Wondered the Lightning in a tangent she would never have guessed at, but it was one that made her think anyways.

"...hmm." Eyeing the man and wondering how 'open' the line of communication she was going to allow should be, the Sun thought about it.

"Do you?" Ganauche asked, obviously startled she hadn't immediately professed her ignorance.

"There's... a bit of a thing coming up." Tatiana didn't know what the next intent for the information pulled out of the KGB was going to be put to, but there was the lingering fact no one had any idea if the Vindice had claim on that information or what should be done about the government's knowledge of the information. "I might be able to ask for you."

Maybe. Depending on a lot of factors. Including if her baby sister was ever going to try to clarify things so Usov could get what he had been not-so-transparently angling after. As bewildering as an 'introduction to a Vindice Officer' was for someone to seek out, apparently it wasn't far enough out there any Mist would consider that 'trite'.

Someone should probably figure that out, anyways. Just to be safe.

"...son of a bitch."

"Speaking of, in a not entirely unrelated news... how long are you going to be lingering around these parts?" Not remotely off-put by the highly wary look that question earned her, the nurse freed a hand from her clipboard just to put it on her hip and tilt things so her chest was just a touch more obvious. "I ask... because my ex is getting out of jail soon. I might need a guy to 'obviously' occupy me, and one that won't immediately run off from the very sight of his unimpressed face."

If he made a pretty boy to chat up to her, she probably made for a tasty bit of arm candy for him as well. Vongola wasn't small fish, however insular the Italian Mafia Families had been up until the surprise takeover over a sixth of the island that gave Vongola's Outside Advisory Branch security oversight here. Ganauche had admirers of his own locally, more for who he was connected to and less for him, and equally less 'professional' places to work that viewed obstructing the nurses because you wanted to shag one silly just a tiny bit dimly to warrant immediate removal of your person.

The Vongola Lightning Guardian grew a lot more serious in a blink of an eye. "Domestic abuse?"

"What? Hell no, I would've murdered the ass." Dismissed Tatiana a touch shortly, not really amused by the implication she would've put up with that kind of shit. " Clan tradition. We start out near home and steal our way as far out as we can get until some or all of us get arrested for it. Depending, especially if you get really far like out of the Iron Curtain far, you might stay local where you are or go back to our territory to either do it again or find something different after your prison sentence."

Ganauche thought about it. "What happens after that?"

"Either we go domestic and return to the clan for something more sedate and less exciting or make a niche for ourselves wherever we are and allow ourselves to be used as a handhold for the next generation's strings of thefts out and about. More the first than the last, but possible."

"I've got another couple weeks. Might be stretched for a month or so more..." Allowed the Lightning thoughtfully as he smoothed a hand over his jaw. "When do you need a pasty?"

"This summer, early." Just before she had to head back to Moscow, actually. "Nicolai is... well, he's
a big guy. Muscles, I mean. No Dying Will Flames, so it should be easy enough to hold your ground against him, but it still should be said."

A whole lot of beef on that slab, in truth. Tatiana's preoccupation with buff men had gotten her into trouble there, and while she entirely appreciated where her ex was coming from… she wanted to heal.

It was rewarding, she liked it, and her skills were phenomenally tailored for the job. Playing house, either back in Moscow or just wherever the gang was, for her 'first' serious boyfriend wasn't remotely as interesting or appealing to her right now.

No respect intended, Lisa. Maybe in a few more years, after she got her doctor's license.

The minor problem not allowing marriage or anything 'family' orientated for the lower ranks of vory, deciding when you were domestic enough with your current partner to settle down together until the vor of the pair had the rank for having dependents without getting them messed was a bit dicey. Especially when the two of you didn't agree when that should happen, or you had plans that didn't coincide with the other's assumptions.

With the school nurse thing, Tatiana would look pretty domestic from the outside. While there was an opening for the school nurse to be a permanent thing, the Sun also didn't want to treat a bunch of snot-nosed brats figuring out how to murder each other off via Flame skills a portion of them had for the rest of her life. Given the whole tiff she and Nicolai had was due to her wanting to professionally learn to nurse or get a doctor's license instead of waiting on pin and needles for him to finish his vor requirements, so he could sweep her off her feet and they'd live happily ever after…

Well, she'd like to hedge her bets. They were all criminals, just because it was something civilized people did didn't necessarily mean they would behave the same way.

Hopefully she was jumping at shadows, but prison changed people. So did time.

…or doing time, as the case might be.

"If possible," because she was totally counting 'helping me with a vor who was my ex' as a personal favor and not part of Ganauche's point hoarding, "and you can do it… I won't put in a good word for your syndicate, but I will put in a good gush or two about how helpful this will be for me."

The whole 'missing an eye' thing kind of made peering at people suspiciously a touch hard for the guy, but he gave it his best shot. "I'll think about it."

More than she could count on, for someone a whole lot more interested in her influence over her little sister and the Flame nurses than for herself. "Fair enough."
"Stay here."
"That's not-"

Sonya turned around and all but bit off the man's nose as she glared the intruder into submission. "Stay, fucking, here."

"Mash, we need to take care of your leg anyways." The girl offered peacefully, beckoning the dark-skinned man with the British accent over to where she had set herself to remove the last of her bindings. "Let's stay out of the way for now."

As the thief finished that in her head as 'we can run once she's gone', she also included the hostage girl in a slightly Dying Will Flame tainted glare before slinking back along the tunnels she had brought them down. Equally as unsure if she should retain some kind of hold or line of sight on the girl they had been there to ensure was returned or ransomed to a separate syndicate for re-ransoming back to someone else, the Russian merely limited herself to a range where she wouldn't be obvious to the two of them but fully concealed in the dark to await whomever tried following them down here.

Hopefully Renato wasn't going to be mad with her, for interfering.

She hadn't intended to, but then Elias Ocean somehow ended up on the same perch she had been on to watch things go down and practically spazzed out about the explosives tied to his daughter.

The man was… sort of a friend of her foster mother's?

Either that or an old acquaintance she had recalled fondly, so the woman's foster daughter allowed herself to be nagged into freeing the girl being held hostage from her lethal accessory after she pointed out it could be easily removed with a bit of stealth. Then shit went south, and she had to leave the Sun using hitman in the middle of a firefight without having a perch to observe how that would end.

What was with everything and anything conspiring together so she couldn't watch her friends do what they were best at?

…after Shamal's religious cult-thing, she should probably head back to China for a moment just to see if Ballsy Toddler Boy was alright or not.

Oh… and the brat's mom.

Sonya ran her thoughts back down that tangent, irked she was yet again snipping at the heels of a kid she was not related to. And said people's people, even still again.

She really had to stop doing that.

Some obnoxiously cheerful humming, in an eerily familiar register even if the last time she heard him hum was… never, caught the thief's straining ears under the quiet murmur of voices squarely behind her and the odd liquid splash of the sewer water echoing oddly off the uneven walls. Orientating herself to where that was coming from, she also managed to pick up the scuffled footfalls of someone
uneasily walking along with said person humming.

…two? Renato's tread was markedly louder than his wont but still what could be described as 'patiently/carefully' placed footfalls, yet it wasn't only his steps she could pick out. There was someone really nervous with him, maybe another… and…

…three. One more, significantly stealthier than anyone else was either being or trying to be.

Three mooks and a hitman, walking along dark as pitch sewer lines, straight to where she stashed girly-hostage and Mr. Brainless.

Were they Janučkievič's men, or the hostage people come to collect the hostage again?

Sonya didn't really understand why Renato would be leading more hostage-takers to her, so more probably the men of the man they were trying to get a favor from. Quickly checking on the girl and the uninvited tagalong herself, who were still whispering suspiciously but entirely unaware of where the Storm-Cloud was lingering, and she slid further into the darkened labyrinth of tunnels to see what the hell was really going on.

"Will you fucking stop?" Someone commented waspishly in a low tone, as the footfalls resolved into four distinct treads to her ears. "They'll hear us."

"My dear man," drawled the hitman almost lazily, but did interrupt his obnoxious humming, "the odds of us successfully sneaking up on whomever stole your hostage is slim as it is. I'd rather this not turn into some cut-rate horror movie."

Hostage takers, then. Why the fuck was the hitman suddenly buddy-buddy with them?

"...horror movie?" Inquired someone really softly, almost inaudibly even to her closing in on where they were to the point she was guessing that was what he said, but the Italian answered the man anyways.

"In the middle of the night, in pitch dark, with unknown hostile... something, ahead? Why, if something lunged out of the dark to bodily haul one of you away down a junction... I'd be utterly unsurprised."

…did Renato want her to play a horror movie villain?

Sonya finally glimpsed some light ahead, cast by the palm full of Dying Will Flames of the Sun the Italian was holding aloft for visibility purposes. That would mean their night vision would be terrible, and if she did snag someone… she'd have to move quickly, luckily her friend was apparently leading them all in a rather broad circle instead of the straight line to where she stashed the hostage. He was getting them near, but not close enough to count for very much.

"Stop taunting the idiots." Grouchy and opinionated snapped, irritated and highly unamused as his group passed a junction that she could maybe use if she timed it right. "If one of them pisses themselves-"

Lunging faster than anyone purely human could account for, the Russian bodily tackled the trailing man of the group into a side tunnel and firmly out of any visible range. Wrenching him even further to the side and off balance for the expected follow-up probably on her heels, she ensured she was supported on the brickwork separating the earth they were buried within and the brick walkway… right over the trough of sewage this network of tunnels managed. Dropping her victim, she resized one of her physical copies of the Bec de Corbins while shielding any possible light with her body to hook into the mook's collar and practically dredge him through the noisy and noxious murk for a
short distance before throwing him away from her and easy discovery.

He screeched rather satisfyingly actually, and the liquid noises were all sorts of suggestive. Tossing him down about three meters of curved brick tunnel also enabled her to keep him out of sight if not hearing range as something powerfully hot and blindingly bright skipped too high and too far to the wrong side of the tunnel.

"…what the FUCK WAS THAT?" The speaker's voice cracked with terror, but there was almost something strange about how as the noise echoed a bit.

"Pipe down!" Snarled the same opinionated mook heatedly before she could give the odd echoing sounds more attention, blinking wildly as what was probably afterimages of Renato's Sun Flame bullet faded from his sight and whirled to try to glare at their only light source. "And you-

"I said I didn't want this to turn into a cut-rate horror movie, but did you listen to me? No." Renato tossed back in a voice that was a touch shaky itself, although she could identify that as pure glee instead of anything like terror as she circled back to them warily. "Put your back to a wall, hopefully that'll keep another of us from getting grabbed by… whatever that was."

It would, but she had a pick on a stick she could grab with as well if she didn't want to be sighted just yet. Resizing things instead of summoning them into being fully sized at least ensured the smaller flare of Cloud Flames wouldn't be obvious around her admittedly not very substantial form, especially with Renato's likely unintended cover of a Sun Flame bullet to hide it within. Even somewhere dim and dark like this, colors like light purple could be covered up by blazing yellow.

She didn't need to grab anyone out of a light source next, while the highly opinionated idiot reluctantly did as the hitman ordered… the other one didn't. He bolted, back the way they had apparently come.

Moving equally as quickly, the thief ensured she skipped over Renato's little pool of visible light by going over the men's heads and bouncing off the wall right over the last remaining mook on her way to secure the last one. She barreled into that man's back roughly, pushing him a touch gleefully herself into the muck before using her polearm to snag his belt and fling him down the tunnels as well.

The outright scream she earned was a touch bone-chilling, if you didn't know what had elected that kind of response out of him.

Spooked well out of his rational mind, the last mook next to Renato started rapidly saying prayers to as many people he could think of in a tone that wasn't at all calm or under his breath. Clutching hard at a fully automatic rifle and wildly aiming it down each of the three tunnels their section of the sewers branched out into, it made her less quick to remove him as well as she really didn't want to get shot again.

The hitman, on the other hand, took one long look at the man as Sonya padded her way closer… then snuffed out the palm full of Flames providing light.

Hooking her weapon into his belt as well, or possibly his coat as it was pitch dark now and she really didn't care at this point, she yanked the last man off his feet and into the sludge for his own dunking. Ears ringing from his entirely high-pitched squeal of fright before being tossed down the tunnels away from them, she sighed as her last standing 'victim' started outright cackling with no care for whomever might hear him.

"Yes… real amusing." Her own night vision had suffered with this digression, while Renato's Sun
Flames only really provided just enough light around him for maybe one or two other people it still was light she had been using to orientate herself for her 'attacks'. Not to mention that blinding flash of Flames. Blindly feeling forward as carefully as she could, Sonya was still surprised when she hit something solid, warm, and alive even knowing the hitman's last position. "Come on, let's get out of here."

"That was satisfying, in so many ways." Renato rumbled back at her a touch roughly, tracing her arm back so he could find her waist. "Brilliant, little dragon lady. Sublime, even. Did you hear him squeal?"

"Obviously. It was right next to my ear." As it meant she didn't have to risk pulling his arm out of his socket she put up with the near-fondling, so they could get sorted out to leave. "Did you kill that first guy?"

The Sun Flame bullet hadn't been aimed at her obviously, but the tunnel did curve a touch and it was entirely within a decent sharpshooter's skill to hit something they only had a split second to aim at if he used a regular one. She might've thrown what's his name a touch hard and high, it was also entirely possible the guy had been visible for a moment.

With how much screaming he did, not to mention the next shout which cracked on fear, it was entirely possible she missed the crack of a gun underneath it all.

"Hmm… well, he did shoot me."

"What?" He was nearly hip to hip with her, as the tunnel's walkways weren't wide or anything. Blindly feeling along the side of him she was up against, she still startled when warm fingers suddenly gripped her hand poking him and moved her to his other side and the hole in his clothing there. "…you shot him for maybe a hundred euros of tailoring repair?"

He wasn't bleeding from what she could feel, at least. Well, Sun. He wouldn't have bled for long anyways.

"Perhaps. Ah… hmm."

Three pairs highly wary eyes turned to the two of them as she brought the Mafioso into the service station she stashed the hostage and her uninvited guest into, which did have a few low emergency lights on that allowed them to actually see each other instead of needing another palm full of Flames.

Sighing, Sonya disentangled her hand just to gesture to the older thief. "Renato, this is Elias Ocean. With him is his daughter, Maria Ocean, and Mr. Uninvited."

"Totally called it." The hitman drawled out sourly over the sounds of the injured man spluttering then yelping as the makeshift bandage around his knee was tightened, glancing over Elias' whole body before turning to the hostage-girl and giving her a slight bow without knocking the Russian thief over. "My apologies for how we met, miss Ocean. I am glad to see you are fine now."

"Thank you?" More a question than anything, she glanced from her father to the pair of them. "Um… it's nice to meet you too."

"Charmed." Dismissed the thief way to shortly to be strictly polite. "Can we get out of here now? This place reeks."

Renato smoothed the heel of his palm down her spine, which was different enough she glanced at him in confusion. "I have no objections. Gentlemen, lady? Somewhere warmer, perhaps?"
"Yeah..." Giving her a last look, half in confusion and a touch of wariness, the older Ocean gave his daughter a thankful little smile before gesturing to the service access he likely got in by. "...I believe I owe the both of you drinks."

"We have to go talk to Janučkievič." Sonya interjected to limit any socializing, not really wishing to do more for the friend of her mother's. This worked out but really, she could go a while without being fast-talked into risking her neck for his daughter yet again.

"I kind of want to know what they're doing here." The hitman informed her lowly, but not so quietly the others wouldn't be able to hear. "Especially how they ended up in the middle of a hostage situation with us."

"Then I want a damn shower. Fat and greedy probably won't be awake until the sun rises."

Elias snorted a laugh, then promptly choked on it through what seemed to be pure surprise at her mouth.

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 4th of February, 1970 continued. East Berlin, German Democratic Republic.)

In a drab little hut of a building's cellar, past a small number of humorless German natives who very nearly got into a scuffle with them until Sonya spoke some kind of gibberish to calm them down, Elias Ocean made good on his promise of a drink.

Of course it was the 'native' wine, which was really imported, called Bull's Blood. The shit was harsh and utterly, painfully sour. Little dragon lady, of course, downed it as she did vodka.

A cast-iron stomach, that one.

The dusty, cramped, and entirely working man's underground bar fitted into a dimly lit cellar wasn't greatly packed with individuals but did have a number of regulars already. Between the Ocean father-daughter pair, what seemed to be a British citizen helping them for a certain value of 'help', an Italian Mafioso, and a Russian thief, they got the far corner table to themselves even if elbow space was apparently at a premium.

"What brings you two to East Germany, anyways?" Maria Ocean inquired after dubiously regarding her mug of wine for a second then focusing on them instead. "Not that I remotely mind, but it's curious."

"Slumming it, apparently." Sonya deadpanned utterly unhelpfully, negligently dropping her own pointedly empty clay mug to the table with a clatter.

Which had been the first one poured, actually.

Renato had to laugh, even if it was tinged heavily with wry amusement. She had decided to take exception entirely to the elder Ocean's very presence, probably sometime when they had been on the same rooftop and she got convinced to interfere even if the hitman didn't mind the help with such a touchy situation.

Even still, Elias seemed well used to brusque and borderline rude Russians and how to deal with them.

Waving down one of the few waitresses, he ordered an entire bottle of the strong red wine and inquired about the possibility of some kind of whisky. The plainly dressed girl promised to at least
look in exchange for a number of the local currency, handing over the half of a bottle she had on her tray already to tide them over for a short while.

The Russian being bribed for patience cocked an eyebrow but allowed it and a refill of her mug as she pulled out her pipe to fiddle with while the liquor lasted in nonverbal allowance of such.

"Personal reasons." Renato clarified equally as unhelpfully for them, but then again if they didn't have to admit to a young and vulnerable dependent then they wouldn't. "We need to get across the Wall in a bit of a hurry, so we talked to Janučkievič about an exchange of services. It's how I just so happened to end up moderating a hostage exchange. What about yourselves?"

"Just a bit of local nastiness." Elias dismissed, likely falsely to prevent either of them turning the group in for a reward from what local presence took umbrage at them. "We had to go through Janučkievič as well, for the muscle we didn't have around here."

"We know." Sonya informed him blandly around the pipe stem in her mouth, taking a moment to blow smoke off to the side instead in anyone's face. "We saw you in Ganymed."

"Along with Faulstich and Blücher."

"He invited me along to that one."

"Faulstich? Father..." At his daughter's disappointed words the older Ocean grimaced uncomfortably and hunched up somewhat in his seat. "Needs must, I suppose. Even still..."

"You're alive, we're fine, and I can fix things eventually."

"We were trying to stop Faulstich." Maria reminded him a touch pointedly, rubbing at her temple tiredly. "He's who I got caught by... um, finessing some information out of his office. His local handlers on the wrong side of the track didn't appreciate it."

"You know, if you keep interfering with the local balances of power the people around here will never get off their asses and handle it themselves. Which also means they won't prevent a resurgence of the same stupid problem with just new names and more victims."

Elias clicked his tongue, eyeing the smoking Russian thoughtfully. "And with that... you're connected to Elisaveta Primakova, aren't you? That's her brand of brutal logic entirely. I suspected so up on that roof with your 'I'd rather watch' spiel, but now her hardline with avoiding local issues word-for-word? How do you know her? A student, protégé?"

"My mother." Allowed Sonya blandly as she pulled the pipe out of her mouth, highly unamused by this tangent and making it obvious through narrowed grey eyes and an icy tone. "She spoke rather fondly about you, but I don't see why. That leap of logic is entirely stupid, because you're not helping the people around here and it's fucking obvious when someone new just moves in to continue the same crap."

"We might've had different opinions about things, but there are results that can be appreciated about both methods." Defended the older man pointedly, ticking a finger at the blonde in an admonishing manner that completely bounced off her unimpressed visage. "Besides which, aren't you a little old to be Lisa's daughter? It's been a few years, more than a decade since I last saw her, but you are more than old enough to have been born around when we were working together."

"I'm adopted, jackass."

Elias studied her for a long moment, taken aback and a bit regretful of his hardline questions now.
Maria very pointedly gripped the mug he hadn't taken a drink from and forced it into her father's face, so he'd drink the wine or end up with it poured out in his lap. "You might be the Russian expert here, dad. But stop insulting the daughter of an old friend because you're just that suspicious."

"More than cold, mate." Chipped in 'Macintosh, call me Mash' apparently just to be heard, busying himself with his mug when both generations of Ocean gave him a short look of his own. "Never mind."

"Look, you can try to claim whatever you'd like. If I recall correctly, your group just moves on well before the end results happen anyways." Sonya dismissed flatly, examining the level of wine she had left in her mug before polishing it off negligently. "Eventually, you'll end up out of places to run too and straight into the consequences of your actions. Until then, let's agree to disagree on that."

"Continuing." Renato interjected when it became apparent young Miss Ocean had her father well in hand and the thief at his side had nothing more to say on the subject. "So you ended up taken hostage, your father got a local power to represent his interests in getting you back. Whose idea was it to fake most of the price?"

"Was it?"

"Yes." Confirmed the Mafioso, as the woman seeking clarification had been underground and moving to remove the suspect belt around Maria's waist when that got revealed. "Obviously. Only the topmost level of the bundles assembled for the hostage exchange were real German Marks, the rest were cut up paper trash used to pad out how much it looked to be from a distance."

"Look, look, look. We had two days to get the money together." Mash defended hastily. Earning himself two skeptical looks, a sigh, and a last curious stare from Maria. "Some of it was always going to have to be faked, getting enough to at least mock together something that looked like enough was hard as it was."

"If you had needed money, there's a bank branch a few streets over from here." Sonya pointed out bluntly, ignoring the surprised blink she got from the younger Ocean and the heavy sigh Elias did.

"We don't have an account there." Pointed out the older Ocean patiently.

"Who said anything about making a withdrawal? It's not that hard to get into a bank vault and steal what you need."

Renato palmed his face as their current drinking buddies exchanged a few highly skeptical or confused looks, trying to decide if she was being serious or factitious in that. "Little dragon lady, not many have the gall you do to misplace a metric ton of gold and regard it as something anyone can do in an absent-minded moment."

She outright growled at him, shifting in her rickety wooden chair to ensure he felt her blistering glare. "I've done a bank in less than two days, with a bit of my brother's help. It's possible with limited hands. Further fucking more, it is a requirement for people to exchange a set amount of currency into at least a bit of Marks when you get into East Germany legally. That's another money source that could've been appropriated if cash is needed in a fast hurry, and conveniently nearby. And, it was not a metric ton of gold."

…point.

"There's also picking pockets, if we're going all the way back to basics, and with how sharp the
class divides are around here it's patently obvious who would be the more lucrative to go after. A day of work at it, and you'd have a nice comfortable amount. Robbing a high-end store for their end of day deposits is also not all that difficult if you go in during the day and just wait for night."

Elias coughed a touch uncomfortably, and Mash slouched down his chair until he ended up under their rough-hewn table and out of sight. Maria took in the reactions, sighed heavily, and took a long draught from her mug of wine.

"I can't tell if that's just high standards, or you being a bit of a snob when around the less... imaginative." He marveled, taking in the reactions to her little spiel and contemplating just how steep the disparity of ability might be between them and her.

"Stuff it, peacock."

"Temper, temper, little dragon lady." Renato teased delightedly, topping off her mug with the nearly empty bottle of wine as the barmaid came back with a full bottle, the asked for and apparently as rare as hen's teeth whisky from how much Ocean splurged on it, with a few shot glasses to drink it in. "You'll be hearing about those thirteen bricks of solid gold for a long time, rest assured."

Sonya stared at him blankly for a moment while Elias poured him a finger of neat whisky, not even a mental commentary on what she really thought of that running through her head aside a strong surge of annoyance. Then she suddenly kicked out a leg of his chair, so the hitman very nearly took a tumble onto the dirty and grimy floorboards.

Almost choking on her sip of Bull's Blood, Maria hastily set her cup down and smothered her snickers into a palm as Renato dropped the liquor to seize hold of the table and prevent a dirty tumble.

"Okay, look little miss. We don't steal from hardworking, honest people. Most of those things aren't methods we'd ever do."

Blowing out an entirely exasperated sigh as she put out her pipe, the Russian turned back to Elias Ocean. "By who's definition of 'honest'? If someone is honestly trying to skim enough together from working for the local slumlord to afford their sick mother's medication... and you pick to rob him of his money and not the factory owner who pays taxes and his workers only just enough but doesn't bother to do anything but line his pockets with that extra cash in 'legal' ways..."

Elias rubbed his temple tiredly. "It's like trying to talk to Lisa all over again..."

"Are we done here yet?" The blonde woman asked of him tiredly, tucking away the brass pipe despite how hot the bowl might've been with embers in it recently.

Renato straightened up to his full height after downing the shot of actual whisky gratefully, sorting out his tie and the fit of his suit jacket and ignoring the broken chair he had been sitting in. "One last thing, Sonya. You, Mash, you owe me two hundred and fifty euros."

"...what?" Accompanied by a wary look around the edges of the table, the dark-skinned Brit frowned irritable. "How do you figure that?"

"Your shoddy ransom attempt put a hole through my suit." Helpfully gesturing to the hole in question, which thankfully wasn't somewhere more obvious but still rather vexing in its own right, the Italian extended a hand expectantly. "Either pay for it now, or I'll collect it later... eventually."

"Uh... I only got Pounds or German Marks, mate."
"Then I'll be seeing you later." Renato informed him pointedly with a wicked grin, extending a hand to help Sonya to her surprisingly steady feet for how much of the harsh wine she had downed the last half-hour. "Ciao."

"Why does it feel like I just made a deal with a devil?"

"It's survivable." The Russian informed him bluntly, completely accepting and allowing him to put his arm around her in something she merely expected now. "Just try not to get any further in debt."

Mash sank back down slowly, hiding under the table yet again. "Oh... thanks."

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 4th of February, 1970 continued. East Berlin, German Democratic Republic.)

"So, this is the lovely lady you mentioned?" Ryhor Janučkievič inquired in a tone that probably should've sounded pleasant, but it was ill-practiced enough to be entirely plastic and insincere instead. "Mmm... I can see the attraction."

Sonya arched an eyebrow, but kept her mouth shut and instead looked at Renato curiously. It was his show, he did most of the work on this end. She was also unfortunately aware she was not very... diplomatic when she felt badly.

A full night's work, a little bit of liquor she didn't have to buy, and between them Renato was more 'obviously' the one to be wary of at first glance so he got a couple hours of sleep in before it was an acceptable hour to call on a man like the Belarusian native and local slumlord. Tired was putting it a touch mildly, and with it came being irritable the longer things dragged on into the blustery winter morning.

Thankfully she got a lot of liquor down while no one was paying much attention to her in the bar, but that tipsiness was fading quickly to leave behind the exhaustion nibbling at her metaphoric heels.

"Quite a pretty one, isn't she?" Boasted her best friend strangely. He pushed off the wall he had been lingering against and sauntered the few feet over to the two of them.

Oh... and Janučkievič's handful of completely humorless and stone-faced bodyguards. All of whom were highly unimpressed, equally beefy if not carbon copies of each other with a few varying features of difference, suspicious looking men.

"She's not all that great for conversation, but then again... she doesn't really have to be."

Snorting softly, she dismissed the whole conversation as more or less pointless posturing and muscle flexing contest. Instead, she examined the warehouse they had been asked to go to in order to meet the slum lord.

Half of it was a garage, refitting something in the backseat of the cars and general maintenance that might be needed or not. The other half was the more warehouse part, stacks of crates and boxes in certain piles or loaded into large and spindly looking shelves. The only thing that separated it from any old garage or warehouse she had ever seen were the tall stack of tires and the pallet of car batteries, a strangely put-together tower of ripped out backseat car benches, and the packing center in one far corner.

"So... my men are alive, as I asked. In spite of some... difficulties."
"You mean Ocean's group. I'm aware, he approached my companion last night." Renato shrugged dismissively, flicking a wrist to her but straightening up to actually do some kind of reporting. "The hostage you sent us after was wearing some kind of suspect belt she was terrified of, meaning it's quite likely the negotiations should've never gone through... or otherwise they really didn't trust you."

"Not really surprising, what is surprising is the negotiations went through anyways."

"We are professionals."

"Quite interesting." Janučkievič informed the Mafioso insincerely, smoothing a hand over his sizable jowls as he inspected the both of them together. "Given what was on the chopping block, I actually wouldn't have minded it falling through as long as my men weren't killed. There wasn't any way you should've known that, but it's always... refreshing to have competent people on the payroll."

Sonya blinked, and looked at the overweight man in working/business man dress skeptically. That was not the way into the hitman's good graces, because it was pretty obvious if you observed the man for any amount of time in a social setting it became quickly apparent he was very considerate of women.

Renato, contrary to her expectations, didn't shoot the man through the head for irritating him. Then again, they did need him for the moment.

The Italian instead got a very nasty smirk on his face as he squared up to the other. "Oh, I had the suspicion. So, we had a bit of fun instead. Making full-grown men piss themselves in fright."

"I... hadn't heard of that."

"They're probably too embarrassed by the dunking they got in the sewers to expound on their little late-night adventures much." Announced the man slyly, buffing his nails on his lapel and examining them intently. "That is... if they managed to crawl out of there yet. They might just... disappear, instead."

Ryhor Janučkievič narrowed his eyes contemplatively. "Interesting."

"Isn't it just?" Inquired the hitman faux brightly.

"...quite." Agreed the local slum lord, but in a way that made it sound a touch repressive and a lot more unamused. "As to my side of this little exchange, Sinclair. You asked for a clear way across the Curtain. If you and your... lovely companion would come this way."

The Belarusian led them all, all five of his bodyguards and the two foreigners, over to the garage half of this operation. One of the sedans was mostly done having its back bench removed, and some of the boot 'adjusted' so there was less cargo space. Leaving a narrow as hell gap of smuggling space, and the thief glanced skeptically at the hitman's shoulders.

"You and your little lady will have to sit a bit... tightly together, admittedly. And quietly, you blow this operation and we'll have a bit of a difference of opinions on how much longer the two of you stay alive."

"Of course." Renato answered for the both of them, examining the cramp space they would have to sit in. "And our luggage?"

"Will have to be handled a touch differently." Announced the overweight slumlord with a dismissive shrug. "It'll be waiting for you on the other side."
So now… did the work they did equate out the possible price of their possessions in Janučkievič’s mind?

Or did the possible future work they might do together more enticing to ensure he’d try to at least keep them respectful of each other?

The hitman and crime boss studied each other warily for a long moment, before Renato inclined his head courteously. As they had started it they might as well see it fully through to where it’d go now it was out of their hands. "Well then, I suppose we’ll be taking our leave now."

"Until later, Sinclair… young miss Primakova."

Sonya glanced at the older man suspiciously from where she had been inspecting the hard 'back' to the much thinner backseat that would be installed after they got in the car’s hidden… pocket space. "My name is Bazanova."

"Hmm… so you say." Agreed the man negligently, waving them on as bodyguards decided to glare at her with various amounts of unimpressed looks.

She and Renato exchanged a set of looks of their own.

"The continuing trials of being a tall bastard?" Started the thief pleasantly, as Janučkievič and his five bodyguards left them to it.

It wasn’t what she really wanted to say but that was likely more than not-tactful, so she was avoiding it for now. Besides which, he was a lot of Italian to cram in somewhere so… tiny.

"You're the one that's going to have to sit on me." Countered the hitman equally as pleasantly, stretching out his spine just that tiny bit more so he fully towered over her the best he could with six feet and change frame when it came to a woman that was five and a half feet even. "I'll also take the opportunity to apologize, in advance."

"For what?" She intended to take the opportunity to nap, because in the dark there wouldn't be a whole lot of anything else to do but talk.

Which violated that 'be quiet' part of being smuggled.

"Of course you would." Muttered Renato a touch despairingly, softly enough it’d stay between them and not them and whoever really wanted to eavesdrop in a semi-busy factory/warehouse affair. "Well, after earlier this winter can't say I'm all that surprised."

Sonya slapped a hand over her face, cursing just about everything out in as many languages as she could as she felt her face heat up a bit. "Shut. Up."

"Ho? What's this now… embarrassed? I didn't think you did that emotion."

"Surprise, I'm human." She snapped back, taking a deep breath and trying fruitlessly to bury the chagrin as deeply as she could before dropping the hand and looking back up at him squarely. "I denied I did that for a couple years. My siblings are taking the opportunity to get in a few well deserved 'I told you so's."

The Mafioso's 'innocent' face absolutely sucked. Massively.

"I now also have a 'medical collar', which has tags inscribed with a phone number to call if someone needs an explanation. With a bell."
"Tatiana's suggestion?" He inquired a bit needlessly given his mind-reading trick, a slightly infuriating smirk starting to crawl across his face.

"Shut up and get in the car."

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 4th of February, 1970 continued. West Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany.)

"I told you."

"Yes, yes." Dismissed the Mafioso flippantly, relentlessly picking off even imaginary specks of dirt that might have clung to his clothing from their smuggling... and then taking off his hat for the third time this hour to inspect it next. "Now then, miss world-class thief, where does one pawn off the belongings of another?"

"...at a pawn shop." Sonya sniffed, checking to ensure that while her nose was freezing cold and likely as red as could be it wasn't dripping or anything like that. "First though, if they're at all intelligent, they'll strip it for hidden compartments or things of a personal nature that might tip off anyone not a fence that it's stolen. Generally unpack it all too, mostly to see what they got to work with. This is assuming they're not pawning the thing off at someone who won't care it's hot, and they have half an idea to share between them."

"How... mundane." Renato set the fedora on his head then cracked his neck, unfolding his frame from the bus stop they had been 'released' at slightly further into West Berlin than she had expected. Their luggage was now two hours late, and neither were at all charitable to assume a great mechanical failure or some kind of raid was going on to cause it. "Then where is Janučkievič's outpost on this side of the Iron Curtain?"

She frowned thoughtfully, gazing off into the air over this hemmed in piece of cramped neighborhood. "Off hand? I don't know... but I bet Maddie can tell us."

"Isn't Maddie's little... den, a touch outside West Berlin? I was fairly certain we were well within West Germany's borders when you took us to meet her."

"One of her sons lives locally around here, and I do know the woman's number."

The hitman inclined his head to her, sweeping an arm down the street they had been extracted from their illicit cargo hold on. "Then lead on, little dragon lady. This is your show now."

"We don't have time to make Janučkievič, or whichever moron decided to make off with our stuff, regret it. Especially if it wasn't shipped at all and is still on the East side." Sonya warned, uncomfortably aware this was supposed to be the year she finally showed up for the brat's birthday on time... and all because Renato was likely making a point of keeping her nearby enough to do some forcible temporary kidnapping if she got 'distracted'. "I can steal it back no matter on which side it is, but that would cause me to backtrack a bit and go around for a hassle-free crossing and cost us time."

He sighed heavily, dark eyes scanning the semi-busy streets ahead as he steadily followed her along the sidewalk. "I'm aware. Frankly, we might just have to do any 'date' thing with you fully aware of it in America at this rate."

"...well, there's..." Not tonight, they were both probably too cranky and grumpy to do more than
find a suitable hotel tonight and sleep for a few solid hours. If brat's religious cult-thing was this
weekend, and they had a few more countries to skip through…

"Your thing for Don Bergamaschi and the Cerrito Crime Family. You planned for it after bambino's
whole thing this weekend."

"Ah, yes. That thing." Which… she'd do while Björn waited in Mafia Land for Verde and Adrik,
even if she was pretty sure she'd have to go out and pick the men up herself in the end. The… castle
she now owned for reasons needed a scrub down to begin with, so a full cleaning and maybe some
grounds keeping could be hired out to the locals to help get things ready for this summer.

The island they worked for really was something you were invited to on either family or syndicate
merits, not because you were unaffiliated to start with. Getting there from a cold start… if anyone
could do it the scientist was probably the only one with the smarts, but if that translated to street-
smarts with or without Adrik's insider's knowledge piled on top…

"...what the hell is in America, anyways?"

"Renato, it's the United States. Fifty some semi-interlocked States and Territories, more or less
autonomous regions you can freely visit between without bothering about customs or passports
needed. Until you get to the higher government levels, then things get kind of the same. They all have
their own variations of laws, state taxes, ideas on what's 'acceptable', and sights to see. Similar
structures, the money spans a great amount of distance, but differing people. What isn't there in the
States?"

"The European Communities."

"Covers half the territory the States does."

"Exactly." Tossed the hitman back a bit repressively. "All the interesting things are in Europe.
History, culture. The Louvre, the water canals of Venice and Amsterdam, the remains of Ancient
Rome, Athens, the nightlife of Paris, London, the Vatican. Scottish Highlands, Italian countryside,
French vineyards, Swedish mountain ranges."

"Greece isn't part of the European Communities yet, neither is Great Britain."

"It's still Europe."

"America has New Orleans. New York, the Big Apple and Broadway. Manhattan. The Grand
Canyon, a massive saltwater lake, five Great freshwater lakes, the Mississippi River. There’re still
massive steam boats with casinos on them you can gamble a fortune away in, any number of
abandoned gold mines and their assorted ghost towns in the West, Chinatown in California to the
French Quarter in Louisiana. For that matter, it's got Hollywood."

He sucked on his teeth for a moment, and when she risked a look backwards the man looked
tempted much to his own disgruntlement.

"I'm not saying it's better than anywhere else with its thousands of years of history." Sonya clarified
likely unhelpfully, now walking backwards because the expression he was pulling was damn near
priceless. "I'm saying it's different. That's pretty much what the US is, across the board. Same
framework, different applications. I don't know another country that spans deserts and a saltwater
lake to tropical islands and two full mountain ranges, the frozen tundra to the swampy bayous,
several different forests types from redwoods to maple trees, and even a petrified forest. You go
about a hundred kilometers in any direction there, not only will the landscape change but the people
making up the local surroundings will differ as well."

"That's not always a good thing."

She shrugged. "Neither is all history, too."

"You're aware it's moderately surprising to hear all this out of a Soviet woman's mouth, yes?"

Humming an accent to show she was fully aware of that, the thief swung around again to keep at least half an eye on where they were going so she could find the main roads and orientate herself again. "As I said, Renato, it's different. And sometimes, different is good."

He quickened his steps until he came up on her side, palming her hip in now what was pretty much his 'usual' thing when walking around with her. "There I might have to concede the point, I think. Different is good sometimes."

"Manhattan might just be your kind of place." Sonya offered fairly, but as she had never visited it ever it was really something she could only say due to reputation alone. "If I recall right, New York had a massive Italian influence you can still find. It might be interesting to see how it's changed from what you know as a native from the 'Old Country'."

"I'm still fairly certain Sicily's countryside or Rome's cityscape would still trump any such thing." Claimed the hitman a touch snobbishly, apparently just to make her roll her eyes at him because he dropped the tangent pretty quickly. "What's close by to San Jose? Since I believe you saw more of California than I did, from what I learned of the situation."

"...San Francisco? Well, Las Vegas is a touch out of the way... but there's still Chinatown, the Golden Gate Bridge, Hollywood..." She trailed off, wondering... "...Alcatraz Island."

"Isn't that a prison?"

The smirk that crawled over her face was probably a bit impish. "Wanna break in?"

"I thought the usual response is to break out of such facilities in our line of work." Renato offered in a faintly wondering tone, following along rather compliantly when she made a sudden turn do to nearly missing the street sign they needed to get to downtown West Berlin even if she very nearly shoulder checked his ribcage. "Isn't it currently occupied by the Native Americans of the land?"

Was it?

Hmm...

"And? It's no fun without the risk of discovery."

"I am more than sold, little dragon lady. As long as I'm allowed to organize an actual date sometime this month."

"Oh... am I rushing you?" Well, more like derailing something he wanted to try for her own interests... was it good or bad he was fully interested too?

There was taking advantage of his interests to avoid a point she was unsure of. Which might be bad of her.

"No, nothing like that. I don't mind, I greatly like your taste in humor seems to be a touch ridiculous and over the top. I'm rather fond of such things myself, admittedly." Icy fingertips yet again dipped
into the waistband of her slacks but given how cold it was and how long they were waiting out here… for a Sun user of his quality to actually have heat retention issues it was somewhat actually concerning, so she ignored it. "America is probably a better idea than what I had, the risk of discovery around these parts is a bit high."

"…discovery?"

"If you replace a friend with someone that looks somewhat like a dead friend, it's somewhat eerie coincidence. If you replace an ex with someone that looks exactly like a dead lover, it's a bit noticeable and possibly creepy. I'd rather not do that to you." Renato explained, a touch depressively now. "You don't deserve that kind of reputation, and I can wait if I have to. A lot of my informant network is European, and all it takes is one loudmouth."

"Well… alright, but that's a lot of territory." Sonya might find that a bit of a reach, who cared what people looked like and looked similar to which dead person but then again she was finding herself a bit deficient in a few things she hadn't thought she'd be.

Maybe it was a thing, and she just never cottoned on?

Human behaviors did sometimes irritate and annoy her, who's to say this wouldn't be another thing?

"I've found if it is remotely a statistical probability… it's wise to plan for it." Drawled the man next, a touch sarcastically this time as the conversation likely hit some kind of sore point. "I've seen completely brilliant things come from those I would've sworn on the Holy Bible itself that they were incompetent morons, and the reverse can certainly be true with those I thought competent pulling completely suicidal shit. I'd rather not compromise what I'm about to try with unknowingly gambling on fool's luck."

"Isn't that just human nature?" She wondered aloud, mostly for the benefit of those passing them on the sidewalk than from any true need to speak her thoughts. "No one ever has completely avoided some kind of fuck up in their lives. Hindsight and the benefit of knowing the full situation outside of right then sometimes does make fools of us all, no matter how carefully one tries to plan things out."

He hummed and turned that over in his mind for a second, glancing upwards to the mostly clear late afternoon sky as they plodded relatively cleared streets for Maddie's middle-eldest son and where he lived. "Point. Then again, I'm almost to the point I can drop off completely and make a few mafia groups… nervous. Maybe another month, and to trip right at the finish line would be terribly embarrassing."

…she had mostly managed to forget this was one of the last times she'd be able to be out and about with just 'Renato', not whichever murderous Sun Flame using hitman would replace his current 'self'.

"…sorry."

"It's… something to keep in mind." Refuted the thief dismissively, pinching the bridge of her nose mostly just so the heat reflection from her leather gloved fingers would warm up her sinus cavity and stop the ache. "I am going to miss you, Renato. Even if you can be an infuriating asshole sometimes."

"I'll try to make it quick and painless, at least the 'announcement' for it." Offered said sometimes infuriating Mafioso blandly. "Slightly off topic, but… do you mind…?"

Sonya glanced up, a touch confused, then shook her head when she saw he was pointing a thumb over his shoulder on the side she wasn't on. "No. You can have Janučkiević, I certainly will never
"use him again so him going suddenly bankrupt or flat out dead won't bother me much."

"Delightful. Another for the list, then."

"Do you… actually have a list of people you want dead in the next few years?"

Again, the man's innocent look sucked. A bit ruined this time by the smirk that fought for space in his expression to boot.

She thought about it. "If you get up to Russia, can I tack something on? Entirely optional, and just something to nibble at if you're in the mood for something different?"

"…ho?" Renato cocked an eyebrow curiously. "I'm listening."

(Thursday the 5th of February, 1970. Moscow School #3054, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Why?"

"I don't want to always put everyone asleep." Mingxia explained to Anna the Mirror Lady, wary of her monstrous spider but it seems the thing had been banned from school grounds as it was never there. "If I ever use my Flames, I would want it to be targeted. To calm this person and not another or the rest of the room. For what I intend to do, enough care will ensure I don't panic and put a whole room to sleep if ever pressed outside my comfort zone."

The dark haired if extremely pale young woman considered her proposal fully, which was the biggest blessing those actually in authority roles had to the young Chinese teenager displaced in their midst.

Being able to question what she learned and what use it could be put to was still somewhat bewildering sometimes, but she was getting used to it with the school-wide encouragement they were all under. The possibility to calm a witness and not Tranquilize an entire courthouse was very enticing to Mingxia, and if used sparingly she might be able to slide it under the notice of many as 'just something about' her manner.

Hence why, even if the Mirror Lady's pet scared her near-witless, she would converse with someone she was somewhat sure held a component to what she wanted.

…that she could reach easily. Usov and the male Mists tended to… not be around ever unless something was going on. While she could interrupt, especially for scholastic reasons as this… it would be rude.

"Mist Flames, from the outside at least, seem to be intent driven. You can confuse this person looking at something, but you can also ensure whomever else is immune to your Constructed understanding." Continued the young Rain after the Mirror Lady gestured for her to expand on the topic. "Larion the Rain and the rest recently found a method by which Rains can 'stack' the effects of their Flames on a target. Which is only possible in one other Flame type, yours. Maybe there's more similarities, or I can pick and choose who I Tranquilize instead of just 'everyone'."

"…they did that because the Boss Lady specifically challenged them to do it, by throwing off their initial attempts easily to the point it looked or was effortless." Anna explained for her in return, a touch amused by the situation if she was reading something as confusing as a Mist correctly. "I think
they intend to try ambushing her with the entirety of the Rain section and see if that puts a dent in the Boss Lady's Stormy immunity. Excuse me one second."

Turning completely around, the woman in charge of the girl's dorms pulled something rather alive and unhappy to be handled creature out of a reflective surface and tossed it in the box set next to her office door. The mirror behind her rippled even after her hand had been removed, and the look into another girl's dorm room from what seemed to be a vanity mirror revealed three very surprised girls staring blankly back into Anna's currently dark blue eyes.

"May I ask, again, that any hazing attempt be conducted in easily cleaned up areas. Not the dorms, within which you also live for part of the week. Ladies."

One of them, a girl with brassy bright copper curls paired with a smattering of freckles over delicately pale skin that made Mingxia somewhat self-conscious of her straight black hair and tanner complexion, cheerfully grinned back into the mirrored portal. "Sorry, Mirror Lady. Won't happen again."

"As this is the fifth time I have had to inform you, Miss Fink, please learn to lie better."

"As always, I appreciate the opportunity to practice."

"I'm sure." Countered Anna patiently, examining the hand that gripped whatever living thing she had pulled likely right out of their hands and was now squeaking irritably in a box. "If you continue to fail so horribly, I might see it in my little black heart to arrange some remedial lessons for you."

Fink's features froze for a split second, torn between confusion and a touch of horror. "…that won't be necessary, Mirror Lady. I appreciate the consideration, though."

The Rain observing the interaction winced at the very idea of a Mist giving someone lessons in lying. More than three in the same room was already hard to take for her, and Mists with a point to prove were not very… nice about their abilities to bend reality.

"As for your own proposal, Miss Sōng, I find it interesting enough to assist you in finding a method by which to focus-direct Rain Flames for specific purposes." Anna continued their discussion as she turned around and reseated herself in her office chair, a very fluffy one that almost looked like an armchair if you concentrated really hard. "Although... before you dig into any major project please keep in mind we only have a few more months here."

Mingxia nodded, a touch distractedly. "Is Miss Fink part of the criminal part of the school or the Flame group?"

"Criminal side only, she doesn't have Flames. That is why she's resorted to sticking some kind of creature into the room of a Sun that recently showed her up a bit thoughtlessly for the consequences she'll make apparent. You can just ask, Miss Sōng. We're listening."

"I just did."

The Mirror Lady's smirk was a touch… not comforting as she got up to investigate her squeaking guest. "I mean even outside this office, little one. You're attached to the Boss Lady now, we're keeping both an ear and an eye out for you. Not literally, mind you... but well, I suppose that's also possible if you feel the need."

"...what is that thing?" Asked the Rain, instead of give thought to floating eyeballs and dismembered but still living ears following her invisibly.
If she made it obvious she was thinking about it, likely a student Mist would take up the 'gauntlet' to ensure she knew why they wouldn't via actually doing it for a while. All in the aims of educational purposes, of course.

Both the rat-like tiny beaver animal and the very thought put in her mind by Anna were ick. "A young Russian mole-rat." Explained the Mist, holding up the creature so it was fully visible. Along with dark blue eyes to match the head of the girl's dorm, probably to ensure the creature remained pacified as it was removed from the building. "Now then, Miss Sōng? I suggest you call it a day a touch early. From what the others have informed me of, you have a surprise waiting at the gates."

Not about to question how she'd know that, Russian Mists had networked themselves together to the point they knew everything or otherwise they'd get obsessive about learning new information presented to them, she just nodded instead. "Thank you for your time, Mirror Lady."

"As we can split off copies of ourselves, I have a whole lot of time to give out now." Dismissed Anna brightly, lightly tossing the creature in her hands through her mirror again… to what looked to be an attic room with a still nightmarish spider sitting patiently in a massively ornate web spanning from floorboards to ceiling rafters to even the tiny window that backlit it.

The monstrous Pavuchky pounced on the offered prey lightning quick, to the point Mingxia blinked and the squealing creature was already half wrapped in a silk cocoon and being dragged back to the intricate web it lived on as paws twitched feebly. The rat-creature was about palm sized, the outlandishly colorful spider was easily five times that now.

It was also terrifyingly silent, all that could be heard was the weakening squeaks and attempts to squeal through spider silk and maybe a soft rustling. Which wasn't coming from the grotesque arachnid.

That would give her nightmares for weeks.

With a proud and pleased little sigh as she admired her dreadful pet, the Mist merely waved a hand as the Rain carefully edged out of her seat and then backed out of her office so as to not turn her back to the mirror-portal thing or invited the massive spider to chase her.

…it was entirely possible Miss Anna didn't bring her pet around to the school because there was no way anything like Pavuchky was remotely natural, and therefore explaining its existence to anyone outside of the umbrella of Flame use knowledge was nigh on impossible.

Mingxia would take it to mean at least the Mirror Lady did have some sense of what was socially acceptable still instead of making those that wouldn't or couldn't understand just not see what would give them issues.

There was that Misty-Lightning guy that occasionally checked into the Flame training section, seemingly the oldest of both groups but picked on for having traits of a different section anyways, who tended to just make people forget they were annoyed or angry with him if he found their attention 'tiresome'.

Maybe helping Master Yaozu with his 'is it possible to defy that which is another's will' experimentation should be a thing to do.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 5th of February, 1970 continued. Moscow School #3054, Moscow, Russian
Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Fong grunted, a touch surprised by how much weight his little sister had put on over a bare few months, and hugged her back so he didn't drop the bag he was carrying to awkward angles. "It is nice to see you too, Mingxia."

Then again, his first exile to Mafia Land also put more weight on him than he was used to being. Some of it might be just padding in the winter gear she was bundled up sensibly within, but more than enough of it had to be from getting fed enough regularly for what her size should have been.

Which caused him a small pang of regret that he hadn't been able to help that.

"Big brother! You didn't tell me you were coming!"

"It's your first New Year's both away from my side and outside of China, how could I not?" He reminded her, squeezing back as she burrowed into his probably inadequate coat for how terribly bitter Russian winters seemed to be. "I brought a few things with me, as to keep sifu's griping to a minimum and so you have something from home this coming year."

"I kind of missed it, sifu muttering as he moves about." She informed him demurely, spoiled by a small smirk as she slid backwards to allow him space finally. "It's comforting, as long as he's complaining as usual everything's fine. But, please tell me you brought wine. He's very unhappy with the local idea of 'acceptable drinks'."

"And a few other bits for at least the traditional meals tomorrow, but I am afraid you will have to be the one to cook it." Allowed the Storm, returning her wry smile with a fond one of his own. "I will also admit I do not know the way from here. I apparently know the place you both now live at, but the streets…"

His little sister practically glided ahead, over the wretchedly treacherous planes of ice hidden by snow drifts and freshly plowed street sides. "I know, Miss Sonya's brother Cherep spent a few weeks guiding me around so I'd know how to get to a couple places. I've only recently been skipping visiting where my section goes to practice, but I know the way home from here."

"The… purple man, right?" The one she had been with while he very unwisely cornered her in a hospital waiting room while her mother gave birth to her new sibling. "I admit, I haven't actually met him yet myself."

"He's really nice. He had a Rainy friend going through the same lessons I was given to get caught up, and as his friend was an adult and knew the way home for him Mister Cherep took the time to teach me the way home for me."

Fong kind of had to focus on the inadequately plowed sidewalks more than his little sister in order to not slip, but Mingxia had few of the issues he seemed to have with the local terrain. "He also taught you to walk on snow, I take it?"

Mingxia whirled around, and as a martial artist himself he now knew that was a trained maneuver and not just her happiness with him showing up for the festivities tomorrow given life through movement, to give him an impish look. "Big brother, I have no idea what you might mean."

The likely dry look he tried to give her in return completely bounced off the young Rain's inner serenity. "If you insist, Ming."

She giggled, more when he immediately felt his left foot try to slide out from underneath himself and he very nearly took an embarrassing header into a snow drift more than waist high.
Which was apparently rather low for the accumulation of icy flakes around here.

Retracing her steps back to his side, she gestured to her feet. "Russians wear heavy boots for a reason. The deep treads give them more grip on slippery things and keeps them nicely off the cold and sometimes very wet ground. I asked Miss Galina for a pair, and while heavier than I was used to they keep my toes nice and warm."

Comparing the half an inch of material that separated her from the ground, then at his traditional and mainly thin cloth shoes, the Storm sighed heavily before attempting to find a less slippery spot to continue walking on. "I see."

"Sifu is likely instructing Scruffy in Tai Chi right now." Mingxia informed him slightly more seriously, as he regained his balance. "They should be done before we get there. I believe, if you ask, my science teacher will not mind helping you sort out your own wardrobe for a Russian winter, big brother."

"How are your lessons going?" Fong asked, interested perhaps a touch more for the mysterious glimpses into what subjects a heavily criminal influenced school might teach students like her and not wanting to admit he had a limited amount of time to spend here. "Are you taking some kind of self-defense training on the side, or is sifu giving you more lessons?"

"Mmm, no. It's optional ballet training, even sifu was surprised it was offered to any that wanted it. And, well," some of her enthusiasm was reduced as she adopted a ponderous expression, which made him want to punch whoever it was that made her feel less than happy with her situation, "I had to catch up in a few classes. More than I expected, actually. I was horribly behind, especially in geography and history. And… I'm not very good at math, I'm afraid."

"I would place a wager you are better than I am in each."

While it did bolster her smile, it wasn't nearly enough in his opinion. Instead, his little sister shook her head before peering back up at him. "You are not stupid, big brother. There was the expected, I didn't know any Russian history but that was understood as I am Chinese and we 'exchange' students are allowed to self-study it alongside Chinese history. I didn't know even how to hold a gun, much less shoot it, either."

Fong blinked down at red eyes that matched his own. "A… gun?"

"It's mandated by the Soviet government. All schools teach their students how to handle at least small arms." Explained Mingxia a bit bewilderedly. "I'm apparently rather decent with a rifle, more than I am with a handgun. Aside that, and I am better at Home Economics than most of my class and everyone is more or less the same for physical education, I… did not know how big the world really was, nor what science could explain."

She was now a better shot than him, as he had never learned to actually shoot the things. Interesting.

"The world being big is something you really have to experience rather than learn about to fully understand. I'm afraid that kind of jolting bewilderment will always be there, but eventually it fades into 'what's new here?' and sometimes excitement to see new things." It was probably a bad attempt at comfort but then again, he still had some remote issues traveling so far from the 'Far East'. "I don't know anything about 'science', to be truthful."

"That's part of the issue, big brother. What we knew while in Hong Kong, and what is known in other places in the world, are sometimes terribly far apart from each other."
"And now you can learn."

Fong wasn't really sorry she hadn't had the opportunity before, schools in China weren't at all safe right now. It was highly likely, if he or Yaozu had sent her to the local schoolhouse, she would've gotten caught up in the Red Guard debacle even if she didn't wish to. Now she was safe to learn everything she wanted, and he was happy for her taking it so seriously to the point she worried over the implications.

…if a bit annoyed she was worried at all, yet not able to actively fight something as intangible as ignorance with physical force. That would require political maneuvering, no little amount of either public sway or massive amounts of blackmail, and even then might not be addressed completely to her satisfaction. He wasn't very skilled in those arts.

The trial of being at least a decent brother was balancing between brutalizing whatever tried to take away his little sister's smile and letting her explore life herself. Even if that meant letting her explore the edges of a razor-sharp canyon full of intents and other people, which he found somewhat hard sometimes.

He kind of dreaded the first time she fancied herself in love with someone he couldn't immediately remove from the land of the living if they so much as glanced at her wrong because she would get upset with him then.

…well, now said future suitor would have to contend with the very Russian that was sponsoring his little sister's scholastic career. Fong, brightened by the prospect someone else would share that headache of being the obstacle to any romantic foolishness anyone would have to face to steal his little sister away, took in what subject she was currently expounding for him and what they hadn't known.

She was massively happier out and about, allowed to grow and learn and be outside without risking anything vital if she so chose. He was honestly glad to see it.
(Friday the 6th of February, 1970. Reggio Calabria Cathedral in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Bova, Calabria, Italian Republic.)

"Sonya, this is His Most Reverend Excellency Giovanni Ferro, Bishop of Reggio Calabria. Your Excellency, this is Shamal Tringali Nikishin's godmother Sonya Arsenevna Bazanova, from the Soviet Union, here to witness Shamal's First Communion and celebrate him reaching a milestone with us."

Blinking twice at the man she had been just introduced to, because this certainly wasn't what she expected at all when he offered a 'mafia priest' to talk to, she stared as Renato very obligingly removed his fedora then kneeled and kissed the man's extended ring finger and the rock sitting there.

…this was now actually slightly disturbing. In spades.

Nice breezy office, still incredibly disturbing contents.

"Just to be clear, you're the first Bishop I've ever met and I have no idea what to do." Sonya announced likely a touch hastily when she became the new man's full focus, embarrassingly aware she likely just fucked that up all over the place.

"It was explained to me, my child. Be at peace, I am fully aware of the reasons you both have sought a moment of my time." Gracefully, in a way that was likely polished and refined from a lifetime and then some of public speaking and directing religious ceremonies, the apparent Bishop of this Cathedral invited them to seat themselves before his very massively cluttered desk. "Come, speak what troubles your mind to me."

"All of it? …um," looking at the still hat-less hitman now standing with her, he mouthed 'your excellency' so she'd know that was also a title she could call him without issuing insult, "…your Excellency? I'm aware it's more or less insulting when I say and question views others hold skeptically, even if I don't mean to be."

Seating himself with a bit of a tired sigh for the work laid out that seems to be undone, or maybe just from old bones because he was easily twice her age if a touch prematurely bald under that skull cap, Bishop Giovanni Ferro instead gave her his full attention as he placed his folded hands before him on said somewhat papered desktop. "How else would you learn? You are seeking more information, to understand what we do and your duties as a godmother to a member of my congregation. It is all you can do as a fallible human on this earth chosen to guard and guide the young entrusted to you to seek clarification on his needs, and it is all I can do as a leader of this flock to ease your way to true understanding."

Well, point to the Bishop. Even if 'true understanding' sounded a touch ominous, or maybe that was just her sudden onslaught of nerves speaking.

Gingerly stealing forward and encouraged by the still polite patience the man had with her even if she probably was being sort of rude doubting him and his intentions to hear her out to his face, she slid into one of the chairs available for guests to this office. "To start with… and so I know the limits of this, you are aware I am not entirely… nice?"

Renato snorted, so she kicked him in the ankle as he picked the seat next to her to wait this out in.
"I am. This is the birthplace of the Vongola, the churches that I manage includes a number of parishes in the Vongola Famiglia's main home territory. I am aware of the elements that make up the diocese I have been appointed to, young lady."

Sonya glanced over at the hitman, cocking an eyebrow for both confirmation and if he knew of Dying Will Flames as well. He gave her back a smirk but not a nod, so she assumed some parts of it weren't entirely admitted to. At least to this man, it was possible priests a lot more remote than in whatever religious authority there was were given the whole picture.

Were religious structures included in the Vow of Silence?

The military was right out, for semi-obvious but mostly unconfirmed reasons. However, she still didn't know if the government wasn't allowed or now if religious organizations were or not.

"...the back of your hair is sticking up." Turning back to the Bishop while he dealt with his hat-hair issues, why he didn't put the damn thing back on again was a little beyond her, she coughed a bit uncomfortably at the wry smile aimed in her direction. "I... apologize. I am aware doubting you to your face is rude, but the stakes alone..."

"Prudence in the face of the unknown is not always a sin, although neither is it a virtue when taken too far. Moderation, my child, is the key to balancing between them."

"Right..." She couldn't really help it, this was a religious man and she had questions on the mechanics of his faith. It was all sorts of awkward, and the asshole next to her could've told her they weren't just going to see any priest but a really important one. "I, through the results of my work in my homeland, have sourced myself a sixteenth century Septuagint version of your 'holy' book. I need to learn a variant of Greek first, but I would like to at least read through a bible before I ask about your... uh, doctrine."

"An interesting choice." Ferro announced evenly, detangling a hand just to smooth it over the chain and cross hanging from his neck as he leaned back slightly in his chair. "May I ask what motivated it?"

"I didn't actually intend to own the book specifically, it came to me through a series of events. However, now that I have it I may as well make use of the tools available to me in order to not waste anyone's time. A thief I might be by my very nature, I draw the line at stealing religious scriptures just to own them."

If it was a book she stole for other reasons, and there were religious scriptures within it, it was entirely different.

The concession of a long-held decision, even one with caveats, earned her a nod. "On behalf of my brethren, who may never know of your restraint within their chapels or libraries, I thank you. If you have questions or indeed if you ever feel like sharing your Holy Book with us, even if only through your godchild, I would appreciate it."

"...sure." If Shamal wanted to take it to church, or Mass, she didn't greatly care. Otherwise it was her book and it would remain so now that she had it. "My current question, and concern if I must be honest, is what is one's 'First Communion' and why is it done at seven years of age?"

The very darkly dress man nodded slowly again. "The third sacrament, the first reception of the Eucharist, is given once a young Catholic reaches the point by which they can understand moral responsibility and reason. More than just understanding good from bad, sin from virtue, it is also at which point an individual can reason for themselves which choice before them would be in standing
for a God-fearing individual and which is the sinful temptation before them."

Third? "What happens before that? The first two… sacraments?"

"Baptism and their first confession."

"I know of confession… but what is the First confession of?"

"Sin, my child." Ferro informed her simply. "Baptism occurs when someone converts to Christianity or shortly after one is born. Confession, the first one, shows that reason can be and will be applied to their actions going forward now they no longer have the pure innocence of childhood. To recognize a moral disorder in their actions or venial sins they might have performed or become a part of and realize such is wrong."

Sonya glanced at the man next to her. "Was Shamal ever baptized?"

"He's Italian, of course he's been baptized." Renato informed her blandly. "It was in his records when I picked him up from the police station, everything on that end is as it should be."

"Like I would know that, Renato."

Frowning a touch sharply at first, the hitman considered her thoughtfully and nearly visibly rethought what he had been about to say. "I suppose. I didn't ever tell you, little dragon lady, because I don't think of it. Actually, until I realized just now, I would've assumed you've been baptized as a matter of course as well."

Oh, there was a question. She… didn't think she ever was. "…I don't actually know, and I'm highly reluctant to actually speak to my father about if I was or not. Religion in Soviet Russia, or even just Moscow's streets, seems to be a touchy subject these days."

The other Italian in the room appeared thoughtful when she turned back to him. "If you feel the lack affects you, my child, any House of God would be more than pleased to fold you into their flock and give you a baptism."

"I'm only vaguely sure what that is, so any lack would never have been apparent to me before. Although I do appreciate the consideration and offer to rectify it, your Excellency. She'd… think on it later. "If I may continue on this tangent… does Shamal have to make something up? Should we review things he's done recently for his 'first' Confession? Or-"

"It is up to the individual involved, but the only time a 'fake' confession is use is to show and instruct a child on how one performs confession for later in life. Of which, young Nikishin already knows and is prepared for." Interrupted the Bishop a touch patiently, shaking his head as he straightened up in his office chair. "It is not earth shaking, nor should it be terrifying, to confess. Errors are human and remembering your error then attempting to make amends for it should be encouraged."

"We'll talk to him tonight, little dragon lady." Renato chipped in while she pondered that over. "We've got all of dinner or maybe lunch if we finish here sometime soon, I can guide you both through the process. So you're familiar and comfortable with it, and to remind him of the procedures again."

Staring back at him flatly, Sonya huffed. "Your religion is complex."

"It's very old."

Tisking, she sat back in the admittedly well-padded visitor's chair herself and examined the Bishop
setting aside time to talk to her. "Returning to the main topic, your Excellency, and this age of being able to reason for the underlying principle of why this First Communion is happening now…"

The man nodded encouragingly.

"I'm… well, concerned. It is entirely within your right to do as you believe in, I do not mean to nitpick that. However, it seems to me seven would be way too early for a child to reflect on and commit to a belief in truth. I'm not sure, and therefore why I seek an answer now, but I don't believe Shamal's ever thought of religion as something to believe in instead of something to just go along with. Is it… right to question that? Proper? Is there a point I should, an age or if he ever expresses doubt, or is it insulting for a non-Catholic to question that? I'm… unsure."

"The question is fundamentally different for one such as you, who went without God being a main staple in your life and are only confronting the lack now, and a young Catholic child to whom God is and had always been a large part of their lives and brought up to believe. For your godchild, and any Catholic at his age or otherwise going through the same steps, it isn't a question of commitment to understanding but of his very lifestyle." Allowed Bishop Ferro thoughtfully, cupping a hand to the bottom of his chin as he pondered over her expressed concerns for a long moment before focusing back on her. "It is a position to be aware of when dealing with outsiders to our faith, and as a parent attempting to guard the young innocent in your care entirely a concern. I do not believe it is rude, as you do not seem against young Shamal being Catholic when you are not interested, but it should be handled delicately."

"Shamal can be whatever he wants to be." Agreed the thief diplomatically as she could, unsure if she had insulted anyone in the office yet or not. "It's his life, his choice to make, and I can't pick for him as I don't know. I just want to be sure he's fully equipped in everything as he needs to be, but I can't do that if I'm not aware of what is or isn't right and the reasons why."

"I, or Sinclair, will speak with him about your concerns." Decided the man after some more thought in a very silent office. "If you do not feel as it is a subject you can approach safely, as it seems to be."

Was his advice given to prevent her asking the kid what he really thought, and therefore prevent the possibility she would interject doubt in him about a faith in the divine, or because it wasn't something he thought her equipped to talk about?

"I think I should, Your Excellency. If only so my very suspicious, untrusting companion here can sit in and make her position clear." Renato drawled, not entirely sarcastically but enough so that she winced slightly.

Turning to the hitman, she shot him an aggravated glare. "I would've asked you in the first place, if you hadn't kept pushing me to talk to a priest I don't know about this instead."

He went still, which was confusing until she turned back to the Bishop and caught the edge of the stern look the man was aiming the Mafioso's way. Sonya blinked innocently when attention went back to her, which earned her a huffy laugh-sigh from the moderately older man as he resettled himself in his well-padded chair.

"I am sorry, my child. This must have been brewing for a while, and I do appreciate you did clarify things to me instead of asking just anyone that holds Catholic Christian beliefs that if handled badly could have been rather insulting. Your concern for the strength of our faith is touching, even if you do not share it." The man's mouth quirked up, glancing somewhat distractedly at the pile of work waiting on him to finish. "I can assure you, we are made of sterner stuff. Your good intentions does you well, bless you."
"…thank you?" She tried, uncertain what the proper response to that should be. "I have one last question that needs to be addressed… well, not now but certainly soon. I've purchased a property much further north than this, due to not wishing to infringe on Vongola territory with myself and my peoples' presence. How does a Catholic… move 'churches'?"

"I will write young Nikishin a letter of introduction, when you and your godchild find a local church you both like simply give the letter to the pastor in charge of the parish." Here the Bishop grimaced slightly, more puzzled and internally directed than at her. "Churches that are 'mafia safe' are few, may I ask where you will be relocating your godson?"

"Moneglia, in the Province of Genoa. Liguria region." Given what Bjørn had to say about it just about everyone local or not knew where she was moving to, so that much wasn't worth it to gloss over.

"I will seek the stance of the Archdiocese of Genoa, the Diocese of Chiavari, and the local churches on the topics of crime and the mafia. Then have the information relayed to you." Ferro informed her rather helpfully. "Although the confessional is sacred, no matter which priest it is they will hold their silence about what sin is confessed, if the pastors are simply uncomfortable with servicing the spiritual health of someone focused on that life for the safety of us all it should be known to all beforehand."

"I do not mind making the trip down here if Shamal needs it." Sonya offered on her own end, because he really didn't have to put effort into smoothing the way for just anyone when from the sounds of it a letter normally did it. "There is a local train station to my… new home."

"The Cardinals and Archbishops are usually aware of such conflicts their flocks might face, my child. You may not have to travel so far just for your godchild's comfort, but such an offer is appreciated. Rather, I believe I can arm you with a list of mafia friendly churches more locally to the Province of Genoa itself in preparation of any upsets you are not sure how to handle."

"Alright." The impression that she was somehow incapable to explain something Shamal wanted to know rankled a bit, but without the hitman she was a bit deficient in anything 'spiritual' right now.

She could work as fast as she might but learning something hastily was just a way to make more errors.

"Out of questions?"

"For now, I'd like to review what I have already before posing more and there's nothing else major coming up shortly I'm concerned by. As far as I know." Admitted the Russian to the Catholic Bishop a touch wryly. "I'm not moving Shamal until his school year is done, so preparations to shift churches can certainly wait until you figure out the lay of the land and after this… First Communion thing."

"An acceptable timeline." Ferro agreed in a tone that could only really be called 'peacefully'. "Then I will see the both of you again come Sunday Mass, my children. The Lord be with you."

"And also with you, Your Excellency." Renato responded for them as he got up, which was fantastic because she had no idea how to respond to that politely. Accepting the hand held out for her, Sonya bobbed a nod to the elderly man herself.

"Sinclair." Called the Bishop before they could leave his office, pinning the hitman with a patiently stern look over the papers he had picked up. "Being aware you might not be the best one to speak to your fellow godparent about her concerns is one thing, leaving her to flounder in uncertainty rather
cruelly is another."

Hesitating a moment, the Mafioso dipped his head to acknowledge that point before opening the doors for her.

She at least waited for the heavy walnut doors to be shut first. "Someone's in trouble."

"You, little dragon lady, should rethink that."

"Ho?"

"Otherwise I won't protect you from all those little Italian matrons that will be positively aghast you're not Catholic and yet are attending Mass this Sunday with us."

"I think, as long as I keep my mouth shut, I'll be fine."

The grin Renato shot her was not particularly encouraging. "We won't be the only members of the Mafia there. There will be a couple others that will know."

"And if I'm attending Mass with Catholics, how many will assume I'm Catholic without asking?"

Sonya countered suspiciously, smirking when the man scowled. "Exactly. I think I'm safe enough."

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 6th of February, 1970 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Sonya!" Practically leaping down one of the main staircases, Fiorella dashed the distance before the Russian could disappear to do whatever she was visiting for. "Can I speak with you?"

Grey eyes blinked at her curiously and a little warily for her haste, a glance given to the man she was accompanying, and the other woman lifted a shoulder in a shrug as she turned back to her. "Sure? As far as I'm aware, the brat I'm here for won't get out of school for another hour or so. So, we can't make off with him for his birthday just yet anyways."

"Actually, I believe they're on a bus heading here. But yes, we are a touch remote out here for the children's schooling. But do please wish him happy birthday from me as well tomorrow." The manor home she lived in was much too grand for even just an extended family and some bodyguards, Fiorella rather adored that half of it was reserved to be an orphanage. She and her family would never be able to use all that space, and it was being put to some very good work instead of rarely aired out for parties. "I wanted to ask, and only if you don't mind, if I and Federico and maybe his brothers attend your young Shamal's First Communion?"

She stared back blankly. "...I thought it was a big thing, and there'd be more than just the brat going through it?"

"...are Russians not Catholic?"

"...no?"

"I think, ladies," Sinclair interjected a touch pointedly but mainly politely, "this discussion should move a few doors down. Lady Vongola, Sonya's explained most of the Soviet Union as atheists and we're currently educating her to the process for Shamal's milestones. A second opinion would be greatly appreciated, as both a mother and a Catholic yourself."

Sonya glanced up at him suspiciously, then rolled up her left sleeve even as she rolled her eyes. "If
"I was not scared, I was being cautious." Sniffed the man faux arrogantly, batting a hand dismissively as the woman between them piled a curious assortment of chains and tiny weapon charms onto the plate the footman waiting by the doors was holding. "Stop getting me in trouble."

Fiorella, adjusting to the fact Sonya wasn't Catholic after a bit of thought, smiled at them both. "If I can get your agreement to let us observe the process, Federico's First Communion is next year."

"...sure." Agreed the Russian warily, obviously confused but not seeing any harm to it to deny her request for what she probably didn't fully understand. "Is there... certain dates used for a 'First' Communion, or is it just held some point after a kid turns seven?"

"It depends on the parish, and the priests within. First Communion Mass is a specific date normally, usually done in the spring after Lent, but with high profile children involved some of the churches stagger when they hold it and for whom randomly. It is usually posted some weeks beforehand otherwise." A bit odd to need to tell a fully-grown woman this, but she could adapt. "Do you have a Bible? It's... well, generally a thing to give the children either a Bible passed on from their parents or one to own themselves here for their First Communion Mass."

"I have a copy of your book." Digging into her somewhat battered looking purse, the blonde pulled a massively ornate and bejeweled Bible out of its depths.

Fiorella stared at the innocently ragged looking satchel suspiciously for a second. How in the world had she fit that in there? Much less carry the heavy looking book of scriptures bound in so much metal without notable strain?

"Are... all 'Clouds' very strong?" Sonya had crushed polished and carved wood in her bare hands last Christmas, Fiorella hadn't connected that to 'always stronger' rather than just 'when in pain'. Foolishly perhaps, but she had been given a bit of resistance to learning more about Dying Will Flames from those that had the ability.

"Depends on how one's initial ability manifests." She informed her absentley, examining the tome in her hands critically. "...I should've had this thing rebound before now. Hindsight, I guess. I didn't intend to read it until I understood Greek, but as I had no idea what would be needed for this celebration thing I sent it along to my Lackey just in case."

"...how one's ability manifests?" Echoed the slightly older brunette, confused.

Grey eyes flicked back up at her curiously. "They're Dying Will Flames for a reason, Lady Vongola. Usually, in most cases unless you get into generational family lines when it's by example instead, it is an ability that becomes apparent when one believes they are about to die... and they deny such with pure willpower alone."

Oh. Oh dear.

Wincing, as when she put into that into context a few of her past questions on the phenomena became horribly insensitive and tactless, Fiorella bit her lower lip harshly to keep from actually cringing. "I... see. Miss Bazanova, I have then been very rude to a few individuals around here... to prevent a recurrence, can I ask you a few questions on Dying Will Flames? Even if they are insensitive?"

The ancient and carefully elaborate Bible was folded to her modest chest, and the Russian turned to fully face Fiorella before she answered. "As long as you excuse me when I question something
Catholic and end up being insensitive, I guess I won't mind such an exchange. I'm not a full expert, I know more about Clouds, Suns, Mists, and some about Storms, Lightnings, and Rains."

"More than good enough, thank you." She could then get 'Sky' from either her husband or her mother-in-law and confirm things through her Timoteo's Guardians. Either way, it was an avenue of exchange she could at least count on if she ran into another insensitive topic she was blundering into.

It was nice to have the actual titles explained to her and what uses they were normally put to, even if she didn't know why others would still try to impress a 'Sky' with a full array of 'Guardians'. Finding out other things, aside 'personality types' that seem rather… rigid to her, was a touch difficult with a limited number of people she knew were Flame users around here.

"Little dragon lady… first of all, that book in your hands is entirely too much. Though I'm not surprised you own something like that." Sinclair suddenly spoke up, eyeing the object in question skeptically. "Secondly, I have a Bible that was owned by his father the brat can use. That might be a bit over the top to give him for his first Mass as a young Catholic instead of as an innocent, and unintentionally make the others feel a bit… under prepared."

"That's a good point." Fiorella admitted, glancing back to the object in question.

It was lovingly anointed with jewels and gilt, the painstaking craftsmanship only tarnished by a sort of distinguished age was well apparent even with what little could be inspected around the other woman's arms, more a thing the Bishop should read from or a family heirloom kept in a place of pride than a personal Bible to carry with someone everywhere.

"Um, additionally… would young Shamal even be able to lift that?"

Sonya shrugged a shoulder again. "He's a Mist, he can literally do whatever he wants to."

"Really?"

"It's a good rule of thumb. If they tell you something you think is outlandish odds are it is utterly true, and you should take any mention as the warning it is."

Croquant Bouche had told her a few things over the years she had thought were in jest, had he been completely serious instead?

Well now, Fiorella had all of five minutes of Sonya's absently given assistance and already two things she thought she knew had been turned on their heads. The people around here weren't being difficult intentionally, they were somewhat insulted or reminded of horrible experiences she was being insensitive about… and Croquant either actually didn't have a sense of humor or had one she didn't realize was there.

"I think," she started delicately, refocusing on the Russian giving her polite attention for what she might say next, "I am going to enjoy having you around, Sonya. Do you mind if I visit or ring you up now and again, if I have any questions?"

"I travel for work." She warned instead of immediately agree. "And aside school holidays or maybe a weekend here or there, I might not be around regularly to anticipate a schedule or anything like that. However, I do have a number of people moving down here with me to help with upkeep of my place. Some of them might actually be better suited to answer questions, depending. Galina is a Lightning, and my… secretary. The Mirror Lady's a… well, Mist."

"That's adorable." A tiny Russian Mirror Lady? How could that not be adorable? "Thank you for hearing me out, Sonya. I feel a need to visit with Father Galdino before Mass tomorrow, so I will
leave you both here."

"Lady Vongola." With a polite nod to her, Sinclair tucked the blonde up to his side and gestured out of the foyer. "Unless you've got something else to give the doorman, little dragon lady, we should move out of their way."

"What is with you and doors?"

"If you stand in the way, odds are you're going to get hit by them."

"...there's a story behind that, isn't there?"

"If I tell you, will you please get out of the poor man's way?"

Fiorella, seemingly forgotten, backed away and left the couple to their rather delightful bickering with a shake of her head.

"Can I just not go through doors? If I go through the window, will you bitch less?"

The man covered his face with his hat, which did nothing for the exasperated chuckle. "Please don't."

(Sunday the 8th of February, 1970. A hotel suite, Calabria, Italian Republic.)

"Are you sure?" Shamal winced when his mamma got distracted enough to pull a little hard with the comb she kept in her purse, which she noticed really fast and gentled her tugging again.

"Fiorella Vongola conveyed the request." Renato confirmed evenly, twisting a hand in the air. "I'll slide you past notice in a way, if you bring an 'heirloom' Bible to Mass to be read from for your godchild's First Communion. Most attending this morning will actually assume with that you are Catholic, because why else would you have such an ornate Holy Book brought down here?"

"Because I have little to no bloody idea what the hell is a requirement for one's 'First Communion'? They'll know I'm not when I don't get up for your symbolic cannibalistic eating of flesh and drinking of blood thing."

"Why should I risk bringing it? It's hot, Renato. Stolen not too long ago. I give it to the Bishop to read from and someone might notice if they have any idea of Moscow news. And you, I really want to meet whichever ancestor you got this hair from brat, then sucker punch them a few times in the gut."

"Apparently, His Excellency hadn't realized you brought it down with you and that's why he didn't ask you himself when we saw him." His godfather continued over his snickers, sounding dryly amused over her third complaint this morning about his hair. "We could slick it back if it bothers you that much."

"Then it looks greasy." Turning on the hitman next, she waggled the comb at him too. "And you, why do I keep dressing up for these kinds of things if you're not going to do it too?"

He hadn't seen her dressed up in a demure purple suit jacket and skirt combo over a dark red blouse before, it looked pretty new too. Did she buy it expressly for Mass?

"I am dressed up, I'm just always this classy." Drawled his godfather blandly, pushing off the wall
and straightening his tie fussily then tugged sharply at the cuffs of his suit. The cheap tin dice cufflinks glinted at the young Mist watching them argue, which made him happy to see them still in use even if they were cheap tin and the older man had higher standards for his clothing. "The reason why, little dragon lady, is because not too long ago there was the Renaissance. A lot of Greek and Latin books were removed, rediscovered, borrowed, or otherwise relocated to private libraries around Europe. The theological and religious texts of Christian belief were part of that, and while we are building back up the Vatican Library and other such institutions some score of topics are still a bit… threadbare. With mistranslations and errors no matter how careful we are."

His godmother cocked an eyebrow at the Mafioso, unimpressed, which earned her a sigh. "Then came the Protestant Reformation, and a lot of that relocated information was devalued or even repressed entirely to the point some of it might've been destroyed. Then America became a thing, the Thirty Years' War, and then of course the more recent nastiness and the damage that did. We lost a lot of scriptures and religious documents. Please, if not for me or any Catholic then to make today all the more special for the brat to have a piece of history there too."

She looked at him next. "Do you care at all?"

"It'd be interesting." Neither of them could read it, so if a priest in the funny hats could then why not?

Renato pressed a hand over his face. "Oh for fuck's sake…"

"What?"

"It's catching."

"What is?" Sonya demanded again, tossing the comb and a weird long brass and wood thing into a clutch instead of her purse. Considering the very heavy and fancy Bible sitting on the end table of her hotel bedroom for a moment, she eventually sighed and picked that up too. "You're not being very clear."

He gave her a flat look over his palm, glanced down to Shamal, snorted, then strode out of her rented bedroom for the rest of the really nice hotel room's main living room. "You both deserve each other."

"…okay then." Glancing at the really heavy book in her hands, the glittering jewels that sparkled in the early morning light and the metal holding it to the cover, she dumped it on her bed and plucked a thin hand towel to wrap it up in. "Are you ready, Shamal?"

"Do you even know what's going on, mamma?"

"It's a religious cult-thing. I'm not sure I want to know, but yes I did go ask a guy in a dress about what it is and why you do it now. " Shifting the white towel wrapped Bible to the side a bit, she turned back to him and sat on the bedspread herself to pull on a pair of black closed toe heels. "I don't need a big production and some religious ceremony to be proud of you, brat. I am, simply because you exist and that's that. All I need to know is that it's important to you, and that's more than enough for me to go along with things anyways."

Shamal wasn't sure if he should be impressed she'd admit ignorance even if it sounded like she wasn't happy with it, exasperation at the 'cult-thing' label, or pleased she was being honest with him. Not that he expected her to lie to him, but even if she didn't know what was going on he was still happy she was going to be there too. "Thanks."

Picking up the plain black leather-bound Bible his godfather told him had been his father's and
rescued out of their house after it had been burned down, he ensured the charred edge wasn’t obvious to anyone without Flames and put the turquoise rosary his godmother got him last Christmas into his pocket.

"I'm ready, mamma."

"Well, at least one of us is." She teased, slipping her other heel on and getting up with her own Bible. "Come on kid, let's start the process of making you a young man."

Pausing to pick up her purse, the thief shuffled things to one arm so he could have a free hand to hold.

"I'm really happy you're here... on time."

"One more smart-assed comment and I'm turning this show boat around. You can do your cult-thing next year instead."

Shamal snickered.

"That would be embarrassing." Renato observed sardonically as they joined him near Sonya's temporary front door, smirking himself. "Being kept back a year, having to take your First Communion with Nonno's eldest..."

He stuck his tongue out at the older man, skirting behind his godmother when the hitman cocked an eyebrow in return. "Careful with that, brat. You're standing next to a thief, she might just steal it."

"What do I get for doing your dirty work?"

"Anything you might want, little dragon lady. Just name it."

Blinking at this change to their dynamic, the Mist glanced up at the half-bewildered expression on said thief's face. "You're... flirting with me."

"Yes, yes I am." Confirmed the hitman with a bit of exasperation, palming the car keys he got from somewhere to drive them around. "Do you really need confirmation?"

"It helps. Sometimes flirty things can be outright confusing instead."

"That explains way too much." Renato muttered sourly as she opened the door for them.

(ooo000ooo)

(Sunday the 8th of February, 1970 continued. Reggio Calabria, Calabria, Italian Republic.)

"It wasn't too noticeable, as you were minding the boys for me and the nursemaid it actually looked as if either you went in line first or were waiting for us to get back to get in line yourself." Fiorella assured Sonya, actually one of the few to ask the Russian thief to page through her Bible to see the contents after the Bishop of Reggio Calabria read from it. "Although, not many non-Christians attend Mass around here as it is, so I don't think anyone greatly wondered what you were doing."

The Storm-Cloud was watching her fingers move across the elaborately decorated pages like a hawk, almost similar as she had been watching when Bishop Giovanni accepted the tome from her all the way up to the holy man returning it after Mass with his thanks. There was a lot less hostile suspicion in this variant, so Renato assumed she had been highly uncomfortable loaning out the ornate book to someone she had only just met.
She probably only did it because Shamal had thought it would be 'interesting'. He wasn't sure if that was a comforting or disturbing thought.

Mist brat's imagination and possible boredom added to her permissive behavior and skills?

When Renato got back, it might just be possible the brat would end up the ruler of some small country or something just because he wanted to try it.

He was watching Coyote Nougat instead, as one of the bodyguards loaned out by the woman's Sky husband, who was not at all comfortable with Sonya's sharp watch on his main charge. Guerra was less wary, but also keenly watching for any sudden movements.

Fiorella was completely ignorant to the overtones in the various stares going on, or at least thought little of it. Her three sons were seated at a nearby table with their nursemaid and the Mist bodyguard of their own, along with a large number of the other children that had attended Mass to witness their siblings' own First Communion with their parents.

"It's gorgeous, Sonya. Thank you for bringing it along for His Excellency. I think you made his year with this."

"...sure." Allowed the thief uneasily as she accepted the metal and jewel encrusted affair back.

Shamal, for once not banished to the children's table nearby for more appropriate company than the adults around him, peered up at his godmother when she plopped the heavy thing in his lap. "When are we going to learn Greek, mamma?"

"We can make a thing of it this summer, I think. See how much we can get through before you have to go back to school." Much more comfortable now the book was back in 'her' possession, or at least the brat's, she gave him a tiny smirk. "As well as find that church of bone I only vaguely recall might exist somewhere."

"An ossuary?" Echoed the wife of a Sky in some measure of surprise. "There's Our Lady of the Conception of the Capuchins in Rome, Sonya. Even if it's not entirely made of bones outright. The chapels in the crypts below it is lined with skulls, of an age of monks and friars had their bones arranged to decorate it."

"That's rather… macabre."

"We don't have a lot of land to spare, Bazanova. A few centuries upon centuries upon centuries of graveyards..." Nilda Guerra smiled slyly at the shorter woman. "The bones are of course treated with respect, but more space was eventually needed everywhere. Stacking up the bones when the graveyards became crowded turned almost into an art form. The catacombs of Paris are indefinitely worse, in that respect. Kilometers of tunnel lined with bones."

"You both are being suspiciously helpful." Sonya commented blandly, leaning back in the chair set out for those joining the celebrations going on in a square close to the Cathedral.

It was only one of a few, the second one they passed, and the one preemptively scouted out by Vongola's CEDEF for if Fiorella got it into her head to join the local celebrations after Mass. Which it had, as it was a big day for Shamal and the lady was very conscientious about not infringing on their godchild's milestone celebration just because she wished to speak more to the godmother and give her eldest a full preview of the event.

Renato felt a little itchy leaving security up to others, especially others that very recently fucked up about confidentiality or getting info-mined by Mist, but he was trying to not think about it. Keeping
half an eye on the rooftops was just… habit.

"You're an expert. When I yet again run into things I don't understand, I'd like an expert waiting in
the wings to tell me if I should really press or allow my husband's people to very politely redirect
me." Fiorella informed her brightly, shooting Coyote a look when he stiffened up and opened his
mouth. "Don't even. I am fully aware of what my husband's been up to, and that only a few of you
have been honest with me. Someone could have told me what I was asking was slightly insensitive
instead of let me go blindly on bringing up bad memories."

"…it's not a pretty topic, Lady Vongola."

"Exactly. Someone only needed to remind me the name, and the obvious." Huffed the older Italian
lady seated at the table at her husband's Storm Guardian, glancing backwards to be sure her baby and
his brothers were doing fine at their table. "I still feel horrible about that."

"It's not always lethal. My sister did it through straight willpower instead… after she knew it was a
possibility." Allowed the ash blonde thoughtfully.

Sighing out her somewhat complex feelings on the topic, Fiorella gave her a small thankful smile.
"So yes, I am trying to get you to think well of me so I can bother you here or there for an answer or
two. I hope you don't mind."

"Do as you need to do, Lady Vongola. I'll inform you if I minded."

"Speaking of your sister, have you spoken to her yet? I think she and Ganauche have a thing now.
He sounded very admiring when he called back to check in with Timoteo and ask for an extension."

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Slapping a hand over her face, heedless of the makeup she was wearing,
Sonya sighed heavily. "Really, Tatiana? Your taste in men still sucks."

Fiorella blinked blankly, more than a little surprised by that reaction, as Coyote coughed around a sip
of wine.

Nilda snickered into her palm. "A bit of a recurring problem?"

"I swear to whatever's holy around here, she's going to get herself in trouble one of these days."
Mourned the Storm-Cloud sadly, pulling up her clutch to dig around for her pipe but left it in there
instead of pulling it out. "She had been taking it easy on that front for a few months, I suppose we
were due yet another beefy boyfriend from her."

"Ganauche isn't beefy." Mulled over the Rain thoughtfully, playing more than sipping her glass of
wine in one hand. "A bit doughy right now, but he is on light duty to ensure the concussion didn't
knock something loose. He's also perfectly a gentleman when it comes to his girlfriends, even from
rumor alone. A few bad breakups, but those happen."

"It's likely your sister doesn't have a 'thing' for men, it's a side feature of what we are." Renato
chipped in for Suns in general, apparently uselessly.

"It's her favored way to blow off the extra energy that stacks up on her." Sonya clarified in an utterly
dry tone, flicking a wrist at him to dismiss that. "I'm aware you all can get rid of it in other ways, but
that hypermetabolic activity you all have? To the rest of us it looks like you're either fitness nuts or
sex fiends, and even still you have the possibility to be slightly hyperactive in everything else on top
of that."

"Well, it's either that or twitchy insomniacs." Allowed the hitman equally as dryly with zero shame.
"Trust me, it's the better option."

"And I almost compulsively need violence or adrenaline surges to retain an even temper, you don't see me picking fights with those that would never be able to keep up." Shot back the thief, elevating her nose into the air with a tiny sniff of superiority that made Shamal snicker.

"No… instead you'll argue with everything and nothing at all."

"You don't have a black eye, do you?"

"A bit lower, I have a bruise on my ankle about the size of a heavy coin from you kicking me."

"Um… is that why Visconti spends more than half the day in a gym before and after any social functions?" Fiorella interjected a bit hesitantly, studying the Storm-Cloud worriedly. "Are you alright?"

Sonya honestly took stock of herself, and anything she might be feeling, before lifting a shoulder to dismiss the issue. "I'm… a little uncomfortable. But I'm used to it, I have other outlets I can use. Renato's really good about arguing with me, which does take a big edge off."

"…wait, that rumor is true?"

The young Mist sitting with them scoffed loudly at the Storm Guardian's question. "I told Mister Bouche that mamma argues instead of fights with people, if he didn't believe me it's not my fault."

His godmother petted his hair, frowning and her other hand reaching for her purse again and the comb there this time. "I didn't know you caught on to that."

"I'm not stupid, mamma." Preened the kid, smirking as he peered up at her from under her hand. "You always cuddled more and were more agreeable after you argued with Mister Renato. Your other half isn't so easy to pick out, but you're not very nice when someone tries to interrupt your reading before you're ready to put it down so it's obviously about your books."

"Three parts." Renato chipped in sarcastically. "And you realize, part of your issues might just be you share a talent with me and your sister, right? You're a damn mutt, so anything within the range of all three is entirely possible to give you issues."

"You have got to be the most terrifying teacher I ever heard of." Nilda announced blandly, looking faintly impressed.

"I'm the damn librarian." Sonya corrected shortly, handing the brat the comb instead of doing it herself this time. "…mainly."

"Even worse." Corrected the Rain simply around a sip of wine.

"Well, Don Bergamaschi and their American branch the Cerritos are about to find out shortly." All but purred the hitman wickedly, a shit-eating grin sneaking across his face as he glanced at the now mildly amused thief in question. "They did ask for a few related lessons on the nature of the gift."

Nilda looked terribly depressed she couldn't get free that quickly to just hop countries and see how that would go down. In contrast, Coyote looked very glad that would happen very fucking far from Vongola territory first until the damage would be known.

"Do you do guest lectures around the world for work then, Sonya?" Fiorella asked curiously.
"...of a... type." Allowed the Storm-Cloud eventually. "More like crash courses. The thing for Don Bergamaschi isn't the only one going on, I've got a green Frenchman getting the same course who's almost done and about two more Moscow local but not in school situations going on. Then Chinese exchange students, and a few other intercity arrangements..."

She thought back to what was waiting for her to do back in Moscow, winced away due to a kind of depressive certainty if she didn't stall long enough she'd end up murdering the wrong people for her continued existence, and the knowledge that she had responsibilities she had to avoid due to a Flame nature related issue... the Russian frowned, then glanced down to the brat they were gathered to celebrate seeking a distraction. "Anything you want to do today, brat? I don't think listening to old people talk would be very fun."

"It's better than what's going on at the kid's table." Shamal informed her with blunt honesty. "But I don't mind sitting for a while, I maybe ate too much at the buffet table."

"Well, now you know. And we don't have to sit here, we could return the Vongola people and take a trip elsewhere for the day. I have to head to the States soon, but that doesn't mean I need to leave tomorrow."

The Mist brat considered that, tiny hands wrapped around his cup of highly doctored coffee milk on top of the damn near priceless Bible his godmother dumped on his lap for safekeeping. "Can we go to Rome and see that bone church today? Please?"

He very conscientiously didn't look at the hitman, but Renato caught the 'before he had to leave them for a long while' anyways out of the brat's thoughts.

Fiorella smiled at Sonya when the thief looked up at her. "We'll leave you here, I think. Massimo probably needs a nap near desperately, and the boys do deserve a reward themselves for behaving so well all morning."

"Thank you. Until next time, Lady Vongola." Acknowledged the Russian for the other woman's consideration, then glanced at the Rain still watching her with amusement. "...Miss Silver-white."

"You're doing that just for the hell of it, aren't you?" Nilda questioned keenly, a wry twist to her lips. "Rosabella said you called her Misty Miss Tweets again, I bet you do know our names you just pick not to use them."

"And now I know it bothers you, I'll never stop doing it."

"Touché."

(Tuesday the 10th of February, 1970. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Miss Sonya."

"Master Tyr." Greeted the Russian in question evenly, turning to face him from the day room she was waiting in for both the hitman normally near her and whichever Vongola Alliance agent Timoteo would attach to her to observe the compromise between her as the head of a Moscow based Mafia School and the Bergamaschi Famiglia. "Can I help you?"

A fair assumption for the reason he was approaching her, as he found some interest in speaking of less focused upon aspects of Flame nature and Cloud aspects with her across the various balls they
had been acquainted. He was also currently interested in why his apprentice Ottavio would not speak of her at all, but that was likely a Cloud Flame related issue he was more than sure about the components of.

The younger Cloud, although respectfully gifted to the point his nature had expressed itself before even gaining conscious use of his Flames, did not remotely compare to her as a Cloud user. That didn't even encompass her other types to bring to bear or himself as a likely factor, because between the two of them she was the better Cloud Guardian candidate even handicapped by requiring a separate but equal connection to her brother as well as herself.

A lingering sense of inadequacy from his situation of being pressed on a Sky that didn't want him and a bit of childish jealousy mainly, but the child was painfully green to the point of being transparent about it to his eye.

…then again, Ottavio wasn't quite quality enough for Tyr to be sure he would've accepted the young Cloud as his Guardian in the first place anyways.

"This," bringing up the water-tight container he had carried out here to the more public part of the mansion, "is the head of the man that ordered the car bombing and wounded Ganauche… which also brought harm to your brother."

If the current spate of rumors were correct, coming from Coyote Nougat as they were gave it a bit more weight behind the claim than he normally gave them, the slightly Sun-touched Storm-Cloud cocked an eyebrow at him at first.

Unfolding her arms, she accepted the plastic pail and screwed off the lid to see the severed head on ice within it. An utterly nasty, wicked smirk curled up her lips as she freely admired his handiwork. "…oh."

"It took a bit of waiting I was not pleased with once he covered his tracks enough to encourage enough reasonable doubt to save his life, but he eventually did do something else Stupid I could then kill him for. I regret it wasn't expressly for the harm he caused you and your other Flame half, but it was him nonetheless."

"…I think I'm going to turn this into a soup bowl." Commented the thief after a moment, tucking the lid under an arm and reaching in to lift up the head by the hair the previously living man had been somewhat vain of. "Did you leave enough spine to make a base from? You did… how lovely."

"I thought drinking mugs were more popular?"

"How... medieval of you, Tyr. No, a soup bowl for me I think. I'd rather not taint the mead the parents of one of my people intend to brew here, but I can certainly make my own borscht and eat it out of this."

The Sword Emperor had no issues with what she intended to do with his gift, he was merely interested in why she picked a soup bowl instead of what might have been assumed she would do with it on the basis of her nationality. "I will be sure to save you the head of the man that ordered the assassination attempt on Lady Vongola for you as well, and get it cleaned of what is likely rotting flesh right now, so you may have a matching set."

The tip that mead was about to become locally available was equally as interesting for an avenue to watch, change wasn't always equally embraced everywhere and someone might just do something Stupid with that route as much as they might try something more direct. Either way, the fallout would be spectacular.
"That's very sweet of you, Master Tyr. I appreciate it." Continued the Russian in a rather intriguing lilting tone, not quite something he could attribute to her Russian accent but something that couldn't be expressly explained away as just a 'pleased' tone. "I suppose I should check on those heads I ripped off in Moscow and see if any could be saved, so I can have an entire stack of skulls to serve soup in. I might have ruined the spines piking them on stakes, but alas if so."

Tyr felt his eyebrows climb up while she replaced the severed head back into the pail, as he pinned down what that tone was and what it meant.

…not entirely objectionable of an event, all told. Indeed, the fact he had overlooked inviting the possibility entirely was a bit Stupid of himself.

Then again, giving Clouds grisly trophies as gifts probably did have its own note in their circles as 'obvious courting behavior'. Less for Guardian aspects and more for… purely physical reasons.

This required more thought than he had initially given it, a mistake he needed to rectify immediately.

While indeed it seemed she had no intention of holding himself and his fledgling Varia organization on the same level as she likely thought of the CEDEF right now, or even Vongola as a whole in spite of being part of it, this was rather rude and churlish thing to do to a useful and mostly innocent young lady whom seemed involved with a Mafioso already.

Even if he and Sinclair had a moderately amusing rivalry going on, they were both killers who respected each other's methods but thought their own was better overall and were in the middle of attempting to prove it through example, stealing the hitman's woman out from under him would be crossing a line with both the other man and her.

Coaxing Sonya to flirt using violence with him was his own fault. One he would suffer willingly as he invited it unknowingly of her awareness of the phenomena, one he assumed she wasn't at yet due to her Mafioso's less straightforward behavior with her, but also one he was aware would tax his self-control rather severely.

With Clouds, it was either friendship based or seduction orientated. If she wasn't yet 'mature' enough in Cloud terms to be aware of her own reaction or intents when it came to 'gifting' violent behavior, then she would do it through what she thought and indeed was friendly behavior for her inherent type.

They were somewhat like cats in that way, presenting trophies to each other in a 'admire me/my skill' process of boasting to catch a Sky's eye as the 'best' Cloud. Doing something similar to them either earned the interloper scorn, if they were far from that level of development or they judged the 'trophy' to be of a lesser skill, attention that could be good or bad depending on a lot of factors… or their highest form of flattery.

It was entirely subject to what the individual you were dealing with and how they took the gestures. He knew of Clouds that showed their trophies in obscure ways outside of the safety and proper order of their initial territories. One tamed wild animals to usefulness, a female Cloud that collected finger bones of previous lovers, the current Visconti Famiglia Head had a rock collection from the tips of treacherous mountain climbing expeditions, the Ninth Generation Cloud Guardian's third-cousin had pieces of shipwrecks from around the world, and even one very old Cloud that worked here as the main Cloud tutor for the Flame orphans hoarded ancient coins unearthed by his hand alone.

That she would use his gift to her in creating what could become her collection of 'admire me' trophies… was still flattering itself even in spite of her actual intents behind it.
If she did collect all those previous heads, then it wouldn't mean Sonya collected skulls as her trophies. If she only added one or two, in order to not be shown up by his offers, then it was just accepted as friendship-motivated as he intended and she might be collecting skulls as her badge of skill to display to other hostile Clouds scoping her out for possible conflict. Including his as they were gifted by another skilled individual in the area she decided was a skill she liked to flaunt or appreciated in others.

If Tyr received a head or two in the coming years, either prepared to be used as bowls themselves or as fresh as this one, then he really had fallen into a very Stupid situation of his own making.

Then again, he asked for it.

The Sword Emperor wasn't sure which possibility he would rather her go with.

"I'm afraid I must leave you here," it earned him too sober grey eyes blinking at him in some surprise, which meant he was not finishing out this flirt correctly as to not damage his standing with her, "but I do look forward to seeing how they turn out."

"I'll invite you over for lunch when they're done." Sonya promised, a touch too considerately for Tyr to feel safe leaving as abruptly as he planned as she watched his movements curiously.

"I've never had borscht before." Allowed the Sword Emperor slowly, not twitching a muscle outside of acknowledging that point. "I'm not even sure what it is aside a Soviet Union type of soup, if pressed to be honest."

"It's… interesting." Tempered the Sun-touched Storm-Cloud slowly, but another smirk was curving her lips again as things got progressively safer for him. "Renato got through a bowl of my mother's recipe, I think you could too."

Safer, but not entirely apparently.

That was a taunt, clearly. Either she thought she was at fault for his apparently too hasty reversal and was attempting to reassure him by showing a possibly noticed rival was fine after a similar incident and inviting him to reassure herself or him that he was just as good or baiting him in revenge for the same situation taken in a less personally faulted way.

Neither of them things he wanted her to think. One was galling for him to inflict on her needlessly, the other equally so in a different and more personal way. Tyr was about to lose this interaction, and he wasn't sure of the reasoning behind it to be confident in why.

Wracking his mind for something else to say on the subject to demonstrate he had not balked at her intentions for his gift or her plans to add to it, the Sword Emperor cocked his head to the side.

"Before I go… where should I send the other head?"

"In the care of Tatiana Primakova, at Saint Julian's."

"The hospital there has a name?" As far as he was aware, it was nearly always referred to as 'Mafia Land's hospital' or in less often cases as 'that island's hospital'. Very few seemed to know of any such name, likely for reasons he was unaware of or simply through sheer laziness.

"My sister and a few of my students do work there."

Nothing in that context told him anything about much at all if it was a security related term hidden for specific reasons or not, which seemed to be her favored tactic when speaking with others. Give just enough information, see if they panic or do something Stupid with it.
Tyr honestly couldn't tell if it was intentional or not, nor what she did with the resulting information besides watch for it. "An oversight on my part, my apology."

Instead of specifically answer that comment with something, she hummed instead thoughtfully as she set the plastic container at her feet. "Did you not say you had something to do, Sword Emperor? Am I keeping you from anything important?"

"It is significantly less interesting than you are, however moderately pressing a situation."

The actual smile he got now was touched slightly with fondness, a new development. "I appreciate the gift and your time, Master Tyr."

…he had somehow gotten through this intact, or at least without damaging his position with her, and he had no idea how. "Miss Sonya. Have a good day."
Chapter 101

(Wednesday the 11th of February, 1970. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"What, exactly, are we waiting on?" Sonya inquired rather idly more than anything else as Renato joined them in the room they were wasting time within, sifting Shamal’s hair through her fingers as she watched him toil away on his homework.

Apparently, it was a greatly distracting habit of hers. Brat hadn't gotten more than three of his math questions answered in the fifteen minutes he'd been out, and two of them were wrong from what the Mafioso could make out from nearly halfway across the room through his moderately messy handwriting.

"Nono's intent on ensuring the attaché won't piss the hell out of you, he's already denied the last three options offered on the allies of Don Bergamaschi's end since the beginning of last month. Not really for more than just 'his personality is going to tick her off, let's not' than anything specific." He informed her simply, as it really seemed as if she didn't care when things got kicked off.

The delay didn't bother him any either, after this he had a few last-minute things to put in place then maybe one last visit to manage before he disappeared but both wouldn't be harmed even if he spent a few more weeks away from it. It was a bit unusual, the hitman would've expected things to have been set into stone well before she got down here rather than a few last-minute fixes needing to be put in place before they got the blessing to take care of this little 'guest lecture' of hers.

However, a delay was greatly more desirable than another cluster fuck. He'd live with it as long as there wasn't yet another facepalm inducing hiccup of bloated stupidity spilling over on something sensitive. Vongola and her people weren't inept, it was too large and way too old to have ever really been hilariously incompetent for very long… or at least it seemed to be everywhere but near one Soviet Storm-Cloud he could name.

Shamal tilted his head back against the couch she was lounging upon, resting the crown of his head on her knee. "Are you going to be here for Valentine's Day then, mamma?"

"I have no idea."

Closing an eye for a moment to study her through the remaining open one, the Mist suddenly shot to his feet and darted out of the library room before the Mafioso could bark at him to go back to his work.

Glowering after the brat and the door he failed to close behind him properly, Renato stalked forward. Mostly to check that yes, the kid would have to redo what little he managed to get done because five of the math problems were horribly wrong not just two. "Do you even know what Valentine's Day is?"

"I'm Russian and an atheist, not retarded nor unobservant." Snapped back the thief shortly, looking slightly put out over the sudden abandonment of the brat and his eternally disordered hair of her person. "It's a religiously flavored and heavily romanticized holiday that turned into some kind of night of romance these days. Obviously."

"…is that it?"

"It's a day for giving chocolate to whomever even crosses your path, if you're a child, and a
romanticized holiday that today means an obligated and overpriced date-night, for adults. When once it was more a pagan fertility festival, at least back in Roman times." Sonya rattled off in a bored tone, merely looking a touch annoyed and not really feeling it. "Something about a dog, a goat, and skinning them both then whipping a woman or hundreds with the skins in hopes to gain some measure of fertility. They once lined up for that crap… then there was something about some kind of sex lottery..."

"Ho…?" Drawled the hitman with a measure of amusement for the history dump, contemplating things and his luck as he neared her choice in seating. "More information than I needed, little dragon lady."

"Then why ask?" She tossed back, actually looking rather sulky than irked.

Nothing had really gone wrong recently, per se, but then again nothing recently had gone really right yet either.

Taking the gamble on his bipolar luck, he dropped heavily onto the couch next to her and put his head in her lap to make himself comfortable.

A pause and then light fingers stole the hat off his head, so the Russian could peer down at him questioningly. "Are you tired or something?"

"…sure, let’s go with that." It wasn't even a lie, either.

The longer this whole situation took, the more rest time he got between dodging people he was only semi-certain wanted him dead between his own hit work around the world and the odd occasional spectacular mess he got embroiled in.

He couldn't do that forever, balancing between being just available enough to target instead of enticing someone going after a softer spot yet still actually working, which was entirely the point.

Almost an optimal position to be in for what he wanted to do…but rather exhausting to juggle his own needs between outright stupidity and a risk of chance. Taking a break from it, and losing himself into the deeper parts of the Soviet Union where few outside it had ever managed to worm their way into meaning his latest round of murderous tails got stumped hard by unamused Soviet criminals ripping back into them for the infringement, was rather nice.

Almost exotically nice right now, especially as the Russian hadn't shoved him off her yet as she dealt with her personal twinges of surprise and unease at the sudden new situation.

He felt weirdly expectant right now, and a slight bit jumpy with little reason to be given very few would strike at a syndicate of Vongola's size just for an independent that would be leaving shortly anyways, but like everything else good in his life right now he was taking shameless advantage while not damaging it as best he could manage.

It didn't exactly mean he had stopped thinking of when they might show back up, bloodied and highly unamused with his delaying tactics… if they survived Sonya's bizarre and oft backwards motherland in the first place.

Well, put in that perspective then Italia would be equally as strange and backwards to her.

…interesting.

Perching his fedora on her own head, ignoring it when the brim immediately sank below the tips of her gem studded ears, the Soviet Storm-Cloud considered him thoughtfully for a long moment before
obligingly sinking her fingers into his hair. Apparently to feed her addiction in trying to neaten such impossible things, hesitantly at first but growing bolder the longer he didn't comment.

The practice she had gotten in with Shamal was greatly paying off in his opinion, as impossibly strong as she was there weren't any painfully hard tugs as things failed to resist her ordering things to her liking.

"Your hair is a mess." She informed him blandly, as if he had no idea how bad it could get.

Renato didn't keep wearing the damn hat they got him for no reason.

With the thief now happily occupied with the futile attempt of straightening out his hair, which admittedly had a curl to it that was a measure worse than what their brat possessed, he tried to think of something to speak of so she wouldn't let her mind wander and then decide this was too much for her sense of personal space…but found himself focused on the stupid bucket of bloody ice set next to the door their godchild had bolted out of instead of something else more mundane.

…with a head in it.

That did deserve a bit of consideration in its own right. He had known that man, and his head was chilling in a bucket until she got it boiled, bleached, and likely set with some kind of metal or waterproof bowl to hold soup.

Fucking Tyr, again. The normally unflappable master assassin of Ottavia's hastily beating a strategic retreat in the face of actual and honest friendly overtures from this particularly confusing woman would've been hilarious to watch go down… if it wasn't an indication of what he was outright abandoning to the whims of fate for the next few years.

Sonya figuring out what to do with other people aside get annoyed with them or occasionally argue with a rare few.

"Why soup bowls?" She had shown absolutely no interest in making art of human remains when they went to visit a few sites with something similar, so the whole thing was a touch out of left field for him.

"Hmm?"

"The head. That head over there in particular."

"I can't do what I would've normally done and spike them on my fence or something... anyone that remotely might be able to talk to Moscow police could easily figure out where I've been operating from that." Sonya answered simply enough, more than distracted to be allowing her mouth to run without actual thought put behind censoring or otherwise editing her words.

Not that such a thing was normally an issue with her, but ingrained habits were hard to shake. Besides which, she never said anything more when he tried such tactics than when he simply asked straight out. Unless she felt really strongly about the situation, which wasn't really a common thing when speaking to her.

"And I can't obviously display them to say someone's gone and pissed me off... especially as I suspect I've gotten real estate in pure civilian territory. So, I have to sort of hide it and since so..." Trailing off, she tugged a touch hard on his hair to get something straightened out.

Futilely, as again there was no way to make things straighten out without it tangling up again immediately once it was let go.
"...you need a haircut."

"Probably." Renato dismissed simply before prompting her to finish her thoughts. "And so what?"

"Well... I suspect several people will certainly try to gain an audience with me for whichever reasons... both soon when I officially move addresses to if I survive past Shamal's childhood. If I delay talking to whomever long enough I can always offer to serve lunch in recompense for wasting so much time. And really, small talk is all about small pointless stories, right? ...like who exactly is making up my dinnerware they might just so happen to be eating out of at the time."

He barked out a laugh, jostling her and gaining a hard look for moving his head so much.

That wouldn't work well more than once, but that once... he wasn't sure who he wanted to be the one to torque the little dragon lady's nerves that much...

Glowering until he resettled back into her lap, Sonya huffed irritably as she inspected her likely completely ruined work. "Do you want a comb or something?"

"I bother with it more than enough as it is, so no."

"Hey!" Shamal very loudly protested, scowling up a little storm as he clutched a tiny packet of brown paper in his hands in the doorway. "You're in my spot, Mister Renato!"

"You abandoned it, it's no longer yours." Shot back the hitman lazily, smirking at the strange expression on the Russian's face as she warily shuffled her gaze between them.

"...I thought I was the thief here?" Sonya questioned slowly, not extracting her fingers but not moving either. Unsure if she wanted to coddle their godchild enough to bother with the effort of trying to shove him off her without inciting an argument or two, or just keep on doing what she had been in the middle of and would likely never finish with no matter how much effort was applied because that was what she was occupied with right now.

Sulky Mist brat sniffed in insulted outrage before she could figure it out, stomping over to the couch but getting derailed off his irritation with the hitman when he was reminded why he shot off on them with his homework undone. "I... um, got you something. For Valentine's Day, mamma. I... kind of never got you a birthday present or anything. Sorry."

"Ah... I... didn't expect you to-"

Cheeks puffed out warningly, which made Sonya shut up before she finished articulating her thoughts.

"So here." Shamal informed her pointedly, making the small parcel disappear from his hands and appear right on Renato's forehead in lieu of her lap.

"Brat!"

Said thief rescued her plainly wrapped gift before he lunged off her and the couch for the Mist, who immediately poofed out of physical reach with a gleeful snicker. A more than decent display of Mist skills, that his godmother's Mists taught him, which gave the brat an edge over the others of his age from what the Mist tutor in-house had to say about the kid's development recently.

Catching on a second too late all the results of that little maneuver, Renato straightened up and turned around only to see Shamal happily occupying Sonya's lap now. The little smug grin the kid had was also rather irking as well.
Plucking the strings apart as easily as she did tangles, she opened up the package to reveal an equally bland little cardboard box with only a watermark impressed on the heavy paper to show it wasn't just any box. Lifting an edge of it with a finger, the thief blinked then looked down at her lap's new resident in askance. "How did you find some of these?"

"I saved up all the money I earned over this summer." Shamal informed her, dropping any pretense of teasing the hitman for stealing back his 'pampering' spot and instead leaning backwards against her modest chest. "One of the maids knew of a confectionary store, and I had it special ordered... because it doesn't seem all that popular, mamma."

"Unfortunately, I rarely find many of these out here. Thanks, brat." Too swiftly to see what it was, she popped one in her mouth and settled in to cuddle the Mist brat instead of letting him work on the things he kind of had to do for school.

Shamal preened under her words and in her arms, which tempted the damn woman to go back to trying to yet again neaten out his hair again. Which meant nothing would ever be done any time soon by either individual.

Renato sighed heavily and rolled his neck to crack it. "I can go see how much longer they'll be if you'd like, little dragon lady."

"Mmm." Sonya simply shrugged a tattooed shoulder, peering up under the brim of his own hat at him while she swallowed whatever it was. "If they take much longer... I'll just leave without them. There's a limit, or there should be, for how long I delay my own work for a third-party problem with the arrangement."

Swiftly boxing backup whatever treat it was their godchild gave her, then sliding the package somewhere out of sight in a movement almost too fast to keep track of even with his skills, she resettled the Mist brat in her lap then peered up at him over the brunette and wavy hair obscuring the lower half of her face.

"Actually... I think I'm going to do just that. I've got that thing Tyr gave me to give to Rasputin, and warn my sister, then I'll head to America. If you want to join me or wait for Vongola to get its act together... I'll catch up when you get there."

"You didn't exactly give a solid date to be ready by." Renato pointed out reasonably, well aware Timoteo would not be pleased if she just took off before he settled on a decent prospect out of the pool of them he had to go through since he nixed the original Mafioso suggested.

Then again, she was right. It was a courtesy more than anything that she was allowing a Vongola Alliance oversight on her 'lectures', something that she really didn't have to do in the face of recent troubles in spite of that being the arrangement agreed to. If it took much longer then someone could use that to argue on the grounds someone or something was trying to delay it so she'd fail to uphold her end of the agreement. She didn't belong to that Alliance, Don Vongola had no hold on her either personally or otherwise, and as long as the situation was done even Don Bergamaschi likely wouldn't complain much.

Unless, of course, someone tried bringing the brat into things. Which shouldn't happen, as it was on Renato's merit the kid he got saddled with was housed in this Famiglia's territory rather than anywhere else. Trying that was sketchy in the extreme, as it was more than a reach.

Not that being such would limit anyone lacking an ounce of sense.

"I think... I can waste a few more days. I don't have anything too pressing to attend to, and spending
"Brat needs to finish off his work first." Drawled the hitman a touch sarcastically, pointedly glaring down at the abandoned homework which was still wrong for more than half the worksheet that had something done on it. "Otherwise I believe he's going to get nothing constructive done."

Shamal considered it. For all about two seconds, before Sonya mulishly tightened her arms around him and made any possible relocation moot. Brat also seemed entirely alright with his godmother deciding to defy the Mafioso's semi-order instead of him.

"I don't visit that often, mostly over holidays." The Soviet Storm-Cloud reminded him equally as pointedly. "A day or two of subpar work won't really affect him all that much, especially paired against an entire year of otherwise better work and tests. Besides which, school at his age is mostly basic foundations that will be repeatedly recovered and then defined more in the coming years."

"We want to instill a good work ethic early, rather than end up with a little slacker well before he starts questioning the reason he needs all of these lessons." Shot back the hitman quickly, before that could go anywhere. "No, the work's not the important part as it will be continually covered as the basics are expanded upon. The getting it over with before letting himself get distracted is. Let him finish first, then steal him for the rest of the night."

Considering it herself for a few more seconds, probably just to be difficult if he had any measure of her personality, the thief sighed and loosened her grip. "He's probably got a point, brat."

"Aw..."

"Ho? 'Probably'?"

"How the fuck would I know what benefits structured lessons have? I was homeschooled." She reminded him pointedly, settling back in the couch she was just shy of lounging upon. "Seems simple enough to me, if it's important do it and if not it can wait until the important crap is done."

"Lisa had specific blocks of time set aside for school work to be done instead of anything else, didn't she?" It was a guess, but the woman was ruthlessly efficient enough Renato would bet heavily on the possibility.

Sonya frowning, more out of confirmation than any disgruntlement, proved his point.

"Brat, work. Now."

Looking pretty unhappy the only barrier between him and yet more math problems had been dealt with so easily, Shamal slid to the floor to start working on his homework again.

"Questions number three, seven, and thirteen are all wrong." Renato helpfully pointed out, earning himself an ugly look for it. "Six and nine are both off because you forgot to..."

"I get it, Mister Renato." Sulky Mist brat informed him pointedly, going to town with his eraser to try said problems again.

Sonya eyeballed what was visible with her higher perch over his shoulder, then the older Italian skeptically. "You can tell all that when it's upside down, you were halfway across the room when you did glance at it, and through Shamal's sketchy handwriting?"

Brat actually squeaked in outrage at the slight to his penmanship, critically studying what he had done already and getting slightly depressed as he realized the truth in her words. It was nothing
practice couldn't fix, which the kid would get in as the years rolled by, so the hitman hadn't bothered to say anything about.

"There's a little place in my cold, black heart for math."

"...I fucking hate trigonometry."

"You're a-" Cutting himself off, Renato swiped his hat off her head and gave her a semi-disgusted look as he replaced it on his own. "...you're an acrobat. How the hell do you know what you can and can't realistically do without trigonometry?"

"By doing. That's what practice is for." Sonya insisted flatly. "Cherep's good enough for the both of us, so I leave such things up to him if I ever need it. Which I never have yet, basic mathematics is more than good enough for my line of work."

Her brother was apparently a bit of a math hound to go along with his stunt driving skills. Interesting, but not really fundamentally altering in any way. Her twinned Cloud didn't particularly like him all that much, but as he didn't see a need to cultivate the brother's opinion that was just fine as far as he was concerned.

"I'm going to go warn Nono you're running out of patience, see if that hurries anything."

She blinked at him twice. Mostly out of confusion. "But... I'm not, really."

"So, you won't decide to suddenly split and catch up to whichever Vongola Alliance attaché once they actually reach the States?"

Sonya's very blank face was telling, and she kept insisting his 'innocent face' sucked.

"I turn my back for two seconds and you're going to run off, aren't you?"

"...I have a Shamal. It'd be more like five minutes." Pointed out the thief in what sounded as she thought was logically, as if that was a major factor in any decisions involving sudden mobility. "And I already said I can spend a few more days just doing nothing, if I have to. I'd really rather get to work sometime soon, if he so feels that generous, but I can live with it."

Rapidly running out of patience, then.

(Monday the 16th of February, 1970. Wo Hop To Triad controlled hotel, San Jose California, United States of America.)

Sonya gave Renato a very unimpressed look for knocking on her door so late in the evening, shifting her gaze to the Triad guard masquerading as a concierge of a decently sized hotel she found to hole up in for the meantime. "It's fine, I've been expecting them. I'm not expecting any more Italians, so if they show up you can bounce them all."

The young Triad tough gave her a nod, glancing at the hitman as his instincts picked him out as the one to be wary of, rubbing the part of his pinky finger that had been hacked off before he took his leave.

"Triads, little dragon lady?"
"What part of 'Chinese exchange students' did you miss?" Deadpanned the thief, jerking a thumb behind her so the two of them would know they could enter without her chucking something heavy or sharp at their heads. "Who's this?"

"Dante D'Attilio, Miss Bazanova." The unknown introduced himself, still standing in the hallway instead of entering her rented space. "The Etiquette Instructor of your Italia sister school."

"...right." Leaving the door open so he could decide to enter or not on his own, the Russian padded back to the couch on bare feet to pick up her book again. "Did you head straight here or-"

"I had to hunt around a little, I honestly didn't expect to find you first before you found us. It was a matter of luck I got a tip from Cerrito's men a new tiny blonde Russian was spotted out here in Triad territory. Since when did you have a working relationship with the Triads?"

"Since last November, or maybe a bit earlier but I'm not sure." It was apparently mostly Fong's fault, for however he did in the Underworld Tournament.

Apparently the asshole won it and failed to inform her, and there was a bit of connection between them as Sonya went in as his hostage then did all that emergency relocation so visibly to just about any groups also there to see it and carry tales on. The Triad here were a Wo Hop To branch gang, so the fact they knew more than enough to connect her to their Oriental parent branch by reputation alone.

It was nice, to be honest. It seemed the entire West Coast was mostly Triad territory with a couple other pockets here or there, which was kind of understandable as the US used a lot of Chinese immigrants to build the railroads around the turn of the century which gave a priceless opening to the Triads to move in long before things were remotely settled enough to leech things from the East Coast and the more European influences there.

Italians were obvious, she had some dealings with them but aside one or two semi-moderate sized syndicates they weren't out in force around here. There were more Mexican Cartel branches than them, and there were a few small Russian holdouts, but mainly it was Triad and Mexican territory out here.

Right now, she wasn't risking civilian attention tossing down a room or two for listening devices. It was more likely she'd be thanked for finding anything instead. It was the best she had looked for, and indeed got.

"So, what's the plan you two thought up?"

"Didn't really get that far, we were trying to catch up to you."

"Yes, because I obviously can't be trusted on my own." Resituating herself on the couch she had been reading upon, she tucked her feet back into the lightweight cotton knit blanket provided but put the history text she had been in the middle of in her lap instead of going back to reading. "All I intend to do is do the briefs, unless someone magically ends up being too interesting for their own good."

"Not that interested in finding yourself some interesting students?"

"I have more than enough students back home." Refocusing on the Vongola Alliance attaché sort of poking around the general entranceway but pointedly not anything closer, Sonya drummed her fingers on the hardcover in her lap waiting for her to get back to it. "What's your story, anyways?"

"I've worked with Sinclair before." D'Attilio informed her simply enough, shutting the door behind himself and leaving his own luggage by the door instead of bringing it fully in as he finally left the
little entranceway. "It was decided that if I could at least work with one of you it'd be good enough, especially as you decided not to wait for someone to be picked out."

"I was there for half a month, I spent more than enough time waiting around on bureaucracy when I informed Don Bergamaschi I'd be ready after the turn of the year and Don Vongola knew exactly when I'd be in the country."

The other Mafioso held up his hands, with a nod of recognition to her point. "Understandable, but it did jolt a few things loose and off the rails. That being the case, we're going to have to plan in the field so to speak."

"Plan what? If Don Bergamaschi didn't warn what's his face, it's not my issue."

"The logistics of what you're teaching, how much, and to whom."

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Inquired the Storm-Cloud curiously more than harshly as she felt it might've deserved only after she spoke. "I have a plan for what I teach, as far as I'm aware of you're just here to bear witness and ensure everything remains as arranged. And maybe introduction, but I thought Renato was the one that would do that."

"And I am also a teacher, miss." He reminded her a touch pointedly in return, earning a touch more attention from Renato who decided to about drape himself across the other end of the couch for this conversation. "Our ideas of what is 'good enough' for any one subject is likely different."

"I'm more inclined to think it's insulting."

A slightly hotter than human-normal hand closed around her bared ankle, and a gentle tug that accompanied it had her looking back at the Sun Flame user sitting across from her. "Little dragon lady, this part is going to require a touch of grace."

"Letting some other organization's agent judge me doesn't sound all that fun."

"I'm not here to judge you." Insisted the other Mafioso calmly as he dropped his hands. "But there likely will be differences, and just to ensure no one can try to use that against you when things are said later on."

That was probably the oldest trick in the book. The 'I'm on your side' attempt to get into someone else's guard easily. A squeeze to her ankle had her turning her attention back to the hitman, who merely blinked innocently at her.

…his innocent face still sucked hardcore.

"D'Attilio and I worked together some years ago, and on the rare occasion we do trade some information back and forth." Renato informed her simply enough, rubbing his thumb around the jut of her ankle bone out of what seemed to be absent mindedness than intent. "A long time ago, comparatively speaking. Before the brat. Fact of the matter at hand, he's not bad."

"Resounding sell, Sinclair."

"Do be quiet." Snipped the Mafioso back in what could be called pleasantly, almost downright friendly for him. "He's fussy, a bit of a tight ass. But no, he's not the type to lead on any particularly interesting contacts for nebulous powers he's not explicitly beholden to."

"Are you admitting Vongola's higher ups aren't exactly competent there?"
"I wouldn't go that far."

The cough from the other side of the room informed her that the other Mafioso didn't think so either or agreed with her. She didn't know enough to call it either way.

"...am I...?" 'Inheriting anything' was how she wanted to finish that, because if he was murdering off his personality then that also meant he needed to abandon even his information network in some method, but she didn't know how much he trusted the other Italian.

The wry twist to Renato's mouth wasn't really an answer. "The point of this being you don't have to worry he's going to sell you out to Vongola. He's respectful of them as any Italian associate would be to a major power, but not heavily involved nor intending to get that way."

Sonya honestly didn't want to inherit any part of his network, mostly because it would force her to actually admit the hitman was 'dead' in whatever way he intended to go in the face of someone she might actually end up invested in. Falsely, as the man would survive just not under the same name.

Most of it she would prefer to go to Shamal, if the man had to parse out bits and pieces to others.

A sharp tug to her ankle yanked her across the couch and halfway over Renato's lap so he could speak to her in a sort of whisper instead of loud enough the other man could hear. "I'd rather not drop critical parts, just keep an ear out for him."

Irked at the rearrangement, without even asking as well, made the thief glare down at him. She was actually somewhat taller than him, or sitting higher on him, than she was on the same level. Which was new but not appreciated. "I'll reserve judgement."

"All I can ask." Shrugged off the hitman, smoothing the hand from her ankle up the back of her leg and catching under her knee. "Do you want us to fuck off elsewhere or would you mind making space...?"

"There's only two beds, and I got the other one on the unlikely off-chance Tatiana might end up slumming it with me for a night or two." Sonya allowed slowly, pointedly removing the Sun user's hand from under her with a bit more force than most humans seemed to find comfortable. She did shift a little backwards more on the man's knees, because it might just be he was a touch uncomfortable with how she ended up on top of him. "He can have the other one, if you don't mind sharing with me or the couch."

Renato paused, glanced downward along her form to where she was straddling him, then back up. "Tempting me?"

"...for?"

"D'Attilio, go to bed. The adults need to chat."

There was a sarcastic sounding huff from behind her, which did slightly annoy Sonya until the man strolled off to investigate the rooms available and took only a brief look at hers before moving on to the next. "Horn dog. You're not that older than me, Sinclair, but I'm not interested in hearing you flirt with yet another skirt for the umpteenth time. However gracious or interesting she is."

She hadn't really thought of that. As annoying as she found it when the hitman flirted with some serving girl in front of her, others might end up annoyed with the situation the same she did if he flirted with her.

"I'm going to pass on climbing into your bed for now, little dragon lady. However nice the invitation
might be." That discarded hand slid back to behind her ass, seemingly just to hold that feature of her form. "From what I heard in the Iron Fort before I left, Don Bergamaschi is maybe one of the few that expect you to manage this. On balance for the rest of the Alliance, most are on a 'wait and see' kick and there's only a few that expect this to end in a Flaming ball of fire."

"Such faith. Where do you land?"

"I know better than to doubt you." Renato drawled out dryly, digging fingers into her ass through the thin cotton pants she was wearing… which she didn't remotely appreciate him doing and he thankfully stopped with a quickness. "This all being the case, you can somewhat weigh the dice in your favor from right here."

"What dice?"

"…please tell me."

"I'm aware, thank you." Sonya cut him off wryly, lips twitching at the disgruntled look she got back. "The fact of the matter is, is that I'm not sure if that's in my best interests. All I intend to do within Italy is sit there until Shamal's old enough to handle his own business. Why would I involve myself in your country's criminal ranks in any great amount? I get the local influences, but Bergamaschi and Vongola are half a peninsula away from where I intend to live."

"You'd be surprised how quickly something minor in the south will affect something in the north. And while you're not interested, that doesn't mean your soon-to-be-neighbors won't be or won't be influenced by such organizations in various directions."

Sonya growled, because she just knew he had a point there. She just really didn't want to admit it. "Why does it have to be Italy, again?"

"Because the brat and I are Italian." Renato reminded her simply, the hand she hadn't had an issue with yet ghosting up her spine. "So, it would be advisable for you to blow a few people's expectations out of the water a few times and cement some kind of reputation others can't tarnish easily."

"…is there a particular reason why you're feeling up my ass?"

"Grope of opportunity. If you're going to sit here so willingly, I'm getting something in before I regret the missed chance."

"Then I'm going to bed." Getting up and throwing him a short look for the quick squeeze he got in, the thief slid to the side pointedly to break his hold on her. "You're weirdly touchy right now."

"I'm operating under the suspicion this is about as far as I'm getting." The Mafioso informed her wryly, sprawling out on the couch and digging her hard-backed text book from under his thigh where it got shoved when he forcibly moved her. "Anything new on your end?"

"On any Italian front? No, Bjorn's scheduled a deep clean and a few repairs of the castle and there's a block of time I have to be in-country for staff interviews for there… but that's going to wait for either the end of spring or mid-summer." Pausing for thought after accepting her book back, she considered him and wondered if he'd care about local news or not. "I thought drugs were something Vongola aligned Italians didn't get into?"

"…they're not."

"You might want to remind Don Cerrito of that, from the looks of things. Some of his men recently got into a scuffle with a local Mexican cartel branch about cocaine distribution logistics and who
had the rights to the local consumer base."

Renato's expression was unimpressed at best. "Cocaine?"

"America's drug of choice right now." Sonya confirmed for him. "That and marijuana, but weed is more locally produced. Very lucrative to import cocaine right now, probably."

"There are lines, little dragon lady. Especially for Vongola Alliance members and even their various branches." He insisted flatly, kicking out both legs down the length of the fairly well-stuffed couch as he made himself as comfortable as he could. "I appreciate the heads up on where to start here."

"If anything, I think the Triads would appreciate getting whatever becomes available."

"I'll be sure to do my part for recompensing your local contacts for our presence, sure." He allowed, flicking a wrist at her before slanting down his hat to block the lights. "We do appreciate you sharing your wealth, little dragon lady. Goodnight."

"...are you going to be comfortable enough out here?" The couch wasn't exactly a new one, or very cushy. Even sitting on it for a couple hours reading her thighs were getting a touch stiff from the odd pressure it gave back for the use.

"There's no way I'd be able to behave myself in your bed without someone else to buffer and keep in mind. I'd rather sleep out here than let things get out of hand against my better nature."

"Sure." As she wasn't sure if she was ready for anything she did appreciate his restraint, even if it would be better for him to get some actual rest instead of napping on a broken-in couch. "Good luck."

There was a soft snort before she shut the bedroom door behind her.

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(Tuesday the 17th of February, 1970. Wo Hop To Triad controlled hotel, San Jose California, United States of America.)

"How, exactly, do you want to do this?"

"Secure location, a limited class size, and control over kicking out the troublemakers or just general control over behavioral corrections are the points I'm not budging on." Sonya informed Dante shortly as she set down her spoon in the empty bowl that once contained her fruit-laced oatmeal. "Aside from that, the rest of the details are up to negotiation."

"If we rent out a meeting room here, would you moderate the class size to whatever would fill it?" Renato's fellow made man inquired after taking some notes down, flipping a cheap plastic pen between his forefingers and thumb a few times in thought over options that could mean volumes depending on how they were tweaked.

The noise irritated him somewhat, one of the few reasons why he only occasionally checked in with the other man. Dante had a few habits that got on Renato's nerves and to be fair he had a couple that irked the other as well, so the infrequent catch ups were more than good enough for them both.

"Possibly," digging around her purse, the thief stole the cheap pen and replaced it with a rather handsome looking plated fountain pen before the Mafioso could react, "depending on how many syndicates you want to fob off on me."
"…only Sicilians, or those with the blood, I suppose." Dante allowed slowly, eyeballing the new pen skeptically before deciding to go with it as just a pet peeve of hers. "More than twenty, less than fifty?"

"Mmm… question. If Don Bergamaschi wanted these people educated, why didn't he arrange someone to do it from Italy instead?"

"He doesn't. The brief is more to buy the American Don off from what he wanted to happen which isn't going to happen." Offered the other Italian, after waiting a beat to see if she'd let the topic slide or not. "More or less a boon that most offshore branches don't get even if something goes catastrophically wrong in their favor."

"So… he's paying more because I'm foreign? Or because someone thinks I'm less important than information…"

"You did agree to it, little dragon lady."

"That doesn't mean I should ignore the reality of the situation behind the scenes." Sonya countered simply enough, a gleam to her grey eyes that made D'Attilio pause and study her warily for another long moment. "I have my own ways to get back at those that think they can order my death and get away with it but catching the innocent grunts between two such hostile powers is rather ungracious."

"The whole point to this outing was to smooth over hostilities." Dante pointed out in a tone that was well controlled, but Renato caught the disquiet the other Mafioso felt about possibly setting up a few fellow associates for a brutal and lethally short lesson in Cloud diplomacy methods. "Additionally."

"Don't panic. If you asked around, the rumors of my being an oddly rational Cloud is mainly true. However, a bad boss shouldn't be in power for long. It is equally my responsibility to hold him to a standard of interactions between two syndicates of varying power as it is yours to ensure his drug running doesn't spread."

"I'll need to check into that first to get the full scope of the situation before I report it to Nono."

"The newspaper and the article detailing the civilian view of a gang fight is under the coffee table in my suite. It should at least be a decent place to start on the bare bones of the situation."

"Noted."

"Pending confirmation on that, for the sake of this conversation," clarified the other Italian after a moment of rolling that around in his mind, "this exercise of intercontinental education was mainly for the sake of keeping relations more or less on good terms."

"Sure." Sonya agreed way too lightly for it to be taken seriously, pawing around her tattered purse for the brass and bamboo pipe to fiddle with now they were done with their Oriental-flavored breakfast.

"…Miss Bazanova."

"No one asked what would buy my forgiveness for the hit contract placed on me, nor the situation that resulted in my own best friend being tasked to kill me. I promised to drop the whole matter and not go to the Vindice if Don Bergamaschi paid the hospital bills, which he did and so I won't, but I see no reason to think highly or even at all of the man or his syndicate for this clusterfuck. As a matter of fact, I intend to avoid having anything further to do with him once I finally get one Flame
user that might immigrate somewhere. Doing this was more to ensure it wouldn't deteriorate more and for my own personal amusement than anything."

Renato blinked blankly at her. Dante pressed his mouth into a line but actually was rather thoughtful over the point as well. Which wasn't particularly problematic, as the young half-Chinese girl waiting tables decided they were done with their breakfast dishes and cleared off the table they were seated around while this was going on.

…in retrospect there was a lot of talk about how much the little dragon lady disliked dealing with Rains and making good on things when someone was in the wrong, but very little aside the hospital bills about what the thief was taking away from the negotiation table herself.

He couldn't decide if that was a specific oversight the Russian somehow coaxed out of the incident to hold over someone's head later or if it was just something she thought up since. He also couldn't tell if he was impressed, slightly confused, or exasperated.

It was entirely possible she didn't mention it at the time to evade any further scrutiny over the cover story for why Renato was never going to do the job to kill her and why pressing the point was a bad idea, or just because she was somewhat testing the Italians trying to negotiate with her to see how much they'd take if given an inch. Finally, it was entirely possible she had forgotten or omitted it on accident or on purpose.

It was kind of brilliant in a way of stalling and otherwise coaxing just tiny bits more than thought of out of a situation. Which made his inability to decide if it was on purpose or not somewhat aggravating.

With the Storm-Cloud in question, either could be possible.

"...ah." Dante tried slowly, stalling on the subject and entirely unsure of what to do or if he should do anything about it.

On one hand he could be possibly setting up another Italian, a particularly powerful one that would probably greatly like the warning on the situation, on the other he did rather want the Russian as a contact if Renato was offering himself as an intermediary and the opportunity to make the connection a good one.

For the sake of the job he had, as one of the instructors for Mafia School, there was also the consideration of forging good relationships with sister schools that might expand not only his student base but their influences around the world in other countries that might've been hostile to his students without the networking.

Dante was always a touch more responsible than most Mafioso Renato knew, which was probably why he was the one he had known for the longest time without dying off.

"When were you going to bring this up?" Inquired the Soft Sun Flame user idly.

"About when Don Bergamaschi thinks he might be able to ask something else from me." Sonya answered honestly enough, eyeing first her pipe then the other Italian rather pointedly.

"He doesn't smoke."

"As far as you knew, Sinclair. I don't mind, miss."

"...it has been a few years since we last saw each other face-to-face, but I doubt it." As a matter of fact he knew the other didn't smoke yet still, he just didn't see a reason to deny the Cloud a vice that
was notorious for calming nerves if she needed it for any reason.

The thief eyed him sternly instead of taking him up on that. "You know it's rude to smoke around those that don't, right? If you don't, I don't mind not smoking."

"I don't smoke, and I don't mind those that do smoke around me." Dante insisted, thumbing the more solid writing utensil against his hand a few times as he leaned back against his dining chair. "Can we get back to the subject at hand?"

"Aren't you here to arrange the finer details?" Wondered the Russian in a carefully manufacture tone of bemusement, tapping the long end of her pipe against the table. "I gave the points I will not move from, arrange the rest from that."

"...and you're going to judge me for how well I do this, aren't you?"

"Well, you are the intermediary. So yes. I don't know the Don, for the sake of good relations I probably shouldn't approach him until he's fully aware of and committed to not attempting my murder that would require me to off him in return. Unless of course... you want him dead."

"You did steal from him first."

"Actually, he stole from me and my clan first."

Pausing, the Italian inclined his head to acknowledge the point. "Fair, if you wish to categorize people as an object to be stolen for this argument."

"I will get as petty as I need to be to keep my responsibilities safe enough to do their jobs and live their lives." Sonya professed simply enough, but by the way her features tightened even the one that couldn't mind-read understood she didn't like that comparison.

"I believe that is something most would do in the same position." Allowed the other Mafioso, packing away his notepad and considering the pen he had been given to contemplate if he should give it back or not. "I'll get things set up, then."

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 17th of February, 1970 continued. Cerrito Crime Family Headquarters, San Jose California, United States of America.)

If anyone glared at him the same way Don Cerrito was glaring at the blonde bird, Vito Romero would run for the hills as fast as he could. Not ignore a man as powerful as the crime boss while reading some hard backed... history text?

Seated between what looked to be two Mafiosi from the old country, the girl with the sharpish features was kind of the oddest one out in that collection. On the other hand, she was way too cool with the hostile attention aimed her way by someone the worst of the thugs Vito knew of would avoid annoying.

Something very strange was up.

"Romero, I need you to... watch this... girl."

From the tone, it was highly doubtful 'girl' was the descriptor he wanted to use.

"Of course, Don Cerrito." There was really little else he could say to that. "...for what?"
"She's a thief."

"With nothing to steal." The blonde answered for herself, not even looking up to appreciate the ugly look shot in her way. "That really is more like bolting the barn shut after the horses run off."

"Miss Bazanova. Please." One of the Mafiosi asked, half-exasperated.

"I am sorry, who is the one wronged here?" Asked the girl sarcastically, finally looking up from the book in her lap. "I really have little patience for a grown man pitching a fucking fit over getting bitch slapped for stupidity. As a matter of fact, given how this bullshit is turning out, I have no patience left at all."

A nearly silent sigh through the nose, and the Mafioso that seemed the less dangerous of the two of them turned to him instead of continue trying to talk to her. "Miss Bazanova is a Soviet Flame expert, she needs a… guide, and someone to vouch for her proper presence in your territory, while she's here."

"And keep her the hell out of everything."

"If I wanted to steal something, nothing you have would stop me." Slamming her book closed, the young woman got to her feet and tucked it away in a ragged looking satchel being used as a purse. "Stop being a child, Cerrito."

"I do agree with her." Drawled the other Mafioso, the one Vito really did not want to ever meet down a dark alleyway. He as well unbent his lanky frame to get up, ending up taller than him and adding a few inches for a moment as he stretched out his spine. "For what it's worth."

"Sinclair, please. I think this has gone badly enough we don't need your help." Snipped back the Mafioso with the most tact in the room in their native Italian, giving both an exasperated look of his own. "If you would get started, Miss Bazanova, I'd greatly appreciate it."

The pretty and utterly shallow smile the grey-eyed blonde suddenly sprouted was not at all compliant nor comforting. "Sure. Would you like to come along, Renato?"

"I think I'll pass today, little dragon lady." Renato Sinclair' declined smoothly, dropping back on his heels and readjusting his hat so the brim would at least attempt to conceal the nasty smirk on his face. "Just to let you… ah… assert yourself without seemingly borrowing anything from someone else."

Joseph Cerrito shot a mostly confused but somewhat wary as well look at the unnamed Mafioso. "I assumed he was her bodyguard…?"

"…Miss Bazanova has little need for a bodyguard, Don Cerrito."

That rather sounded… strange and just a little ominous. The woman looked like anyone that bench-pressed recently could break in half with a harder than usual hit, but neither Italians looked to be having a joke at their expense.

It was possible, but by how anticipatory the other man looked for someone to ask the obvious question… Vito wasn't taking bets. He also wasn't going to be asking the obvious, because that seemed to be exactly what the darker Italian wanted so he could get a good laugh in.

Probably at his expense. "Where to, then?"

"The meeting room, Romero." Don Cerrito informed him, mostly occupied with trying to glare a hole in the woman's blasé attitude and accomplishing absolutely nothing by it. "Let's get this farce
Given the hardening edge to the sigh the man he didn't know a name for blew out, it was possible if Vito got the others out quicker he might be able to salvage something for his boss. Not really sure what, but something.

"This way then, Miss… Bazanova." She was at least biddable, for what it was worth. There was still something really strange about the entire situation that made it so Vito wouldn't be expecting jack shit until he knew more, but it was something.

Outside of Don Cerrito's office, the taller Mafioso split off with just a backwards wave to saunter off somewhere else and the woman looked at him semi-impatiently to lead on.

Which he did, but that attitude wasn't going to win her very many friends. Especially with where they were going, and Vito sort of got why Boss Cerrito had the more argumentative and asshole-ish of their number gathered up today in a tiny ass meeting room.

He was probably sabotaging whatever the girl was up to, and while he was sorry he wasn't nearly enough to warn her or try anything to mitigate things.

He'd hang around and pick up the fallout, but that was about as far as his goodwill went right now.

Gesturing to a specific door, Vito invited the girl to pass him and head on in and took up a position next to it just to hear how this was going to go down.

The door shut with a quiet 'snick' behind her, there was a beat of silence, and then the voice of someone he knew for a fact was Marcus Crispino. "So, we're buying hookers now? Nice, c'mere bunny."

...yeah, that was about-

An ear-splitting scream wasn't what he expected. Nor the subsequent thumps and then the massive edge of some kind of gold blade was shoved through the door about waist high with a splintering crack.

Vito had to stare and wonder who the fuck was stupid enough to walk around armed with something like that. Obvious and showy, and entirely impractical when it was easier to hide a piece instead.

"Fucking assholes! Get me the fuck down from-"

"Shut the hell up before I give you something to really whine on about."

"Bitch, you broke my arm."

"Then maybe keep your hands to yourself, jackass."

What?

The bird did this?

Trying the knob netted him no resistance but trying to open the door got him sworn out as Marcus was apparently straddling the blade in it. "Fuck! Whoever the hell that is, stop it! You cut it off, and I swear I'll do worse to you!"

"Back the fuck up then, Marcus."
On his very tip toes, the quarter-blooded Italian-American did so. It would've been funny, had the man not been one slip from losing a rather vital part of himself.

"Get in and shut the mother fucking door." Glancing up, he got the full brunt of a red-eyed glare from the blonde woman that he would've sworn had grey eyes before this. "Now. Or you will be my next target."

How he missed the massive gold-plated battle ax in her hand would be something he'd wonder for the rest of his life. She didn't have that before getting into this room, and if she needed-

"Now." As the demand was accompanied by her hefting that thing, which was heavy looking enough that even if she threw like a girl it would do some respectable damage anyways, Vito cautiously slid into the classroom around Marcus and his flailing attempts to grab him.

The guy pinned to the door by another massive gold battle ax wasn't having it, or his position. "You little bitch, the moment-

…okay, bird could throw better than any professional pitcher. The ax went through the top half of the door and from the sounds of it crashed into a wall hard enough to penetrate it, scaring any number of the maids on the other side from how they screeched and swore in response.

"Next one will not miss." Promised the woman, those red eyes bleeding purple next. "Now, shut your fucking mouth."

Of course, Marcus wasn't that smart. "What other one? You threw-

He did at least shut the hell up when she merely held out a hand and some kind of purple fire lit up then spat out another of those gold battle axes in it.

Which did explain where she got them from, somewhat. Slightly. Not at all, but he could hope it would if he gave it a bit of time.

Vito made sure he was in the nearest open seat, probably Marcus', before she could turn her attention back to the rest of them. All of whom were suspiciously silent behind him, and before this he would've called the whole room a 'rowdy lot'.

"Now then. As you may or may not have been told, I am a Soviet Union expert on Dying Will Flames. These kinds of Flames." Another threatening heft of that stupidly impossible ax, then it was set on her shoulder as she examined the associates in the room likely staring back at her as her eyes bled out the color to go back to her seemingly natural grey. "Yes, I can make my own weapons to beat the shit out of all of you. Infinity. I can rip off your fucking arms and beat you with the soggy end until you're dead, and never get fucking tired of it. The next asshole to try feeling me up will be losing their hands instead of be pinned against a moving piece of wood by their junk, understand?"

A pause occurred, where no one spoke.

"I will take silence as assent. Lovely."

"Vito, man, what the-"

Thunk.

Vito did not glance over, because he was pretty sure that wasn't another gold ax. That was some gunmetal grey polearm with a pick end, and he didn't want to be the next to attract her attention or experience what else she could pull out of nothing to use.
"Excuse you, I am talking here." Leaning in on whoever that was, and the short end-table it was embedded in if he remembered the room's layout right, the stupidly impossible woman leaned in and smiled sharply at whoever was next to him… then spoke in still accented but clearly understandable Italian. "Until such time I ask a question, keep your fucking nonsense to yourself. That goes for the rest of you as well, keep your fucking traps shut until I say you can speak."

…probably understandable, she did show up with two Italian Mafiosi so the odds were on her already knowing the language and just letting people talk around her without mentioning it would net her some information was pretty good.

He at least wasn't the only one that flinched when she yanked out that weapon from the wood it was lodged into, from what little he could see of the various legs and feet around him.

"The lot of you have been picked, handpicked I would say, by your boss to learn all about Dying Will Flames and how not to fuck up your next attempted abduction of one." Chick apparently knew full well what was going on, full credit to her if he wasn't fucking stuck in the middle of it. "And thus, we come to our first major issue. Most of you probably do not want to be here, I especially do not want a fuck-load of assholes that do not want to be here… but you are going to just have to suffer. I will teach you to standards, and you will uphold them. Even if I have to beat it into your heads for you to become close to competent."

The fact her eyes bled purple again probably meant nothing good, even disregarding that weapon in her hands which then flashed out of existence the same way it came into it. It was as far as Vito's experience with 'Dying Will Flames' went, and that was regrettably going to be expanded upon apparently.

"Now, this is the part where you can talk. Who knows anything about Dying Will Flames?"

Someone in the back shoved themselves to their feet noisily, and Vito just wanted to bury his face in his hands and ignore the next five minutes. He didn't want to know what was about to go down, but he also didn't think he'd get away with not watching or running for it.

"Bitch, you might've gotten lucky once-" Was about as far as whoever the hell that was got, then quicker than a rattlesnake the woman lunged forward and someone else was thrown into the wall that used to be behind her.

Silverio Rotelli wasn't a light man, either. He was one of the heavier enforcer-types they had, generally the guy they fetched to ensure the locals remained far away from where they were operating if they needed something done quick and dirty like, and apparently some hundred pound-nothing woman tossed him ass over teakettle as easily as someone else would sling a towel over their shoulders. Of course Rotelli wasn't the type to take that laying down, he scrambled upright and tried to swing back at her for the manhandling.

Vito then got a front-row seat to why Marcus claimed the girl broke his arm, it took an unbelievably light jab for Rotelli's forearm to bend in ways the human body wasn't made for as she flat out ignored his heavy fist impacting her ribcage to focus on returning the insult. She then fisted a hand in his shirt and threw him at Marcus, who had been suspiciously silent for a while trying to wiggle out of his rather precarious position.

Luckily for both, the door broke under the abuse instead of making the other man slide down that ax blade he had been straddling… which poofed into another batch of purple fire instead of slice either open. Both men ended up at the shoes of that other Mafioso, the one called Renato Sinclair.

"Couldn't help yourself, I assume?"
"Morbid curiosity, little dragon lady, I swear." Claimed the full-blooded Italian, eyeing her handiwork with interest before glancing up with a shit-eating grin on his face. "Want me to take out the trash?"

"Eh, throw them somewhere. If they wake up, they can come back... if they're brave enough."

From the despair inducing dark laugh of delight he gave, Vito was pretty sure if anyone else got tossed... or even survived today, they'd be running for it instead of risk whatever the fucking Mafioso was gleefully looking forward to.

...no, wait. If everyone refused to come back and risk bodily harm or being target practice for some apparently not-imaginary medieval weaponry, would they be defaulting on the offered lectures through delinquency instead of her for being unable to control a classroom of the worst thugs Don Cerrito could scare up?

Someone was going to have to bite the bullet and tough it out and Vito had the sinking suspicion it'd be him, so they at least didn't end up holding the short end of the stick. He couldn't remember who all was in here, and he wasn't glancing around for any reason even if he was curious.

"As for the rest of you, someone had better answer my question really fucking fast." Those grey eyes flashed from purple to red and then back to grey, as she practically prowled back to the front of the meeting room again. "Or I will assume I should start from the very beginning... and that might take a bit of time. Who knows how long we will be locked in this tiny room, waiting for someone to have the courage to answer a tiny little question like that..."

This was going to go downhill fast. Most of the men in here would probably eventually bite some kind of bait when their tempers chewed through their common sense, then get their asses handed to them in various humiliating ways and kicked out in short order.

Worse of all, they started it too. Stocking a room with a bunch of hot-headed enforcer types to hopefully scare her off so they'd get a better return on whatever Don Cerrito was up to. Just gave her ammunition to use in return, instead.

Unexpectedly jarring turn-around in expectations, really fucking galling to boot. Vito's next week was going to go downhill, just as quickly as this room emptied.

"No one?" The woman had the guts to pretend some very faked surprise as the Mafioso dragged off her two initial victims. "Well then, I guess I should start at the very beginning. Listen up, assholes. This will be on the test."

Might as well change 'week' to 'the whole of next month' instead, from the look of things.

Vito gave up and put his face in his hands when one of the hotheads in the room got fed up by being treated like schoolchildren instead of the supposed adults they were, shoving himself to his feet without a word and just simply lunging for the woman.

That one was tossed out the second-story window, instead of out the already broken door, almost instantaneously from the sounds of it.
Out of the twenty-seven men they started with, five were in the hospital because of their 'instructor' and three others had split without looking back over the course of two 'lessons' given over two days. Lesson number three, the part where the monstrously strong if dainty looking lady from Soviet Russia finally got into Dying Will Flame users and how they tended to 'express themselves', Vito was really regretting not joining the ones bailing out.

The unfortunate side effect of having some responsible bone in his body, it sometimes struck at the worst times and left him in a stuffy second-story meeting room turned makeshift classroom.

The rest of them… were either too hard-headed to realize they were contending with what amounted to a brick wall in human form or thought that eventually someone would just have to get lucky through the stacked odds not in their favor. Eventually.

Miss Sonya Arsenevna Bazanova had already introduced her 'other' trick yesterday, the one with the tobacco pipe and setting on fire the resulting smoke or possibly other people, which made four in the hospital for 'blunt force related trauma' and one for second- and third-degree burns. Today was apparently a 'testing patience until someone snapped' kind of day because she showed up bare-handed and seemed just waiting for someone to start anything, so she could beat them down without any of her Flame tricks this time.

As if they needed the extra embarrassment, the whole class was a laughingstock of everyone else in the know… and none of those fuckers would put their money where their mouths were and try it out for a day.

Don Cerrito had spun a fast and pretty tale, spreading to his main supporters the whole farce was some kind of penance turned opportunity. In a 'risk the lower thugs, get the information traded off to the higher valued associates, call it good' kind of thing and not the imploding attempt to run the 'teacher' off. About half the house bought it full sale, Vito wasn't one of them but kept his mouth shut.

Notably, neither of the two Mafiosi from the old country believed a word of it either and Don Cerrito had to spend a whole lot of time and effort trying to get them to keep quiet about it.

"You. Next passage."

Vito snuck a glance to the side, feeling a kind of sinking feeling grip his chest when he recognized who she was calling out to read aloud from her little worksheets brought in today.

Expecting it and it coming up were two very different things.

Matthew Lentine wasn't the smartest man on the block, a bit slow with his words sometimes, but he was a good man when it came to machinery or even telling a tale. Little grumpy when it came to figuring out written words put before him or trying to listen to a fast talker, but that didn't mean Vito or any of the other associates in the room would appreciate their 'teacher' calling him out for it or picking on him for an issue he couldn't help.

Matt knew perfectly well he wasn't getting out of it, but he did at least shoot the 'teacher' an ugly
look first. Her *highly* unimpressed expression made him turn back to the few sheets of paper stapled together instead of try something, and after a moment to hastily scan the words printed neatly in blocks on the page started to read haltingly from it.

It really only took a few seconds to get Bazanova to pause and frown, but it was more thoughtful than annoyed despite what Vito expected.

The last time someone fucked around with what reading she mandated needed to be done, not half an hour ago, she tossed that fucker through a wall instead of allowing it to continue this long. There was a hole in the wall from him crashing through it without the benefit of any protective gear, and as a matter of fact Vito half-expected the man was playing dead so he wouldn't be forced to crawl back through the hole and read more.

The scrape of one of the abandoned chairs being dragged over wooden floors interrupting Matt's stuttering voice made several people flinch, but all she did was pull it up across from the guy and settle her pert ass in it.

"Stop." Rather needless of an order as Matt had already paused with his head down, probably expecting to be the next one tossed, her unvarnished nails tapped on the paper he was holding mid-way down the page. "Read this word."

"…ex—— no *dis*-tinct."

"This word."

"Ten-n… be… an, ic…? Tendency."

Another pause, and the blonde dug a pen out of her pocket and marked up her left wrist before pointing at another word on the pages before Matt. "This word."

"…I don't know that word."

"Sound it out, take your time."

He shot her a suspicious look, glancing back down at the letters on the page and hunching his shoulders up. "Ax… er… ar-da… t… ion."

"Exacerbation." Corrected Bazanova simply. "Ex, ac, er, ba, tion. To make something worse. This word."

"Then why not just put 'makes it worse'?"

Matt earned a pointedly expectant look, but not an answer.

Frankly, Vito was sort of sure the woman had picked her vocabulary to be as difficult as possible just to mess with the others. Some of these words he didn't know without a dictionary on hand, and he actually finished compulsorily schooling. He also suspected he wasn't the only one aiming to hit the books later tonight, so they'd understand what it was she had before them, which also might be half a point in itself since this was all really sensitive information they were warned to keep secure beforehand.

With a heavy sigh, and highly reluctantly, the man twice her girth obediently looked back down. The next pause was a touch longer, and somewhat seemed to pay off for him. "Pro-ber-ba-t-ion."

 Mostly. It *was* kind of a word.
"Propagation."

…wrong word.

Reaching the end of what patience he had left, Matt attempted to shoot to his feet. The dainty hand fist ed into his wife-beater tank top forced him to sit down again, heavily.

"Propagation. A Cloud Flame user's ability. Meaning to make more." Bazanova informed him with pointed patience as she let him go then leaned back in her chair to study him thoughtfully for once. "You just had to say you were dyslexic, I would have moved on."

"…what?"

"Dyslexic. Congenital word-blindness, like some are face-blind or color-blind. The written words swim around on you, do they not? Difficulty telling 'e's from 'a's, 'p's from 'q's to 'd's and 'b's from 'six's or 'nine's, guessing at words even with the context clues before you or never really being sure what you read, are some issues those with dyslexia have and it seems you as well possess."

Matt looked at her in askance, poleaxed without her needing to use her magical weapons. "There's a term for it?"

"It is not widely known of, most of the identifying work was done in Britain at the turn of the century. Not a whole lot continued from there either, but it is a known issue that may arise in the human condition." She offered to him as she got up and kicked the chair away negligently. "Just remind me if I forget, and I will pick someone else to read. I will also define whichever unfamiliar word you may come across after the lesson, if you require."

Then she thumped her fist right on the table next to Vito, giving him a very insincere smile as she pulled her unmarred left hand out of the splintered top piece of wood.

"Hopefully you know where we left off. Keep reading."

He'd put a finger on where they were, smartly it seemed. Old trick from school, but one that paid off highly as she then didn't have a reason to knock him unconscious for the rest of the lesson.

Obediently rattling off the 'Rain Flames and their characterizing differences' passage they were reading aloud like a bunch of middle-school brats got him space from the blonde, as she picked someone else for the next paragraph and continued down the living room turned 'classroom' with her back to the middle of the gathered men.

With the space, Vito risked a glance at Matt's still rather stunned looking face. His somewhat battered mug was almost funny paired with that expression, but knowing the man personally made things a touch more sobering.

A couple of the guys around looked highly tempted to risk Bazanova's wrath and start whispering to each other, almost like the school children she was treating them all as, but the sudden start and the suspicious level of attention everyone suddenly paid to their own worksheets probably meant the blonde bird had turned around and caught Vito looking around.

She gave him a very pointed look when he risked a glance, glanced once herself to Matt still sitting there. Not looking at anything in particular, definitely against what she had ordered them all to do… but then she silently moved on without saying anything to them both.

Uncharacteristically. She had literally punted a guy out of the room not an hour ago for trying to ignore her orders, yet apparently the big guy got a pass.
Then again, Matt was already pretty dazed. Maybe she just had a thing against kicking a man while he was already down.

Vito slowly returned to his own worksheet, feeling vaguely sheepish and a bit like the school kid the woman was treating them as. As a matter of fact, the whole situation now felt like some kind of remedial summer school thing with the whole 'read this' incident.

Weird.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 20th of February, 1970 continued. Cerrito Crime Family's Headquarters, San Jose California, United States of America.)

"There is no way to 'cure' dyslexia. It is a crossed wires kind of thing, I am afraid." Sonya was informing some brute of a man in her tone-less and difficult to read deadpan when Renato checked into her makeshift 'classroom', disposing of a whole fistful of papers in her hands using her Storm Flames. "Something you were born with or caused by too many knocks to the head, not a thing you learned wrongly or can undo. The only thing I can recommend is dedicated practice to learn your way around it, and unfortunately a lot of practice. Get yourself a book of crossword puzzles and a pocket dictionary, then just work at it until you get a little faster at reading and writing or find some workaround for recognizing letter groups or trouble words."

"…my third-grade teacher said I was just stupid."

"Your third-grade teacher is an uneducated moron." Countered the thief flatly as she flicked ash off her hands, actually sounding honestly annoyed with said unnamed teacher. "There is nothing wrong with you, there is no stupidity involved. It is merely the way you are from birth, otherwise known as genetically, or the result of traumatic brain injury. Both of which are not things that can be changed. Unfortunately, it is a disability you will just have to learn to cope with. As a method to make it easier on you is still unknown, there is nothing else I can say or do to assist you with this."

The man twice her girth and more than a head taller than her rubbed a broad hand over the back of his neck, well-muscled shoulder slumping at the news. Curiously he didn't look all that defeated at her words, just a bit resigned and wryly accepting.

Renato figured he had stepped into something he wasn't really involved with nor should be involved with and rapped his knuckles on the doorway, so they'd know he was there. "Should I come back?"

Sonya glanced up at him, lifting her tattooed shoulder in a dismissive shrug. "As I cannot do anything for this, it is entirely up to Mister Lentine here how much effort he wished to put into it and thus not something I can be involved with more than I have already offered."

The man, ridiculously enough, shuffled his feet awkwardly like some nervous schoolboy in front of a teacher. "Call me Matt, Miss Bazanova. Um… thanks."

Obligingly stepping aside for him, the hitman left the door open as he walked into a rather damaged seating room turned classroom. Wasn't a point to close it, anyone attempting to spy inwards could just peer through the gaping hole in the wall for easy access. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Once they stop being rowdy," allowed the Storm-Cloud with a thread of amusement in her tone, merely watching him advance on her rather than start moving herself, "the lot of them are not particularly bad students."
"Rowdy, is it?" Renato drawled with amusement, smirking at the diffident shrug he got as he came to a stop next to her. "'Rowdy' is why you've already started racking up a hospital bill not halfway through this thing?"

"And would you believe it? Don Bergamaschi already agreed to pay the hospital bills." She purred back, fighting the smirk trying to gain purchase on her lips but failing spectacularly. "So thoughtful of the man, is it not?"

"Mmm… there might be some difficulty convincing the Don of that." Not that he particularly minded, her mischief was entirely appreciated… at least by him. "However I believe you owe me a date-night, little dragon lady."

Sonya was markedly more amused now to the point it was actually visible just looking at her, thankfully he had seemed to catch her at a really good mood in spite of the difficulties one of her students suddenly had. "Ho? Indeed, I do. I believe it is also your turn to pick when and where."

"How about something classic? Dinner and a show?"

"What show?"

"Leave that part-" The clink of masonry being lightly kicked against a wall had the Mafioso turning around sharply, almost fast enough to catch whoever the hell it was using the hole in the wall to try spying on the two of them. "…shit."

Sonya glanced at him skeptically, then turned more to the hole to see who it was he needed to quiet in a fast hurry. "Mister Romero, did you require something?"

"Ah… nope. Just. Did Matt already leave?" Warily peeking around the shattered plaster and bricks still standing, the… half-Italian American tried for a smile that came out more like a grimace aimed at the both of them.

"He left already."

"…right. Sorry. Saw nothing."

Renato huffed sourly as the other man dashed down the hall and passed the still opened door. "Great. Now it's going to be gossip fodder, and there's no way Dante's going to miss it."

"Ask D'Attilio to keep quiet about it now, then pay off a Mist to make him forget later." Offered the thief a touch warily, still somewhat confused by the sudden tone shift but willing to help him still. "Or we could put it off until he leaves?"

"Rumors' not going to believe it, maybe I should've caught you outside instead." Tisking, the hitman turned back to the still puzzled Russian. "No, little dragon lady. Put it out of your head and let me handle the details. I need to run and catch… Romero was it? You just go find the tools to make yourself more pretty, and I'll pick you up around seven tomorrow for it."

"…okay?" She eyed him sternly. "No breaking my students. At least until I get to it."

"Of course."

There was yet another pause. "Do you… really think I am pretty?"

Sonya was thinking more about the times he had refrained from giving into Shamal's demands to say it too so she'd believe the brat, having assumed he hadn't because she didn't fit his criteria of 'pretty'
and they didn't typically tend to lie to one another if it wasn't serious.

Renato blinked slowly, with a mild headache from trying to follow her thought process back through that incident and then forward back to now through all those moderators she apparently tended to filter certain experiences through. "...yes, little dragon lady, you *are* pretty."

"Oh. Okay." She got about a step before something else occurred to her to ask first. "...what should I...?"

"A cocktail dress will do." Offered the hitman a touch tiredly, grinding the palm of his hand into his left eye momentarily in attempt to alleviate the pain there. "Go with your usual colors, please."

"Like my little red dress from the first Ball we attended?"

"...that will do *perfectly.*" While yeah, she had been sixteen at that point in time... the Mafioso would not mind at all any kind of repeat with short hems and garter belts to admire. *Especially now* she was twenty.

Made him feel less like an old lecher perving out on a much younger woman. Four to five years wasn't really *that* much of a gap at their age.

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**(Saturday the 21st of February, 1970. Island of Corsica, Mediterranean Sea, French Republic.)**

*Verde* skidded, haste causing his battered footwear added to rain slicked cobblestone resulting in his feet losing grip on the material underfoot most unsatisfactory, as he dropped to a marginally painful kneeling position in an utterly disgusting alleyway next to his fallen friend to somewhat frantically press hard on the gunshot wound.

"...Verde. Verde. It's... *not* that bad." Adrik protested lightly, more from an inability to breathe through a punctured lung of all things than from any levity taken from this situation.

Flatly ignoring him the scientist pulled a small plastic card from his pocket, the local library card he had acquired for additional reading material or limited research opportunities, removed the belt the other man was wearing to plug up the hole with the allowance through the semi-ridged plastic to only let air escape if need be before yet more air was sucked in and caused a collapsed lung.

Hot and slick hands already covered in blood gripped his and then shoved him off, the Russian groggily hauling himself bodily up against the brick wall he was half-collapsed next to before providing the pressure on the card the Lightning had been intent on himself. *Check him, and you're going... to have to finish him... off. If we're lucky.*

"To hell with luck." Snarled the scientist with ill-temper, free hands curling up uselessly as things were as contained as could be without any supplies or medical professionals at hand. *Luck is what got us into this situation.*

"It's... the quickest way back to... that hospital, and the... whole 'no... need to explain why... I'm shot' thing. Would be nice. Boss lady... would... also be good for the... the fees, too."

Twitching, he shot the wounded man a blistering glare for the entirely valid distraction before turning on the one that shot at them both. While as a Lightning he found bullets to be less than a significant obstacle, the one without Flames between them had no such protections.
They had a week left in that arrangement between himself and Sonya and depending on traveling time they might just get through this with possibly less than a day to spare. Verde would be highly upset if his relative freedom would cost his friend his very life, but he was also highly aware it was Adrik's choice to assist him in seeking the lofty goal he had been perusing and to risk his life for it.

Once it turned March, the thief would return to France and seek them out. If Verde did not get them into Mafia Land and to her Lackey Bjørn before she found them, his end of the arrangement would be forfeited along with all the frustrating and halting progress the two of them made to date.

The both of them had poured too much time and effort to see everything fail just short of their nearly impossible finish line, and that did give the scientist enough motivation to turn on the hazily recovering criminal armed with one of his own creations with the extended magazine capacity.

A lot had gone wrong in last hour, more than he had accounted for after getting used to the routine at the other man's elbow the last couple of weeks.

He hadn't quite gotten to the 'disposing of bodies' part of being a 'made man', but at the moment Verde felt doing by dictation this once would be suitable. Normally he-

-he was stalling.

Frankly put, he was not a murderer nor had the mentality of someone that could kill for a living. Adrik had been very understanding about that detail, explaining that knowing your limits and where not to go was key to avoiding the possibility of ending up a mere shallow mockery of oneself. However, the Russian had also not spared the Frenchman from any murder-orientated lessons either.

Right now, Verde found it was still very much beyond his capabilities to murder even in this situation. Between this one, who turned his manufactured weapons against them in hopes of separating the Lightning from the one enabling his freedom, and Adrik… he'd chose the latter every time.

Even still…

A sharp kick to the back of his calf had him moving to at least separate the infringing criminal from the handheld pistol, and the scientist got caught up yet again between what he felt like doing at this moment and what he knew he wasn't good for.

They couldn't let the man go to run and report their position to someone more fit to catch them, not only was Adrik injured and unable to move in his crazy Russian leapfrog-flat out run pattern which normally let the man edge around armed individuals chasing him… but it was entirely possible their assaulter had the tickets for the ferry they needed.

Tickets for Mafia Land's 'day-trip' ferry, the 'price' of this botched exchange.

Not using the tickets for the return trip would significantly devalue the worth of them, meaning Verde had paid twice the amount a single one-way ticket would have cost them only to use half of both, but also with criminal inflation it meant he had to practically subside on coffee and whatever small cheap thing Adrik could coax him to eat mid-project to amass the amount of weaponry required for the trade.

Even if the actual trade of modified and manufacture illegal weapons would not have taken place, the two of them had been prepared for that possibility. This should've been the one and only meeting Verde would show up to, requiring the other side to actually have the tickets and prove it before the Lightning reveal himself. As long as they were produced and verified, a thief of the Russian's skill
would have little issue stealing them off a target once the event had concluded.

However, it was raining. Not heavily, it could barely be classified as precipitation instead of a rather salty misting seeping into anything available, but there was also enough moisture in the air to make things slick and clammy without factoring in the wind or the lack of sunlight cooling things more. Their 'target' had indeed double-crossed them in the end as expected, but also brought in more muscle than either had anticipated for taking control of just one rogue Flame user.

All the practice and experience in the world would not have saved this particular tragedy of errors from happening, it was too much at the wrong moment and at the wrong time with all the worst factors in play.

Verde… still could not bring himself to shoot the instigator of this particularly bad day. He could play with the idea of wanting to, especially as it was possible that Adrik's gunshot wound would be fatal if left without treatment much longer, it was just a matter of… …it was possible they could escape from this situation yet still without murder. Death was not necessarily the only option.

"…Verde."

Instead, the scientist lit his hand with his emerald green Flames and used it instead of the weapon in his hand to render their opponent unconscious non-lethally. Through several hundred volts of electricity, and a tap applied directly to the forehead.

"…that works." Adrik allowed slowly, audibly exhausted but also somewhat wry to the Frenchman's ear. He was somewhat alarmed to note the man had somehow worked himself up to his own feet while he was distracted debating the situation and the results they both had to contend with, adjusting his patch work medical aid to reside under his flannel long-sleeved shirt. "Check his pockets."

"Adrik."

"You're not a thief." Interrupted the Russian dryly, slicking a hand through his waterlogged hair and smearing rapidly thinning blood onto his face in exchange before tightening his belt the most he could stand then laboriously pulling back on the button up shirt. "If it's not there… I'll have… to go find them."

Verde was the only one uninjured. However, belaboring the point would net neither of them anything of significant value. He made a poor thief, in spite of the attempts to educate him by a professional.

Twisting back to his unconscious target, the scientist rapidly but thoroughly checked both pockets and the lining of the fellow's clothing as the thief taught him to in order to find hidden recesses or post manufacture additions in cloth. Using his thumb and forefinger, testing the give of the lining by sliding the material back and forth.

It was one such hidden pocket, the opening disguised by a standard inner jacket pocket lining, in which their prize was secreted. The only reason they had not let this one man 'lose' the two of them in the scramble away from his more armed fellows. "…I have them."

"Thank fuck."

After inspecting them for not only the watermark but the other marks of validity Adrik had advised him upon, he tucked the tickets into his inadequately insulated jacket's pocket and rounded on the injured man next. "Now, cease aggravating your wounds."
The thief gave him a gimlet stare but did refrain from moving more until Verde had his arm thrown over his shoulder and started moving them while keeping his compromised ribcage adequately compressed and as motionless as either was capable. "Seriously... two words. 'Stop it'. Would've worked fine."

"Again with this?" His speech habits had been a on and off conversation for a while now, one he did not particularly care for.

Especially now, as everything Tatiana's medical texts had 'coughing blood' as a significant sign of severe internal bleeding to the point of advising immediate medical attention immediately they could neither afford nor pause for here. Not all of the blood on Adrik's face was there from his hand, which would not assist them in evading attention until the scientist could find them the correct dockside.

Thankfully there was enough moisture in the air to assist with cleaning it off quickly and preventing it from congealing into hard rusty streaks anywhere it spread from the injury.

Verde became more alarmed when Adrik failed to respond to the nearly formulaic argument they had repeated practically verbatim for several weeks, and even if it would cause him a headache glanced over out the corner of his eye. His spectacles were not up to modifying his peripheral view, but the ashen skinned Russian had his mouth compressed into a thin bloody line and that was easy enough to make out against shadowed walls and the dim false morning light after a moment.

"...Adrik?"

At his prompt the man grunted, then coughed out another mouthful of blood. "Not... enough... to... speak 'n... move."

"...silence is then preferable." Concluded the Lightning, well aware the other would catch on to his concern and worry easily enough. His ability to conceal things was dismal as of now, especially paired up against the thief's trained ability to note such weaknesses.

"...sure." Shifting slowly, which still caused him pain from the tightening of the hand encircling Verde's rather thin wrist, Adrik shifted so the bloodstains and the hole in his flannel shirt would not be immediately apparent to any that glanced at the two of them. Pressure on the wound was then supplied by the scientist, as it fit the 'supporting the other' visage they apparently were attempting to project.

An out of place rasp of metal against thin metal attracted the Lightning's attention, he very nearly stumbled and took them both to the ground when he realized the other man had somehow come into the possession of a small flask and was thumbing the screwed top off. "Where did you acquire that?"

The Russian merely gave him a tight grin, much as he did when something criminal he was unfamiliar with was afoot, and dumped the contents of the very likely stolen flask over the front of his jacket. It caused a very noticeable if now waterlogged scent of whisky to rise off the other man, and the emptied metal container was then discarded too easily to have been one of Adrik's possessions.

...their possessions.

Verde very nearly stopped at that realization they would be forced to abandon everything but what they had on them for right now, but the thief's knee impacted the back of his and forced him forward another step.

"No. Docks." He insisted as strongly as he could, which was not remotely comparative to how he
would normally sound when correcting the Lightning's errant behavior. "*Fuck anything, else. Get to the... docks.*"

"*You gentlemen alright down there?*"

Blinking a bit owlishly at the policeman that was shining a flashlight into his face, the French native nervously adjusted his hold on the suddenly silent Russian and thanked their soaked garments for whatever concealment of the blood they might give. "*We are, officer. I am afraid I am tasked with ensuring my friend reaches his bed this morning.*"

Verde's attempt at deceptive words and a calm tone were not nearly sufficient to convince anyone nothing should be alarming, much less someone who made a career out of catching the less law abiding in their delinquency, but the alcohol Adrik liberally doused himself in gave key corroboration to convince the approaching law enforcement officer to take the statement as truth. "*I see. Hurry up, there's sounds as if some gang of idiotic criminals are running around all excited like.*"

"*As a matter of fact, such is why we are taking the backroads. Three streets over behind us there was... a significant number of very rude fellows that nearly knocked us over after checking us for whatever they search for.*"

Given a more immediate threat to safety and public order than two men attempting 'to get home', the older man refocused on the way they had come instead of the suspicious dark stains on the wounded man's clothing. "*Damn. Get off the streets quickly then, though it sounds as if you had some good luck to get away once... better not test it again.*"

"*Indeed. Excuse us.*" Even if he followed the thief's advice the best he could, it still somewhat surprised the scientist that such social interactions could be 'geared' in such ways.

He did not believe himself very good at such things, but even an inept moron would learn some small trick at a master's elbow given adequate time to watch.

Verde was not particularly robust in form, was eminently satisfied with such normally, and yet again he found his lack of physical prowess negatively affecting his current aims. Physically hauling the other man along required a fair bit of upper body strength, which he found difficult to supply while also attempting to keep Adrik's ribcage as still as possible yet also hold the highest volume of blood within the wound at the same time as the other equally important aims.

He was failing, possibly horribly given the ever-spreading dark stain down the other man's front. They were moving closer to their goal, yes... while the Russian's conduction degraded even faster without basic medical aid they still could not afford to apply on the public streets.

The only grace they had was the lack of heavy pedestrian traffic, it was a touch too early in the day for even the bakers to start out for their ovens. That did not meant there were no others sharing the streets with them, even if the third-shift workers and a few fishermen ambled along in the dark as well, however their situation seemed no different than other late-night drinkers attempting to progress home or to their work shifts as well.

Adrik was trying to help the best he could in his condition, and being whipcord fit as he was provided a significant amount of the strength to at least carry them both on as long as Verde held him adequately on target and still. It was more aiming the Russian than carrying the bulk of his weight, which fell off by increments until a nearly burdensome amount was left solely on his shoulders.

Instead of comment upon the situation, which would not assist their aims at this moment, Verde
instead marched on the best he could while also attempting to keep an eye out for the ferry boat.

Mafia Land servicing ferries did not mark themselves or their docks differently, it was the ferryman's marked attire which would indicate where the vessel he manned was aimed to travel. Adrik had scouted out and pieced together rumor and secondhand information to learn of the only mark that would confirm the two of them had come to the end of their misadventure, then for suitable concealment took the scientist through the method so he could come to that conclusion as well.

The symbol in particular was actually the alchemical symbol for arsenic, embroidered in black into the cap all such workers wore, which had interested Verde into asking why of someone that would not react hostilely to being questioned. The Russian he was traveling with did not know, but the Lightning assumed the woman that did work for the island would be able to tell him.

A sudden increase of weight had the Frenchman shifting course unexpectedly, and through fogging glasses he did glimpse someone actually standing out in the misty dawn watching the two of them. Without alarm, Verde had to assume, as nothing really changed as they staggered closer. Relying on the Russian's eyesight over his impaired one, the Frenchman reluctantly let go of his friend to produce their prize from last night's misadventure.

All the ferryman did was take the tickets offered silently, examining them intently then ripping them in half and returning a pair of stubs before waving them on disinterestedly.

The cabin onboard was already half full of particularly shady looking types and given the Lightning's less than stellar combat ability, he chose to instead retreat to the far railing to lean his friend up against.

Encouragingly, Adrik did blink at him once he was situated. His tanner skin was still ashen, washed out by the dim light struggling against steel grey clouds overhead. The bloodstain was alarming, as was the fact there was very little clinically sterile enough in the possession of either to pack into the wound to staunch the bleeding.

Verde was particularly fine with silence as of this moment while he tried to think of some way to preserve the Russian's life, as long as the other man indicated he was yet alive in some method until then.

"Move."

"Ticket."

Alarmed, the Frenchman attempted to peer over his shoulder. Then he removed his thoroughly opaque glasses and blearily tried to make out the situation back on the pier without the condensation in his way.

Their ferryman was holding out what seemed to be an expectant hand, to a large group of significantly and familiarly colored toughs appearing rather heavily armed and encircling him. The captain of the boat seemed singularly unmoved by his entrapment, merely chewing on something protruding from his mouth which could either be a pipe or an unlit cigar.

"We just need to-"

"If you don't have a ticket, you're not getting on my ferry."

A pause, in which by the slight movement of what he took to be facial features and hair shifted around as an alternative method pass the man was contemplated by their rather intent pursuers.
"Damn, you two seemed to have made it in the nick of time."

Verde couldn't really help the crackle of Lightning Flames that arced across his skin, which he had to hastily snuff out as water did prove to be a conductor for his Flames especially when he did not wish for them to travel.

From what he could assume once his issue was dealt with, a thin looking male was making some kind of expression he could not make out but was speaking to either him or Adrik. "Lucky you, huh?"

"We've… got nothing." Somewhat slurred out the thief as pointedly as he could manage, rolling his head weakly to the interloper. "And, his patron… will be… rather… displeased… if you… try."

"I just want to watch the show." Claimed the other man simply enough, raising both hands in a fruitless gesture of innocence.

…what 'show'?

An out of place scrape of chains had the Lightning reluctantly returning his attention back to the dockside, where their indomitable ferryman was being assisted… by a very dark splotch of something vaguely man-shaped who had the entire group held in equally as dark chains.

"For Violating the Rules of Sanctuary, you are Under Arrest."

"Meet the Vindice." Their unwanted interloper commented idly as he shuddered at the understandable yet somehow incomprehensible tone. "Always fun to see a newish Flame user react to one."

"…fuck." Adrik coughed out with some measure of blood, back pressed against the railing rather harshly for someone already injured.

If Verde could see what was supposedly so alarming, he might appreciate the reactions of the others more. As it was, all he could understand was what his other senses were telling him.

Which was summed up as 'stay in place if you want to live'. Not particularly a hardship, and in truth the Lightning was somewhat glad of his inadequately weather-proofed glasses failing to be useful as of now if the voice alone made him this uneasy.

Which was questionable as… Verde was not one who was shy of distasteful information. If it was information, it was worth knowing simply for being knowledge if not put into practice due to whatever was distasteful. The feeling he suddenly had was at odds with his understanding of himself, possibly then not his own feeling and therefore suspect.

Were there more than just 'seven' types of Flames?

Black chains and innate aversion to oneself were not an ability that neatly fit into the types he already knew of.

…portals might be, although Viper had employed a more economic 'phase through' variant which was perceived less spectacularly than pitch black holes opening in the dock planks and failing to expunge those dragged into it to the sea below.

When whoever that was finally disappeared into his portals as well the lack of the unnerving feeling actually somewhat warmed the dreary morning, curiously.
"So-"

"Don't... fucking-"

"Desist." Verde snapped at them both, irritated and somewhat exhausted now things were marginally safer. Especially with the interloper stressing the Russian out, Adrik required rest and relaxation not some new situation which made his heart beat more and worsened the bleeding before something could be found to staunch it.

That man glanced at him, to the injured Russian, then looked back and harder at the Lightning. 
"Alright. No need to get feisty. I was just curious."

Adrik snorted. "And... I'm a... fish."

"You could be sleeping with those fishes-"

"You were warned." Their ferryman cut in shortly, startling all three of them and attracting even more attention from those residing in the ferry's covered cabin. "I'd rather not have to air out my ship from the stench of your electrified corpse later."

Holding up his hands as he silently turned and slunk away, the interloper left them.

Turning to the two of them on his deck, the grizzled seaman then sighed heavily. "I'd also rather not be struck by lightning while out at sea, if you could."

...was Verde a lightning rod?

Could he survive that?

"...my apologies." Allowed the scientist slowly, not entirely certain how to prevent his recently developed nervous tick of summoning his Flames to guard his skin when surprised. The ability was highly useful as an instant guard, but if he proved to attract lightning strikes if nothing else was available to draw it off...

The ferryman likely eyed him suspiciously, or made some face he was unable to make out aside the slight movement of whatever was in his mouth for a silent moment, before moving on to the steering wheel and a freestanding dash open to the sky. "There's a first aid kit hitched to the port quarter railing. If it'll calm you down, take some supplies from there."

...what side was 'port quarter'?

Additionally, did seafarers pack a medical kit differently or in another container than the white marked with a red cross affair he was already familiar with?

(...000000)

(Saturday the 21st of February, 1970 continued. San Jose California, United States of America.)

"So... the boys and I were wondering..."

Sonya flatly regarded Vito 'Vic' Romero questionably, wondering when he was going to spit it out. Probably the smartest man in her 'class', the only reason why she was putting up with him lurking around, but it was really rather annoying he was shuffling around whatever the fuck it was so much even after getting a run-down on impatient traits of both 'Storms' and 'Clouds'.
"...if there was a point to this."

"Aside arming you with the information to make an honest go of interacting safely with any further of my type or other users you may encounter?" Asked the thief dryly, earning herself a sheepish shuffle of some feet for the effort. "I hold no ill-will towards any in the class, unless they behave stupidly."

The man had been lingering, rather annoyingly, around her long enough to the point she wasn't certain if he had a question or a concern to pose rather than attempting to 'keep an eye on her' as his Don asked. They were outside, far from anything 'important' that Cerrito might not like her in and generally the point he left her to her own devices, and she was really keen on figuring out what Renato thought was 'classic' for a date.

She did kind of need to hurry up and go change, and as lucky as it was to find a red cocktail dress similar yet different enough to not be the same one she wore to the Ball that first time was... the lack of decent footwear was irritating. She could find knee-high black boots, but they were all fucking uncomfortable as hell.

She wanted her old 'fancy' boots back... but she burned them up with Storm Flames, so unless she ordered herself a new pair and wanted to try to describe the event on how she lost them to Horatiu the old cordwainer...

...should she go check up on him?

Romania was rather far from here, and the weird old bootmaker guy in love with her legs was kind of more a civilian contact than a criminal one. Then again, he was also part of Crina's... network?

Did he count as a contact?

He didn't really have information for her, just a service she greatly liked.

Either way she wanted at least a new set of 'fancy' boots again, and probably a couple sets of 'extra just in case' pairs of walking boots, so it was likely going to have to be one of those 'suck it up and try your best' social interactions. She hated those, it seemed like she usually failed at them somehow. Sometimes horribly.

...she really missed Crina. The old bat didn't require special handling, all she had to do was show up with a bottle of something and everything was good between them for however long the thief lingered.

"Miss Bazanova?"

"Try asking plainly." Deadpanned the thief, shifting her attention back to the man. "I am not in the mood to guess what it is you are trying to get to."

"Well, you helped Matt."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Vito was about to say something, paused and visibly rethought whatever it was, then tried to speak again before she interrupted whatever it was.

"Look. I might have an issue with Don Cerrito and Bergamaschi, and Don Vongola, but that should not translate over to the foot soldiers. Currently, I am your instructor and my job is to ensure you have the information you need to go on dealing with those like myself and not get messily murdered
in the process."

It wasn't something she was always going to hold to, but on the occasions where the minions weren't key or carrying on whatever stupidity their boss was doing…

"Then why beat up half the class?"

"A gross exaggeration, I merely dealt with the outliers who refused to behave." A bald-faced lie, given she had been provoking a few to react to her, but eh. Who didn't expect to be lied to eventually? "Try to recall what I have already taught you about my type, if you would please."

"What? You're…" Vito trailed off at Sonya's pointed look, glancing around at the open pavement leading up to the Cerrito Crime Family's villa, then skeptically inspected her. "…uh, you like violence?"

"Violence does help those of my kind rather nicely." Allowed the Soviet Storm-Cloud wryly with a wicked smirk. "And, not to put too fine a point to it, the bigger guys are pretty much the only ones able to survive my ill humors as long as I am careful. Why not have a little stress relief as long as the option is there?"

The man spluttered, probably out of either surprise or aggravation for how little she cared to pick it out. "What? Why didn't you just-"

"Why should I have?" She interrupted blandly, crossing her arms and glancing down the lane to see if Renato had turned on the road with the car he promised to find yet. "It is not my responsibility to hold your hand, only to ensure you know what you risk."

"It wasn't our choice to risk anything!"

"It was your boss', and while I am understanding I am not that gracious." Sonya corrected unhelpfully. "I have refrained from permanently damaging anyone, all injuries will be healed eventually with minimal scarring. You know the basic information, if have little practice putting it in use. However, around here there is only myself and then Renato… who was not part of this arrangement."

Vito glared, apparently rapidly rethought the likelihood he'd survive doing that more than she was willing to humor, then huffed as he changed targets to glare at the road.

"Tomorrow we will review what you and your… friends have learned. The day after D'Attilio will check to see how much you all retained for reporting back to his masters. Then we will be leaving you all to it."

Sonya was, kind of, debating on stealing something from Joseph Cerrito right before they left. Just as a… warning of a type. Yes, she was a thief, but she really had no intents to steal anything until he decided guarding the villa from the possibility was something he was going to make a point of.

It would prove the asshole right, which was why it was only a thing she was 'debating' about and not 'intended' to do.

Digging through her purse, the Russian found both a new hole and her pipe. The fabric of her tote-purse thing affair was about ready to give up from the abuse she put it through, she just hoped it would survive long enough for her to find a replacement that wasn't easily snatched or had less space.

"We were always going to be fucked over, weren't we?"
"I do not believe you understand the critical parts of this arrangement." She observed dryly, sourly inspecting the empty if rather clean bowl of her pipe and wondering where the tobacco fell out at. "Then again, with how casually the entire farce has been treated I am unsurprised."

"...what do you mean?"

"The information I am giving you, and your 'boys', is expensive." Glancing up at him, Sonya had to smirk wryly again at the skeptical expression on Vito's face. "Technically, this information cost someone on your end their life. He tried to shoot me, I killed him in return. Not only that man's life, the protection of your attempted kidnapping student that saved his Tutor's life that I owe, my own interference in your 'neck of the wood', and a bit of political trading in Italy. All of that, and 'this' will smooth all that over..."

"Would Don Cerrito be... settling? Any?"

"Do you really believe that blowhard's claims?"

His expression went flat, which probably meant she shouldn't insult his leader to his face just yet.

"Discarding Don Cerrito's... continued hysterics," allowed the thief with a measure of distaste she wasn't particularly bothered about showing, "the information is closely guarded and protected as part of an entire trade. Of which, both myself and D'Attilio are involved with and have our own special rules from those entities we all really do not wish to bother much. Which is the reason your Don is 'settling' any. He might have a thing to press on to Bergamaschi, but I have a much bigger thing to press back if he tried."

Vito studied her suspiciously, Sonya merely pulled her tobacco pouch out of the many things her purse carried every day and repacked her pipe.

"At the very least, I would assume you realize you now have information which has worth if only through trades. If you will not believe me on the exact value, I suggest you keep an eye on what use your Don puts it to in the coming days instead."

A car that finally wasn't a Cadillac sedan finally turned down the lane the two of them were waiting on, which wasn't a heavily armored one either as the convertible also wasn't riding low. Renato pulled up to the curb skillfully, but the Storm-Cloud glanced back to the man who had been keeping her company instead of pointedly guarding the last hour or so.

"All I really will insist upon is the secrecy aspects. I have dealt with my own country's... awareness, I will be rather displeased to be forced to come back and clean up after you lot as well."

Vito was more sliding away from the hitman's unimpressed attention than listening to her anymore, but Sonya while amused didn't particularly care. As long as he heard her, then he could do whatever made him happy.

"You ready, little dragon lady?"

"As long as Vito here has no other inquiries to pose." Under the Mafioso's hard look, obviously the American had nothing to say. "Then yes."

(Sunday the 22nd of February, 1970. Sonya & Tatiana's Apartment, Mafia Land.)
Hanging up the receiver of his new phone, the Lightning-Storm Lackey rose to his feet and snagged the leather satchel holding his documentation and notebooks on the long-term plans in the works. He expected to be able to sneak out of the apartment without waking Tatiana, as she had a far room not close to the 'front' door.

He did not expect to suddenly be returned to his seat, a folder which he was positive was one of the long-term investments left to build itself slapped down on his new desk.

"Bjørn… mou, what is this?"

"The… Poseidon stock?" That was what was written on the folder and, unless he horribly mixed up the files transferring them to their new apartment, what should be inside.

"Poseidon's stock crashed." Viper informed him shortly, dragging a newspaper from the stack of them next to his office chair to show him the Financial section and the headlines proclaiming just that. "You should have sold it earlier this month, when it peaked at a ridiculous two-eighty per share."

Grabbing the 'offered' paper, Bjørn leafed through it until he reached the part in the Weekend News that detailed the slip Poseidon stocks had in value. Twenty-four dollars in a day was a bit much for any one investment to go down within hours, and this was from January… tenth.

…shit.

With how much he bought the shares for, it wasn't looking good. "This is why we diversify."

"Yes, but it is also why we watch the fucking market." Snarled his tutor with ill-humor, circling around the Lackey without actually having the physical space to do that in but ignoring any issues in the way. "Mou, what have you been doing instead?"

Arranging and ordering the refurbishment of an entire castle with the addition of some remolding, new constructions, and the upkeep of the grounds.

"Speaking of which." Viper drawled venomously, circling back to standing within Bjørn's desk as he fought off a cringing sense of embarrassment for overlooking the entire situation. "However did you get that kind of money?"

"Dama has a lot of things sent in to be sold off." He knew for a fact she capped out the credit limits Mafia Land allowed their agents for 'business fees' twice, to the point the island actually paid some of it back the first time and just silently took the rest of it without crediting her with it the second. He had simply done what Galina had and diverted some of that to be sold off later and for a better price through the fences, which was paying off for the additional paperwork.

There was both the 'for whom it may concern' contract and the recent 'fuck these people' contracts she had taken last year, which paid well but raised her profile somewhat alarmingly. Which she wasn't here to appreciate so it would likely come to an unpleasant surprise when she checked back in herself for new ones to amuse herself with. All the belongings of that one German politician she intensely disliked sans the books, as well as the better parts of that one Triad group… paired with the recent debacle with the gold bars…

With that perspective, the loss of this one investment wasn't staggering. Bjørn had bought them for about seventy-five Australian Dollars a share, now they were worth about a dollar at best if it fell back to the original 'stable' price before the inflation. It was steep and reduced a lot of what he had planned for the near future from 'possible' to 'incredibly risky', because metals were one of the 'main'
investments that made up one of the hopefully *stable* portfolios he had put together, to the point a few semi-important things would have to be pushed back for a time.

The stable renovations, and possibly even the bulk of the new constructions on the grounds in Italy. That wasn't particularly hard, if somewhat behind the timetable he wanted to get the castle finished and ready by. Mainly so Sonya would not have a reason to actually start asking why things were not ready for herself and her godchild by this summer.

Not to mention the rest of the 'people' she had claimed, including the about to arrive Verde and those they might not be able to hire right away now.

"While *enlightening,*" droned out the Mist sarcastically, letting him know that the self-claimed 'Esper' had been rifling through his head even through his Storm Flames and Lightning-rapid thought process, "I would be *happier* if you had made some of that… *excess* the old-fashioned way. Have *all* you been doing is fencing shit, *mou?"

"Of course *not.*" It was just… faster-paced. Investments did require being checked, however he had let that slide recently with everything else going on. Items to be fenced did require checking themselves, but normally there were people doing the selling on his behalf and the proceeds became a respectable trickle when properly managed.

With all that going on, the Lightning-Storm had been focused on the property renovations and detailing exactly what had to be put aside when to order what value of contract he should arrange in at certain times so Sonya's absently errant stealing sprees would be maximized to supply the most when it was needed.

Viper made a tisking sound, retreating further into the cowl they always wore. "I had hoped you would evade the narrow tunnel vision of Lightnings, it seems I should ensure this lesson is painful enough you will evade any further… mistakes."

"It's not a *Lightning-* born mistake. Any perfectly normal human can make the same." Bjǫrn defended himself, slightly sheepishly but still strongly. Embarrassment thankfully never lingered long, but it was still galling to have a failing pointed out and be the topic of conversation.

"But *as* a Lightning, it's easy to blame instead." Countered the miser simply, turning their attention to the various stacks of information he had accumulated for the moment. "If you had intended to evade such a descriptor, you have to avoid *all* of it, *mou.* It's why so many freaked out over Sonya's mere presence, she wasn't particularly threatening nor aggressive enough for some people… then they got obsessed over why not."

"Which *makes her* aggressive."

"Exactly." Viper insisted flatly, whirling around on him while *still standing* in his desk. "Until you match expectations, you will forevermore be poked and prodded until you fall into those neatly sorted 'boxes'. Either own it, *mou,* or evade it. There is no in-between for those like us…"

Considering the problem of Poseidon NL stocks before him, and the Mist who brought it to his attention, the Lackey sighed. "Viper, is there something specific you wanted me to do with this?"

There wasn't much he could think of other than sell them and try to recover what value had been lost through different investments and the shuffling of a few others.

"It depends. Mou… who *told you* about these stocks?"

"An investor from England." Bjǫrn had all the relevant names and details recorded, in bits and
pieces across six different ledgers covering three different topics, which would only require a bit of hunting to assemble again either by him, the miser, or a professional cryptologist. "Why?"

"Time for a field-trip." Insisted the Mist wickedly. "My last lesson to you, student. I will show you the process of how rumor and speculation destroys good information… mou, twisting something as simple as a mere nickel mine into something priced higher than gold."

"There's a nickel shortage."

"That does not excuse anything being priced ten times more than it's worth. If there was a drought of nickel, perhaps… not a shortage." Spat Viper venomously, making the Lackey belatedly wonder if some poor idiot had tried to give them the same information only to run into the miser's ill-humor when it didn't pan out as claimed. "Besides which, there are methods for investors like us… to recoup the financial losses we take on shoddy advice. Mou."

That sounded… somewhat threatening.

"I have one arrangement due to be put in motion within the hour." From the call he just had, which was alerting him one of the ferrymen Sonya somehow generally picked to be chauffeured by to wherever in the Mediterranean had the Lightning inbound on his boat.

Those ferries had limited ranges with their equipment, if it was a good day they might be able to call in an hour ahead and have their return trip somewhat filled before even docking with the island. This wasn't a calm day, the seas were somewhat choppy outside Mafia Land's wake which did give the whole island an eternal vertigo sensation.

There was a reason nothing was built higher than four or five stories around here, stormy days could likely knock anything higher over into the other buildings and into the streets.

As Mafia Land was a moving island they could avoid some of it, but every now and again they were caught out in a storm or two. At least they could avoid hurricanes with regularity.

"An hour is fine." Viper allowed graciously, making Bjørn suspicious he was about to incur fees. "Mou… as long as-"

"I need to get this done first." Sonya was the one supplying the money for his living situation and her reputation to guard his life, it was the least he could do to handle her orders before getting distracted with even someone she was paying to teach him their specialty.

"Then you need to pay me a hundred euros. Mou, twenty for every minute beyond that."

"I have to assemble the information first!"

"Get working fast, then."

"That's inflation!"

"Of course it is. It's my time." Insisted the Mist pointedly, the tattooed triangles on their face flexing somewhat over the nasty smile. "My time is expensive to waste, especially in bulk."

Bjørn was not going to win this, so to prevent 'haggling fees' from being stacked on top of everything else he wordlessly pulled the relevant files to figure out who gave him that suspect advice. There were more than enough such fees on the receipts from Viper's tutelage already, and he had yet to scratch at paying off some of the money the Mist had charged the Storm-Cloud for training him up.
He had paid a day off, but that was the start of it where he didn't ask 'stupid questions' or 'repetitive failures' which had their own little fees. Which didn't include the whole 'business suits' or 'proper attire' fees from other establishments.

It was going to be years before he could pay anything off, and he suspected there would be more 'wasting time' fees in the near future just so Sonya didn't wander back and wonder where the hell he was when she wanted more things to steal for whichever reason.
Sonya curiously peered over the edge of the convertible Ford Mustang Renato somehow sourced for tonight as they pulled in, mostly in a construction lot and some distance from the drive-in movie theater down a slight hill. "A movie?"

"Well I promised something 'classic', didn't I?" After parking on the really shifty looking dirt hill he manipulated the radio, eventually finding the station the movie's soundtrack would be broadcasted to given the 'waiting' music cut by the half of the announcement that was currently playing. "And you were so looking forward to it, too. So the basic of dates, a night out with dinner and a midnight movie showing. Perhaps a bit of bar hoping if we're still awake enough."

A good call, they probably both didn't normally do 'daylight' schedules very often and this interval likely helped neither very much. He napped as a matter of fact just about anywhere he could get in a small amount of rest, and frankly most of her work was done in the middle of the night when there weren't innocent bystanders just waiting to get in her way.

"What are we watching?"

"A 'Nightmare in Wax', apparently a 'House of Wax' rip-off with a much tackier spin." Admitted the Mafioso, adjusting the driver's seat back so he could stretch out his legs. "A passable if not particularly scary mystery horror movie from the sound of it."

She didn't particularly mind but was curious over why he picked this. "Horror?"

"Well, yes. You'd take a member of the fairer sex to a horror movie in hopes she'd get frightened and cling to you for the safety. Preferably sweetly instead of with deadly force." He glanced at her, and the skeptical expression she was probably wearing, and smirked. "This'll be campier than scary, little dragon lady. I'd rather not get my rib cage crushed."

"I wouldn't do that."

"Have you ever watched something legitimately in the category of horror before? Just to know what your reaction is?"

"Not specifically... but I don't watch a lot of cinema, or television to be honest." She thought taking a girl to a drive-in theater was 1950s kind of thing, not...

...well, they weren't all that far removed.

Renato dug a hand behind her lower back, gripping her right hip and hauling her yet again across the car seat to his lap. "Are you calling me old?"

"I said nothing," Sonya countered, slightly annoyed he didn't just ask her to move over more. Only slightly, because the middle of the night in a desert was fucking chilly and the Sun user was a living furnace right now. "Although, from what I know of this little trope we're in... shouldn't there be popcorn?"

"We just had dinner." Instead of directly answer if he had any or not, the hitman reached into the back bench of the car to pull a picnic hamper out of it to set in her forlorn and empty front
passenger's seat. "Although, if we were going to recreate a horror-themed tacky teenage 'dream date' trope, there'd also be some heavy petting or shagging in the backseat… and possibly a very cranky serial murderer or late-night handyman lurking about to kill us both once we're distracted."

"Yeah... let's skip that part." Toeing open the basket first, she then shifted forward to actually reach it from her new and very comfortable warm seat.

He had a couple small snack-like things packed in the basket, a block of cheese and a few apples were on the top along with the neck of some bottled beverage. Likely alcoholic, but it seemed to be just wine and there were glasses tucked in the far back corner to drink from.

"How about some light petting instead?" The left arm she had thought was set on the window sill was apparently a hell of a lot lower than that, given the fingers that traced up the outside of her garters on that side as she leaned back with the wine and glasses.

She wasn't... entirely sure what he meant by that. Agreeing to something she wasn't entirely certain of was never a good idea. On the other hand, she had already ruled out what she felt like was a touch too much for her right now.

"...as long as you don't poke my stomach." Sonya agreed slowly, easily pulling the cork free as he held the glasses for her.

She couldn't even get herself to accept Tatiana poking her there, until she figured out what the hell that part of her should be left alone. However, it was weird the brat could touch her there and it was fine. The thief had no idea how that happened, just that she wanted it to stop reacting to Shamal and eventually it did.

As long as he avoided that, and any other adverse reactions she might have, she didn't see a problem with a bit of experimentation.

"I do not need more reasons to join you in your bed, little dragon lady." Renato deadpanned, while she was contemplating what steps might have led up to the brat's immunity from her weird reactions and concluded it was probably Shamal's frequent visits to cuddle with her when they were in the same place. "I'd just rather not cross any of your unknown personal boundary lines accidently, and that sounds like a great recipe to getting my hand crushed."

...how did that coincide with her being perched on his lap?

"Because, if anything, I'm apparently a glutton for punishment."

"...we are going drinking after this, right?"

"Oh, hell yes. I think I'm going to need a couple stiff drinks in commiseration for behaving myself so much."

The radio crackled with the start of the movie reel's soundtrack, derailing any further conversation in favor of settling in to see what the movie was about.

(Monday the 23rd of February, 1970. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

"I don't know what else to say." Tatiana informed both Verde and Adrik apologetically, adjusting the IV stand slightly so she had a better reach to fiddle with his nasal prongs that were supplying his
wounded lungs with oxygen. "Pneumothorax, a collapsed lung, of this severity is kind of an end-game injury. If he had gotten shot anywhere else, maybe except for a major artery, it would've been fine. But with this where it is and how bad it is... there's now a high chance Adrik's lung will re-collapse in the future even if he follows his prescribed recovery schedule precisely. His field days are well over with, unless he wants to risk it."

"I'm not up for doing stupid shit." Drawled the bedridden Russian lightly, more out of respect to his healing organs than out of acceptance or indifference.

"Well, it's also the second time in a year you've been in here."

The cut-purse security expert huffed sarcastically instead of responded verbally.

Adrik wasn't really a front-line kind of thief, anyways. His best use was from the rear, keeping an eye out for anything going catastrophically wrong or where the local police were at, or when stealth was something they could keep up for the entire job rather than being in the thick of any conflict or dust up. Now the man couldn't even risk that, for one merely travel could deflate a lung on him and for another trying to carry too much on him would equally stress out his compromised systems to the point it might be lethal.

Partially, currently, Tatiana was a bit more concerned by Verde's expression.

To be more precise, his apparent non-reaction to what amounted to the crippling of his main personal support in this lifestyle he had been suddenly and very rudely shoved into without consent.

As part of her nurses' training, especially here and dealing with so many Dying Will Flame users from all corners of the world coming through, she had gotten a couple lectures on how and why to treat certain Elements. The Sky lectures were more of a 'don't ever do that ever, unless a doctor is there' kind of thing, but the other six Elements were more useful to her.

In particular, a Lightning's general ability to not react until a split second before whatever emotion escaped their grip. She had some experience with it, but it being defined into words and terms was very clarifying.

Bjørn wasn't really like that as far as she knew, but Galina could flip switches like a pro if need be. Going from biddable and sultry to wickedly violent and sarcastic before someone could react to it. Usually by then the Lightning was entirely too close to evade or ward off, and frankly if Verde was about to snap in a similar way then she wanted to be nowhere near him.

On the other hand, she was Adrik's friend and as the Lightning was one of his as well. In the thick of it was where she had to be.

"...Verde?"

"Is your ability with Sun Flames not enough to heal the injury?"

"My strength or skill as a Sun is not really the issue." Tatiana started off slowly, taking the free visitor's seat in Adrik's recovery room for this discussion. "When a person has no Flames, it's both harder and easier to heal them through Activation. There's no innate resistance to me, like trying to heal over surgery incisions on my sister was ten times harder than healing Adrik from his, but there's also this... absent factor. My Flames only affect Adrik's injuries in increments safely, up to an arbitrary limit which is different for everyone, and it has to be done slowly. If you don't have Flames, too much at once can be worse than just taking another gun and shooting him again."

Verde fiddled with his glasses, again for the tenth time this morning alone. Exhausted and a bit more
"It might just be an unfamiliarity with Flames, or just something Adrik lacks naturally which explains why he doesn't have Flames of his own when we do." Shrugging, the nurse sighed and shifted her apparently a touch too old and broken to be comfortable anymore shoes so they would stop hurting the bridge of her feet. "For myself? I've done nothing to study the phenomena, Doctor Kappel and I have been focused more on the physical toll merely possessing Flames has on the human body rather than how they interact with separate entities."

"Possibly genetic, otherwise an innate resistance of the physical form which inhibits the ability?"

"There's been no great study into it to understand what it actually is, it just is, and the process is well documented enough to be known as a factor Sun Flame healers are warned of." One of these days, she'd get who made her little sister's boots for her and get herself a pair. Eventually. "If Adrik had Flames, then this wouldn't be nearly so much of an issue. While the complications might linger on anyways, the bulk of the stress and damage would've been easily smoothed over by even a half-assed Sun user."

The egg-head gave her a blank stare.

Apparently, that didn't help him much. "It's by factors. If you have no Flames, I can still heal you but there's still complications to watch for. If you have Flames, I can still heal you but the risks for complications are reduced. Either way, I'm still better than natural healing."

Verde glanced down to his interlaced hands, apparently just to stare at them.

"In the end, the fact you did put something to stop the air leak in Adrik's lung in place was a fantastic patch-job in situ. The injury was just a touch too serious for immediate and makeshift triage to help with much." Tatiana glanced to the man on the berth herself, ensuring the thief was still listening too. "Given what happened the fact he's alive is the best outcome, everything else is a bonus."

"Like my immediate retirement?"

"What have you been doing lately?" Shot back the Sun dryly, a touch lightly to hopefully spark any terror or bile he had been saving up to vent to someone that would say just the wrong thing at the right time before it happened. "Even when we were in East and West Germany? Stick with it, instead of find Nicolai again once he's out up until he does something stupid again and gets arrested for it."

Adrik very nearly snarled something, probably insulting or rude, but then apparently rethought everything he was about to say in a fast hurry. Likely from a couple years of following her and knowing full well she didn't put up with that kind of bullshit if it was baseless.

Shit.

"You still have options. You're still a Zolotov, the clan will put you up somewhere as long as you teach or sustain a fallback point or just supply a link in some kind of chain where they put you. Even more, you owe Sonya a bit more than a little money… and while the clan will manage it in exchange for the rest of your mortal life… she needs teachers. In Moscow."

"I banked a few things on being able to pay them off later." Admitted the bedridden Russian sourly, rubbing a hand to where he had the surgery to open his ribcage to remove the air leaking from his lungs from his body and patch the holes so the membranes no longer allowed it. "This is a rather…"
critical setback in my plans, boss lady."

Tatiana sighed, rubbing her temple. Not entirely what she was going for, but progress.

Better for her fellow thief to blow up or vent his despair at her, then at the Lightning who apparently never really had a solid friend before in his life catching the ugly side of this situation. Verde and her baby sister were two peas from the same pod, but while Sonya got herself a Cherep to buffer her awkwardly sharp edges around others it… seemed as if the Frenchman never found something like that in his.

Given her recent preoccupation with getting to know Ganauche a little bit better, she knew Lightnings as a type of personality a touch better than she did with just Galina to draw from or second-hand accounts from the brunette Russian's misadventures as a school teacher to other Lightnings.

They were all primadonnas at first. Every fucking Lightning ever, in some way or shape or form, were all stubbornly opinionated on their ‘main’ purpose in life and how to go about getting there. Not overtly, in a lot of cases it was hidden in ways you'd have to invest some real effort into discovering the nuances of, but all of them had a very specific idea of who they are and what they were going to do with their lives well before most ever thought of wondering about the same.

It depended on the Lightning in question, and what degree of Inverted or Classical they were, what they picked and when it kicked in hardcore to the point of possibly being life-endangering if they didn't get it. From there they all ended up with some kind of bullet point list on how to get what they want and what order they were going to get it all in.

For Verde, from what she had observed from sharing a domicile with them for a time, it seemed he had been allowed to devour any and all information available to him so he somehow decided learning everything was his main purpose in life. Shifting the Frenchman off that would’ve been a herculean task for any just one person, and for vague or dismal results, so it was probably never tried before it all cemented into the scientist persona he now identified himself as to the exclusion of all else.

The fact he could be a phenomenal anything with a brain like his never seemed to occur to him, it was just information gathering and learning all of it that was his main life goal. Not putting it to use in ways that wouldn't immediately benefit his short-term situation and longer-term goals, just acquisition. Everything, anything, was all about learning or studying the sciences to him and furthering his knowledge base to learn yet more.

Her sister's little Lackey decided Sonya was a good boss to have from one semi-absent interaction with her, an act of more sympathy for them both having broken limbs at a time in their lives more than mercy, then made it happen through sheer perseverance and grim dedication. Through several months of the Storm-Cloud flat out ignoring him and refusing to even consider it, across several countries and kilometers of both developed and rough terrain with little to nothing to his name, and all the way up to a situation that likely would've eventually gotten him killed for risking.

…but not immediately, but a little preteen Icelander orphan runaway would've been shipped back to Iceland with a media storm nipping at his heels if he had been picked up by the police. Which would've put him directly in the path of whoever had the kid before he escaped that clusterfuck and ended up following the Storm-Cloud, and likely ended with his death to ensure anyone else that thought they could run from whoever it was would think again.

She knew perfectly well how bad it was for Björn before he ended up in Mafia Land working for
Sonya, she had access to his medical files. The teenager still gave no indication he was aware that he might've failed to follow her little sister far enough, what happened was his goal and now all he had to do was perform to expectations and his life was set forever according to him.

Galina was… she had never really been too out there as a person, either as a kid or as an adult. There had been no extreme decisions she suddenly had as the answer to her own existence or role in life, but the woman was efficient in practically everything mundane and routine. That had frustrated the Lightning somewhat fiercely, that she wasn't a great thief or just generally a key player in the group, to the point just before her very untimely walk in East Germany when her Flames popped. Which had occurred right after Adrik left them to draw the heat off the girls, with both Ziven and Nicolai already arrested and awaiting processing in a jail cell beyond their reach when it seemed everything was falling apart before it should've. With enough self-pity liquor Galina finally spilled every little inadequacy she felt she had, in excruciating detail, to Tatiana before storming out of their little hiding spot. That didn't last more than five minutes, certainly before the Sun could recover her bearings and give chase, because then two idiots spotted her and thought to have a little fun with the foreign woman.

Then Galina was another of the 'rare' Russian Flame users, who could murder with a touch near effortlessly and short-circuit anything electrical with the same ease, which the redhead honestly believed salvaged what the other woman thought of herself and her self-esteem. The fact she had a skill, a notable and priceless one at just the right time but it was just a touch hard to spot and draw out, gave Galina more than enough motivation to try turning her hand at a different criminal skill she hadn't considered at first until she ended up 'gifted' with a new purpose.

Ganauche was… another like Verde, with a disturbing twist.

He had been hand-fed his purpose in life, probably specifically groomed to be a Guardian to a Sky from very early childhood from what little she could glean from casual 'get to know you' talks, and the possibility that he would've been overlooked as one probably never occurred to the guy. To plan for or even that it could've happened in the general way life worked out sometimes, she had gotten absolutely no recognition of the possibility from their chats to the point she was almost certain he wasn't trying to hide that realization from her.

Additionally, Ganauche wasn't small fish outside of his Vongola connections. The Mafioso was equally trained to be a Guardian Lightning as well as he was given a whole lot of social connection lessons he was putting to use on her. The possibility that the 'other' training was given to be a fallback point just in case he didn't become a Sky's Guardian Element…

If it happened to one it probably happened to more and that was actually semi-terrifying to contemplate. How many other Italian or otherwise Lightnings were fed the same bullshit that 'they would be a Guardian to a Sky' when Skies were so fucking rare to begin with that it was statistically near-impossible. Then there was the possibility that some great number of others raising or training a Lightning wouldn't be aware they needed more than one life goal to safeguard the whims of fate…

Meaning when they were overlooked in Ganauche's or some other Lightning's favor they probably suffered a more debilitating mental break like Galina risked for a few utterly terrifying moments. With the removal of their very purpose in life, Lightnings didn't tend to do too well with that from all evidence she could gather.

…which made the 'very reckless' label Lightnings tended to operate under also semi-terrifying in its own way.

Of course they were reckless, what did they have to live with if they had no purpose left in life?
If they failed their main 'role' as 'a Lightning Flame user'?

Or worse, when they thought they failed only to end up attached to an entirely different Sky than they focused all that initial attention on?

It all boiled down to a very nasty situation the healer in her actually was balking against, but one she didn't remotely believe she could change or salvage in any possible way from where she was. Ganauche was… well, set in his ways like any Lightning would be by his age and entirely non-comprehending to her attempts to point it out gently. To affect the situation somewhere she wasn't involved in would require political capital of a phenomenal measure, which she didn't have.

The only thing she could do is see if it was possible to 'rehabilitate' a fully adult Lightning, and at least get the information out there so hopefully a few parents of such Flame users would balance things out against those who would use their children like that.

Tatiana wasn't really certain if that was a decent thing to do, given she wasn't really sure where she wanted her currently really causal relationship with a Vongola Lightning Guardian to go in the first place. Ganauche might just end up a good friend against the odds, or a guy she might honestly contemplate settling down with in the far future, or something even different from all that.

Bringing her work home with her didn't sound like a good basis for a long-term relationship she was maybe playing with seeking, and it wouldn't be fair to him either to base such a thing partially off her disgust with how his country treated Lightning users and her hope to 'fix' some of it.

...the next time she was home, she'd talk to Lisa about it. Hopefully her mom had half an idea on what she should do on the various possibilities, but at the very least a second opinion would be nice.

Too bad Sonya absolutely sucked at girl talk… then again, her little sister was moving there. She had to know some of the political landscape in the criminal factions in power, as just to gather some more detail to make an informed decision with was never a bad plan when at a loss at what to do.

Tatiana blinked twice, looked from the very still Lightning in front of her to the bedridden thief who had yet to say anything to each other instead of her… then sighed heavily.

Men.

"Okay, look. The both of you. Verde, it's not your fault." Holding up a hand before Adrik could spit whatever was on the tip of his tongue, she waited until the green Frenchman was at least looking in her general direction. "Seriously. Getting shot is an occupational hazard. Sonya's been shot, I've been shot, you've been shot at. We play with guns too, we use them and frequently guns are used against us. It's just a matter of time before we all get shot somewhere painful and debilitating. Sometimes it's later, sometimes it's earlier, sometimes we dodge the possibility, sometimes we just can't."

Sometimes they could fix it, like her sister's liver cysts, and more often they couldn't.

Verde didn't really give any indication of listening, but he likely heard her full well and was turning it around in his big brain so it would fit in place.

Turning on her former gang member, the Sun quirked a wry smirk for the semi-impatient and mostly aggravated look on Adrik's face. "You, you need to know you are very good at what you do. You survived and escorted Verde through that entire mess and I honestly was worried for the both of you. So what if you're now paying the price, you did it against any and all odds I would've placed on the possibility. Now, plan the next job better."
"Thank you, captain." Drawled the man a touch sarcastically, more than used to her little pep-talks and probably not seeing the humor in it right now. "Can we get on with things now?"

"I have rounds to do." Tatiana allowed graciously, rising to her feet and gathering her things to do that with. "You two geeks plan your next steps. You made it, alive and everything, so now what?"

Adrik looked back down at his healing rib cage, because with no Flames of his own and an operation that opened up the cage of bones to patch him up everything was likely still sore and painful for him, but the wiry guy actually looked to be plotting instead of just stewing.

Verde very nervously pushed up his spectacles, and kind of fidgeted in place instead of glance at the other man.

"Hey… Verde. My man, we made it. What are you going to demand out of Sonya first?"

"…any and all information on the other types of Flames she is aware of." Bitterly admitted the Lightning, then there was a semi-awkward pause where Adrik finally caught on that his friend blamed himself still. "How… I mean-"

"I have options. I swear. They're just not… not the ones I thought I would have."

Hallelujah, they were talking instead of stewing in silence.

Shutting the door quietly behind her, so as to not interrupt the manly-bonding time they both probably sorely needed after a scare like this, the nurse gave Kappel a small smile. "Finished here, doctor. Where to next?"

"Usually, types like your little friend in there tend to react negatively to their newly compromised situations." Commented the dour German idly, but marking things off on his clipboard anyways to note Adrik as a 'lesser' risk for violent reactions as they progressed down the bland hospital corridor.

"Adrik's always been able to roll with the punches aimed his way." Most scrappy orphan types were like that, she'd know because they all were if they came from that specific neighborhood in Moscow. "There was a touchy moment, but he's past the short-term now. I'll observe for future developments, but I don't expect anything too major just yet."

"As long as you are aware." Kappel commented distractedly, peering at the paperwork clipped to the wood in his hands as they moved to the nurses' station to get their next recovery patient to test for acceptance to his or her postoperative condition. "Speaking of this… I was curious to where you feel as if your medical career is going."

"…doctor?"

"Do you still feel as if you would do best in pediatrics?" Brown eyes peered at her over those damn half-moon glasses, which she was more than certain he didn't need but wore anyways for some other reason. "I require to know soon, Primakova. You are adequate enough I should pass you off to a specialist for further refinement in one field of medicine. I would rather not, as you are a nurse I find to be the most useful out of the complete passel of Flame users we have been sent and would rather you do more than become a nurse practitioner. My specialty is general practitioner, if you feel as if that is not the role for you then I likely will not be able to further your career in any meaningful way from this point on."

Tatiana rocked back to her inadequately comfortable heels, a bit bewildered at this sudden question out of the blue. "I've… doctor, I've got a stint being the school nurse coming up."
"I am aware." Drawled Kappel a touch wryly. "However the point remains it is both the role of a general practitioner as well as a pediatrician to tend to school children of ages six to sixteen, and it is experience that will look good on any resume."

"…can I do both?"

Blowing out a sigh, the German came to a full stop to turn and face her squarely while she caught up to his side again. "While having a secondary specialty is a very considerate of any physician, and all should have at least a basic understanding of all fields to recommend others if a patient requires a different specialist to handle some ill or another, it is best to start with one. Pediatrics, general practitioner, or surgeon?"

"Surgeon?" Echoed the Sun Flame nurse in bewilderment.

"You assist me adequately." Kappel insisted, high praise indeed coming from him. "And indeed, when given the opportunity to perform a little yourself you are well composed and quick even in the face of complications. With your Flames, there is the added bonus of healing any major complications as they develop pre, during, or post-operation. As such, I feel as if neglecting the option would be ill-done of me."

"I… um. Do I have to pick now?"

"Of course not. The sooner I know the earlier I will be able to assist you on your way or start the proper paperwork to formally attach yourself as a student of mine instead of a medical intern." Instead of immediately move on, as was her general understanding of what the ex-Nazi preferred to do when getting into praise which he found to be a sort of gateway to inflated egos but still something to gingerly hand out when warranted, Kappel instead eyed her with an intent she couldn't identify. "Unless, you wish to remain a nurse?"

…Tatiana just wanted to heal.

Although it was through Lisa's pregnancy issues she found her way here, and the pediatric ward of St. Julian's was criminally neglected for those like her mother who had similar issues… she could possibly pick it up as a secondary instead and get something that would enable her to remain in the thick of the hospital with Kappel.

The good doctor was not a thief, he didn't bother trying to steal the clipboard from her. He simply took it from her unresisting hands, then physically turned her around away from their next patient. "Take the rest of the day off, contemplate were you wish to go from here."

She had no more vacation time to use, but when a doctor put a nurse off shift that was that according to the hospital's guidelines. Kappel could do that if he felt she was not up to performing to expectations, and rarely put it to use so he'd likely not be questioned on why he did it.

Woodenly, the Sun absently retraced her steps to get off the recovery ward and into the hospital's main floors. She didn't really make it all that far, and Ganauche found her aimlessly staring at the same speck of discolored beige wall when he showed up for their lunch-date. Which meant she had been staring at this wall for a good hour at least.

"Err… Tatiana?"

"…I'm halfway there."

Holy fuck, she had almost made it to doctor. She just had to pick where, and then she'd be on the
final phase to becoming one. Admittedly it'd take yet more years of study and patients and long nights of frustration to finish, but being halfway there…

"Yay?" Offered the Lightning Guardian warily as she started grinning, looking really confused as he peered at her with his remaining good eye. "With what?"

"…becoming a doctor." Seizing him by the face, she tugged the Italian down for a nice long kiss because she felt really good and wanted to share it with someone.

Surprised or not, and like all Lightnings, the guy was at least quick on the pickup and gave back as good as she gave. Tatiana ended up nicely breathless, feeling tingly, and smothering her semi-hysterical giggles of relief into his shoulder.

Which didn't help her breathlessness any.

"…alright. I think you need a break." Ganauche observed wryly after studying her giggle-fit for a moment. "I thought you'd be more worried, given your friend's situation you told me about last night, but I guess the reservations to that stupidly expensive seafood place you adore on the beachfront can be in celebration instead."

"Oh, fuck. Thanks for reminding me." Ineffectually swatting him on the arm but appreciating him popping her bubble slightly to bleed off the hysterics of relief, Tatiana attempted to draw in a real breath for the first time in what felt like minutes. The Mafioso very thoughtfully rubbed her back as she struggled a little with her air situation, waiting with surprising patience for her to get her act together even if that ran the risk of them being late for that reservation.

Admittedly, the crab shack eatery was stupidly expensive but she adored their salmon-stuffed crab cakes. It was something she only once mentioned in his hearing, and that was an aside to another nurse about where to take an asshole of a guy trying to pressure her into dating him in revenge for the idiotic behavior.

"I have no problems with bubbly, glowing Suns being happy and spreading the joy around." He informed her a bit saucily, a raunchy grin sliding across his face as she probably ineffectually pouted at him for poking fun at her. "But I think the hospital might prefer you to work off that… glow somewhere else."

Whoops, she was glowing. Aimless and undirected Activation had some interesting side-effect, more notably restless behavior as any passerby got a charge of stamina from her. Which in a hospital, with sick people needing rest and relaxation, wasn't a great idea.

Maybe in the physical therapy rooms, but if she didn't wish to be stuck in there for the rest of the night until it faded they should get a move on. "Run!"

"Whoa… wait up!"

"How'd you get past the nurse on duty at the front desk, anyways?" Tatiana asked curiously as they made for the basement and the one-way access to the underground tunnels out of here, skipping steps down the well-trod path she usually took to get home like most of the nurses did after shift when they weren't at a hundred percent and able to watch their own backs.

"Might've… picked up a trick or two from your little sister." Ganauche informed her wryly, gamely keeping up with minimal puffing merely and missing a couple things trying to get in his way from his left side. "Her breaking into the CEDEF office here was pretty much heart-attack inducing, but… whoops, sorry! But good for motivating the grunts into investigating the how she managed it."
"Care to share?" Because marveling over the weird and twisty turns her little sister's mind went through to end up 'crawl across the ceiling' as something entirely legitimate to do when in a crowded hall with other people she didn't even have to avoid was always fun, if also slightly exasperating.

"Aren't you also a thief? Shouldn't you know it already?"

"We develop off in our own ways after the bare basics, and while I'll never keep up with Sonya's progress… I'd rather know enough to tease her instead of just wonder."

Surprisingly, the guy was right on her heels still instead of back a way even with the obstacles in his way when she turned to see if she should wait before opening the passageway with her nurse's ID card. Well, given he was in what seemed to be 'light' duty from the injury that took his eye and developing a bit of a paunch from inactivity.

Caloric intakes for Flame users were all over the charts as it was, Dying Will Flames were a type of energy and that energy had to come from somewhere. Certain ones were more energy efficient, like Clouds and Suns, others were more intensive to use, like Mists and Lightnings.

It was possible Ganauche was still trying to work out what should be his diet for a reduced work load yet around his continued Flame usage even most of a year beyond his injury, poor guy.

"Thanks."

"For?"

"Stopping." Ganauche informed her wryly, holding the heavy bulkhead door open once she got it unlocked. "I might know what your sister did to corner me, but she's also not nearly as tall as me or has as much muscle mass. It's hard to do what she did and fit into the places she had to have been in to get around a few things."

"Well, you stick around long enough you might learn a couple more little thief tricks."

His single brown eye inspected her closely. "Is that an invitation?"

"Maybe." Darting off down the tunnels without waiting for his response, Tatiana started jogging for the beachfront exits to drain off some of her excess Sun Flames and ignoring the Lightning Guardian's exasperated shout of protest for yet more running.

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(Monday the 23rd of February, 1970 continued. Cerrito Crime Family's Headquarters, San Jose California, United States of America.)

Passing out the second set of neatly stapled together packets out to her classroom, Sonya paused next to the big guy with dyslexia. "If you wait after class, I will read the information you require off for you and clarify a few terms if need be."

"…thanks."

"For the rest of you, this is the last time we will be reviewing this information. D'Attilio will be testing the lot of you for retention tomorrow, and there is no second chance. You fail to learn, and your syndicate is screwed."

"You're not getting penalized for bad teaching?"
"Thankfully," she started with a nasty smirk, "there is no bonus or penalty for how many of you pass or fail. I merely need to be here and supply the information, what you make of it or take away from these lessons is another thing."

There was an uneasy shifting around the classroom as they absorbed that, and unfortunately she had weeded out a lot of the bigger and hotheaded Americans so far to the point the wiry and smarter remainder wasn't so easily provoked. Those that assumed their size and girth would see them through everything were always up to scrap with someone that seemed smaller and weaker than them, aside from Matt the dyslexic there were only a handful of bigger built but cautious men that proved the stereotype wrong.

"You couldn't have told us that sooner?" Vito inquired a bit exasperatedly as he took his worksheet from her hand instead of waiting for her to set it in front of him. "Like when we had a couple more people in here?"

"No one asked." Sonya dismissed simply, handing out the last couple of sheets easily enough.

There was only a baker's dozen of 'students' left and reducing the number of hot-headed Italian-American associates from the room had greatly reduced the amount of fun she got out of countering the ones with bigger personalities. Then again, it also left her with the ones she could teach something to and who would probably either greatly abuse or make the best of the information.

"The lot of you may have the next two hours to review the information on your own, and to discuss things between yourselves, before I start posing hypothetical situations you will need it to navigate through." The thief had woken late, because she and Renato had gone bar hopping after the really tacky horror movie and at least the hitman's snacks had enable them to go up to closing time in all the local bars easily enough. She'd like some personal time to think about a couple things, but as the late start meant she had to head straight here to make her own class it'd would have to be at the expense of easing up on her students. "I would highly advise you contemplate how and when this information would be best put to before I dispose of it for security reasons. Mister Lentine?"

She got a wary eyeing from the man, who was already trying to make out the neat type before him.

"Attempt to make out as much as you can for now." He didn't require having his hand held, just enough time to muddle through. With the lack of time she would be forced to help him, but that didn't mean she had to be condescending about it. "Although I feel as if the discussions may assist you more at this point."

She earned herself a shrug, so she left them all to their own devices as much as she could while still being in the same room. There was a chair for her, now that her class had been thinned out, but she scorned that in favor for a slightly flimsy looking side-table.

Renato's 'light petting' seemed to be just feeling up her thighs and arms, which really wasn't too uncomfortable for her. Especially as he had been nice and toasty hot, when she had not been dressed appropriately for near-desert nights. Comfortable, unlike the time that Chinese tub bath where other women she didn't know scrubbed her down.

Meaning it was really rather likely she would only be comfortable enough with a good friend to try anything... interpersonal.

With the hitman intending to dodge a few personal problems of a lethal sort soon, it meant she likely didn't have the time to develop that with him. Disappointing, because as embarrassing as it was for Renato to very pointedly lay down exactly what he was seeking from her in front of Lady Vongola it was clear cut and a solid indication he'd put effort into it as well.
Sonya dithered maybe a bit too much with uncertainty for that, but it wasn't entirely her fault. The Mafioso knew perfectly well she wasn't really great with people and tried to be politely subtle about it.

Additionally, she probably wasn't anywhere near close to the point where she could be comfortable in a physical relationship. Even with Renato, trying to think about attempting anything he seemed more than willing to try with her made her uneasy with nerves.

…also, if you really thought about it, about the mechanics and what some of that action really was about sex was just… gross. And really unhygienic.

No, she hadn't figured out how masturbation worked with this body. Which was actually somewhat alarming, because she knew she had once been able to do it as Rachel… and being fully human and female it shouldn't be all that different from one form to another.

Different, yes, but not by that much. Which might have to do with her disinclination to fool around with another adult in a similar fashion to her sister's favorite stress relief option.

Mostly, her currently observations boiled down to there was something significantly different about this body. Which was pointedly obvious, because in her last life she hadn't been able to bend steel bare-handed or melt things to their component elements and her coloring was entirely different.

She was also about half an inch taller, for what it was worth from being of average size in both lives. Her features were a bit sharper, and she'd take the thin-bladed nose over something a lot fatter even if she had better lips as Rachel.

Aside fundamentally different body chemistry being a possible contribution, there was also… well, the matter of soul or whatever it was Dying Will Flames drew off of to give it specific forms. There was a greatly likely possibility that whatever element one's Flames were being drawn from also affected one's sense of self to impress certain templates to one's outlook into something easily describable to one or two traits for people who grew up separately and in wildly different ways. It might have some influence with the differences between her physical form of now and the form she had in another lifetime.

Regardless of what was the cause, the result was what she had to deal with. Which was an aversion to physical relationships with other people, unless she was already close enough with them to feel comfortable.

…meaning at least a year or two of acquaintance was needed before she sought a relationship with someone else. Even then, she'd be back to this point she was at with Renato.

Possibly not interested in anything further, which was rather rude in a 'leading another on' about something she wasn't ready for.

Why did it all have to be about sex?

Couldn't she just have a cuddle-buddy instead?

Well, in that case she should just invite Fong back to her bed. The martial artist was just clingy enough to count as 'cuddly' but really, she just preferred Shamal's cuddling to even her siblings.

"Uh… Miss Bazanova?"

Glancing up from her lap, she curiously eyed the man she didn't know standing a smart and a bit far distance from her. "What?"
"You're a 'Storm', right? We've got a bit of a… argument going you might be able to settle."

"Ho?" Sliding back to her feet, the thief followed him back to a knot of five or so men that had surprisingly been arguing without actually catching her wandering attention. "What is the issue?"

"You'd be able to burn your way out of everything, right?" Asked the man next to Vito, hastily enough she felt there was another argument behind this one. "I mean, Disintegration is pretty limited as an ability…"

"Except for the Vindice, and you are not thinking hard enough." Deadpanned the thief. "The Vindice has a general law of 'clean up after yourself', meaning we cannot just walk through solid walls at will. We would need some set up of reasonable doubt put in place in order to not attract the wrong attention. I believe the exact wording is a Flame user is 'expected to keep any rumors or knowledge of what they could do contained from civilian or governmental scrutiny if unable to abstain from using their abilities'."

One of the bigger guys she didn't have a name for perked up, glancing once at the man who posed the first question. "So, you can do more than just burn things?"

"My Storm Flames can make me immune to poisons." She allowed slowly. "Which included medical anesthesia and alcohol, and drugs I do not wish to feel the effects of. As I am immune to my own Flames, I can also light a fire with Storm Flames and remain mostly unaffected from the resulting smoke or heat."

"…huh."

"I also know Chinese Storms who utilized their Storm Flames similarly, one to eat steaming hot food without burning his mouth and another to somehow negate friction or his own momentum in exchange for burning off a bit of energy elsewhere that will not negatively affect him."

"It's not just physical things, then?"

"Technically, energy in this topic is a physical object." Sonya corrected slowly, wracking her mind to explain that particular insanity to purely human students. "While I am unsure how actual science clarifies that, any Mist is actually spending energy to create a physical object that can be interacted with completely. Which then turns their energy expenditure into something another Flame user can then act upon, as I've burned through a Mist's Constructions several times before, yet it is merely energy given a ridged form."

Vito gave her a shifty side-eye. "So… can you burn a fire?"

"I could remove the components any fire is drawing from, if I had the security to do it in. Which would burn out what fuel it had to burn on."

Shooting the guy on Vito's right a smug look, the second and apparently a touch more inventive guy leaned back with a smirk. "So, you could Disintegrate water to supply your own air, wouldn't you?"

"I suppose." Allowed the thief after recalling her previous thoughts on the subject and the major reason why she never tried it. "This is assuming I have someplace prepared to vent the resulting hydrogen and an endless supply of water to use and am nowhere near someone that would be vulnerable to the extreme heat generating enough to be breathable would cause. While I am immune to such results of my own Flames, another would not be… and neither I nor another would be immune from a hydrogen explosion that might be caused with inadequate ventilation."

She'd probably get the truth of the matter if she tossed a handful of Storm Flames into a bucket of
water, but she really wanted her own place to put a hole into if things went *horribly* wrong before doing those kinds of experiments.

Something to do this summer, in other words.

"So, she *can't* walk across the bottom of an ocean." Concluded the only guy who had been silent so far, a bit disgruntled. "Can we move on?"

Sonya considered that. "…I actually do not know if I could or not."

*Technically,* if she held her hands in front of her mouth and nose and only Disintegrated the water there, it was *possible* the hydrogen would merely escape between her fingers and she could breathe in the heavier oxygen if she positioned things correctly to drop everything else into the water. Water currents would remove the heat leaving just the factors of vision, terrain, and crush depth to be concerned with.

Propagation might also help with keeping oxygen levels up, but that ran the risk of disappearing oxygen from her own body when she lost focus for any reason. Which might not be a good idea, especially in an inhospitable situation like being under a few hundred tons of seawater.

An interesting question to explore later, at least.

Fuck she loved teaching. There were *always* one or two really good questions to ponder from each event.

"Who posed that question?"

"Um," spoke up the man that had fetched her sheepishly, who she had honestly forgot was part of this conversation entirely, "I did?"

"Keep thinking." Sonya half-ordered, rubbing a thumb up her jawline for a moment. "Just because someone ends up with Dying Will Flames, it does not mean they will be inventive enough to put it to full use."

"What do you mean?" Vito asked curiously, blanking his face of anything but polite interest when she shot him a look.

"Rains in great concentrations all tend to end up as sheep, no arguments and passively going along with everything with no idea how badly it looks from the outside." She allowed wryly. "Equally, gathered Storms tend to never stop arguing with each other in *some* method or another. As far as I know, more than a few Mists in one room tend to get into ruthless competitions in how 'best' one can 'break reality' and Lightnings end up running through everything they need to learn before they have the understanding of how best to apply it even separated out. Suns are… just too hyper for anyone else when there's more than two. Clouds do not gather naturally, honestly."

She was given strange looks by all the men there, and a couple more eavesdropping horribly nearby.

"What happens when you do put two Clouds in the same room?" Asked the man next to her.

"One will probably die." Given *her* reactions to both Dorokhov and the Wolfpack Gang the first time they met, unless said two Clouds knew each other beforehand and were secure in whatever they claimed in territory… and they weren't in one's territory, any situation like that would never end well. "It *is* possible to have them ignore each other, but that requires a lot of factors to be just right."

Hence why seven separate Clouds could interact as peacefully as they could for their types that first
Vongola Ball she ever attended. They were in Visconti's territory, who had a Sky and territory everyone wouldn't infringe upon, and they all were aware of that then never did make a move the older Cloud would have to respond to.

She really needed to talk to both of them at least once more, but that had to wait until she could do a rapid and glancing shot through Moscow without needing to interact with Gedeon at all.

Hopefully, when Dimitry got back from prison, he'd be able to do something about the Sun in a method that wouldn't get him into the same troubles she and the next Zolotov clan's Pahkan had.

"You lot have an hour and a half left," Sonya reminded the entire group when no one responded, and everyone else listening in, "I am now expecting better than basic answers from all of you."

Someone in the back of the room behind her swore softly, and a vast majority of the men in the room hurried to put their heads down and review all the information she was supplying. Vito was very surprised when she planted a hand on his little end-table desk.

"You warned everyone, did you not?"

"…maybe." Allowed the guy uneasily, warily eyeing her as he shrank backwards the best he could without physically moving his chair.

At least she got some in before someone spoiled her fun.

Tisking, the thief wandered away to go back to running her mind over her current personal issues. It wasn't quite as good as the time she spent thinking in between aims during a heist, but decent enough to turn over her current issues.

There was even the possible bonus of another good idea or two, if she could coax something good out of this group.

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(Tuesday the 24th of February, 1970. COMSUBIN Main Headquarters, Italian Republic.)

"Do you have anything else to add, Lieutenant Commander Murgia?"

Standing at parade rest in front of the assembled brass, the blue haired woman shook her head. There really wasn't much else to say, because in spite of what she knew happened and what evidence was left on her... the site of the incident had been professionally wiped.

Beyond professionally wiped, if Lalia had to comment on the situation. There was nothing left beyond her own bullets lodged in a few walls and the casings from her sidearm. Not the bullet casings from the gunshot wound she had in her left bicep which was not a figment from her imagination or even bullet holes from the gunfire she returned after she had been shot.

Even her blood was missing, and there was no sign anyone bled where she knew for a fact she had.

There was something galling about the whole situation. She would have accepted it if one of those war horses on the board were behind it, but she knew the COMSUBIN cleaners and they weren't that good. Outside civilian cleanup crews wouldn't have half the competence the military professionals would with the same materials, meaning it wasn't them.

Which left her with a very short suspect list, and she wanted revenge for this mockery.
Lalia did not enjoy being made a fool of. Reporting a firefight she got into with unknown assailants, and even had been wounded by, only for nothing to be found called not only her competency in question but also her mental state.

COMSUBIN was not a nice and shiny military outfit. They were all trained as assassins, demolitions experts, saboteurs, and snipers. The type of soldiers sent in when shit went south and little else could be done about any situation, in final and very permanent ways, yet to be set up so effortlessly and with her own assistance…

"Lieutenant Commander, I am placing you on administrative leave for the duration of this investigation." Commander Scalzi boomed out, catching her wandering attention after a short few minutes of their deliberation as easily as he could catch the attention of an entire parade field of soldiers. "You will not be confined to quarters, as there seems to be no casualties from this incident, but I would advise you to not try leaving the country."

"…yes sir."

The old and greying warhorse huffed out a harsher than normal sigh, eyeing her severely as the rest of the board got up to move on to the next issue they had to deal with this day. "For what it's worth, Lieutenant Commander, I'm more inclined to believe you. The problem would be convincing anyone else who don't know you personally of that."

Giving him a short nod, the best she could scrounge up, she turned on a heel and marched out of the hearing chamber. Having her reputation safeguard her standing to the Commander's eyes was a silver lining, but that warning about other opinions likely meant she'd be sacrificed to keep public opinion on COMSUBIN's side even if the top brass believed her side of the story.

That was probably too generous, she knew perfectly well a couple of the Majors would use her situation to further some political gambit or another. Once you got high enough in rank, it always seemed everything was either personal or political.

Colonel Frasca would ensure she'd get kicked out in disgrace if he could, which was the only member of the board she knew had motivations aside political ones.

He had hated her for years, ever since she bested his dead nephew's range scores effortlessly at the start of her military career. Had she known the situation beforehand she would've handled the entire thing with more grace, but at the time she hadn't and inadvertently insulted the dead man.

Turning down the twisting staircase leading to the general operations part of the base, Lalia turned off the path to her quarters and instead headed off to the medical bay. Her bandages needed to be changed anyway, the only proof she had that last night was not a figment of her imagination.

The angle was entirely too wide and too high to have been self-inflicted, which galling had been a question that needed to be asked and proven false. With a lack of any other evidence that there had been a firefight she had been involved with, ensuring the documentation of her injury and how it was healing was solidly irrefutable was the least she could do.

It was still highly likely she'd be asked to retire herself early or resign silently to preserve COMSUBIN's reputation. They were shady enough as it was, a scandal of one officer possibly being mentally unstable or possibly recklessly risking civilian lives when off-duty wouldn't help anything and could turn into a skeleton in the closet that could haunt not only just her but the whole unit.

"Lal! Oh, Lal!"
"I don’t have the patience right now, Corporal Grillo."

The rushing blond sniper slid in step with her, side eyeing her calmly. "I heard. What are you going to do about it?"

Lalia sighed, clamping a hand to her gunshot wound. "At the moment, wait. There's nothing else to do right now that will help me."

"And later?" Inquired her student knowingly, a sly little smirk on his face she kind of itched to smack off.

…well, she wasn’t discharged yet. She could put Grillo through a few more field exercises, and maybe a couple more where she could shoot at him fully blame free. It would be something to do while she waited for the inevitable, at least it would kill blocks of time and ensured there would be someone to kick that asshole Frasca into retirement only to take his place even with her gone.

Showing a rare amount of self-preservation, Grillo slid away from her smirk as she shouldered open the swinging doors to the sick call clinic. "Later? Corporal, you shouldn't be worried what I'm doing later. You should be more concerned with yourself."
Chapter 104

(Wednesday the 25th of February, 1970. Alcatraz Island, San Francisco Bay, California, the United States of America.)

"Would you please just..." Sonya trailed off out of pure bewilderment, giving the Mafioso stepping out behind a rocky outcropping of the sea-splashed rock she was perched on a strange look. "...what the ever-loving fuck, Renato?"

"What?" Asked the still damp yet fully dressed hitman, tugging the cuffs of his fucking suit jacket in place fussily.

He even had his shiny Italian leather shoes, and his hat!

She just palmed her face instead of responding, well aware the nosy asshole would pick up exactly what out of her head if he wanted.

They swam across the bay to do their break-in of Alcatraz Island's defunct prison, mainly to avoid the Coast Guard's routine-more-than-security sweeps and any of the occupying Native Americans from spotting them. They'd ended up on the far side of the island's north-west tip, to plan as that would likely be the less watched if there was any kind of watch going on.

Yes, there were waterproofed diver bags they used to ensure neither of them froze on this trip once out of the water. They weren't that big, and just fitting a towel into it kind of strained the thin plastic.

Sonya managed a pair of flannel cloth pants and a decent knitted sweatshirt in dark colors from a local shop, with a rather smaller towel to dry off with wrapped around a pair of flats. No socks, not even a comb for her now salt matted hair, and she had the suspicious theory something sprang a leak as it was.

Yet Renato apparently felt as if settling for something else than his usual was far below his dignity, and somehow managed more than her. A great amount more than she had, no matter how she packed everything up.

It was one hell of a swim from Treasure Island to Alcatraz, the two of them cheated heavily through most of it using a kind of flotation device, rope, and her strength to cut through the bay's currents. With all that she couldn't manage to hold onto miscellaneous things, so he had managed their 'supplies' as well as the directions here and she also could've sworn he had as much limited space as she did.

Now he was fully dressed, in a slightly creased and a bit damp full suit and had put his shiny black dress shoes back on. With both socks and a tie just to top everything off. Even his hat had somehow survived the trip in whatever he did without being crushed. Mussed, obviously a bit more crumpled than he liked, but again fully dressed somehow.

"...you are such a peacock."

Given the look he shot her for that, he didn't agree with her sentiment. "If we get caught-"

"Oh please. Who's going to catch us?" This whole situation was practically risk-free, the only real risk to them was the Coast Guard who would just accept a rather stupid 'late night romantic swim' if they were picked up. "I kind of really hate you right now."
"Lies." Scoffed the man, *unfairly hot* fingers sliding across her damp and chilly flesh over the edge of her pants to end up planted on her hip yet again. "If you wanted me to prepare a little something more for you to be waiting, you only had to ask."

Like she would've thought about it, when she had no idea what he was running all over the city to do while she was otherwise occupied teaching. It *did* explain how he got everything over here, aside the damn hat she had thought he left behind with the car.

"Additionally," outright *purred* the asshole she called a friend through his shit-eating smirk, the different temperatures between him and the end of winter night ocean air making her shiver as he pulled her closer and tucked warm hands actually into her clothing and over her clammy skin, "*you really only have to just say so for me to… ah, warm you up."

"Dream on." Scoffed the Storm-Cloud, slipping out of his hold with a twist and turning her attention to the rocky cliff face that stood in their way to the prison proper. "*I might not often use my abilities for heat, but I can.*"

…and admittedly, it was cold enough she didn't really want to risk burning off her clothing in the first place, so she was going to have to be chary with that particular skill. Flimsy as damp cotton was as thermal protection, it was at least *something.*

"Ah well, suppose I'll just content myself with the utterly lovely view."

Given he said that while she was already started on her way up the rocks, and glancing back did indeed inform her he was eyeing her ass, Sonya figured this was going to be one of those nights. The kind of one where he felt *really* frisky, and anything nearby was going to be flirted with just because he could do it.

It'd be interesting to be the target of such a mood for once, even if it was somewhat ill-timed.

Scaling the rocky cliff which made up the northwestern side of the island was of little issue to either of them, and the first of the real obstacles in their way was a rather rusty and spiked tipped barbed wire fence perched on a small lip of pure rock. Renato, very pointedly, looked at her expectantly once he reached the same lip of stone she was on.

She smirked, then simply jumped over the damn thing. Easily clearing both the height and distance, without needing to use her polearms or axes. Or the damn hammers practically freezing a hole into her bicep since solid metal warmed slower than thinner pieces.

His *utterly* unimpressed expression was somewhat satisfying from the other side through the fencing. "*Really?*"

She sniffed and crossed her arms under her chest, half in mock-insult and a tiny bit for the cold but the rest of the emotion was smug superiority. "*Oh wait… what was your plan to get through the fences?*

Glancing down both directions the obstacle stretched off into, which was somewhat hard to see given how dark it was even with a waning moon overhead being closer to full than half, the hitman held up a finger at her before sauntering off. In the direction of a rusty and rather dubiously perched structure that took up the more western northwestern lip of the island by itself, which you couldn't *pay* her enough to go into without a reason for it.

Curious, the Russian did wait the ten minutes it required for the *Mafioso* to come wandering back on the inside of the fence with her. "…*and you didn't even let me watch.*"
"Little dragon lady, I've got a couple ideas for you to watch instead..." Trailing off with a salacious waggle of his eyebrow, he was entirely unmoved by her flat look.

"Does that line ever work?"

"Never." Renato boasted cheerfully, as if that was something to be proud of.

"...what exactly would I be watching?" Sonya inquired next, curious over both the logistics of being invited to do so as well as being somewhat unsure about the contents of the 'loaded' question.

As well to see if he would actually answer her.

They had time, this part of the island was apparently rather unpopular at night and ensuring no one was curious over any unfortunate noises they might have caused crossing the fence was never wasted effort. Talking through such a wait was a bit like defeating the purpose, but she was curious.

There was a blink, but he didn't linger too long on her likely awkward question and instead smirked wickedly with no small amount of glee. "Well, anything you might want to watch."

More than likely the intent was sexual in nature, but she really didn't understand exactly what was being offered because there were several things she could think of that might be it. Her frustration with come-ons and pickup lines were most really didn't make much sense to her, and the rest she tended to take too literally at first... then get somewhat embarrassed if she ever did realize what was really being said later on so when someone else tried the same thing she just got irritated all over again.

The hitman's 'anything' probably really meant 'everything', which didn't help narrow down anything for her. The suggested voyeuristic escapade could be anything from watching him eat to another invitation to observe how he worked his trade again, as well as any other 'naughty' possibilities he probably meant instead.

"Do you need the specifics?"

"It would help a little..." Sonya affirmed wryly. "...but sure."

"...what."

"I want to watch."

An utterly blank pause happened for a full second, then the murderous asshole she called a friend looked delighted and entirely too amused at her admission for her peace of mind. "A voyeur? I can work with that, I can work with that very well. Where and when, little dragon lady?"

"Why not here and now?" Demanded the Russian sarcastically, planting a hand on her hip and gesturing to the rocky outcropping tucked into the side of a building they were hesitating on.

There was barely enough of a moon visible through San Francisco Bay's foggy shores to make out each other's outlines from more than four feet away, much less anything that could happen that required invitations to see from closer. The gloomy night assisted their break in by keeping most near either heat or light sources if they were awake instead of inspecting the bay's waters, making the possibility of being spotted low... until they got into the actual prison. It also meant it was hard to make out what the other was doing with any degree of precision and watching anything would be hard.

"Here is a bit cold..." Mused the Italian slowly, actually putting effort into her flippant question and
eyeing their surroundings with an eye for whatever he had in mind for this. "But, I suppose, if that's what the lady wants..."

"Do what... Renato, why are you loosening your belt?"

"You wanted to watch, here and now." Given the shit-eating smirk he was wearing, whatever his offer was had a high likelihood of being either indecent or perverted.

Or both.

Rolling her eyes at the man and his frisky mood she was apparently encouraging with her questions, she abandoned the entire ridiculous conversation and him before he actually did whatever he had in mind and her toes froze. Instead she walked off in her inadequate shoes to explore where they ended up instead of awaiting his next corny line or confirmation she wasn't sure she needed about what kind of offer he gave her, because they were out here for a reason.

There was some kind of several tiered building to their immediate left and a bit of greenery to the right at the very northern tip of the island, further on was what looked to be a coal or similar kind of dirty energy plant next to a warehouse building.

Then there was that rusty eye-sore of a condemned building, asymmetrical and built more to conform around the island's odd contours more than for human sensibilities.

That all rounded out the northern section of the island, and while there was a road paving a lot of the 'interior'... it was occupied. There were a couple late-night wanderers, the Native Americans that occupied the island who were either night owls or simply insomniacs, and here or there were dots of couples taking advantage of being off the foggy San Francisco coast to admire the dim patches of starlight here or there or the distant glowing city line to the east.

Then there was a long, thin building a bit beyond the eyesore of a cliff side building they had arrived near. It was also edged right up against the cliffs to the point there was fencing anchored to it, meaning they couldn't go around it to avoid being spotted, but it was likely going through the building would take them at least a quarter of the way into the island and possibly to the jail cells they were really here for.

...that was probably where Renato got over the fence. He wasn't marked with any rust or suspicious rock dust, which... probably meant little to nothing about what method the hitman used to join her on the island proper.

Hmm...

"It's the old prison labor building." Announced the Sun Flame using Mafioso blandly as he sauntered up to her side, probably knowing full well she hadn't known that and was looking forward to finding it out herself.

Her glare earned her a mocking raise of an eyebrow.

"Shush." Sonya huffed at him, sliding her way into the puddles of dark around the few working outdoor lamps to work her way to the less condemned and shifty looking building. Renato rather silently followed along rather cheerfully for him, weirdly alright with just following her as they got deeper into the island.

They had all night. No real reason to go lightly on this little outing, as she wasn't sure when next they would end up able to do something like this again.
Of course those occupying the island had taken advantage of the beds available. Meaning the jail cells were almost entirely occupied, especially as they contained everything one needed for personal hygiene.

Sonya was not put off from her goal of breaking into the prison even if there were civilians milling about their target, and watching her slither and slide around everything but the floor as she attempted to find them an empty cell so they could finish 'breaking in' was… distracting.

Greatly.

The woman was way too damn limber. He was staring to get… even more ideas.

Of which, he was utterly certain none of them would be investigated anytime soon. Unfortunately. She only offered to watch, while that was enticing in its own right… it was probably the theme this relationship had entirely.

Renato was really just along for the ride, mostly. Sometimes accidental and unexpected steps forward or not, Sonya was too chary about interpersonal contact to be comfortable with much right now.

Of course he was interested in matching up differentiating skill sets with the professional thief she was, knowing how not to act or think like a hitman or specifically as something distinctly else helped him enormously when getting around law enforcement or even just fellow hitmen on the trail of another that did this or that hit… especially as he knew exactly how long she'd been stealing for and the fact none of it had caught up to her yet marked her out as a very successful one.

There were these sorts of 'life-expectancies' for various criminal job classes, mostly unstated and rarely actually quantified to anyone outside them. The Mafioso had been around and working long enough to know the general ones for hitmen himself, and the fact assassins tended to die messily quicker but thieves slower. Even with those facts, a girl that started near the age of ten and had worked on through a decade's worth of contracts however she went about it was markedly impressive.

Where he would've just made use of the preexisting infrastructure available to him if he was planning this outing, mainly the dock and the ferry even if that ferry was out of service since the utterly expected takeover of the island, such issues were normally easy enough to get around if you knew how to work the people involved. Somewhat noticeable, but not too alarming for the people involved, and would get them to where they wanted to go in decent time.

Sonya, on the other hand, hadn't even spent a moment wondering about any method which utilized a boat or other seafaring vessel once she learned the docks weren't in use anymore. Instead, probably predictably as thieves kind of needed to be unnoticed in their areas of operations until well after the fact to be successful ones, she thought of a low-tech but in the end elegantly simple solution to the problem of transportation.

Something that would cost them either little to nothing or could be acquired locally and not be thought of with suspicion even well after this night. Easily acquired, easily disposed of, able to do both with anonymity, and the actions of would never stick out in anyone's memory.

Admittedly the amount of what they brought along could've been expanded upon with a few simple
words from him… but the opportunity to have a shivering and scantily clad leggy blonde cling to him for the warmth had been too tempting of a possibility to pass up.

Alas, she didn't behave to expectations per usual. Clouds might not be greatly known for being cold-weather resistant, but Storms and Suns were. Apparently pulling on that side of her Flames more, the lightly dressed Russian barely gave the cold another thought once she adjusted.

...meh, still an utterly lovely view to admire. Especially behind her, and even more when she was clambering up something in front of him.

Now perched on a high and mostly abandoned part of the main cell house's vaulted dead-ended catwalks, watching Sonya ghost around and over the late-night owls of the ex-prison's residents to get what she was after, Renato made note of what she was doing around which obstacle to ask the why later on.

Without some serious help, he highly doubted he'd be able to do the same maneuvers. It wasn't even just a question of strength or ability, flexibility maybe, but of temperament he honestly hadn't expected to lose out to a Cloud by.

He'd fully admit he was a somewhat impatient asshole. If someone was in his way, more likely men than a lady or two, it was highly likely that someone was about to have either a rough encounter with the ground or about to have a horrible day. Even when on the job, a hitman was more likely to remove any witnesses to his or her movements in very final ways rather than spare the effort of moving everything around the clueless civilians wandering about.

Made it somewhat obvious where and when a hitman was operating, but a risk Renato ran willingly enough for speed and security in the moment.

Sonya, on the other hand, flowed around them like water. Yes, they might be in her way and that had to annoy the rather patient Cloud something fierce as it was… but the people she was avoiding would likely never realize she was in the same general area much less close enough to lift their wallets. Which meant it would be next to impossible for anyone to reliably track her movements, even if they knew for a fact she had been around specific areas or people.

Blinking, the Sun narrowed his eyes and watched the pale smudge that was the thief closely for a second as she made her way around the ground-level floor below and a late-night walker in her way. She could almost reliably evade even his watch, mostly by accident it seemed, but as of right now she wasn't really doing a lot to prevent his ability to keep track of her.

Probably out of absent-minded thought more than intent… but yes, she was lifting wallets of those in her way. Removing what looked to be American currency bills out of the billfolds before just as delicately replacing them, so the owner would not immediately notice the theft before moving on her ponderous way to find what she wanted.

...they made quite a pair, didn't they?

Now highly amused, Renato turned his attention on how exactly he was going to get down to the ground floor to join her the moment she found whatever it was she was after.

Acrobatics weren't really his thing. He was athletic enough, but some of the maneuvers the thief made to get down there were a touch outside of his comfort zone. Especially if he couldn't see half the things she had to have used as hand or foot-holds to get down there. After getting half-towed to the island, making use of her insane strength against the ocean's tireless currents, the hitman didn't really want to rely on her Cloud Flames just to make the final stretch of this little outing.
Catwalks and... hmm, yeah, more catwalks. There were the obvious buttresses and scaffolding supporting said catwalks that provided a really flimsy path for anyone walking from a cell to anywhere else, made of gratings and metal railings which while it allowed him to easily see down to the ground floor clearly... it would also mean there was little in the way of cover from some unwary idiot looking around and spotting him trying to move.

Renato considered the obvious first, walls. There was a far kitchen and canteen affair where they entered the building at, obviously where the former prisoners ate and the prison staff cooked said food, but that would remove him from the actual cell area they were in right now.

Which was a complication he wasn't sure he appreciated.

Losing sight of Sonya might just mean he'd fail to find her again before dawn broke and they both had agreed, no matter what happened, that they had to be off the island and at least making their way back by then. It was the latest she could be out at yet still make her personal goals this week, Dante was done and finished with testing her 'class' for retention and she apparently had one last thing to pass onto her students before they wrapped up here. It was also possibly hoping too much that she would remain in place, because evading discovery might just be needed and if he didn't know she had to... they could miss each other too easily as it was.

However, backtracking was his best bet to getting down without causing himself some kind of injury in the middle of the attempt and wasting time and Flames.

Which, if it happened, he was somewhat positive the damn Russian would never let him forget for the rest of their natural lives if she caught on.

If he didn't go down the far wall well outside of this little 'cell block', that left the 'main' cells in the middle. Yet again three floors total, there was both more people and more dubious methods to get down by.

The three free-standing 'walls' in the middle, with corridors of cells lining each on both sides, that made up the middle of this jailhouse was packed with the sleeping occupying Native Americans that had taken over the island as another Reservation. What looked to be a far recessed line of ground cells nearly invisible from his current position on the ground floor, a jutting line of more cells built out in an inverted V-shape on top of them, then the highest line of cells jutting out from atop them yet ensuring his sight lines were most disagreeably fouled and getting spotted could come from any corner.

That made climbing directly down off the highest wall-mounted catwalk he was perched upon a dicey proposition, even if Sonya apparently found next to no issue going down that way.

As he had no desire to be shown up in his breaking-and-entering skills, even to a professional thief, Renato was highly tempted to go down the same way. Somewhere she couldn't watch, if only to earn another exasperated glare and that would allow him to use yet another cheesy pickup line to get her to actually straight out glower over again. Which hopefully would also get her more used to being flirted with.

Eventually, equally as hopefully, she'd actually get a clue and realize it when other people flirted with her without someone needing to club the woman over the head with the painfully and brutally obvious. He wasn't going to hold his breath, the fact she now listened to him flirt with her was honestly decent progress he was utterly fine with. Why cheesy and tacky worked when everything else hadn't said volumes, about what he wasn't sure of yet.

Besides, that was kind of aiding the opposition and Renato was enough of an asshole to be
ambivalent over encouraging that possible end-result.

Apparently finally finding what she wanted, the thief on the ground floor looked up to ensure he was watching then pointed out whatever kind of cell she wanted for them before entering it.

Cell block D, ground floor. Because of course this wouldn't be simple enough. Getting out again would be interesting, especially if that was near when everyone here would start to wake up.

The only bright side was that there was a wall instead of an opposite line of cells to keep in mind and said cells the little Russian finally picked were apparently undesirable enough to be limitedly populated.

He examined the far wall facing cell block D skeptically from his shadowy corner instead of immediately move to join her. There were the bars one would expect penning in the windows, which would provide a kind of handhold that wouldn't be too objectionable if the shadow of a fully-grown man climbing down them wouldn't give him away…

...now if only the damn Storm-Cloud hadn't picked a cell more than halfway down the damn building.

He was going to have to backtrack or go around for a different entrance, because he didn't feel confident enough to pass by the cells on the ground floor without giving the game away if just one person looked up at the wrong time and he couldn't just kill anyone that did so. Sonya could by copying a damn monkey if she wanted, he was just going to have to get creative if he couldn’t figure out exactly which cell she picked to wait for him in once he was down there.

Cell block D had the solitary confinement cells… it was highly likely the blonde woman was currently in one. Apparently, she decided with the lack of prison guards to contend with she wanted to get into the most secure part of Alcatraz to 'escape' from.

Humans as a type didn't tend to like occupying such places… maybe he could convince her to take a momentary break to 'warm' her up. Besides which, not 'letting her watch' again would earn him a dirty look and possibly open that conversation back up about what she asked to see from him.

A very odd game of chicken they were playing with that. Sonya might have her suspicions but until such time he confirmed it she might actually get curious enough to just stay and watch, but one Renato could almost not lose.

(Thursday the 26th of February, 1970. Neuchâtel, Republic and Canton of Neuchâtel, Swiss Confederation.)

"Do not leave this city." Viper demanded shortly, earning a confused but accepting nod from the Lightning-Storm Lackey he'd borrowed from Mafia Land.

Bjørn's fingers twitched over the dossiers the Mist had given him that he had barely just cracked open, just seated in a 'borrowed' office desk to pursue the information and pick out who's life they were going to ruin for losing him several thousand Australian dollars on a bad investment. "Do you need any of this?"

"No." Adjusting his cowl, the Esper ran a skeptical eye over the Mist Flames lacing the space to ensure it was safe enough to leave the young man at his own devices. As long as the Lackey was
smart about everything, not even the cleaning staff should bother with this room until he took down
the Flames embedded in the walls. "Mou, you need to figure out which idiot gave the poor advice
you fell for and only that. As long as you focus on finding our next mark, I can at least ensure you
remain in one piece while I take care of... other business."

He was more or less sure Sonya would be highly unamused at someone or something breaking the
Icelandic Lackey at this late date, given how much money she had poured into the Mist's pockets to
shape him into her personal investor and money man. However, being the only and recognizable
assistant to Mafia Land's sole Cloud Flame user made the young blond man highly visible in the right
circles.

Very specific, and very dirty circles. The ones the Icelander didn't yet know how to swim within and
they were in Switzerland to start teaching him.

Given what Viper was hunting, and the fact Björn couldn't be easily 'disappeared' without attracting
a lot more attention than any self-respecting Mist would court to preserve operational security, the
other made a respectable distraction for the last few details he needed before investing in some
heavy-duty backup.

As long as the Lightning-Storm stayed in place.

"...is that all I'm doing?" Questioned the Lackey obediently when the Esper lingered just long
enough to encourage questions to be asked.

"Of course not, mou. However, it's all you need to know and concern yourself with for now."

Smirking as he accepted the fifty euros the Lightning-Storm handed over with a highly unimpressed
look, Viper slid the bribe into a dimensional pocket for later sorting. "My own business, something
which your patron has promised to assist with in exchange for taking the time to train you."

Björn heaved a pointed sigh, then actually fetched out his wallet to make an even bigger bribe for
information. Two hundred this time, a respectable amount to top off the fees he had already charged
the other for his 'assistance'.

"There's a group of Mists, and associated idiots, who thought they could hide a mark from me.
Mou... very nearly got away with it too, and I intend to show them the error of their ways."

Suspicions and only rumors of collusion weren't nearly enough in this situation.

If he was going to nail some idiots to the wall for trying to 'disappear' his target and costing him the
hefty bounty price, the Esper wanted to be more than sure he was targeting the right idiots and had
an estimation on how much push back he could expect afterwards. As well as any associates or allies
he had to evade or otherwise manage to not be hostile to him… or wipe said allies out before moving
on the main target.

More information was needed, less targeted than just investigating the actual culprits and more
general lay of the land details.

Even if he gave up the reputation he lost on that botched job as just the consequences of
overreaching, there was the possibility some enterprising Mist stumbled upon a way to hide someone
from Viper's Thoughtography. He wanted to know not only the process but how to evade another
situation like this… and the money. Especially the money, for both the job and the not so
inconsequential bonus for acquiring a location quickly.

If he were going back to offering the ability for sale once again, he needed to ensure another mark
wouldn't be hidden at the wrong moment. Cherep had taken the ability in stride, actually almost indignantly for the easy-going Cloud because Viper never made mention of it before getting sick, meaning it was a good possibility he had marketed it to the wrong pool of customers. Making mention it was just a 'Mist's twisted sense of privacy' instead of being overly invasive gave evidence that those more used to his Flame type would accept it as another skill to make use of easier… possibly.

If a Cloud, when another made mention of his type's typical habits, thought little of Viper's ability as something to object to… then other Flame users that were used to Mists would likely see it as useful instead of something to lethally inconvenience him for. Now there were actually Flame users working into positions of power again, or at least into positions where they could advise those in power, perhaps his slightly unusual Esper ability could be profitable to make use of instead of cost him connections.

Before the stuntman said something, Viper had just been after some revenge and a little bit of extra money he could swindle out of everyone available during a bit of a dry spell in jobs for information brokers. Rather, a widespread lack of acceptable jobs for information brokers.

Now he was not only after the money to make up for that botched job, but also whichever unlucky puppet that stumbled upon a way to hide people from him.

Even if there was work he could take that might pay equally as well or take less effort these days. Work was picking up again, equally as many suicidal and shitty contracts as there were survivable jobs from more respectable powers but all were becoming more lucrative to the point a freelance information broker could survive off them again.

There were things he could think of to make use of that information on how to hide someone from another Mist for and removing someone able to hide future marks from the miser was mere prudence before attempting to sell the ability again.

Drumming his fingers on the desk, the Lightning-Storm scanned the nearby files provided by the building they were 'technically' camping out illegally in before glancing back to the Mist. "Should I maintain a safe bolt-hole until you return?"

"...it would be appreciated, mou." Viper admitted lowly before he stepped between what was and what wasn't to start in on his own work for today.

He wouldn't need to teach the Lackey to secure his living area, apparently Russians had their own standards for setting up a safe location to use as a staging area. Adding Mist Flames could always be done after the basic grunt work was over.

Bjørn learned to do it by watching Sonya's process of making a small staging area to work out of while he was learning the ropes of being a thief's Lackey. Appreciatively paranoid or not, the Soviet woman apparently hadn't spread the method to her brother as well. Which was the only aspect about the previous skills Bjørn had before coming into his tutelage the Esper would credit the woman with, otherwise he was holding her brother's less meticulous habits against her.

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 26th of February, 1970 continued. Wo Hop To Triad controlled hotel, San Jose California, United States of America.)

Dante hadn't taken Bazanova's disinclination to socialize with him right after being introduced personally, with Clouds it was rarely if ever personal unless you made it that way or they were pissed
Indeed, practically the moment he was finished 'looking over her shoulder', and a suitable distraction happened the night before to put her in a good mood, she actually designed to notice him as someone more than 'that associate guy with my boyfriend that happened to be around'. Over breakfast that wasn't this Triad hotel's complementary morning fair or something he had to source himself, which he was fully aware was more their dinner than something eaten after waking up.

"D'Attilio, have you noticed a kind of 'clumping' situation when too many of the same kind of Flame users group up together?" Asked the blonde curiously, after peering at him blankly for a whole second obviously trying to recall his name. "As in too many Rains in one group forget just because they can debate an issue calmly that doesn't mean everyone agrees with them or their views on it?"

"...now that you put it into words... limitedly." Allowed the Italian Mafia School instructor slowly, attempting to parse through previous interactions with some student groups that approached him for mediation purposes. "How did you notice such a thing?"

It was part of his duties, ensuring agreements reached between students would be held to and the consequences of not doing so were apparent to all parties as well as the other Instructors, but he dealt with either a class at once or limited groups outside of scholastic hours.

"Before the Moscow schoolhouse was bought and things resituated into a whole, Soviet Flame users were trained up in their own groups situated far enough away from each other to prevent... headaches."

The dry way she stated the history of her school's pre-establishment days made him crack a smirk, because even when left to their own devices a limited variant of her 'clumping' habit tended to happen even in Mafia School's student body. To 'prevent headaches' that came from dealing with a Flame type that didn't correspond to another user's was almost word-for-word the excuse he heard about why they had to break up larger groups before they could cement into place.

"We didn't exactly notice right away, but I sure as hell noticed when the Rains became kind of an island of non-progress nor interactions when even the Storm group fragmented apart due to internal conflicts and got kind of absorbed into the Sun group's cheerful optimism bullshit that turned into some kind of living thing. The less said about the Mist group the better. Only Lightnings do decently well in large groups of their own, if a bit hasty with everything they do."

"I don't have personal experience beyond limited coincidental happenings that might be what you've noticed," allowed the Etiquette Instructor thoughtfully after swallowing his next bite of bagel, "but I do know we're encouraged to prevent more than five of the same type of Flame user students from grouping up together. There's probably something factual the older instructors could supply in answer for why those rules are in place."

Being able to point her in a direction was sometimes just as good for Cloud Flame users as having the information they wanted, which also had the benefit of earning him credit for being at least knowledgeable in what topics she was interested in asking about even if he didn't have all the answers.

He hadn't required Renato's assurance that she'd get around to talking to him eventually, Bazanova wasn't the first Cloud he ever interacted with. The fact that she was probably the first Cloud a number of loose international Flame users beheld before interacting with Italian versions probably explained a few curious happenings that reached back to him in an enclave as sheltered as a Flame school for baby Mafiosi.
It was curious she hadn't been nearly as hostile while he was carrying out his responsibilities, especially as it implied she would not handle her own to standards. From what he knew from the rare few young Cloud Flame students, they *hated* that something fierce.

The fact she was older than his lone Cloud student or the others in Mafia School as well as something beyond just another Cloud likely explained her disinclination to hold it against him personally.

"*No personal experience?*" Questioned the thief in question a touch skeptically, which was attention grabbing in its own way.

"*Nothing I can share without compromising my students' personal privacy.*" Amended Dante as calmly as he could.

She stared at him flatly for another moment, obviously displeased by his ducking of her question even if it was a valid reason to. Renato, the utter asshole, cocked an eyebrow in pointed disappointment but kept silently nursing his coffee on the other side of the small hotel table laden with breakfast food the man hadn't touched yet.

...right, not *just* a Cloud. Storms would be highly displeased at being denied information they were seeking, *especially* if it would aid their own responsibilities in some way. If he actually had such information or not was immaterial, he already confirmed he might've noticed something like she was wanting confirmation for so not telling her was risking her temper. *Especially* if she offered some information in return only to be denied.

"*I'm rather young for a Mafia School instructor.*" He informed her with blunt honesty to make up for pigeonholing her somewhere she didn't entirely fit. "*I've only taught two years of students so far, of which none have graduated yet, and none of them I will compromise the safety of by carrying tales to someone they might need to interact with at a later date.*"

She blinked, apparently not expecting an admission of inexperience from him. That really didn't speak well of any other Italian *Mafiosi* she might've interacted with beyond those from Vongola or Sinclair himself, or it could possibly be a cultural difference between expectations of age and experience.

Dante wasn't *old*, but he was in his mid-twenties only a few years shy of Renato's age yet apparently older than her by equal or more years. Frankly, before ending up in Mafia School barely two years ago he hadn't ever expected to be an instructor to students at all in his lifetime.

If a Russian actually expected him to have more experience, and be firmly in place long enough to have former students... and she was younger than him...

As well as a 'Soviet Flame expert'. One already published and well experienced enough to catch such issues as their current topic of discussion.

An incident of tempting the wrong individual to gain her desired knowledge was less infuriating to a Storm than setting up the exchange appropriately only to be outright refused for arbitrary reasons. Which wouldn't exactly mesh with Cloud habits of accepting the direction as just as good as the information itself for simply putting forth the effort.

Renato *had* warned him, it was really his own fault for blindly walking into the issue without adequate thought.

Apparently, the Soviet Storm-Cloud was equally as unsure what the right response from her should
be as he was himself. A moment more of scowling at nothing, then she shrugged the whole incident off as she returned to eating her yogurt.

He wasn't sure if she'd keep his failure to be helpful in mind for eternity, or eventually just assume it was an Italian thing. He also wasn't sure if that thought was galling or not.

"Smooth," mockingly observed the other Mafioso over the rim of his coffee cup, "real smooth, Dante."

He flipped the other man off, chagrined and a bit irked at his inability to peacefully interact with a full-grown Cloud as well as he could with younger ones. Even if there was only been one young Cloud in Mafia School right now he interacted with to judge other Clouds by.

"So," she changed the subject before he could adequately respond to his fellow associate's needling, gnawing somewhat absently on her spoon as she pondered the last of her breakfast but gently as it couldn't resist gaining teeth marks, "what was your verdict on my efforts here?"

"More than adequate to ensure no one should complain once we're back in Italia again." Not that Dante expected everyone to be happy with the outcome entirely, but the easier methods by which to annoy the Storm-Cloud was snipped short by Don Vongola's insistence on him double-checking against their own standards.

Her cutting down the class size she had been given by literally beating up the dregs and tossing them out on their asses wasn't something he intended to include on any report he had to make but mentioned to at least a handful of Dons he knew of who would ensure Don Cerrito's bitching remained in his little corner of the world. No one should be all that surprised at her response to be given an entire class of the less than respectable members of the American famiglia and allowing them to crawl back if they wished was more than he could've said about how he'd handle the same situation.

The mere fact there had been enough of a class size to review information with at the end was impressive enough as it was. Fifteen people surviving meant she hadn't been intent on chasing off the entire class.

"What is your 'one last thing' to do with them?" Inquired Renato lazily, from appearances more interested in refreshing his drink from the pot on the table than the answer if one wasn't aware the hitman was asking at all meant he was greatly interested.

A lift of her shoulder was the first answer as she swallowed her bite of granola laced yogurt. "I wanted to see what they know of Flame users before the incident with all us European ones."

"Americans? I can save you the time, nothing."

"Stereotypes, Renato." Mocked the younger woman back dryly, ticking her spoon at the man in rebuke. "And exactly. Anyone with half a brain cell would know if you popped with Flames in Europe or the Eurasia Continent you have to join up with the Mafia just to survive... but that doesn't hold true here simply because the States doesn't have a highly networked underworld that spreads rumors of their passage further than they can run."

From the slow blink the other Mafioso gave, he didn't quite see it the same way. Instead of actually say that to a woman called an 'expert' on the topic, he instead boldly stole her scarred spoon to try a bite of her breakfast. "Whatever you want, little dragon lady."

"I've completely lost a mid-aged Sun, who was not a fan of the Mafiya at all. I know he wasn't killed
near us, I know exactly how many Flame users die in Moscow or the surrounding area through the reports the Mist group seems delighted in burying my office in." Allowed the thief wryly, skeptically eyeing the spoon returned to her dismally then the remains of her breakfast before abandoning both for preparing her tobacco pipe instead. "That doesn't mean he is dead, but that he did escape Moscow perfectly well even after being outed as one before anyone might've caught him. Getting away from us isn't all that impressive, no one was interested in going after him, but the fact he tried at all is rather suggestive of what older civilian Flame users would do instead of conform to expectations if they gain their Flames later."

"I wasn't objecting to your idea." Refuted the nominally asshole-ish Mafioso rather simply, finally picking out what he wanted to eat now he knew for a fact it was all safe and both Bazanova and himself were showing no ill effects. "It's an interesting thought, but if they get this far don't they deserve their freedom?"

"You think I'm doing this to trap others?" Countered the thief sarcastically, curling up in the armchair moved over to the table for just these kinds of meals that just so happened to occur with them all in the suite at the same time to wait out Dante so she could indulge herself. "Hardly."

"So why ask then? Just to know?"

Bazanova remained silent for a long moment, more than enough time to pique the curiosity of both Mafiosi she was seated with. "There's two variants of Dying Will Flames. Of Sky, and Of Earth. But you never hear 'of Earth' Flame users anymore."

Renato looked entirely skeptical, but Dante made a surprised sound he didn't intend and got both of their attentions rooted to himself.

"The Simon Famiglia."

"Who?" Demanded the other Mafioso shortly, utterly confused and per usual highly irritated he had no idea what they were talking of.

"Ancient history, ancient Vongola history." He offered then corrected himself quickly before the hitman decided violence would 'encourage' the information he wanted to correct the long-loathed 'ignorance' he might suffer from. "The Simon Famiglia were once allies of the Vongola Famiglia near the start. They were the only known Earth Flame using set in all of Mafia history I ever managed to read. But, Miss Bazanova, they're dead. To a man, they were all dead before Primero and his generation handed things off to Secondo."

"Only one set, out of the entire world?" Refuted the thief blandly, barely blinking over the information few would ever know being presented and instead poking his assumptions full of holes. "Where did they come from? Where did the Earth Flame user gain his Elements from? Are there opposites like an Earth Flame is to a Sky for the rest of the Elements of Sky?"

Dante... didn't know.

"Out of the entire world, there's only a few sections of which might be the likely candidates for where they might've come from... if we can exclude Europe as too well known. A hundred or so year drought in Flame users, which social group have been reduced to the point even the mafia wouldn't hear a whisper of it anymore?"

"Native Americans... Africans? The Ottoman Empire's remains... or the remains of the Aztecs and other such far off tribespeople." Grimly concluded the older hitman, looking slightly put out at this discussion happening between two of his associates without having any idea of the topic himself.
"That's why you weren't remotely upset to learn Alcatraz was occupied by Native Americans right now, or that we'd have to work around them. You could've said something about wanting to see if there were any Flame users in that group, little dragon lady."

"Initially, that wasn't the plan. I wasn't bothered because they wouldn't be the ones to catch something like us, and it's not necessarily Native Americans that are Earth Flame users. They're just... a not-known quantity to anyone in the mafia." Admitted Bazanova simply with another shrug, cradling her prepared pipe instead of immediately light it. "I only thought of it when I was waiting for you to join me in the solitary cell, and by then I already knew no one there had anything of note."

"That doesn't really explain how the Simon Famiglia ended up respected friends of Vongola in the era of Primero, or why another hasn't been found in the two hundred and some years since the last known Earth Flame user and his Famiglia died."

His counterpoint barely gained a reaction from the Soviet Flame expert. "I'm merely interested in confirming or refuting my theory. Either way it comes out, I still gain something from asking the question. And if not Native Americans, or Canadians or South Americans or even Pacific Islanders, then that means there's parts of Europe and Eurasia that require a harder look or three or Africa might just be it... but that is way too hot for investigation."

He rubbed at his jawline, dubious if anything could be found at this late date. "They might all be dead and gone, not somehow living under the suspicion of any Mafia associates in the world."

"Or they might've carved out their niches well before any late comers tried to pry in after them."

"...I'd be interested in the answer, if you find any Earth Flame users." There were a couple others that might equally be as interested-

"No." Refused Bazanova flatly, instantly. "If I find them, alive, I will be telling no one. Unless they're long dead, but if they are alive and don't wish anything to do with this day and age's mafia I will not be the one to try changing their minds."

Blinking at the utterly abrupt and entirely unexpected shutdown of the topic, which wasn't something he had thought while there was an ongoing exchange of information... ...this was because he hadn't managed to answer her first question, wasn't it?

Was it?

It wasn't entirely a certainty, as it could equally be her Cloud instincts rebelled at the mere thought of clipping another's wings even accidentally. Storms would be that petty to refuse someone something in the same vein they were denied.

Unable to decide which it was, or if it was less personal than Flame related as something professional she honestly didn't intend insult by, Dante let the conversation be derailed without protest. He had no right to the results of her research, nor was there a reason she'd offer that kind of information to him for free.

"I've got one last question, if I may." Dante interjected before getting up from the slightly makeshift kitchen table affair they had, as today was his last day with the two of them.

He had a flight out later tonight, and the two of them would do whatever was next themselves, so the opportunity to pose his lingering question before he likely never saw them together again. He spent most if not all his days in Mafia School, while Bazanova might visit for scholastic reasons as she was currently and was about to be a former principal of another school... Renato never would.
"...shoot?" Offered the Russian uncertainty after studying him for a moment.

"When's the wedding, and who do I have to murder to ensure am I invited?"

Renato shot him a blistering glare, but the woman merely blinked at him curiously. "I'm never getting married, why ask that question?"

Both Mafiosi glanced at her blankly, exchanged a set of looks, and Dante decided he had probably pressed his luck more than the Sun Flame using hitman would appreciate for at least the rest of the year when the man narrowed flinty black eyes on him as he fully scowled.

Maybe most of next year, as well.

No wonder the other Mafioso was so handsy with the woman, and that was before he learned she had no intention of commitment to anyone much less him. It was going to be worse than how Renato was around Nataline while the two were dating, wasn't it?

Then again, they were all young idiots that far back. He had to have grown up just a little over the last decade or so it had been since then.

He glanced at Renato's somewhat conflicted but also somewhat insulted face then decided he probably wore out his welcome here and turned to her just to give her a crooked smile. "My thanks for your hospitality, Miss Bazanova. I'll get out of your hair now and settle things for you in Italia."

"...sure."

(ooo000ooo)

(Thursday the 26th of February, 1970 continued. Cerrito Crime Family's Headquarters, San Jose California, United States of America.)

A fully-grown man, not to mention a self-made man and associate of the Cerrito Crime Family, should not fucking pout.

Vito half-heartedly glared at Matthew Lentine, but not really able to put much heat into it given the conversation topic.

Now the guy knew his reading disability was even limitedly known of and there were ways around it, he had gotten into crossword puzzles on the advice of their temporary instructor in hopes of raising his reading level and try for his GED. A General Education Diploma, America's equivalent to Europe's General Certificate of Education O-Levels, which to be fair the guy needed for practically any kind of honest work.

Which, weirdly, the Russian bird hadn't needed an explanation for when Matt informed her of his future aims and possible plans.

Made sense, in a way. She was in the career of education, she should be familiar with the terminology.

...still kind of stuck with him as a bit odd a girl from Soviet Russia was familiar with the United States’ education system to not need explanations for alternate education paths.

The fact Bazanova was leaving made Matt not happy the only one to know of and identify his disability was going to be hard if not impossible to speak more to if he found another issue he wasn't sure how to get around or wanted to speak to someone that knew anything about it.
"I only suggested crossword puzzles because they are more involved with problem-solving parts of the mind than just reading a book. More likely to pay off with a tangible reward quicker than just finishing a story itself in spite of the issue." Admitted the blonde haired and grey eyed woman blankly, looking up from the badly tattered if still somewhat new book of crossword puzzles the man showed her. "Which, again, there is nothing wrong with you aside a kind of processing information error and this showed you that full well. Suppose it worked just fine, I guess."

The big guy shuffled his feet sheepishly in front of her like the student she treated them all as, but from what the man had said before this little meeting upon their 'graduation' from her class the possibility of something he could do to prove his detractors wrong had been a bit more than just tempting to him.

"No, I don't know anything about American Flame users." Vito informed the woman flatly to hopefully hurry this whole 'meet and greet' thing up, which earned him no kind of appreciable reaction as she returned to inspecting Matt's progress in his book of word puzzles.

"Not really surprised. You are all imports, not Natives." With a sigh, the slim lady handed back the bound bundle of papers to their owner before glancing boredly at him. "What with the 'required' traceable Sicilian blood La Cosa Nostra require to be 'acceptable' as associates? The possibility you had any idea of what I wished to know was so low to begin with that I very nearly never actually posed the question to you. I have time though… Renato's being weird, and I do not feel like dealing with that right now."

That was… actually really insulting. "You think you can find someone that could answer the question better than actual Americans?"

"Actual Americans are the Native residents the 'White Settlers' and Pilgrims kicked off their own damn land, that name has been mutated from what was 'original' almost no one else can accurately claim to be actual Americans without a lot of asterisks behind them." Pointed out Bazanova dryly without any sign she was aware it might be a sensitive topic, stretching out her spine and not remotely looking at either man that actually did bother to see what she wanted from them today. "So… yes, actually. I merely need a reason to actually speak to a Native American medicine man, or perhaps their elders. Without violating Omertà at the same time… somehow."

"The 'original' Native Americans weren't bands of peaceful hippies dotting the land," Vito refuted maybe a little pointedly, "more than most were war-like bands of roving family groups turned tribes. They barely had a system of writing or any publications, fought against each other insistently, no structure for disaster relief when their numbers were ravaged by diseases-"

"That could apply to the Dark Age of Europe's near fall to the Black Plague. The Spanish Flu." Interrupted the thief flatly, glancing up to the bright afternoon sky probably to judge the time and how late it was getting. "The justification of Rome's conquering of everything they came across until it fell. The Crusades, so on and so forth. Just because they lost their lands and did not entirely survive being conquered with their culture intact is no reason to devalue them as a people, and the fact they have not violently thrown off the hostile occupying culture actually makes them stand out a little from historic examples regardless of why. Introducing virulent strains of diseases into what amounted to untouched populations who had no immunity to any variant of it will always ravage a population until the survivors develop the resistances. Judging them by European standards side-by-side does everyone involved a disservice."

"I think we, or the Pilgrims and later settlers, would have noticed Flaming Native American warriors if they had any Dying Will Flames to them. Something would've been noted about it somewhere, that's not easy to miss."
"Unless the diseases that ravaged their number took the small percentage of Flame users they had before open hostilities started. There is never really a whole lot of us, even if we are highly visible in ways, not even in Europe. I recently ran across what happened to a faction of the Triads that attempted to fight European Imperialism near-openly against the Laws." She shrugged a shoulder almost lazily, but at least remained on this topic instead of going back to the other one. "There's several possibilities as to why they would not have used such abilities equally as openly, which include the Vindice or a variant of the Laws as just one, rather than simply 'they have none' or 'they are all dead'."

Matt slapped his rolled-up paper book in his hand a few times. "If… there's not 'many' of you…?"

"...the information I taught you is likely never to be of use in your lifetime without a major happening to shake up the former 'standards'." Admitted Sonya blandly, actually looking at the big guy straight on instead of stare at the sky more. "No one in Europe or Asia likes to let their Flame using lines go, meaning if anyone in America has the ability they are either on loan as I am or like Renato in being here for his own reasons without the intention to stay. There is the possibility you might eventually run across hostile or on the run Flame users, hence why the exchange is not entirely useless to the point of being valueless. However, if I assume correctly from the 'base' education level of my class, such interactions may not be in your sphere of responsibilities."

Vito had long since drew the same conclusion, especially with Don Cerrito's plan to have the information passed on to his more ardent supporters to be put to 'better use' once she left them. It wasn't really all that surprising she had caught on, if a little sour. "Why are you telling us this?"

"Why would I not?"

"You're…" gesturing to all of her, he wracked his mind on how to phrase it without being insulting. She could punch him through a wall, he'd seen her do it before with another guy.

"A communist bastard? Or bitch, given your gender Miss Bazanova." Mused the heavier man slowly, and bluntly.

"I suppose." Allowed the blonde woman as she slid down the short brick wall to stand on her feet again, a tiredly amused twist to her lips even if her tone had been as bland as usual.

"...sorry." Matt fussed, actually somewhat hovering over the tiny Soviet lady as if tainting her presence with a profanity or two might actually damage the monstrously strong woman somehow when a guy thrice her weight class hadn't so much as made her pause.

He manly resisted the urge to bury his face in his hand at guy's behavior, for the uncountable time this week alone because someone did something either utterly ridiculous or insanely stupid around her.

"There is a lot I could say to answer that accusation, most of which would be excuses or justification in type. I will instead say it is a preoccupation I have had since childhood, to arm myself and those that seek answers from me with the somewhat hard to acquire truths about this stupidly tricky quirk of human nature. Any grudge I may have with your leader has nothing to do with my association with his people, and I do have a sense of pride in my work."

And… instead Cerrito stuck her with an entire class of assholes that either got their asses beat down or grit and bore the insult of learning from a girl half their size to finish her lessons. The fact she succeeded teaching them anything to Mafioso D'Attilio's satisfaction was either a tribute to her stubbornness or professionalism. Vito himself was a surprise entirely, but he wasn't the only one to
'pass' her lessons so his addition wasn't entirely necessary.

Mostly his being a sympathetic ear for the other guys to bitch and whine at because he got lumped in with the rest of them probably cut down the number of 'casualties' from the whole incident, and probably just helped them attempt to keep up with her lesson plan so a number of people passed it.

Matt probably only passed the whole farce due to his slightly disturbing drive to not embarrass himself to the only one that hadn't expected him to be the stupidest guy in the room just because he couldn't read or write well. Vito got roped into helping him through the written information in class and reviewing after hours more often than anyone else, much to his disgruntlement.

The big guy was a little hard to refuse though, like an overgrown bulldog begging for attention with a semi-disturbing intent. Especially when he was intent on something to better himself through.

"If something happens in that 'major happening'... that you didn't cover in the basics, who do we ask for clarification?" Asked Vito curiously, because this was the last time they had to deal with the Soviet Flame user.

Given how Don Cerrito felt about her, if there were any future interactions it probably wouldn't be as neutral in intents as now.

"D'Attilio, I guess. I am unsure how Italians structure their alternate education inquiries."

Matt kind of grimaced sourly, because the Italian associate hadn't been impressed at all with him or how slowly the guy talked. "How do we reach you, Miss Bazanova?"

An eyebrow rose curiously, or skeptically as she was a bit hard to read correctly, and she very deliberately thought that question over longer than any translating efforts would require. "There are ways. None of which are guaranteed nor quick. If you desperately require advice from me alone, a letter can be sent to a place simply addressed 'M.L.I. St. Julian's' in the care of a woman called Primakova. There is a phone number, for my office, but that will be defunct in as little as a couple months."

...M.L.I.?

Mafia Land Island?

Well fuck. He wished he knew that before, the fact she might actually hand out a highly coveted invitation to visit the massive criminal haven could've been used to motivate some of the harder headed associates that gave up on toughing out the classes.

Of course, had someone put effort into talking to the woman about what she might be able to offer in return for not behaving like idiots in her classes he could've learned that sooner. Vito grimaced and gave up on the whole situation as headache inducing as well as mainly his own fault.
Chapter 105

(Saturday the 28th of February, 1970. Mafia Land.)

Sonya blew a sigh out over her spiced black tea, which was maybe a touch too hot to order while on a tropical island in the middle of a 'spring-summer' season, exasperated with the entire conversation yesterday and her associate's preoccupation with it the day before. "What does it even matter?"

"…curiosity." Renato claimed to her face, sounding both false as hell and like he was lying through his teeth now she knew how to catch him at it. "Besides which, I have the sinking suspicion this might be a 'religious' difference I want to know the root of before you wander off into jack shit nothing again and I never get the answer."

That actually sounded more likely, and she frowned at him in puzzlement while she adjusted again to the island's oppressive heat this close to the equator. "If you must know, I have no intention of marriage because it's stupid. We barely pay taxes unless we absolutely have to so the so-called 'benefits' of being married are not worth the mere effort, 'registering' myself as someone else's main and favored 'bedfellow' with any kind of structured government that leaks everything in the face of any old Mist is a security risk waiting to happen, and finally I have no need for a husband to define myself through or want to risk that shit happening to. I have my brothers and my father for any needed 'male influences', and I'm utterly fine with just them."

By the hitman's expression, apparently all that had never actually occurred to him.

"Additionally," she continued blandly after another sip of her still hot beverage, "what does any kind of paper or 'marriage license' matter to me? If I chose to stay with a person for the rest of my life, I will do so. On my own merit, for my own benefit, and because I want to instead of being told to or expected to do so by random other people I could not care less about due to what a random piece of paper says about me."

"So… it's not you being afraid of commitment or a desire to avoid 'holy matrimony'?"

She shot him a look, half-skeptical and more incredulous, which the asshole hadn't the decency to look abashed over.

"Why the hell would I pick up the brat, much less get attached to my foster family, if I had a fear of commitment?" Wondered Sonya exasperatedly, snatching her pipe off the table between them to light and then hopefully smother her irritation with him under the nicotine hit.

"I noticed you didn't address the religious overtones."

"There is more than just one method of 'marriage', some of which don't require the Christian God to see through. Like just a government… registry office… thing. Thus, such a concern is pointless."

"Merely curious, little dragon lady." Insisted the Sun Flame user indifferently, as if he hadn't thrown some kind of silent fit over the whole situation for about two whole days now.

Unless this wasn't what upset his apple cart so damn much, and he had just used it to distract her with.

At her highly unimpressed and utterly unconvinced stare, he flashed her a smug little smirk and changed the subject as he folded a long leg to rest it on his other knee. "What are you going to do for the next month and however many days?"
…until she was free of the Zolotov Clan?

Or until she started taking Shamal on full-time for him?

It was the end of February, and then all she had to do was the bulk of March before April came around and she likely had to return to Moscow for the changeover of powers and all that other political bullshit she probably would pay little to no attention to. It'd affect the Flame training groups they needed to know if they were getting cut off from any supply lines or finance links, so she could help them afford operating costs next year or if the clan would remain a backer.

Frankly, there were a couple things she really should be doing to prepare for that but couldn't stomach the thought of. Like reach out to the other two Clouds of Moscow and review information with then inform of her upcoming absence from the territory, or even heading to the Mafiya School and at least showing her face for a while so Galina wouldn't blow a few fuses on her.

"I think… I'll head to Romania. Probably. Or at least I'll try to end up there…"

Viper had apparently abducted Bjørn for something related to his financial instruction she was paying for, and she was more than fed up with picking out her own contracts again. It was at least more fun to bitch out the poor Icelander in her head when she ran into something objectionable, than bitterly musing on her own failings and faulty memory. She could wait a week or so, but then she'd move on to the other things she had waiting for her to get to.

Renato snorted, she wasn't entirely sure if the distance between them across a table would keep him out of her thoughts so it might be in response to that, and finished off his cup of espresso. "Why not come with me instead?"

The invitation startled her, but the man wasn't obviously watching her for a reaction or looking even faintly expectant for a positive answer.

Well, it was a suggestion. Whatever he might be up to or planning could actually be more interesting than dealing with civilians that might not know any Flame user history even if they had suggestive stories about them. "I'm not sure if I can go. Or even when the next time I have a block of unclaimed time come up again, and I've already been meaning to get this particular thing handled for about a year now."

A blink, and he smirked crookedly at her. "Well fine then, I suppose I should head on back to what I was doing as well… just out of curiosity, do you have any preferences if I find you and the brat a professional chef?"

Sonya pulled hard on her pipe, peering at him dubiously through the resulting smoke before salty sea breezes blew it away. "What?"

"You now have the space for one." Offered the Mafioso idly, as if that was the part she would find most objectionable about his offer. "Besides which, heaping the entire process of cooking on you when you have an utterly unpredictable schedule such as working for Mafia Land taking contracts? A chef as part of your staff would make it easier on you, as well as your own people making sure if there's any delays the brat won't be home by himself."

"I'm somewhat certain such a person is on the books to be hired already." There would have to be one, because as sure as shit she'd kill her entire staff with food poisoning trying to cook for any number of people. She didn't know if anyone she 'had' already wanted to cook for a living either, as a matter of fact she should take stock and figure out where everyone wanted to go after hiding behind her to free them up. "Why are you expressly going to find me one?"
"I know a chef, who might just so happen to need an employer who won't ask any questions about his previous places of employment." He offered casually, as if that wasn't obviously another killer for hire that only may or may not share his job title. "He's... more or less ensured he's barred from cooking in any civilian outfit anywhere within Italia."

"You're not dumping another of your old friends off on me, are you?"

"Not in so many words, no."

Yeah, she didn't believe that.

Under her unimpressed glare, the man rolled his eyes and leaned back in his spindly café chair again. "Rest assured, we were never friends. Just a bit of mutual back scratching."

"Like getting a job with someone that won't ask his qualifications?"

"Ask for qualifications all you want, just not where he worked at before, you just won't get an answer of he'll offer to show you why he gets fired every now and again." Countered the hitman simply, turning his head to the side and inspecting the skittish messenger boy that had been skirting the two of them for a few hours now.

The very reason they both hadn't split off before now, because he had the marks of a Mafia Land agent yet for some likely stupid reason the kid wasn't secure enough in himself or the island's security to approach either of them. The time to adjust from the change between a seaside shore area and a middle of an ocean island was also somewhat a factor, but they were both variants of swelteringly hot and salty currently.

"Should we order refills? Again?"

Renato scoffed, apparently losing what patience he had to bicker with her instead of immediately waltz off and crooked a demanding finger at the kid.

Sonya sighed regretfully, draining off the dregs of her tea so she could finish her latest bowl of tobacco before they moved on. "Which of us did you want?"

"...erm, both?" Flinching at the statement that came out more like a question that earned him a pointedly disproving glower from one half, he scrabbled in his black vest pockets to pull out two folded flyers before delicately laying them on the table instead of actually hand them over. "A response is... desired."

"They're asking for Flame users to volunteer a few months or weeks out of the year." Reported the Russian aloud when he didn't reach for his, already in her pamphlet and less than interested in the fresh-faced agent's fidgeting. "Apparently for 'stand by' things, like that fishing net trap I dealt with for you I guess..."

"You're joking." Snatching up his own folded paper, the hitman glanced through the same information she was perusing less hastily. "Why now? There hasn't even been an invasion with a decent amount of us yet, surely this can wait until something trumps the island's security first."

"...they, or the idiots in the hospital, thought I went berserk when Lisa went into labor. They called in a Chinese Storm, thankfully one I knew of who equally thankfully left when I demanded it instead of trip off any instinctual desires to rip his head off while we were both trapped in a private waiting room." She reported to him thoughtfully, examining the shiny and very professional 'request' for volunteers. "Same as those Turkish assholes, just more polite and asking for it first."
"…this is fucking lazy."

"In a way, sure."

It was equally as smart and efficient as it could be lazy or stupid, there were social as well as cultural differences between all the Flame users in Mafia Land that could share a type but have wildly different expectations for their or other's uses. The difference was the lens by which you peered through to see it.

"This is… actually surprisingly smart in a way, honestly." When the Italian shot her a skeptical look, Sonya could only just shrug a tattooed shoulder as she put her thoughts into actual words. "It was Ganauche, wasn't it? I just punched his nose for the CEDEF behaving as they would back in Italy around a Moscow Flame user like Rasputin. If this is his response, reaching out to those foreign Flame users so there's at least a regional expert on file to ask if there's any further major culture clash that could happen, while also padding out the ranks with the 'exceptional' of each for a stretch of time to gain that information from…"

Because once this was widely known of, of course certain factions would likely ensure their 'best' were put forth the minute someone actually designed to agree. Regardless of their own respective desires or the opinions of the people being voluntold, Vongola was a powerful entity in a distant land that good connections too might just help with any number of things… and because showing off.

Bragging rights and showing up competitors wasn't expressly a reason in itself, but still a motivation to account for. Everyone liked to look good in this lifestyle, from Mafiosi to vory to everything in between.

Renato looked less than sold on any of that being major reasons why the Ninth Generation Lightning Guardian picked to do as he had. Or maybe just her words hadn't been enough, she wasn't sure what the utmost limit of his mind-reading range was right now.

"…well, damn. I guess I don't mind he's likely fucking my sister now."

How much of the CEDEF are Flame users? I didn't see many when I went in there…"

"I'm not answering that." Flicking his pamphlet to the inner folds, the Sun examined the 'desired qualifications' part of the request.

"I refuse. For at least the short term, I have little to no idea what my schedule may look like to volunteer even a week or so. You also have national representatives of my motherland in the hospital." Sonya at least belatedly informed the kid forced to wait on their responses, eventually.

Once she realized he was still standing there.

"Ditto." Her tablemate chipped in, after she kicked him lightly to put the poor teenager out of his misery.

Gratefully, the Mafia Land agent bobbed her a nod and vacated the street in a fast hurry. Without so much as thanking them for taking the time to let him get his thing over with, and very nearly running their usual waitress over who had their bill in hand.

"How rude."

"They really don't make the agents like they used to." Agreed the hitman blandly, who had swiped the bill from the girl before she could. "I suppose this is where we split, little dragon lady."
"...be careful, Renato." It was the best she could do in a public space, which Sonya found rather distasteful given how inadequate it seemed against what the Italian was likely off to finish preparing for.

By the infuriating smirk the asshole tossed her as he rose to his full height, the sentiment wasn't needed. "Of course, I'm always careful."

…why was she going to miss him, again?

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 28th of February, 1970 continued. Sonya & Tatiana's Apartment, Mafia Land.)

Sonya was putting her room back together when Tatiana got home, which answered if the thief would know their new address without being told. Until said Storm-Cloud was done messing with her books, the nurse was not going over there.

She'd done that song and dance once before, thank you very much. Death by irked baby sister was not in her plans.

Instead, she started in on dinner. That was the 'arrangement', if Sonya remembered.

She cleaned, Tatiana would cook.

Well, up to now, it was more Bjørn cleaned and the Sun cooked. Bachelor cooking was... ew. The Lightning-Storm could cook, but his standards for 'adequate' and 'too gross to eat' was weird.

However, from what little she could see from the kitchen-center of their new three-room apartment... it looked as if her sister had already gone to town cleaning up the 'common' bathroom she'd share with her Lackey when in residence. That bathroom was missing the little collection of tiny blond beard hairs that usually dotted the sink and had new hygiene products lined up for later use, and it looked as if someone finally swept the hardwood floors from said bathroom all the way to the front door.

Apparently yes, Sonya remembered.

Tonight they would have... some beef stroganoff, without mushrooms even if Sonya would eat Lisa's mushroomed food likely from self-preservation alone, because Tatiana probably should go grocery shopping and that was pretty much most of what she had left to make something from. She wondered, if she asked really nicely, if her baby sister would mind running errands tomorrow instead of spending a day recovering from her trip with a good book or three.

If she would, they could have some golubtsy tomorrow.

Putting a pan of water on the stove to boil for the potatoes roused her sister for a moment, mostly to check it was the nurse and not a robber by how brief the emergence would've been had Tatiana not asked about grocery shopping.

"I could." Sonya agreed absently, three dust encrusted books tucked under an arm and obviously itching to get back to shelving the unholy pile of papers into their rightful places. "Anything specific you want me to pick up for you?"

"Well, if you could not forget the mushrooms, because I'll eat those... cabbage. Specifically. And whatever cuts of meat you feel like shelling out for." Everything but seafood was actually surprisingly expensive on a floating island in the middle of the ocean, which probably should've been
unsurprising but still. "In other news, Verde's back."

"...fuck."

"Adrik's been shot through the lung, and it collapsed, before the two of them could get here." Tatiana continued blithely, slicing the spuds in cubes and wondering if she had time to bake some biscuits too. "He's... not going to be good for much now."

A few too many beats of silence had her checking over a shoulder to see if her sister was pulling faces or what, only to earn herself a semi-concerned grey stare for the effort. "Are... you okay?"

"Me? I'm fine."

"Tats, that was a former associate of yours. You don't feel anything now he's functionally crippled doing something objectively stupid for a near-stranger?"

She dropped the pot's lid after adding in cubed potatoes, she didn't slam it. "I'm fine, Nya."

The books ended up on the somewhat beaten up kitchen table that used to be Bjørn's, and her baby sister warily padded around the obstruction to come up to Tatiana's side. "So, what's Adrik's issue?"

"He's crippled, not... having an issue." Corrected the nurse a touch sourly, waving her knife a few times in emphasis before starting in on a few sprigs of chives for later toppings. Cutting things up was soothingly therapeutic after a hectic hospital shift and cooking for more than herself fed her inclinations to nurse those around her of any hurt. "Pneumothorax isn't treatable, the integrity of his lung was compromised. As he's had one, another is highly likely. So just traveling isn't really recommended, as his lung could just collapse from changing air pressures and the like after being weakened so..."

"...so, he needs three seconds with a medically inclined Mist user every few months or years, or a new lung?"

Stabbing the chopping board, Tatiana whirled on her baby sister before her mind caught up to the suggestion and she actually thought about it. Blinking blankly down at the only Soviet Flame expert and Storm-Cloud blankly staring back at her, the nurse eventually sighed exasperatedly and covered her face with faintly potato-onion scented hands. "Or I could ask you to Propagate his lung, either entirely or just the damaged part, then Activate cellular division so it's real without your Flames and he'd have an entirely new lung his body won't reject or a perfect lung again. Oh, for fuck's sake..."

"When would you need me to do-"

"Nya, I love you. Shut up right now." As it was entirely unknown what health risks a Flame-generated organ would pose to the human body after surgery, they could even get Adrik's medical bills heavily discounted beyond what the Zolotov Clan already got because it was testing of a theoretical medical procedure for future use or selling.

The clan paid his bills right now, if only because it was technically on Sonya's behalf he was off in France even if she hadn't expressly tasked him with guarding their newest foreign Lightning user. She hadn't said not to, which technically was permission in and of itself when it came to her.

Her idea would be just another one of a few hundred different medical tests going on for science, because yet again St. Julian's was the ultimate pinnacle of somewhat black-market human testing in the medical field. They had cutting-edge anesthesia combinations, nearly unknown vaccinations not
available anywhere else until the side-effects were more known, experimental drugs and antibiotics, theoretical surgery techniques being tested, and the prototypes of a thousand different medical tools alone… half of which were in storage since being replaced by the resulting equipment or better performing alternatives per the agreements to test the equipment in the first place.

Tatiana apparently had a date with some papers after dinner, writing down the entire process and step-by-step guide for the imaginary surgery she had been thinking for Ganauche's eye based on the 'mere idea' that a Cloud Flame user could Propagate human flesh as they could everything else they got their hands on. Admittedly an eye was a hell of a lot more delicate than a lung, but the process by which a duplicate could be made would be the same. If her baby sister required study to replicate entire…

…no, there was no way in hell Cherep knew what comprised all the body parts he had replaced over the years. Beyond 'bone', 'blood', and 'skin', a child even at the age he'd been when Sonya dragged him home wouldn't know how to put themselves back together in exact detail down to the delicate nerve fibers that ran through the spinal cord alone.

Likely, a Cloud could replicate any old body part all they wished. As long as they had the Flames for it.

If they thought about it.

That would be a fairly interesting conversation to have with Doctor Kappel, because her Cloud siblings' possible immortality had never actually been brought up to him. He was going to be pissed they omitted that, as she had been when they finally came clean to her, but it was really likely the former Nazi would help her disguise how exactly she knew the process was sound for the proposed surgeries.

"You want to do this, or should we call in our dork of a-"

"I'll do it, he doesn't want to come back here." Sonya cut her off next, sounding unamused over the mere suggestion.

"Okay then… I need paper when you go shopping." Glancing at the potatoes to ensure the pot wasn't yet boiling over, Tatiana moved on to the beef tips that nearly cost her an arm and a leg and the half an onion left she would be slicing up next instead of mention one of the sister hospitals around the world that could be convinced to spare them a surgery suit and a recovery room for such a medical miracle being 'discovered' there. "A large amount of it, and a few pens if you don't have any."

There was going to be a bidding war anyways, because 'discovered by a medical professional in Mafia Land' was never going to be in any history text ever. Even if it couldn't become something shared with more civilian medical communities, there were enough criminal friendly ones that would hide where the replicated organs were coming from to ensure the process would be widely available just enough to generate a lot of interest and bragging rights.

More likely there would be an imaginary 'cloning facility' invented that made a breakthrough with… whatever some PR specialist dreamt up to disguise obvious Flame use.

The red tape in her future… and that was just her. Sonya would likely demand a few reams of her own, simply because it was their brother's ability she likely wanted no one to connect to him or her. Tatiana didn't want any whisper of that getting out herself, which likely meant a titanic amount of secrecy clauses to be argued over and enforced.

At least, until it came out some other way. Undead Clouds… would be a mite bit hard to miss rumors
"…about when are you thinking about doing the lung thing?"

"Oh, it's not going to be for months. I've got to get with Doctor Kappel and we've got to write up a process, have it reviewed by the Head Doctors, then probably explain the entire thing in detail to the surgery teams or just one so they can put together a game plan for the actual surgery, then you'll be asked to replicate a few organs for both my practice and dissection for any obvious complications that might happen to the tissue, we need to check if it's just the lung or the lung and the thoracic cavity for what's really the biggest risk and if it would help at all to begin with, and only then would we even tentatively schedule Adrik for surgery. But," Sonya was unamused and very unappreciative to get a sudden hug as fiercely as Tatiana could give one, especially as she ended up face-first into her older sister's cleavage again, "I really appreciate the kick to the rear, sis. Thanks."

It was easy to state, hard to do. Something she had half an idea how to start the process, but she had been expecting years and Ganauche to somehow either get his whole syndicate written off or finally assuage some of the Storm-Cloud's ill feelings to happen first.

Shooting her a very betrayed looking glare and raking a hand to order her somewhat longer than usual hair, the younger thief shuffled backwards to shield herself behind her books again. "...I'm going to Romania for a month or so."

"Have at."

"I'll also probably skip in and out of China first."

"Noted."

"Sometime in there, I'll throw Verde… and I guess Adrik, so he doesn't do anything too stupid before you get to him, in my house in Italy."

"I appreciate it."

"…that's it?"

"Galina told me what you told her, in a very… roundabout manner." Admitted the nurse blandly, nibbling a raw onion slice that didn't want to get off her knife before glancing over to her wary baby sister's new position. "Do your thing, sis. Gedeon has tried to get a hold of you, we're preventing that by being really unhelpful. Oh, but old man Zolotov would appreciate it if you're in country by the second week of April. Apparently, you need to be there for political bullshit when he formally hands things over."

Sonya eyed her dubiously. "Sure."

"Are you going to go grocery shopping for me, or should I do it after my shift tomorrow?"

"I said I'd do it." Insisted the Storm-Cloud stiffly, frowning now. "I also apparently need to talk to Verde tomorrow anyways. So, a couple of days at least before I leave again."

"Phenomenal." Tatiana insisted back brightly, judging she had enough onion slices and putting her knife in the sink's basin for the thief to clean up later. "And thanks."

"…I highly doubt you're thanking me for talking to Verde, or grocery shopping. Especially since you're cooking."
"For talking to me about Adrik." Corrected the nurse a bit wryly, blinking rapidly from what she'd insist was the onions and not emotion. "I wasn't thinking too much about it to be honest, because yes that is one of mine and he went and fucked himself over to the point I can't heal him. I know he's got high hopes for Verde's brain, but... why was he so damn stupid about... he didn't have to do that..."

"Maybe he's after something?" Posed Sonya warily, from the sound of it not sure if she should leave her big sister to her onions or linger around. "Aside the whole 'guy saved my life' thing?"

"Adrik was the idiot that was fully willing to steal from old ladies we lived next to and shoot himself in the foot when they reported him to each other. Why'd he had to show he grew up now and not in a few more years?"

"...because people change?"

With a half-laugh that came out a bit more strangled than she intended, the Sun pressed the heel of her left hand to her left eye then only realized that might not have helped much. "Not by much, apparently."

The fork she had picked up to check on how done the potatoes where was tugged out of her grip, mostly because it was in her left and that was not only on which side Sonya was but also being dangerously close to poking something sensitive out. "Tats... you are not allowed to be bipolar. I refuse."

"You do, huh?"

"You'll forgive me for asking, but what the ever-loving hell?" She even sounded horribly confused too, warily lingering out of arm's reach just in case yet still standing there looking both alarmed and suspicious. "You're normally not... mopey."

"I'm a Sun, we do everything with a vengeance." Sniffing as she felt an impending sneeze, Tatiana glanced at the mascara coating the heel of her palm sourly while blinking hard to clear the onion oil from her eyes. "Also, may I point out onions?"

"...do you need Ganauche?"

The blurted-out laugh was painful, and not just because of surprise or because she had been trying to sniff again. "How the hell did you hear about that already?"

Her sister snorted dryly. "I was in Italy for a few weeks."

Like that answered anything. Besides, they were still in the 'get to know you' phase so nothing of a physical comfort side was going on to justify that question. "Why are you suggesting him?"

"Because I suck with people, and apparently I did something wrong here." Pointed out the Storm-Cloud with exasperation, glancing down at an apparently forgotten fork before eyeing the dangerously bubbling pot of potatoes dubiously and putting it down on the counter. "What did I do?"

"Nothing. Just reminded me of something, and didn't let me pretend I was utterly fine?" Countered Tatiana blandly as possible without laughing, dumping her onions and the beef tips into an unheated pan sitting forlornly on the stovetop with the pot of potatoes. "I hate pain, so I was avoiding even thinking about it. Yet here you come along, all innocent and grumpily concerned and now my eyes are watering and can't stop."

"All I did was ask a question!"
"Exactly. You didn't do anything wrong."

Frustrated, her baby sister outright glared for a full second before stalking away with insult lining every step. Surprisingly Sonya then came back without her books, but something wrapped in foil in hand instead. "Here, chocolate. I'll even consent to another hug if that'll help."

She sounded so sour over it too.

"Why do you have chocolate?" Dark chocolate too…

"I buy one every month and leave it in my purse for… emergencies."

"Hmm..." Tatiana managed through a mouthful, idly poking the potatoes with the fork to see how tender they were now, "smart idea."

The younger woman eyed her like another thief would eye a particularly unfriendly guard dog, or how a particularly competent civilian might eye a ticking bomb, very gently leaned in for a kind of glancing contact that could masquerade as a hug if someone's arms were disabled, then vacated the kitchen with a vengeance.

Apparently to await dinner's completion in the relative safety of her room instead of risk Tatiana's 'unstable' moods.

It really was the onions, she just smeared the oil all over her eye and that was why she got teary. Free chocolate, free fine gourmet candy, was a bonus she just really didn't want to give up. If Sonya drew the wrong conclusion, that was entirely on her and her loss.

…and now she just stole candy from the evil little mastermind thief that was her baby sister.

Savoring her next bite the nurse then wrapped up the rest of it and stuck it in her purse, so she wouldn't ruin her appetite. Who knew the next time she could get one over the blonde thief, accidently as well, so she was going to ensure this lasted as best she could.

Then she finally fucking sneezed, thankfully away from the food they'd be eating in as little as an hour.

(Sunday the 1st of March, 1970. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

"Have you been… living out of here?"

Verde pulled his face out from behind a textbook he managed to badger Tatiana into giving him, blinking first blankly at the blonde thief that just let herself into Adrik's hospital room then with a measure of puzzlement. "Where else would I go?"

"Did Bjorn not get you a hotel room or something?"

"He did." Offered her fellow Russian before the Frenchman could quibble about what he felt should or could risk and how much it limited him somewhere like Mafia Land. "Long story short, Verde's more interested in bugging the nurses for reading material."

Sonya was hard to read on a good day, but he was sure that was a 'skeptical' cocked eyebrow. "Well... okay."
"Something up, boss lady?" Adrik asked, mostly so she wouldn't inquire about anything else he was currently unable to harass the scientist into doing. Like eating regularly.

"Today's been a little... strange." Shrugging off whatever it was that made it strange to her, she refocused back on her new Lightning. "So, you survived."

The fact she sounded rather unenthusiastic over Verde's admittedly mostly lucky run from France all the way back here annoyed him, he'd put good money it would likely piss off the other man. Then again, given what they were talking to, it probably wasn't really impressive because she did it at least five or more times a year.

Without counting her Mafia Land contract work.

"...are you going to hold up your end of this challenge?"

"I believe I said 'alone'. Not 'with a personal bodyguard that will hand-guide you through it'." Sonya observed tartly but rolled her eyes as the two of them exchanged a more or less panicked looks at the thought of the Lightning having to do all that over again but this time on his own. "But fine, whatever. You want to hide behind me, so be it. I finally have room for yet more people, count yourself lucky you got in before yet another asshole decides to dedicate their lives to my service for random reasons of their own."

Verde opened his mouth, Adrik slid a foot off his medical berth and kicked the Frenchman in the thigh before he said something stupid in response to the thief's less than pleased response to picking him up as another dependent.

The fact was that she was going to, however he got there, was more than good enough to bite a tongue and let her be as bitchy as she wanted to be.

"What's next, then?"

"For him? I need a body to be in a place my brother owns for me, while he's there letting in everyone needed to make it habitable he can do whatever he wants until I have more time." The considering look he earned was not encouraging. "For you? I'm altering our deal."

Adrik honestly wouldn't fight it, letting him duck out on her yet again to wander after Verde had been enough of an allowance on her goodwill as it was. As long as whatever the change was wouldn't kill him.

Maybe not even then, given how much money he also owed her.

"Our arrangement was information based for doing my end, my sister needs a guinea pig for medical-Flame research." Sonya announced blandly. "That's not to say I'm releasing you from the rest of it, but I'm sure if I require a teacher in information technology later Verde can cover the basics perfectly fine on his own. This way, I can at least get something out of that."

"...ouch. You calling me unreliable?"

"Aren't you?" Countered the other thief dryly, ignoring the outraged puffing up the Frenchman was doing on his behalf.

He rolled that slight around in his head. "There are worse things to be called, I guess. And it probably does seem that way to you..."

"It wasn't, and still isn't, immediately urgent. Since you had better things to do for Tatiana, and
technology advances in accumulating degrees these days, I had little problem shoving off you repaying me." She informed him bluntly, ignoring his wince because she was right and what she got out of that hasty deal on his end would’ve been equally incrementally valuable the longer she waited to call him out for finishing his side. "However, at this point, I'm a little suspicious you're not going to survive to pay me back all that effort and time."

"Your inflation is appalling."

"You're the idiot who made a deal with me, should've recalled what happened to the last moron that tried the same." All but purred the Soviet Flame user wickedly, which was a sharp enough change in tone that it made both Verde and Adrik blink at her in askance. "So now, there's still the issue of not only the medical bills I paid for you but the remaining balance on our trade of favors."

"If I let you change the details, that means I don't owe you nearly as much."

"A fraction less amounts to still expensive as hell…"

Adrik scowled, tempted but also keenly aware whatever it was she was driving for could be even more risky and he wasn't even out of the hospital yet. She was right, he owed her a shit ton. From the sounds of it, it would also enable him to remain more or less free around somewhere he could easily keep in contact with the so far silent Frenchman. That kind of benefit was suspicious.

"What I want is not combat likely." Sonya clarified for him when he apparently spent too long glaring at the half-healed surgery scars, not really all that far from the scar he had from the appendix one he got last year. "One could, in fact, call it cushy. Think of it as a milk-run, so you can relearn your limits somewhere safe… ish."

He shot her a skeptical look. "Then why offer it to me?"

"Everyone else is spoken for, and Verde would not know how to do it. You owe me enough you won't let anything I don't want slide." A lift of a tattooed shoulder, and the woman actually bothered to look at the Lightning she was now responsible for. "In fact, if you agree… I won't even protest the whole 'got to Mafia Land with a bodyguard' instead of 'alone' issue with his deal."

"Agreed." Adrik spoke hastily, before the scientist could open his mouth and somehow make the situation worse by demanding clarification.

He wasn't sure what kind of 'worse' there might be between the two of them, but Sonya's bland acceptance even with caveats was better than risking the Lightning having to do it all again. Without backup.

"...you planned on my failure."

"Of course I did. Most would, in my position." Sonya admitted to Verde's statement as if the whole thing was inconsequential and wasn't the hinge upon his future freedom and safety swung. "However, you survived and technically I suppose since you had to drag him back here it counts as alone for that little bit which was the end goal I set. I'm not petty enough to deny what you want on principle or anything, even if you cheated, so fine. I'll secure yourself as much as I will mine until you earn it fairly."

"Why is that an expected point of contention you are using as leverage?"

"We're criminals." She blandly claimed to his face. "We all cheat, that you did as well is actually as inconsequential as the fact you two were only caught because Adrik needed medical aid. I expected it, I knew he was with you, as anyone else that offered the same would be equally as expectant if less
accepting. There's an argument to be made that you made the connection with Adrik to the point he would aid on your own before meeting me, which means it was not intended to count towards the 'alone' mandate as it was a previous connection established and from that point on you refrained from forming any others to aid you against the arrangement."

Verde's somewhat constipated look of consternation was actually pretty funny, paired with the utter indifference that was Sonya entirely.

Besides which, the lady thief had a good point. The way the deck had been stacked against the man, the only way he could've survived her challenge was to cheat like hell. Which… was the first instinct for anyone in the Mafiya, especially when staring at the base of an insurmountable obstacle. Them showing up at Mafia Land on time at all was a big obvious sign they 'cheated' getting the Lightning here.

That she was going to honor the deal anyways was pretty fantastic as it was.

Technically, Verde hadn't asked anyone for help. Adrik volunteered his time and efforts without needing it, mainly to get around that mandate of 'alone', on what was practically automatic.

In hindsight, incredibly stupid thing to do without clearing the interference as acceptable with the one laying out the stakes. He very nearly ruined everything for the Frenchman, it was a rather… galling thought.

Of course, since Sonya was being ever so thoughtful and almost 'nice' for her… Adrik had no room to wiggle out of anything she demanded. Even if it'd start rumors of his 'unreliable' nature, he had to take his lumps and be appreciative for it.

"Err… Sonya? Out of curiosity, mind you… what did I just agree to?"

Instead of immediately lay out his near future as she saw it, his fellow Russian turned to him at first blankly but it shifted to a rather calculative curiosity before long. "…you've put a lot of work into Verde, and have a lot of faith in him to stick your neck out this much. Why?"

"Aside taking a beating with me to keep me alive? Even if it was pretty much in his best interests anyways?" It didn't shift her attention much, although Verde shot him a nettled look for referencing a beat down in an admittedly pretty lady's presence. "The man's brilliant, Sonya. I don't mean just intellectually smart, but he's that too. When his Flames popped, there's only so many places he could survive much less live and if not us then the Americans or French crime syndicates would do worse than we would. My… ah, career path… it's getting complicated. He's likely to keep on the cutting edge of technology just out of practicality for whatever he settles on doing with his life, and if I need help… I could get it from him for practically nothing now."

"Verde's your version of job security?"

"Well… he was." Adrik shot his healing chest a sour look.

She obviously pondered the situation a few moments more, before huffing a short sigh. "Tats has an idea about that, I wouldn't count yourself out just yet."

"Nurse Primakova informed us there is nothing to be done." Almost spluttered out the Lightning in protest, nearly instantly irate out of more being informed the wrong thing than irritation she might've withheld something.

"As of right now, there is nothing." She corrected absenty. "There's not a Mist nurse in residence yet, so Tats was correct in telling you that. Even the possible short-term, and highly subjectively
beneficial, suggestion has not been more than discussed yet."

Verde outright glowered at the shorter woman. "Why not?"

"Because it is Flame based, and that requires testing that is not possible yet as there are no medically inclined Mists to assist with. Hence the arrangement with Adrik. He remains in reach for Tatiana to test her ideas out on and record any drawbacks to both supposed methods of correction, and otherwise start in on securing my castle where you're going to live at least until you pick your own little dot in the ground, and I'll release him from our old agreement after some time."

Well… to be honest, if the boss lady even thought she could fix the unfixable, Adrik would've stuck close to her anyways. The conscription to be Sonya's head of domestic security wasn't really his thing, but the woman was a lone thief who already had a Lackey and a schoolhouse to maintain. In short, it could be worse.

Bonus, it would be where Verde would be for the next however few months or so.

"You're being… suspiciously understanding and nice." Stated the bedridden Russian warily, because none of this fit with the childhood image he had of the girl.

The fully-grown version of the same female gave him a hard to read look. "I am a Cloud. I dislike it when other idiots have ideas about what I can or cannot do. Entreating a Cloud for protection from the same seems to be a thing the world over. Verde's not actually the first one from outside Moscow to do it, as a matter of fact... I was expecting a new dependent to show up."

"So... why the run-around if you expected it?"

The baffling woman gave another dismissive shrug. "I didn't have the room then."

Verde stared at her hard, with a kind of dark glower going on. "And now you do?"

"I said 'castle'. Twenty-six rooms, six stories tall, of fortified stone castle off the north Italian peninsula. Which I am already running out of space in to the point there's now plans to build an apartment block on the land it came with." Sonya paused, looked semi-thoughtful for once, and sighed heavily while cradling her forehead. "And a few houses for married couples."

"...I get to hire help, right?" Adrik asked, he didn't squeak.

Nope.

"And train a replacement to standards, yes." The look she shot him spoke volumes for how unimpressed she was with his question. "I'm not stupid, Adrik. You're temporary but eminently more trustworthy while I get used to the people you'll put in place."

"Well, doing it alone would probably make up the headache I've caused you, boss lady."

"I am aware that is Tatiana's title, stop using it for me. I am not her."

"That's... a little obvious." Offered the bedridden man slowly, unable to help the glance to her chest.

Sonya followed his look and shifted backwards somewhat to redefine that part of herself and critically eye the feature much to Verde's embarrassment. "I'm not that small... am I?"

A small part of Adrik's brain shorted out, partly from a natural male instinct to not go there with a woman's self-image when he had just been unfavorably comparing her to another woman and partly...
from she could knock his block off self-preservation.

"Anatomically speaking," started the scientist who had moved out of kicking range during the course of the conversation, still pointedly staring flatly at the ceiling instead of the woman now looking semi-expectant at him, "Nurse Primakova's... measurements... are somewhat unusual for human norm. By statistical average, you fit squarely within easily and scale somewhat more to the... heavier end."

"...Verde, no. You never go there with a girl." Adrik groaned out around a wheeze, half because trying to laugh made his lungs hurt and half because the strain of keeping up with extended conversation also kind of hurt in a different way after getting his ribcage opened to deal with his leaking lung. "You especially don't call a girl 'heavy'."

Yet again, baffling, the strangest woman he ever held a conversation with just shrugged.

To compound the issue entirely, the scientist was quizzically peering at him blankly from behind his coke-bottle glasses then glancing to Sonya's complete non-reaction as if to say 'evidence does not support your claim'.

Dear lord, he even thought it in the Frenchman's accent.

"How long did it take for you to pick up Russian?"

"Adrik insisted, on the basis the language was more secure than speaking English so close to England."

"I am asking for reference, there's another that learned mostly the hard way and I was curious how long it naturally took for someone else. Most of half a year, and he barely had any grasp on it."

"...four months for basic understanding. I have yet to flesh out the vocabulary adequately enough for comfort."

"Huh." After that comment on nothing, the Soviet Flame user glanced from her French fellow back to her countryman then back. "Until such a time Adrik feels physically fit enough to start working for me, I will not ask you to move locations unless you are that uncomfortable walking down a busy thoroughfare here."

"It is not that I am uncomfortable..." Hedged the scientist waspishly. "I do not belong here and that is apparent to everyone."

"You think a Mafioso from Italy belongs on a street with a bunch of Triad thugs, or American Mobsters belong in the same drinking hole as Russian vory? It's all an act, Verde. An illusion, a pretense of confidence and not the fact anyone really feels that secure here. Admittedly that confidence is based on violence, and the knowledge of 'if you fuck with me, my fellows will fuck you up'."

Verde had looked actually interested, up until she clarified what the real understanding here was based upon. The utterly deadpanned look completely missed the mark, because Sonya was now musing about something else and not paying attention to appreciate it.

"Um... Sonya." When she finally looked at him, Adrik jerked a thumb to the third-floor window overlooking the side street the hospital was built upon. "Are you... stalling?"

"...I don't want to go back out there. It's even worse than when it came out I was a Cloud."

Grumbled the thief sourly. "The personal space bubble thing isn't back, but way too many people
are watching and not doing anything."

"Any idea why?"

"No."

"Anything really weird stick out to you?"

Sonya eyed him suspiciously, but the fact she practically outright owned the both of them probably made her more verbose than with anyone else she barely knew. "I've gotten a couple suggestions to 'stay and relax' when I pass a couple cafes. I think they were all Triad connected too. Otherwise it was just too many people paying attention for what I know is normal."

"Think you might be getting too well known for the anonymous services?"

"Fuck I hope not, Tats doesn't have the time to help me with that." Sonya bitterly mused, pondering over Adrik's suggestion but giving up with another dismissive shrug. "Well whatever. I don't care when you start as long as it is sometime soon, Adrik, but I will release you from service when Nicolai is freed up and makes it back to Moscow. Depending on what happens, you'll either still owe me the full balance of medical fees or I'll reduce it for help beyond the requirements of duty."

"Probably more than I deserve."

"Yes, yes, it is." She glanced at her new Lightning scientist then back. "But then again, I now have more reason to let you slide than I started with."

Verde blinked back at her blankly. "Why look at me?"

"Why indeed." The woman turned on her heel, digging her tobacco pipe out of her purse on her way out of the hospital room. "When Bjørn returns, have him set you both up in my place in Italy. Or just tell Tats you want to leave earlier."

"What shall I be doing then, if Adrik is tasked with security?" Demanded the Frenchman at her back skeptically, not earning even a pause or a look back.

"You have a cause to chase already, if you remember. There isn't anything like Flame sciences just yet, you might want to look into starting the process while things catch up."

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(Tuesday the 3rd of February, 1970. Bristol, South West England, United Kingdom.)

"How about a whisper or two of 'body armor'?” Mauricio inquired aloud more absently than really listening for Skull's response, reviewing his contingencies for the probably likely crash that would happen on this world-tour. "Start it early, to get the jump on any suspicions later on if the worse happens?"

"That's... actually pretty likely to weigh in mind if anyone gets around to asking. And I have, or will have, the connections to make it even murkier for when someone gets around to checking." He really only wore the full body leather jumpsuit because it concealed everything from neck to toes, meaning if there were bruises no one could tell right away.

It was easier to hide things if no one saw them in the first place.
Especially gaping injuries or shattered/misaligned bone. Sonya's standby of giving him a bloody nose to explain any blood was also supremely useful, if somewhat painful to cause himself if there was no injury to his face at first.

Skull zipped up, snagging the gloves set in his helmet then rounded the dressing part of his dressing room to fully see the rotund little Spaniard still not paying much attention to much anything but his own hands as he plotted. Checking the time, not that he had to because this circus outfit had a program manager that would send a runner if he wasn't in place more than fifteen minutes before the current act ended, the stuntman took a seat at the brightly lit vanity mirror that was the bigger draw to getting this room to prep in.

Rolling his eyes at the continued if less smart suggestions the Rain was running over to help him manage his role as his 'hype-man' and press agent, he started applying his makeup for the few short minutes he'd be helmet-less before and after his stunt act. Just so 'Skull' would be harder to connect to 'Cherep' on his off-time if anyone saw him out of 'uniform'.

It was by far not the biggest dressing room in this theater, that went to a pair of magicians turned lion tamers who were apparently in between cruise lines entertainment shows or touring themselves that headlined the whole tour, but he really only needed the mirror.

Showboat performers would be used to more amenities, more than any traveling circus type would be used to making due with. The German guys weren't all that bad, a little flamboyant but at least Roy took good care of their animals while Siegfried handled their props so they weren't all over the place like other performers he knew of.

They were the 'headliners', Skull was kind of leaching their fame as he would be performing before the main act. He wasn't the opening act at least. A group of Asian acrobats were doing that with some damn impressive tumbling routines without most of the props the acrobats he knew of needed for the same.

Eventually the Cloud would get around to asking their nationality, he was a little wary about issuing insult because he didn't know the culture very well but mostly he just didn't want to.

Might be a grudge in there, because Sonya got chased off from the circus in Asia. He didn't want to treat the mix-gender group with any hostility, they had too long scheduled together to start off with drama this early.

Closing out the program was either the firework display or whichever local musical act their patron arranged. Occasionally absolutely brilliant, their first event had the Animals performing right after their more day-evening show with a concert.

Free concert. Bonus.

Occasionally, now and again, their lineup would be changed up here or there depending on a couple of factors. The musicians obviously with local flavors or big bands when possible, but he knew an escape artist would be picked up in America for the part of the tour in North America but would leave them after Australia. In Mexico there would be a stand-up comedian Skull would share a time-slot with, before Canada they'd pick up a Wild West cowboy act he wondered if Glen knew anyone there to give them all a break when need be, who would split off from the tour before they got back to England again.

Basically, this was a showman's version of breaking into a new or previously untapped market for their specialties. Get together, show off for a little bit, then wander into whatever looked more interesting than where they had been. Some signed up for the whole thing, like him and the German
duo, some for only part for a safe or lucrative way to travel in style to a new place, like the Asian acrobats and the Wild West show.

He didn't mind the wander and shifting cast list, the more people he got to talk to and get to know in this side of the business the better. Rubbing shoulders with them as entertainers was just a bonus.

Picking up the purple lipstick he technically stole from the Grobes Volksfest's dressing department, just simply because he couldn't find another shade as perfect that matched his coloring, Skull smeared it over his lips while only half-listening to Mauricio's ramblings.

"...and, perhaps, a bit of crowd networking."

"Nope." Denied the stuntman pointedly, popping the 'p' so the makeup around his mouth was as even as he could get it, half-expecting the suggestion to be posed yet again. "Give it a couple months, Mauricio. By their terms, you're still 'hot'."

The Spaniard Rain threw up his hands. "I cannot manage your reputation without-"

"Mauricio, please. Just give it enough time for me and the other acts to overshadow your possible sightings. we'll live just fine with a few shows without you networking the crowd for us after this. We're going to be here for a long while." Capping what was left of the lipstick, he was running out but finding the same shade was practically impossible, he turned around instead of watching the other man through the mirror. "Another month at the latest, two preferably. Then those in the 'world under' will be forced to step lightly around you before doing something more… directly inconveniencing."

"I have been patient this long, another month will not be too bad." Allowed the Rain a touch grumpily, sighing heavily and finally focusing on the man he was 'managing' the reputation of.

It made Skull feel rather guilty to repeatedly remind the man why he couldn't do half the things he thought up, he wouldn't be nearly as peaceful if someone else was hemming him in so much. The only thing that reassured him even a little about doing it was that the man only needed a reminder or two to recall the reasons why he shouldn't do what he suggested and hemmed himself in. Mainly.

"...I don't suppose you would mind if I then turned my attentions to networking with the staff here then."

"I have no idea why you think to ask my permission for that, the more people you're seen by the safer you are. If the crowd is a touch too risky, then the employees are your next best bet." The Rain would likely pick up a lot of decently useful contacts doing that, and with him doing the business side of socializing Skull could focus on the fan-base more.

Mauricio tapped the tips of his fingers together thoughtfully for a moment. "Indeed."

"Try not to burn bridges behind us." Interjected the stuntman dryly, strolling over to the door when someone knocked on it.

"I would never dream of doing-"

"Two words, snake oil." Skull juggled his things to pull his gloves on, then glanced back with a wicked smirk for the sour glower aimed at his back. "See you after the show, Mauricio."

"Break a leg, Skull."

"Hopefully, you don't mean that literally."
Mauricio visibly thought about it before grandly doffing his floppy colorful hat that was a gift from Aziz for helping save his life. "Very well, not literally."

(Tuesday the 3rd of February, 1970 continued. Bristol, South West England, United Kingdom.)

Even knowing his family really didn't like his career choice for the obvious reasons of risking his life for fame, Skull loved being a stuntman. Probably a ridiculous amount.

The crowds cheering him on were a draw, as was any money he could make out of what was basically having fun messing around with bikes and momentum, but what he would probably never give up even if there was nothing he could gain from stunt work was the few moments of pure flying.

Being in the air, without limits or constraints, on his own terms and ability. The closest he could get to utter freedom, to being just himself... instead of a runaway Czech boy trying to duck shadowy men who wanted his immortality or the awkward and somewhat misplaced middle child of a criminal family.

He loved Lisa, and the rest of the family, but mainly their foster mother for allowing him to prattle her ear off with all his misgivings and thoughts until he did fit in more and the awkward edges rubbed off enough to fit. His sisters were too far entrenched in that life to have understood his few more civil years of upbringing and what view it gave him of their actions, Arseniy had been terrifying up until he basically quailed as much as he physically could in the face of Sonya's badly stifled tears.

Admittedly that incident had been entirely awkward as hell for everyone involved, not just their old man.

Skull ran both eyes and hands over Diana, checking one last time over the 1969 Indian Motorcycle he was minutes from starting up and jumping the ramps being moved into place for his act. Last second checks were more just for peace of mind than to catch anything, because there was a complete tune-up done yesterday where any issues from the summer of driving around on roads would've been caught.

Freshly washed, waxed, and polished. Diana was looking pretty with her black and blue coat offset with silver details. Skull honestly preferred purple, but he had limited options if he wanted a bike right then and not later when India Motorcycle Company could paint him a custom job.

There were only a couple more empty minutes before his next show, as things were shoved into place or secured by stagehands or the audience scurried back to their seating after taking advantage of the break for their own needs, waiting it out was always hard for him. As per usual, his thoughts were jumping around all over the place, especially as he was antsy to start.

He kind of wished he could dedicate his shows, but that would draw attention from the wrong comer of the world to his family. Also defeating the purpose of making himself a 'persona' for show business that didn't share a nationality with his real self.

Lisa deserved more than her fair share, frankly. One or more would have to go to Arseniy, just for helping him keep out of their lifestyle after he solidly concluded he didn't like it in the least. Tatiana would be amused, Sonya likely unimpressed and annoyed by the same.

Viper getting something dedicated to her would likely end up with Skull paying through the nose for
all and every insanely expensive meal they ever had for life… but frankly he suspected he was always going to be footing the bill for those.

Ooh, and one each for his baby brother *and* Shamal. One was a bit too young to appreciate it, but the other-

The PA system set up cracked to life without a whine of feedback a lesser trained announcer might accidently set off, Skull rose to his feet quickly so when the curtains concealing the changes to the stage and him pulled back he wouldn't be on his knees still.

An almost helpless smirk cracked open the stuntman's mouth as the spotlights were manned and turned on him the same second as his form and bike were revealed to the gathered crowd waiting for him.

Showtime.
(Wednesday the 4th of March, 1970. Sonya & Tatiana's Apartment, Mafia Land.)

Ganauche hid the fistful of colorful lilies behind his back when the wrong sister opened the door in response to his knock. "Err... hello, Bazanova. Is... Tatiana ready?"

Sonya peered at him suspiciously for a long moment, which was horribly unnerving as she had not been remotely happy to see him the last time they were in the same building, before padding off into the apartment but leaving the door open for him. "Tats, your boy toy's here."

...boy toy?

"So... do you mind?" Asked the Lightning Guardian warily after edging in just enough to be taking that wordless invitation to come inside and shut the door to hold the air conditioning in, not really sure what to do with either answer that question could earn him.

"Tats is her own person." The Soviet Storm-Cloud informed him blandly, curling up on the somewhat battered sofa with the obvious bullet hole patches with an equally battered looking book. "My minding is not your opposition. Yet."

The flash of purple eyes over the top of that paper collection had him stiffening up all over again.

"Then again, if she becomes unhappy about anything..."

"It's mostly her idea."

"I don't care."

Before he could respond to that or heave a sigh of relief because the little sister was kind of one of the bigger things he was worried about taking things the wrong way, the bouncy Sun nurse flounced into the main room of their apartment. "Ready, Ganauche?"

"Always."

Even knowing the whole relationship was more being mutually used by each other than anything, when a Sun decided to be sociable in a really friendly way it was actually really addictive and more than a little flattering. Activation was a kind of charisma in itself, especially when they got bubbly with their delight and Flames so it started triggering sympathetic reactions in everyone else around.

The same trait that made Hard Flame Suns excellent nurses made them fantastic friends, and even better lovers.

Really, the fact Tatiana had informed him of her intents was more than most could hope for when a Sun decided to befriend someone. That was either variant, too.

She was greatly amused at the slightly awkward offering of the wildly colored tropical lilies, which admittedly he picked on his way out here from the CEDEF security offices. Ganauche was normally smoother than this, but this was the first time anyone from her admittedly intimidating family had been present to witness his actions too.
Maybe he should graduate to professional work, Tatiana fully deserved it and he'd be a hell of a lot less nervous over hand-picked gifts under Sonya's scrutiny.

However, the nurse was still delighted by anything he brought her. Even a handful of dying plants, she actually seemed to like them more than the cheap trinkets or even the diamond studded little cat charm for her old silver charm bracelet he scraped together the funds to buy her.

It was possible there was something about diamonds or platinum and thieves he didn't know about yet. He was having fun figuring things out and she was having fun stumping him in trying to ask, which was the only really important part in the exchange.

Sonya looked less than amused to have her water glass repurposed as a vase but allowed it peacefully enough while her sister arranged things to her liking.

"Don't wait up." Announced the redhead with a smirk, practically flopping on top of her prickly sibling in lieu of a more sedate hug of farewell or anything else. "I'll be home late, so there's things in the fridge for you if you get hungry."

Whatever the muffled response was made her laugh and earned the blonde an extra hug on top of nearly being flattened into cushions. The Storm-Cloud sighed heavily under the Sun, squirming after a bare moment unhappily from the close contact constraining her.

Bouncing off her sister, Tatiana flounced over to Ganauche's side in as few steps as she could get away with. "Okay, we can go."

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 4th of March, 1970 continued. Sonya & Tatiana's Apartment, Mafia Land.)

Sonya snorted softly as the door shut, trying not to think how often Vongola tended to screw up around here as she pried herself out of the crease between the back and the couch cushions she got shoved into.

Surely things would be different here. Ganauche was kind of defective, but Tatiana wasn't defenseless or vulnerable.

Fingers tapped on the ragged history text she was somewhat sure was taken from Albania that she was no longer reading, as her thoughts started churning around in circles.

It wasn't anything like Rasputin's situation, and that reminded her to ask either Usov or Anna to spare the time to see if they could do anything for Igor the moment she saw either next. Her sister was also pretty canny now she was grown and surer of herself, to the point the nurse could work and live somewhere like Mafia Land without so much as one major scuffle to talk about inconveniencing her.

Then again, Italians. She really hadn't been all that impressed with Renato's countrymen. In fact, had she not met the hitman first she would've concluded all Italian criminals were way too hidebound to be useful for much.

Frustrated, and now suspicious, the blonde glared down at her book as if it had insulted her.

Tatiana would not appreciate being spied upon. She could take care of herself, and Sonya even attempting to imply she couldn't would be… probably ugly.

Maybe… maybe only once?
Not because she doubted the nurse, just her date for the night. She only met him a few times, and that wasn't as the man her sister was somewhat interested in.

It would drive her up a wall to not at least check in on them. As long as her sister didn't catch her at it, like how Cherep stupidly waited outside the bar for her when Renato popped up in Austria, it should be fine.

…or she could just be brutally honest when her sister asked why she was following them. She had been informed about Sun Flame habits and those injured around them before, telling Tatiana it was just her Cloud-senses getting in a snit about potentially harmful influences near her even if she knew better than to doubt her elder sister… that just might just work too.

The nurse was also… likely unpracticed. Still a trained thief, but the edge had to be taken off over three years of bookwork or study for her profession. Her Fut Gar backhand was still harsh, and her sister was indefinitely more socially competent than her, but the sly skills were of an unknown quality. Getting caught was actually a rather sketchy possibility once she thought it through.

Ganauche's Lightning nature would be less than an obstacle, as the Mafioso himself. She knew perfectly well how to stalk mafia men now, and she highly doubted he'd be the exception.

Decided, she left her book on the coffee table next to her glass of water now holding a collection of wild blooms.

As she really didn't want to be spotted, Sonya took less traveled paths. Which were underground here, as the rooftops of Mafia Land were more populated than the thief appreciated. Forcing her to surface every now and again to just keep up with the couple.

She still really didn't appreciate the night-life here.

Yes, there were bars and nightclubs and whatnot… but here you could go in daylight hours and avoid the posturing drunk criminals tended to get into with each other. Everything got a lot less civilized when the sun set, and that was well before the booze was brought out or disputes about this or that lady's favors occurred as more people turned their attention to relaxing for the evening.

She kind of had to get used to it now, because there was no way she'd restrict herself indoors at night for as long as she lived with her sister.

Infuriatingly, when she passed the Chinatown sector, yet again she got asked to take a moment with this little old lady sipping tea on what was probably the porch of her business. Despite being obviously really busy, to the point the offer had to be made twice after the first one was ignored.

Baffling, said little old lady tutted her for glaring and manhandled her rather bravely to sit across her little veranda tea table. "You need break, not good for you."

…well, tea. Giving her sister enough of a head start to be fully distracted before sneaking up on her date with the Italian wasn't necessarily a bad plan, and it had been a while since she had a decent cup of green tea. "What's not good for me?"

"Angry, stress, you need relax." Humming something incomprehensible under her breath, an additional cup was produced from somewhere she was honestly impressed to not catch and poured before being pressed on the Russian. "Finish tea."

"Do I want to know what's going on?" Sonya inquired a touch less annoyed than she started in Mandarin Chinese, sniffing the fragrant liquid appreciatively and somewhat to catch anything that shouldn't be in simple green tea.
"Oh good, you speak a sensible tongue." Brightening even more, the tiny lady drew herself up approvingly and gave her a head to toe glance over. "You will make a fine wife and mother."

"This again? I do not need to be married to stay with someone, and I especially do not need to register my personal life with something as fucked up as a government that might mishandle the information to my or my supposed significant other's detriment."

Nodding somewhat sadly, the elderly lady sighed wistfully as she stared up at the stars just emerging in the dusky sky overhead. "Sensible, in a way. It is how I lost my husband... a rival group paid for the information. An insultingly low amount, but they found me. Had it not been for my husband, I would not be sitting here now."

Blanking on anything to say to that, the thief merely cradled the handle less cup of tea as she watched her tablemate warily. She hadn't looked, nor expected, to run into a lot of people that understood her desire to not get hitched.

Which were really mere excuses, because she just really didn't want yet another fucking name. Sheepish and a little regretful was her entire reaction, and it was somewhat startling to feel from just a few words of agreement.

"...it was long ago. You do not need to look so concerned. And, I notice you say nothing about being a mother."

"What do you know of my son?" Snapped the Russian suspiciously, only to blink blankly when she was yet again beamed at.

"You know the gender!"

"Of course I do, how could I not?" Shamal was rather obviously a little boy. Even that one time she got him in a dress he had shown no curiosity over gender roles or discomfort in his own skin, or even a desire to wear a bit of her makeup instead of play with it like anything new he encountered when he could.

What she really wanted to know was how a little Asian lady on Mafia Land knew of her godson, or that she even had one in the first place. If the Italians was telling people if they asked she was going to skin Ganauche and send Timoteo the results. Even if Tatiana would not appreciate needing to regenerate the skin on her boy toy if she wanted to keep him.

"Aa, yes. That's right. I should get you something to eat." Rising off her creaky knees, the old woman hobbled off inside the building before Sonya could gather her wits to refuse.

Tempted to just get up and leave, but reluctant to just in case she roused old sore memories she had really little right to do to the elderly, the Storm-Cloud drummed her fingernails off the cup.

She... didn't know where her sister was going on a date with Ganauche. It should be easy enough to figure out since she knew her siblings... except there was the Italian half to account for.

Hunting after mention of their passing would just tip off the nurse what she was doing later on, when rumor and gossip managed to catch up with her. Tatiana had a better information network than she did, especially being a nurse working in Mafia Land's hospital. Centralized, always present, probably delighted to help things along or add in a few touches of her own when gossip passed her by.

If she stayed, as polite behavior of a Chinese guest demanded even if she wasn't really sure where
the little old lady generated from but that was the closest culture she was familiar with, she'd be thwarted in her intents this night.

Knowing, intellectually, that Tatiana and Ganauche had been on a couple of these date-nights without catastrophic happenings inconveniencing the Sun half was one thing. Didn't really help her much because she didn't see that for herself, and the man was getting to the point of being able to hurt her sister.

Sonya only had one older sister and didn't feel like giving hers up for any stupid reason, but… it was entirely possible this delay had likely let the couple get too far ahead now.

Something tangy and savory started sizzling behind her but also up a story or so, and with an annoyed sigh the thief made herself comfortable. If little old lady wanted to feed her, so she didn't see that for herself, and the man was getting to the point of being able to hurt her sister.

The whole not being able to see what was being made was an issue. Either hopefully the serving platters to share was also something her hostess's culture also conformed to or a taste tester wandered by sometime soon.

Studying the pedestrians either coming or going with an eye to corral a suitably expendable person, she noted Fong's appearance but since Mingxia would likely be upset if the Storm died in an embarrassing dietary snafu she was involved with she passed over him.

There was also the whole 'strongest Storm Flame in the world' thing she shouldn't forget.

Fong wasn't nearly as disinterested in her presence as she was in his, given the bee-line he made for her. "Sonya, I am glad someone managed to hold you for a short moment."

"I am being fed, but my hostess deems English as less desirable than what Chinese I know." Switching back to Mandarin, just in case the lady was eavesdropping from above and mistranslations were sometimes worse than being overheard, she eyed him warily. "There's not going to be another Tournament so soon, is there?"

"It's likely there will be enough momentum to ensure there will be another later this year, however I doubt another hostage arrangement will happen." The martial artist examined the table set out, glanced upward for some reason she wasn't looking to find out, then refocused on her. "Sonya, are you aware of what is being said?"

"About?" If this was another of those 'wild gossip' things like the 'she was pregnant' one Renato basically had an aneurysm over trying to figure out without directly asking… she was going to punch someone.

That had been somewhat embarrassing.

"That you're pregnant?"

Exactly the same, wow… it'd been a few months and that hadn't distorted somehow yet?

Sonya shot him a skeptical look. "I am not pregnant. Who started that rumor?"

Fong, the ridiculous battle-happy dork, heaved a thankful sigh as he sat himself down off the veranda almost at her booted feet. Even if that left the tip of his ever-present braid to dip into the grit on the paved road this building was situated on. "I am unaware, but a few are now convinced I was the one to… ah…"
"Contribute to my imaginary condition?" Her sarcastic drawl earned a huff of laughter, and although she looked over the tea table she couldn't see an extra cup or where the little old lady pulled hers out from. "I regret to inform you that it isn't the first time I've been the target of mafia gossip, and if you're living here it's only a matter of time before you become the subject of another one. Hopefully, that time you'll do something that I'm not connected to."

"Hopefully, the next rumor will be delivered in a less… surprising method." Muttered the man sourly, settling his hands in his wide sleeves and apparently settling in to keep her company while she lingered in Triad territory.

She hadn't been greatly bothered when ducking through the Chinatown sector of Mafia Land before but then again, she did somewhat recently 'blow her top' in China to the point they were still trying to decide what they made of her.

"I was somewhat worried you were pregnant before attending the Underworld Tournament as my hostage, had you been nothing I would say would convince the others I was not the father of your child."

There was a mutter of something else she was going to pointedly ignore, referencing her gunshot injury and how terrible the Storm would feel if his drive to invite her to spare his sister the same experience had killed her unborn child. The sentiment was understandable but the implication she'd be that reckless with a baby, especially her own before it could live, was somewhat insulting.

"To note, the Martial Arts Tournament the Triads is trying to get off the ground isn't the only Mafia only tournament in existence. To be clear you should probably say the entire title." She picked to continue with instead of address that, sipping her green tea when he blinked at her blankly. "There's the Underworld Cooking Tournament."

"...I believe I misheard you."

"Probably not."

Fong blankly stared at her, eyes just a touch wide, probably the closest she could get him to dumbfounded in such an open area like this. Sonya sipped her rapidly cooling tea idly while he adjusted.

"Someone got a cooking tournament established, before a fighting tournament?"

"According to what I've learned about it working for the Black-Market Spice Trade, it's utterly cutthroat and nearly a combative tournament in itself." Offered the thief just because his reaction was highly amusing if she was being delayed here, smirking when red eyes stared at her reprovingly. "And I only worked for them once, getting a recipe. The next place to be holding it is in debate right now but the Committee deciding should be done soon, if you wanted to go see one."

"I will pass." Decided the Storm solidly, pretending he didn't comprehend her expression and instead peacefully radiating contentment to sit there.

"Are you waiting for something?"

"Validation."

Validation for what?

Before she could ask, or even puzzle over his one-word answer, little old lady bustled out of her place of business with a large platter of… some kind of fried steamed bun.
Fong looked delighted. Sonya figured she found herself a taste tester. Old and insistent beamed at the addition.

…oh, wait. "I am not pregnant. I have a godchild, I thought you were speaking of him."

"There's time." Decided old and forward decided after a moment to fucking pout at the news, reaching over to pat her shoulder once the platter was on the tea table and the martial artist was given his own cup of tea. "You both are young and healthy, it will not be long."

Why the hell was she being reassured?

…and why was Fong included in that?

From the sigh a touch lower and to her right, the Storm she was seated with found the little old biddy equally as exasperating as she did.

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**(Friday the 6th of March, 1970. Zürich, Canton of Zürich, Swiss Confederation.)**

**Björn** nervously glanced over, but Viper wasn't paying him any attention.

Swallowing a touch hard, he hadn't… intended to do any 'hands-on' work himself until the miser poked holes in his arguments with cruel logic, the Icelander squared his thankfully broad shoulders up then stepped out of the Mist Flames concealing him up to this point.

His being 'wishy-washy' would reflect badly on his patron, in the end. Being that 'soft, toothless target' at Sonya's back would mean she would be forced to spend too much effort securing him against both her own and his fairly earned enemies. If he could handle his own work, without wasting money on a team of bodyguards to do everything for him aside just another set of eyes to watch his back when his eyes were turned away, that would simplify and reduce complications by factors.

…and save a significant amount of money. Viper was rather more intent on the whole cutting cost aspect, but Björn was contentious of the drain of time and effort. Sonya was running low on both, he was no longer her only minion to mind.

It was different if there was only two of them, now there were more targets who all might not be able to defend themselves. Given Russian sensibilities, being the reason they were targeted was not something he wanted to explain to the Soviet woman.

Narrowing his gaze on the badly startled Swiss stock broker, gaping at him stepping out of the badly illuminated corner of his own personal office, Björn allowed a tight smile to slip loose. "Schüpbach, I require a… word."

"...who the hell-"

Driving a heavy knife into the man's office desk, thankfully a wooden one which allowed that without requiring Viper's Flames for intimidation, cut the Swiss man off with a startled oath. "Schüpbach, I require a… word."

"You told a few men that the Poseidon stocks were something to invest with early." Tugging his
knife out of the heavy wood, ignoring the nervous twisting in his guts and the lump in his throat actually doing this himself caused, Bjørn allowed what little light the man's tiny lamp gave off to play over the edge. "Who advised you to claim that?"

"Look, whoever you are, I don't have to answer."

Driving his knife into a hand he snatched and yanked across the desk this time, the Lackey allowed his lips to peel back for a toothier if blander smile. The smell, and the hot blood, added with the automatic flinch from harming someone's hand… Viper wouldn't let him throw up or shudder and right now he was bewilderingly thankful for it.

"Make the time." Bjørn advised his victim as tonelessly as he could manage. "If not…"

Twisting the knife just a tiny bit earned him a full-body cringe from Schüpbach. "Fuck… a man by the name of Singline. In England. Now get fucking out!"

"Mou… no." Viper droned from the back corner behind the Lackey. "Answer honestly."

Blanching, the man tried to pry the Lightning-Storm's grip off his arm and the knife. Desperately, failing, and actually making his injury worse without requiring the Icelander to do it himself.

…apparently either Mist Flames or Viper themself was known well enough to terrify civilian stock brokers.

Or this wasn't a civilian stock broker.

Shifting his offhand grip quickly, Bjørn gripped the hand trying to pry his off and gave enough of a shock of Lightning Flames to make the man sit up and take him equally as seriously. "That is not who you should be worried about. Now again, who told you to promote Poseidon stock to international buyers?"

"I already told you!" Hissed the man dressed in tweed, likely in shock and now more than half terrified out of his mind. "I've got nothing else for you."

"The hard way, then." Bjørn concluded grimly, yanking his knife free and leaning back as he inspected the dark blood clotting slowly on it. Pulling a handkerchief out of his breast pocket to clean it before returning it to the sheath his right-hand pants pocket was altered to allow strapped to his thigh, then and only then did he return his gaze to the man slamming his phone receiver into the cradle in frustration. "This would have been over with had you been honest."

He earned a mockingly sarcastic laugh as Schüpbach sat back in his chair with a nasty sneer. "No, no it wouldn't. I know people like you, no matter what I say it's never going to be 'enough' or 'true'. Fuck you."

"Unfortunately for you, I have a fool-proof way to know if I'm being lied to." Pointed out the Icelander simply, with a glance over his shoulder to the still utterly shadowy corner of the lonely office. "So actually, you don't know people like us."

"Us..." Given the glance in the same direction he looked in, now the Swiss stock broker was plotting in how to ensure they were implicated in his assault or murder.

Reaching forward, slowly to prevent any scuffle starting early, he touched a finger to the blood pooling on the scarred wood. The viscous fluid evaporated into nothing but dusty ash. "I am afraid… you will not be surviving this."
Schüpbach spent a whole moment too long trying to understand what he was seeing, by the time he thought to scream for attention Viper had long since ensured no one would hear him.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 6th of March, 1970 continued. Zürich, Canton of Zürich, Swiss Confederation.)

Viper had a horrible sense of humor.

Björn queasily poked the medium rare steak of veal the Mist ordered for him while he was a bit busy, taking care of the… 'remains' of his first interrogation effort. Having to do it all alone was apparently part of his 'lessons', which he only learned of after they extracted actually correct information.

After a couple hours.

"You're too wordy. It slows you down." Whatever language the other was using was… incomprehensible, but the meaning got across perfectly well as it was. "Short, concise, to the point. Mou, the longer you draw things out the more risk you expose yourself to."

"I hardly see the point." The Icelander offered in his native language still, resigning himself to paying for a meal he wasn't going to eat even if that would make the Mist get short with him for wasting food. "It's unreliable."

"What are your alternatives then, mou?"

"Bribery, better odds to gaining true information. Blackmail, if I didn't wish to pay an individual that already mislead me." He immediately listed off sourly, drumming his fingers on the table between them. "I do not mean to say I am ungrateful for the lessons, Viper. It's just… wasteful, not to my tastes. I don't want to do that again."

The hooded Mist scoffed with irritation. "You've been infected with Russian sensibilities, I see."

"Not all of them. Just the non-vory ones."

"I'm not sure if I should dismiss that as soft or appreciate it as ruthlessly practical." A moment of visibly pondering the issue, then Viper shrugged both the Constructed image of contemplation as well as the whole topic off. "Mou, regardless…"

"We already knew where to go next, why did you insist on this?"

"You need… blooding." Offered the genderless figure dictating what he did here, pausing in their leisurely grazing to pick up the wineglass instead. "Confidence in yourself will save your life in tight situations, but to gain it truly you not only need to know what you are capable of but what you can do in the end. Faking only gets you halfway there, take it from the illusionist here. Mou, the moment someone presses pass that what barbs do you have to ward them off?"

"Aside a highly pissed off Russian who pays my salary?"

"Will that save you in the moment? Mou… against those that do not know of our Elements?"

Björn kept his mouth shut.

"Will that prevent anyone coming after you? Even if it's suicidal?" Pressed the Mist insistently, tipping the wineglass just so the red shadow it casted in the dim lighting backlit the purple triangles
tattooed on their face and gave a red gleam to hidden eyes. "There's always going to be that one moron to test limits, to press just that tiny bit more. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. When it does, that individual is brilliant. A maverick and an admirable risk taker. When it doesn't… well. Morons are about a dozen per centime. The stupid, idiots, the village rejects. This isn't to prepare you against the smarter of our number, mou, this is to arm you against morons and those that think they're brilliant but really are utterly retarded."

When the Lackey didn't respond, or at least didn't respond right away, Viper settled back into their seat and polished off their glass of wine.

"So… admittedly, your suggestions are more than decent. Mou, I am particularly a fan of the blackmail route, so we shall try that one next. Eventually, you will hit up a method that gives you an appreciable amount of truth for a price you find just right. To understand how much truth you get for each, we need a new name and the ability to control the whole system beforehand. This was only an investment of time, and as you saw held a dubious amount of truth in it."

"I'd put more faith in someone lying in my face, even when in pain, to ensure I end up facing something I cannot actually survive against."

"That can happen." Allowed the Mist idly. "As can being led into a pre-set trap for someone hunting among information brokers without paying for it. Being sent after those with nothing to do with the topic you want to register a complaint against like a hitman or assassin, mou… or ending up hunting someone outside the umbrella of the mafia."

"Aren't we doing that?"

"Mou, Schüpbach was selling information to those like me for a price. That more than validates him as the top layer of the crime happening in this country, and when I spread the news among the other information brokers about his misleading of an associate of a Cloud… well, mou. No one important will miss him."

Glancing down at his still full plate, the Icelander looked up as he pushed it away. "Is… there anyone I need to be aware of coming after me for his…?"

Viper snorted. "No."

(Monday the 9th of March, 1970. Butwal, Kingdom of Nepal.)

The last contract Renato Sinclair would ever take for Mafia Land led him through some interesting terrain and hunter squads before even reaching the fringe of a little kingdom he had little idea actually existed.

Being in a remote little country off the northern tip of India at least meant when the fastest idiots trying to kill him caught up, they stuck out just as badly as the Italian did himself. Outside the interference of luckless murderers he quickly put into the ground, the contract he was here to do was a kind of social dispute getting out of hand.

Only… someone had connections. Rather respectable ones, given this was a legitimate Mafia Land hit contract.

It was far enough outside his 'usual' known haunts and completely beyond his nominal network of contacts that Renato hoped the change would help cement the idea he was losing his grip with all the
other distractions happening in his life. Even if a rather murderous group trying to kill him got 'disappeared' here, as per usual when some moron thought they could take him, picking contracts so far outside of 'known' areas of operation was generally regarded as a fast way to get caught.

Or the desperate scraping together the bare minimum they can get to struggle back to their feet.

Reporting in for the fine details in-country, however…

"Run that by me again?" Inquired the Mafia almost cautiously, too confused to really put much heat into the question.

His 'host' and contact point sighed, as if he was intentionally being difficult. "Those Hindu bastards are refusing to sell, because one of their 'sacred' cows like to rest in the field. We need that field, for our... operations. Kill the damn bovine, but. Use this. Please."

Automatically accepting the small tarnished copper figure of a robed lady with eight arms, and some kind of headdress or crown that was at least pointed enough to be of use as asked with enough effort, the hitman flattened his mouth into a thin line and stared hard at the man.

Religious differences weren't all that surprising for the Mafia to get tangled up with. Belief was a strong driving aspect in a large number of humans, and about half the world's history of conflict had something rooted in religious intolerance or hate. A bit… bewildering in this aspect, but Mafia Land was international.

A Catholic hitman being called in for a tiff between some civilian Hindu group and this well-connected band of Muslims was... well, a bit strange. Outsourcing the blame was understandable for future neighbors who only had a single reason to be at odds right now, but the bad luck to grab this specific contract instead of something less out there was phenomenal.

Even for him.

"Anywhere in particular you want this to happen?" Renato inquired simply and a bit blankly, once he adjusted to the proposed murder weapon in hand. He rolled a thumb over the tip of the headdress to feel how dull it was and how much muscle would be needed to actually use it to kill something.

Animals tended to have thicker hides than humans, getting this through a cow's skin and the muscles even somewhere like the neck would take a bit of doing. He'd have to lend his Flames for the problem, just so he wasn't at it all night to the point he got caught at this.

"Overnight, and perhaps in the same field their cow likes to nap within. They'd sell it in a heartbeat if you can."

Technically, putting a hit on a cow was covered by Mafia Rules a Mafia like him had to obey. Going after mascots and figureheads of hostile syndicates was a hitman option more than an assassin's, because taking away a point of pride to demoralize another group you were at odds with wasn't direct enough for them. Additionally, between an animal's life and that of a human being's... well, the Church would greatly prefer keeping the innocents alive so attacking their symbols was indefinitely more acceptable.

As in this... job.

No one was really innocent in this fraction of the world, he was hired by drug dealers to run off a group of traffickers in more human merchandise from a stretch of earth one didn't need and the other wanted to expand into.
However, religiously holy bovines being tossed into the mix was... a... new one for him.

Scratching the back of his head with the hand not holding the proposed murder weapon, the Sun Flame hitman glanced from the tarnished copper to the contact and back again before shrugging. "Alright then."

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 9th of March, 1970 continued. Butwal, Kingdom of Nepal.)

A rice paddy.

A hit on a holy cow, to take place in a rice paddy, using a religious figurine.

Renato was never going to breathe the word of his last Mafia Land contract to anyone, even to himself. It was a knickknack paddy whack, like the children's nursery rhyme.

If anyone heard about this, no one would ever respect him again. He'd be a laughingstock, a joke, and frankly he was well aware that would gall him for eternity even if he shed the name known for this.

The long-horned and mostly white colored cow with three rather large splotches of black fur on its rump chewed on something idly, eyeing him with absolutely no wariness or caution as the hitman delicately picked his way across the earthen mounds separating this water drenched section of terraced farm fields from the lower valley plots that weren't in contention less than a meter down and set into the earth at least half that way.

Coming to a stop in front of the animal still earned him absolutely no reaction. The damn beast in fact rolled over, settling into the waters lapping its side and smearing mud over the upraised flank to keep away the biting insects aided by a few wet slaps of a tufted tail.

...he was going back to take another 'last' Mafia Land contract. He'd make the time, and if no good contract was available he'd ensure the 'last' professional act of Renato Sinclair was suitably bloody and hard to miss on his own.

This was not what he was going out doing, a fucking knickknack paddy whack was never going to be remotely impressive to anyone.

For Christ's sake, the cow looked highly unimpressed already and he had yet to do anything!

(Thursday the 12th of March, 1970. Rome, Italian Republic.)

The waiter delicately set out the desserts ordered on the table, whisking away the remains of dinner she had been delicately picking at to avoid this part. Luce of the Giglio Nero smiled softly at the teenager, then with a soft sigh returned her attention to the latest Elemental Guardian prospect she had found herself face to face with.

"Down to business then, I suppose." Started the Sky serenely, deliberately misinterpreting why the buff man had been sent to meet with her instead of the Don that had asked for this meeting. "What was it your famiglia wanted to know so badly?"

"...lady Luce-"
"I'm aware we are not the easiest information brokers to find," barreled on the Sky heedlessly, taking ruthless advantage of the awe around her Flame type to avoid a massive insult about to be issued souring relations when she really didn't have the time to deal with it, "we're preparing for a bit of... something about to happen which is really rather distracting. I must admit, while my famiglia respects dedication in our work to a rather bemusing degree... to reach us through our preparations shows a flattering amount in your own."

Drawing himself up rather proudly, under the slightly mistaken impression she was impressed with him, the slightly younger Rain paused rather obviously trying to think of something.

He would never get another chance beyond this once, it was one of the less risky meetings Luce had to suffer through. Having gotten out of her territory once, in a social function that ended rather disastrously but not nearly as badly as it could've been, shutting herself in again until the Arcobaleno reformed for the pre-Cursed jobs would do no one much good.

Not her own famiglia or Vongola, or anyone else that got 'insulted' or 'suspicious' over her distance.

The next time she saw this young Rain, Luce and the rest of the Mafia would know Lal and Colonello. Even on their own, one of those Rains could effortlessly outdo him blinded and with one hand tied behind their backs.

Mostly, her people were digging out an underground secret library and sorting out what had to be hidden there for the next few years. Just so a damn curious and suspicious thief wouldn't discover the wrong detail at the just right time to warn the rest. It had to be done and finished soon, otherwise any of the future Arcobaleno would be able to find it when they cased around suspiciously after meeting her from the barely worn paths from the foot traffic.

A full year of no visitors, and it would require a day or three of intent search for Sonya to find it. After Luce died, and the Arcobaleno tried to help Aria adjust to her new role as the Ninth head of the Giglio Nero and their Sky, then the thief would have the time and effort to spare on securing someone else's territory.

The problem with being an Arcobaleno Sky, rather the biggest issue being a future one with the gift of foresight. She would have the best of the best around her, the pinnacle of Flames but more importantly of specialized skills, and if she had Guardians when they met her the Arcobaleno would be too reserved around her for them to come together just enough for Checkerface to Curse.

They'd do the rest of it after she betrayed them so they would survive... or not, until Vongola Decimo broke the Curse or it was no longer needed.

Even when she didn't intend to, it was nearly impossible to stop comparing every other Flame users to the ultimate examples of each she would know personally in time.

No other Sun could come close to Reborn's blisteringly strong Flames. Any average Storm off the street could never match Fon's tempered if still wild inferno. No diplomatically trained Rain like this young man could match Lal's banked if fiery blaze or Colonello's lazy but steadfast scorching fires. Even Verde's brilliance eclipsed the same phenomena his Flames were named after in ways that might never be seen again, much less overshadowing how the bent Lightnings in Italy remained in their conduits without so much as flickering outside them. Viper was practically untouchable in their Mist even by other Mists yet could sear holes in any that tried to direct or dictate a shape they had to take. Skull's unquenchable, eternal embers that would require a near-god to snuff out against his will to even how his little sister Sonya's Flames practically seethed when parted from him, both still easily eclipsed any of the rare Clouds that still drifted free on their own.
When young Flame users like the baby-faced Rain across from her tried to impress her, she was never impressed nearly enough. It wasn't even his fault, it was hers.

Luce was always well aware she was a spoiled Sky, it was times like this that reminded her of why rather clearly.

The Rain Guardian Candidate being offered to her, as she couldn't take his being shoved in her direction to forge good connections with a close neighbor in any other way, finally settled on something to say. "Donna Giglio Nero, nearly outside our territory a... small blot of unknowns operating in Tivoli, Lazio. The few we, I mean my famiglia, sent to investigate found nothing unusual to report but the lack of business we would normally receive from the locals has dried up."

…the Gesso Famiglia. More accurately, the start to the vassal syndicate that would help Aria so much in a decade or so after the heirs met and became friends in Mafia School.

Pursing her lips tightly for a moment, actually rather surprised there was a reason beyond being the most banal or keeping connections mutually agreeable to attend this meeting, the Sky rewarded him with a businesslike nod after deciding on how much to say. "The locals are not intentionally snubbing you, it is just they found a local problem already being solved and have taken to talking to their native son with their... issues, than those outside the city."

The surprisingly diplomatically trained Rain slightly settled back in his seat to memorize the information for later reporting to his Don. "Just the locals? That... would explain the decrease in requests..."

They'd be murdered to a man if they tried to 'discourage' the formation of a local criminal syndicate before it formed up, since they looked at it as a small thing right now and not the men of an entire township deciding to pull together after a rather harrowing event. A full out fight between the old guard and the new up and comers would do nothing but irritate the locals and the rest of Italy's Famiglias, because it would inevitably spill into the civilian sector with one too new to be well defined for the other to know how to fight them.

Luce spent the energy to foresee the short-term outcome of a few responses she might give, which made her a touch spacy and a little more than distracted than recommended when dealing with relative unknowns like the young man across from her. Aria would need them in time, and that was really all the Sky cared for to nudge things in their favor.

"They might just welcome some help, as long as you refrain from trying to smother them." She decided simply, after some more time spent making sense of what she saw when the young man was seemingly alright with waiting out her distraction. "The Todd Famiglia has been trying to sink their nails into them and fighting that influence off has rather disorientated their information gathering abilities and drained their energy somewhat."

His face went completely blank. "The... Todd. I see."

"Have completely failed in their aims. Hence the... ah, issue the men in Tivoli objected to in the first place. The care for their countrymen deserves some kind of reward, don't you think?"

Todds were... mainly assassins, just a touch too far outside of respectable for most southern Italians to tolerate. They rarely had anything to do with the others in-country that close to Rome, Vongola wouldn't let them drift so far south. However, there was the formation of Tyr's Varia Squads to account for.

Apparently, someone sensed a rival.
The fact a high-ranking member of the Gospella Famiglia as the favored nephew of the current Don had no idea the Todd Famiglia were slinking around his home territory like that meant someone didn't ask for permission or even informed them as per the courtesy accords in the Vongola Alliance required for every member. It didn't matter if one wasn't part of that, the other was and that was the only important part as far as the Alliance Dons were concerned with.

Only the CEDEF didn't have to inform other Dons of their movements, and the CEDEF was more concerned with rooting out traitors or betrayers to the Vow to be hindered for such a thing.

"My compliments to your uncle, young master Saverio. I rarely have delightful dinner companions these days, since we insisted on making ourselves so busy." Luce concluded their meeting, after nibbling the last of the chocolate mousse off her thin dessert spoon.

Her cooks were nowhere near as skilled with the treat, she refused to tell them she liked the dish otherwise they'd perfect it and then drown her in it until she didn't anymore. She had to get it where she could until Skull invited her to take advantage of his sister's chef and his skills for her next birthday.

Startled, and torn between finishing his apparently excellent introduction to an apparently amenable Sky or rushing home to report the trespass against them to his Don, eventually the Rain concluded there was nothing more to do to better his chances but take his leave.

The rumors born from this, the fact the Giglio Nero were in the middle of some kind of preparation of something big, would ease some of those invitations she had to spend hours on politely refusing in ways that would not offer further insult. Some feathers would be ruffled and smoothed equally, as they weren't the ones she spoke to or at least there was some kind of explanation for why it was only Don Vongola's invitation she accepted so far.

Luce really hated politics. It was rather boring when you already knew the reactions, and as they were not hers why bother manipulating them in better and better positions when they'd get there just fine on their own?

A future ally made things only slightly more interesting, but not by much.

Probably why no one of her line had tried taking over the world, why spoil everything like that when so much already had the teeth of risk blunted to be ignorable?

( Friday the 13th of March, 1970. Sonya & Tatiana's Apartment, Mafia Land.)

"I'm really proud of you."

"Mmm…?" The absently tacked on questioning tone added on belatedly to the end of the entirelyabsently made sound proved the blonde thief was paying no attention to anything at all.

Tatiana, who had strictly structured schedules so she could be paid and matched up with Doctor Kappel's working hours when a nurse was needed to fill out the hospital's roster, hadn't really seen her sister for a couple days.

Obviously, someone had also spent the time to add to her security measures. She nearly tripped over one this weekend in the early morning and got her bell royally rung when something was adjusted just a slight bit outside of where they had been before. As a matter of fact, it looked as if a few more 'tiny' readjustments had gone on, so she actually prevented stubbing her toe on the coffee table for
once this week and didn't trip over the armchair she bought to go with the couch as she flopped down into it.

Sonya kind of slept through the mornings, went out and about for some grim reason she refused to eased up on around lunch and sometimes into the evening, and while she'd sometimes eat the easily heated leftovers the Sun left in the fridge while she was working… not nearly enough for her to feel as if she was feeding her baby sister properly.

Or at all, really. She was likely eating out mainly, because the other thief didn't do much more than nibble on things stocked in the fridge. Which worked, because that gave Tatiana a few more minutes here or there to cram in a few more pages of her current medical journal instead of spending the time cooking something else on her meal breaks.

From what rumors and whispers that reached her well after the fact, this whole week had been Sonya polishing up her acrobatic skills and just generally being pointedly seen out in the streets.

"You didn't stalk me and Ganauche on our date last week."

"I tried." Shot down the Storm-Cloud immediately, pulling her nose out of a letter that got hand delivered earlier that morning which woke her up this early and glancing over to her. "I got waylaid. Ended up having dinner with Fong and this really forward little old Asian lady that told me I was young and healthy enough to have a child sometime soon and to not worry about it."

Trying, and utterly failing at, stopping the snort of laughter made her sinuses hurt. She hadn't heard that, or any 'really forward little old lady' being utterly terrified out of her wits for annoying the only Cloud in Mafia Land.

The only reason Sonya wouldn't retaliate or ensure someone knew she thought they were too forward was if the 'forwardness' was to be expected. She would know, she had a lot to do with the Triads recently…

"Is that… ah, usual for little old ladies to reassure people they just met about?"

"Annoyingly enough, yes." Sourly groused the other thief, somewhat drifting back to the letter. "Not to say I don't trust you or believe you can't deal with anything that happens, Tats… I just don't fucking trust Ganauche."

…right, baby sister admitted to trying to stalk her on her date. "It's been a month and some of light date nights."

Sonya shot her an entirely skeptical look over the top of the papers, utterly unimpressed with that logic and having no reason to hide it.

"I can take care of myself, Nya."

"Of course you can. Ganauche?"

"Don't you know him from your time attending the Vongola Balls?"

"Vaguely." Dismissed the younger thief blandly, folding up her letter as apparently the nurse was now more important than whatever some poor kid knocked on the front door to deliver to her. "I know he's a Lightning, one of Timoteo Vongola's Guardians, and he's a bit defective. He's also prone to being a target, someone tried to blow him up using a car. It's how he lost his eye."

"You were there? Wait… a car bomb, or a bomb in a car?"
"Ask Cherep, the two of them were talking about a 'clicking noise' that was wrong with it before it went boom."

In her ever so educated opinion dealing with the ass end results of those kinds of situations, and the injury patterns that tended to also happen she and the others in the hospital tended to treat, Ganauche was fucking lucky.

…also, lucky Sonya didn't gut him for bringing something harmful around their brother.

Tatiana made a slightly frustrated sound, mentally reviewing scar patterns and how they had to been caused but with only a partial set of data to work from meant she was likely missing a lot of factors. She only saw the scars around the eyepatch, so there was known missing patterns.

Obviously, as the Lightning was still alive, they hadn't been up close and personal with any exploding car.

"So… there actually is a lower chance you'd help Ganauche get his eye back if he asked than I figured."

From the utterly blank look on her little sister's face, that was a 'not even if hell froze over' response she didn't want to actually give her.

"Will anything change that?"

Pondering the question, obviously to give her time to stall with than to really think about it, the Storm-Cloud decided inspecting the rug placed out to give a bit of insulation between air-conditioned cold floorboards and bare feet was more important than looking at her. "…do I have to?"

"No, you don't have to." The response was an utterly suspicious and entirely doubtful frown, and Tatiana smirked wryly. "It's your Flames. If you're not going to tell anyone that Cherep can do the same, or that you learned from him, then that's your right. I'd like you to, because something else to study and draw conclusions from when we also fix Adrik's lung is… you know, helpful."

Sonya leaned her head against the couch's backrest, scrutinizing her closely. "You're not going to put in your feelings on the matter?"

"I'm a nurse, mine should be obvious and I don't feel like asking you to do something you don't think is a good idea as your sister and not just as a healer. Unless you decided to do it yourself, I'm not weighing in."

"But you will ask for Adrik?"

"Adrik we know, he's one of ours who won't fuck you over for helping him. Ganauche is new and isn't ours. We're way too new as a couple to start manipulating assets to help the other out of their own problems." Tatiana announced solidly, arms crossed and frowning back at the blonde watching her from the couch. "Besides, I don't know him that well and I rather like you better still."

Her baby sister's lips twitched, which meant she was amused she just didn't feel like expressing it. "I'll think about it. I'm going to head off since Viper hasn't seen fit to return Björn by now, I'll probably dump off Verde first to coordinate the cleaning and outfitting of my castle before going to China and Romania in that order."

"Works for me, you going to do your contracts later this year then?"

"Kind of used to spending months on other things and not the things I really should work on." With
a shrug that wasn't really that dismissive just accepting, the younger thief got up to pad off to her
room to start packing up again. "I really only need about four months to finish it all off, thankfully."

…yeah, four months to do what normally took other contract thieves a full year to do. Not even
counting the Lackey she also needed to afford the room and board for, which was a tiny bit more on
top of what she also had to do.

She'd fail, she liked more time to plan things out. The blonde was more used to making due with
what she could grab and could improvise better.

…then again, Tatiana was a safe cracker slash forgery expert. She needed more time, Sonya didn't.

(Saturday the 14th of March, 1970. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

Shamal startled, flinching away from the cool hand he hadn't expected pressing against his forehead
and nearly took a tumble off the medical bed when he got a bit unbalanced. Since he had been
watching the sky out the window instead of anything going on in the room, he swallowed down the
irritation he had for the interruption and stared up at his visitor.

Lady Fiorella smirked at him, elegantly seating herself in the empty chair next to the bed so he didn't
have to crane his sore neck around to see her face. "How are you feeling?"

"... I'm okay." It kind of sucked he was sick on the weekend, he had kind of hoped if he ignored the
fever long enough he'd recover enough to go on the club trip. It almost happened, but he kind of…
passed out rather unexpectedly.

The young Mist had been rather mortified when he woke up only seconds later, especially as a maid
had only been halfway to the medical wing to get him checked out. Revelli, old lady Ottavia's Sun
Guardian, had not looked at all impressed with him waiting so long before admitting he was sick to
someone.

"Lady Fiorella, you really shouldn't be here." Shamal attempted to instruct the nice lady, his stern
tone somewhat ruined by a bit of a nasally break in his voice. "Sick Mists do strange things."

He was handed a tissue with a stern look until he obligingly blew his nose. "I wouldn't want one of
my sons left alone in a sick bay, I don't think your mother will like the thought either. Besides, you
won't hurt me."

"It's not a matter of 'want', Lady Fiorella." He didn't whine, he simply protested with a particular
tone and maybe a bit of waving of arms so he'd be taken seriously. "I don't have control, that's why
Master Revelli had everyone else moved out for a bit."

The pretty brunette very pointedly looked down the room both ways, where absolutely nothing that
could be labeled strange or weird was going on. "You seem to be rather impressively in control,
young Shamal. Daniella lent Glisenti to Revelli's aid, but she's had little to do from what she said
when I talked to her."

After blinking at her a bit fuzzily, Shamal harrumphed and sulked in his cot. "At least someone has
sense to be on guard."

If he hurt Lady Fiorella, Nono Vongola would be very unhappy. As would his godfather. His
godmother might not be remotely concerned, because coming in here was the other pretty lady's fault
so if anything happened it'd be expected rather than to be upset about.

Shamal would actually agree with Nono and Mister Renato. He had the Flames, Lady Fiorella did not. If he hurt her it would be his fault.

"Someone let slip you can't focus enough to read yourself." Commented the pretty lady, carefully picking up the old book Miss Sonya allowed him to borrow from her. "I have about half an hour or so of free time, would you mind if I read a bit of your godmother's book if I read it aloud?"

"...would you?" He was almost done reading it, he was on the last story with the wolf and the goat. His godmother had asked to try and find a moral to each fable, and while some were easy the others took a bit of thought.

The young Mist found in depth thought kind of painful right now, but Miss Sonya hadn't said he had to find any meanings alone. Getting help was always a valid option, Mister Renato said so.

"Where would you suggest I start?"

"The beginning?" Shamal had the time, and if Lady Fiorella was volunteering he might as well make the most of the opportunity the best he could. "Please?"

Chapter End Notes

Full credit goes to Colin Mochrie of Whose Line is it Anyways? fame for the knickknack paddy-whack joke.
Chapter 107

(Monday the 16th of March, 1970. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)

Verde found it somewhat disquieting when he was tasked with starting on transferring the luggage instead of physically muscling another man into the surprisingly tall building. Sonya showed absolutely no strain from it, unlike the only time he had to be Adrik's support, easily bracing the taller man with only one arm shoved under his to prevent undue stress on his ribcage while she supported his forward progress at his pace.

"You could've stayed behind…"

Her fellow Russian gave a painful snort, eyes locked grimly on the looming doors and the interior where he could afford to rest in relative comfort.

Instead of hover uselessly around the pair when he couldn't assist either, the scientist checked over the medical supplies Tatiana had assembled the moment Adrik refused to be left behind even if he was not currently physically fit enough for any security related duties. The wiry Russian was only just healthy enough to be discharged without expected complications, whereas any 'civilian' establishment would sensibly refuse for at least another week of recovery.

That was assuming another medical center was unaware how recently the man had his ribcage pried open. The skin was healed, the muscle mostly healed, the bone knitted together under the influence of Sun Flames… but the organ remained damaged and the ache remained as the body tried to adjust to the new state of being injured and not in different places.

The nurse sent along nearly ten grams worth of opium derived morphine, evenly divided into portions of oral tablets and injectable forms for managing any pain Adrik caused himself or to help the man get some rest in spite of it. With the expected equipment to properly administer an IV, a near jumble of sterilized bandages if a brace for his ribs were desired, less addictive medication variants for self-medication when lesser pains plagued his waking moments… and the equipment to take a culture or samples if yet another complication came about.

Tatiana had run the Lightning through the very butchered requirements to be a hospital lab technician for St. Julian's, mainly to embarrass and motivate one of her fellow Flame using nurses working on qualifying for the same. The end result was he was now legally and technically qualified for the more basic research-oriented medical roles, and while Verde honestly did not expect the information to actually be applicable when the next medical emergency arose… it made for an appreciatively solid base to build off of in his studies.

Zipping the cooler closed again once assured the vials endured the trip intact and reassembling the clearly labeled plastic if sturdy medical chest which could be utilized as a seat easily enough, the Frenchman tucked the field-worthy military issued container under one arm and used the other to secure the preserved provisions they would live off of until supply lines were secured.

Not his terms, Verde had been informed that was what the contents were intended for when Sonya had him accompany her to ensure they could live for a short while if something concerning happened. The one-armed man that sold them the food supplies had seemed rather militaristic, and his words merely confirmed the impression taken of either a mercenary or military bent.

The lesson that 'provisions' and how to find an adequate measure to last a set time was infinitely
more complicated than he expected was… not expected. Adrik had secured theirs while Verde had been doing the bulk of the manufacturing of weapons they sold to afford it, so the detail of where the spoiling resistant food came from or how the thief provided alternate clothing for another man had been somewhat ignored. When confronted with what is normally considered 'personal' details so a slim blonde lady could purchase the items needed for hygiene routines, clothing size and styles preferred, if Adrik had any allergies or if he had them himself to last for a short while before they could find the places to provide them locally… he found himself less observant than he desired.

He blinked somewhat uncomprehendingly when Sonya leaned her countryman against the wall of the foyer just to dig out a key from her pocket. Apparently paired with the lock in the front doors, however… why was it in her pocket if she utilized it to open…?

…thieves. Logic dictated she then hadn't done as he expected, if the tool nominally used to unlock barriers was still secured with her clothing. Was it still termed 'breaking and entering' if it was one's own domicile?

"And the gate key." Adding a significantly heavier and longer if excessively old-fashioned wrought iron skeleton key over that came from her pocket, the blonde shoved a hand through the short ashy blonde strands to smooth back the hair in her eyes. "Two floors above, there's another set of rooms like these little… walk in closet things. I don't think they're supposed to be actual bedrooms, but the real estate idiot obviously thought they were and counted them as such."

"What about them?" Inquired the wiry Russian as he fought his body against excessive panting that might jar his ribs excessively.

"You two can pick from them… once this place has a good scrub down. I'd advise you to remain on the ground floor until then, Bjorn's notes says there's a draft from somewhere but it's at least clean enough." Sonya shoved open the rightmost door from the entrance, showing a cot already in place and a makeshift writing desk already assembled. "Down the hallway on either side once you're past this foyer thing are two 'public' bathrooms. The kitchen is on the right, all the way down the hall and opens up into a conservatory and a formal dining hall the hallway also connects to. Other way down the hall has a library and a backroom kind of lounge affair… then there's everything above this floor which is mostly made up of rooms and yet more bathrooms."

"People like to be clean…"

"Adrik, I have two floors of nothing but bathrooms and bedrooms. Four bathrooms alone on each floor. Seven bedrooms and five baths on the second, eight and four on the… third and fourth each. Two each on the ground floor." Sourly snipped the blonde back, hands on her hips and an equally annoyed expression on her face. "Also, no room has an actual closet but the master's. So… you're going to need to either keep your things in packs or buy some damn drawers."

Adrik glanced up, at the freshly painted fresco walls and ceiling enclosing them to the marble paving the floor but lingering on the baseboards that had been obviously painted over as well, then gave Sonya a strange look. "What's above that on the fifth?"

"A fucking guard tower, or some kind of viewing room slash bell tower slash aviary thing, which can be made into one more bedroom with a little remodeling. Which I'm probably going to, because I will put money on one of the three Mists that will live here will take one look and claim dibs."

"...you said six floors, right?"

"Yeah… there's this tiny square hatch room thing stacked on top of everything else. About the size of a walk-in closet affair, if it was half the size of these two foyer rooms."
Gingerly pushing himself off the wall the male Russian shuffled over to the opened door, hopefully to recuse himself from any further activity today but more likely to investigate the room for whichever he liked to know before settling in. The traveling had likely proven to be straining for him enough, and to be frankly honest they had enough supplies to spend at least an entire week doing little but walking the grounds or investigating the structure for obvious problems needing repairs.

Lowering her tone in a surprisingly soft register, the other thief gave him a pointed look. "There's only one cot set up here, I'll buy another and anything else you think will help before I leave you both to it. The first group I send you will likely be another of our kind if not type by the name of Usov and his parents, because the mother has a business idea to set up on the grounds and the father will be the household purser."

"Is this where I am to work, then?"

"Yes and no. You could, but this is just the first place I've claimed as my own. If you feel it's not going to do, merely pick out your own. However," glancing out the still open front door, the woman turned back after a strangely lengthy pause, "be aware the further out you go the less likely I or someone else that defines themselves as mine can immediately respond if you need the help."

Verde was not particularly a fan of communal living, however used to it he was from his years in a college dorm. He was also quite finished with running from one location to another because someone decided to try 'poaching' him or his skills for their own use. "You spoke of building additional infrastructure?"

Sonya actually appeared mildly disgusted with the reminder. "I take it you'd prefer something custom built as well?"

"Hazards of lab work. Sometimes contaminations occur, I would rather not put your or anyone else's child at risk. I will pay for it myself, as long as I can design the addition."

"...can you?"

"Architectural design is a field of study I have some familiarity with."

"Is there anything you don't have 'some familiarity' with?" Adrik questioned sourly as he gingerly wandered back to join the two of them in the foyer of this castle, likely more from the insistent pain that was going untreated than actual disgruntlement.

"Psychology." Reported the Lightning honestly, setting down his burden to locate at least an anti-inflammatory to take the edge of the discomfort the other man had to be feeling this late into the day. "Anthropology, oceanography. Mainly social sciences are outside my purview, natural ones were my current preoccupation until such time I could no longer safely study. I began my studies on applied sciences and know them better than others."

With a scowl, the wiry Russian did at least accept the two little white pills and a bottle of water to wash them down without protest of being 'fine' when he was rather obviously not.

Distracted with repacking the jarred supplies, Verde did not realize Sonya was closely watching him as if he was a new individual she did not know again. "...what?"

"Did... you study geology?"

"Before Adrik tempted me into what there is of information sciences, indeed."

She now either looked highly exasperated or somewhat annoyed, he was unable to differentiate the
...I beg your pardon?

"With documenting what you can learn of Flames from what is already present in the mafia." Clarified the shorter thief flatly. "I can use someone that knows geology, and if you learn it I don't have to task Scruffy to do it. He can instead keep more accurate logs of what we find, then you can make sense and find the fucking why."

The Lightning cocked his head to the side, well aware what his 'initial' grant was to pay for but not seeing a reason for the demanded haste. "Can I not do both consecutively?"

From the slight frown, the Storm-Cloud was either not sure what the correct answer would be or doubted he could.

Or Verde was attributing traits to her baselessly.

"I suppose... you very well might. Take note that aside the spinal jewels working for all, and the cinnamon stone garnets working for Storms, no one in Italy knows anything about the jewel matches for different Flame users." Before he could ask what gemstones had to do with Dying Will Flames, or indeed follow up with any other related questions to the topic he had been somewhat hushed from asking on their trip out here, the woman turned on a heel to leave them rather abruptly. "Usov will need to be installed as at least temporary security oversight before I start transferring the information down here."

Adrik appeared entirely unhelpful when the scientist rounded on him for whatever explanation he might be able to offer. "I said I had an old 'childhood friend' that might be interested in the chemical composition of shiny rocks, right? Have you met Sonya yet, Verde my man?"

"Hilarious." Deadpanned the Frenchman, coaxing a painful laugh out of the other unintentionally. "Why are crystal formations mentioned in context to Dying Will Flames?"

"Because the 'Flame rings' I told you about. Remember? They're some band of metal with seven different 'stones' affixed, which Flame users can use to 'boost' or 'refine' their Flame use through. Shatter like nothing else, incredibly expensive, and when I said the girls poured an insane amount of money into finding those 'cheaper' alternatives... well, for one I meant an insane amount of money and for two the alternatives aren't all that cheap either."

...the medication appeared to be working adequately enough, if Adrik could ignore the pain when speaking a touch longer than he normally could this past week.

"I don't think she wanted to speak of the issue here." Offered the remaining Russian thoughtfully, glancing skeptically around them at the few meters of the entrance to this entire castle. "Which... I kind of agree with for right now. I need to... check for any obvious or not listening bugs."

"...is she... well known enough to expect such measures?"

"I don't think so, but there's no reason to be reckless." With a shrug, the man somewhat stiffly shuffled his way back into the room Verde intended to insist he take. "It'll take me awhile, but by the next time she comes around hopefully you can ask whatever and she'll actually take the time to expound."

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 16th of March, 1970 continued. Vibo Valentia, Province of Vibo Valentia, Italian
It occurred to her, about three-fourths the way down the street to the gates of the stupid place, that just waltzing in and ducking whatever security was there might not be the best idea. Especially as it was approaching dusk.

Sonya paused, even if there was an opening just there and if someone was quicker than what was probably humanly normal it was possible to reach a carefully pruned oak tree somewhat deeper into the front lawn, and sourly eyed the tall walls separating the Iron Fort of Vongola's from the rest of this outskirts of Vibo Valentia.

She could do it with Ganauche and the CEDEF, because they were being stupid and reckless. They needed the very obvious reminder they weren't somewhere such shit they tried to pull could be excused, and that if they pressed she could make all of them regret it severely.

Ducking Timoteo's security, on his personal home he lived in with his civilian-ish wife and his children, would be… boorish.

Although… she was utterly alright with being boorish. It was being diplomatic, especially since her sister decided to see what an Italian Mafioso was like, that the Storm-Cloud paused over.

Disliking Nono was one thing, he was kind of an overbearing asshole who tended to get way too distracted to deal with outsiders very well. Compromising Fiorella's security, and her three sons whom one of which was the same age as her baby brother, wasn't really something she found acceptable.

Daniella was also annoying, but Tyr lived within these walls too…

…so, she'd make mention of the hole she pinpointed but she wouldn't be using it.

Maybe it was bait? A Mist lying in wait right there, or at least assigned to the walls as a kind of safety net, could catch significantly determined saboteurs if they were utilized as part of the security arrangements.

Sonya rubbed her temple in frustration, unable to decide if it was just a piece of bait or really a hole in their security arrangements. With Italians, either could likely be it.

Thankfully someone had already spotted her just standing on the sidewalk eyeing their walls speculatively. The thief just really couldn't say much positive about the greasy-faced idiot guardsman posted on the gate.

Had she really been intent on her first idea he wouldn't have, and she'd already be in.

Fumbling first for a ham radio under his tiny guard shack desk, to report sighting her and probably ask what to do, the man who turned out to look somewhat older than her against her first glance impression then pretended ignorance while also trying to subtly keep an eye on her. He rather failed horribly.

In response, the Storm-Cloud dug out and made use of her pipe. She had to replace her purse finally, when the hole that liked to dump out her tobacco got wider to the point of threatening the integrity of the entire thing. This one was at least less tote-like, being a repurposed WWII messenger bag.

It fit a decent sized book, her wallet, whatever files she needed for work, and her pipe with the tobacco pouch somewhat tightly… but it worked. Still easily stolen to the point she was resigned to
always keeping a hand on it while she used it, but at least it had no holes.

Yet.

…or was Disintegrated into nothing like that one set of clothing she burned off.

Much to her annoyance, when someone reached the gates in response to her showing up… it was that cowardly baby Cloud.

Sonya stared down at the brat, who very pointedly did not let the tall estate walls be moved from his back as he inched down to where she was… and he gave her a snotty look back behind a thin pair of lenses covering half his face.

"Why are you here?"

Instead of favoring the child with attention, she didn't recall what his name was or anything about him aside the fact he was Tyr's apprentice and the brat had once picked a fight with her godson, the thief removed her pipe from her mouth to inspect the wear and tear she had subjected it to so far.

Away from specifically infuriating situations, it had lasted significantly longer than she expected. The brass was a tiny bit gnawed on, and there was a split in the bamboo when she gripped it a touch too hard once, but it was at least still serviceable.

…huh, there was a new kink to the pipe since she last took note of the damages. Maybe she should invest in a new one for when this one broke, or a pack of cigarettes again.

The littler snot apparently used up all his bravery snipping a question mostly coherently, because out of the corner of her eye she could tell full well he couldn't decide what to do with her apparent non-reaction. Glancing at the somewhat dumbfounded guardsman, back to her, at the wall at his back, then back to her again, shooting a rather desperate look to the gates, then back at her again.

When Tyr came out to collect his wayward apprentice, Sonya actually designed to speak. "I'm not impressed."

"Neither am I." Spoke the Sword Emperor simply, which had his tetchy student quailing and somewhat huddling behind him. "Miss Sonya, did Ganauche inform you…?"

"…no? I just… I left Mafia Land rather early yesterday." She knocked out the half a bowl of tobacco kid even if she didn't remotely like him. "Why should he have contacted me?"

"Your godson is somewhat… concerning… ill."

Sonya stared at the master assassin. Said man stared back rather unruffled, even while his apprentice cringed into the wall and the guardsman somewhat fainted or something in his little hut.

"Miss Sonya?"

"Either invite me inside or get out of my way."

Tyr rather thoughtfully did, somehow managing the brat behind him to not be half-supported by the wall or leaning on him anymore at the same time. "I believe you know your way to the medical wing."

Yeah, she'd been there more than enough times. On her way past, she did at least glance to see the guardsman wasn't out cold just looking as if he'd really like a vacation or retirement to happen
already… and already hyperventilating.

Somewhat insulted and rather disgusted, the Storm-Cloud bolted up the drive the moment she had a clear shot. The doorman at least had better control of himself, he didn't stagger away from her as he yanked the front doors open for her instead of risk the thief ripping them off their hinges.

It took her less time to enter the designated area of the Iron Fort than she recalled it took when hobbling out of it, and the Russian came to a blank halt when she realized Fiorella was sitting next to Shamal's bed. Her brat was asleep, and if it was 'concerningly ill' according to an assassin then asleep was probably a good thing, she rather more sedately approached the two.

The civilian woman hadn't noticed her despite the haste anyways, looking nearly comically surprised for a second when she looked up in response to a change in the shadows in her line of sight. "Oh, Sonya! I thought someone said you were on foot at the gates? How did you get up here so fast?"

"I ran." Sliding closer, Sonya investigated and concluded there really was a fever involved because that was way too high for it to be natural flux in body temp. The Mist brat was not happy with her significantly warmer hand touching his forehead, scowling in his sleep and shifting away. "Why are you here?"

"I wouldn't want my sons to sit alone being miserably sick." Confessed the woman immediately and simply, which likely saved her from being unceremoniously ejected if her reasoning proved less brat-orientated. "Your eyes are purple again."

Slipping onto the cot her godson was rather fitfully napping in, Sonya was somewhat surprised to have her same apparently too warm hand seized and then have a Mist nearly wrap himself around it. "It happens. Dying Will Flames tend to come out in times of high stress or distress, so when you use them to solve such issues it becomes an automatic reaction to the same before long."

"Oh… that… makes an obvious amount of sense…” By her tone, sense she hadn't thought of and was somewhat irritated that she had to ask.

"...should he be doing this?"

Shamal wasn't twisting enough to pull the IV stabbed into his arm out, but if he had a fever then why the hell was he curling around her?

Being part Storm, and a little bit of Sun, Sonya's body temperature was a little high. She was, to quote Lisa, the 'second cuddliest' of her children. Tatiana earned first place and Cherep would likely tie with Valera because Clouds didn't really have a lot of excess heat to them. Perhaps not, and their mother would favor her biological child more and Tats would get knocked off her throne of 'getting the most hugs in the winter'.

"I was told, to tell you later if you bypassed Revelli who went to try to 'intercept you', that it is suspected to be meningitis. An inflammation of brain tissue." Fiorella reported clearly, an apologetic and somewhat wry twist to her lips as she fingered the copy of Aesop's Fables she let the brat borrow off her. "He had a lumbar puncture for testing, so somewhat drugged and not feeling very well… paired with the sick feeling he tried to ignore making him dizzy and drowsy… he's probably a very sore and miserable little boy."

The thief she was speaking to was trying not to hyperventilate at 'lumbar puncture’ or allowing herself to hold that against the older Sun. Medical things were Tatiana's specialty, all she knew of the spine was that the fluid should remain inside the spine.
Was it a safe medical test?

When had it been discovered?

How the fuck did that help anything?

Sonya harshly bit her lower lip, ignoring the trickle of blood because of course she failed to restrain the force just enough to prevent breaking skin, and took a deep breath.

"Mamma?" Shamal, blessedly coherent if not entirely aware given how his eyes slid trying to focus on her, mumbled groggily while gripping harder on her hand. "Are you late or early?"

"...I have no idea."

"Is... is Mister Renato here?"

"No." She didn't think so, if someone a Sun considered 'theirs' was ill... and as strong as the hitman was?

Renato would've been plastered to at least the far wall the entire time had he known this was going on, if not directly at the brat's side, glowering in his stupid gargoyle mode and just generally making himself a pain in the ass while his little charge was sick. Tatiana had all sorts of interesting tidbits about how she learned to reign herself in, and given some of those horror stories shared second-hand through Andrei about how the younger Suns were adjusting to their habits...

"The... then you're early." Decided the brat way too confidently, moving very awkwardly in trying to plaster himself around her hip. "I'm tired..."

"Go to sleep then."

What Shamal then mumbled wasn't really understandable but given he did as she bid she figured she could guess. After pulling a pillow down further and plastering his chest to the outside of her thigh.

"Sonya?"

"Is it safe to rub his back?" Her left hand was now freed, but a lack of something to do with it had her hesitating with it held out over him.

Her inability to use her own Sun Flames had never galled her so much before.

"Why... oh, right. Revelli's a 'Sun'!" Fiorella looked puzzled as she set the tome on the bedside apparently Shamal was assigned, given it was the only one that had medication laid out on top of it as well as a modest lamp for what she guessed was used as a reading light. "I didn't ask. I'll go see about doing so now and retrieve the good doctor, so he can return to work."

"Why did he leave in the first place?"

"He said he didn't want a hole in his wall."

Sonya snorted disgustedly... but then tried to recall if she left craters in any of the concrete or floors on her somewhat heedless dash in here.

"You have my apologies, Miss Bazanova." The elderly Sun announced from the same doors she had come through not too long ago, answering the rather absent question if she had broken anything that distracted her for a second but not so much she hadn't heard him coming. "It was rather unfair of me, given how considerate you've been with us in the past."
"My intent was to get to Shamal, not create complications or make your job harder than it needs to be."

"I appreciate it. And I did heal the young man of his lumbar puncture after the procedure."
Threading a few fingers into his goatee, which was looking a bit saltier than peppered, before turning right around. "Rubbing his back will not harm him. Should I inform the maids you will be remain."

"Of course I will be staying."

Revelli nodded distractedly on his way out.

"I'll visit again after dinner." Fiorella decided, rising to her feet somewhat less than gracefully for her usual gait. "And see about getting you some books from the library, your young man informed me you love to read."

Sonya glanced up at her blankly for a second, before returning to ensure there were no major changes in Shamal's state. "…thank you."

(Thursday the 19th of March, 1970. Mafia Land.)

Renato had expected to turn in the contract that shall never be mentioned ever fucking again, take the rest of the night to murder a few brain cells off, and then find himself something new and indefinitely better for a 'final' contract than said contract which needed erasing from existence… sometime tomorrow morning.

He did not expect a busty redhead Sun nurse to be waiting for him once he left the hitman's contract hall, looking grave enough no one was bothering her even if she was in her hospital uniform on a street full of thugs and criminals. If an in-uniform nurse was waiting for someone on Body Avenue the general assumption was someone had died horribly, and they needed a known associate to identify the remains for insurance or revenge-hit reasons.

Harassing said nurse was then seen as a bit tasteless because it could very well turn out to be your associate, or very lethal depending on whom needed to be contacted… and if they needed a convenient target to take out their likely sudden bad mood on. As a matter of fact, instead of being catcalled everyone passing her by on the street were pointedly ignoring the nurse in the hopes of it not being them she was here for.

The Soft Flame Sun had precious few associates left that hadn't already bit the big one, and after a moment adjusting to the sight of Tatiana very pointedly waiting on him he offered her his arm with an equally grim expression wondering who it was that died now.

At least she didn't look upset enough for it to be Sonya. No Sun would be that composed after losing family.

"We're going to the hospital," announced the redhead obviously, but he really wondered why that needed stating, "I'm going to give you a couple things, which you are not to open or even acknowledge until you get to where you're going and are safely in criminal held territory."

"You sound rather certain I'm going." Renato observed idly, thoughtlessly… then picked the why and what up out of her mind even while trying not to do it.

It was slightly hard when the nurse was wondering how to discreetly inform him of Shamal's mild
but possibly serious illness, the frankly illegal and 'criminally untested' meningococcal vaccine the hospital had for vaccinating others from it that needed slight adjustment for the number of orphans she didn't know about, and a small major problem she had recently run into that echoed of a conversation the hitman once had with her sister in a Moscow bar.

…why hadn't he informed Revelli the Eighth Generation Sun Guardian of the 'Sun Flames can make viruses worse' finding of hers?

Or even Brow Nie, as the Sun Guardian he actually saw more frequently?

'It's Vongola' Sonya had dismissed at the time, for why she hadn't mentioned Storms making better Mist-wranglers herself when she noted the discrepancy even when she had no reason to hold her tongue about it. Renato, upon reviewing his own thoughts and the paired memories, hadn't once thought to pass on the tidbit Tatiana had to suffer through to notice even after admiring the nurse for finding the truth of the matter out personally before he accidentally harmed his own ward.

He'd been through what Vongola knew of Sun Flames, just out of practicality because there was no reason to skip reviewing it if there was something he had not known detailed down somewhere. The hitman was more than certain there was nothing on the nurse's findings in there, or at least he didn't see it in what he got a hold of. Saying nothing, when he hadn't even been asked to keep it to himself, was actually… utterly out of character for a Sun when it could eventually harm his own.

Twice over, Tatiana adored 'her nephew'. Suns were obsessive *assholes* when it came to being or maintaining a healthy baseline in those they accepted, having two like them 'forget' the same thing was beyond utterly suspicious.

Equally as certain as she was that he was going now, he'd… think of something for ensuring his last act as 'Renato Sinclair' was suitably dignified to exit on, the hitman adjusted his hat with his free hand and allowed the Hard Flame Sun at his side to squeeze his arm as much as she wanted. She didn't know of his sudden change of heart and was still trying to think of something suitably clandestine to say no one else would understand without having the history between them to allow it.

He rather appreciated she held her silence instead of blurt something hasty out in desperation.

If anyone used Sun Flames on Shamal while he was sick, especially near whatever bodily function his illness was attacking… Activation boosted *viruses*…

Why the hell had no one else in Italia noticed it?

They had the *most* left over that strange dip in numbers the last century. Tatiana was a more than admirable nurse, but they had a good number of Sun Flame medics, nurses, *and* full-fledged doctors. By numbers alone, there should be more Italian Flame-medical findings than elsewhere and something as basic as 'Sun Flames can Activate what you don't want' was or should be basic knowledge.

…something was *sour* about the whole situation that very quickly made Renato's shoulders ache with how tense they went on him before he forced himself to remain relaxed and amiable in the nurse's hold before she thought he was going to brush her off without an adequate reason to follow.

Either something was preventing that from occurring, either within the Iron Fort itself or the whole of Italia entirely, or the Suns involved that could notice were being made to ignore it when it cropped up.

Worse, there was now the possibility something was preventing Vongola from gathering Flame-
related information that might contradict or change how they viewed something related. It was only a possibility he could conclude, but the possibility alone was alarming enough.

The whole situation stank of Mist-meddling, and there was one for sure he knew thought Vongola was it's to manipulate but no one seemed to really know or take the possibility of a massively powerful Mist merely lurking about seriously. Thankfully Sonya was fully committed to murdering said Mist in a horribly painful fashion the next time it popped up, incorporeal and using a civilian as a meat-shield or not, so perhaps the problem would be solved relatively soon and someone could unravel the whole issue from adversely affecting his native country.

"Give me some faith." Tatiana decided on asking, very nearly dragging him into Mafia Land's underground so no one trying to follow them to see what could be spread as gossip because they were suicidality bored could follow.

She would've succeeded at yanking him along if he wasn't equally as intent on following her to pick up the Vongola order for vaccinations and the courier request contract to be allowed to handle it. Very illegal, under-tested, not widely available to the civilians because the side effects weren't well known vaccinations.

"Given." Renato offered instantly, morbidly amused at their situation even with the worried itch squarely between his shoulder blades at the underlying one.

Normally, one didn't want a hitman to be with them down shady dark passageways. Busty nurse wanted him to hurry the fuck up already and to stop being so difficult, he complied silently as they got further into the tunnels on their way to the hospital's few entrances.

He'd trust her if only because it was Sonya's sister and her purview was everything medical in that family, which kind of included what little family he also had. Knowing what was running through her head merely confirmed what he would've suspected, which was that she had no ill intents for him personally.

Any Suns around her adorable shit of a nephew that triggered an Activation charged viral infection on the other hand… she would want them to die horribly if anything happened.

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(Friday the 20th of March, 1970. The Iron Fort, Italy.)

Sonya jerked awake an instant before Sinclair managed to smooth a hand down her back. "My apologies for being late, Tatiana wanted me to transport the vaccinations as I was going this way as it was."

The blonde Russian tried to hide her yawn, gingerly straightening up from her half-collapsed position in a waiting chair even if that pressed her back against his fingers and blearily glancing around until she spotted the window letting in a bare gleam of true dawn. "At least you were told, I just came over to visit and surprise... brat had a lumbar puncture already and wasn't feeling good enough to stay awake for long."

Fiorella wasn't sure why that earned a pensive frown from the man, and a sharp look to Sun Flame nurse checking in to see if she had to wake up one of the doctors or if it was only more visitors before silently excusing herself to wait in the lobby for an emergency.

Accepting she didn't know enough to even guess was a hard adjustment to make, especially being a
full-grown adult as well as married and a mother. A secret society with their own special skills and double-talk expressly designed to hide their abilities made it somewhat hard to understand from the outside looking in as a 'non-user' of Dying Will Flames like her.

A significant look between two individuals she would've assumed held the same or radically different positions or social rank ended up influencing things she had no idea was included in whatever type they identified with. There was a pattern, she just didn't have the information to make use of it.

Yet.

"I'm going to deliver the vaccinations so Revelli or Brow Nie can give them to the various brats and staff as your sister demanded, I'll return well before anyone thinks to bring breakfast."

"I'll be sure to save you the coffee." Sonya offered around another yawn, settling back in her chair to wake up instead of going back to being half slumped over the side of the bed their godchild was sleeping in for a few more moments of rest herself.

An amused sounding huff and the darkly dressed 'Sun' Flame user turned right around and approached Fiorella standing next to the swinging doors. Instead of protest, she specifically had a maid wake her to relieve the native godparent of any burdens so he could focus on his godson's recovery and they both knew she could deliver the same, she just handed it over instead.

Yet.

"You spent an entire minute studying him before even waking Sonya up, and you were visibly alright with the situation after inspecting his medication laid out for when he wakes." Reminded the lady of the manor with amusement, hands on her hips and giving the man a rather practiced expectant look he tried to ward off with a very flimsy innocent expression. "That is not the whole story, no matter how cutely you try to act."

The insult that passed over his face, topped off with the adorably disgruntled glower, was even more amusing. "...and?"

"And nothing. You don't need to lie to me, Sinclair. Have a good morning with whatever you really wish to do, I highly doubt I'm qualified to sit in on whatever conversation you need to have with your fellow 'Suns'."

Black eyes narrowed at her without even a minute change in expression, and Fiorella simply beamed back at the man's suspicious scowl before moving on.

Eventually, someone besides the Russian quarter she had been introduced to would stop lying to her face or making very understandable excuses for what they were really going to do. Fiorella had spent nearly a decade of her marriage becoming or being aware her husband and his staff were keeping her out of something, now they were being just a bit slow in recalling they didn't have to anymore.

She just really hoped her suspicions that Timoteo and his men were trying to keep her out of something else wasn't true.
All three of the Suns in the older one's office were probably not in the best of moods, one hadn't slept in nearly twenty-four hours and the other two had been somewhat rudely roused from bed at the Soft Flame Sun's demand. However, the ill-feelings had been left by the wayside as their professional responsibilities demanded when he reported the need that drove him to do so before socially acceptable hours for visitation.

Revelli pushed up the reading glasses he didn't need right now to pinch the bridge of his nose where they normally rested. "I did heal the lumbar puncture. Miss Bazanova even asked if I had. Why didn't she-"

"That's the problem." Renato interrupted shortly before he could finish the expected question, gesturing widely to include all Italian Suns in their home country and those outside both categories that were seeking to inform them of the issue even after so much time had passed. "None of us thought of it. Not me, and I was only informed several years ago of the finally documented discovery and I knew you all didn't know. Not Sonya, who probably never thought to ask her sister in the first place because she can't use her minor talent with Sun Flames. Not Nurse Primakova herself, who was the one to Activate healing of a needle mark post injection and infected herself with an Activate-strengthened viral infection to discover it could happen and is currently involved with Ganauche."

Considering they were speaking of another fellow if Soviet Union Sun Flame user, who was the sister to the hitman's fellow godparent, they'd draw the same conclusions as he did.

"Tatiana only thought to tell me, who she knew had heard it from her instructing doctor because I bought her a drink for running into it before I hurt the brat. Not her boyfriend she spends more time with or would be able to say if you all back here knew the possibility or not with some certainty, me. She eventually realized while waiting for me that it was odd... but if you didn't know before I got back here then she forgot again to talk to Ganauche about it."

Brow Nie put down the paperwork Doctor Kappel had filled out and had published in-house for Mafia Land's hospital staff, in a series of publications restricted from being taken off the island aimed to raising general awareness across all hour shifts and native lands so everyone knew the same information as another. This copy had come from the German doctor's records, which Tatiana had broken into as easily as breathing when he asked for a written something to hand off to the other Suns in Italy.

Reaching for a binder to file it with the rest of the Sun-centric information the nurses needed to keep up with, he quickly slotted the pages away for later encrypting and disposal then found some blank paper to start making an in-house memo to start ensuring the same. The papers detailed a bit of the incident itself, some theories how it could happen on a cellular level, and suitably redacted hospital records of the same possibly happening with a Sun attending the 'routine' procedures verses the ones without such complications occurring that general or nurse practitioners didn't need to know right away to be aware of the phenomena.

It still had Flame terminology included in a professional document, it had to go before someone more law enforcement than criminal got lucky snooping around. Regulation rather than a necessity this deep in Vongola territory, but still an appreciative hard rule when it came to information on Dying Will Flames somewhere accessible to outside influences.

"And you?" Asked the Sun once he had everything he needed assembled, glancing over to ensure both the others were aware he was keeping up with both his duties and the conversation.
"I? I forgot about it until Sonya said the brat had something called a 'lumbar puncture' that might've allowed the possibility. While Tatiana was talking to me I was very intent on checking to see if you all back here were aware of that since somehow a Russian nurse from Moscow hadn't been... as well as the biggest Flame utilizing hospital in the whole Mafia. Then I forgot..."

"So..." Icy brown eyes turned on the younger Sun without a Guardian bond, as the Eighth Generation Sun Guardian adjusted to the idea he was not getting updated on medical discoveries that would help him safeguard the health of his Sky's responsibilities. "...who."

"I don't know. I don't even know if it's inbound or outbound focused, but I do know it's a Mist and it's entirely likely this isn't the first time we've run into this specific one."

With a puzzled frown, Revelli tugged on his neat beard a few times while he thought. "We? As in Vongola, you, and your lady thief? ...the same one that attacked Miss Bazanova's students?"

"Exactly. Whoever it was tracked her down afterwards, piggybacking a civilian for a confrontation about 'her' interference in 'his' responsibilities, while we were in East Germany only a couple handfuls of days later. Whoever it is, it's powerful and hard to deter in messing with someone who could've been a solid ally for us before it screwed you over. Sonya thinks it's a Mist that believes they have some right to Vongola or her people but doesn't believe you necessarily need to know it thinks that way for whoever to be a colossal pain in our collective asses."

As the younger Guardian was drafting mafia-only public service announcements for later distribution, the older Guardian carried on the conversation his inquiring glance asked. "Are we being forgiven for that incident?"

"You've met a Cloud before, Revelli. Right? Of course not. Especially with how utterly retarded the CEDEF behaved panicking over possibly losing the service we had been allowed to use, trying to secure hold on Rasputin without so much as speaking to Sonya first as the legal guardian of the Flame using medical students the hospital is tempting to stay."

"No, you're not forgiven. The only silver lining for Vongola is that Sonya is very intent on murdering the Mist messily once she finally coaxes the damn Flame user into her reach."

"If we don't catch this miscreant first."

"We didn't even notice it first."

Brow Nie stacked a two-page report together, which apparently wouldn't have so many medical terms to lose anyone not in their field before delivering the salient points to the right people, rising to his feet during the pause while Revelli sourly accepted that fact. "Sinclair, can you accompany me?"

At his somewhat confused but admittedly slightly sardonic look, the younger Mafioso just sighed as if he was being intentionally difficult.

"If you forgot on your way in, it's entirely possible something this supposed miscreant Mist has laid down will cause me to forget before I can pass on the relevant information to those that need to know. You managed to bully your way through with only a reminder, I'm not as confident I could do the same without such if I set these down before speaking to Nono."

Renato glanced down at the writing scrawled across the pages, and sure enough there was in bold lettering a reminder to speak of the situation with Timoteo as a pseudo headline just in case any sudden forgetfulness struck.
All three of them were *Mafiosi*, admittedly. Only he was a hitman, the other two had been identified as Suns by Vongola then specifically trained to handle the personal health concerns of their Sky and fellow Guardians in a hospital or medically equipped place like this wing from the very start. They weren't weak-willed men or Flame users by any means, but the Soft Flame Sun in the office was the only one to need a stubborn sense of self-entitlement to secure his life and even faked confidence in what he was doing to just survive his work.

"Ho... possible?"

"*All we have is subjective hearsay.*" Admitted Brow Nie apologetically with a regretful shake of his head. "*Not to say I disbelieve you, but we can't actually declare some unknown Mist is messing about on information gathering efforts on so little evidence. Which likely does play right into that Mist's hands in the end, hamstringing us from adequately finding the outer limits of the damage to address or correct the problems it's causing us.*"

Neither Sun had much to say in response to that, admittedly.

"*We'll have to do another lumbar puncture. See if the cultures changes any between the first and second, ensure I didn't instead harm my patient unknowingly instead of ease his time here.*" Decided the older Sun with a weary sigh after a moment to allow the younger's point to stand, rubbing the back of his neck then smoothing down his goatee fussily. "*While a split-Flame Storm-Cloud breathes down my neck for harming her baby in front of her for a procedure that shouldn't have been necessary to repeat... wonderful. Just what I wanted to deal with this early in the day.*"

"*I'll distract her.*" Renato promised as he straightened up to assist the Ninth Generation Sun Guardian, snatching his fedora from the hat rack as he did so, as it was the least he could do to assist his fellow Suns. "*Somehow, I'll get her out of the medical wing for however long you'll need.*"

"*About half an hour.*"

"*She'd probably appreciate the opportunity to take a shower and mess around with her pipe now I'm here and can substitute just in case the brat wakes up or wants anything.*"

The older Sun grumped rather unhelpfully as he turned to assemble the needed tools for his next sample extraction. "*Good luck explaining that one after the fact.*"

"*Sonya is very conscientious of the side-effects of her behavior. If she tries to leave, then we need to worry about collateral damage or a death-toll.*"

"*I'll have a nurse fetch Visconti and Solothurn and let them know, then.*"

"*No.*" Refused the hitman immediately, pausing before he could follow a rather patient younger Guardian out of the older Sun's office. "*Get Tyr. She won't mind at all murdering the Cloud Guardians, she's not really a fan of either Sky to pull her punches if she wants to vent. I've seen her fight before, turning humans into ballistic missiles isn't out of her reach nor is sneaking up on them even utterly enraged. For some dumbly odd reason, probably because he actually speaks to her, she likes Tyr enough to not want him headless even if he pisses her off.*"

Revelli gave him a smarmy kind of smirk that kind of made the Soft Flame Sun itch to pistol whip it off his face, but thankfully didn't quip something stupid at him.

(Saturday the 21st of March, 1970. The Iron Fort, Italy.)
Sinclair had somewhat tricked Bazanova out of the medical wing while a second spinal tap had happened on their brat, which by the wider staff of Vongola's headquarters was accepted as a necessary evil even if that meant the hitman was in the dog house with the Russian thief once she realized what had happened. They appreciated the consideration aimed their way, so they were extra careful both delivering items to both individuals and trying to give the couple as much privacy as could be gained in a semi-public location as the medical wing.

Especially as the Storm-Cloud now flatly refused to leave her godchild's side at the Sun's insistence, even to talk to her fellow godparent somewhere less public. The child wasn't getting any better even now on the correct medication to treat the infection noted on the first culture, so the uneducated assumption was that the second procedure had been needed in the end anyways. A secondary medical station was set up nearby but outside the same room the thief was practically dwelling in for lesser medical emergencies to work around the Flame user drama currently going on.

However, Lady Fiorella had noticed and logged the reactions as odd. Then invited Nilda Superbi ne Guerra, her recently married bodyguard she was amiable in turning into a friend, to explain to her why the moment she reported back in after her somewhat lackluster honeymoon. Pointedly, to show she was fully aware of the situation and getting suspicious over the repeated evasions.

Downing about half of her espresso in one go, because she was not paid for this nor really wanted to be the one in this position, the Rain rather miserably wondered how to explain the visceral fear most felt when staring into the face of a very unhappy momma Cloud diplomatically enough to someone who would hopefully never see it.

"You've seen Bazanova crush polished wood in hand, right? Accidentally? Without really meaning to?"

"Yes."

"Now imagine you're the nurse or doctor in charge of young Shamal's recovery. You did one test that unfortunately and unavoidably hurt him while she wasn't here to invalidate a situation, then it comes to be it has to be repeated for his well-being while a monstrously strong woman that mothers said kid is in the room."

Fiorella crossed her arms over her chest, multitasking in keeping an eye on her older two boys roughhousing in the back courtyard while having this conversation, and pursed her lips in an utterly unconvinced way. "Sonya is a wonderfully meticulous woman, she hasn't harmed anyone with her strength. It was on accident she broke the banquet table, and frankly entirely understandable why…"

Because the woman was flinching from Revelli pulling a knife aimed at the other woman out of her foot.

Nilda nodded simply. "Exactly."

"Nilda, I still don't get this."

"Sonya's very contained. What's her breaking point? When will she not be so nice about being able to crush people in one hand or behead them with a punch?" The Rain closed an eye and nodded at the puzzled expression now on her charge's face. "All the Clouds in the Iron Fort are known elements, Lady Fiorella. Most of them either grew up here or come from lines that would know. We know perfectly well how far they can be pushed before they start getting bothered to avoid such an incident happening or to do so where they can be suitably distracted. Problem solved easily enough. But a Soviet Russian example of a Cloud? She only visits about once a year and doesn't tend to spend a whole lot of time angry while here."
The civilian woman finally looked away from her boys, as if the nursemaids and the guards slash footmen weren't also keeping an eye on the twosome for any issues, to look somewhat graver about the topic of discussion as she gave her bodyguard her full attention.

"Those in the know see this: Sinclair, her longest-known associate who has seen her breaking point at least twice before, decided that for the safety of all involved she needed to be distracted from their godchild's side during the procedure. Meaning it is either very likely she would've terrified the staff into incompetence or stressed everyone involved out more than safe when a needle is that close to the kid's spine. Which is not the time to either be terrified for your life or realize you can't stand watching the procedure happen. They're really thankful he's done that for everyone and know full well not to hold it against Sonya because it's likely she wouldn't even intend to scare everyone, so we get this situation now."

"That's... not fair."

"It never really is." Sighed the silver haired woman, draining the rest of her coffee and putting the cup down before she gave into the impulse to fidget with it. "That's why Sinclair's not defending or trying to explain himself, even if it's not personal just practical. That's also why Sonya's not punched him or anyone else working there through a few walls, she agrees with his decision and is instead just working through her hurt at being misled and not there for Shamal while he was being harmed even with good intentions. That's why everyone else is giving them space to work through it and not carrying tales to other people, even you."

Fiorella, instead of being reassured it wasn't personal in her respect either, huffed in irritation. "If everyone could stop deciding what is or isn't my business, I'd be less suspicious when these things happened. I don't even need the details, just an 'I'll explain after it's over' would do."

…very thin ice, there.

Nilda rubbed her temple, not even sure who was on thin ice in this conversation. All she knew was that there were perilous and choppy waters still ahead of her and her charge, and the tangle of blame was certainly deep enough to catch just about everyone in it.

Timoteo was certainly perched on a whole patch of it himself, Fiorella likely didn't even suspect what was lurking below her own, she'd catch flak no matter how it eventually worked out, and…

"...Sonya, you want to handle this one? I seem to have a nagging headache."

"Sure." Came the utterly unenthusiastic response, which finally alerted her charge they had been joined by the Russian herself. "It is, stupidly enough, habit. If you don't know, then likely talking to said person would get you in trouble. If you do know, you don't need to ask. Questions are more 'allowable' for children, once you pass a certain point no one wants to speak of it anymore. Even to older if equally as new Flame users. First reaction to being asked by someone fully grown, even by you Lady Fiorella, is to deny everything. Apparently, that's caught more than just you in the net of."

Sonya had perched herself on the half-wall that neatly sectored the patio seating area from the rest of the back garden and the courtyard, fiddling with a very awkwardly bent tobacco pipe and her pouch of the shredded tan leaves.

The Rain made note to send a footman with an order to replace her smoking tools and probably pick the other woman up some more tobacco, loose leaf or otherwise. The Lord knew she was likely almost out, and the pipe was a lost cause after she pitched it at the hitman's head in revenge for lying to her about their godchild's health.
"How are you feeling, Sonya dear?" Fiorella asked, out of not only politeness but because the lady was honestly invested in the couple and was rather tense with them at odds like this situation.

Looking up from her pipe slowly, the thief glanced from her to the bodyguard and back again before sighing heavily and giving up on her pipe. "I? I can't even get mad. Which, frankly, doesn't help. The nurses don't know me, I don't know them, there's no reason why they should've been able to tough it out even if they were afraid of me. And that's another thing I can't get angry at, because I am dangerous and unknown so it's sensible they're afraid of my reaction when the brat's being harmed in front of me. I was afraid of me, and that incident was only being scared of harm to him not watching it. I didn't invest time in them so they'd know better, even knowing other Clouds have reputations that make it a necessity to be wary of our reactions. I didn't handle it, Renato made a call to account for that as the one that would know, and… now this."

Giving a flourish of a hand to include her fellow blonde in her previous explanation, for why the Iron Fort's staff weren't taking anything snapped at them personally while she worked through her own issues, Nilda glanced longingly at the pot that should've held coffee on the shaded patio table between them.

It was empty, unfortunately. A maid had been by some time ago, but it would also take a bit of time for a request to be refilled to be asked and the promised liquid to be delivered. They would get snippy at any woman here for carrying it to the kitchens, Nilda and Sonya because they were guests or not a maid and Lady Fiorella because a lady shouldn't have to do so when she had maids who would love to do it for her.

The Cloud woman reached over and plucked the silver carafe up, investigated the empty pot for a moment, stuck her hand inside with a bright flash of something suspiciously purple… then set down a full pot of coffee.

"...Sonya, don't take this the wrong way… but I love you." Breathed out the Rain, all but taking possession of the cask to cuddle with. "I love you so much right now…"

"Drink water as well." Advised the utterly unimpressed woman as she returned to trying to unbend her pipe. "Cloud Flames disappear after a while after all, but it should taste the same."

"How long will this last?" Even as she asked, Nilda was pouring both herself and Fiorella a cup to savor.

"Two or three months." When the Rain inhaled in surprise at the wrong moment and nearly spluttered out the lovely Flame-hot and appreciatively strong Italian coffee, she earned an utterly indifferent blink that was sort of mocking around the edges. "Maybe four now, I don't know."

The Lady of Vongola was too uneducated in Flame terms to understand why that was a little surprising length of time, especially as Clouds didn't often intend their Propagations to last much beyond initial use, glancing between them.

"...why?"

"Why not?"

It couldn't be for any professional reason, an incident with a faked replica winking out of existence in front of an expert or a camera somewhere and she'd be wanted by the Vindice for breaking Omertà or risking it unnecessarily.

A suspicious little wiggle of an idea occurred to her, but she highly doubted the thief was in any kind
of mood to banter about the subject and confirm a few details for the ex-hatchet woman. Nilda instead set the suspicion aside, because if she was right then in time it wouldn't matter if she got the information now or later.

If she was wrong… well, wasn't that interesting?

"Nilda, dear… is there a reason why you seem a bit coffee-mad today?" Fiorella decided on asking when the silence stretched, from the look on her pretty face well aware this was another 'Flame user only' exchange she was excluded from.

"My honeymoon had atrocious coffee." Admitted the Rain bluntly, which was the very least of the issues the event had to begin with in her opinion. "I have no idea why Superbi had us go to England for it, miserable weather and they're all tea drinkers."

There was a snort, which reminded the two Italian ladies the Russian one preferred a type of tea.

"You'd hate it too. They add milk and sugar to theirs. Sometimes lemon."

"Some people add milk and sugar to coffee, too." Sonya drily returned.

"Heathens."

"In fact, you're supposed to drink black Russian tea with either jam or sugar chips." Continued the thief in a bland tone, ignoring the wild blinking from Lady Vongola and the utterly disgusted one the Rain was aiming at her. "There's even a select group of people that drink tea with yak butter."

"Bullshit." Nilda refuted, mostly out of disgust. Only to blink herself when she merely earned herself a raised and superior eyebrow making her doubt her gut reaction. "…really?"

"Really. It's a specialty in Tibet and northern China." Continued her fellow blonde evenly. "I've even tried some once."

"Have... we been serving your tea wrong?" Inquired Lady Vongola delicately.

"It can be 'properly' taken in any way. Straight, with sugar chips, or with jam."

"Oh good." Pleased, assured they weren't making a social faux pas in her culture and that the woman wasn't really all that irritated with anyone but apparently her own inaction, Fiorella momentarily paused.

Nilda could almost see her thought process. Sonya was apparently feeling better to the point of bantering with a few select others yet drawing attention to that might set back that unintentional progress. Scrambling for something else to carry on with, the Rain tried to hide a wince when the wife of a Sky turned her attention to the platinum blonde.

Apparently, she succeeded too well.

"How is married life treating you, Nilda?"

She tried for a polite smile, but by the alarmed look on her charge's face and even the slow blink from the Storm-Cloud she thankfully failed utterly in that. "It's... not all that different from being 'single', honestly."

Fiorella peered at her over the table warily.

"Political?" Sonya asked blandly from the wall, shrugging when Nilda nodded appreciatively. "That
sucks."

"Oh..." fumbled the civilian, obviously having not expected that response from what she had only known as an employee of her mother-in-law, "...please don't take this the wrong way, Nilda... but how?"

"We have our own culture, Lady Fiorella." Answered the thief before the Rain could figure out a proper mixture of lies and truth that wouldn't cause the older woman to feel betrayed when the truth finally came out, in a way that was utterly true yet entirely not the full story. "We've been in hiding so long that it was unavoidable. Certain dynasties, like the one you married into, have been around for centuries while others are a lot newer. Because we have to hide about half or more of ourselves in 'public', we tend to stick to our own or those in the known when we can."

"My family's not important," Continued the ex-hatchet woman equally as casually, "but we're loyal. A bit more important family wants into this social circle, hence my marriage to allow their head to enter this corner of the world and rub elbows with your husband."

Not to mention a smuggling route for ammunition 'traded' to fatten the deal the Don of her famiglia wanted. Her husband wasn't objectionable, but maybe a little too interested in his sparring buddies than his striking new wife. She learned that one out on the honeymoon, but once a spy always a spy.

Nilda didn't mind at all. An heir to secure the line, then she would return to being an active Rain agent for Ottavia or Nono with her husband's blessings and more secured from gossip as a married mother instead of a single woman following others around. Silvano would be and was paying through the nose to secure her willing help, and either a very uncomfortable night or some awkward help later he'd have the son or daughter he honestly did want to have.

He just didn't like women in a sexual manner. Taking a wife from a notoriously hardline loyal famiglia was his attempt to avoid controversy and salacious rumors over his preferences, yet still get what he did want from a marriage and continue his famiglia into the future as he was responsible for.

...in a couple years. Silvano was working up the courage to actually father the baby with a woman, the fact she was very feminine apparently didn't help him much.

The 'political' excuse was entirely true, and Nilda was working on ensuring everyone believed it but the two of them were perfectly fine with it being so for their own reasons. She was just getting used to using utter truth to lie with, her methods were normally a lot more direct or didn't need words to begin with.

Apparently, she needed to take notes from Sonya.
"Mamma?" Shamal nearly slurred out around an utterly exhausted yawn even if he just woke, little head lolling slightly as he tried to peer at her. "Are you late or early?"

"I'm here, aren't I? Renato's over there too, if you can see him."

Frustratingly, the tiny Mist boy almost dwarfed by her practically occupying the same berth as him puzzled out her words then the meanings for a couple long seconds before understanding. It was somewhat obvious, given when he tried to look around then give up per usual. "You're... on time? Thanks... mamma."

Sonya strove really, really hard to keep any of her feelings off her face. "You're welcome. We'll go for gelato once you feel better, all three of us."

"...yay. I'm tired."

"Go to sleep then." She prompted him blankly, using a hand towel dipped in ice water to dab on his forehead and hopefully soothe the brat a little bit so he wouldn't complain about her being next to him and being 'too warm'.

It would've been somewhat amusing how quickly Shamal's head thumped back into his pillow to do as she said if this wasn't the seventh time they had a variation of the very same conversation. Always with the same amount of surprise to see her with too, the brat didn't show any recognition to have seen her before... and she got here before the asshole hitman.

She would bite her tongue and let the kid needle her about being late for the rest of their natural lifetimes if only they could have a different conversation for once. Anything to show he was improving and not... still fighting off some microscopic infection trying to kill him.

Old Revelli didn't need to say anything, Tatiana's silence over the phone was equally as unneeded. She knew perfectly well losing memories and any sense of time passing was horrifically bad in this situation.

Mists had the lowest body temperature of all Flame users, lower even than Rains who had just under human normal base temp and noticeably lower than Clouds who were just a touch higher than a normal human. Fevers for Mists tended to be really inhibiting, and unlike a fully adult version who just sneezed in Constructed amphibians for a couple days... Shamal barely had any grip on his Flames to do more than leak un-Constructed Mist Flames fitfully now or again.

Even when Suns got sick to the point of suffering a fever, they drained off their Flames trying to burn through the illness in a fast hurry to the point of 'feeling cold'. Preventing them from boiling their brains alive or being too restless to recover from high energy levels, the moment they got and were suffering Shamal's current issue of being asleep more than awake.

There were different coping mechanisms throughout all Flame types, according to the old Sun that ran this place, for all sorts of plausible reasons but... Shamal apparently wasn't making use of his type's.

No one quite knew the full reason why Mists tended to unconsciously create Constructions while sick, especially as they tended to be not very good at it, just that they did. Current Italian theory was
it was a self-defense thing, in creating a whole lot of targets and chaos to disguise their weakened positions until they recovered. Sonya privately thought that was bullshit, because from the sounds of it nothing a Mist made while sick was remotely believable as 'normal' or would be useful as anything other than a major sign of compromised Mists.

The brat hadn't done any of that, which made a few Flame users that should've known otherwise assume it wasn't that serious of an illness until it was obvious to those without Flames. There was an utterly flustered little maid getting gifts from both the godparents when they needed something else to do that wasn't related to their current worries, because she actually dragged their brat to get checked out when it became apparent to her.

Frankly, a guilty feeling Sun was her limit. Trying to deal with two guilty-feeling Suns fussing around her, one for the whole 'lumbar puncture' event that was now the known reason Shamal was this damn sick and the other for never preventing this possibility in the first place, was well beyond what Sonya could remotely even begin to handle.

She'd be a whole lot less understanding of the issues had both not resulted from what was charitably called Flame lore, which was so incredibly spotty that nearly no one really knew what they were doing with examples from other types to raise or interact with anymore. Everyone at least stubbed their toes on the issue once in their lives, more likely it would happen several times before the happening became widespread common knowledge.

Renato's guilty feeling was… somewhat understandable if a little hard to swallow. Mainly, in the end, the man wasn't a healer by nature even if he was by temperament. A Sun with more inward bent than outward expression of his Flame nature.

He could sub in as a healer in a pinch, with an atrocious bedside manner and more brute force than skill, but medical advancements and regulations weren't what he kept up with. As far as the Inverted Sun was concerned, as long as he knew what not to do and kept others more or less in one piece to get professional help later he had done more than enough as it was.

More than enough for combat wounds or the occasional accident he wanted to erase on another adult or possibly a child as he grew.

He'd never, once Kappel informed him of what Tatiana found out the hard way was possible, do what Revelli had and healed the kid when he was sick. Accounting for another's actions or inactions that might affect their godchild was entirely something a parent or guardian did for various brats, and frankly there were avenues by which the same information should've reached the Eight Generation Sun Guardian without the hitman so much as saying a word to anyone.

As there were various things in place to prevent exactly what happened, to keep Vongola abreast of Flame-related findings in something as critical as the medical field, that each method all failed them so utterly was not his fault. The hitman was not part of nor Vongola's keeper, it wasn't his responsibility to the Famiglia to keep it updated as best he could. As the brat's, on the other hand…

Intellectually Renato was equally aware of that information as she was. Accepting that was another issue, especially when it wasn't him that bore the brunt of the consequences.

Revelli was at least old enough to be aware and accepting that sometimes shit just happened on him when it really should've been avoided. Even if he utterly loathed the fact he accidentally dosed the brat with a hyper-variant of a bacterial meningitis infection when it was a known issue with viruses and Sun Flames. The new stronger than recommended for children medication was now making a dent, slowly and by increments she could measure with as obsessively as she was watching, which would hopefully stack up enough to start making a difference sometime soon. It was looking as if
Shamal would come out the other side physically fine once the illness ran its course.

In the end, although there was harm done it would hopefully not be permanent.

Said medication mix was, as the vaccinations that were distributed a couple days ago, another 'Mafia Land' special order courtesy of Tatiana delivered by a very dazedly behaving Ganauche. Not a variant typically used by civilian institutions, but this time not nearly as illegal or untested as the vaccinations.

It was a lot more effective than the general antibiotics Revelli had started the brat on the moment they suspected it was a lot more serious viral infection than just a common sickness… the new medicine was even equally more effective than the 'legal' variants he changed to using when the results of the first lumbar puncture was known and they could identify the correct reason out of many possibilities.

Physically, the kid should be on the mend now.

Mentally was… another question entirely.

If this forgetfulness would spread to any of Shamal's memories or his fully healthy state once the illness ran its course was a bit more concerning. It was possible he'd have some difficulty with using his Mist Flames after such a high fever, or logical processing that his type wasn't really all that well known for in the first place, which… she'd accept and deal with as long as he was still a little opportunistic brat she called a godson.

Shamal kind of had to live, Sonya wasn't really sure what she'd do if otherwise… and Renato was certainly taking the whole thing a lot worse than she even was.

…and she was the fucking Cloud in the grouping.

By the time she felt settled enough to glance away from their godchild's little form without feeling as if the moment she looked away he'd get worse, the hitman had already slunk out of the medical wing's recovery hall without a word.

More than likely to go shoot up the firing range located somewhat removed from the 'garden' parts of the Iron Fort's grounds. He was chewing through their harmless clay targets for moving target practice faster than those assigned to maintain training courses had expected to deal with, and from the gossip Nilda shared with her on rare occasions outside the medical wing… they were actually running low on those innocent targets.

To the point a Vongola Mist agent was tasked with creating them instead, so at least there'd be enough for the staff to re-qualify as competent early next month.

Huffing a tired sigh, because no she wasn't mad at him but the coping mechanism the Inverted Sun had for personal failures convinced a handful of the maids and footmen that she was for some stupid reason, the thief instead glanced around for the other Sun that was 'braving' her temper.

"He's responding better to the chloramphenicol and ampicillin than the cephalosporin, at least he didn't fall asleep before thanking you this time." Revelli offered quietly when he noticed her looking at him, tapping his pen against his other hand as he took a moment to speak to her instead of just shift guiltily while updating the observation notes on the bratty Mist's illness. "Next time he wakes, try asking him to Construct you something... without, hopefully, agitating him."

Yeah… she had an idea for that.

"...do you want me to drag that rascal back by the ear?"
"For your information, although I don't know why it's your business, I'm not mad at Renato. He's left to go temper his emotions back to something he can be civil with, interrupting that will do no one any good. Let him do his thing in peace." Sonya was just not speaking to him because she felt guilty in forcing the hitman into an untenable position, in having to lie to her to protect Shamal from her reactions scaring the piss out of the medical staff doing a possible complication-heavy procedure on said brat.

The fact it was required for their godson's safety depressed her. That he let her throw things at him without retaliating for the near lethal insults was very sweet of him, and entirely something she shouldn't have done as pissed off as she had been and probably couldn't do for him with any kind of equal forbearance.

Renato read minds, he knew full well what she felt and was feeling. Just because they weren't talking did not mean they weren't communicating.

There was more than enough blame to go around, depending on how you looked at it. The hitman didn't blame her, and the thief didn't blame him, but blaming themselves was another matter entirely.

Finding a pediatrician who could deal with her… Sonya didn't know where to go. Given the latest round of gossip she was subjected to on Mafia Land, the pediatric wing of the hospital there basically all collectively wrote or updated their wills all at the same time when the first rumor of her being pregnant started. That left civilians, because if she couldn't find someone that could face her who knew of her Cloud Flames that only left those that wouldn't realize what she was.

…well, Renato had been using Doctor Kappel for Shamal. Out of probably thoughtless habit, even if the former Nazi was a general practitioner and not a pediatrician. If she explained, perhaps he wouldn't mind staying on for her until she found a way to pull off the apparently impossible or the brat was more in the age bracket he was supposed to deal with.

Shamal, for one of the rare few times he shifted about these last couple somewhat terrifying days, ended up throwing an arm around her waist and cuddling closer in spite of his fever. Sonya adjusted his IV tubing, so it wouldn't be pulled at if either of them moved, then settled back for more waiting.

(ooo000ooo)

(Monday the 23rd of March, 1970 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"You need to go."

Yeah, like that was going to help at all.

"Renato, you need to go." Sonya insisted again without turning to look at him when he didn't respond, not able to help her fidgeting with Shamal's hair as he slept on. "You've put off a whole lot, for both me and him, but you have a couple of things you've been ignoring. I know it. We appreciate you staying here. I do and Shamal will too. But-

"Little dragon lady, this actually helps that." Just not the things he had to do after establishing the background situation as 'fraught with complications'. Besides, he left and he wouldn't be able to do a little side-hunting here or there to spare Timoteo the money on all those clay pigeons the hitman would shoot to shit otherwise.

Not just Vongola enemies trying to get close although he had no problem at all taking a few here or there for Nono, there were still trickles of those idiots that chased him into the Soviet Union and then to Timbuktu and back again. Only the really smart or stubbornly bullheaded were left, and Renato
honestly found them serious enough as a threat he had to focus to take them out as they finally reached him. If he didn’t take them down as they showed up there’d be hell to pay to just slip out of Vongola secured territory once Shamal was back on his feet.

There was only so far Timoteo could keep clear for one lone hitman, especially as Renato wasn’t exactly pulling his weight in that relationship anymore.

Additionally, she had promised the brat gelato. Shamal might not remember the offer once he got better, but the woman would not be making him into a liar by omission.

…to be clear, he was a dirty filthy liar. Only on his terms, thank you very much.

Sonya wasn’t particularly happy he picked to wander over and take up a position directly behind her stiff-backed visitor’s chair she practically lived on recently but suffered the unasked imposition into her personal space silently enough while the Sun checked on the fever’s progress himself.

It was getting down there, but it wasn’t broken yet.

"Besides," continued the hitman in a forcibly neutral tone while still somewhat bent over her, now he didn’t have to speak loud enough she’d hear him across the damn room, "this is more than likely the last time I can do this until… well."

She was utterly unhappy to hear it and let him know by glaring. At the blankets Shamal was practically cocooned in rather than him.

"You are right in a way, little dragon lady. I keep putting it off." Admittedly for good reason, but Renato was stalling. The excuses were enticing, but frankly it was getting to the point he was inventing reasons to linger even knowing full well doing so was a particularly stupid idea. "You won’t mind taking him a little bit early than agreed so I can get… on top of that, would you?"

"You owe us dogs." Sonya immediately objected as quietly as him, sullenly. "And not until April. I leave the clan then, not now."

"In a week and a half."

"In two weeks and whatever political bullshit my Pahkan wants to go out on. Maybe three, I don’t know what he’s planning."

"A pair of puppies, two weeks at the earliest, and whatever political bullshit it is." Agreed the hitman simply enough as he straightened up again, then continued before she could point something else out in her aims to delay him more. "And yes, the arrangement with Nono for Shamal’s housing will last until his school year is over even if something happens to me. As a matter of fact, we’re disengaging it about two or three years early as it is."

He earned a disgusted glower for preempting her. Yet again, not actually directed at him but at her lap this time.

"The canines aren’t born yet, I had them special ordered. They’re paid for, to be delivered to the brat once they’re old enough to be weaned from their mother. Around June, probably."

"…did anyone think to feed Luiqi the last week or so?"

"Yes, I’ll be taking the dratted lizard with me." The Mist Flame pregnant dratted lizard, and the whole bug colony that would feed the damn things Shamal had been somewhat obsessively maintaining for the last month.
If the baby lizard was born in the next two weeks, then maybe he could leave the 'mom' behind without earning himself a Mist tantrum once he got back. Frankly, unless he was really creative, keeping a pet alive while his own survival would be a touch sketchy was not particularly the brightest idea.

…it was entirely a Mist one, and while Shamal was usually good about troubleshooting his off-the-wall ideas this one had gotten fanned by his Storm-Cloud godmother from conception to practical applications before it could be nipped in the bud at the altar of practicality. Hopefully the lizard would survive so he'd have something to present the brat once he was back, equally as hopefully the creature could be trained to be not useless or get itself killed stupidly.

If the damn thing died he'd invent a whole heroic story of its aid at a desperate life-threatening moment for why he no longer had it, but Renato really wasn't accustomed to failure these days. Even if it was stupid.

"Do you think…" Sonya trailed off before finishing her thought, unsure if her idea had any bearing on the situation at all but being directly behind her let him follow her thought process without too much trouble.

Did Luigi's condition explain why Shamal didn't pop Constructions into existence while sick?

Was the thing still pregnant?

What about the bugs he had been 'engineering' to be Flame-based for the baby chameleon to eat?

"…I'll check." Renato promised before her mind tripped down a few dozen more avenues to distract them both, then yanked the woman's chair about so she had to face him because he really didn't appreciate being ignored.

Sonya knew perfectly well he didn't, and he wasn't used to her being less than obliquely direct in a brain-baking and brutally blunt if sideways way. Not being annoyed with him, or infuriatingly angry, meant he had kind of stalled on how to help her deal with her latest show of 'surprise, I'm human' that was self-directed shame for both inaction and her recent actions.

He didn't mind she felt safe enough to express how utterly unhappy she was with his decision to mislead her at first, and he appreciated the faith he could take care of himself while she was so angry to finish yelling at him until she calmed down enough to think it through herself and see his position. He would've minded had she immediately left him to go blunt Tyr's sword instead.

To her credit, she didn't immediately look away from him. Instead he got the full brunt of her ugly glare for maneuvering her around without express permission as he re-adjusted himself to be level with her even if that meant he was kneeling in front of her seated form. It took less than a second to get the woman to sigh exasperatedly at him and finally shove away the feelings of chagrined irritation she had with her own belatedly realized fuck-up.

Not exactly dealt with, but at least she wouldn't dwell when looking at him anymore. Hopefully.

"I'd rather not go out on a sour note."

"That doesn't mean you deserve anything better." She immediately shot back without heat. "And I'm not faking anything for anyone just because they might get their feelings hurt. Not even you."

"Good. But can you at least look at me when we talk?"
"Frankly, aren't we already at a point we don't even really need to talk?" Mostly because he bullshitted half of it.

He sort of had to give her the point, both of them spoken or not, but there wasn't any reason to admit it. "What do you think the brat's going to think when he wakes up but you're giving me the cold shoulder?"

"...that you did something wrong, again?"

Snapping their heads to the side, the both of them took in a very miserable looking Mist dully staring back at them through glassy brown eyes. As the brat wasn't thinking anything, just sort of absorbing what little of their conversation he heard, the hitman had missed him waking.

Sonya was warily waiting for yet another repeat of the same conversation, but Renato noticed that while Shamal still wasn't entirely coherent he was at least thinking somewhat differently than he would the other times he woke up.

The kid also very distinctly recalled the last conversation he had with his godmother, and the fact the woman should be around.

For once.

Shamal, too groggy to catch on to the unspoken after waking up not too long ago as he wasn't sulking about Renato's upcoming 'abandonment', wiggled onto his side to see them better in the dimly lit hall. "So... when are we going for gelato?"

"Once the Old Sun lets you out of here." Promised the thief quickly, damn near slithering around the Sun's form with a couple very suggestive maneuvers to just hover at the kid's side. "I'm not going to ask if you're feeling better, I don't think you really remember much... but can you Construct me a pillow?"

Staring at her blankly for a full second, the Mist slowly frowned at her in a puzzled fashion. "...were you early or just on-time, mamma?"

"I was early. I got here even before him."

Renato stole her chair since she was back to fussing over the brat, idly brushing off any dust or dirt that might've gotten onto his knees while he waited.

Besides which, the incredulous look on the brat's face as he tried to make sense of that and his fragmented memories was more than enough revenge for the damn woman not staying put and finishing their conversation.

Strangely though, Sonya did not remotely mind the doubt aimed at her.

After Shamal managed to wrap his mind around his godmother being early, with a couple glances at him to check that really happened as she claimed, the kid did do as she asked in handing over a faked bag of fluffy feathers that didn't need to be pulled out from under his head.

A moment spent critically examining the object, then... neither of the males expected the thief to take firm hold of the thing and whack the hitman across the face with it.

"...the hell was that for?" Demanded the Mafioso shortly as he rubbed the side of his face she hit then had to grab for his hat before it hit the ground, keenly aware she hadn't actually put any force or irritation into it because... well, he still had a head.
"Stop being moody. The people around here are starting to think it's my fault." Sonya then hugged the Mist Flame pillow to her chest, a wry smirk aimed at him as their godson tried and failed to smother his shocked snorting giggles behind a hand. "Also, stop manhandling me. You can just ask."

Revelli had asked her to see if Shamal could Construct something the next time the kid woke, apparently. The pillow was, as she suspected from how bad Mists were with their Flames while sick and investigated for a second to be sure it still applied, utterly useless for anything but feeling soft and very squishy. Hitting him with it was all her idea, because she really was tired of being yanked around yet never really found an appropriate way to get her objections across in a way that would not really hurt even accidently but would still be shocking enough to hammer her point home.

She didn't particularly mind being held if he found it so pleasant, just his methods of getting her into his lap.

"…brat, give me one of those." The lady had spoken, and Renato would listen to her protest over his behavior and adjust accordingly… but he didn't lose fights.

Even pillow fights.

It was the principle of the matter, really. The fact it was a fight and as a Cloud Sonya would greatly enjoy a moment or three to be violent with even a useless Construct weapon that wouldn't let her kill anyone had little bearing on the situation.

(Wednesday the 25th of March, 1970. Saint Julian's Hospital, Mafia Land.)

"Do you have a moment, Doctor Kappel?" At the faintly expectant expression turned on her when the older man turned around, Tatiana firmly did not grimace or shift guilty. "Somewhere else…?"

"My office?"

"Erm… I was kind of thinking of getting lunch or something." Having prepared an excuse, the Sun Flame nurse pulled a whole sheaf of papers out from under her arm to show him.

The theoretical surgery notes alone were about seven pages of probable actions and expected side-effects or short-to-long term complications, explaining the Flame related terminology and several processes for replicating human flesh for replacement from damaged or not originals took another fifteen.

"This is a bit… well. We're going to need a bit of time to get through this entirely."

All the pages were hand-written as well. She had more sympathy for her sister's utter dislike for amending her paperwork on the Flame training results, but not by much. It had to be done, and it was in the end.

Just… ow, finger cramps.

"A new project…?" The man was surprised as he accepted it to look over for a general gist.

Likely because until she had everything written out and suitably vague on how she knew 'replicating Cloud Flame flesh' was an actual something that happened instead of a suggestion that could, she had not dared breathe word of this to anyone but her sister and kind of somewhat to Ganauche.
"Something like that, a Flame involved suggestion for a possible surgery. I would like your opinion… and then get your advice on if it's worth it to submit or which path I take from here. I've got a plan, but… you'd know better than I would if it'd work."

Kappel wasn't a fool or easily mislead. He got her general idea in seconds of scanning the first page of her proposed medical procedure, arched a fairly confused eyebrow until he got into how she thought to fix the problem with Flames until technology caught up, and then he got suspicious as expected over her motives for luring him out of the hospital well before he looked back up at her.

Which, to be fair, she wasn't even sure if he left the hospital at all. The good doctor might just actually have a little cot shoved in a corner somewhere, and the general impression most of the Moscow Flame users had of him of always being around or available if need be wasn't just for them.

"Please?"

He glanced down at the papers in his hand, sighed while reaching over his half-moon glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose for a moment, then dropped the hand from his face to gesture towards the general entrance for their place of work. "Lead on then, Nurse Primakova."

As it was entirely likely he knew just as well as she did his office was bugged with listening devices, the former Nazi doctor just really didn't care all that much by appearances, she tried for a grateful smile before doing as bid.

Their conversation would still probably be incredibly awkward, but it probably should happen before something utterly major went down to necessitate revealing the components of that surgery. Not too much information would need to be revealed, but still more than enough for Kappel to buy on supporting her proposal to the Head Doctors. Then there would be admitting that she intended to try for surgeon first and not a general practitioner until after her 'main' secondary as a pediatrician.

Shamal survived his very unfortunate jaunt into Flame related medical complications, from the sounds of it only slightly muddled and hopefully just needing a bit of time to sort himself out again, but her sister had a point. The number of pediatricians that could face down a Cloud or Sky, or even a Sun, parent and actually convince them about salient points of their child's health or care being different than they thought were probably non-existent.

Rain, maybe even Lightning, and more certainty Storm parents couldn't be a whole lot better if they didn't immediately accept a medical specialist had more of an idea of what was or what wasn't healthy for their children than they did. Mist parents… probably never sought out medical help much.

The kids involved in such situation didn't deserve to be overlooked just because it would be harder than hell to deny or argue against their parents about what was 'best' for them.

Tatiana wanted to continue working with Doctor Kappel. The man was at least trained up enough to not take one look at her generous chest and dismiss anything she might say as a brainless-bimbo flapping her lips just to be heard. Frankly, surgeons were kind of the pinnacle of sexist assholes in the hospital and that was an infuriating headache and a half just waiting for her.

It was just… her younger siblings would not be amiable to taking orders from just any medical practitioner barking at them or fussy Sun obsessing over their contributions. They'd also probably feel a whole lot safer with her being the one to handle any kind of involvement they'd have until an actual Cloud nurse was sourced somehow.

This was all assuming they'd even want to help out here or there a tiny bit, otherwise the Sun nurse
had the intent to stonewall any inquires to see if her siblings could 'help' the proposed medical procedure along by 'donating' or otherwise being paid for their time and Flames.

Neither of the full-grown Clouds were healers by nature, Sonya was fussy but not entirely nurturing unless whoever happened to be really close to her and while Cherep could he just didn't want to do that for his entire life. Valera would likely join them in the 'indifferent but if Tatiana insisted' grouping given enough time.

The best way to hide where she got her inspiration from was to include more Clouds than just her siblings, at least until such time either Skull himself or Sonya let it slip 'undying Clouds' were possible. Which, as her as a main 'Flame source' from the Zolotov accord with the hospital about supplying more personnel with the abilities, would not happen naturally without a little help.

Hence the German doctor patiently following her out the hospital and into the streets to find a less compromised place to talk. Even if explaining enough to gain his help would be, as noted, awkward to do.

Kappel would not be impressed with any of them. Especially as Sonya kind of forgot to inform him of her broken leg situation when he asked for any further injuries to be aware of, Tatiana for not coming clean about it at the time or alerting him to her siblings' having a medical-related work-around that needed more investigation as there was at least one known side effect possible, or Cherep himself for skirting around actual checkups by insisting the Sun do it if he had to.

He'd understand, probably, but still would not be impressed at all.

(ooo000ooo)

(Wednesday the 25th of March, 1970 continued. The Iron Fort, Italian Republic.)

"Good afternoon, young Shamal. You had a very interesting week, didn't you?"

"...good afternoon, Lady Fiorella." The tiny Mist mumbled back sheepishly, not twitching from his half-sprawled position over his godmother's lap. "Thank you for sitting with me."

Apparently, his lethargic behavior was from exhaustion or just because he was making the most of the time he had Sonya as close as she was.

The child squawked in offense when a finger pushed his face into the half-prone Russian's stomach, pouting up at the woman that did it once he could raise his head again. "And now he knows better than to ignore it if he's sick, don't you brat?"

"Sorry, mamma." Spoke the abashed child, curling into her for more shameless cuddling that was admittedly adorable.

Why didn't her two eldest sons want to cuddle with her anymore?

His color was a lot better since the last time the Lady of Vongola caught a glimpse of him, and her wry smile for the other woman earned her a sarcastic eye-roll that made her laugh instead of a polite excuse of Shamal needing more rest. Still... being lethargic was to be expected after so many days dreadfully ill to the point of unconsciousness, slightly exaggerated or not as the case may be now, but that was acceptable paired with being awake and moving around under his own steam.

Furthermore, the child was aware and not stressing his very dedicated godparents with repeats of the same conversation the rare few times he surfaced from sleep.
Fiorella wasn't remotely sure what and why the 'Flame users' were now concerned with in the child's recovery, she just knew there was something they were keeping watch for, but that was entirely not her business and something she would not ask about.

If it was one of her sons, she would not be happy to have to explain a limitation or worry to a nosy outsider either.

"Are you seeking a 'break' again?" Sonya inquired simply while she took a seat next to them, merely re-adjusting the book of fables in her hand not occupied with her godchild's hair while distracted.

"I didn't intend to until you didn't very politely chase me out again once the greetings were given."

Both Visconti and Solothurn didn't tend to like talking to people, the fact Sonya could hold entire conversations with others using words was an appreciative difference between Italian and Russian examples of the same 'Flame type'. Fiorella had come to appreciate the same, especially as while seeking a distraction from her own worries the woman would not mind distracting or helping with hers now or again.

The Russian merely hummed in acknowledgement of her presence instead of immediately offer her opinions on the strain between her and her husband, grey eyes dropping to clearly printed if faded pages to continue reading for Shamal's enjoyment even if another was now in the room to listen too.

She didn't have an expressive voice, that would be a touch generous even considering some Clouds were nearly outright mute in comparison, but it was soothing in how calm and unhurried she was to be reading something aloud.

Sonya would've likely gotten to the end then restarted the whole series of fables without either Shamal or Fiorella interrupting her had it not been for Enrico. Who got into the medical wing and almost snuck around his mother entirely to see what was going on for himself had, without so much as pausing between one word and the next or even glancing to the side, the blonde set her book down on her knee and reached over to haul the other child up into Fiorella's lap.

As the younger woman went back to holding the book she was reading from, she instead occupied herself with her lapful of son. "Enrico, you shouldn't be down here."

"Neither should you, mum." Her second boy countered, at first confidently but under the arched eyebrow she aimed at him he grew less sure of his statement. "...right?"

"I am an adult. Yes, I too have bodyguards when I leave the family floor but mine is just outside in the hallway. Where is yours, young man? Did you even get permission to come down here?"

Enrico's silence was utterly telling, as if she needed it knowing full well most of the mischief her older children got into was mostly his idea at first. "You need to stop doing this. What if you got hurt or lost?"

"I live here." He countered in offended dignity, wrinkling his nose at her to cement how ridiculous he found her suggestion.

Sonya finally paused in her reading but didn't look up. "Objection, brat. I don't know you, and I highly doubt you know who I am. So, if you were hurt or got out the front gates on me I wouldn't know to tell someone or to not call you an ambulance."

"Hey," Shamal protested, pouting up at her in a somewhat exaggerated fashion, "I'm your brat."

Obviously, through the little conversation she had with Enrico in front of her alone, the Russian was fully aware he was Fiorella's son now. Given how deft she was with handling her own child, it was
also entirely likely she’d fetch a young boy trying to slip out of the Iron Fort to drop said child into a maid or footman's arm if only out of practicality. She was sharp, sharper than the older Italian by a measurable difference as plucking her sneaking son out of nowhere showed, but lending her credibility in the quest of all mothers everywhere to pound some common sense into their sons was always appreciated.

Enrico finally realized the blonde wasn’t one of the veritable army of maids or a new nurse that worked in his home entertaining a sick patient, going eerily silent as he finally absorbed some of the lesson of 'not everyone here at home could have your best interests at heart'.

With the resilience of children everywhere, he bounced back from that little setback in his world view exasperatingly quickly. "Shamal, where have you been? You missed a whole week of school!"

Amusingly, the little brunette gave his contemporary's little brother an utterly bland look he more likely learned from his godmother's example. "I'm in the sick bay, aren't I? I was sick."

"Did you get your tonsils removed or something?"

Fiorella wasn't sure if Sonya's sudden frown at the question meant anything, the Russian seemed more confused than anything more serious.

"No. I was just sick. Slept through most of it too." Shamal explained tiredly, smoothing his little chin down his godmother's thighs to apparently find a cooler spot given his blissful little sigh when he found it.

"Federico said you died." Reported Enrico tactlessly, and as brightly innocent as only a six-year-old boy could pull off saying such a thing.

Slapping a hand over her middle child's apparently somewhat big mouth, his mother gave the very still godmother next to her a tight smile. "I'm apparently going to have some stern words with my eldest, sorry about that Sonya."

"...it was a very close thing. We're lucky my sister has little morals about bending a few things when it comes to the health of another, sending us that medication." Refuted the woman slowly after a slightly awkward moment. "Your eldest might've misheard something and told his brother slightly wrong information instead of... well, anything specifically intentional."

"I still need to speak to him about spreading second or third-hand gossip." That was just inviting trouble when there was always more than enough to go around, and Fiorella would very much like to know who spoke of the situation around her son when no one would inform her of anything. "And maybe speak to all of my sons about the harm such thoughtless behavior can do to their reputations and another's."

"It's a good idea." Sonya offered awkwardly, obviously not really sure if her opinion would matter to her or if it was wanted at all from how warily she was watching her.

Shamal, the sweetheart that hadn't looked remotely bothered by what Enrico told him or distressed at the revelation of what was being said about him, tugged on his godmother's blouse. "Mamma...? Can I dress up as a zombie when I go back to school?"

"...I know I'm going to regret this, but why?"

"Because it'd be funny."

The Russian rolled her eyes, then caught Fiorella's perhaps a touch too shocked stare. "Mists, Lady
Fiorella. They're all... equally as weird. It would be something a Mist finds funny, to twist rumor into reality when the truth is very different."

"Does... Federico know that?" Was her son helping the other boy?

"It's possible. I don't know a whole lot of Sky behaviors but setting up an amusement a prospective Guardian Element might find interesting does sound plausible. Shamal's of the same general age range as your eldest, I believe, so 'courting' a Guardian might entirely be a motive for him."

The older mother pursed her lips thoughtfully. "You weren't just saying that to make Enrico's comment sound less rude to me, were you?"

From the grimace that twisted the other woman's lips, she wasn't entirely correct. "I don't know Skies. You'd have to ask either your husband or your mother-in-law for a better idea, or the kid himself what he does or doesn't intend."

"Do I have to ask to get any answers around here?"

"With me? Yes." Countered the blonde bluntly, something she was also fast becoming rather appreciative of. "You have to ask me because I'm not a native of this part of the world, and there are parts of it I don't know. There're all sorts of ill-intentions someone might have to volunteer information you didn't ask for when you have no prior experience to judge their claims against. You take the wrong person with ill-intents at their word..."

Fiorella released her middle child's loose lips just to rub at her forehead as she took that advice to heart. "I see... is there anything you can recommend to make this go faster, then? Timoteo said he couldn't right now, and I really want to trust him in that despite all the 'in the know' around here but he's already lied to me about something rather significant before..."

Sonya drummed her fingers into the spine of the book she wasn't reading anymore. "While... I really don't want to help your husband at all... he's right. Actually. What you want is a Home Tutor, but there's never very many of them. I have two, for all of Moscow, and one already has a consecutive contractual obligation somewhere else the moment he's done with his current student. The other one started his assignment half a year ago and won't be remotely finished with his for another year yet. I doubt Italy has more, given how difficult maintaining a Home Tutor's position of neutrality to all involved parties to avoid accusations of this or that agenda regarding their students is for any length of time."

A tutor? "That doesn't sound-"

"They're expressly for situation where the normal methods of instruction aren't viable." She continued rather pointedly, then sighing as she turned back to fussing with her pliant godson's wavy hair. "Which, in your case, is entirely the issue. Vongola's old, Lady Fiorella. Coming up on three-four centuries old, depending how you measure the time. That's a lot of history, a lot of political pull, in this part of the world for our society. A lot of people either want a piece of it or to tear it down, and you are Timoteo's wife and the mother of the next generation of Vongola's leaders. He can't just pick anyone, and there's a couple other long-standing groups that would object to a Tutor for you being pulled from another family instead of them."

As she had drawn the same conclusion over the parts of that deliberation she could see, and it did explain the hovering by the staff when she entertained a few garden parties for the wives of her husband's associates where apparently half knew and half didn't, Fiorella took that under advisement. Somehow and somewhat transparently but given the short approving nod Sonya gave her apparently without causing hard feelings.
"I don't like your husband, it's somewhat well known by this point. I like some of his people, don't really appreciate your mother-in-law, and my sister's somewhat distracted by one of his Guardians. I don't have much reason to mislead you, but I could if you ask me without a witness nearby to refute the bad information. Which is why Miss Silvery-White was very attentive when I explained Flame user habits around fully-grown adults to you, and the fact she's eavesdropping, if you noticed."

She hadn't, either then or right now. Trying to not show how out of her depth she felt, things were so much less complicated when all she really needed to do was keep the gold diggers and twits from harassing the help or behaving rudely to another wife over coffee or otherwise raise her sons, she glanced down at her own boy and stopped him from pulling silly faces at the older 'Mist'… who was pulling faces of his own right back.

Fiorella's confused look was answered by an utterly deadpan expression.

"I've got a Mist. With them, pulling faces when bored is honestly the least of my worries."

"Oh?"

Sonya grimaced again. "There's this kid back in Moscow who's also a Mist, he's been screwing with how old others perceive him as. Because 'he gets left out of all the fun things' and doesn't appreciate it, as he's nine and trying to get into the things only teenagers are allowed to try their hands at while also being too impatient to wait until he is old enough."

"…oh dear." She had a lapful of 'a possible Sky', another maybe-Sky and her eldest was known as one.

What childish misadventures were Skies known for?

"I think… I should probably speak to my mother-in-law rather soon." Lady Daniella had been attempting to let her settle things between herself and her son without influencing them, however Fiorella now found a few pressing concerns she really must speak to an 'elder' Sky about.

Timoteo would only try to reassure her that he and his staff had things well in hand and would handle anything before it could happen, without actually addressing anything she asked of him and the why it mattered between two individuals if she wasn't asking about him or his Guardians. It wasn't that he still believed it wasn't her business, when her sons were expected to follow her husband's Flame type or when she had to rely on his bodyguards in fraught moments too.

…the somewhat infuriating man did think it would be ultimately useless for her to know anything in detail about any other Flame type behaviors beyond the social niceties to accommodate the few users she apparently interacted with, but he was of the opinion if it made her feel better to know then there wasn't much point trying to prevent her learning anything. Fiorella found the sentiment rather insulting, and somewhat worrying because Timoteo believed it was possible to control what she learned.

Worse, it was entirely likely it was possible.

It wasn't until recently that she realized how few friends she had left, none of them from before her marriage and a few after that were likely used to reporting things to Timoteo when asked, that she realized how true the 'outsider' feeling she had was. Her current issue was trying not to correlate her lack of support outside her husband's 'staff' and people to said husband, because drifting apart after school or when you rarely spoke to old friends just happened.

…but her husband probably could, entirely naturally, slowly extract her from the people she would
have otherwise had around her that might have different opinions on the subjects of contention. If she could speak to them about it, that was.

She called her parents now and again, but the last time she saw them in person…

They’d probably appreciate seeing their grandsons in in flesh at least once in their lifetimes, honestly. Fiorella should arrange a visit sometime soon.

"…mum?" Enrico asked hesitantly, pulling on her dress' bodice a few times to get her to refocus on him. "Are you okay?"

"Mmm, I'm fine." It was entirely ridiculous to be lonely or feel isolated in an entire house of people and her own sons, so patting him on the back once she let him slip to the ground. "I think we should probably leave young Shamal to his rest for now, Enrico. Say goodbye, dear."

Said young man needing his rest merely waved a limp hand at them both, settling in for what did look to be a nap in progress. Sonya, on the other hand, gave her a very pointed look that called Fiorella out on her bullshit… but she remained silent as she moved her book away from potential drool hazards.

Daniella was entirely correct, calling Russians delightfully blunt and frank. At least they had the tact to make it an appreciative character trait rather than an exasperating one.

Nilda, indeed waiting just close enough to the medical wing's doors to enable eavesdropping if she wished, gave her charge a tight smile as mother and son joined her. "Back upstairs?"

"Indeed. Somedays, I wish there weren't so many… but, well… I now have a fantastic set of legs for a mother thrice over." Enrico gagged at her side, but her bodyguard's tight smile loosened to something a lot more natural.

Now then, was her 'Rain' guard annoyed over being called 'Miss Silvery-White' again or for being called out for eavesdropping?

(Saturday the 28th of March, 1970. Saint Gallen, Canton of Saint Gall, Swiss Confederation.)

"Pack. Up."

Scrambling out of bed for everything he would remotely need for the next few hours as those words rang in his ears without needing to be spoken aloud, Bjørn pinned a leather folder to his chest and his suit jacket with tie in the other and almost reached his shoes.

Before he could get there, there was an entirely nauseating sensation of being pulled apart and also blindly bounced around somewhere tightly constrained.

Tatiana blinked at him blankly, stirring whatever she had cooking on the stove absently as she eyed his rather ungainly emergence from nothing in an undignified flopping manner to hit the living room floor of the Mafia Land apartment. "Do I want to know?"

To add insult to injury, not that Viper would intentionally hamper his health but bruises were fair game entirely if he failed to keep up, the Lackey's brown leather loafers bounced off his head before he could answer. Grumbling sourly under his breath in his native language, he gingerly picked himself and his things up before his tutor could dump the rest on him. "Viper apparently deems
whatever happened to be not in my best interest to become involved with."

"Well, good for you." Observed the nurse idly, tasting the thin soup she was tending curiously for a second before adjusting the heat under her pot and continuing to stir it. "Nya was here then left again after about a week. Shamal got really sick, so she's a touch distracted from just about everything right now."

Björn didn't groan in dismay, it was close but he didn't. He did shuffle over to his couch to await the rest of his belongings to be tossed through whatever insanity-space Mists made use of to him, bloody or not as his tutor dealt with whatever they banished him for. "Anything else?"

She likely wouldn't ensure her displeasure at being tardy to report in to her was felt because he was off on business she had arranged for him, but she had asked he not make her wait that long.

"She took Verde and Adrik to her castle, you can coordinate anything you need to arrange through them. They'd also probably like whatever you know is missing from the upkeep there."

A cough jarred him from immediately responding. "Anything else beyond that?"

"I've decided to focus my studies on surgery." Admitted the nurse after a moment to very deliberately draw attention to her plotting. "So, if I eye you like I'm plotting out how many parts I could separate you into… it's probably because I am."

…apparently, she felt a tiny bit sadistic today. "Okay…?"

"Doctor Kappel would appreciate it if you would check in with him sometime soon, just so he can reassure himself you're not hiding any medical difficulties with your Flame types from him." She continued brightly, deeming her soup or stock finished and clicking off the stove.

That was a bit of a non sequitur. Confused what that had to do with anything, Björn shrugged instead of risk speaking more even if she wasn't looking at him to see it and turned his attention to checking over what he did manage to grab in the few seconds he had to prepare as he got sort of light-headed.

Switching from the mountain edged valleys of Switzerland to a sea-level island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean was harsh. Mists were probably the most experienced Flame type in dealing with altitude sickness, but they also knew of reverse altitude sickness. Viper had informed him, while detailing his extraction options in case of emergency, of the phenomena somewhat pointedly. The miser also offered what short-term adjustments to high altitude areas for someone that lived in low altitude ones like him needed to do, and the reverse just in case, when the Icelander paid for it too.

The near-instant headache was to be expected. As was the dizziness and the somewhat more difficult breathing. The coughing was… something a touch more.

Yes, at this elevation oxygen was denser… but it wasn't like his body knew that. All his body could sense was something had changed, and whether or not he could draw in enough air to continue living was entirely something it felt the right to panic about.

…Björn had been dealing with Mists too long, thinking of his body as if it was a separate entity from him.

"Lackey, why are you having problems breathing?"

Well, nurse. He told her between deep breaths and around some involuntary splutters on his own air, trying to get his body to adjust already.
Glittering yellow Flames coaxed his lungs into doing what the brain was smart enough to identify but was unable to communicate to an automatic function, then two inhales went unaided before Tatiana helped him draw in enough air again without spluttering on it. By the fifth time she had to help him his lungs got the picture, and the headache started to fade as what felt like bands across his lungs loosened.

"I didn't know this was a problem." Spoke the Sun Flame user idly, which really had no bearing whatsoever on what she was really thinking or feeling and was entirely deceptive in giving the illusion of answering being optional.

"Apparently," no coughs, so perhaps he could get to work on arranging the work crews that needed to replace the somewhat old window sills with more sturdy modern glass today instead of tomorrow, "it's a well-known phenomenon in Mist circles. Likely from first-hand experience... but you know Mists, Tatiana."

"Yeah, they do that shit then wonder why we have so much difficulty helping or understanding them later on." With a huff, she left him to breathing on his own to decant what she had been cooking into a strainer over another bowl to separate the liquid broth from the bones she was boiling. "By the way, put on some damn pants."

The moment she spoke the word 'pants', the slacks he had removed last night ended up in his face as Mist Flames apparently waiting for that exact moment decided to ensure his embarrassment was assured for the rest of his life.

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 28th of March, 1970 continued. Saint Gallen, Canton of Saint Gall, Swiss Confederation.)

It took a few hours, but eventually Viper had to admit defeat.

Grudgingly.

At this point, the Esper couldn't even really say what it was that woke them. A void was a void, even in one's senses. The fact Viper had noticed a void of nothing near them at all would have to do, because without even a taste of whichever Mist wanted a good look at them they could not secure a method to track the other down with. Even with the Thoughtography ability, they would not be able to pinpoint the other without something the target called their own.

Names worked, as did a sense of another's Flames. Body parts, from toenails to hair, and blood would do... and in a pinch the blood of family would work equally as well. Better if it was from parents.

They had nothing to show from this scavenger hunt into nothingness, which meant nothing to pin down and eliminate a threat through.

Tugging firmly on the hood they wore, a Constructed facsimile rather than the wool cloth they normally used, Viper turned on a heel and walked back into the real world walking west down a street called Birnbäumenstrasse on their way back to the hotel.

It really would only take a second to appear there, but the Mist was somewhat shaken by the close encounter with nothing. When such rare incidents happened, they tended to choose long-winded and pointlessly complicated methods of travel to slide under the notice of those expecting that by using an ability of speed and convenience going slow would never occur to Mists.
To be fair, it rarely happened.

It was also why Viper counted money in both physical ways and Mist ones. The first thing anyone, much less another Mist, would do to mess with them was target the very trait that was becoming so infamous a Lackey and his patron both wordlessly offered up cold hard cash to get what they wanted without pointless talking or attempting to barter the Esper down to more realistic amounts.

…a pity, as Cherep was the only one to take it as a challenge to haggle with Viper about the price of various 'services' but that was a rare event. Mainly the stuntman didn't care to protest anything except what was too outrageous, because paying his friend was something that made them happy so he would.

The question now was if that void-sense was part of the Mists of Switzerland or not. It could be like the whispered rumors of the ancient one, a boogie-man of a myth credited with the occasional death of idiotic Mists intent on disproving the rumors only to end up removed from the living world.

Viper highly doubted the void-one was the ancient one, as flighty as most Mists were when it came to trading verifiable information the fact there was one enduring trait applied to the rumored being said it all. It was ancient, likely a dead Mist refusing to die much as a Cloud stuntman did on a much grander scale, and highly disinterested in anything but its own aims unless you forced it to be interested.

If that sensed void returned… in a fraught contest of wills between two or more Mists…

Thankfully, there would be a war hammer involved to assist them with tapping down loose nails that thought themselves so clever in short order. Against the void-one it might not help much but injecting something greatly different into a situation to counter expectations was always a valid tactic.
Chapter 109

(Tuesday the 31st of March, 1970. A gelato shop on Via D. Cardona, Vibo Valentia, Italian Republic.)

Shamal, wearing his godmother's light knit sweater because even the mid-morning sea breeze chilled him a bit more than he was comfortable with so soon after being seriously ill, had his eyes on maybe finishing his cup of gelato then starting in on Sonya's. The thief had picked vanilla, rather than copy the hitman in picking espresso or the brat in his chocolate flavor.

Renato snorted when the woman so innocently looked away from a suspicious shiny silver butterfly to take a bite of her treat... a second before the Mist could commit to stealing a bite from her. The game had been going on for five whole minutes now, and while Sonya would allow Mist-made or her own distractions to tempt her away from her gelato she always went back just before the brat could dare do anything.

Getting a polite look of attention from the thief, and a sour glower from the Mist, for the noise the hitman discarded his little paper bowl and the plastic spoon supplied to eat their frozen yogurt with in a nearby trash can. "I should hit the road..."

She tisked, making a sour kind of sneer not really aimed at anyone. "So should I, frankly."

"Ho? ...are you putting something off?"

"Something like that."

Shamal, the utter brat, appeared utterly unconcerned by anything the two of them had been in the middle of before he got sick and derailed a whole lot of plans.

"I need to head to China, at the very least." Sonya continued absently around her little plastic spoon. "Now... if I could only remember that guy's name..."

"Which guy?" The Mist pounced on suspiciously, although making an admirable effort to keep his disgruntlement off his face to keep from distracting the woman from answering.

"Fong's Triad head... Zhōng, that's it. I keep thinking it's Gong. But no, that's the guy whose hand I crushed. Well, that or something with an 'i' in it." She looked pleased, for about all of a second. "... don't ask me his surname. Either one. I don't recall if I was ever told."

"I'll be sure not to." Renato drawled out a touch sarcastically, but apparently any reason for why he'd be so flew over the Russian's head. She dismissed it as just him being himself, rather than being a male interested in her not appreciating her mentioning other men to him.

Fong would be the Triad martial artist on Mafia Land, the hitman had run into him once directly and otherwise glancing around the island's more residential sectors. Which reminded him, he had yet to spend the time or accumulated efforts to learn Chinese from a Mist... he wouldn't have the influence to spend for a while, frankly.

"Regardless... brat. A month or so, probably more like two because I need to have some construction done in a fast hurry, and I'll be finished with the basics of my... place. Then you can come live with me, once you're done with the school year. So, this summer is when you're moving. Plan accordingly."
"Am I staying with the school next year too?"

"That's a bit far to go just for school." Observed the Mafioso dryly when she blinked a few times to contemplate how to enable it if he did want to return next year, even flying round-trip that would still be a few hours to get to school and return so it wasn't feasible even if she wanted to try. "Probably not. More likely, you'll get shoved into whatever's local. Although, speaking of… if you do get a different school… you know perfectly well how to behave yourself, right?"

At first matching his pointed look with a stubborn look of his own, the brat winced when Sonya tossed in her two bits.

"Seriously, kid. I'm not going to have a whole lot of leeway with any time for the next couple years. I won't be able to do a whole lot of these 'drop everything' moments, so if you'd kindly save them for real emergencies I'd appreciate it."

Of course, Mists being Mists, that got translated into 'don't get caught/suspected' in Shamal's devious if young mind. The kid did, since his godmother ruled out something she didn't want to deal with, adjust his plans enough to account for that but the restriction didn't really impact much that he had pre-planned for his current and future school mates.

As far as he perceived things, that is.

Renato wished Sonya the joy of dealing with the inevitable fallout, because as strong as the brat was he was unpracticed and rather inexperienced yet with his plots. He'd get the experience by doing things that might just need 'parental' interference to prevent the Mist from accidently screwing himself over, which had been thankfully thin on the ground the last couple years.

Although, speaking of… "...how much of our... special skills are held under the police's umbrella? If said special skill holder isn't under the Vows already?"

Shamal should, at the very least, be aware of the finite limits of allowable leeway. As should they, just to ensure his excitement wouldn't exceed his common sense.

The only one who would probably know between all of them gave a semi-thoughtful frown. "It's not explicitly clear. Unfortunately."

"More of the brat's kind aiming to take advantage?"

"How ever did you guess?" Ignoring his bark of laughter, and the keenly interested stare from said Mist brat, the blonde discarded her own frozen treat to the child in order to rub at her forehead. "I swear... if it's not Usov and his interest in getting an introduction to an officer of all things, it's the entire damn section deciding that the wording is more important than the intent behind a few orders and of course they're allowed to twist around such things to violate the spirit. Repeatedly."

Well, that stood to reason. What Mist worth their Flames didn't immediately find each and every way around what they've been forbidden to do?

Getting them to heed those limitations were sometimes more trouble than it was worth.

"When are you going to ask, then?"

"I'm not sure I should." Sonya immediately responded, vastly different than he expected her to. "It's not just those like our brat, who more than likely will end up with us before long. There's... a small handful I know of that don't want anything to do with the world we live in."
Renato… was not impressed.

Apparently somewhat transparently, given the utterly bland look he got back.

"One of said handful is a young teenage girl, with an interest in law."

…alright. Apparently he needed an attitude adjustment because the first thought he had was 'well, we need lawyers just as much as anyone else', which while true was entirely churlish. If a lady said no a lady said no… yet apparently that wasn't what he immediately understood from the proposed situation without the details behind it.

"Besides which, what exactly gives anyone the right to another person just because they have some kind of trait?" Continued the professional thief who also stole people absently, eyeing the dregs that were left of her gelato after Shamal got through with it. "Just because she has it does not mean she's not her own person or can live as she likes."

"I believe the prevailing thought behind that particular habit is 'because we belong together', although admittedly I'm no expert." Offered the hitman after a moment, skeptical of even that because he never really dedicated any time to asking around or inquiring about what other options there might be.

He hadn't been interested in anything other than being a hitman. From the start to even now, he wanted to be a Mafioso and he wanted the ability to secure his own damn back from other Mafiosi or hitmen around him.

"Oh please." She scoffed sardonically. "As if that ever goes through anyone's head unless they're poaching independent civilian outfits. And it's an excuse, we all know it."

"I wouldn't be the one to speak about that."

"Actually, you are. Because you don't have a reason to dress it up in pretty political lies and hand wave the practice. You're also a sample of what the men on the ground assume is the rule of thumb for such incidents is, and what they'd do with that information if and when they find it."

The hitman pondered the accusation, as indirect and backhandedly as she issued it. "And what, exactly, would convincing me do for any such knee-jerk reaction?"

"Because you are what it means to be a… well, what you are. If you have a difference of opinions on the subject when asked or whatever, then all the wise guys nipping at your heels vying for your position or attention will adopt the same outlook because 'it must work for him'."

"Will it work for us?" He shot back quickly, earning a shrug.

"It will cut down on disgruntled employees that feel as if there's no reason to be loyal because they didn't want this in the first place. It might even just result in earning you consideration later on for not pulling people that would otherwise live simple lives into infinitely more complex lifestyles they don't survive in long." Sonya batted a hand at him as if to dismiss anything that might happen from it. "Who's to say? As it is now… there's a lot of unsavory parallels that can be drawn to several social groups that either once existed or still do today. Mainly 'impressment', 'conscripted servitude', 'human trafficking', and 'serfdom'. Of which, I'm about to go take advantage of to ensure yet another toddler isn't being impressed into something he shouldn't be before he can decide himself."

"That's a bold claim."

"What would've happened to the brat had you not gone back for him?"
Renato blinked, then thought about it. Obviously, Shamal wouldn't have ended up in the Iron Fort so quickly after being made an orphan and homeless, his father lived much further north than Vongola's home or even allied territories. If anyone, the brat would've ended up somewhere in the Pesca Famiglia's umbrella scrounging much as he had himself in his childhood for just enough food and recognition to scrape out something a touch better for himself.

Mainly half assed living quarters, which only occasionally had enough running water every four days and barely enough room for an actual bed.

…it was half the reason he grabbed the kid in the first place, because that was damn near cut-throat in competitiveness. Sometimes literally. The other half was because the baby brat was a Mist, and Flame traffickers… hmm, point.

He'd done it all before on his lonesome, and how many times had he cursed out the adults around him for not sparing two seconds to warn of easily made mistakes before he cut himself on them?

Now he had the skills and tips to pass on and a baby possible Mafioso-hopeful at his knees, the hitman didn't want to be a damn thing like those stingy bastards who just watched him try then fail over and over again. He'd do better than all of them, and Shamal wouldn't struggle with the unnecessary bullshit he had to string together to be taken remotely seriously.

Then again, when Renato had been seven and scrapping for his dinner being a Dying Will Flame user was practically the same as being any other brat in his little scrap of dirty slums because outside the massive famiglias it wasn't well known what one was. Now that Shamal was seven every luckless moron remotely connected to the pulse of the Mafia knew full well having Dying Will Flames allowed you entrance in any famiglia worth its salt now the structured organizations realized there was fresh blood to snag running about.

Then there was the point of Flame traffickers, and the point it might not have gone away just changed slightly to be more respectable. Otherwise the syndicates that started it all finally wised up and amended their policies to prevent 'disgruntled workers' from aiming to take them down from the inside.

Like picking up a child Flame user that wouldn't know better or otherwise because they were orphaned early, then raising them somewhere they wouldn't have originally to cement their loyalties to structured syndicates of choice.

Which wasn't what happened here with Shamal, and Sonya knew full well… but she was practically the only one and she had been there from the start to have that view. Anyone looking outside in would just see bratty Mist was powerful, Renato's ward since toddlerhood, adored the hitman and took his words to heart. They'd look at her and see mostly the same if slightly different because the thief wasn't Italian nor interested in cultivating local contacts nearly as much as he was.

That lens hadn't been applied to his interactions around here, because this was his home country and the thought they'd specifically set out to do something he had to horribly fuck up in the first place to cause… well, he might not have thought about it but ignoring the possibility now would be both hard to do and stupidly self-sabotaging.

"I'll see what I can do." Renato promised the Russian, which he could do without lying because she was fully aware he would be coming back after his 'death'.

He really needed to think up of a handle to use, he kept putting it off because specifically linking a name to any one specific thing he couldn't control just yet was more than likely impossible. A couple pre-made assumptions of his existence before 'Renato' died would help prevent others from linking
the two hopefully somewhat different *Mafiosi* to the same individual.

Not having any idea just yet meant no one else would have any idea what he'd call himself if he wasn't going to go by name.

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**Saturday the 4th of April, 1970. Wo Hop To Triad's Compound, Wan Chai District, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.**

"*Lady* Cloud, be welcome."

Given the thin, utterly unfriendly smile he got in return, being a 'welcome' guest would fast be straining the definition of the term. Zhōng Duyi returned the expression with a short nod, which thankfully smoothed the ill-fitting and entirely faked expression from her lips.

"This is going to have to be quick, I've had way too much come up and delay me as it is." Pausing, and seeing if he was really all that interested in what delayed her for two whole weeks outside the agreed time, the thief very silently sighed in his face. "My godson got terribly ill."

Ah.

Tactfully deciding to forgive her missing the actual arranged dates to be within his territory with such an excuse to offer, he gestured for Huang to serve the tea. "Understandable. Will you be staying with us long?"

"No, as I've said... I'm now sandwiched between several pressing responsibilities I can't shove off or otherwise ignore. So about two days, in which I have only one burning question to answer." That faked smile returned, although this time not aimed directly at him as much as the situation in general it seemed. "How is that Flame-blind child doing?"

"...to be clear, we are not aligned nor associated with the Big Circle Boys." Admitted the head of the Wo Hop To Triad to start with, earning him not even so much as a blink for the detail which did limit his Triad from gaining the information she specifically wanted. "We have, as well as some other very interested parties, been keeping an eye on the situation. However, as they are formally under censure they are fully aware we are watching them and conduct themselves either accordingly or outside our combined ability to observe."

Grey eyes narrowed slightly, the woman herself seemingly somewhat pensive rather than hostile. "Do you think, if I go 'visit', you could use the opportunity to claim 'outside observer'?"

Zhōng highly doubted he could stop her, and just checking in with him to see if he could use her presence was already entirely unexpected consideration as it was. "If you would wait two or three hours before heading out? I have... some avenues to investigate to smooth your way."

"As long as you do not mind my presence in your kitchens."

His Sun cook preened, pleased, caught himself doing it and tried to settle himself. Badly.

"I wonder if I should be concerned you may try to steal him."

"I've been told I'm getting an Italian chef." Bazanova spoke simply without directly refuting the observation. "Mainly, it seems, because the godfather knows this chef and if I imported anything I'd be sure to hear about it for the rest of my brat's existence."
He inclined his head to acknowledge the points she had against such a concern, even if that was very obviously not a blunt refusal of the possibility. "I cannot say I am entirely sorry to hear it."

(ooo000ooo)

(Saturday the 4th of April, 1970 continued. Fo Tan, Lek Yuen, Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.)

Ballsy Toddler Boy apparently remembered her full well, in spite of the concerns the Storm-Cloud held about missing his more than likely maimed if not dead father and his more immediate social situation as the son of a man that got them if not in trouble then shamed by their fellow syndicates.

A second of staring, apparently just to be sure it was her, and the kid crawled up and into her lap just to curl up and resume his somewhat unsurprising napping on the Cloud in the room.

It took another three minutes for the mom to realize she had a guest.

From how quickly she recovered from being badly startled, Sonya held the suspicion this wasn't the first unannounced visitation this part of or partial family had experienced since last fall. "...good morning."

By the complete non-expression she earned, the mom would beg to differ.

"Is your husband alive?" Inquired the thief, not bothered at all with the idea of waiting a long while for an answer or any movement aside what had already been done.

It was a bit more telling to inspect the surroundings available, in truth.

The Big Circle Boys were a big Triad, and when you got down to it… it was only a branch that decided to be naughty. A bigger than normal 'branch' admittedly, but not really all that large when stacked against what else they had to draw from. That one branch getting caught, or worse making the rest look bad, to the rest of the Chinese underworld would indeed lose a large number of people their lives down to parts of their bodies.

She remembered full well that occasionally a Chinese man she met might be missing a part or all of some fingers. She also recalled why it happened, and frankly self-mutilation just sounded like a bad idea all over.

Sure, the one that committed the infraction would regret it and prove they were fully aware of the price to be paid for fucking up in the first place… it would make it hard for someone to maintain a grip on everything from papers to a weapon depending on how much they lost. Which would mean the odds of them being unable to help some future situation would go up…

Eh, not her culture.

This was… a tiny personal house. Which was actually somewhat generous given what city living was normally like in massive sprawling metropolitan cities like the port of Hong Kong. Fo Tan was a light industrial and residential area, requiring a lot of logistical and infrastructure to support a significant workforce to make such goods, however this tiny home was being infringed upon by local transit construction to connect this side of the Sing Mun River and Tolo Harbor to the rest of mainland China and Hong Kong’s southern or southwestern ports more directly.

The fact hopefully two people and a child lived here wasn't really surprising, the fact they didn't live with another family was. It was painfully clean, which just revealed a bit of threadbare patches and marks of somewhat less gracious fortunes these days compared to what the occupants had been
accommodated to.

It could either be what drove the dad to mischief with his local chapter of the Big Circle Boys, what made it seem like a good idea to participate in a martial arts tournament being held by the Triads, or just what drove this small family into seeking criminal help to survive in the first place.

"What does such a rude western demon have to do with my family, and is so familiar my son knows who you are when I do not?"

"To clarify, I didn't know you were even alive or in the picture for the kid." Sonya offered, ignoring the slur because really 'guizi' was actually somewhat correct in a way. "When I made it apparent what he was, it was to spare him the worse of the backlash your husband invited."

Apparently, this mother knew full well what her husband had or was up to and what complications it might pose to her child. The admission didn't earn the thief a damn thing, which was in a way admirable even if it was kind of in her way right now.

At the very least, the woman stopped hovering in indecisiveness and at least committed to gathering information instead of ineffectually trying to beat the Russian off somehow with what she had at hand. Taking the kitchen chair opposite the other woman, Ballsy Toddler Boy's mom crossed her arms and had the gall to look expectant.

…well, apparently the kid got his guts from the maternal side of his family.

"My name is Sonya Bazanova, I am a Russian Cloud and Storm Flame user. It was, during the same hostage situation I am sure you are familiar with where I was held as the Wo Hop To Triad's hostage for good behavior, that your son came to know who I was. It wasn't until near the end of that farce that I learned what he was."

"And what does 'Flame blind' even mean, demon."

"That he is, without exception, the only one I know of who could believably be a neutral party in any situation involving opposing Flame users. If handled correctly, that is."

"And are you here to 'see to it' I am raising my son in the correct way?"

Sonya allowed a small, thin smile to creep across her face. You really had to admire such resistance where you found it, as way too many allowed themselves to be steamrolled without protest by her and others once Flames were brought into the picture.

Yeah, she could murder everyone remotely in her way. As it was turning out, she might not have much of a moral barrier to that possibility as it was a socially learned understanding that murder was not really the best answer even if it was the last one you had. It would get incredibly boring, as well as being the morally wrong answer to all problems she faced, and if she had spent her last lifetime scraping together enough money with the intentions of picking up diplomacy as fast as humanly possible… she might as well make use of it in this one.

Again, if she had to murder something to do whatever it was she was doing… she was either doing it wrong or too inflexible to remain in that role for long and should give it up for a quieter life.

"I am here to 'see to it' you may raise him without unwanted outside influences as you see fit."

Corrected the thief pleasantly, lifting a hand and summoning a rather unremarkable looking double-handed maul out of her Cloud Flames just to set on the woman's bare if highly polished kitchen table. "Whatever you may deem such things are."
Ballsy Mom glanced down at the tool summoned out of nothing but light and a small flash of heat, then looked up with a faintly challenging but now more uneasy stare. "Is there some cultural connotation for why you've holding an oversized hammer?"

"A blunt weapon. A maul. For I'm not going to murder for you..." because if she couldn't then she wouldn't be offering the ability for others either, "but a little property damage here or there is more than enough. Especially given what my 'type' is known to do in revenge for being crossed, whatever such a thing is meant for or means to another."

"Why now?" Questioned the other, older woman suspiciously. With more than a little hostility in her tone to boot. "Why not then? When my husband was still alive?"

...ah. Unfortunate. Probably explained why Ballsy Toddler Boy immediately curled up on her for comfort, and not trying to introduce her around or show her everything he knew to be 'theirs'.

"In the interest of being brutally clear so you have the information to make use of my offer, I'm stretched too thin. It's about to... collapse back into something manageable as I rid myself of some dead weight, but the point remains there's too much demanding my time to get to everyone when I want to." Absolutely nothing that earned her more than a darkening glare, but the thief merely shrugged any kind of blame off. "Besides which, some of your husband's 'fellows' put two bullet holes in my gut while I was minding the other hostages when they tried to take over the tournament. He likely would've been dead well before the docs let me go from that."

It would be somewhat amusing how fast she went from judgmental and pissed off to pale and uncertain, had the situation been somewhat different.

"I should've gotten here earlier, yes. I am not to blame for your husband's stupidity or foolishness in colluding with his fellows in something they all should've known full well would not work out as they wanted. I will help you, if only because I want to see what your son makes of himself. Helping you aids your son, and from what I know of orphaned children... most just really want to know at least one or both of their parents to see what they were like for themselves."

A moment to study her own lap and contemplate things on her end, Ballsy Mom raised her head and looked straight into the Storm-Cloud's eyes. "What do I get, if you're feeling this 'generous'?"

"Financial aid, mainly. As long as you live in China, all I will do is ensure you do not need to seek aid from a Triad that would not have either your or your son's wellbeing in mind. You may if you wish without risking said money, I don't really care as long as you're careful. I will also interject a protest if someone attempts to pressure you once what a Flame blind individual can be used for is better known." Sonya leaned backwards, allowing the child in her lap more room to settle in. "I'd rather you stay here, mainly. Culturally, this is his corner of the world and he should know his history and how to navigate around. However, if you find it too hard to continue or live here then I'll adjust things so you may go where you want."

"History isn't quite what the people around here value."

"Funny thing about history, we're all part of it. Trying to deny it just makes it all the more interesting to others." It'd change, eventually.

Chairman Mao Zedong was merely human, he'd die just as everyone else did in the end. Eventually, just like the Cultural Revolution, the cultish hype around his whole public persona would unravel and leave just what managed to survive and a whole lot of heartbroken, confused, or horrified people as they tried to adjust to the rash of social madness and move on with their lives.
"I don't owe you anything, demon." Deemed the woman after a moment of silence, in which she stared skeptically at the Russian intruder in her home. "Not for the money, as far as I see it it's what you owe my son for making him into a bargaining chip to be used. Not for your 'offer', you're just being self-serving in that and really don't mean to 'help' us much at all."

"Fair enough. I'll give you a phone number, all you need to do to reach me is inform whomever on the other end that picks up 'Ballsy Toddler Boy and Mom requires aid'."

The lady did not look remotely impressed at all.

"This is normally the point someone threatens the other for whatever stupid reason, intimidation or coercion or what have you." Allowing her maul to disappear, the thief reached over for a wrought iron fire poker and curled the poker end around a finger before bending it back to the poky end it started with. "We're both smart women, hopefully the obvious don't need to be explicitly gone over. There's not many ways to abuse the help I will supply you for your son's sake, but it's possible and I won't like it at all."

Had the woman been a little more cooperative, the thief wouldn't do this. However, she was fast finding the whole 'afraid of her shadow' thing as somewhat useful if rather annoying in tertiary social circles. Ballsy Mom wasn't really necessary to put up with, although the child in her lap might beg to differ later on she could do that if the woman survived.

To future-proof, Sonya would put forth realistic measures of effort to help keep the woman alive. If it failed, which would be hard to do but people as a type could be stupid, then so be it.

She tried.

(Friday the 10th of April, 1970. Vod ный, Moskva, Voykovsky District, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Accepting a glass straight vodka from a waiter, Milos 'Old Man' Zolotov spent his time idly observing the guests come to see him 'off' into proper retirement.

This would've happened in a gentlemen's club… but vor Arseniy had very silently glowered at those in charge of planning the whole farce because the guest list included his youngest daughter and a whole lot of vory with unknown or known vices.

Who wasn't here.

They were all professional brats, given who trained them up… but not the match to a Pahkan intent on networking within his own damn syndicate. When old man Zolotov asked, several people volunteered the information immediately.

When he asked why the hell Bazanova was mysteriously missing from everywhere in Moscow, a number of his personal Flame bodyguards/medical attendants reminded him of the little-known intrinsic habits of 'Clouds' that weren't entirely known of in Soviet Russia. More specifically, that the damn woman was straining herself not to do so the possibility while known of wasn't immediately assumed as a motive.

Additionally, that her 'blow up' wasn't actually a rare event for pushed Clouds. Less eye-catching, but more frequent, incidents of property damage or homicidal murder was actually the assumed
normal for such creatures.

In the Storm-Cloud's place was the ever-efficient Lightning woman, Galina who was at first very unhappy then somewhat resigned to her current role in her leader's absence. Something that changed a few months ago and was suspect for the point of which contact was finally made with the other Flame user.

Proving that it was difficult to get ahold of the other woman, meaning their very clandestine but still noticeable campaign to keep his heir away from anything to do with her was both understandable and probably prudent.

One of the rare few Mafiya women represented in the lounge of this restaurant and keeping in mind Galina was there as the representative of the Flame school and wasn't available for 'distractions' was hard for a couple other vory or their associated thugs milling about and enjoying the free food and drinks.

More than a few were suffering electrical burns when they 'forgot' a few times too many to be believable or didn't get sloppy enough to have the drunkenness to be believed as genuine.

Gedeon, finally showing either tact or some damn self-preservation, was at least attempting to pull attention away from the lone Flame using influence in the room that didn't have an answer to where the Moscow Cloud woman had gotten to. At least the next Zolotov Pakhan was doing much better networking with the men than females, which was at least progress to be satisfied with. Galina was flat out ignoring the Sun as politely as she could manage, which was actually somewhat significant compared to everyone else that wanted to try prying the why out of her.

The night probably would've passed without a hitch, predictable and fake gliding on every smile or offered congratulations for reaching a point to retire from, had Bazanova not actually shown up.

Then she immediately got directly behind the latest idiot to try 'seducing' an answer out of the utterly disgusted Lightning woman about some aspect of Flame user lore, without very many actually catching on a blonde woman in a slinky black dress paired with knee high black and silver boots they were waiting for had arrived.

…when more than half the room and her own damn father were discreetly trying to keep an eye out for her, and she almost managed to slide by all of them if it wasn't for the idiot harassing her help. Most kept watch out of idle curiosity, a few very specifically for their own varied reasons. He and it seemed her father might know she got in from a balcony access via the awnings stretched over the waterfront veranda, but it seemed not enough vory were watching up just as much as they were keeping attention on the others and the main entrances.

Like any of his thieves would be that predictable.

Galina's utter non-responsiveness to a rather crass invitation was somewhat unusual enough to attract more attention, especially as most assumed she'd if not immediately then quickly shock the latest to try something fresh with her within five minutes. Very slowly, the Lightning dutifully backed up under just one glance from the Storm-Cloud and found different companionship elsewhere near the Cloud's father.

Finally accepting the fact she wasn't interested and there might be something more interesting going on behind him, that vory turned around only to get sized by the throat and lifted delicately off the floor to fully appreciate the blonde's utterly unamused expression.

"For your information," Bazanova started almost pleasantly, "if she had answered that would turn
this event from giving respect to our Pahkan's life achievements into something political the Vindice will be forced to attend. Which they might or might not appreciate, so keep your damn trap shut."

His son quickly hid the wince at the news, which could entirely mean he hadn't known that or already risked what the Storm-Cloud was advising against. Milos wondered if he minded at all, because even the rumor of the Vindice attending his 'retirement' party would ensure no one stopped talking about it for years.

Which was a hell of a lot better than gossip from a boring party to wondering just how strong a grip he had on the Flame users entirely if their 'leader' didn't bother to show up.

A beat, apparently just to inspect her victim from head to toe and snort so how unimpressed she was became apparent to all, the woman discarded a vor as if he was a tissue before stalking over to the retiring leader of the thieves' clan with some kind of disgruntlement obvious in her steps. "Forgive the delay, Pahkan."

"Your 'emergency' over with now?" Inquired the retiring Pahkan idly as he inspected the foolish boy she tossed, idly speculating if he had a specific reason to try something they all had known wouldn't work.

"My godson survived his bout of Activated bacterial meningitis infection, and the issue is now well documented enough so future incidents in other children might not happen again." Agreed Bazanova absently as she earned his full attention, spoken in a pleasant tone in a direct contradiction to how she 'discarded' the scrappy bit of an idiot she came upon hitting on her assistant. "Thankfully, although it was slightly questionable for a few days if the brat would even live."

That was a much better excuse than he expected her to have for him.

"Although, I might steal Galina and bail out early. I would apologize, but I came straight here from the airport and have yet to be briefed in all the stupid shit the students have gotten up to and need solving by older Flame users. I don't really have much to report to you but a few contacts in America and maybe something interesting developing in China."

"How is your school coming along?"

"Surprisingly well. They've been autonomous for about half the school year now, aside the funding and the contacts I had to pull in to spare the drain of manpower from you." The blonde raked a hand through hair she left loose, which was a detail that lend credibility to the idea she changed somewhere semi-public just to be attired properly for this event. "There's been no major upsets, but I need to review the reports waiting for me before I can claim it has gone better than projected for you. And hire some actual god-damned teachers for next year."

Milos grunted, not particularly sympathetic at her obvious disgruntlement with paperwork given his own piles on a good day… but his son was aiming to come over and attempt something so letting the woman go would at least prevent Gedeon from showing exactly how little respect the older Moscow Flame users held for him. "I'll be more or less busy with well-wishers attempting to meet my heir or cash in old favors before I don't have the power to give them whatever they're angling for but do let me know when you've assembled everything, and we'll make the time."

Bazanova gave a curt nod, then stalked over to her father to collect her Lightning and greet him before blowing everyone else off as a matter of fact. That fallout would be something to watch in the next week or two.

His sometimes idiotic son tried to follow her with some intent, but he was still Pahkan and got his
heir to stop and attend to his father instead of confront the Storm-Cloud somewhere public with the foolish thought she'd conform to expectations and not verbally gut him for the entertainment just because she could.

A few more days, and he'd no longer be able to stave that off… but then again, she'd not be around to undercut his heir's authority from under him anymore either.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 10th of April, 1970 continued. Voykovsky District, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"There's one teacher we have… issues with." Galina started off delicately, only to earn herself an utterly unimpressed look from the woman sharing the backseat bench of a car with her. Giving up on subterfuge, the Lightning delicately pressed the pads of her right hand against her temple. "One of the civilian literature teachers, he's not convinced we're just a school and there's been a few… complaints."

"Of?"

"Inappropriate behavior." To be fair to the individuals complaining, they were obviously incidents of either information hunting or faux interrogations as the man tried and failed to understand what was going on below the surface.

He couldn't get there because the Mists were stonewalling him, no one was without an ounce of self-preservation to tell him anything, and about half the staff had no idea either. Given they were a co-ed school, obviously some of those attempts to interrogate the students that did know something ended… questionably.

Equally as fairly, right now was not the time to inform Sonya of a major hiccup he represented. Galina had to pick from either reporting it all now to get it solved quickly before she escaped again or putting it off until her boss was less travel-worn, tired, and had to force herself to play nice for a few minutes to maintain the façade their ultimate boss wanted to present to any outsiders.

The younger thief nibbled at the lipstick smeared over her lower lip, fingertips tapping against a bare tattooed arm as she thought over what little information she was providing. "Right, I'll deal with it next week."

"…was Shamal really sick?"

"…yes?"

"Ah… alright." She kind of pitied whoever was nearby when the blonde learned of the problem, and everyone remotely nearby while the brat was sick.

Well, sort of. It was a curious thought, what did Sonya do when confronted with something she could not fight or intimidate away from those she claimed?

"How long are you going to be here?"

"Only as long enough as I have to be." Absently responded the Storm-Cloud, ignoring or heedless of the raised eyebrow their 'stolen' driver quirked at them through the rearview mirror as she dug a pack of cigarettes out of her purse with a slight wrinkle of her nose. "See if you can find me a replacement pipe, Galina. Or at least secure a couple packs of cigarettes for whatever you want to review with me."
"What happened to yours?"

"…I threw it at Renato's head. I missed, but it got a bit… bent." Muttered the other woman sourly around the filter between her lips, then lit it with a flash of red Flames that made their driver twitch suspiciously.

Sonya didn't miss that, but also didn't comment. The flash of grey eyes to the Lightning informed the other woman that there would be a few more questions of a general sort in short order.

(Saturday the 11th of April, 1970. Moscow School #3054, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

"Oh. Good, you're back."

"You don't have to sound so disappointed."

Peter McScruffy grimaced slightly. "I didn't mean to make that sound disappointed. Or I did, was. I am slightly disappointed. I didn't get your armor done, not yet. It's… still in progress."

Pausing in reading whatever was in front of her, Sonya blinked slowly and looked up just to aim a slightly confused stare at him.

Instead of continuing, because babbling was becoming a slightly concerning habit when he was uncomfortable these days, Peter shot a desperate look to Galina. Who, instead of immediately help him, just looked highly amused.

"…okay." Tried the blonde woman after an awkward moment. "I didn't expect you to actually make it, just figure out if it was possible."

"Well… prototype. It won't be as you asked about, but somewhat? I mean, I can't finish it until Galina lets me start with the idea I had some time ago…" Trailing off when the Storm-Cloud merely blinked blankly, he scrambled for something to distract himself with. "I should… go grade the tests. That's what I came in today for. Right."

Trying not to cringe externally as much as he was internally, Scruffy slunk off to 'his' desk in the teacher's lounge affair set up right outside of the principal's office. Normally this part would've held a secretary or some student files, and in a normal school that very well might be the case around here… but instead it was more a gathering place given their principal had been MIA for most the school year and no secretary was needed because whoever was there answered the phone if need be.

"…I take it he's doing better?" Sonya inquired to Galina absently, which just made the tips of his ears burn more.

"Phenomenally so," assured the Lightning pleasantly, "once you get past that initial fumbling with new or people he doesn't really know well. He gets better about it after enough time, but you've been gone for a while now."

"Understandable." Apparently deciding that was enough of torturing the Sun today, there was just the sound of paper being shuffled or moved and the slow burn of some tobacco for a few minutes.

Burying himself in his work, he attempted to drown out the occasional comment or question as he went through and graded fifty of the same tests with varying right or wrong answers. Some of the
students occasionally answered in ridiculous ways for various reasons, on a dare or because they were bored of playing diligent schoolchildren, and they could be somewhat amusing to read before having the kids retake the test or redo the homework.

"Miss Bazanova." Almost fumbling his red fountain pen at a third voice, Scruffy glanced over a shoulder into the opened office door to see the Mirror Lady's very serious face. "There is an... incident developing."

"Right now, or in general?"

"Right now. I think... you may wish to see for yourself."

"...alright." Curious despite himself, he got up to join the ladies watching one of the Mist's portal-mirrors for something that might just have to do with his coworkers.

Sonya had put her boots up on her desk sometime after he entered the office, Galina was standing at her side with a grouping of files on the Chinese exchange students, and Anna was holding what the two older women were watching. Apparently having gotten into the building via the single window overlooking the bare meter of yard between the schoolhouse and the brick wall separating them from the road, instead of turning her portal into the live reflection of whatever was going on she used a fairly large hand mirror taken from somewhere to show what she wanted the others to see.

There was a significant presence on school grounds even when classes weren't being held, a fair number of their students actually lived on the third and fourth floors in the dorms there for some had homes in a different country and a surprising number of other students were orphans without any kind of home to return to. If there was an incident with the students, it would've either gone through Anna as the head of the girl's dorm or the younger Andrei as the head of the boy's dorm.

The Mirror Lady hadn't ever sought help for the students before. The head of the Sun training section had sought his advice for a few incidents near the beginning, the younger Sun being experienced in dealing with other Suns in volume but not various other Flame types or non-Flame users in equal masses. Anna had the entire Mist section to pull upon if she needed the assistance, and more often than not her own Misty ways were more than good enough to keep the girls in line after hours.

Once he got a good look at what she was showcasing through her hand medium sized hand mirror, Scruffy understood.

It wasn't just a student issue the Mist wanted to show someone else, a member of staff was involved too.

The older Andrei, his coworker Chikatilo, was... speaking to a barely preteen female student. Given body language, he was attempting to intimidate the young... Miss Fink. The copper haired young girl was not impressed at all with the teacher trying to loom over her, a fist on her hip and an entirely skeptical expression on her face.

The older Sun in the room was somewhat speechless at the incident entirely, while almost all the staff of the school was aware Chikatilo was suspicious of something going on he hadn't been aware the man had graduated to trying to interrogate the student body. Miss Fink wasn't a Flame user, but the girl was fully aware of the Flame training exercises and sometimes did assist as a 'non-Flame using' control variable in experiments.

...why a younger girl?

As he aided Yanlin with the sport teams and physical education, some of his boys would've
responded better to the older man than a girl on the shooting team who was known to be a bit of a mischief making, occasionally delinquent, merely passable student attending the school because her best friend needed the Lightning Flame training and she wanted to stick with her.

Well, if Chikatilo had tried his sport teams and struck out-

"…Galina, did he just grope that student?"

"…that's what I saw."

Sonya tipped her head to the side, apparently to admire Miss Fink's technique with a switchblade as she fatally stabbed the civilian teacher a few times in both chest and neck just to be sure her assaulter was down and would never try that again. "I… believe that girl needs therapy. Probably not the only one, either. Do we have a psychologist or counselor on staff?"

"Not yet." Clicking a green stone plated pen, the Lightning made a note on the clipboard on top of the files already in her arms. "I'll be sure to source one for the students in short order, boss lady."

"Peter," ignoring his start of surprise, the thief pulled her legs off the desk and got up, "come along. Shoot the body a few disproving looks and fuss over the girl so she knows she did the right thing and isn't in trouble."

"…err, should I…?" A male member of the staff had just inappropriately touched her, would Miss Fink even want him within a hundred meters of her?

"Anna can take you back here if she wants you gone." Allowed the Storm-Cloud after a moment of thought and a nod to acknowledge his point, then stepped through the Mirror Lady's suddenly wall-sized hand mirror to end up next to the blood splattered girl clutching a switchblade.

It was the work of a second for the blonde to disarm the younger student who flinched at the sudden movement and tried to stab her, but after closing the folding blade the weapon was handed back. Delicately, and only after Galina shot him an encouraging look, Scruffy shuffled obediently after her into the portal.

A sudden shift from inside and moderately warm to outside in very brisk spring air made the Sun shudder and allowed him to hear the last few gurgled gasps of what was left of a semi-decent friend. Peter stared down at the other man in askance, unable to really understand why the man would risk everything to grope a student of a criminally-based school.

"Mister Bordrov? Oh… oh fuck, Miss Bazanova, I'm so sorry-

"Scruffy's part of the Sun team. He's not going to report you to the police. Shush."

Miss Fink made a face fairly distressed face anyways, then moved to rub her wool-clad arms only to jerk away at the feel of rapidly cooling blood stiffening the fabric, and forcibly lowered both hands to her side as she tried to look at the results of her handiwork around the older woman's form. "…I'm still really sorry-

"No, no you did exactly what you should've done." Sonya interrupted pointedly, critically eying the dying man dispassionately as he sought help from the entirely wrong quarter if he wanted anything like mercy. "Has anyone taught you how to dispose of bodies?"

Spluttering, and a bit shocked at how clinical the woman was being, the Sun in question wrung his hands and didn't approach the student who just had a disquieting encounter with a male teacher but circled around so she could see him fully instead of try focusing on the stabbed man or the Storm-
Cloud instead of the slushy ground or the sky.

…she was still armed and knew perfectly well how to use it, caution was just prudent.

"Miss Fink, are you alright?"

"I… um, I kind of want a shower." Shivering, or shuddering, the teenager scowled at the body laid out as she shuffled backwards closer to the gun range building and away from her handiwork. "Do we… need to call the police or anything?"

"Ah… no. No, I don't believe we're doing that." Depressingly, from the fistful of ruby red Flames summoned to his boss' hands, he was mostly sure Chikatilo would be an unsolved missing persons' case from now to the end of time. "More importantly, do you need anything? A blanket? Something hot to drink?"

He still didn't know what in hell the man had been thinking, nor how in the world he thought he could get away with something like that. He'd gone drinking with that man and thought him somewhat decent personally if a bit… off. Well not 'off' per say, just not very friendly the same way Dyrbov was.

Fink was a pretty young girl, but just… no.

No, she was barely fourteen if anything. More likely thirteen, and Scruffy just could not understand why. He didn't want to know why.

"It's not the first time shit like this has happened, Mister Bordrov." Fink responded, a rather uncharacteristic scowl on her fair face to go with a bit of defensive hunching. "…can I keep my knife?"

"I highly doubt you're the only one armed here, so as long as you feel safer with one you may." Scruffy reassured the girl, just a touch wryly to go with his non-confrontational and very gentle tone. "Would you like more? A different weapon? A heavier knife? I don't know much about them..."

"I can teach her to throw them, it's not much of an issue if she wants another. I can get her something more balanced." Interjected the Storm-Cloud, dusting her hands of nothing as the body behind her was quickly consumed by her Flames. Refocusing on the younger girl, the thief studied the half-defensive and somewhat belligerent expression stealing over her face. "The official story will be that after a series of complaints about his work ethic and disruptive attempts to 'see' what we're apparently 'hiding'… we were to let him go, except he never showed up Monday for us to fire him. No one knows what the hell happened to him, we all never saw him today, a real mystery. Coincidentally, there will be a school-wide and very pointed assembly next week about sexual harassment being morally wrong."

"…that's it?"

"That's it." Confirmed the older woman blandly. "I would appreciate it if you told me who else really needs to die horribly, if you didn't get them first. My father would enjoy a little diversion, he'd be pleased to hunt down anyone that tried something with you."

Instead of immediately volunteering the information, Fisk hunched further into her bloodstained coat and looked away from the both of them. "It was a long while ago."

That didn't particularly make Sonya very happy, going by the very thin line she pressed her lips into for a bare moment before smoothing everything off. "Very well. Let the Mirror Lady know if you need help getting the blood out of your jacket, or if you'd like a replacement on the school's behalf."
"The same, different, whatever. And... Miss Fink?"

"Yeah?"

"Good work." Awkwardly patting the girl on the shoulder, the thief gestured into Anna's Mist portal which showed a very pale looking teenager about the copper haired girl's age sitting on what was presumably her bed in the girl's dorm. The Lightning using friend, who had apparently been watching for a few moments to understand the delicate situation probably somewhat filtered via Mist Flames.

Once the student very gratefully took her Mist-assisted discreet leave to her friend's company, the Storm-Cloud turned to him with a grave expression. "You're going to have to pretend he was still your friend."

"...what?"

"Your poker face sucks," Sonya informed him bluntly, "he was a friend, wasn't he? Or at least, you thought of him as one."

"Boss Lady."

"No, listen to me. He was civilian, people will miss him. If we don't report him missing, someone else will. You're more than likely going to have to tell whoever asks you that he was a friendly co-worker or whatever it was you knew him better than just casually through, without mentioning or even breathing word of this. A sudden change of heart, when the other teachers thought you were friendly, will be suspicious as all hell. You can't afford an in-depth background check, Peter. You've got paperwork that says you're the only son of a safely deceased couple with proper if still dead grandparents and Soviet lineage, but anyone tries to find old childhood friends of yours or even just anyone that remembers your 'family' in your 'hometown'..."

Just about everything in Scruffy tried to protest, except for his head. He knew what she was alluding to, but he really never wanted to claim a pedophile as a friend ever. However, if he became a suspect in a missing person's case or worse yet a murder investigation then he'd probably see the inside of a Russian jail cell too.

"...I am rather glad we are leaving soon." He wouldn't have to do it for long, but the bar visits with Artemiy would be somewhat hard until then.

"You can also be glad you're not the one that now needs to double-check all the paperwork we have on file for teachers and students alike are valid or would pass a quick to a moderate perusal by law enforcement."

Peter tried for a smile but fell rather far from the mark given the cocked eyebrow he got in response. "Cold comfort, boss lady."

"It's all I've got to offer."

(Monday the 13th of April, 1970. Moscow School #3054, Moscow, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.)

Patience was an underappreciated trait in a number of individuals and aspects of life, but Viper's was starting to get a bit strained.
Having a target to go after, information to collect, and a group to gut for anything of worth... made waiting on the strong-arm asset to insure their payout for months of diligent work rather hard. Being 'polite' and properly professional in collecting on a promised favor meant they couldn't bully right through the interlacing Mist Flames coating the building and a good portion of the area Cherep's younger sister was checking in on.

They weren't much of an obstacle, admittedly. Interlocking in some fascinating, very specifically distracting ways or not. It was a web they would delight in adding a few personal touches to, just waiting and open to be tapped and twisted... but that was the point.

It was elaborate, enticing bait.

Viper had more self-control than that, and enough patience to get through the web to their target.

The very instant a Mist touched that web with their own Flames, even funneled through a puppet with their own Flame type, every other Mist connected to it would be aware and knew everything about the intruder. There were a lot of Mist users that contributed tiny personalized touches and overlapping each other once or twice at the least even at the edges.

They could appreciate the distraction to study while they waited, but even that got boring after a while. About a day later, honestly. Then a few more hours were spent hunting down the separate if networked Mists making up parts of that web to interrogate them for new ideas on how to use Mist Flames, keeping out of any aspect of identification and mainly pretending to be a 'new' node of the network. Except for three, who held bigger parts of the web and were not fooled by the adopted identity.

Getting around the interwoven web of Mist Flames yet again, taking particular care around the 'reflection' threads that would catch any Mist merely observing the web if one wasn't careful to pick the ones without said spider-silk threads because it was both rather fascinating and something Viper wished to copy for later use, they checked in to see if the woman they were after was done or not. She wasn't.

The 'Mirror Lady' directed her attention at them once again, the author of those reflection threads that came the closest to catching the Esper than the many who specifically tried in the last few years, but they impressed the feeling of a shaking head on the other Mist.

Instead of turning back to minding her threads of the web, the only one to know full well Viper was in the area and what they were here for specifically paid attention to something else. An understanding of exasperation and a strong dislike was offered, even as the younger Mist admired the Sun's strong features and kept him from even glancing at the building they were lurking around.

A thread of curiosity was answered with merely a sense of amusement, Viper's amusement was given a few friendly pokes for apparently encouraging further investigation. Actually passing on a trick learned in France earned them a few choice bits of blackmail on the 'future' Pahkan of the Zolotov Thieves Clan.

Apparently, they were being encouraged to 'steal' the thief away before the Sun managed to find a way through the Mists running interference.

Viper was actually somewhat reluctant to do so before Sonya was finished with whatever she built a Flame academy for, however much money might be made. Their vice was money; anything with value fell within that. Information was the most difficult and most rewarding currency to trade with, either priceless or worthless by turns and nearly impossible to predict the trends of.
A day spent investigating around earned them currency in Mist Flame tricks and quirks. Something they had only rarely found any group willing to share as freely as the Russian Mist web.

When the brisk Lightning woman returned, carrying yet more files and distractions to pad out the time Sonya needed to do whatever... Viper bowed to the inevitable and stole the woman out of her office.

Sonya blinked, pen posed above a missing pad of paper as her chair was very considerately transported with her without the desk she had been using. "...huh."

"I'm calling in the favor you owe me, mou." Viper announced blandly, stepping into the same realm of existence most other living things occupied.

"...sounds good. Anyway we can extend it for a week or so?" Asked the thief, dropping the pen to the rooftop across from her schoolhouse and massaging her right wrist as she leaned back in her office chair to focus upon the Mist.

"Boss lady," spoke the Mirror Lady reprovingly, not bothering to follow Viper into the perceivable world, "that might be pressing your luck..."

"Alright, fine. Any way we can get this over with in twenty-four hours?"
"That's your plan?" Sonya inquired skeptically, giving the Mist she was assisting a sideways look of pure skepticism. "That is the best you can come up with? Throw the melee specialist straight through the front gate and murder everything?"

"The other plan was to reverse the very thing they are doing to others, mou. On to them."

"I like that plan better." Quickly claimed the blonde woman, now entirely unimpressed indeed as she backed away from the edge he planted her upon to aid him.

Viper heaved a sigh, as if she was being difficult and not coinciding with exactly what he wanted. "Mou… there will be more effort involved. I thought you would prefer to get this over with quickly?"

"I'm not particularly fond of sloppy work." Responded the professional thief blandly, within expectations given the details he had worked out of her brother on the woman.

It wasn't really hard to guess, even without the stuntman's few tidbits weaseled out over months of visits. There had to be a reason why she remained a thief so late into her life, instead of itching her violence lust with bloodier work. Elitism among other Clouds was entirely a possibility, but out of consideration to her pacifistic brother's outlook or just keeping to a predetermined set of values was equally a possibility.

"Good." All but purred the Esper in return, evaporating the Constructed map complete with moving target markers between them in favor for something that looked close to a corkboard supporting a web of multicolored strings than any kind of actual map. "Then this is what I need you to do…"

She already had an idea of the structures down there, ensuring a Cloud recognized the targets she wasn't to allow to die was a bit more important now.

The thief examined the new variation of the offered information curiously, more specifically studying what she was required for and where then when to move or deal with certain subjects, narrowing grey eyes as they caught and lingered on something. "Viper, you seem to be missing a part."

"No, I'm not."

She traced a few of the lines, which the Esper made the string connecting them glow in red as her finger passed over, linking what targets she shouldn't go after for reasons with the possible information that could be extracted afterwards. "What are you going to do with them afterwards?"

"Me? Mou… why ever would I have any need for such people?" Asked the Mist absently, which didn't shift off the Russian's suspicions in the least.

Downside to working with smart assets, they tended to catch on to the unmentioned faster than the brainless thugs they normally worked with.

"As long as I don't have to deal with them, I don't care. I don't want any. I have more than enough."

"…methinks the lady doth protest too much." Observed the miser critically, studying the 'backup' they had wished for and basically kidnapped out of her office to get. "None of them? There's a couple in the process of having their previous entanglements erased, mou… as long as you keep
your trap shut about where they come from I could always toss one or two your way."

"Viper, keep them away from me."

Hooded or not, he had no issue leveling a suspicious glare on anyone they wanted to.

The woman glowered back, then sniffed in a decidedly not hostile but disgruntled way. "I'm repaying a favor."

"Exactly." Grumped the miser sourly, hunching further into their cowl and glancing over their target at the foothill of the mountain they were perched upon for the planning aspect of this event. "You have no reason not to talk about this, given what it will result in I find that… disquieting."

He had plans, of which they couldn't quite do without the inevitable rumors of a Cloud's rampage to convince others that the target had all perished to a man and discourage investigation for a few days. There were a number of those without or with destroyed pasts being used as grunts by these Mists and redistributing them to be made use of could only happen if no one knew they might have survived.

Widespread Constructions of templates for conclusions were easier to pull off when there was a reason for a specific assumption to be made.

"Aside common fucking decency? Cherep would never let me forget it if I got you killed, Bjǫrn does respect you and will have something to say if you never check up on his skills, and for fuck's sake my brat probably would like more tips and pointers in the future."

"…mou, I find it smarter to rely on something more… universally understood."

Sonya palmed her face in exasperation, raking a hand back through her hair next just so she could fully level a glare on him. "Like blackmail, I take it? I'm a Cloud, Viper. Why the fuck would I let you have hold on someone of mine like this?"

Viper pondered around the objection, because that was a good point even if it was very obviously not her issue with the offer. "...or, I suppose, I could give you a tiny bit about a new fascination of your brother's if you agree to never speak of this incident as well as supply some… physical force, as agreed."

She blinked at him, somewhat interested.

"Which may or may not be able to be used in revenge for his sometimes nauseating eating habits, mou." Continued the Mist a bit more confidently.

"Now you're talking." Summoning one of her hammers as she dropped her hand from her face, she eyed the distance between them and the front gate of the little community enclave down there per his plan. "To be honest, I might miss getting the range so be sure to… adjust accordingly if it's going to the wrong spot."

"Just throw, then brace yourself to be moved immediately in the middle of their little set up to wreak havoc." Viper advised, already with one eye on the best perch to plant the 'heavy melee specialist' to distract the bulk of the attention for him.

(ooo000000)

(Tuesday the 14th of April, 1970 continued. De Mort Castle, Moneglia, Province of Genoa, Liguria, Italian Republic.)
"Verde! Lunch."

With a guilty start, the scientist lowered the keyboard he was hunched over and glanced around this back hall of the castle he had gotten a touch distracted with.

Now he wasn't focused on something rather complicated and trying to foresee the inevitable complications before they occurred, it became apparent to him what time it was and a few other key details he was sure his current housemate would make him dearly regret.

He… might've failed to sleep last night, as well as eat something this morning, and Adrik would be entirely unimpressed with him once he learned.

…even if he got the packet switching program of the ARPANET project to finally work, sending a data set from one terminal through a central 'hub' and to another via a specific 'address' value assigned to one of four other terminals, now that he had the uninterrupted time to work on it and Tatiana sent along the prototype she had stored for them.

It was just something to do, while he awaited completion of the four of five months of the construction on the private residences near the front gate he would also live within for at least the next few years. The Lightning was not particularly of any help to the Russian's tasks of inspecting all six floors of the castle after the cleaning crew and the men refitting updated window sills in had finished their work.

Now the aim of those invited into the grounds was constructing the independent housing, on the acre of land that made up the 'front lawn' of this place near the main gate and across the drive from the stable house. Verde's house was being built first, thankfully… but that still left him at odd ends for the handful of months the construction would require.

Adrik might become annoyed he continued the experiment without him, on top to the unintentional neglect he caused himself.

Verde wasn't exactly sure which would annoy the other man more.

"…Verde."

Wincing, the Frenchman dropped the keyboard to the crate being used as a work desk and started in on the somewhat more elaborate than expected task of freeing himself from the nest of wires. It kept his attention down, and away from meeting the other man's eyes.

Adrik apparently spent a few moments just taking in the vast amount of changes to the long hall, which they had utilized mainly as storage of the items the Sun nurse sent on to clear out her storage unit containing the personal effects of apparently five other people. Verde and Adrik, Sonya herself as well as her Lackey, and apparently their middle brother the Lightning had not met yet who had an interesting collection of antique tools and machinery parts stored away.

Tatiana was pleased with all the extra room she now had, at least.

"Okay… you need a hobby." Bluntly announced the Russian, without enough inflection in his tone to give weight to any assumption about what he thought of the situation the Lightning was wrapped up in.

"…I believe my hobby is decent enough as it is."

"Wasn't this supposed to keep you occupied for the next two months, or however long it's going to take for your labs to be built and the boss lady to move the information you wanted down here?"
"I do not believe construction will be done so quickly. It is more probable Sonya will return with her other staff before any such labs are completed."

Adrik gave him a skeptical look, scratching the back of his head with a faint frown. "How many 'labs' did you add to your blueprints?"

"Enough." As there would also be a paved road added to allow for unimpeded traffic to move, whatever it might be, Verde took advantage of the scope of the proposed construction to ensure he had at least three heavily reinforced and adequately ventilated vaulted rooms with adequate facilities that would survive whatever he might need for them.

…then three more on top of them, lighter built, for less risky experiments right under ground level and only then the actual ground-level housing with the rest of the scheduled construction.

It took a significant amount of the grant money he had already been given to have the space he would like to work with and ordering the equipment to fill out even half of the proposed labs would require a significant amount of what was left of his inheritance as well as the remainder of what he argued out of Sonya.

The results would be more than worth it, easily upgraded and sectioned off in case of emergency while still being reasonably multipurpose enough to adapt to future studies and discoveries. As the Lightning didn't really require much in the ways of living quarters, he had been tempted to skimp on the proposed housing covering the entrance to his labs… but he was fully aware the other man would be highly unimpressed enough to stage another 'intervention' if he tried.

Deciding not to address the question fully, Verde adjusted his glasses as he finally stepped out of the web of wiring unfettered. "May I ask why it is you've decided to be domestic today?"

"Yeah… if you'd care to take note of the weather outside, it's raining. No construction to keep tabs on, and likely none tomorrow either or at least until the ground dries out." Drawled the Russian a touch tartly. "Additionally, I'm fully aware that's the same damn outfit you wore yesterday, Verde my man."

"Well…"

"If it's not an admission that you skipped sleeping and grabbing something to eat for breakfast, don't even try. You suck at lying."

The Frenchman thought about it but concluded the same when he couldn't find an excuse the other man would believe coming out of his mouth. "I believe you spoke about lunch being ready?"

"Lucky for you, I just pulled the casserole out of the oven." Adrik drawled with arms crossed over his chest, unamused entirely with his less than effective attempt to change the subject. "It needs to cool, so you've got just enough time to take a damn shower."

(ooo000ooo)

(Tuesday the 14th of April, 1970 continued. Outskirts of Lugano, Ticino Region, Swiss Confederation.)

Sonya wasn't sure what she had been expecting.

…'not this' was pretty apt yet didn't really cover everything.

A cabal of memory-tampering Mists was… not entirely outlandish of an idea, but apparently the
idiots Viper was opposing weren't what one could call 'well prepared' for discovery or being opposed.

They had the handful of apparently really skilled if completely clueless Flame users and a bare couple more non-Flame users with particular skills they 'retained' as a kind of compound guard. Great idea, full marks.

However, it seems as if they never attempted to see how many of them they could directly control against a hostile invasion or just for the hell of it. Nor did they realize that erasing their personal memories meant the handful they kept wouldn't remember enough to use their skills without direct aid.

The net result was some kind of really awkward looking zombie-mess shuffling after her. Dangerous undoubtedly, but… hilarious. Also, not nearly as difficult as expected to out maneuver.

Her fucking students wouldn't be nearly this bad, at the very least they'd be able to work together in controlling a single person and keeping awareness up to hunt two separate Flame users a hell of a lot better. That wasn't counting Anna or Usov, she meant the newest Mist brats who all probably barely knew what they were doing.

She almost didn't need the amulet Viper pressed on her to hide her from the Mists hunting for whoever was collapsing their underground base bullshit. The thief did need it to cut off the suddenly no longer zombie-like idiots that thought asking a group of unverifiable Mists erasing pasts to fuck with their heads was a great idea and tossing them into the holding pen the miser set up on the borders of this place was easy enough if you ignored their demands to know what the fuck was going on.

Viper was at least good enough to keep a portion of their attention on the safe area, knocking those loudmouths out before Sonya had to.

Her main use, in this situation anyways, was scaring off all the morons that might want to scope out what was going on. The Mists had set up a kind of 'no interest' zone for anyone not specifically seeking them, and the Mist she was here with had used that to ensure all the civilians and civilian emergency personnel would assume either 'avalanche' or 'earthquake'… but it was the thief's job to keep the criminals away.

By being destructive in a 'usual' Cloud's expression of displeasure, while avoiding getting caught by the Flame users here and preventing the deaths of said zombie-like brainless morons.

It took a bit of creativity, admittedly.

Ironically enough, the zombies were better about looking up than anyone else she ever had to work around.

Doubling back, and a quick check to be sure no one else 'woke up', Sonya slid around the back of the shambling mass aiming for the more northern side of this group of houses. Another of Viper's 'destroy this' marks lingered there, lacing around a manhole cover in the middle of the street.

Sonya leapt down from a single-story rooftop, a double-handed maul in hand and whacked the metal disk as hard as she could get away with. The entire street caving in wasn't really unexpected when she destabilized the entire ceiling of the sewer line, but there was an additional side-cave in she hadn't expected and nearly mired herself in to get back to street level.

Obviously what Viper wanted her to cut off, but a fucking warning would've been nice.
Staying low, as the mindless Mist puppets all shot at hip-level to start with if they were armed with automatic weaponry, the thief tried to duck around a garden shed… only to immediately backtrack because someone got the bright idea to split their remaining forces.

The bulk of the shambling mess was directly behind her and likely rounding the building at her back, which just left the rooftop of the single-story that possessed a garden shed as the only bit of cover she could reach in an instant.

Then Sonya had to immediately reverse her momentum the moment she touched the shingles, because it wasn't someone splitting up their forces it was an idiot wandering around like a moron because he didn't realize what was going on. She slammed into the Storm and took them both to the ground, who cursed her out for a breathless second before shutting up when the zombies across the way opened fire on them.

He at least gamely followed her straight through a hedge before they both were shot full of holes.

"What the fuck is going on?"

Apparently, there was enough information left in his brain to make sense of 'ticked off Cloud' being a bad thing. Which wasn't her intent, but 'excited' on a Cloud Flame user did tend to be equated to 'irritated' more often than not.

Gee, she wondered why.

"You did this to yourself. Get into that area over there and wait." Helpfully pointing didn't get the Storm to leave. Even if he was a bit more put together than everyone else she 'rescued' and should at least not require her to keep his fool head on straight.

"Why should I?"

"Do you have any better options?" Sonya countered flatly.

The Storm, a somewhat older man with a bad five 'o clock shadow and looking a bit more beaten than the rest of the zombie hoard she separated out, glanced from where she was pointing to her with the only second pair of yellow eyes she had ever seen. "Well… there's you."

"…oh, hell fuck no." Viper only agreed to fuck with her paperwork, because of a highly probable police investigation into one of her now recently murdered civilian teachers.

There was no arrangement for a new person. She didn't have the money or time.

She pointed a finger in his face and glared. "No."

The Storm, because of course they were all argumentative assholes, merely cocked an eyebrow at her. "Oh really?"

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(Wednesday the 15th of April, 1970. COMSUBIN Main Headquarters, Italian Republic.)

**Technically**, COMSUBIN was a naval Special Forces group. Their motto was 'from the sea we assault the enemy' for a damn reason. Rangers and divers, started back during the first World War and never quite stopped being needed.
Lalia Murgia allowed her court martial go on without protest, and now she was ever so politely 'kicked out'. Invited back for training exercises of course, because the only thing Colonel Frasca could not refute in any way was that she was a damn fine trainer and none of her students got themselves killed in stupid ways.

On one hand, she had been somewhat aimless the last year or so since reaching her rank in the Rangers. On the other, she hadn't decided she was done with COMSUBIN yet.

Someone interfered, and Lalia was going to hunt that asshole down to either clear her name or figure out what the fuck that jackass was playing at before blowing his brains out.

Special Forces against civilian police?

It took her about three seconds to steal into the evidence locker, scout out her own name, and take the information she was interested in for review.

As sure as she was that Commander Scalzi, who lead the ranger units, as well as Admiral Matarrese, who commanded the COMSUBIN unit in its entirety, hadn't mislead her or lied about what was known about who attacked her… the utter lack of any evidence the crime scene investigators found from the spot she had been shot at aside what she contributed in blood and bullets?

It was damning, of course. For her, and for her suspicions.

Lalia hadn't believed it was humanly possible, to clear or contain every scrap of betraying evidence in the middle of a shootout. Yet apparently it was, because there wasn't time between when she returned fire for being shot and when the police responded to the noise for anything to have been cleaned up without someone noticing something.

Now she had to figure out who could pull something like that off, without actually giving away why she wanted to know the information.

Sliding the evidence reports, and connected sample containers, back into the cardboard box that held the damning evidence on her she turned instead to clearing out her bunk.

She… really didn't have a whole lot that wasn't standard military issue. About half of what was 'hers' was actually issued to her by COMSUBIN's supply depo, meaning she had to return it to clear out of the unit properly. The rest, if it wasn't for the express intent of keeping her military gear in the best possible shape then it was bought to complement a few pieces.

Her sidearm was hers, as was the uniform she was wearing from jacket to boots, but-

"So!" The entirely unamused glare she tossed over a shoulder completely bounced off the affable grin being aimed at her from a blond sniper, although the expression was a touch less exuberant and she appreciated that. "What's next for the lovey Lal?"

'Lal' unholstered her sidearm and shot three times at where his head should've been without looking back again.

"…aside that?"

"Grillo, they can't yell at me for shooting you outside a designated range area now."

"Alright." Both hands up, her 'replacement' slid back to a normal posture instead of remaining contorted to avoid her bouncing rubber bullets off his face. "Alright, I'll be good. I promise."
…she could load normal bullets into her weapons again. Depressing, but true.

Probably something she should change sooner rather than later, so at least she knew where her first stop would be after this now.

"…um," offered Cornello after a moment of taking in her personal bunk and what she was hesitating over, and she nudged the lid of a backpack closed over the police evidence box before he could see, "need a packhorse?"

"That sounds like you don't believe I can handle my own equipment, Grillo."

The sniper huffed in badly faked offended dignity, crossing his arms over his chest. "Yeah, maybe to you. I know full well you can out march me with fifty more pounds anytime, I'm not that stupid."

Lalia shot him an evil smirk. "So, you're admitting you are stupid? Well, well… it only took me the better part of a year to beat some humility into you."

Cornello frowned at her faintly instead of rise to the bait, sharp blue eyes already suspicious and searching. "And now I'm a slight bit more concerned. Where are you going next? I know they want me to basically replace you, but I'm also fully aware you haven't really finished beating me up in the name of 'polishing the idiot student up enough to not be an embarrassment'."

"Not sure yet." There were options, of course.

Few if any that were in the direction she thought she needed to go in just to figure out who set her up. Body guarding for political morons or their innocent family members, mercenary outfits that might really like a tactician the level of a COMSUBIN Ranger, she could probably enlist in a different military branch that accepted foreigners if she had to.

She wouldn't, but if she had to because she just couldn't adjust to civilian or near-civilian life well enough.

Worse came to worse, she could start up her own branch of mercenaries. Might be interesting and somewhat fun to do if she drew a complete blank in the coming years.

"So…" leaning up against her door frame, the sniper shot her a hopeful grin and waggled his eyebrows under the bandana he picked up from somewhere. "…now we're not potentially violating regulations against dating outside your rank, wanna-"

He bolted off before she could finish swinging her first duffle bag of issued equipment due to be returned at his head. Lalia kicked it instead when it hit the ground, the bag of lopsided and freshly cleaned equipment impacted the idiotic student of hers squarely in the back and sent him tumbling down the hall ass over teakettle.

"…I'll take that as a 'maybe'?"

She pitched the next one directly at his stupid head before he could scramble upright and run for it. At least the asshole did take the equipment with him.

(Thursday the 16th of April, 1970. Mafia Land.)
"Good evening." Fong offered pleasantly, earning himself two badly hidden starts of surprise.

One of the men immediately turned and opened fire on him, forcing the martial artist to immediately dive forward at an angle to both evade the possibility of being shot and get in range to disarm him at the same time.

Gripping the offending wrist, the Storm hauled his attacker forward and over a shoulder to slam him bodily against a nearby wall. Mentally giving his apologies to those who lived above the flower shop, he immediately kicked out to catch the other man in the guts before he could manage to try anything.

"While enjoying the services of Mafia Land, it is not acceptable to perform a 'dine and dash'." Fong informed the both of them, flexing a hand as he ensured his Storm Flames prevented his gripping of a just fired small arms from burning his skin. "Either pay your bill, or... well, I am afraid I must get insistent."

The man he kicked, hunched over from the Chinese man's assault, took out a heavy knife from a concealed spot near his upper chest to try stabbing something tender. The man nearly upside down from being bodily tossed squirmed the best he could to regain his feet, and haul something secured to his back over a shoulder.

Obviously, a refusal.

It took really only two sharp hits to knock both out, and it only earned him a shallow graze on his right wrist from a desperate lunge to wound him before the knife-wielder could no longer contribute to their defense.

Amateurs never understood what was considered impossible to try by experts, it made them sometimes more dangerous than fully trained individuals.

It was an interesting deviation from opposing other martial artists, in all truth.

Fong wasn't entirely certain as to why this was attempted, surely these... fine Spanish men knew such behavior would not go unanswered for long. Dragging them both back so his fellows could press a complaint with the island's bill collectors would be somewhat tricky, as night had long since fallen and having both hands occupied would just encourage any that might try to stall his aims for their own reasons.

Pondering over his options and keeping an eye out to be sure neither was attempting to fool him by pretending to be unconscious, the Storm was not nearly distracted enough to fail noticing he was being surrounded.

Hmm... an attempt at a turf war?

Newcomers, especially if these gentlemen weren't Spanish but hailed from Southern America instead, all couldn't really be said to know the rules of the island. By which, turf wars for territory was rather sharply discouraged.

Taking territory over by starving them of revenue and buying out the failing businesses, and whatever real estate is also sold to make the rent Mafia Land demanded of any venture established on its shores, was the only 'acceptable' method by which such was allowed. This, attempting to attack those that worked in such ventures in a divide and conquer tactic, was not.

Mostly to prevent the already heavily armed visitors and patrons from picking to enter the hostilities themselves for any and all reasons. This was a manufactured island, it was not as stable as a lip of
earth that rose out of the sea naturally. Enough open warfare would destabilize the entire island, enough to probably risk the integrity of everything built on top of it.

The occasional invasion by those hungry for influence they only heard rumor of, and the more frequent heavy ordinance accident in the markets, were really risky enough as it was.

Alas, some just refused to acknowledge that what they sought would be destroyed by their actions if they succeeded… or sometimes even if they failed.

Most probably did not care if it was. As long as no one else held the advantage over their own.

"I will advise you all to desist your current aims." Announced the Triad member peacefully, in a vain hope it would prevent a bit of an incident tonight.

As expected, his words alone were not enough.

He had to immediately weave around two men armed with machetes attempting to jump him from a first-level rooftop, around a corner to avoid someone armed with a semi-automatic rifle on the other side of the street, then utilize two walls to get off the ground and avoid a hand grenade.

…handheld explosives. Not a first, but it ensured this would be heard by all awake tonight and there would be those coming to investigate in short order.

Fong kicked the next grenade tossed up at him, right into the face of the man armed with yet more, before being forced backwards to avoid another armed with a pistol from shooting him in his face. That left him with the two armed with oversized knives, who were not nearly as skilled at scaling sheer walls and struggled slightly to reach his position, and the gunmen still on the street level.

A loud crash behind him informed the Storm that there perhaps was someone attempting to go through the building to reach him, but the residents of said building would beg to differ about such aims. A rough demand in a language he did not know but clearly was interrogative, and from the continued commotion said rudely woken man was both highly unamused to be threatened back and entirely well equipped to defending himself and his home against intruders.

Ah… Mafia Land security would not be amused as such developments. Then again, as long as Fong did not request it himself it would be allowed to slide.

Perhaps he should look into taking up some of the contracts offered for those at loose ends or looking for a lump sum of pay. This was actually somewhat more interesting than merely being on hand as extra security for Triad held businesses, and perhaps he would be less bored until events back home calmed down somewhat.

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(Friday the 17th of April, 1970. Ristorante La Sciabica, Brindisi, Apulia Region, Italian Republic.)

"-and, without putting too fine a point on it, Lady Giglio Nero, my father-"

Luce attempted to not grimace, already more than tired on this one and highly skeptical that anything he might have to say would be at all as interesting as he was trying to make it sound.

Unquestionably the last time she would accept a date from this man.
You would think, being able to foresee the future and all, she could avoid all the really scummy dates as a matter of fact. She probably could in all honesty but checking to see more than if it would be a pleasant first date and if anyone would die if she went out was wasteful of both her talent and energy.

The problem wasn't the first or second date. A nice time out with a bit of dancing or with a couple light drinks to break the ice with were entirely enjoyable… but then all these Mafiosi seemed to think she was 'caught' enough to listen to their thinly veiled attempts to influence what her Famiglia would involve themselves in or dictate terms to a Mafia Donna.

Perhaps she should look into civilians. Boring, but then hopefully one…

…no. Her daughter never had a father figure in her life, did she?

Was that a specific choice of hers?

It was entirely possible she was overthinking the situation. She might not need a man for longer than a night, honestly. A bit lonely, but frankly… did she really deserve much else?

Either she picked a man who would die before she could start showing a baby bump, or she would never contact whoever she selected ever again. Then she wouldn't have to go on any more dates only to become disappointed when the motivation on the other end was more political than personal.

The future was the future, with everything already decided and acted upon and what she saw was just that. No one conveniently spoke in any future she foresaw about the why and how things ended up in that exact arrangement, just whatever was the decision or event at hand, so there were elements of guessing to be made in the end anyways. Educated guesses, but just assumptions in the end.

Often, there was no time keeping objects nearby aside wrist watches or newspapers that might or might not be the future date.

Sonya's kitchen would have a calendar at least… but if the Sky put up more than one or two in the 'Arcobaleno's Mansion' then someone would ask, and she'd need a believable excuse. Reborn would poke most full of holes and Skull would whine about the rest being off from Soviet calendars which would have Fon wonder why they were all based off Christian time keeping and insist on a few Chinese calendars be included just for redundancy's sake.

Which, in the end, would be even more confusing for her if she failed to ensure which calendar was which method of timekeeping.

Luce knew she would be 'just showing' pregnant around a Christmas time. That she wouldn't attend that year's Vongola Ball, and the end of said pregnancy would be the Introduction to her Arcobaleno Elements.

It could be this year, or it could be next year, that she would be pregnant.

She might've asked two years from Uncle Kawahira, but that was only because she foresaw herself doing so and that conversation actually went well enough to set in place what she needed. Everything she claimed was correct, most of the first picks to bear the Curse would've refused and gotten suspicious or hostile to what very nearly happened to them when the next picks took up their burdens.

Then everything she foresaw that might end the necessity of the Arcobaleno would not happen. There were no other possibilities that had as good of a chance of happening as this one.
Two years was somewhat suggestive. Either two turns of the year, or two periods of three-hundred-
and-sixty-five days expiring would be 'two years'.

With a Mist marking the time, either measurement possibility could be it.

Either 1971 or 1972 would be the first day they all would meet, and no one thought to bring a
calendar or flash something dated for her to foresee.

…well, neither did she. Why could be for any reason under the sun. Likely, because it would never
happen and she wouldn't bring one to prevent a different vision from coming true she hadn't
obsessively studied to be sure would result in the future she was hoping for.

Fiorella Vongola could've died last year, only to be saved because Sonya had an automatic instinct to
control flying blades near her, so that was that incident. There wasn't a Vongola Christmas Ball she
foresaw herself attending between that specific event and the one she declined due to being unable to
hide a pregnancy, but that didn't necessarily mean she didn't attend one more.

Just that she hadn't looked yet, or it had been drowned by more important events that could happen,
or that there wasn't one.

Luce pulled her attention out of her own thoughts, checking on her dismal date of the evening. It
really only took one mention of 'what we could do together about' for her to decide this was a lost
cause.

Now, was she in the mood for petty revenge or not?

"Excuse me a second." Asked the Sky pleasantly, sliding her dining chair back from the table and
rising to her feet. "Feel free to order if I don't come back by the time the waiter returns."

…because she wasn't returning. Poor boy, being such a deferent son might've been cute had he not
been so reliant on his father's status to define himself well into his twenties, could dine alone if he
thought she was pleased to put up with him scheming for her using her people.

Perhaps that was the problem. Luce seeking male companionship made others think she was also
seeking a Don to take the 'heavy workload' off her shoulders. Making all these irritating ends to her
dating life her fault for not making things explicitly clear to outsiders yet again.

Civilians it was.

(ooo000ooo)

(Friday the 17th of April, 1970. San Marino, Republic of San Marino.)

Renato really rather liked his name.

He had quite a few of them, to date. Mafia Land handed out new names and fake paperwork to its
agents as need be, he'd gone by any number of other 'Italian names starting with R' over the years.

From Raffaele to Ricario, Romano to Rufo. They were all really rather fucking retarded, nowhere
near as elegant and fitting as just Renato.

That wasn't even mentioning the sheer butchery that happened to his last name, because outside of
Italy being a Mafioso wasn't entirely a distinction between one criminal asshole and another. Both
first and last name got twisted well beyond acceptable values given what happened when he
pretended to be a different nationality due to political shit now or again.
Perhaps... not a name at all?

A word should work. There were all sorts or moronic braggarts that tried to pull it off, using handles taken from nouns to verbs and everything remotely between.

"...how the hell-" Not waiting for the momentarily physically present Mist to finish his demand, the hitman shot him through the head while he wasn't able to be a pain in the ass.

It was always the Flame users that were the worse. Out of everything and everyone hunting him, it was only his fellow Dying Will Flame users that got the closest and proved to be colossal pains.

 Burning through the Mist's obliquely applied defenses had been distracting and draining enough as it was, he didn't remotely want to trigger yet another fucking 'clause' in to restrict what he could or could not do.

No one got away with dictating what Renato Sinclair could or could not do, to his face or otherwise.

Tying what anyone could do in a designated area to how they identify themselves had been bad enough, the asshole used his fucking full name as part of their restrictions.

No one named 'Renato', 'Sinclair', and 'Renato Sinclair' who identified themselves as 'Soft Sun Flame users', 'Mafioso', or any fucking 'hitmen' could utilize a handgun while within a hundred meters of the unlamented dead Mist. Any 'Suns' in the same area could not utilize their Flames either, burning through that the last twenty-four hours had been nasty so hampered.

Thankfully, he was a damn 'Inverted' Sun. The label courtesy of their Soviet brethren, and a term seemingly dismissed out of hand for all Italians that ever heard it used. It didn't exclude him from the inability to use his Flames because apparently that feature hadn't been as clearly defined, but it did allow him the use of a gun as only 'Hard' or 'Soft' Suns were excluded.

Of course, it took him two days entirely to think his way around the Misty insanity barring him from retaliation for being hunted. Shamal wouldn't have dared to try restricting anyone like this, especially given his godmother's nature, but figuring out how his godson could've done it was the only way he figured out what was going on. Exploring and then defining the limitations of this use of Construction had been mostly a process of elimination, and now he was a bit more beaten up than he liked to be but victorious in the end.

All the others caught in the same bullshit might have either been verified as 'not a target' or let loose, which didn't include what damn group said Mist had been sent along to assist, leaving any others in the area complete unknowns and likely still around.

If his opponent had merely excluded anyone that might interrupt his 'hunting', that left Renato surrounded by hostiles. If he had sent them away, that might've reduced a number of others in the same small town as him.

Depending.

"You know, this is why I was perfectly happy not to be as 'special' as you are."

"...Caesar." Renato tipped his head back against the bricks behind him, glaring up to the assassin-chef perched on a railing above. "How long have you been hanging around?"

"Long enough."

"I swear to God, if you left me on my own to go cook something-"
"I, you ruffian, was in the middle of making a soufflé. Yesterday. Then, if you must know, there was an order for suitably doctored cannoli to induce a single death for some Don's wife's garden party. I just finished it and came to see if you'd like one of the extra non-poisoned ones. Such discourtesy."

Catching the dessert dropped down to him, the Sun glowered at the pastry then up at the man who confessed to making it. "Seriously?"

"I'm not 'one of you'." Caesar reminded him pointedly, adopting the visage of a man taking a well-deserved break and not someone holding a semi-clandestine conversation with a hitman beneath his terrace. "I believe the last time such a thing happened you told me 'leave it up to actual users'."

Renato suddenly remembered, again, why the fuck he didn't really visit the others he grew up with often. They were all as annoying and as opinionated as he was, Dante was the only one with an ounce of tact, and really… there was only room enough for one of their egos in a single city limit. Nobody let anyone forget even the slightest infractions, because he sure as hell wouldn't so the others didn't see a reason to let it go either.

"If you're here, somewhat related to what Dante informed me of last month, then of course I'd love to meet your new Natalina."

"...I was sixteen, we were sixteen." Snapped the Mafioso irritably. "And it's a job offer, jackass."

"Notably, that is both not a 'no' and you have consistently failed to apologize for the incident in question."

"She can apologize for herself, I'm not her fucking keeper."

"Well, at least you can learn." Finally deciding to descend to Renato's level, Caesar designed to gift him with a sharp smirk as he pulled his filleting knives free of their sheaths tucked into his sleeves. "Now you've taken care of your own 'kind', let us deal with the rest of these scoundrels and see about your job offer."

Not in the shape to sneer at some assistance just yet, the Sun merely heaved an aggravated sigh instead of verbally accept. He did pause to eat the sweet tossed to him, because assassin or not it was by Caesar's cooking alone any of them survived without starving to death or growing up malnourished.

Himself especially, with a Sun's metabolism to feed.

(Saturday the 18th of April, 1970. Outside Katuaq, Nuuk, Greenland.)

"It was mislabeled." Skull informed Siegfried wryly, jerking his thumb over a shoulder to the east and deeper into the icy waste that made up the bulk of the country they were visiting. "When it was first colonized, by the Vikings. Erik the Red was exiled from Iceland for murder and moved here only to label it 'Greenland' in his language, hoping the pleasant name would attract more settlers. There's a whole exhibit in the local museum documenting the entire incident and explains everything."

The blond German very pointedly cast a glance north along the spit of land the Katuaq cultural center they were performing in sat, across the wide river-like bays separating it from another chunk of mountainous land a stone's throw from the shore of this one, and then out to the Atlantic Ocean to the south.
Most of which, at least the land anyways, was still capped with snow and ice this far into an 'eastern' spring.

"I fail to see it." The former magician turned lion tamer dismissed with a flounce. "Then again, Vikings. Entirely possible they had a horrible sense of humor."

"Well, only one more show and we'll head over to Canada." Returned the stuntman good-naturedly, tucking his really rather battered helmet under an arm to grip his bike's handlebars with his other hand. "Then... more icy terrain. Probably."

"Urg, I cannot wait until we reach better climates."

"I think we're supposed to get down to Florida..."

Siegfried, amusingly enough, purred at the very idea before shouldering the part of their cage-lion stand thing he repaired for the duo of former magicians. "Lovely. Can't wait."

Rolling his eyes, Skull started pushing Diana the Indian Motorcycle into position for later tonight, when he got to perform again.

...hmm, it'd been a minute since he last saw Mauricio.

Where did the Rain magician get to?

Not that the Cloud was his keeper, but it had been several cities and a few weeks and the man had been more or less behaving himself. Perhaps they could go drinking after the show was over, leaving packing up everything but Diana herself to the extra hands tonight. Skull earned the goodwill from the Chinese acrobat troupe, so they'd pack his equipment up once or twice in return for packing up their props and equipment the last two shows because he wanted to tune up his motorcycle before getting it shipped to their next port of call.

"Skull!!!"

Speak of the devil.

"Skull, would you perhaps be against a bit of an investment opportunity?" The slightly still portly Spaniard slid into step with him as they wound around the ramps being set up, panting somewhat heavily but gamely trying to get all his words out in order anyways. "There's a fine gentleman on the wharf, he was entirely enthusiastic about perhaps selling me some of this material he called 'kigutilik'."

"Sperm whale, more than likely something made of their ivory." Identified the stuntman bluntly.

"...really?"

"Yep."

Mauricio pondered the information for only a moment. "Well, I suppose..."

"No, Mauricio. Ports are havens for smugglers, and ivory is a hotly debated trade item right now. We do not need to help them, they've got more than enough willing hands as it is."

"It is a decent amount to make up for the risk."

"I swear, why is it you can find all the morally dubious money making offers the moment we get in anywhere?" Lamented Skull, pausing in the parking lot of this municipal building just to palm his
"I'm starting to think Nojan was right."

"I," insisted the magician turned hype man fastidiously, "am a financial-

"-Idiot savant. You find things that are just a touch too risky for your skill level, then occasionally
jump in with both feet without looking for the tripwires." Finished the Cloud dryly. "Remember the
poker game, the 'really friendly, just to pass the time' one, with the Provisional Irish Republican
Army guys back in Dublin?"

"We got through that with more money than we went in with."

"Because I know how to cheat and get away with it. Unlike you or them and yes, they were cheating.
Heavily."

The Rain paused yet again, looking slightly confused. "I hadn't noticed…"

"Thankfully, neither did they."

Puffing up, well… a little more than his somewhat heavy-set physique would account for, the
Spaniard huffed in offended dignity and took a few flouncing steps away. "I shall take this as a
refusal, then. Pity."

"Yeah… real pity." Skull would be more annoyed if the Rain specifically went out of his way to get
entangled in such situations, but it was always just as innocent as the man claimed. And the man at
least asked before risking the really shady ones that weren't so innocent anyways.

If he accepted without double checking anything, then things got a bit dicey when he either didn't
realize the situation's not entirely legal background or didn't realize it applied. The stuntman couldn't
really point fingers, given his own 'undying' risks were a hell of a lot more noticeable than Mauricio's
occasional side-jaunt trying to make them some more money.

Besides, it wasn't really all that long ago the Rain had been part of a circus outfit just a tad bit less
respectable than Master Liam's Großer Volksfest. It had been just his way of life for probably more
years than he'd been with a circus, the other man wasn't used to remembering that he didn't have to
jump on every and any opportunity he found just to make ends meet. To be fair, there were just as
many shady and refused opportunities as there were ones he accepted unknowing of the risks.

Well, it kept things interesting.

Viper would be outraged Mauricio wasn't nearly as bad at making money as they had assumed from
the incident they all met in. That the incident in Budapest was an outlier, and Skull would happily
pay for dinner just to get a front row seat to that information exchange going down.

He'd pay for dinner anyways, but at least he'd get something out of it then.

(? ?? ?? ?? ??)

The Tri-ni-set Administrator, who was sometimes known as 'Uncle Kawahira' or more hostiley as
'The Man in the Iron Hat', eyed the list in his hands without much enthusiasm or interest as he moved
from an icy sheet somewhere far to another place much warmer equally as far.

There wasn't much a point to be anywhere. Not just yet, anyways.
That was a Mist oddly working with one of the Clouds for aims of their own, the Lightnings he had to pick from, one Rain separated out, a test set up for the Storm, a check-in with poor Luce's situation, the Sun's situation checked up on, and the other Cloud he had identified as candidates.

He wasn't really certain about taking both Clouds or just one of them, although he would admit given the guardant Cloud's ability of Propagating his own flesh to fast-fix injuries… causing his Flames to turn in on him in order to separate the pair would be a horrible idea.

A pacifistic guardant user of Dying Will Flames of Cloud would turn worse than his inverted little sister's outward mentality if so wounded. Frankly, Kawahira wasn't entirely sure who would come out on top in that fight, or if there would be a 'winner' at all if by some mathematically insignificant possibility the sister wouldn't be equally as wounded and turn as peaceful as her brother once was.

The female already had a fractured Will as it was, cementing only one facet of her to be expressed enough to harvest the Cloud Flames he needed would be just as difficult as getting a group of criminal thugs to accept a noble guardant Cloud as their fellow. Entwined as they were, both options were equally as damaging as the other.

Kawahira was actually somewhat fond of the male Cloud, as a slight echo of what Dying Will Flame users once had been. No sulking about on the fringes of society as little more than a common thug, free to do what he wanted as he wanted without fear of earning recognition for it. While his innate skill with Propagation was honestly alarming in several aspects, especially with how deeply he ingrained it into his subconscious to be so aware of but unafraid of high velocity impact injuries, he at least turned it into a way of life to be proud of.

…he'd figure it out when the time came.

Little Luce's advice was bearing fruit, and it wasn't much of a hardship to continue following it however it made his bones ache with yet more strain.

Not that horrible ideas had ever stopped me before, mused the ancient Mist as he thumbed the Segno Hell Ring on his left-hand.

In his list of things yet to be done or needing amending, separating the Rains had gone off without a hitch. One remained where the pair had been found, and as far as he was concerned even if the male remained in a military outfit these humans had way too many of it was perfectly fine. The female was at least proving to be interesting, if not very inventive in her hateful hunt of him.

Ah well… it wasn't like she could find him for framing her and enabling her somewhat peaceful assimilation into the rather inane 'underworld' of criminal forces she once worked against. Her current aims would just ensure she was isolated and at loose ends enough to jump on any 'major' offer that might help her desires along.

It was tempting to issue the invites just now, because the Sun was the strongest of the next Arcobaleno candidates he had. Losing that one would be rather annoying, especially as his history was trying very damn hard to catch up to him.

On one hand, if he survived his arrogance-fueled gauntlet of opponents he would likely complement Sepira's descendant somewhat well. The girl was equally as manipulative as all his long-departed friend's children tended to be, he supposed it came with their gift just as much as those eyes did.

If he didn't… Kawahira would have to find a new Sun.

He already still had to find a proper Lightning. There was one possible guardant Lightning he could
pick up, but the man hadn't done anything too interesting to measure his strength by besides the apparent 'usual' uses for them in these days. Two inversed, one of which was more active with his Flames and another who had a more advantageous positioning to be made use of. Both of which who didn't tend to use their Flames at all to be measured.

None of which really seemed like Lightnings that should be in the company of the Strongest Flame users of the Age… so perhaps he should scout out along the pre-established lines of communications between his picked victims, a good two-thirds already knew one another which made his job a slight bit easier.

Maybe another one, a more active one, could be found then.

Bit of an accidental name, they didn't have to be 'the' strongest… however, if they were then it would put off the requirement of hunting out the next group that much further. He never bothered to correct it, no one was remotely interested in hearing him explain why they had to be Cursed after they received their burdens.

Most of the Dying Will Flame users these days would last… a day.

Maybe two, if it was a particularly stubborn one.

The very limit of what he was searching for was ten years, depressingly the limit the last of Sepira's line. They used to last longer back in the day, but he supposed the bloodlines had the time to thin out rather far. What was once a skill of honor and dignity was now the prized trait in the bloodiest faction of these squabbling human societies, and for sure nothing looked as it once had to his long reaching memories.

A deep bowl of some steaming broth with noodles soaking in it was set right under his nose, and the Mist flicked his eyes to the serving girl manning the 'Ramen Bar'. "Your order, honored customer. Enjoy!"

"Aa..." …what did he order?

More specifically, what did the man who sat here order before the Mist made him 'remember' something pressing elsewhere to take his place. It took a second, lifting it straight from her head, for him to realize his use of Mist Flames applied to prevent anyone noticing him had instead made a slightly Lightning-natured girl assume he was the one to order and pay for the bowl's contents.

"Appreciated." Kawahira decided on responding, not particularly against consuming something to sustain his strength even if it wasn't what he ordered.

He wasn't even sure if he'd order this in the first place if given the choice.

It seemed to be… something sea-based. There was seaweed in it, and something that very much looked like a cut-away of a spiked conch shell. In some light-colored broth and placed over the noodles.

Why did Luce recommend he move to this society anyways?

He had to lift the language and social customs out of someone's head to even order something to sustain himself on, frankly he wasn't even entirely sure if he had the correct language or customs.

Lifting another round of information from his 'fellow diners', without any of the four from realizing something was rifling around their minds, Kawahira slid two sticks out of a protective paper packet and ensured they broke evenly as apparently was the custom via Mist Flames.
Apparently, one held both sticks in hand and used one end to pinch what was to be consumed while gripping the wood more than halfway up.

…strange.

Well, it wasn't much different from utilizing miniature pitchforks or shovels to transfer sustenance into one's face when you had no other options.

Humans…

…none of the noodles were of size to be easily consumed, either.

Opting to start in on what was sensibly of size to eat, the Mist turned his attentions back to his dilemma.

When to issue the invites?

They would have to be issued some time before he Cursed the Arcobaleno, most of the time they would be complete strangers to one another and without some kind of established trust these human candidates tended to lash out at each other instead of relying on their fellows when upheavals in their short lives happened.

This round had decided to solve most of his headache for him, aside the inevitable jarring that would happen as new or ill-fitting initial outsiders are slotted in wherever they fit. However, if it would remain so was entirely subjective. Either once they were called together or if in the very near future. He never liked tending to his sacrifices to ensure they would remain alive just long enough to be of use to him, although he was prone to doing it more and more until his recent two century 'break'.

It hadn't been nearly as restful as he thought it would be. Having little to no good candidates for the next Arcobaleno might've started his 'hiatus', but to be honest Kawahira just hadn't searched for another set of Dying Will Flame users much at all for an entire century.

He had been doing this for a millennium, he was really tired of being the Tri-ni-set Administrator.

Being the last of his race meant there wasn't anyone else to take it from him, so he had to enforce his own vacations. Unintentional as it had been at first.

Aathira had always claimed he was just sly enough he'd outlive all of them, sometimes he wondered if the very first Sun of the Arcobaleno sacrifices had cursed him with that.

A misplaced clink drew his attention downward, and the ancient Mist blinked blankly down at his mostly empty bowl. All that was left was a bare dreg of the salty broth, and nothing else.

…oh.

That was why Luce recommended this part of the world to him.

Kawahira wondered if anything else this food stall offered was equally as tasty as 'salt ramen'.

Curiously, he was interested in finding out for once in nearly two hundred years.

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