When Mia first learned about her daddy's second life, she found it all so very fascinating.

Growing up, he'd just been Daddy, her father who loved and adored her. He was gone for work a lot, important, dangerous work which meant he was out at all hours of the night and sometimes didn't come home for days or even weeks at a time, but that just seemed normal to Mia. Most other dads were the same way, because they all worked for Daddy too, so it was just the wives and kids who stuck around the village each and every day. Sometimes, when Daddy came home to visit, they'd all celebrate and throw parties, but more often than not, they had funerals instead, funerals for the other dads who couldn't make it back.

That's how Mia knew her daddy's work was dangerous; because sometimes, he'd come home to visit, but some of the other dads didn't make it. Wasn't anything special about it, just sad really, and for Mia, that was life on the Frontier.

Things changed around her 10th birthday, when they all moved into Brightpick. They went from living in a tiny shack to a big stone house, one where she had her own heated room and a bathroom with running water. Daddy bought her all sorts of clothes and jewellery, and they always had more than enough to eat no matter

the time or season. The way everyone treated her changed too, like a princess who's every whims were fulfilled. Her friends never argued with her ever again, and people bent over backwards to do whatever she wanted, even the teachers in school and her scary uncles with all their scars who were always dropping by to talk to daddy at the house. Where he stayed most days of the week, with Mama and Mia for a happy family of three cared for by maids and butlers aplenty.

This wasn't just wealth, but power too, power wielded by Daddy and the Family behind him. Not their family, but **the** Family, the one where Uncle Iggy made all the big decisions and Daddy made sure things went according to plan. For the first time in her life, Mia got to see what her daddy really did for work, and she spent years learning the ins and outs of it all. There were so many secrets, what with the dinners and the late meetings, and the Omertà that they all fell back on when she asked one too many questions. A code of silence, one not even her considerable charms could crack through.

To be fair though, back in those days, Mia thought a big smile and batted lashes was all it took to charm someone. Simpler times, when she was a pimply faced innocent so curious as to what Daddy was up to when he ran off into the shadows at night. The more she learned, the better her imagination became, as she envisioned the Family meetings as a solemn and serious affair. They all got dressed up in their collared shirts, some with vests and others with suspenders, but all wearing ties and a silly looking

fedora with the contrasting hat band. Made them look sharp and distinguished, different from the rabble and common thugs they worked with, what with their ragged clothes and grimy hands covered in soot or coal. Then they'd gather around the big table and talk business, from the yields from the mines to the quality of the towns, deciding how much to sell for, who to buy from, and who got to do what in and around Rimepeak, decisions that would affect the livelihoods of everyone Mia knew because that's the sort of power Uncle Iggy had.

So imagine her disappointment when after years of dreaming of how the Family operated like a well-oiled machine, she saw the truth firsthand. Those Family meetings? They didn't sit around a big table in all their fancy outfits. No, soon as they were through the doors, the jackets came off, the collars were loosened, and the ties thrown to one side in favour of drinks and cigars. And women too, loose women of ill-repute whom Mama warned Mia away from, but all of Daddy's people gravitated towards all the same. They'd sit those women on their laps and play cards or dices, telling terribly salacious jokes while ragging on one another for having ugly kids, ugly wives, ugly shirts, or terrible taste in general, like they hated each other and loved to point it out each and every chance they got.

Which was just men being men. Hardly surprising, but Mia always expected more from the Family, because Daddy put so much into his work. There were no in-depth discussions of the cost/benefit analysis, no deliberation over the best company to award the

contracts to, no discourse over their quarterly profits and how to maximize them moving forward. None of that mattered, or at least it didn't matter as much as Uncle Iggy's current mood, or how much he liked the people they were discussing. Instead of the best person for the job, work was given out to whoever flattered him the most, or gave him the biggest, shiniest, and most expensive gifts. Then, when that person inevitable made a mess of things, it was left for Daddy to clean up, while Uncle Iggy threw a tantrum over a problem he himself created.

It shouldn't have come as any surprise, because Mia had long since known the Family was a criminal organization. No one ever shied away from the fact that they cared nothing for the law, but everyone broke the law, not just the Family. The Accords were merely a suggestion, a set of rules people abided by because they were too weak to enforce their own laws, and the Family was far from weak. That's why they controlled Mount Rimepeak after all, because the Family was the only ones strong enough to take it. Before they moved into Brightpick, the mines were a warzone of criminal activity, the battlefield upon which Daddy made his name as the Phantom and Uncle Iggy as the Firebrand. Together, they brought peace to the mountain operations, uniting them all under one roof, the Pugliano's roof where Uncle Iggy's word **was** law.

That's how laws were made after all. Powerful men stepped up, took control, and decided what rules everyone would abide by. Don't like them? Then go ahead and break them, but you also

had to live with the consequences. Violent ones, whether you were Mafia or Federal, so the only difference between them was how far they'd go, and the Family was nothing if not unforgiving. They had to be, because while they were criminals, they worked together, because only then could they stand against the other Families, gangs, and government organizations, who were pretty much just a gang with a different name.

Strength and unity. That's what separated the Family from your everyday outlaw, scavenger, and gangster. The Family all stood behind Uncle Iggy, the Don who was the strongest of them all. Or at least, he had been, back when they first moved to Brightpick, but had now been transformed into a hulking tub of lard with too many chins who made breathing sound difficult as he huffed and wheezed in abject outrage. There was no drinking at today's meeting, no card games or cigars, just a bunch of grown men in fancy suits standing around the table like schoolboys at the principle's office. Not Daddy of course, as he was stood beside Uncle Iggy, looking sharp and dignified in complete contrast to their furious, red-faced Don. "Five days, we no do no mining," Uncle Iggy growled, and only because he needed a breather before he could go back to screaming. "Five days! Fire damp, my miners say, with their birds no singing and rats no squeaking. I say okay, we no want explosion, so we shut down and ventilate, run fans day and night to clear out gas, but five days now and we still can no go back to work?"

Hidden in the shadows with an Invisibility Spell, Mia had to stifle a scoff of derision to hear Uncle Iggy complain. Still rolled her eyes and pursed her lips, because it wasn't like this was entirely unexpected. Fire Damp was a natural hazard of mining, one they could've easily avoided if Uncle Iggy listened to Daddy last year and upgraded their ventilation systems. Their current one was struggling to clear out their main shaft because it was an outdated, underpowered model provided to them by a friend of a friend of a friend who got in good with Gio and gave him a great price on the hardware. As well he should've, since it was already outdated a year before the Family bought it, but Gio wasn't exactly a thinker, and Uncle Iggy just went along with it because Daddy's proposal was too expensive, even though he'd done his research and showed how it would save them money in the long run.

Like in the here and now, where a more powerful and up to date ventilation system would've taken care of the Fire Damp long before it became a problem big enough to shut down the most profitable mine shaft in the entire mountain.

Course, Daddy couldn't come out and say as much, because that'd hurt Uncle Iggy's feelings. Nor could he bring up the matter of updating their ventilation system or hiring Diviners to help scout out problem areas and plan out their future mining shafts to avoid this problem in the future. Uncle Iggy was already upset over lost profits and would balk at any large expenditures, which was hardly any way to run things, on emotion and gut feelings. No,

you needed to do it with cold logic and calculated reasoning, the way Daddy approached things, with facts and reason above all else. That's why Mia thought the Family would be run that way, and why she was so disappointed to learn otherwise. The drinking, the jokes, the womanizing, all of that that could be overlooked because it was just men being men, but Uncle Iggy's unreasonable and frankly irrational decision-making process could not be forgiven.

Not because it was selfish or suboptimal, but because it harmed the Family's interest, and the Family always came first.

That much Daddy could tolerate though, because he loved Uncle Iggy like a brother. The only people he loved more were Mama and Mia, which was the only reason Daddy had turned on Uncle Iggy, and Mia was here to help. He'd always believed in her, said she could do anything she set her mind to, and what Mia wanted was to be the Don after him. Together, they'd shape the Pugliano Family into the well-oiled machine she'd always envisioned, going fully legit as true-blue businessmen instead of ruling from the shadows and jumping every time the law looked their way. That was the way forward, to become a part of the system and change it from within, rather than setting themselves apart and working around the laws that were oh so cumbersome to navigate. It'd change the whole dynamic, because then the Feds would be working for them, beholden to the Family and sworn to protect them instead of turning a blind eye thanks to all the gifts, girls, and other bribes Daddy made sure to send their way.

None of which were paying dividends in the current situation, for more reasons than one. That's why Uncle Iggy had called this meeting, one Mia snuck into by following Daddy's lead. It wasn't just the Invisibility Spell which let her move about unseen, nor was it what earned Daddy his nickname as the Phantom. Sure, the Second Order Illusion Spell did exactly what you'd think, conceal the target and all their clothes to an almost indiscernible degree, but that didn't mean you couldn't be spotted. Your average person had sharper senses than you'd think, and all it'd take was a scrape of your heels or a sharp intake of breath to give yourself away. Can't sit on a chair or lean against a wall, because not only would you leave an indent or possibly cast a shadow, but you also risk reacting too slowly when someone moves to interact with what they think is empty space.

Mia was an old hand at it though, having picked up the Spell more than two years ago soon after she turned 15. Now, at 17 years young, she was fast becoming a second Phantom, and even did some work with Daddy that required a lighter touch. He'd long stopped hiding the bloody side of the family business from her, and in truth never worked so hard at hiding it to begin with. It's just how things were here, and better she learn sooner rather than later, a lesson fat, greasy Antonio had yet to figure out because Uncle Iggy spoiled him rotten. "Bunch of worthless fucks," Antonio growled, trying to match his father's deep and gravelly intonation only to fall far short of the mark. "What we even pay youse for anyways?"

No one spoke up, but Mia saw the flash of discontent go across each of the Capo's faces. She knew what they were thinking, the same thing she was, that this greasy pig of a boy had no place at the table since little lord Antonio had yet to make his bones and put his name in the books. Neither had Mia, not officially at least, since women weren't allowed membership into the Family. Not officially. They could join as wives, daughters, and mistresses of course, but as made men? Never. Didn't matter than Mia had long since made her bones, more than once in fact. Life hadn't always been safe and idyllic as it was after moving into Brightpick, and she'd had to fight, kill, and run more times than she cared to remember whenever daddy's enemies found them. Even made her bones again after Daddy decided to turn on Uncle Iggy, as he needed to be sure Mia had the spine needed to survive in the cutthroat world she wanted in on. She didn't disappoint him, and might well have made a big name for herself if Daddy hadn't stepped in to take credit for all her work so no one would ever suspect her.

All in all, she'd make a much better successor than Antonio, who continued berating the Capos lined up before him, any of which would gladly slit his throat if it wasn't for who his father was. Uncle Iggy might not look like much these days, but Mia had heard plenty of stories about his Spellcasting prowess and suspected he could kill every man in this room with little more than a thought. Probably had his trademark Scorching Beam all readied to unleash with little more than a thought, Metamagicked to skip the verbal chant while waving his fingers under the table. The beam

wouldn’t just go shooting off in one direction either, as Uncle Iggy had complete control of the shaft of searing sunlight shooting out of his hand, and could easily making it twist, turn, and seek out target after target after target like a living snake of burning flame.

Something every man present had seen their Don do countless times before, which was why they all stayed silent while Antonio screamed until he was red in the face like his father. Then and only then did Uncle Iggy wave him off and pick up the conversation again. “Fix this soon. We fall behind because of Mindspire, this cannot be avoided, but now the appetite for materials has gone up. Every day of delay means we fall further behind on our orders, and the Feds, they demand their penalties be paid.”

Daddy had warned Uncle Iggy about taking those contracts for this very reason, said they ought to renegotiate for lower prices, but also lower penalties for failure. Even then, it was just money, money they didn’t even have to pay out of pocket since the Feds still had to make payment on delivery. The problem was that despite making money hand over fist, Uncle Iggy spent it as quickly as he earned it. The Mindspire had put a hurt on his finances, and now this delay was further exacerbating the issue. God forbid he tighten his belt and spend less on wine, clothes, women, and food for a month or two. That would be unacceptable, which meant the rest of them had to pick up the slack and kick up more to make him whole.

Course, it wasn't just the money either, else this meeting wouldn't have ever been called. Sitting back in his chair, Uncle Iggy played with the over-sized diamond ring wrapped around his sausage of a pinky finger, turning it about again and again while watching the light play out over the obscene gemstone. A sign of nervousness, on Mia knew all too well, but few ever picked up on it like she had. "Not only this," Uncle Iggy began, snarling something fierce as he did. "The Marshal? He use our delay as excuse to poke his nose into our business, demanding a government inspection to see our books and find out why there is so long a delay. Says it may be excuse, to hold material hostage and drive price high in a time when materials sorely needed for military defense."

To be fair, it was something they'd done plenty of times before, since there really wasn't much competition to speak of. Even less now that Vanguard National was put out of business thanks to the Firstborn, but it wasn't like they were much of a threat to begin with. Sure they had high yields thanks to their chemical explosives and could offer lower prices, but the transportation costs were what kept them from being truly competitive. Wasn't cheap running a caravan out Coral Desert, which was infested with goblins and Scavs alike. As for Prosperity Hills, they were owned and operated by the Métis Government, meaning they had higher costs due to oversight and worker rights and all that nonsense. Add in their lower yields, and they rarely produced enough to fulfill the needs of the Métis Government, much less sell to any third-party buyers. No, if you needed stone and iron, then Mount Rimepeak was your only option until the operations at

Redeemer's Keep got underway, a project that'd been stalled for years thanks to Daddy's ingenious foresight.

You couldn't just dig a mine however you pleased. You needed surveyors, geologists, engineers, and Diviners to tell you how and where to dig, and there were precious few of those here on the Frontier. Most of whom were gathered here in Rimepeak, and kept here by Daddy using a mixture of high salaries, lavish lifestyles, and good old fashioned death threats.

In Mia's opinion, that was the wrong way to go about it, as they ought to instead look to expand their operations over to Redeemer's Keep. Not only was it a second mine to print money for them, it would open up an entirely new region to sell to. Not just iron and stone, but all sorts of other goods, both legal and illegal, and more territory to recruit from. That's what they needed to do, open up the books and bring on new blood, young blood from Mia's generation who were ready to rise up and take centre stage. They needed training though, training she and Daddy wanted to provide, but Uncle Iggy was against it because he thought they should stick to the old ways and let the new blood learn as they go. Which was silly, because this wasn't the old country where the Mafia had deep roots, or America were corruption and bribery were rampant throughout the county. No, this was the Frontier, where you had to do more than scowl and flash a piece to get what you wanted, because everyone walked around strapped and knew how to use it.

Take the Firstborn for example. Mia had thought highly of the Joey Jr., a strapping young mezza Innate who could sling Ice Knives like no one she'd ever seen before. She figured he'd have a decent chance of taking out the Firstborn, especially with so many armed friends eager to make their bones alongside him. That was before she met the Firstborn though, and saw how different he really was, a true wulf to those lapdogs the older women always went on and on about. The Firstborn took one look at her and knew exactly what she was, and even unarmed, was far more dangerous than even 10 Joey Juniors ever could be. Those kids were nothing compared to him, and even Daddy might have trouble taking him on, which was why Mia reconsidered the whole plan and wanted to call it off after the meeting didn't go as planned, but that idiot Louie P couldn't keep the kids in line and forced her hand.

And what a disaster that was. Not only did they fail to kill the Firstborn, they barely even hurt him, while he slaughtered most of them with only a hatchet and one hand. To make matters worse, Joey Junior killed the Firstborn's girlfriend, which had always been a possibility. Perhaps even a preferable outcome, or so Mia would have thought before meeting the other man. Give the Firstborn a reason to hate Uncle Iggy and let them fight it out, leaving Daddy and Mia to pick up the pieces after the fact. The details weren't important, because they could always make them up once all the dust settled, but the long story short would've been simple. Uncle Iggy had let them to disaster, while Daddy solved all their issues and got things back on track.

Unfortunately, the Firstborn wasn't the hotheaded, trigger-happy killer everyone said he was. No, the only accurate part of that description was the killer part, and Mia could only hope they could still salvage something from all this, and maybe even turn the Firstborn to their cause.

That'd been a big part of their initial plan, working with the Firstborn to bring Uncle Iggy down. The Rangers wouldn't help him, not without any real reason, because a bunch of angry kids out for revenge was hardly worth going to war with the Family for. It wouldn't just be the Puglianos after all, as all the Families would unite against the Federal government if they ever declared war, which was a fight none of them really wanted, but the Feds had more to lose. Couldn't just focus on crime, not with the Divide sitting right there and a deadline looming overhead with the Watershed approaching. Once the Rangers let the Firstborn down, then he'd have no one to turn to besides Mia, except as far as Daddy's sources could tell, that infuriating man hadn't even asked the Rangers for help, much less anyone else. Instead, he disappeared into the forest a day after his girlfriend's funeral, walking out the gates armed only with two revolvers and two Blastguns on a supposed hunting trip.

That was a full week ago, and since then? Not a peep, not from the Firstborn at least. Uncle Iggy had been furious to start with, demanding that they find the '*bastardo*' responsible for supplying

Joey Junior and friends with guns in New Hope, but Mia had taken care of that long before she left. Even if she hadn't killed the man, Uncle Iggy would've never learned of his existence, because he got all his information from Daddy and only ever listened to half. That's why he would never learn about how the Sherrif in New Hope was looking for a girl that matched Mia's description, or that some of the kids who survived were all singing about how Joey Junior told them how the Family had his back because the Firstborn killed Joey Senior.

A minor ploy, meant to isolate the Firstborn from his people and leave him no option but to turn to Mia.

As for Uncle Iggy? If Daddy wasn't so concerned about face and propriety, he could've slit Uncle Iggy's throat years and taken control then. Sure, Capo Dom, Capo Matty, and Underboss Gio might have raised a fuss, but while they controlled the mines and therefore the money, Daddy controlled everything else. Which meant that if push came to shove, he could easily take control of the money, and there wasn't anything anyone could do about it. That's what it all boiled down to. Not money, not guns, not loyalty or family. Power was all that mattered, because with enough power, you could take anything and everything you might need.

That's what drew Mia to the Firstborn in the first place, his strength and ability. Say what you will about what happened in Pleasant Dunes, but Mia suspected there was more to the story

than what they'd already learned. Uncle Mikey swore there was no way that Ranger Lieutenant Wayne would have turned against Ronald Jackson, and she believed him. Uncle Mikey knew loyalty because he lived and breathed it, gave it freely and expected it in return. Which Uncle Iggy failed to do, leaving a good Soldato like Uncle Mikey to waste by the wayside, while Daddy made sure everyone was taken care of as best he could.

Which meant the official story of 2 Rangers and the Firstborn bringing down Vanguard National was a lie. If one Ranger was on Ronald Jackson's side, the ranking Ranger at that, then chances were, the second Ranger was on their side too. This left only one possibility, that the Firstborn took on Vanguard Nation and two experienced Rangers all by himself, a feat she wouldn't have thought possible before meeting him last week. One man against God knows how many, and all he lost was a hand, an injury he sustained before the fighting even began. Now there was soldato she wanted at her side, and now she had an in. He was hurting from his loss, angry and ready to kill, so she would give him a target then swoop in to save him when all else seemed lost.

First though, he had to show his face again, but so far, he'd done nothing of the sort. The Firstborn's hillbilly friends weren't buying weapons for his war, and he wasn't hiding out at Mueller's Quay to watch their shipments either. The hippy commune, the protestant co-op, the Innate refuge, he wasn't hiding out in any of those places, though he'd visited at least two of them before disappearing again. Nor did he take the direct approach and visit

any of the towns in Rimepeak, which was what she would've expected from a hot-headed youth before she met and got the true measure of him.

What was he doing then? Travelling elsewhere in search of help? He had a long list of dangerous friends, all of whom were on Daddy's watchlist, but so far, they'd heard nothing about moves from major players. There were no letters mailed, no radio calls, no travel plans made, or Qinese youths spotted anywhere North of Redeemer's Keep. It was like the Firstborn had dropped off the edge of the world and disappeared into nothingness, which was entirely out of character for the eager killer she'd met in New Hope. Much like Mia, the Firstborn understood that power made the world go round, even if he preferred to play by the rules and live among the sheep instead of lording over them as he should. A dead girlfriend wouldn't be enough to break him, so why had he yet to show his face?

Uncle Iggy had long since forgotten about the Firstborn though, except to be annoyed by the renewed Federal pressure. That was the Marshal at work, using red tape to try and trip them up, but it wouldn't amount to anything. Even if an inspection got called, and Daddy was certain it wouldn't since he had people to quash it before things got that far, all it would take was a bribe and a threat to convince the inspector to say and do nothing. That's how things worked after all, and to believe otherwise was foolish to the extreme, so the Marshal was nothing if not a fool. The man had the utmost faith in a system of laws that didn't even work in the

old world, so why would they apply here in the new? A good thing for them though, because the Family's biggest advantage was the fact that their greatest threat was held back by the rule of law, rules the Family excelled at working around.

The meeting continued for some time yet, as Uncle Iggy and bratty Antonio whined and whinged about the shutdown. When they were finally ready to move on, there wasn't much else to discuss. A dead body found in an alleyway two nights belonged to the bouncer working at La Vino, a Family-owned bar and restaurant where Uncle Iggy ate at most nights. While the bouncer wasn't a made man, he was still off limits to the masses since he worked for the Family, so if it wasn't someone from the Family who killed him, then they would make this killer pay. One they couldn't find, but would soon enough now that Uncle Iggy was invested.

The Zampanos were also making big fuss about a lost shipment, or rather an entire lost ship, one that had been carrying a veritable fortune in Q-Ace that only they and the Puglianos knew about. So of course they were crying foul, claiming it must have been an inside job from the Family and demanding reparations be made. Uncle Iggy did his due diligence here, or rather listened to Daddy who did all the legwork already, confirming that their people handed the Q-Ace over to the Zampano agents waiting at Mueller's Quay, then watched them load it onto one of their ships and leave, meaning the Family's hands were clean.

As well they should be. No one in the Family was dumb enough to rip off a shipment of Q-Ace, because it was a rare and strictly controlled military resource that was difficult to sell even with the Families behind them. Didn't matter if a single pound was worth tens of thousands of dollars, they'd never find a buyer without the Families catching wind, not unless they somehow brought it East of the Divide or south to the Qin. Both scenarios in which the sellers were more likely to end up dead than rich, a fact everyone and their mothers already knew.

All the same, Uncle Iggy put a meeting with the Admiral on the books for tomorrow, just to hear what the Zampanos had to say. More likely than not, they were just posturing and refusing to own up to a mistake they made, putting such valuable cargo on what was most likely a leaky, ramshackle ship held together by glue and twine. Probably started sinking and the captain didn't want to radio for help, not with illicit goods on board that would quickly be found out. Now they were scrambling to find someone to blame, because that Q-Ace was supposed to have gone to the famed Don Manfredi, the head of a Family on the west coast with power enough to wipe out the Zampanos and Puglianos both without breaking a sweat. Daddy had been quite pleased to make a more direct connection to the Manfredis, and so had Uncle Iggy, as they both knew they were small fish in a big pond largely controlled by the other man. Would've been even better if the Firstborn hadn't gotten in the way and stopped Uncle Sammy from springing that Vanguard National thug out of prison so they could secure what

remained of their explosives caches and maybe even figure out how to make it themselves.

Couldn't be helped though, and Mia made a note to sound Daddy out about a possible alliance with the Manfredis to take out the Zampanos later on down the line. Would have to take their time laying the groundwork for that, but control over the Wayfarer would bring in plenty of power and money both, which was why Daddy never got over how easily Uncle Iggy ceded over control of the river.

There wasn't much else to go over, aside from a shipment of booze that left Irongate three days ago, and was now a day late for arrival in Rimepeak. To this, Uncle Iggy grunted and said, "Send Mikey to find out what happened. He cost me plenty already with the Firstborn, so it's time he make it up to me." The Capos all nodded along and the decision was made. Daddy didn't say anything, but Mia frowned to hear it, because Uncle Mikey was one of theirs. He might not be much of an earner, but he was a soldier through and through, and would be good to have around in a pinch. There was nothing for it though, because there was no looming crisis on the horizon, no posse led by the Firstborn spoiling for a fight or Ranger Strike Teams gearing up to execute search warrants on the Family casinos or warehouses. Wasn't even a threat of the Zampanos coming to attack, because much like Uncle Iggy was content with Rimepeak, Don Alexandro Zampano was happy to hold the waterways and collect tolls and smuggling fees until his end of days.

A frightening lack of ambition, that's what was holding them back. An infusion of fresh blood would revitalize the Family, but they were too stuck in their ways and concerned with gender, bloodlines, and nationalities. Mia would change that though, as she intended to become the first *Donna* of the Frontier, and she'd do so by winning over the greatest talents of her generation regardless of their nationality. So what if Antonio was a full-blooded Sicilian who could trace his ancestry back hundreds of years? That whiny fat pig of a loser was nothing compared to the Firstborn, or even Joey Junior who was all too happy to go after his father's killer no matter the odds stacked against him. Antonio? He'd fold the instant he ran into trouble without Uncle Iggy there to cover for him, so what value did he bring to the Family? None, that's what, which was why Uncle Iggy's efforts to cement Antonio as the Family heir wasn't doing him any favours. Even if Daddy hadn't turned against him, Uncle Iggy's reign would soon come to an end, because sooner or later, someone would grow sick of him and his son and do something about it.

So why not Daddy? Sure, Uncle Iggy played a huge role in building up the Family, but Daddy was the one who kept things running these last eight years, as evidenced by how the Don and Antonio left the meeting with plans to visit the brothel and get a taste of the new girls, while Daddy was left with all the work. Mia followed him out and into his carriage before revealing herself again, and he gave her a smile like he always did, so proud and full of love. Mia returned the smile, and soon as he gave the all

clear, she said, “I’ve a bad feeling about the shipment. The one Uncle Mikey is being sent to check on.”

Though Daddy was curious, he didn’t ask, just raised an eyebrow and waited for Mia to make her argument, except she didn’t have one. “I don’t know why,” she finally admitted, after wracking her brain for some time. “It just feels… off.”

“Trust your instincts,” Daddy said, still smiling proudly in spite of her failure. “They’ll never steer you wrong. You say it feels off. Why?”

It wasn’t anything he said, but the way he said it which told Mia she was right to be wary, and he already knew why. Which meant there had to be a reason, one she wasn’t seeing, so she talked it out like she was taught. “A single late shipment shouldn’t matter much,” she began. “With the mines shut down, alcohol consumption is up, but the workers will soon run out of money anyways, so it’s not like a late shipment is a big deal. Deliveries are late all the time. A horse throws a shoe, a wagon axle breaks, or a driver gets into the goods and goes on a bender. Hardly anything to worry about.”

Daddy nodded, but otherwise kept silent, because he wanted Mia to figure it out for herself. Why was this bothering her? A single late caravan that should’ve arrived last night, and now it was early

afternoon and still no word. No word, that was it. “We should’ve heard something by now though,” she continued, and Daddy’s smile blossomed to hear it. “Traffic might be down here in Brightpick, but it’s not like every mineshaft’s been closed down, so if the caravan ran into trouble, someone would’ve spotted them on their way past and word would’ve reached us soon after.”

“Exactly,” Daddy said. “Even without radios, word travels fast. If we haven’t heard about the caravan, it means no one has seen anything. Rules out most reasons for the delay, since people would be talking if they were stuck on the side of the road or still camped out in the middle of the day.” So in all likelihood, the caravan had been robbed, either at gunpoint or with help from one of the drivers or guards. Such were the issues of outsourcing transportation, but it was cheaper than handling things in house so long as your deliveries actually arrived.

Seeing how Mia was less than pleased at having to work for an answer, Daddy reached out and gave her hand a squeeze. “No need to be sour. The fact that you noticed something was wrong is great, and the rest will come with experience.” Which was the whole reason why he started sneaking her into their meetings, so she could see firsthand how things were done. No wonder Daddy hadn’t said anything about Uncle Iggy sending Uncle Mike. He was the best person for the job after all, as he was idle and had plenty of experience out on the road, so he’d know what to look for once he was out there.

Still though, there was something that didn't sit right with Mia, but she didn't say anything about it. She just followed along and batted her eyelashes while Daddy saw Uncle Mikey off with almost a dozen men, most of whom were Daddy's soldatos. Uncle Mikey only had the one Innate to back him up, a taloned freak who went by Fingers, as the rest of his crew had been done in by the Firstborn some weeks ago. With the new additions, Uncle Mikey was more than equipped to handle whatever may come, and Mia threw it all to the back of her mind until a few hours later when Louie P came knocking at the door with news for Daddy in the middle of dinner. "We got another body," the big, burly idiot began, in front of Mama no less who gasped to hear it. "Oh, sorry Mrs. P. Little Mia. I forgot."

Mama didn't much like the bloodier aspects of Daddy's work, so Mia helped her into the kitchen where she poured herself yet another glass of wine. Though still beautiful as ever, Mama hardly ever went without a glass in hand, and they rarely stayed full for long. It was a weakness, one Mia detested, but it kept Mama sane when Daddy was gone for long weeks at a time, and she never saw reason to break the habit.

A minor grievance, one Mia had no choice but to endure as Mama told her never to follow in her footsteps. A statement Mia nodded and agreed with, because she had no desire to be a mob wife, especially not when she knew most of the men cheated on their

wives anyways. Maybe even Daddy, but she never asked, if only because she didn't want to know the answer. No, Mia knew her parents had their faults, and she loved them all the same, but she would never allow herself to suffer the same indignities they'd both experienced, whether it be becoming the trophy wife to a man married to his work, or playing second fiddle to a less deserving individual for almost two decades just because their mothers were sisters in the old world.

Didn't take much to settle Mama down, and Mia slipped away to rejoin Daddy in his office to see what all the fuss was about. Louie P was gone by then, leaving Daddy alone with his thoughts, until he deigned to share them with Mia. "Like he said, another dead body," Daddy began, his brow furrowed as he explained, "This time, the accounts manager of La Vino."

Why kill a bouncer and then the accounts manager of a mob restaurant? "That's strange," Mia said, eager to hear more about it. "Someone looking to knock it over? Why La Vino though? They hardly bring in enough to make it worth anyone's while." Especially since you could hardly kick a rock and miss hitting a casino or gambling parlour here in Brightpick.

"I've been thinking the same thing," Daddy replied. "Could be about something else though. The accounts manager did the books for a number of our properties, so I got Louie P looking into it now."

Mia's stomach jumped as she was struck by an idle thought, one that immediately took root and refused to go away. "The caravan of booze," she began, hoping she was wrong. "Who were they delivering to?"

"La Vino," Daddy answered, but he didn't see the connection. "Why's that relevant?"

Rather than answer, she asked, "The bodies. Were they tortured?"

"Could have been, or could've just been beaten really badly."

"It's the Firstborn then," Mia said. "This is him."

"You sure?" Daddy asked, still not getting it, but that's only because he never met the other man. "That's a big leap."

"60% sure," Mia said, which had to be enough. "Killing two innocents doesn't fit his track record, but he might be angry enough after losing his girlfriend. You saw how he scalped and mutilated those kids in New Hope, so you know he has his dark

side. Otherwise, this is just the sort of thing we can expect from him. Probably spent all week watching us, studying us, identifying patterns and targets to hit. Recon Scouting, just like he was taught. Now, he's poking the hornet's nest to see how we react, and he's doing it somewhere far out of the way where the chances of civilian causalities is lower than here in town." Still a straight shooter then, though killing the bouncer and account manager gave her hope of turning him yet.

All of which was enough to convince Daddy. "Guess he wanted to know which caravan to hit, instead of guessing at random," Daddy mused, only to frown and ask, "How'd he get in and out of town though? A one-handed Qin kid should stick out like a sore thumb."

"Plenty of ways to disguise himself," Mia replied, as Daddy himself knew all too well. Sometimes, Makeup was even more useful than Invisibility, because blending in with the crowd was far easier than disappearing from plain sight. "All that matters is that we know he's here, so we need to get word to Uncle Mikey and do what we can to convince the Firstborn we're on his side."

Daddy shook his head, but stood to grab his jacket all the same. "Too late now," he said with a grimace. "They're hours away, and the Firstborn will hit them before any of our riders reach them. All we can do is send a rescue party and hope our people make it out alive."

Ominous as that statement might be, Mia could hardly restrain her little whoop of joy as she watched her daddy ride away. After all these years, she thought she finally found someone worth playing with, only to discover he didn't feel like playing along. Now he was here though, playing by his own rules, but she could adapt, because at the end of the day, Mount Rimepeak was her territory, and no one, not even the Firstborn himself, could keep out of their sights for long.

Now, all she had to do was win him over and get him dancing to her tune. A simple enough task, especially now that he was grieving, as she could offer him all the warmth and comfort he desired. Yes, forgot all about tradition and purity of blood. This was the 21st Century, and it was high time the Family changed its ways. A Donna to lead them, with her husband and Consiglieri the Firstborn under her, what a power couple they would make. With their combined skills and connections, they could take over everything West of the Divide and then some, perhaps even declaring themselves a new country to become the first real new world power beholden only to themselves.

One step at a time though. Today, the Firstborn, and tomorrow, the Frontier.

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“Alright Sully,” Mikey said, gesturing into the trees. “You’re on point with me.” Bit of a grimace, because no one liked riding point in the forest, but at least he wasn’t going in alone. “Eyes open and weapons ready,” Mikey continued, speaking to the rest of the group as he headed off the path. “Just make sure it’s not one of ours before you shoot.”

Which was asking for a lot, even from experienced toughs, because there was something about dark forests that struck a primal fear in people. It was all the shadows dancing around in the light, whether it be from the setting red sun or their flashlights which everyone broke out and waved around. Which wasn’t the best thing to do, since it made them focus only on what their lights were shining at instead of the forest as a whole, and all the distracting movements kept Mikey from picking up on errant movements that might give their enemies away.

Didn’t stop them though, because wasn’t no point in trying to teach them now. If they were walking into an ambush, then they’d just have to fight their way out, which was why Mikey readied his trademark Spell. Wasn’t subtle about it either, squeezing his waterskin for the material component while muttering the words and making the movements right in plain sight. That got the rest of them all battle ready and nervous, all except Fingers who was riding at the rear, because Mikey needed someone he could trust watching his back.

Yeah, these might be Franky's guys, but they weren't no real tough guys here. Those were few and far between these days, as almost everyone had gotten soft. Not Franky, as he was still out taking care of business, but everyone else Mikey came up with fat, old, and toothless. These guys? They were survivors, sure, but they didn't have that killer instinct you needed to make it big in this world. Sully and his bunch would do whatever they needed to do, but guys like Mikey and Fingers? They lived for this sort of shit.

Showed best in how Mikey kept his cool, while everyone else was glancing this way and that the whole ride through. Wasn't a long one, which was good because if they kept going, someone was gonna pull a neck muscle and spook the rest with their grunt or something. Was weird though, because whoever hit the caravan went to a lot of effort to hide their tracks, but didn't go all that far before stopping to loot it. There they were, six wagons all looking neat and tidy as can be without so much as a mark on them, parked together in a neat circle of dirt that looked freshly turned. No horses though, which was gonna be a pain, since there was no way Mikey could just leave the wagons here. No guards or drivers either, which wasn't a good sign, but if they were willing to kill everyone involved, why'd they stop so close to the crime scene? Why even stop at all? To change wagons maybe, but this close to the road? Where anyone who heard fighting might stumble across them soon enough? Didn't make no sense.

Even less when Mikey finished his circuit and didn't find no ambush laying in wait. Since that was the case, he rode up to the wagons themself and took a peek in the back, where he found it stocked full of barrels of booze just sitting there untouched. Was the same for every other wagon he checked, and he didn't know what to think, not until Sully brought his attention to the piece of paper tacked to one of the driver's seats.

"Your people are unharmed, sitting tight a hundred and fifty meters to the north. Careful." That's all the paper said, or least that's what he thought until he turned it over to look at the back. "Told you I'd see you first."

Mikey's heart skipped a beat, then he cast his Spell and yelled, "Get away from the wagons." Credit where it's due, the rest of them listened and moved without hesitation as Mikey heard a soft pop and a long whistle before the world came alive with a roar. The dark forest lit up in a blaze of fire, and the heat sizzled against the cool mist of Mikey's Elemental Barrier, an icy blue globe that made him look like he was in standing smack dab in the middle of a snow globe,.

That's how he earned his name as the Snow Show, which admittedly sounded as ridiculous as it looked, but this Elemental Barrier was tough enough to withstand a double barrel Blastgun at point blank range. Which he knew from experience, as he'd tanked two to save Franky all those years ago. Saved his bacon

here too as it absorbed the force from the blazing explosion, one hot and loud enough to spook Mikey's horse and send him flying off its back. Even as he watched himself hurtling through the air and back down to the ground again, all he could think of was how much shit they were in for now that the Firstborn was here.

And none too shy about showing it either, because this? This wasn't an ambush. This was a message, a challenge, a signal of intent and declaration of war, one that was telling them to be ready. That's how much confidence the fucking kid had, to not only dare to go up against the Mafia, but to warn them in advance, and try as he might, Mikey couldn't help but admire the kid for having balls bigger than his head. That's the last thought he had just as the world went dark, but he wasn't afraid, because the kid didn't want him dead just yet.

Still needed a messenger, now didn't he? After that though, it was anyone's game, and scary smart as Mia might be, Mikey was sorely tempted to bet on the Firstborn.