

Razputin Aquato had been bounced from foster home to foster home for the last year and three months since the accident. No one really talked about it - they tried not to mention it around him. No one wanted to mention his family, or the horrible accident that had taken place during the late Aquatos' circus act. It had been tragic, really, a huge media circus around the massacre of the six other Aquatos, that left the young boy Razputin orphaned. Everyone figured the boy had suffered enough.

Well.

Not everyone.

Most of the people in Raz's life - as fleeting as they were - pitied the boy. There wasn't a single family that Raz had been shuffled into that didn't know his story. Even his current foster mother treated him like something fragile and pathetic.

There was a knock on the door of his and his foster brother's room, and a woman poked her head into the room - tired and disheveled, his foster mother always had more kids than she could really handle. There was something shining in her eyes, like a secret she was eager to share with him. "Razputin," she sang, "someone's here to see you!"

She didn't leave, until Raz hauled himself up and came to see his mystery visitor. It wasn't his caseworker, that much was for certain. The caseworkers always made appointments to check in on the children, and the house was always spotless. But now, things were in disarray, and the triplets were chasing each other around the living room, screaming and fighting.

In the kitchen stood an old man in an old coat and a top hat, whose eyes were sharp and dark. His lips twitched upwards underneath his curled mustache, but the smile died before it reached his eyes.

At the table beside him sat an elderly woman. Long silver hair sat atop her head in a magnificent bun, and for a fleeting moment Razputin saw his own nonna sitting there before him. There was an impossible lurch of hope in his heart for a single second before she turned to face him, and the illusion was shattered.

"Ah, Razputin!" She sang, her voice pleasant and velvety and thickly accented, "How nice to finally meet you!"

The boy stopped in the doorway. The single flicker of shocked hope that had shown on his face died down into neutral confusion as he realized that he didn't recognize either of these people. The resemblance of the old woman was uncannily like his Nona, yes, but he couldn't ever remember her mentioning a sister or an aunt or a mom or any living relatives.

His eyes went back and forth between them and his foster mom as he tried to understand who they were, why they were here, and how it pertained to him.

"Um...hello."

The old man gave a gruff little grunt under his breath, and hobbled towards the young boy with a limp to his gait and an elegant walking cane that came to a silver hooked head at the top, where he rested his weight on every other step. "You must be the luckiest little boy alive, ay ragazzo?"

To have survived the tragedy that had drowned every other living Aquato – his mother, his father, and all of his siblings – was nothing to snub your nose at. That must have taken extraordinary luck. "They told me about the accident. That you have no family left. No, si, you are lucky – not only to have survived such a terrible tragedy... but to then be found by your only remaining next of kin." His voice was laden with a certain kind of sticky kindness, like flypaper, but the words were spoken like the set up to a joke, and Raz didn't like the look in the man's eyes as he said them.

With the boy's confusion evident between the three adults in the room, and his foster mother mistaking his discomfort for nerves, the woman gave a little start, eager to introduce herself and her husband. "I am your nonnetta," she said, "and this is your nonno—"

"Mia cara," the man grumbled gently, "I don't think—"

"Ah! Of course. We," she tried again, grabbing the boy by the arms with a delicate touch and pulling him closer. Something buzzed unpleasantly in the back of his mind at the contact, as though her touch were ants crawling along his skin, "are your great-grandparents."

His...nonnetta and nonno? His great-grandparents?

Razputin looked between them, absolutely flabbergasted now. This didn't make any sense. Or, maybe it did a little bit, with how much the old woman resembled his lost Nona, but it still didn't really. All his extended family on his father's side had been lost in Grulovia - to the war or the floods or poverty. And while they clearly spoke Italian like his mother, they looked nothing like her and besides, she'd once said herself that her own grandparents had died when she was very young.

So where on earth did these people come from?

"I...don't understand," he said, slow and uncertain. "I thought...everyone else was lost in Grulovia..."

His so-called nonnetta was still holding him. She holding him at arm's length and yet it felt like he was being smothered. Carefully, he maneuvered out of her grip and took a step back, looking up at these two strangers who cast such a dark shadow over him in the bright kitchen.

Mithra's hold lingered, and it was clear she didn't want to let go. It was actually surprising that she didn't snatch him right back up once he pulled away from her. Instead, she folded her hands in her lap and smiled sweetly as her husband lurched toward the young Aquato once more.

"Si, si, my boy... it is true that the Aquatos all perished in Grulovia. Your grandfather drowned, as did your uncle Raffio. Your aunt Camidalia was betrayed by her own alligators." He said, speaking lightly, as though he were remembering these events with fondness. He smiled, looking down his nose at the young boy whose own family had met a watery demise.

Both of his great-grandparents were smiling like they were in on some kind of elaborate joke.

"But the Galochios survived."

Razputin's face went slack. What?

What?

His gaze darted from one to the other, and they could see the pupils of his eyes shrink to pinpricks. He took another step back, involuntary this time.

"You - you're - but you all -"

He couldn't get the words you all drowned too past his lips. What blurted out instead was:

"I'm not related to you!"

"My dear boy... I'm afraid there were things your family never told you, before their untimely passing. Your grandmother, Marona... my beloved daughter... how they shamed her for her family name. I daresay they never once mentioned to you that she was once a Galochio herself, did they?"

It was clear, though perhaps not to Raz's foster mother, that Zalto was taking a great joy in imparting this information onto the young boy. Just another great weight on his already fragile shoulders.

If only he had been the strong man of the family, instead of his baby brother.

"You are related to us, mia caro," Mithra told him, taking his hand once more. "You're our little baby pronipote. And we've come to take you home."

Maybe it was because he was so shocked, or maybe it was because of some new curse they'd already laid on him, but he looked down at the hand gripping his and found he couldn't muster the energy to try to break away from it. He looked up at his foster mother very suddenly, hoping to plead with her for a rescue, but the woman was smiling and already beginning to move towards the doorway, where the other younger kids were making a scene.

"It was so difficult keeping this a secret, Raz-Dear," she hummed. "But now you'll have a much more stable place to live, with your real family. Isn't that fantastic?"

"Wait - but you - wait!" The poor boy stammered, watching with a rising sense of foreboding as his only lifeline gave him a cheerful wave goodbye before disappearing into the other room, leaving him alone with his family's killers.

"You will come home with us, bambino," Mithra said, pulling him close again. When he was close enough, she laid a hand at his cheek, and smiled down at him. "And we will be a happy family again."

“Lucky for you,” Zalto said, clapping him on the shoulder - the gesture ended with a grip on his shoulder as he veered the young boy towards the front door. “We had your caretaker keep this our little secret while you nonnetta and I worked through all the details with the agency. It was finalized this morning, Razputin.”

The man threw the door open with no small amount of force, and pushed the boy out the door. It was not rough, per se, and there was only enough force behind it to force him over the threshold, but there was deliberate purpose behind the gesture.

“Now, you are a Galochio.”

The push sent him out the door and onto the front steps, caught by the shoulder on one side and by the arm at the other. It was only once his shoes hit grass that his brain remembered how to control its own limbs again.

He planted his feet, going rigid in a full stop. He might not have had the time or training for that year to keep himself in top shape, but he had still tried to stay active, and it was noticeable.

“I’m not a - we’re not family!” His voice rose into a tiny squeak at the end, betraying his terrible growing fear.

Mithra moved from his side, crouching down in front of him and brushing his hair from his panicked eyes.

“Of course we are, bambino,” she cooed to him. “You’re going to come home with us and meet the rest of the family. They’ve all been so excited to meet you!”

“We do not have time to dawdle, Razputin,” he said sharply, pushing the boy down the front lawn towards the car that awaited them. It was small and black and may as well have been a coffin, because the moment he got in, he was as good as dead.

“L-Let go -” he tried to jerk out of her hold, away from her touch, but Zalto’s cane came up between his shoulder blades and kept him from retreating. Perhaps there was some other force involved as well, because Raz could’ve sworn he felt something much larger than their hands grip him to nudge him forward.

He couldn’t flee no matter how hard he tried. The car’s back door was waiting, open, like the entrance to a hearse.

The moment he was in the car, the door was shut and the lock secured. He couldn’t pull it up no matter how hard he tried, as Zalto and Mithra loaded into the front seats.

Once the engine turned over, the deed was done. Raz watched his foster home fade into the distance as they drove off, hauling the young boy off to a new and uncertain life.

Well, it wasn’t totally uncertain. One thing, Raz was absolutely sure of.

As long as he was in the Galochio household, he would never be safe.

Razputin tried in vain to unlock the door at first, but abandoned it when the car began to pick up speed and Zalto gave him a dangerous look through the rear-view mirror. He wasn't stupid. Wherever they were taking him, to whatever horrible end like the rest of his family, he'd rather not risk them restraining him further or just tossing him out along the highway. At least this way, he had a better chance of escape as soon as they were stopped.

It was not a short trip. The Galochio home was far, far from his fosterhome - they must have been driving since early this morning to have reached his home by midday. And now they were driving back - without stopping, and Raz was sure it was no coincidence. They weren't going to stop until they got where they were going.

Eventually, they pulled off the main road, down a series of secluded dirt roads that wove through the trees, and pulled up to an old but sizeable home in the middle of a clearing that surrounded a lake.

The Galochio home.

His fingers curled into nervous fists as he stared at that house and that lake. Especially that lake. There was nothing and no one out here. Far too easy to make someone as small as him disappear.

He sat on his haunches on the backseat of the car, watching the couple in the front seat and waiting for the first opportunity to make a run for it.

It was Mithra who opened the door for him, holding out a hand. She was going to walk him into the house. It was an excellent trick - if he didn't know who she was, she would even have seemed gentle and caring in that moment.

But that's all it was; a trick.

She took up the entire doorway out, and Raz was fully willing to admit he was seriously considering pushing her to the side in an attempt to run. But then he caught sight of Zalto standing behind her, with his hands leaning on his cane and something thick in the air as he met the boy's eyes.

With a nervous swallow, Razputin gingerly slid out of the backseat, trying and failing to avoid the woman's hand as it snagged his own on the way out.

She took his hand in hers, her grip secure but not nearly tight enough to hurt. She was delicate with him, as though her were made of glass or porcelain. Like she was afraid of accidentally damaging him.

Together, all three of them approached the front door of the Galochio house, stepping up to the porch and unlocking the door. Before them lay the foyer, a great set of stairs painted in a dark green, and a little girl frozen in shock.

"Guillelmina, amore mia," Mithra cooed to the shell-shocked little girl. "Go fetch the others, vuole? We have someone very special to introduce!"

She blinked, seemingly rooted to the floor for a moment as she stared at the other little boy. After what felt like an eternity - but was really only a few seconds - she turned on her heel and took off running up the stairs.

Raz's own wide eyes watched her retreat. That was a kid here. It wasn't just this couple here. There was an entire family, several generations living here like with his own family.

An entire family of Galochios. He shuddered and tried to pull away from the woman latching onto him.

Four generations of Galochios, all under the same roof. As the little girl ran from room to room upstairs, knocking on doors and explaining in hushed tones that Zalto and Mithra wanted to talk to everyone, people began pouring down the stairs.

Raz counted eight Galochios total, including Mina, Zalto, and Mithra. Eight people who hated him on principle. Eight people who believed he was better off dead. It was a daunting number, and one that only added to the weight on his shoulders as Mithra held his hand, keeping him snugly at her side. She wasn't going to allow him to escape - not before he'd been properly introduced to the family, at least.

Eight people. Eight people who should not have existed, based on his father's stories. Eight people who did exist, while seven out of eight Aquatos did not.

Raz's fingernails were leaving marks in the skin of his palms.

Once the Galochios were all gathered in the foyer of the home, and all looking expectantly at Razputin, Zalto gave a nasty, self-pleased grin and raised both arms in an almost welcoming gesture. "Galochios! I am pleased to introduce to you our newest family member!"

A beat passed, and he looked down at Razputin, standing between him and his wife. The boy was frozen, wide-eyed and terrified of the family standing before him. Zalto gave him an unkind nudge, hard enough to shock him out of his stupor.

"Introduce yourself," he ordered.

He jolted and blinked rapidly, trying to remember everything his parents had ever taught him about fighting through fear to put on a performance.

"I - my n-name is Razputin."

"This boy," Zalto said, giving him a little shake by his shoulder, "is the last surviving member of the Aquato family."

There were hushed whispers and snickers amongst the remaining six. The little girl seemed shocked and disgusted, like her great-grandparents had brought home a tarantula instead of a little boy.

One of the men broke ranks and moved to Razputin, stooping down to crowd his space and examine his wide, fearful look. "Sei serio? We missed one?"

Raz recoiled to no avail. Zalto's firm hand on him kept him in place as this man practically breathed in his face. He grit his teeth and turned his head.

Zalto held him secure. He wasn't going to let the boy shrink away from the family like that. There was no respect in a gesture like that.

"Indeed we did, Ignazio. But you will find, it is a good thing. This young Aquato," he said, "is a psychic."

The rest of the Galochios exchanged glances. They'd suspected something like this might happen eventually. But this boy?

"But he's an Aquato, papa." said one of his daughters. Mina looked up at her grandmother, with some measure of confusion. "Why is he here with us?"

"Because we cannot wait forever, for the next generation of Galochios." Mithra answered, "He will be raised properly, here. Taught how to control his powers, instead of how to suppress them."

The boy blanched at the mention of the word "psychic." How did this man know about that? He'd been staying so careful about it while in foster care! No one should know but him!

He barely managed to catch up with the rest of the conversation, and his face dropped even further in shock. They were going to train him? What? He'd thought that they'd brought him here for a quiet execution.

With surprise written all over his face, he glanced up at his great-grandparents. "You're...not going to kill me?"

Mithra moved in front of him, taking his face in her hands with a loving touch. "Of course not, amore mia. You're our baby, now—"

"Mithra, please," Zalto grunted, and spun Razputin around to face him. "Now you listen to me. You should have drowned with the rest of your family, bambino," his voice was dangerously soft. "But now, you are here. You have one chance. Do you understand?"

"This is a waste of time," Ignazio complained, eyeing the boy. "Just toss him in the lake and let the curse do its job. You're just fooling yourself if you think this will end any other way."

Mithra shot him an ugly glance. "No! I won't have any of that! This little angel is staying with us. That is final."

Zalto sighed, and let go of the boy. It was clear he didn't agree with her adoration, but he didn't have the heart to tell her no outright. He would afford the object of his wife's infatuation a single chance in this family.

Raz's eyes darted back and forth between everyone so fast it was a miracle he didn't get vertigo. They were arguing over keeping or killing him like how he and his siblings had once caught a mouse, and he felt just as helpless now as it had been.

One chance before he was drowned like the rest of his family. One chance to be...obedient, he guessed. Obedient and "acting like a Galochio," whatever that really meant. He didn't know and he wasn't keen on finding out.

He wouldn't be sticking around long enough to find out.

The way they were manhandling him was especially awful, bounced back and forth between Mithra and Zalto, a loving touch to a harsh one. He didn't dare speak a word about it as the adults came to their decision to let him live.

The only difference between him and the mouse was that Frazie had made them put it back outside. It was clear by now that the Galochios were not going to let him go free so easily. If it were up to them - and it was - he would either live or die here. Freedom was never an option, since before being adopted - since before foster care, since long before the tragedy that had claimed his parents and all his siblings. His fate had been marked since the days of the Grulovian National.

Eventually, Mithra won the struggle over Razputin, replacing her husband's harsh grip with her gentle possessiveness. She smoothed his hair down before standing up, her hands at his shoulders as she turned him to face the rest of the family again.

"I have every confidence in our little Razputin that he will be the perfect little boy," she said, laying her hand atop his head with a smile.

Facing six pairs of hateful eyes, all wanting him dead, the boy could do nothing but stand there and let himself be presented like something from a carnival freakshow.

His great-grandmother's hand on his head made his scalp buzz.

The little girl at the middle of the family gathering was certainly looking at him like something out of a freakshow. Like she couldn't decide what to make of him, if he was something worth having around - not that she got a say in any of this. She wrinkled her nose. She didn't really want another kid at the house. Especially this one.

For one, he was an Aquato. That alone told her everything she needed to know about him. But more than that, he was older than her. She didn't like the idea of her nonnetta fawning over someone older than her. She could already tell that this was going to be a miserable existence until nonno inevitably lost his patience.

Raz spared one glance for the only other kid in the group, and his heart sank as she seemed to share the same venom as the rest of her family. He probably shouldn't have expected anything different, but it was really going to suck knowing that even someone his age hated him right off the bat.

He wrapped his arms around himself in a hug, and looked down at the floor.

“Can - can I go get my stuff from the car, now?” He asked quietly. He’d seen Zalto load his only duffel bag into the trunk when they’d left his foster home, and he really wanted to be doing anything else than stand here.

“No,” Mithra said sharply, her hands back on his shoulders in an instant. She didn’t plan on letting him out of her sight - ever. “You’re going to come upstairs with me, and get settled into your new room. Ignazio, dear, will you fetch his things from the trunk?”

“Si, mama,” he said, pushing past Razputin with little kindness.

Without further ado, Mithra pushed him further into the house, past the adults whose gazes all followed him with venomous glares, and up the stairs.

He was not prepared for the sharp response either in words or in action, and it was only by his acrobatic grace that he didn’t trip up the stairs as she carted him up to the second floor. For such an old woman, she was deceptively strong.

She didn’t give him the time to stumble, so quickly did she march him up the stairs. There was nothing to wait for down there, and she didn’t want him downstairs while they brought his belongings in. Her husband would go through his belongings before deciding what he would and would not keep.

While he did take his time picking and choosing which parts of Razputin got to survive in his new home, Mithra brought him to the second room on the right past the stairs. It was simple, but not unfurnished. It was clear that Mithra had known about this adoption for a long time, and had put a lot of thought into his room. It was perfectly staged, and perfectly sterile.

Razputin was no stranger to having to stay in rooms like this. All the functioning and furniture of any kid-sized bedroom, but without any personal belongings or things that made it feel more homely and lived-in, because no foster child ever stayed in them long enough for it to be worth the extra effort. Raz could only hope that it was not an omen about how long he’d manage to survive these people.

Razputin’s adoption had not been short-notice. Zalto and Mithra had known for weeks that the papers were being processed. She had had plenty of time to furnish a new room, but half of the fun was adding trinkets and baubles as they went. Little things that catch her eye, that remind her of her little bambolino. Maybe even some things he likes!

Still, even given all her plans the room was still impersonal. Comfortable, yes. It was a far cry from the plans Raz had thought someone like Mithra would have had for him.

But really, wasn’t that the irony of it?

At Mithra’s nudge, he stepped cautiously into the room, looking it over as if expecting to find some nasty trap set for him. He noticed that the window was overlooking the backyard lake, and had no rooftop from the first floor underneath it. It was a two story drop straight down.

He tucked the info into his mind to look at later that night when they'd all be asleep. A drop that high was easy for him, and there were always ways to climb down the side of a wall.

Turning back to the doorway, he fidgeted with his fingers as he saw Mithra still standing there.

"So, uh..." He began, and then found himself at a loss for words. What did you even say to someone who wanted you dead? Who belonged to an entire family that wanted you dead?

There was a gentle hand on his cheek, lifting his chin to bring his gaze to her. "I know this is sudden and scary, my love. But I'm not going to let anyone hurt you, no matter how much they want to. You're my sweet boy, now, and I'm going to protect you."

There was a maternal lilt to her voice, and a gentleness to every movement, but something about it crawled under Raz's skin.

For some reason, instead of reminding him of Donatella's overbearing comfort when she was worried about one of her children, the words and the way they were said struck him as something Frazie used to say about Sugarcube after an audience member got too rough with it at the petting zoo. Like something you loved but didn't really see as on equal standing.

Maaaaybe he should avoid thinking along those terms. He could be totally wrong. He hoped he was totally wrong.

"Um, thank you?" He responded, as gracious as he could manage. "I can - I can take care of myself, though. You, uh...don't have to...inconvenience yourself. For my sake."

"Inconvenience? Oh, mio dio, no, sweetheart. You mustn't think that way!" She brushed the hair from his eyes again. He needed a haircut. He'd been neglected over the last year and a half since the accident, that much was clear. Foster care had not been kind to him - but really, how rarely it ever was for someone in his situation.

"I'm here to take care of you, darling. Because without me, Razputin," she told him, her touch delicate and loving, "you won't last a week."

The tentative confusion on his face gave way to shock. He stiffened, and didn't pull away from her only because he couldn't tell whether that was a stated fact or an actual threat. He didn't want to risk falling out of her "good" graces if it was the latter.

"Uh - you - I -" he stuttered, completely thrown about how to even respond to something like that. "I - I'll still - do my best anyway."

She pinched his cheek gently, an affectionate little gesture. "Oh, I know you will my love! Such a headstrong little boy! It runs in the family, you know!" She chuckled.

The sound of the front door closing came from downstairs, and Mithra picked her head up at the sound. "Oh! Ignazio must have gotten your things. Come on, then, let's go get them."

He trailed out of the room with her, doubly worried about his situation because he couldn't for the life of him figure her out. At least the others were easy to understand in their animosity.

Unconsciously, one hand rose to sit in his jacket pocket, where his goggles remained tucked away. His helmet was packed in his bag, but he'd learned the hard way that leaving his goggles anywhere in reach made them a prime target for thieves from children and adults alike, being as pretty and light as they were.

Frankly, he was looking forward to getting them and his helmet back on. His foster mother had asked him to "clean himself up" the morning before his great-grandparents had shown up out of the blue, and so he'd opted out of wearing it. He very much missed the feeling, especially with the way this woman kept touching his hair.

By the time Razputin made it down to gather his meager belongings, Zalto was already going through the duffle bag. He seemed unconcerned by the fact that these weren't his things, that this was an invasion of privacy, that Razputin might object to having his things rifled through. He was unconcerned by any of that.

There was a pile on the kitchen table - a few comic books that Ignazio took one by one, flipping through them before burning them to ash with her pyrokinesis; his leather aviator helmet, which was set on the table before Zalto; a small pile of essentials and necessities that his foster mother had stuffed into his duffel bag while packing it for him that morning. There had been no time for Raz to pack his own things before they'd left that morning. With the bag empty and the few comic books destroyed, Zalto picked up the helmet, turning it over in his hands.

"And... what is this?" He asked the boy who had come to the table to join them in the examination.

Raz had come in just in time to witness the last of his comic books go up in flame. A strangled noise left him and he tried to jump forward, but Mithra was faster. Her hands settled around his shoulders, far too close to his neck, and that combined with her earlier words were enough to hold him in place.

Barely.

As Zalto held his helmet up, the boy realized he might very well lose that too.

"It's my Psy-" He cut himself off before he could finish the word Psychonaut. He'd just watched them destroy his True Psychic Tales. He had no way of knowing what their reaction would be.

"It's - my psychic helmet," he said instead, pleadingly. "I've been wearing it when I'm - trying to practice my powers. It - it makes me feel like I can control them better."

A long pause. He couldn't read their faces.

"I - I bought it with my own money just a few weeks before - b-before the -" accident. Tragedy. "- before f-foster care."

Zalto watched him carefully as he stuttered through his explanation. A psychic helmet, that made him feel like he could control his powers better.

The man laughed. It was not a good natured laugh, and it was clear that Raz was the target of ridicule, here. "A psychic helmet! Oh, bambino, of all the ridiculous notions. This piece of garbage will not help you learn to control your powers," he said, handing it off to Ignazio. It was too thick and bulky for him to burn, thankfully, but that didn't mean it was safe. "The only thing that will help you achieve that is discipline and hard work. And an excellent teacher, of course."

He already had plans for Razputin's schooling - both academic and the necessary psychic training he would receive as part of the family business. The boy wouldn't like what was in store for him, but children so rarely agreed with what was best for their future.

Though, if he wanted to have a future at all, he would learn not to argue with his elders.

His eyes tracked the helmet's passing from great-grandfather to great-uncle, and he had the terrible feeling that this was the last time he'd ever see it.

"C-Can I...still keep it?" He asked tentatively, wringing his hands together.

"Don't be silly, dear," Mithra said with a light giggle. "Of course not! You don't need that grimy old thing to help you learn your powers. We're going to teach you. A bright boy like you will master your powers in no time!" She ran her fingers through his hair, driving home the point that she liked it much better this way, without that silly helmet in the way.

"I will be teaching you how to control your powers," Zalto told him gruffly. "Your learning won't be of any concern, if I have anything to say about it."

His hands twitched at his sides as he stared at that helmet. Tears began to prick at his eyes. That was one of the only personal items he had from his life before. Even if it had been really new at the time, and was more a representation of things he'd wanted separate from his family, it was still something he'd clung onto through foster care through teasing from adults and children alike.

It had made him feel safer, if only in illusion. But there was no place here for even an illusion, it seemed.

Thank god he still had his goggles and his - Raz tensed just a little bit. His tumbling outfit. He was wearing his tumbling outfit under his clothes. There was no way he was letting any of them see it, or ever taking it off again.

Back to now. Back to the present. Helmet, that's what you're most upset about right now, Raz.

And speaking of that...

"How did...you know I'm psychic?" He asked. "I never - told anyone."

Zalto paused, and looked down at him with an expression that betrayed his annoyance. Unnecessary questions weren't a trait he could say he particularly appreciated in a child. Especially this one.

"It runs in the family, you know," he said curtly. "Every Galochio, for generations, has had some measure of psychic ability. Madre e padre were psychics. All of my children are psychics. Their children. Their children's children... it's not exactly a stretch of the imagination, Razputin. Besides - and come from a family that tried to nurture a shame in you for what you are. Tried to teach you to repress it. But you are young, and inexperienced. Or perhaps, defiant," he gave the boy a pointed look. It was not a kind one. "Your psychic signature is still strong. It's that of a Galochio, without a doubt. You can feel it on us, tu no?"

He could feel it. He'd thought it was just the hostility they all shared for him, but now that he was really thinking about it, they had this...aura about them, like how he used to feel from Frazie. And once thought he felt from his father, too.

"Yeah...yeah, I can feel it," he replied very hesitantly, and very much not dwelling on how Zalto was saying he also had a Galochio signature. "I never realized that's something you can tell."

"There are a lot of things you never realized, because the Aquatos have always feared and hated psychics. Even Augustus, who himself had Galochio blood in him, hated his own powers, repressed them to the point of nonexistence. It's a terrible thing. But you," he said, turning to the boy, "will not have to endure that."

He said it like it was some great kindness, that Razputin no longer had the oppressive shadow of the Aquatos looming over him, without acknowledging that the shadow that loomed over him now was much, much more dangerous.

Raz bit his lip under that heavy gaze and those significant words. He'd wanted more than anything to learn more psychic powers for years and years without fear of repercussions. And now he'd gotten it at the price of his family, his home, a majority of his identity, and potentially his well-being.

Careful what you wish for, he guessed.

Careful what you wish for, indeed.

Everything he'd wished for had come true. He was no longer tied to his family's little travelling circus. He would finally be allowed - encouraged, even, though it might be more apt to say forced - to practice his psychic powers. No more one-room rolling prison. Even foster care was a thing of the past.

It had all been replaced by the Galochios and their animosity towards him, dragging him down like the greedy hand of water that had claimed the rest of his family.

Well. If he was going to have to endure all of this, he'd just have to make the best of it. Learning how to be a better psychic was his lifelong dream, and he was going to be the best psychic ever for the short time he was here. He'd stay long enough to learn how to impress the Psychonauts, and then run across the country right to the front doors of the Motherlobe if he had to.

If those were his plans, that was all fine and well, but he would soon find out that what he wanted didn't matter in the Galochio household. "Now, my dear, take your things upstairs and

get settled. Guillelmina,” she said, and the little girl snapped to attention, “go help him. The adults need to talk, now.”

“Yes, nonnetta,” she said obediently, and started to push Raz and his half-empty duffel bag towards the stairs again.

He clutched it close to his chest and buried his nose into the top of it, walking and eyeing the girl without a word. He was no stranger to the cruelty of other children, both in the circus and in foster care, and the open venom in her face was enough to make him wary despite them not having ever spoken a word to each other.

There was enough venom in this little girl to make a black widow blush, but even as she pushed him bodily up the stairs, she didn’t speak to him. What would she even say? Sorry my family’s blood curse killed you whole family?

She supposed she could say that, but mama had raised her not to lie.

The truth was, he was an Aquato. He was temporary here, at best. Eventually things would all go back to normal and they’d send him back to foster care or something and nonnetta would stop acting so weird over him.

They’d stop acting like he was a part of the family.

“Put your stuff away or papa will be cross with you when he checks our rooms tonight,” she told him, and turned on her heel.

She paused halfway out of the room, one hand on the doorframe as she looked back at him. “It won’t really matter for you, though. They’re gonna be cross no matter what you do. Good luck,” she grinned, and with that, she left.

Raz stood in the middle of his room, mouth agape as the girl left. Not so much because of her vitriol, because it was about what he’d expected, but for the thing she had said.

When he checks our rooms tonight.

What kind of family was this? To not trust their children - err, child - enough to let her have her own space and privacy? He’d dealt with foster parents like this, but they were the nosy, self-righteous types who thought all kids in the system were troublemakers. For even this girl who was part of this family to face the same kind of scrutiny was mind-boggling.

With worried thoughts swirling in his head that no longer only pertained to him, Razputin dropped his bag on the bed and began putting his clothes away.

If Raz were to pluck up the courage to ask about his concerns, Mina would have laughed at him. Of course their rooms would be checked before they went to bed. The fact that Raz was shocked by this just went to show what kind of household he’d grown up in. He really was a little circus freak.

At eight o'clock her dad would come up stairs and make sure their rooms were tidy and that they weren't doing anything they weren't supposed to before bed. That's just how it was, and expecting anything less was just delusional. He might have run amok at the circus, but things were going to change here. The Galochios were respectable people - not a family of acrobats that lived in a circus caravan with the animals.

She had no reason to believe that nightly checks were anything less than normal. It had been her whole life, after all. And it wasn't just the room that they checked in one from time to time...

Raz would learn that one the hard way.

Everything was put away neatly within a few minutes. He had learned what adults liked to see from a room, and hopefully it would give him a little bit of grace here.

His hand ghosted over the collar of his sweater. Underneath it was his tumbling outfit, which he had been wearing as pajamas for the last year and three months. Now, with the adults doing nightly checks, he couldn't risk being seen in it. But he didn't know how thoroughly they checked the room, either. He couldn't risk it being found.

He decided to wait until the first check tonight, and see what their routine was. Then he'd find a good hiding place for his clothes.

If he wasn't already gone by morning, that is.

Dinner rolled around long before eight o'clock, and he was called down to set the table while Mina helped in the kitchen. He didn't know where anything is, but no one seemed to pay that fact any mind until they were fed up with telling him where to find dinnerware.

"Madon! I'll do it!" Catalda snapped, snatching the things from his hands so quickly he couldn't have dropped them in surprise even if he'd tried.

Raz jumped nearly three feet in the air, and retreated to the far side of the kitchen to watch the cranky woman go back and forth with plates and silverware and cups for everyone, making a mental note of each of the cupboards she pulled from.

Mina snickered from her place on the step stool at the counter. "Don't feel bad, Aquato," she told him, tiny hands mixing breadcrumb, "no one expects you to do anything right."

"Guillelmina," her mother scolded, from the stove.

That seemed to curb her attitude, pink in the cheeks as she turned her attention back to her task.

He rolled his eyes out of her line of sight. She called that an insult? He'd heard worse from Dion.

Forgive her if she's not quite as biting with the insults as the rest of her family. She's nine and has never had anyone to talk back to before - if she ever tried to say something like that to one of her elders, she'd be grounded until she was thirty.

She was testing the waters with Raz, because she knew she'd be able to get away with it - even if her mother reprimanded her, she would probably be the only one to. The others knew he was an Aquato, and they despised it. She was well aware of how much the others disliked him... with the exception of Mithra, maybe.

Mithra seemed to like him a lot, and Mina couldn't for her life figure out why.

It was time for dinner, and as Raz stared at the giant dining table, he realized he was going to have to sit with these people. Suddenly, any minot appetite he'd had was gone.

Safest bet was probably between the girl and her mother, who he'd been surprised to hear reprimand her for her words. He slid into the seat on the woman's left side while the family hadn't all yet chosen their spots.

His desperate guess was right - that was, easily, the safest place to sit at the table. Guillelmina was younger than him and clearly not used to having any measure of superiority over anyone in the household, and her mother... her mother was a bit of an odd bird, quiet and reserved among her own family, but she didn't seem to share the other Galochios' animosity. She mostly just seemed tired.

He kept his eyes trained on the table cloth in front of him as everyone sat down, and smoothed his napkin over his lap like he'd learned from the boy's home he'd first been dumped in right after the tragedy.

He was strangely well-mannered for a circus brat, Mina thought, watching him out of the corner of her eye at dinner. He didn't cause a scene like she thought he would, and he was quiet and polite while the adults talked amongst themselves. It was not unusual to be excluded from the more serious conversations at dinner, but she found it odd that no one was talking to him tonight. It was his first night here, after all. She certainly wanted to know more about him, the oddity that he was.

Quietly, she leaned over and grabbed a piece of bread from the basket in the middle of the table, eyeing him carefully. "So," she said lightly, "how long were you an orphan?"

Tact, Guillelmina.

Her taunts earlier hadn't fazed him in the slightest. This, however, made him go rigid in his seat. His eyes flickered up to hers with something heavy and full of disbelief and disgust.

It wasn't like he hadn't been asked this question by callous kids before, but the light way she said it, like she was asking about the weather - it drove home everything his parents had ever said about the Galochios' contempt for their lives.

"....A year. And, few months," he answered anyway, quietly, hoping she'd get the memo and drop it.

"Wow, over a year? Well it's a good thing we finally found out about you. You'd probably still be in a boy's home somewhere if nonno hadn't gotten that phone call." She took a bite out of the

piece of bread she still held. “Weird it took them that long to find your next of kin. I guess we do move around a lot. Or maybe they just forgot about you,” she shrugged.

Raz stared long and hard at his peas. “They thought no one had survived Grulovia.”

We thought no one had survived Grulovia.

There was silence at the table.

All eyes turned to Razputin, who had uttered a particularly volatile word, bringing the various conversations at the table to a grinding halt.

No one talked about Grulovia anymore. So many people - many Galochios included - had been lost in the wars. In the protests.

In the floods.

“Razputin,” came Zalto’s voice, grave and dark as he set his cup down. “You have been here under my roof for the matter of hours, and I already have half a mind to put you out.”

“Oh, mia caro, you know the Aquatos—”

“I do. And that’s why I’m telling him now. If I ever hear that word, or anything about that place, from your mouth again, you’ll have wished you drowned with the others. Comprendere?”

Wide, startled, fearful eyes met the man’s own as Razputin nodded vigorously, shrinking backwards into his chair like he expected half the table to launch a psychic attack at him.

He hadn’t expected a reaction like that at all. Among the Aquatos, Grulovia was a terribly sad subject that Augustus and his Nona hadn’t much liked to talk about, but they’d never shied away from it when it was important to bring up. Never, ever had they threatened him or his siblings about saying even the name alone.

Mina watched with wide eyes and a plan forming. All of her life, she’d had questions about where her family had come from. They were heavily Italian, yes, and that part of her family history and culture she was well familiar with, but no one was allowed to talk about Grulovia. No one was ever willing to.

Until now.

She turned her attention away from Raz, going silently back to her meal and forsaking conversation and ridicule for the questions forming in her head.

Raz went back to his own food and tried to eat through the sick pit in his stomach. All he managed to do was nibble here and there.

They were expected to help clean up after dinner, clearing the table and helping put dishes away once they were washed - what they could reach, at least - and afterwards were sent up to their rooms.

Eight o'clock on the dot, Raz could hear heavy footsteps coming up the stairs.

It was time for Signore Galochio to check their rooms.

He sat down on the edge of his bed, watching the door and feeling more trepidation than he had for any of the other homes that did this kind of thing.

There was no knock, no announcement. The door opened without ceremony, and the intimidating figure of Zanobi Galochio stood in the doorway. He entered without a word, and stalked towards Razputin.

"Here is how this will work," he told the young boy, cornering him against the edge of the bed. "Your room gets clean by the end of the day. Every day. Belongings, clothes, laundry, cups. Everything gets put away. Where it belongs. I take anything that is out of place, and you work to get it back. Do you understand?"

Zanobi was considerably taller than his grandfather, especially without the bad posture, and as Raz craned his neck upwards to look at him, he was struck with the feeling of being five or six years old and looking up at the intimidating silhouette of his own father.

"Yessir," he said quickly. "I can do that."

"I saw what you came in with. It'd be really sad if you couldn't." The boy already had so little. He was sure his nonna would take care of that in due time, but ultimately this boy had arrived with nothing.

Nothing he'd been allowed to keep, anyway.

"Get ready for bed. Lights out at nine."

And with that, he left to check on his daughter.

Razputin released the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, and he trudged across the room to close the door before leaning against it, rubbing the lenses of his goggles still tucked away in his pocket like a safety charm.

Not even a full day and night here, and he was already thoroughly exhausted.

But he couldn't take any time to rest. Lights out at nine was within the hour, and he needed to do some sleuthing before it became suspicious.

Moving back over to the window, Raz peered down to the ground still barely visible in the house's lights. There didn't seem to be much to climb down from at first glance, but then he spied a drain pipe that was easily reachable with a well-placed leap from the window sill. Quietly, carefully, he tested the window itself. It opened without much noise or fuss, and he nodded to himself before closing it again.

He'd wait a few hours before making a run for it, when everyone was surely asleep and his absence wouldn't be noticed until it was too late.

As soon as her father had disappeared back down the stairs, she'd snuck herself out of her room and made the dangerous and perilous journey across the hall. It seemed that no one in this family had any concept of privacy, as she, too, had pushed right into his room without so much as a knock.

She watched him examine the world outside his window before opening and closing it with a terrified caution. She knew the circus folks could be weird, and he was an Aquato, but that was strange for even him.

"What are you doing?" Came the tiny, skeptical voice from behind him.

He jumped with a loud squeak and whirled around. A million different emotions flashed across his face at the sight of her, but it eventually settled on guardedness. He crossed his arms.

"Trying to decide if I wanted to feel the night breeze, but the window looks really old so I didn't want it breaking," he lied smoothly and without any stumble. "What about you? What are you doing here?"

"What do you know about Grulovia?" She asked in a harsh, hushed whisper. "No one will tell me anything about it! I was the only Galochios who never even got to set foot in the circus. Even my dad was born there! But they won't tell me anything."

She seemed to buy his smooth lie; she had no reason to believe he'd be stupid enough to try and jump out the window.

Acrobats, man.

Raz's eyebrows jumped up past his hairline. Her, coming to someone like him for conversation? Information, even? Then his face fell as he was reminded of the dinner conversation, and that guardedness returned full force.

"Why, so you can snitch on me talking about it right after I got told not to talk about it?"

"Don't be stupid, Aquato. I'd get in trouble, too. I just want to know about Grulovia. It's my culture, too, but no one will tell me about it." She sounded genuinely put-out by that, and the way she kept glancing over her shoulder to the door spoke volumes about the risk she was taking even being in his room.

He hesitated, torn. On one hand, he really, really didn't want to give Zalto a chance to make good on his threat, especially when he was going to make a break for it tonight and piss him off as it was. On the other, having the chance to talk to this girl without her hurling insults sounded a lot nicer than he cared to admit. Maybe because she reminded him a little of his siblings, in a super annoying way.

Maybe he was just lonely.

"Fine," he huffed, already feeling like he was going to regret this. "What do you want to know first? It's an entire country, after all."

She scrunched her face up, irritated already. "I know it's an entire country. Or, it was. But no one will tell me anything about it. What happened to it that we all had to leave in the first place?"

She had a deep, instinctual need to know about her own family history. The Galochios were proud people, after all, but how could she be proud of her heritage if she knew nothing about it?

"Oh. Well..." He knew a lot of this history from both his parents and True Psychic Tales. It wasn't pretty. "Like, 20 or 30 years ago, there was this big war over there, and the Gzar hired a woman named Maligula to lead his armies because she was a really powerful psychic. I think she was a hydrokinetic?"

He shivered.

"Anyway, um, so they won the war, but it really messed up the economy and stuff for the people, so there were protests about it. According to my dad, the Gzar ordered Maligula to "take care of" all the protestors, so she broke the dam in the capital city and it drowned most of the people who were there. Everyone calls it the Valermo Dam Disaster nowadays. My...my grandparents were there, and my grandpa died."

Mina wasn't listening. The world came to a screeching halt around her, and her stomach flipped uncomfortably. Suddenly, she wished she hadn't asked at all. Was that why they had refused to tell her about Grulovia? Was that why they acted the way they did about her powers?

Raz saw her pale, and her attention slowly drift elsewhere.

"I... I didn't know," she muttered, more to herself than anything. Her fists balled up in the hem of her skirt and she cast her gaze away from him. After a moment, her attention snapped back to Razputin.

She wanted it to be a prank. Payback for her snide remarks. But Razputin, unless he turned out to be a particularly strong telepath, couldn't have known... right?

"Are you sure? Are you sure this Maligula lady had water powers? That she caused the Valermo disaster?"

He was caught off guard by the question. Of all the things to ask to elaborate on, he couldn't have guessed she would ask about that.

"Uh...yeah, that was her. And after she did that, she started attacking towns and cities all over Grulovia, so that's when the world leaders begged for help from the Psychonauts. There's like, a whole thing about them fighting her out over a huge frozen lake."

It was obvious how she closed herself off. She'd come in curious and trying to contain her excitement at the idea of finally learning about Grulovia, but now she shied away from the intruder in her house, arms held close to herself and seeming smaller than she was, which was quite the feat considering she was already so tiny.

There was a flicker of misery across her face before it ignited into anger. "Well— the psychonauts were really stupid to try and fight a hydrokinetic over a giant lake. Are you kidding me?" She hissed, latching onto her anger instead. "God, no wonder no one likes them. They could've saved the whole country but they were too stupid to know not to take on a powerful hydrokinetic over a lake," she rolled her eyes. "They deserved to have their butts kicked, if you ask me."

Raz recoiled in shock. That was the kind of thing he'd grown up hearing from Dion or his mother or even sometimes Frazie when she was in a bad mood. To mock and reject the Psychonauts was something that happened in a family that hated psychics - not a family full of them! It didn't make sense just like watching Ignazio burn his comic books didn't make sense (well...unless that had been only to get at him).

Offended on their behalf, he recovered quickly and drew himself up to his full height, putting his hands on his hips. "For your information, the Psychonauts won that battle. Maligula wouldn't come out anywhere else so they went to her, and they won. She was defeated, not that you obviously know."

"Sure, after she killed all those people at the dam! Some heroes they are!" She spat back. She hadn't known Marona - her dad had only been a baby when the Galochios had fled Grulovia - but she still knew the grief that the family had endured from such a tragic loss. Raz's grandfather had brought her to the dam that day. He went and got her killed by this maniac psychic, not that Raz would care.

If Mina were just a little more capable with her powers, Raz's sheets might have gone up in flames. As it was, there was the faint scent of smoke and a dangerous look in her eyes as she thought about the Psychonauts and how this boy was defending them after everything that has happened.

"Forgive me if I don't fall adoringly at their feet!" She clasped her hands together and bat her eyes innocently before it fell into a sneer. "Gimme a break."

"They didn't know she'd do that until it was already too late!" He growled. "Were they just supposed to assume another psychic would go insane like that? Do psychics do that all the time? Are you saying my family was right about you guys all along? Cause that's sure what it sounds like you're saying."

"Your family," she hissed, with a well-placed shove, "were a bunch of lying, prejudiced, abusive jerks who tried to ruin our lives and then destroyed our family! If you're stupid enough to believe anything they said about psychics, you're just as bad as they were! No - you're worse, because you are a psychic and you still believe all that garbage!"

The blaze in his eyes was an inferno. He recovered from the push with one easy step and got right into her face the very next instant.

The furniture began to rattle around them.

"My family weren't murderers," he spat, jabbing a furious finger into her chest, "who literally did ruin our lives because they couldn't handle the fact that we survived the Grulovian tragedy when they didn't. They weren't jealous, hateful, miserable people who'd rather be mean to some kid they've never even met than learn how to move on. If I'm stupid to believe psychics are so evil, then you'll have to show me some who aren't, cause I sure haven't met any around here!"

"The Aquatos," she spat back, "got what they deserved! It's karma, for killing my family in your stupid circus act! For all the suffering the Galochios endured because! Of! You!"

A light clicked on in the hallway, and Guillelmina froze. Raz could see the anger flee her, replaced by something cold and startled.

And in an instant - just before the door opened - she had made herself disappear.

The anger had not left him, but terror rose up alongside it in a terrible storm of emotions that left him visibly shaking and his nightstand beginning to lift outside of his awareness.

And that was how he was found, standing there in the middle of the room with wide, wide eyes.

The door opened without any warning or prelude. Of all the Galochios, it was Ignazio who stood there.

"What part of lights out don't you understand?" He growled, stalking into the room. Guillelmina sidestepped nervously, rounding her uncle and creeping her way back towards the door. "This isn't practice hour," he said, grabbing the boy by the arm and dragging him back to the bed. "Wrap up your little show, get your culo in bed, and go to sleep, cretino."

"But - but -" Razputin stammered, eyes darting over the room where he just knew Mina still was even though he couldn't see her. His ankle hit the bottom of the bed and he nearly fell onto it. "But-!"

Mina was long gone, crept back to her own room out of fear of reprimand. If Razputin tried to claim it was her fault, she would be waiting in her bedroom, under the covers with her lights out like she was supposed to be.

"Shut up. I don't care what your excuse is. Your job here is to shut up and do as you're told. Now get in bed," he tugged on the boy's arm once more, manhandling Razputin as he set him roughly on the bed, "be quiet, and go to sleep."

He clammed up and ducked his head so that Ignazio would be satisfied enough to let go of him. Inside, though, his blood was boiling. It was their kid who had come to his room in the first place! And she was the one who'd riled him up so bad that he'd started levitating things!

He didn't let these thoughts out of his head. It wasn't going to matter in a few hours anyway. He was going to be long gone by then.

"All this shouting, for what, mia caro?" Came another voice - softer, gentler than Ignazio's reprimand. A figure was silhouetted against the hallway light, lingering in the doorway as Ignazio

deposited this little boy in bed, trembling and afraid. "Iggy, please. I'll help him get settled. You go back downstairs."

Mithra gave her great-grandson a gentle smile as she moved into the room.

Razputin Aquato was not afraid of little old ladies. He was not afraid of his Nona, either. But seeing this woman come into his room, gentle and slow as she was, set off an alarm bell in the back of his mind the same way seeing the Hand of Galochio from a distance did.

Something dangerous and slippery and that needed to stay very far away from him.

He scooted back to the far end of his bed, back hitting the wall. "Um, I'm settled. It's fine. You can go back to bed now."

She shooed Ignazio out of the room, the man grumbling the whole way about disobedient little brats. It was clear that the rest of the family hadn't taken a liking to him like she had. She turned back towards him to find him pressed up against the wall, looking like a cornered animal.

She wondered if he would bite.

Mithra moved to his bed, smoothing her dress underneath her as she sat beside him and gently took his hand. "I know the first night in a new place can be scary," she told him, gently stroking the back of his palm. "But you'll feel better in the morning, after a good night's sleep," she told him sweetly, and he couldn't help but notice, in that moment, how tired he was. It felt like he hadn't slept in days, with every deliberate stroke of his hand.

"Now, you're going to go to sleep, and have sweet dreams, and when you wake up tomorrow morning I will be there for you with breakfast and a hug and a kiss. You're my little pronipote. And now, you're a Galochio." She watched as he settled down into bed without fuss, and would stay with him until he was fast asleep. "And I love you very, very much, bambolino."

He felt...heavy. Heavy like after a full day of acrobatic training and then a show in the evening, where his body was exhausted and his limbs were weighted and he could barely keep his eyes open until he fell into the bed he shared with Mirtala.

Without a fuss or a fight or anything, Razputin let his great-grandmother help him lay down, and struggled to stay awake as she tucked him in. His nose crinkled as she gave his forehead a kiss, but that was the extent of the fight left in him.

He just wanted to close his eyes, now.

Once she was sure that her little boy was fast asleep, she pressed a kiss to the top of his head.

The caseworker the Galochio patriarchs had been working with to finalize young Razputin's adoption had informed them, thankfully, that he was a runner. He'd tried to run away from his foster homes before - a troubled child, he'd said - and had warned them not to take their eyes off of him.

This little display of anger, the frustration and the explosive power he possessed was only a testament to the fact that the Galochios needed to keep a close watch over him. To make sure he stays safe and sound, here.

And what better way to keep him safe than to remove the choice entirely?

She smiled sweetly down at her sleeping little angel, and left.

Raz woke up slowly. It felt like lead filled his bones, and he didn't really want to fight to open his eyes. He barely managed to stir enough for his head to tilt sideways on his pillow.

Why was he still so tired? Why didn't he want to wake up? Why did he want to wake up, actually? It was so much nicer and comfy in bed...

"Razputin!" His name drifted in musical tones from downstairs. "Bambolino, it's time to join us!" The familiar, cooing voice of his great-grandmother was simultaneously grating and a curative that washed away the warm heaviness he felt.

It was like a lightning bolt had struck him. All the sleepiness left, and suddenly he was painfully aware of the morning light coming in from his window. He jolted upwards into a sitting position.

How was it morning?! He was going to make a break for it last night. He wasn't even tired last night, when on earth did he -

His eyes widened as the fight with the Galochio girl and the aftermath of the two adults showing up flooded back to him. He lifted his hands up, turning them over and staring them down as he remembered Mithra's words and the gentle way she'd touched his palm, and tried to figure out how the hell she'd done what she did.

It had to be some kind of hypnosis, right? That was the only explanation. According to True Psychic Tales, it made people feel heavy or fall asleep all the time.

A shiver ran down his spine. As he got up and reluctantly began changing into his tumbling outfit (hidden deftly in his pillowcase during the night) and then layered with other clothes above it, he was determined not to let it happen again.

The family is already gathered at the kitchen table, watching him come down the stairs. Guillelmina will not look at him, but Mithra is right there to grab the boy's attention.

"Did you sleep well, bambolino?" She asked sweetly, leading him to his seat. There was something awful shining in her eyes.

She already knew the answer.

If Razputin was a braver kid, he wouldn't have answered at all. But with so many hostile adult eyes on him, he decided to be the smarter kid instead.

"Y-Yeah," it came out so soft anyway.

Mina watched him out of the corner of her eye, still very quiet and head bowed as she ate her oatmeal. She had laid perfectly statue still in her bed last night while listening to zio Ignazio scold him.

And then she'd heard Mithra come upstairs.

She knew what had happened last night, without a shadow of a doubt. The woman had put him to sleep, safe and sound last night, and he hadn't even had the chance to argue with her. She wondered if he knew about hypnosis, or if he'd woken up groggy and confused.

It would be obvious to her, or any of them, that he probably did. He was subdued and avoided all eye contact as he took his place at the table next to Guillelmina.

She didn't engage with him; she didn't care to, after last night. Truth be told, she thought he was going to get his butt handed to him by zio Ignazio, and probably the only reason he didn't was because Mithra had showed up to protect her precious baby Aquato.

Raz had thought so, too, and honestly? He almost would've preferred it. At least it was something he knew how to roll with.

Raz didn't know zio Ignazio. He definitely wouldn't have preferred it, that much was for sure.

But now he knew Mithra. Really, it made sense. Initially, Mina couldn't believe that someone like her nonnetta had taken such a liking to him, of all people. It was absurd and unusual, and went against everything the Galochio family stood for.

But it was starting to make sense now.

"Now that you're all settled in and well-rested," Mithra told him sweetly, "I thought we would start your lessons today, bambolino. Doesn't that sound exciting? You're already such a powerful psychic," she said, and Ignazio scoffed into his coffee cup, "that I think it'd be best for you to learn as quickly as possible. Don't you?"

He wasn't eating anything - hadn't even started - but the question made him want to leave the dinner table regardless. He saw Mina fidget out of the corner of his eye and it made him do the same.

"Um, I - I don't know if I'm, really all that powerful," he said, giving a nervous sound that attempted to be a chuckle.

"Oh, but Ignazio says he saw you levitating all of the loose things in your room last night," Mithra cooed. Underneath the veneer of polite charm was a strained displeasure. She'd fix that today - anything that couldn't be bolted down would be removed. It would make his room a bit more bare, but until he learned to control himself - learned his place in this family - she wouldn't have any more accidents with his powers. "I won't hear it, Razputin! You are a Galochio!" Her husband gave a displeased grunt. "You are powerful by nature. It's in your blood! Mia caro, won't you teach him today? No one knows the clairvoyant arts better than you..."

Zalto looked over at her past the rim of his coffee mug with a sour look. Eventually, he sighed and placed his mug down. "Sì, amore mio. Anything for you."

Never in his life had Razputin wished he could disappear the way Guillelmina had last night. Never had he wanted to go invisible and slink away from this table and this house and this family more than in this moment, faced with being taught psychic powers by the man who was indirectly responsible for the deaths of everyone he knew and loved.

He stuck his hands between his knees and squeezed them tight, burning a hole in his plate with his eyes.

Mithra rubbed his back gently, and set a place of eggs in front of him. "Now eat, bambolino. No use training on an empty stomach."

It was clear from the start that Zalto didn't particularly want to bother with him. Of all the animosity the boy received in this house, the worst of it always came from Zalto. He could tell with every breath that the patriarch hated him. Truly, deeply despised him. If it hadn't been Mithra's idea to adopt him, the man must have truly craved misery, because having Razputin Aquato in his household was not something he was enthused about in the slightest.

But he had promised his wife he would train up the little wretch, and that was what he would do. The moment he was done with his breakfast - even though Raz was still eating, or trying to - he stood from the table and ordered that the boy follow.

Now.

The hair on the back of Raz's neck stood up, and he scrambled to leave his seat and follow the man before he changed his mind - on teaching him or letting him live.

Zalto would not hurt him - not while his wife was still enamored with him the way she was. He'd meant it when he'd said he'd do anything for his darling Mithra. So long as she was happy, he was... perhaps not happy, but certainly less miserable.

He felt the boy's terrified presence following close behind as he led him into the parlor - the front of the house, where clients were taken. Not even Guillelmina practiced here. "In the future, it will be my wife who teaches you. But because you are at..." he gave the boy a once-over with a sour gaze, "such a remedial level, I will have to get you up to speed. Now, sit."

Razputin's face flushed. He hated being reminded of that fact, and he hated that this man knew it. That the whole family probably knew it, despite him not having said anything yet about what he could do. It was obvious and embarrassing.

He sat down across from the man and gripped the sides of his chair.

Of course he was unskilled. He was only ten - at that age, it was expected that he have little control over his powers. But he came from a family of acrobats who had shunned those powers, forced him to repress them. He needed more help controlling these things and understanding exactly what he was capable of than most.

Zalto sat down across from Raz, and leveled his gaze. "You are going to learn, and you are going to learn, quickly. You are behind, Razputin. Now, let us begin." He held his hands out for the young Aquato.

The boy hesitated to put his hands in his, feeling Mithra's phantom touch, but one sharpening glare from his great-grandfather made the decision for him. Raz gave him his hands.

He examined the boy, and Raz could feel Zalto's psychic energy creep forward, pressing in on his mind. It was a terrible feeling that sent a shiver down his spine, but it was not violent. Shocking as that may be, Zalto couldn't to teach the kid if he were a braindead heap on the floor.

Although, if he were a braindead heap on the floor, he wouldn't have to teach him. Hmm...

No, no. He promised his amore that he'd do this properly. Curb his vicious anger to rear this little circus brat to be a proper, respectable psychic.

Razputin tensed at the feeling. It was very rare there was anything strong enough pressing against his mental defenses that he could actually feel them; according to Frazie, over half of her attempts when they were younger of her trying to get into his mind happened while he was happily oblivious to any kind of invasion.

Well, he was feeling it now, and he decidedly didn't like it.

Well, whether he liked it or not didn't matter. He was going to have to get used to it. At long last, that invasive feeling subsided, and he opened his eyes to look over Razputin. "Your mental defenses are... unusually strong," he said, and sound utterly displeased about that. "Hmm. Interesting, for a boy your age."

He didn't like that getting into the boy's head was that difficult. No telling what Aquato secrets he was hiding in that fortified noggin of his.

Well, they would work on that later. For now—

"You're going to have to work around those defenses if you want to have any substantial control over your powers."

Never in his life had praise sounded so backhanded. So displeased. He squirmed and gave a small, hesitant nod to show he understood.

"Good. You'll learn quickly," he said, and actually sounded pleased for such a thing, "after all - you don't have any choice, my boy. Mistakes are rarely tolerated in my house. Do you understand that?"

"Y-Yessir," he said with a swallow. Then, perhaps in an attempt to do damage control, "I'm a - fast learner. I can learn."

“Buono. I don’t think I need to tell you what happens if you slip up, ay bambino?” There was a slight chuckle to his voice, and Raz got the distinct feeling that it was something that Zalto Galochio dearly looked forward to.

“Now. Let us start with your telekinesis. I have heard you have trouble controlling that.” He cocked an eyebrow at the boy, an accusing look. “Si?”

Raz bit his lip. He wasn’t about to lie to this man about his powers, but neither was he going to rat himself out about the real reason they’d caught him up late last night.

“I...well, I, I didn’t used to...” And it was true. Before foster care, at least, he could barely lift a pine cone on his own no matter how hard he was straining himself. “I wasn’t very...good at it. I don’t know what changed.”

“I will tell you what changed: you are an emotional, unruly imp who never learned to control your powers - and now, you are in a position you recognize as, ah, disagreeable,” he gave the boy a cruel grin. “Your lack of control is manifesting in unfortunate ways. Ways that are going to prove dangerous to your health if you do not reign them in.”

Oh. Oh, he got that message loud and clear. It was taking everything in him not to get out of this chair and put as much distance between himself and the man before him as he could.

He stayed in his seat by some force of will he didn’t know he had.

“I’ll - I can reign them in,” he promised, with a desperate little tint. “I can do that.”

“Good. Good. It’s in your best interest, ragazzo. Now! I’m going to teach you to control those unruly powers of yours.” Zalto stood up from the table and moved behind Razputin where he sat. He laid his fingers at the boy’s temple, delicate and sinister. “You suppress anything that moves, and you get to leave this parlor today in one piece. Ready?” It didn’t matter if he was ready or not. A surge of power shot through him, and his own TK flared up wildly.

Razputin jolted at the sensation, and the sudden levitation of almost everything in the room around them. Unlit candles, curtains, chairs and even the table before him began to float with an aura of orange tinted with a sicklier, darker orange.

His eyes darted back and forth to everything around them. Suppress anything that moves and he’ll be okay. He could do that, he could totally do that, he was not going to panic about this!

Nothing was settling down. Nothing was stopping in the air. Panic began to bubble up his chest and into his throat. He’d never experienced psychic powers this strong, coming from himself or anyone, and he had no guidance on where to even begin.

Breathe.

His eyes widened. His mother’s voice broke through the terror.

Breathe, Pootie. Deep breaths while you work. In and out, in and out, yes, that’s it!

Raz took a deep, gasping breath. In, out. His eyes landed on the table hovering four inches off the ground. One thing. He could handle one thing. He poured all his concentration into that table.

It began to sink towards the carpet.

There was no motivator on earth like fear.

Promise a man riches, give him an ultimatum, beg for his action, and you might be lucky to see results. Make a man fear for his life, though, and you would be amazed what he could get done.

Zalto said nothing as he felt the boy's panic rise, watching his breath hitch as the room levitated uncontrollably. Zalto could keep each and every object in the air if he chose - it would be a nice excuse to take out his frustrations if nothing else - but he wanted to see what this kid could do.

And so, when the table started to drift back towards the carpet, he watched with an intense gaze. Once all four legs were back down, he let it go, and Raz's own power released it as well.

One by one, he watches as Razputin focused on objects, returning them to their proper place. He'd be impressed if he weren't so disgusted.

When there was not a single thing left hovering or spinning in the room - not a single thing even glowing - Raz slumped forward, panting and trying to recover his mind. So much effort to put things back where they belonged, when he had never done so much before and had been given a powerful boost against his will, combined with the fight-or-flight mode that Zalto's promise had set him into had exhausted him mentally.

Zalto watched quietly as the boy slumped in his chair, removing his touch from his temples and walking back to his own seat with a keen eye trained on the child trying to catch his breath. He could feel Razputin's signature flicker in its effort, like a candle flame assaulted by a brisk wind.

"Very good, ragazzo," he said stiffly, demanding his attention even as he struggled. "You were right - you are a quick learner. It's amazing what you can do with the right... motivation," he smiled. "You seem tired. That will be temporary. Once you learn to control your powers, they will not take quite so much effort to perform. But for now, take a moment to catch your breath, and we will continue."

Continue? They weren't stopping after this? What else could Zalto possibly want to teach him control about? It wasn't like he'd been running around setting things on fire or astral projecting out of his body, neither of which he could even do right now.

Raz closed his eyes a minute as he relished what little time he'd been given to recover. It reminded him so much of when his parents were really pushing during a new training routine, and it made his stomach roll.

Control wasn't just about restraint and good behavior. It was the core proficiency for all of your powers. If you did not know how to control your own psychic energy, then you would be unable to learn how to use your powers to their fullest capacity.

He watched his great-grandson take a breather, his eyes closed and exhaustion written in every line of his young face.

"You will be expected to perform these tasks easily in the future. Do not get too comfortable."

He opened his eyes with a grimace before sitting up properly. "O-Okay. Yessir."

"Good." Without taking his eyes off of Razputin, a cabinet against the wall opened its doors, and a crystal ball was levitated to the pedestal between them. "You have one purpose in this family - to see the future and become a Galochio fortune teller. That starts now."

Raz tracked its movement to the table with wide, unblinking eyes. Fortune telling was taboo to his family. Even among the psychic stuff, crystal balls and seeing the future and parlor tricks like this were only mentioned in passing, and always in a hiss or a fearful whisper.

Suddenly he wasn't ready to learn how to be a psychic. Not if it meant learning those things, and taught by this man.

Well, as it turned out, he didn't have a choice. Zalto didn't care what the Aquatos had despised, what they had whispered to each other in harsh, fearful tones. They were dead and gone and their only surviving member was a psychic who was his great-grandson, his property, and he was not going to abide these superstitions the Aquatos had instilled in him any longer.

Zalto reached out psychically, forcefully latching onto Razputin's guarded consciousness without moving from his seat across the table. He sat there, straight-backed with his palms flat on the table.

"Follow my lead, Razputin, and I will teach you to connect to the crystal ball."

The psychic contact made his spine prickle and his body stiffen. Nervous and apprehensive, the boy mimicked Zalto's pose and waited for his next command.

"You will reach out with your power and connect to the crystal ball - as though you are trying to read someone's mind, si?" He ordered, knowing full well the boy had probably never read a mind in his life, with the household he came from.

"Uh - okay," he replied very tentatively.

He tried to think about how to read someone's mind. Sometimes when the Aquatos had customers, they tended to think loud enough for him to pick up stray thoughts here and there, but the only time he'd ever really tried to actively listen to what someone was thinking was with Frazie, and her defenses had been nothing to sneeze at.

Hoping that maybe it was similar to that, he bowed his head to stare deep into the white of the ball, putting all his focus on it and treating it like trying to read his lost sister's mind.

Luckily for him, the ball didn't have half the defenses Frazie had once had. It was easy to connect to it, almost like the little trinket was eager to have that input. The very moment Raz felt

his own energy connect with it, it pulled him in, an inescapable vortex that consumed his psychic power and used it as power.

It began to glow, gentle white tinged with warm tones.

Zalto merely watched as his power settled in.

Razputin gasped at the sensation. It wasn't a bad sensation by any means, but he wasn't used to it at all, and it showed. His gaze was transfixed on the crystal ball, and his own green eyes seemed to mirror the glow.

"Steady, ragazzo. You're doing well. I want you to look into the future. Nothing too difficult. In a moment, I will tell you a number. I want you to divine what that number will be. Even you should be able to reach mere moments in the future. Now, look into the crystal ball, Razputin, and tell me what you see."

Zalto watched him coolly and without emotion, unbetraying of how fascinated he was to see if the young Aquato could actually pull it off.

His eyebrows furrowed as he stared at the ball. Look into the future. Look into the future. See a number being told.

The world around him and the crystal ball seemed to dissolve, narrowing into a tunnel where only the two of them existed, and then suddenly expanding again where he sat across from Zalto. He was about to open his mouth, saying that he had started to feel it but it had slipped away, when suddenly his great-grandfather beat him to the punch.

"Five."

Razputin blinked, and let out a surprised sound when the ball seemed to glow brighter before dimming. He glanced up at Zalto, who was now silent again and watching him like a hawk.

"Is - is it - five?"

There is silence for a moment as Zalto sizes him up. It's an excruciating few moments where the possibility that he'd somehow screwed up loomed heavily over him.

"Five," Zalto said gruffly, in the exact same intonation that Raz had heard him speak it just moments ago in his vision. "Si, you're correct. You are a powerful psychic, aren't you, Razputin? You've done very well."

It was impossible to tell if this was a compliment or if he was displeased than an Aquato of all people had these powers. He thought of his own great-granddaughter, and how she had been training for years and had yet to see even a few seconds into the future much less have a concrete vision like this boy had. Despite his praise, there was no joy or kindness in his eyes.

Despite the fact that he had seen the future and predicted the correct number, it did not feel like a victory to Razputin. He sensed that somehow, sidestepping one bad outcome of this practice

round had put him right in the way of another; one he wasn't yet aware of involving his cousin and her own powers. He tensed in his seat and tried not to play with his hands.

"If you...say so, sir. I don't really feel all that strong yet."

"You are still very remedial, but you are a quick learner, and that is valuable. You clearly know how to control your powers, with the right... motivation. Mithra will be pleased once you start your lessons with her. In the meantime," he said, standing from the table, "we are done here. Go speak to Ornella and receive your chores for the day. I will speak to nonnetta about your next lesson."

Mostly he just wanted to be done with the little imp. Wasting his time training up an Aquato - there used to be a day where he would have drowned the boy they'd brought him home. But his wife, ay mio dio, she got something in her head and it was impossible to change her mind. He knew her little pet project wouldn't be worth it in the end, but he didn't have the heart to tell her no.

Raz swallowed and hurried out of the parlor. The less time he was around the man who wanted him dead, the better.

Well, Raz should resign himself now to the fact that he was going to be spending a lot of time around people who wanted him dead. Zalto, Ignazio, Ornella, Catalda, all of them thought he would be better off drowned in the lake behind the house than taking up space here.

The only one who care for him, it seemed as Raz established his life there, was Mithra. She looked after him. She doted over him. She bought him new things - clothes and little trinkets for his room that he wasn't allowed to touch.

She made sure he went to sleep every night in a soft, warm, unnatural embrace. She kissed him goodnight every night as she tucked him in and stroked his hand as he laid there.

She loved him. Didn't she?

The next few days made it harder and harder to tell.

He'd spend the mornings and afternoons and evenings doing chores, avoiding every adult in the house like the plague if and when he could, and facing terrible ridicule and mocking. The words said his way in Italian were particularly nasty, and he kept his head down so no one could see the way his face went red with embarrassment and anger and fear.

Every night, he vowed to himself that it was going to be the night he ran away, and every night, Mithra found a way to thwart it. She pulled him close to hug him goodnight - she was standing over him in his bedroom - he woke up groggy and disoriented the next morning. She surprised him in his room with something cute she'd found at a store right before he was supposed to go to bed - she was looming above him as he laid in bed - he woke up the next morning. She called him to help her make some tea right after dinner, and just when the kettle started boiling - she was tucking him for the night with a quiet hum and a cup of tea in her hand - and he woke up the next morning.

It was infuriating. It was a pattern of madness he couldn't predict no matter how hard he tried, and oh how he tried. Avoiding her led to her becoming more persistent in finding him. Acting subdued and obedient did nothing to keep her away.

Raz had to get out. He had to slip past her somehow and escape. It was driving him insane that he hadn't found a way to, yet.

What Razputin didn't know was that his caseworker had warned them - had given them a heads up that the child they were adopting tended to be a runner - he'd run from three foster homes in the past year he'd been in the system, and the Galochios had shared a knowing look at that information. Of course he was going to run from them.

Mithra was the one who had suggested she lend a guiding hand to the troubled youth. She was more than happy to ease him into bed after dinner, whether he was aware of it or not. Every night she would find him, dote over him sweetly, and watch as the consciousness fell away from his eyes without protest. Her favorite part of the day, putting him to sleep for the night, watching as he consigned the utmost trust to her. Once he was asleep, she could make him do anything. She could have marched him into the lake and he wouldn't so much as protest. But she only wanted to protect him.

She smiled down at him as he joined her for breakfast the next morning. So many days had passed with gaps in his memory that it was hard to decipher exactly how many days he'd spent here with them.

It was too many, that much he knew for certain

"Good morning, bambolino!" She chirped. "Did you sleep well last night?" It was only polite to ask, of course. She already knew the answer.

Razputin didn't look at her as he took his usual spot next to Guillelmina's mother, Adelasia, at the table. The fact that he'd been here long enough to start remembering names was as alarming as it was frustrating.

"Yes," he replied quietly to avoid a reprimand about being rude. His knuckles rubbed back and forth almost obsessively over his pant legs.

"Good! Good, good, because you and I have a long day ahead of us!" Mithra chirped, ruffling his hair. Mina didn't say a word to him - she'd refused to even acknowledge him in the house since that night zio Ignazio had almost caught her out of bed past lights out - but she fumed listening to how Mithra fawned over him. She couldn't believe that Nonnetta of all people was wrapped around the finger of an Aquato. "I want to take you into town, mia caro, and get you some new things. You can't keep wearing the same three shirts, they're practically threadbare."

"Ah," Ignazio said in hushed tones to his sister, "la bello di mamma si vestirà bene!" He chuckled, and Catalda laughed brightly. "È davvero una piccola bambola."

The boy went scarlet. His first instinct, the one that had him opening his mouth, was to protest the humiliating nicknames and his great-grandmother's insistence on infantilizing him, but he

shut it quickly with an audible click as he realized that she was going to let him leave the house. She was going to let him go to town.

His mind began whirring with all sorts of half-baked plans beneath the safety of his armored head. All he needed was one chance to slip away and he could run out of her range of hypnosis or telekinesis or any other trick she had up her sleeve.

But he needed to play this convincingly first.

"I'm, I'm fine," he murmured, not meeting anyone's eyes. "Really. You don't have to do that."

Deference. Humble self-effacement. It was the perfect answer that allowed Mithra to coo and fawn over him. She could see the color in his cheeks and assumed it was the humiliation of being babied and cared for so publicly.

"Oh, don't be silly," she sang, lifting his chin as she rounded the table. "You're mia bambolino, now. I won't have you looking like you came from some run-down circus," she laughed.

It was funny because that was exactly where he'd come from - and even worse, he'd had a layover in foster care before coming to live with the Galochios. He was the perfect picture of the downtrodden orphan waiting to be loved and cared for, and Mithra intended to remake him into something much more picturesque.

A grimace spread across his face as he winced at the phrasing, knowing it was intentional and meant to get a rise out of him. Which it had, and he hated it.

It was a small price to pay, though, as he managed to keep his hands from pressing to his chest where his tumbling outfit still remained hidden. He'd lost track of the days here, but miraculously they hadn't yet realized what precious thing he was holding onto.

He intended to keep it that way, and he intended to get out of here. Going to town was his big chance.

His eyes met Mithra's briefly before skittering away, still red in the face.

It would be an awful shame if Mithra found out about such a dangerous secret. The chances that she would let him keep his old, tattered tumbling outfit if she found out about it were slim to none. Chances were she would burn it, just like they'd done all his other belongings. The idea of this last remnant of his family going up in smoke in Ignazio's hands filled his stomach with dread despite Mithra's cheer.

"Go get dressed, mia caro, I want to leave soon!" She called after him as he skittered off, eager to be apart from the rest of the family.

He hurried up the stairs and into his room, closing the door carefully but quickly behind him. As he began changing, he hesitated, looking down at his tumbling outfit. Should he leave it here and hide it while he was out, on the off-chance Mithra might see it on his body out there?

No, he decided. No, he was going to try to make a run for it out there. He was not leaving one of the most precious things he had left in this house.

It was only a few minutes before the boy appeared on the staircase, ready to go and feeling his stomach twist in apprehension.

“Oh, Razputin,” she cooed, looking at him, “it’s going to be cold out today. You know what - come here, I have a jacket for you. I was going to wait until we got home, but you just can’t go out like that!” She sang, fluttering back to her bedroom to fetch the article she’d bought for him.

It was soft, and comfortable, and a perfect fit. It was big enough on him that moving his joints wasn’t too difficult, but it wasn’t too baggy, either. The soft white trim of the aviator’s style jacket was warm and comfortable to the touch, and he looked rather smart in it.

“There you go!” She said, tugging gently at his lapels as she fixed it to her liking. “Oh, aren’t you just the cutest?” She asked, pinching his chin before she gently pat his cheek, and the world went black as he slept.

Razputin’s eyes dimmed and his body relaxed. He was gone like a tiny flame blown out.

Mithra’s gaze softened with adoration as she watched the will flee from her little doll. She didn’t seem aware of the hush that fell over the table as the other Galochios watched his consciousness drift away. She didn’t notice the way Guillelmina watched with wide, unsettled eyes.

She’d never seen what that looked like from the outside, before. It was eerie. But Mithra didn’t think so - he was perfect, this way.

“Mama, is he out?” Catalda asked, her voice clipped and curious, as though she were resisting the urge to prod at him with a utensil. “You really want him under like that?”

“Of course I do! Look how sweet he is like this! Unaware... obedient... my perfect little boy!” She cooed, and Ignazio fought to keep his breakfast down.

“But you’re letting him come back once you get home, si? I don’t want him spending too much time in his own head. Who knows what kind of ideas he’ll get in there.” Zalto grumbled.

Raz wasn’t aware that he was sleeping. He wasn’t aware he was dreaming, either. He was on top of a giant rubber ball, showing how easily he could balance on it for a cheering audience that was unusually large compared to the crowds the Aquatos usually got.

His family encouraged him from the ground, performing their own complimentary acts while showcasing him as the centerpiece. A grin lit his face as he took another lap around the circus ring on the ball without breaking a sweat.

“Now, mia famiglia, we will return later this evening!” Mithra chirped, holding her hand out for Razputin. He dutifully took it, staying close to her like a shy little child hides by his mother’s leg. It didn’t matter how outgoing or brave he was. While he was under Mithra’s hypnosis, he was

only what she wanted him to be: docile and obedient. He was the perfect little boy, and this little outing was only the beginning.

She knew her husband didn't want her keeping him under for long periods of time, but she was sure that he would come to see it her way eventually. Aquato or not, he was better this way. And when he finally asks her to take everything away, she would happily abide.

"Everyone be good while we're gone!"

The ball began to wobble. Razputin blinked, keeping up the practiced show smile with ease even as he wondered what was breaking his carefully-maintained balance and rhythm.

"Si, si, mama," Ignazio muttered, inattentively. "Divertiti con il tuo nuovo giocattolo."

She tutted as she led the blank little boy out of the front door. Mithra had been born and raised in Grulovia - this cold was nothing to her, but her little doll was not so accustomed. She pulled her dupatta closer around her shoulders and shuffled Razputin into the passenger's seat of the car, eager to have him out of the chill. The child showed no response to the cold, not even so much as a shiver, but her hypnosis would not stop him from catching cold.

"There," she said, as she took her place behind the wheel. "Now, buckle yourself, bambolino, and we can head into town." She smiled as he moved robotically and obediently, and the engine turned over as they pulled away from the house.

With all of his attention on the ball that suddenly seemed to want to roll out from under him, Raz didn't notice at first that the cheering had also faded. When he did, he spared a precious second to glance up, and found the crowd still watching him, but in eerie silence.

Something like dread began to pool in his gut.

The drive into town was long, but spent in a comfortable silence. Mithra knew that conversation wasn't going to be her little doll's strong suit, today - and that was alright. She was content simply to be with him, wonderful and ideal as he was. She was unaware of the dream taking place deep, deep within his subconscious, as some ancient and primal part of him protested his nonnetta's control over his mind.

Perhaps he was still willful underneath the veneer of her power. Or, perhaps, he was just a scared little ten year old.

Razputin's balance was wobbling at a rate that was actually concerning now. He dropped his gaze from the silent audience to keep his focus on that and only that. It wouldn't look good to be the centerpiece of a show and fall flat on his face, after all. He had to show how good he and the family were, especially with such a large crowd tonight. Speaking of his family...

...Where were they?

It was nearly an hour before the barren wooded countryside gave way to development. The Galochios were a reclusive family - they valued their privacy, of course, and the ambiance of mystics in the woods sold better than the urban decay of the corner shop psychic frauds.

She pulled into the parking spot in front of the little brick building, the downtown area bustling happily, unaware that the child Mithra helped out of the car was so far gone. "Come on, pet," she chirped to him, taking his hand happily once more. "Let's get you some new things!"

A gnawing feeling in his heart made him look up again, despite the risk of losing his balance. Queepie and Mirtala weren't in front of him anymore. He looked left. Mom and Dion, gone. Right - same thing with Dad and Frazie.

The spotlights felt very bright and hot. Raz lifted a hand to shield his eyes and looked through the crowd for his family, hoping that maybe they had found their way out there instead.

Mithra led him around the little store and picked things out for him, holding them up to see what they would roughly look like on him before slinging it over her arm and continuing on. She had a very eclectic taste in clothes, it seemed - and really he looked good in everything, adorable as he was - so there was quite a variety of outfits she was going to have him try on.

She even picked up a pair of swim trunks for him. He was going to be needing them come the summer.

They weren't in the crowd; the crowd that was still silent and stony and nonreactive to the boy's rising panic and struggle to keep the ball still. It wobbled back and forth almost violently now, like he was on a surfboard caught under the Hand of Galochio. Beads of sweat ran down his temple and the back of his neck.

What was going on? Where had his family gone? Why was the audience so cold? Why was he having such a hard time doing something he'd done since he was three?

Once Mithra was satisfied with the amount of garments they'd accumulated - perfectly matching outfits and cute little button-downs and blazers that she would embroider just for him - she led him towards the changing room, hanging him each outfit, one at a time and having him come out for her approval. A few things were discarded back to the racks, but for the most part he looked absolutely darling in everything she'd picked out for him.

The crowd started to boo.

It was quiet at first, but as the seconds went by and none of the Aquatos came back and Raz could clearly be seen barely keeping himself on the now-unmoving ball, their heckles grew louder and louder until the only thing the boy could hear above it all was the pounding of his own heart.

In the realm of the awake, Razputin dutifully changed in and out of every outfit he was given. One of the last things handed to him was a pair of swim trunks, and he took that without pause as well. She'd told him to change out of that "mixmatched garb," and so he had.

The tumbling outfit, being a onesie, did not register as part of the "mixmatched garb." He wore it under every new thing she had him try on, and it was sheer luck that it was not visible every time he stepped back out.

Now, there was nothing to hide what he'd been wearing under his clothes for over a week. The boy came out of the dressing room with his tumbling outfit on and the swim trunks layered over it like a child incredibly sensitive to the sun.

Mithra felt like she must be dreaming. She was confused at first, seeing him come out in swim trunks and... whatever that was. It took her a moment to put it together, one finger pressed to her pursed lips as she examined him, standing there before her blank and unaware of the secret he had just spilled.

That was a leotard. It was old and worn and patched in places, and it was obvious this was from his life before - before the Galochios, before foster care, even. This was a silken tumbling outfit from the circus. She'd spent plenty of years in the Grulovian National before the diaspora - plenty of years around the Aquatos and their particular style. She knew it well, and there was no denying this was one of them. It was painfully worn, of course, not nearly as pristine or flashy as the Aquato uniforms had once been, when they'd been under the employ of the Maliks, but a hallmark of the family all the same.

She crouched in front of him, and looking into his eyes - glazed over by her lasting power. "Razputin, mi amore..." two fingers plucked at the strap of his leotard with disgust. "What is this dirty rag you're wearing?"

"It's my tumbling outfit," he answered without inflection or hesitation, so caught in her control as he was. "It's not dirty; I've been sneaking it into my laundry every day so it's never dirty."

And even so, that little bit of him was still shining through.

"I see," she said curtly, lips pressed together. It was clear that she was displeased with him. Her perfect little doll was keeping secrets from her, was he? "Go back inside and take it off. I don't want you wearing it." She ordered, snatching the rest of the clothes from him. "Change back into your outfit for today and don't even think of putting that horrible little thing back on."

The boy marched back into his dressing room and did as he was told, with absolutely no protest or even awareness of the storm he had just unwittingly unleashed.

Raz had given up the pretense of standing on the ball. He had dropped to his hands and knees, practically hugging the thing, and still it shook and moved as if alive and possessed. The ground around him was beginning to darken, fall away like he was hovering over a pit, and he was terrified of falling off and into it.

The audience had morphed further - no longer were they only in front of him, but now they jeered from all sides. They screamed and laughed and pointed as boos were echoed, taunts were spat, and insults were hissed. Their voices were becoming familiar; Zalto and Mithra and Guillelmina, Ignazio and Catalda and Ornella, even Zanobi and Adelasia who usually left him alone.

They were all there, all around him, and they were merciless in their words.

Mithra waited for him to emerge again, and held a hand out, silent as he handed her the folded garment. Even in his hypnosis, he had taken such care to treat it gently.

She held it with a faint disgust.

After he emerged, she led him to the register and paid for his new things, before loading him back into the car. The drive home was silent once again, but the atmosphere between them was markedly different. No longer was it light and pleasant in Mithra's cheerfulness. Now it was dense and dreadful, her displeasure and irritation - her anger - bleeding through.

It wasn't until civilization was far behind them once more, the winding country roads all looking the same with the tall trees and consuming vines, that Mithra allowed him to wake up, there in the front seat with the seatbelt strapped across his chest.

Eyes on the road, she did not say a word to him, but the tumbling outfit folded neatly in his lap was all she needed to say.

A figure emerged from the darkness before him. It looked like Mithra - no. It looked like his Nona. She sneered at him with glowing eyes and held up a needle. Raz's eyes widened and he opened his mouth to cry out, "dont!"

But it was too late. His ball popped, and suddenly he was falling, falling, falling into the pitch black. He tried to scream -

He woke up with a terrible jolt, gasping for air. It took only a moment to register that something solid was beneath him, and that he was in a car, and that he was awake.

Oh, yeah, that shopping trip. Raz turned his head to look at his great-grandmother, but whatever words he had died on his tongue as he realized there was something on his lap. He looked down.

His face turned ashen.

"I - I - I can explain."

"Oh, I'm sure you can," she said coolly, not bothering to look at him. "I'm sure you've been working on an elaborate explanation since you moved in - keeping secrets, from your poor nonnetta," she huffed, clearly disappointed.

Despite her disappointed, chastising tone, her voice suddenly hardened as she glared at him through the rear-view mirror. There was something horribly dangerous in her eyes. "I don't like liars, Razputin."

Whatever initial explanation he'd been about to utter got caught in his throat when she glared at him. She was looking at him like Zalto looked at him. She'd never looked at him like that before, and suddenly he was starting to miss the doting. Humiliation over hatred any day.

Slow and careful, one hand laid atop his leotard while the other strayed towards the end of his seatbelt. They weren't driving all that fast, right? There weren't any other cars on the road. He could jump out and make a break for it if it came down to his life, couldn't he?

"I - I - I technically never lied. I just - didn't say anything."

"Lying by omission," she told him, "is still lying. Now, I know you're a good little boy, and that you would never do anything to deceive your nonnetta like this." It was spoken in such a matter-of-fact tone that one might believe, for the briefest moment, that she truly believed this was some sort of misunderstanding. But her grip on the steering wheel said otherwise.

"So we're going to fix this, together."

Raz didn't dare take his eyes off of her. His thumb lightly grazed the button to un-click his seat belt, ready at a moment's notice to release it and spring for the side door if whatever she said or did had anything to do with the word "water."

"Wh-What's, that going to be?"

She hummed lightly, not taking her eyes off the road. Soon, they would be upon the final turn off into the woods that led to the Galochio property. "Don't worry, pet. No one is going to hurt you." Quietly, she reached over and ran a hand through his hair with a familiar affection. "Well, mia caro, he would certainly want to hurt you if he found out that you still had that grimy old thing. He doesn't like acrobats, you see. If he saw you with that thing, who knows what he would do to you? But he doesn't have to find out about it. I will help you fix this whole, awful mess."

The Galochio home did not have a driveway, per se - and no garage, either. It was just compacted dirt, just like the rest of the roads back here, the path wide as it approached the side of the house.

He knew she was right. He knew Zalto was capable of many terrible things without ever having to involve the curse. He knew that if his great-grandfather saw him holding his tumbling outfit after over a week of living with this family, his wrath would be indescribable.

She was offering him an out. Some kind of way to avoid that wrath entirely and save his own skin. But he knew better than to trust her, either. She had looked ready to rip him into shreds just a moment ago.

Raz gave her a long, wary look, holding his leotard a little closer. "What's the catch?"

"There is no catch, dear," she said simply, getting out of the car and rounding to his side to let him out. As she stood there, blocking him in, she dug around in her purse. "I'm not going to make you do anything you don't want to do, but I dread to think what will happen to my little bambolino if your nonno catches you with that filthy thing. So," she said, and handed him a little cardboard box from the depths of her purse, "I'm going to help you."

The box had a little slide-out drawer. He pushed on the back of the little drawer and it opened with ease, revealing a small cluster of matches laying patiently inside.

Razputin stared down at the little box. He stared at its contents. It clicked immediately, but he still stared as if those matches might turn into something else entirely.

Slowly, disbelievingly, he began to shake his head.

"No. No way." He dropped the box of matches and took a step back, clutching his tumbling outfit against his chest; his heart. "I'm not doing that!"

The contents of the little box were spilled against the scattered leaves when he dropped it, but with Mithra's direction they re-arranged themselves neatly and the entire thing levitated back to her hands. She snapped the little box shut again and placed it in her pocket, tucked away - accessible, if he were to change his mind, but no longer an immediate threat.

The same could not be said of her.

"I won't force you, bambolino, but I won't be able to protect you from your nonno when you walk into that house carrying an Aquato uniform. He's been in such a bad mood since you came home to us, you know," she cooed gently, laying a delicate touch at his shoulder and turning him towards the house. "Are you sure that silly, tattered little thing is worth him losing his temper?"

Yes, was his first thought, and it was written all over his face. It's worth everything. It's worth my life.

But that wasn't quite true, and they both knew it.

He stared up at the house, with its dark windows and even darker secrets. If he walked inside now, it would be a miracle for Zalto not to murder him straight out once he saw what the boy was carrying. And the miracle probably wouldn't be so great either, knowing the things that man could do with his mind. Knowing he was always ready and waiting to do them to the young Aquato given even a semblance of a reason.

Razputin's expression began to crack.

It had been hell here. It had already been more hellish than most of his year in foster care, and that was truly saying something given the short time it had really been. If he survived walking into that house, it most likely meant he'd never get the chance to escape. They would put him down literally or metaphorically, and he'd be trapped forever.

His hands began to tremble. Fingers dug into the worn-out fabric of his leotard.

Mithra's hand was on his shoulder as she leaned down, her grip unyielding as she leaned down to speak softly in him.

"Zalto doesn't have to know. I certainly won't tell him. This can be our little secret, pet, and you will be safe and sound. But if you march in there holding it like that, you won't be able to hide it from him. I'm just looking out for you, darling," she cooed.

She moved slowly, trying not to startle him into movement as she reached into her pocket and offered him the matchbox once more.

"I don't even want to think about what he'd do if he saw you with that."

He didn't want to think about that, either. He was cracking.

"C-Can - can't we just - hide it?" He asked, the timidity in his voice a far cry from the finality he had spoken with just moments before. "It - worked this long. He - he doesn't have to know..."

"I told you, Razputin," she said, with the intonation of someone speaking to a very, very young child, "I don't like liars. I cannot lie to my own husband and pretend like you are not hiding this awful secret from the rest of the family, knowing how upset it would make him. If I let you keep this, bambolino, I have to tell Zalto. You don't want that, do you? And you don't want me to have to lie to my beloved husband. So..."

With a rhythmic movement, she tapped one finger against the box just under his nose, each rattle of the matches inside sounding like an avalanche so close to his face like this.

"What will it be, my love?"

Every tap was like a gunshot. Every tap made him flinch.

His eyes watered as he looked up at her and realized what his only choices were. Losing the last thing of his family was betraying their memory. But dying, or wishing he was dead from whatever Zalto did, would be betraying his fight to stay alive to tell their stories.

Raz's expression crumpled. He buried his face into his tumbling outfit and began to sob, running his hands over and over it as if simple touch could commit it to memory.

As if it could make it flame-proof.

With his head still buried, he finally, damningly held out his hand.

Raz held out his hand for the matches, and Mithra smiled, reaching forward and laying her hand in his, as though she had misunderstood the gesture - as though the matches had never been part of the conversation at all.

"You are such a good boy, Razputin," she told him. Her voice was gentle, soothing as he hiccupped and cried. She smoothed down his hair as she tucked the matches back into her pocket, and laid her hand over his, still clutching onto the leotard like a lifeline.

“And I hate to see you cry like this, bambino. Just this once... just this once, this can be our little secret. Zalto does not have to know, and I will hide your garment for you so it’s safe and sound.”

Raz didn’t believe it. He couldn’t believe it. He peered up at her, still crying his eyes out, and it took a solid second of searching every inch of her face for him to realize that no, she was not lying. She was not tricking him. She was telling the truth.

She was going to let him keep the outfit. She was going to let him hold onto his family.

What happened next was something Razputin had sworn he would never do willingly, no matter what. But the enormity of what he’d almost just lost combined with her honest promise that he didn’t have to burn his own treasure had hit him in a sucker punch that not even he could defend himself from.

The boy lunged forward and wrapped his arms around her, burying his face into her dress and wailing in some unintelligible stream of thank-yous.

Mithra wrapped her arms around her little boy and held him close, cooing gently as he cried into her dress. She smoothed his hair down and pressed little kisses to the top of his head as he fought to compose himself.

Her smile was soft and caring, but there was something terrible underneath the maternal sweetness.

“Hush, hush, bambino. Ti sono vicina. I’m here. I’m not going to let anything happen to you. I’ll hide your little treasure and no one in the house will be any the wiser. But you have to promise me something in return, bambolino,” she cooed, waiting until his sniffled had quieted to lift his gaze to her once more.

It was a struggle to meet her gaze. His vision was swimming from tears and the beatdown of his emotional core. He could barely find his voice despite how his sobs had subsided into sniffles.

“...Wh-Wh-What...?”

“No more secrets, my love. Not from me. You’re having a hard time adjusting here, I can see it. I don’t want you keeping secrets from me. I want you to have someone to trust, here. I love you, my little tesoro,” She told him, and hugged him close to her.

He let out a choked little sound, but whether it was from her heavy hold or the promise she was demanding of him, he couldn’t say.

No more secrets. What counted as a secret? An escape plan, probably. But that was something he would never ever give up even under penalty of death - because death was the risk he’d be taking if when he tried it. He knew that already.

No. No, he couldn’t tell her about that.

But she wanted an answer. She expected confirmation and follow-through, and....he owed it to her, didn’t he? She had discovered his most precious thing, and she was going to let him keep it

without leaving him at Zalto's mercy. That wasn't something to treat lightly. Maybe she deserved a little slack compared to the rest of this terrible family.

Maybe he could....trust her. Just a little bit.

Raz sniffled and wiped his face with his sleeve. He stared down at the grass beneath them.

"...O-Okay," he whispered, looking and feeling miserable. "I...I'll tell you. I - I can - hear thoughts, sometimes. Ignazio's and Adelasia's and Guillelmina's, a-and Catalda's sometimes, too. I don't mean to. I don't know how to keep it from happening. I was - scared what would happen if - if I said a-anything about it."

Mithra sighed, and brushed gently at his cheek. "Oh, bambino, you must be so frightened, hearing all those terrible things they think about you..." she cooed. It was true - the things that most of the other Galochios thought about him were violent, cruel thoughts that they barely tried to suppress. If they hadn't made such a point of never reading the minds of the adults in the house, Raz might even think their thoughts were purposeful - in hopes that he would pick them up, a silent threat.

"I'll tell you what," she said, wiping the tearstains from his cheeks as she fixed his hair and smoothed out his new shirt. "I will talk to my husband - no, no, shh, bambino - and tell him that I want to take over your sessions from now on. I can teach you, my love, to keep it from happening. We can do this, together."

Raz hiccuped and nodded, half-curved in on himself from the idea of Zalto knowing about anything even related to this terrible situation. He was still holding his leotard, and that was more than enough proof that she was at least someone who kept her word. He'd trust her about this, too. Just this once.

Just to see where it went.

Still rubbed completely raw and not wanting to go inside even though they'd been standing out here a while now, he leaned into her side and tentatively brought up his free hand to take a gentle hold of her dress. It was shy and awkward and shot with nerves, but he had thought he was about to lose what little physical connection to his family he had left. He was still getting used to the fact that she wasn't going to rat him out.

"....Th...Thank you," he murmured, so nervous and exhausted.

"Prego," she whispered in return, smoothing down his hair and embracing him as he took hold of her dress. She was his stalwart, now - the only one in this house full of enemies that would comfort and care for him. Any other Galochio would have torn that leotard to shreds in front of him - Zalto would have done much, much worse - but she had allowed him this small comfort.

"I love you very much, dear."

With that, she laid her hands at his shoulders, removing him from her dress and turning him back towards the house. "Come now - the others will start to wonder what we're doing, out here. Tuck that away in my shopping bag, and let's go inside."

A terrible knot twisted his gut as he placed it in her bag, hidden under all the new clothes she had gotten for him. He knew that logically, she was right, but as he spared one last longing look at it before turning away, he had the dreadful feeling that he was never going to see it again.

Mithra held her hand out, and this time, it didn't take so much hesitancy before he took it.

With a gentle smile and a gentler hand, she guided him back into the house. He was not immediately met with accusations and anger, he wasn't threatened or harassed the moment he stepped in the door for this dreadful secret he had kept from the others for so long. It was as if they didn't even know.

It occurred to him that maybe they really didn't - that Mithra, in all her telepathic connection with her family, truly was going to keep this a secret between them. Maybe she really was going to protect him from Zalto's fury.

"Oh, we had such a lovely time!" Mithra chirped, when Ornella asked how the trip had been. "Our little man is so handsome in his new things, I need to wash everything and tailor a pair of pants a bit, but he'll look good as new this time tomorrow! Isn't that right, bambolino?"

A pause, and she looked over to her husband, coming in from the parlor; a client had left not five minutes before the two had arrived home. "And Zalto, mia amore, I want to talk to you about Razputin's lessons, sì?"

Raz fidgeted with the hem of his shirt, not meeting anyone's eyes. To the rest of them, who had seen him leave the house hypnotized, it looked as though he was simply having a hard time reconciling the lost time from whenever she'd woken him up.

In reality, he was trying very hard not to hold his breath, fearing that perhaps the family would learn his secret no matter what Mithra had promised him.

"Hmm? Mithra, my love," he said, trying to curb the displeasure in his voice for her. "We are training him. He has only had a handful of lessons. Remember, he came from a family that hated people like us." Like him. "He came into this house with nothing - no skills, no proficiencies, no training! These things will take time, mia cara."

Mithra watched her hands about, ignoring all that. "No no no - I want to teach him. I'll take over his lessons! It will be good for us to bond, sì?"

Zalto hesitated. On the one hand, he had a very particular way he trained up his family. On the other hand, not having to train this one in particular... it was tempting.

Standing just behind Mithra, Raz acted as her little shadow, staring at the floor without making a sound. He couldn't deny that not having Zalto as his teacher was a mercy he had dared not think of before.

"If... you think it would be best, mia cara... But he is not like the children. He knows nothing. You will have to be careful with him."

"Please, Zalto! Sweet little bambolino is not the first psychic I have taught. Our family has learned much from their mama, si?"

"I suppose. Just know what you're getting yourself into, here."

"Oh, my love... Trust me, I know."

Be careful with him, he said, like every lesson they had together wasn't him forcing Raz's powers into overload and making him learn control under threat of hurt or worse.

The boy hugged his arms around himself and looked to the side. He caught Guillelmina's gaze on accident, very briefly, and hurriedly turned his gaze away to the neutral, empty rocking chair instead.

Even if Zalto's lessons forced him right to the brink of his breaking point, he was still careful with the boy. How easy it would be to just snap his psyche in two and be done with it? No. In order to teach someone with so little experience, Zalto had actually taken great pains to be careful with the boy, with how far he'd been pushing him.

"Of course, my love. I will take care with our little bambolino." She ruffled Raz's hair affectionately.

He didn't squirm under her touch like he had every other time. She was keeping his secret. He could handle some discomfort on her behalf for it.

He would handle more than a little discomfort, but that would come later. For now, she would comfort him, keep his awful little secrets, and teach him how to keep other people's stray thoughts out of his head.

She smiled down at him softly, a loving and dangerously possessive look in her eyes.

"He'll be our perfect little fortune teller."

Raz met her gaze with a swallow, playing nervously with his hands. A tentative, awkward upturn of the corners of his mouth was his answer. It was clear he still didn't fully believe they were going to bring him into the family business, and it was also clear he hadn't quite crossed the line into trusting her completely.

The life that Mithra led was not exactly what she had expected, as a little girl.

She'd always thought that she would grow up, settle down with the love of her life and raise their children. She had to admit, the circus had been a surprise.

But once she'd had her first taste of it - that very first night she had met Zalto - she knew there was no going back. Not just because she couldn't go back... when she first saw the grandeur of

the Grulovian National and its amazing psychic performers, she knew that was where she wanted to be.

From that day forward, Mithra had been a performer. An actor, tasked with dazzling others. And the show must go on, until he trusted her implicitly and without question.

The boy's eyes slowly dropped from her to the shopping bag she was holding. He bit his lip.

"Should - should I take that up to my room?" He asked, trying so very hard to keep his voice steady and empty of hope so that the rest of the family wouldn't pick up on anything.

"Hmm?" Mithra was snapped back to reality, looking down at her little doll and realizing exactly what it was he was asking her. Her eyes lit up, and she laughed. "Oh, heavens, no! I've got to take all the tags off and get them washed. I'll put all your new things on your bed for you after dinner, alright, mia amore?"

Raz wrung his hands, and the only reason he didn't protest was because Zalto and at least two other Galochios were still in the room.

"O-Okay..." The confliction in his voice was practically touchable.

"Good boy," she cooed, with a pat to his head, "Now go wash up so you can help me in the kitchen, pet." Without another word, Mithra carried the bag off to her own bedroom. The children were not allowed in the adults' rooms, that much Raz was well aware of already. Until she put the rest of his clothes on his bed, he was separated from his leotard.

He watched her go with a strange pit in his stomach. She'd said he could keep it. She'd said it would be fine. He shouldn't worry.

He went to wash up, worrying the entire time.

There were footsteps coming up the stairs as Raz washed up to help Mithra in the kitchen. Mina stood at the top of the stairs, waiting for him with her arms folded across her chest and a grim frown set on her face.

She was smaller than him. She was weaker than him, even after a year and three months in foster care. But she stood her ground there like any of the other Galochios as he came out to face her.

"You're nervous about something," she whispered to him. It was an accusation.

Razputin stopped two steps down from where she stood. He looked up at her, clearly surprised, before it gave way to a scoff.

"And if I am?" He asked. "What do you care about me having a bad day?"

"Because if you're nervous, it means you screwed up," she said sharply. "And you're waiting for the other shoe to drop. What did you do? Did you upset nonnetta while you two were out shopping?" She asked.

"I wouldn't know!" He snapped, half-defensive and half-truthful. "I was in your living room one moment, then the next I woke up in the front seat of the car and we were driving back here! You ever think that maybe that's the reason I'm a little off-balance?"

She clasped her hands in front of her and gave him the biggest, saddest eyes she could manage. "Aw, was Wasputin afraid of taking a widdle nap?" She mocked. The look of innocence on her face lapsed into a sneer as she rolled her eyes. "Gimme a break. It must be so hard being nonnetta's perfect little bambino all the time."

"Yeah, it is, because if I'm not, your nonno will get sick of me," Raz growled, taking one step up to get into her face, "and then it's game over. I'm dead if I'm not perfect, and I still haven't figured out what 'perfect' even means to her!"

"He's already sick of you," she spat. "We're all sick of you. You think anyone in this family wants to babysit an Aquato? You're only here because nonnetta wanted a new toy."

With those words and a wicked, smug grin, Guillelmina stepped aside, giving him plenty of room to go back downstairs where Mithra was waiting for him in the kitchen.

"Go ahead. She's waiting for her little bambolino."

It was not often he felt the urge to smack another kid, but he had physically stood up to bullies before, and this girl, this so-called "cousin" of his, definitely fell within that category. He only refrained because they could hear Mithra start to call his name, and he was not about to make any more waves in the wake of the tumbling outfit discovery.

Begrudgingly, accepting the lost battle, he pushed roughly at her shoulder with his own as he descended towards the kitchen.

She let him get that final shove in, still grinning like a Cheshire cat as she watched him descend into the kitchen.

"Oh, there you are, sweetheart!" She chirped, seeing Raz trudge into the kitchen, still fuming. Mithra stood at the island in the middle of their kitchen, ingredients scattered across the countertop as she worked. "I was wondering if you were going to come help me! Come on, pull up a stool. I want to teach you something!"

The boy did as instructed, watching her with growing curiosity and trying to stuff down the angry, bitter feeling in his gut.

She was kneading some kind of pasty dough, almost yellow in color. "Have you ever made pasta before, bambolino?" She asked him. "I'm making ravioli for tonight, and I'd love some help." There was a musical quality to her voice, elated and sweet, delighted to have his help.

His eyes went back and forth between her and the dough. "Um...yeah, I've done it once or twice. We didn't usually have the money to make it from scratch, though."

“Have you? My, isn’t that a surprise!” She chirps, and rolls out a sheet of yellowish dough between them to about 1/16 of an inch, and placed a bowl of filling between them. “Take a spoon, pet, and start putting little dollops evenly on the sheet, will you? My hands are all sticky.”

Raz dutifully began doing so, careful to measure each dollop out at the same size and distance. He kept watching her out of his peripherals.

She hummed as she washed her hands, and when she turned back to Razputin, she was pleased to see how even his work was. “Oh, very good, pet! Ah, ah, that’s enough, only halfway. Because look!” She said, and pinched the corners of the top side of the dough, folding it over to cover the dollops he’d laid out.

“Now, take this,” she handed him a pastry wheel, “and cut in straight lines up and across the rows!”

He had done this twice before, when the Aquatos had made decent enough money and Donatella was able to buy everything she needed to set them up for homemade Italian dishes for a week or so. It had still been quite some time since then, as was apparent when he performed the technique correctly but didn’t quite get all the lines 100% straight. It was more like 95%.

Mithra watched him carefully, and gave a noncommittal hum as she watched him butcher one or two of the lines. Oh, well. They were just going to be pressed, anyway. It didn’t really matter... but they’d work on it.

“Close, pet,” she told him, taking the pastry wheel from him and replacing it with a regular fork. “A little sloppy, but you’ll learn eventually. Here, now - time to press them closed.” She took his hand and guided it, pressing the tip of the fork about a half inch in on every side of the unsealed ravioli, producing a perfect design in the dough as it sealed the two sides together.

“Now, you try!”

He thought about reminding her that he had done this before, like he’d just told her not two minutes ago, but he held his tongue and went to work with the fork instead. This part, at least, he could do without any fumbles.

Mithra didn’t particularly care that he said he’d done this before. She was teaching him now, and that was the only experience that mattered, here. She would not be doing things like his family used to - like his mother had taught him.

They would do things her way. Whether or not he remained conscious for it was up to him and his attitude, and she was pleased with how agreeable he was - if perhaps a touch clumsy with a pastry wheel. But bygones be bygones! They would be successful in their dinner endeavors tonight - of that, she was certain.

The ravioli folds were finished without incident, and Raz took the flour-covered fork to the sink to wash it. He continued to keep Mithra within his line of sight. Just because she was trustworthy on one big thing didn’t mean he hadn’t forgotten what she was capable of with hypnosis.

And good. She didn't want him to forget what she was capable of with hypnosis. And in fact, should he get too comfortable here with her, she would have to remind him in subtle ways - ways that would not upset the delicate trust she was working hard to build with him, but that asserted the authority and dominance and power that she held over him implicitly.

But for now, she smiled and kissed the top of his head, thanking him for the lovely little ravioli before dumping them into the pot to boil. For now, he could enjoy this repose.

The gesture and her words reminded him far too much of Nona, and it was not helping that they looked so much alike. He hugged his arms close to his chest and closed his eyes as the food began to cook.

"Razputin," she said softly, with a long wooden spoon gently stirring the pot of ravioli. They were alone in the kitchen, and as she paused the only sound between them was the water was boiling hard, scaling and sending streams of steam curling upwards towards the ceiling. She did not look at him. "Are you happy here, with us?"

His eyes snapped open. His breath caught in his throat. What was he even supposed to say to that? The obvious answer was "yes" so he didn't upset her, but that wasn't the truth, and not telling the truth would also upset her.

He was trapped between a rock and a hard place.

"Um," he stammered, "I - it's...nice not to, have to move around all the time anymore..."

She hummed thoughtfully, taking his answer into consideration. He was avoiding her question, that much was clear - she didn't have to ponder to determine that, and it was all the answer she really needed.

"Oh, I'm certain. You spent so long being bounced from home to home... I'm glad you're finally able to settle down with your family, where you belong," she mused.

She stirred the pasta one more time, three revolutions around the pot with her wooden spoon.

"But you didn't answer my question."

Razputin flinched and he drew into himself just a little bit more. "Oh, well, y'know, it's just - there's a lot of ways to answer it. It's n-not, uh, so simple."

"I don't see what's so complicated about it," she said simply. There was no anger to her voice, but she still did not turn to look at him. "Either you are happy," she banged the spoon against the rim of the pot, "or you aren't. Which is it, pet?"

Nervous silence was her response for a solid few seconds. Eventually, his voice came through much, much quieter.

"You...if I tell the truth, will you get mad?"

"Of course not, my love," she said, but there was a tight quality to her voice. It was not the warm and relaxed tone of reassurance. But she'd kept her promises so far... right? She hadn't snitched on him. She had helped him hide his secret. She'd taken care of him. She'd loved him, all this time.

"You can tell me anything, Razputin."

Raz knew a prelude to an elder's ire when he heard it. His mother had been the expert of it, after all. But Mithra was expecting an answer, and it was too late to try and bluff his way out of this with a falsehood. She was far too focused on his words and tone and reaction for that.

"....It...hasn't been good, no. Not if I'm being honest."

"You're unhappy with us?" She asked, turning her head an inch to glance at him out of the corner of her eye. It was a dismissive glance, but one that struck him to his core all the same. "Miserable even? What has made you so unhappy, pet?" She asked.

She knew, of course. The cruel things that were barely whispered. The strict rules and the even stricter punishments. The way they talked about his late family. The threat of the curse looming over his head. The way she removed every ounce of will from his body at her whim.

But she wanted a confession.

"I..." His voice died in his throat at that glance. "I, um..."

It must be so hard being nonnetta's perfect little bambino all the time.

Eat your heart out, Guillelmina.

"I - I just - it's been hard to - adjust." He finally settled on. A neutral answer. A safe one that could mean anything. "Y-You know. After...foster care and everything."

She hummed again, and it almost sounded like she was satisfied with his answer. "Of course, my love. It must be such a drastic change, after everything that happened. But you'll adjust. I promise you, you'll adjust." It was spoken like a threat.

She carried the pot to the sink, and drained the water.

"You're a part of this family, now, Razputin, and I for one wouldn't have it any other way."

He watched that boiling water cascade down into the sink like a miniature, deadly waterfall. Suddenly he wasn't very hungry at all.

His fingers gripped tightly at his elbows. He didn't dare look up at her. He kept his eyes on that water.

His uncle Raffio had met his end by boiling water. There had been a tragic collapse in the circus during his act, and he had been trapped in his landing pool, surrounded on all sides by

pyrotechnic flares that couldn't be turned off. The collapse had caused several of the flares to collapse inward, shooting off fire to superheat the little bucket of water.

By the time they were able to get to him, it had been too late.

"Set the table, will you dear?" She asked, snapping him out of his thoughts as the rest of the water swirled down the drain, fleeting and harmless. It couldn't hurt him.

She wouldn't hurt him.

Raz snapped out of his trance. "Y-Yes ma'am."

He rubbed his arms as if cold, and went to do as he was told.

The Galochios had not been there to see the demise of the Aquato children; Lazarus' family had dwindled quickly after the curse, and it had had nothing to do with the wars being fought in Grulovia at the time. It had been a very different war that had done in the Aquatos. One that was still raging, right here in this very house.

As Razputin set the table, Guillelmina watched him carefully from the stairs. She saw how he held himself, how he shied away from something as dumb as making dinner. She couldn't understand why Mithra had taken such a liking to him. He was an annoying circus brat who hated everyone here just as much as they hated him. Why bother?

If she had asked Razputin directly, he wouldn't have had an answer. He could guess, and they were not the kinds of guesses he particularly wanted to dwell on, but they were still only guesses.

Perhaps she looked at him the way one might look at a lost little puppy. Or perhaps, the way one might look at a jewel. Because that was the crux of it, really - was this emotion she felt for him care or covetous? It was impossible to tell.

Mithra said she cared for him - loved him, even. Mithra also said that she hated liars.

And though it seemed straightforward at first glance, it all felt like a trap.

Before today, Raz hadn't cared about it or her beyond keeping his head down and his nose out of trouble. Before today, he'd seen his nonnetta as another Galochio out for his blood, even if she went about it in really confusing, unorthodox ways.

After today, he was still very confused by her, but it was tinted with the thought that perhaps she could be an ally instead of an enemy. A person of safety instead of danger.

He was like, 40% sure that was the case. He couldn't count her out as a threat yet, though, and he knew she'd still be pretty pissed once he got out of here.

Caution was the key. He just had to stay cautious until he got undeniable proof she could help him, or he got his chance to leave every member of this hell family behind forever.

Dinner happened without any incident. Mithra had him sit next to her as usual, so she could dote over him. Guillelmina sat on his other side, and didn't bother to acknowledge him, even going so far as to ask her nonnetta to pass the bread that sat right in front of Raz. She did so without question or thought, levitating the little bread basket to her great-granddaughter and leaving Razputin out of the transaction entirely.

For all of his uncertainty about her, though, she truly seemed to care about him. And after dinner, leaving the children to help clean off the table, she went to fold the clothes. As Raz placed a dish in the sink, he could see her going up the stairs with a small stack of folded garments cradled in her arms.

It took a great deal of willpower not to drop everything he was doing and run up after her, but with Ornella right next to him and giving him the stink eye, he thought better of it.

As soon as the last of the dishes were clean and he had been cleared of dinner chores, he went up the stairs as casually slow and nonchalantly as he could possibly be.

There they were, sitting on his bed as though it was the most innocent pile of clothes in the entire world. She had laid them all very neatly, in a single stack, for him to put away.

Remember, Razputin: 8 o'clock, and anything out of place will be taken from you. She expected him to put these away, tonight. It was not a lot of work, but with his leotard tucked up underneath the pile, it would have to wait.

He moved each garment carefully, on the off chance that it would be tucked between two shirts or wedged underneath a pair of pants that did a particularly good job hiding the striped fabric from view.

But he stripped the final folded shirt from his bedspread, and that was it. There was no hidden treasure at the bottom of the stack. There was nothing but new clothes.

His leotard wasn't there.

A bolt of worry jolted through him before he quickly stuffed it down. Maybe she'd put it away in case someone else came into his room before he did. Yeah, that was probably it.

Raz grabbed the pile of new clothes and put them away, not wanting to incur Mithra's irritation if they were found on his bed and taken away right after she'd bought them. Then, he started meticulously going through each drawer from top to bottom, looking for his outfit.

He beat down the urge to tear the room apart, knowing that even one thing out of place when the adults came to check the room would result in consequences for him. It was meticulous, the way he searched through his closet and through every drawer to find the hidden leotard.

Mithra had brought up his clothes, but it was becoming increasingly clear that the leotard had not been with them. It was taken, hidden somewhere in the house - or worse, discarded.

It was gone.

It was gone. It was gone. Razputin sank down onto the end of his bed, staring at his closet and dresser as if they would reveal some secret compartment where his precious tumbling outfit was hiding.

She - she hadn't lied to him, had she? Surely if she was going to get rid of it, she would've done the cruel thing and made him burn it like he'd thought was going to happen in the first place. No, she must've just hidden it somewhere else that was safe.

Yeah.

Standing up, the boy crossed his room towards the door. Surely he had time before lights-out. He'd just catch her in private and ask her.

It was seven fifty four. He had six minutes exactly to find Mithra and ask her about his tumbling outfit, without raising the suspicions of any of the other Galochios, among whom she was sitting in the living room.

The chatter was unimportant as he descended the stairs to find her - nothing more than talk about clients and services they provided as service psychics.

The entire family paused when they sensed him, the chatter coming to an abrupt halt. Mithra was the first one to address him, soft and gentle with a little smile. "Mia caro, what are you doing down here? Shouldn't you be getting ready for bed?"

He froze at the bottom of the staircase. He'd hoped that she would be alone, or at least somewhat alone so he could whisper his question where no one else could hear it.

No such luck. He'd have to try a different approach.

Eyes wide like a deer in headlights, Raz shifted uncomfortably where he stood. "Um..."

An idea came to mind. It was not one he particularly liked, but it was the only one he could think of to get her alone and drive off suspicion.

"Could...w-would you, um, be willing to..." he stammered, hating every word out of his mouth, "t-tuck me in?"

There was a look of surprise splashed across Mithra's face for a moment before it softened into something loving and maternal. "Of course, mia caro," she cooed, parting from the throng of adults to usher her little bambolino back upstairs to his bedroom.

She flicked on the light, and moved him to the bed, happy to tuck him in. Finally, things were going in the right directions with this tragic little boy.

It was easier to ignore the snickers and whispered words from the other adults as she walked off with him. He knew he was way too old for something like this, and they knew it too, and it was humiliating.

But it was a small price to pay for one of his most precious treasures.

“Um.” He stopped right before climbing into the bed itself, forcing her full attention. “So, where did you put my tumbling outfit? I couldn’t find it in my new clothes.”

Mithra paused, abrupt and displeased as she looked down at her little bambino, hands hovering, ready to tuck him in before this interruption.

She listened without so much as a word, and a gentle smile on her face. “Pet, I told you, I hid it away, safe and sound,” she told him, laying her hand against the top of his head. “I couldn’t just leave it here with you - what if someone were to find it?” She cooed, helping him into bed. “This way, no one will find it. You don’t want to get in trouble for it, do you?”

“I - well, I mean, no, but -” Raz squirmed and tried to think of a way to counter her reasoning. Nothing came to mind, and he was left stammering as she pulled the covers over him.

“But you’ll let me see it again soon, right? So I know where it is?”

“Of course, my little pet,” she tells him, brushing her hand through his hair. “You can see it tomorrow, right after our first lesson together. I promise you, it’s safe and sound with me.” She pressed a kiss to the top of his head, pulling the covers up for him. “I love you very much, darling.”

The skepticism in his eyes was only outmatched by the sudden drowsiness as she tucked him in. His face began to relax and his eyelids fluttered closed.

“M’kay...”

She watched as he started to slip into comfortable unconsciousness. Even if it was slightly aided by her gentle hand, it was so sweet to see him settle down all warm and sleepy.

“Sweet dream, my bambolino. You’re safe and sound, with me...”

It was the drowsiness. It was the stress of the day. It was his tumbling outfit and his family dominating his thoughts all evening. It was the trust she’d started growing in him.

It was a million and one things, he’d tell himself later. A million and one things he couldn’t be blamed for.

“Kay...night, Mom...”

Even Mithra was caught by surprise, at that little slip. Perhaps it was the drowsiness. Perhaps it was the stress of the day, or his tumbling outfit and his family dominating his thoughts all evening.

But more than anything, it was the trust she’d started growing in him. The trust she had sown and tended to carefully in its infancy, like the most delicate little sapling struggling to poke its head out of the dirt.

It wasn’t clear whether he realized or not, but it didn’t matter to her. She smiled, and stooped down next to him, pressing a kiss to his forehead as he drifted off.

“Goodnight, my little Razputin. I love you.”

He drifted off into peaceful slumber. It was the first time in over a week that he actually wanted to do so.

He slept peacefully, calm and content in his bed. No nightmares visited him that night, and when he woke up - if he kept his eyes closed and burrowed into the soft blankets - he could almost pretend everything was okay.

But the clatter from downstairs, drifting up from the kitchen, ruined the illusion.

Mithra was so happy the next morning that it set even her children on edge. She was uncharacteristically cheerful, humming and checking the stairs every so often. It seemed she was particularly eager for her little pet to wake up, that morning.

Razputin wasn't nearly as groggy as most of the other mornings he woke up. It surprised him, but he didn't spend a lot of time dwelling on it as he heard the family bustling about downstairs.

Worried he'd woken up late and not looking forward to a reprimand first thing in the morning, he hurried to get dressed and join them.

When Raz finally joined them, there was no harsh reprimand. There were glares, and unkind grumbles, but he was not yelled at for being late. It was... amazing, actually, the power that Mithra held over this family. Over even Zalto. Raz was her perfect little pet, and so she protected him. Cared about him even as he was so deep in the lion's den.

“Buon giorno, mia bambolino!” Mithra chirped, arms open for him.

“Did il bello di mama sleep well?” Ignazio jeered. “You sleep like a baby when mama tucks you in, si?” There was a wicked grin and a round of chuckles, like a joke he wasn't allowed in on. Like he was the joke.

“Don't listen to them, mia caro,” Mithra cooed, smoothing his hair down. “Ignazio is just jealous he doesn't get tucked in anymore. You don't listen to him!”

He frowned, confused by the joke and Mithra's strange, almost-fierce protectiveness. The nickname, he'd heard before. The emphasis on “mama,” he had not. So what was -

He remembered last night. His face went cherry red.

He started trying to gently pull himself out of his great-grandmother's hold. “S-Sorry. Sorry about that, I didn't mean to call you anything - disrespectful.”

Zalto had hammered in that everyone older was “sir” or “ma'am” to him unless told directly otherwise. He didn't think she'd be upset over the blunder, but you never knew with these people.

There was another round of laughter, seeing the way his face went beet red like that. It was funny, to them, his embarrassment and discomfort. His humiliation.

"Oh, hush, bambino," she cooed to him, lifting his chin. "I don't mind it at all. I love you just as much as I love my own children. Why shouldn't I be your mama, si? I think it's sweet, my love."

Catalda gave an indignant little scoff at the idea of their mother loving this little Aquato wretch like a child, but none of her children actually protested. They were performers, after all, and were happy to watch the show.

"Ah, hah, well..." All of her adult children were watching him like hawks, and Mithra wasn't letting him slink away so he could feel embarrassed in private. "I mean, you're my - my nonnetta. Not my mom, ha..."

He never should've asked her to tuck him in last night. Even if it had been a ruse, he should've waited until the morning to talk to her alone. It wasn't worth the slip-up and everyone jeering at him over it.

"That may be so," she mused, "but I take care of you, do I not? I am raising you as my own, aren't I? I do not think," she told him sweetly, a hand to his cheek, "that your madre would mind."

In fact, he should be lucky to be able to call her mama. She was the only thing that stood between him and a watery grave at the hands of her beloved husband. What was more maternal than that? Than protecting a child with compassion and love?

"You are my bambino, Razputin."

She had called him bambino all week. Just about everyone, even Zalto, had called him bambino (among other, nastier things) all week. It hadn't bothered him. It was just a statement of what he was.

But this time, it felt different. It felt different in a way that made his heart clench and his gut squirm.

With her hand on his cheek, she could feel him swallow.

"I, I suppose you are..."

There wasn't a way out of this. There wasn't a way to appease her without feeling like he was betraying his real mother, and there wasn't a way to feel better without risking her ire for acting ungrateful.

"That's a good boy," she cooed, patting his cheek gently, lovingly as she led him to his seat at the kitchen table. "Now, you have breakfast while I go set up for today's lesson. We have a lot of work to do if you want to be a proper fortune-teller, bambino!" She chirped, happily.

A proper fortune-teller. If calling Mithra mama wasn't a betrayal to his real family, this certainly would be.

Raz slumped in his seat, still red in the face and wishing he had never gotten out of bed. Zalto's lessons had been cruel and strict, but they had mostly been about maintaining control over what few powers he knew how to use, with a light sprinkling of seeing the near future here and there.

The man always got particularly moody when he succeeded at that task, though, which Raz had assumed meant he wasn't going to join the family business after all. Couldn't let an Aquato taint their perfect parlor, after all.

Now Mithra was promising otherwise, and all the boy wanted to do was travel back in time to throttle his past self before it could utter that accursed word.

You couldn't change the past - the best you could do was steal a glance at it from the present, and even that was incredibly difficult - and the best Razputin could do was swallow his pride and his embarrassment and eat something, because psychic training was never fun on an empty stomach.

Mithra seemed convinced that he was to join the family business one day, even if her husband had his reservations. He was going to be taught how to perform tricks on command, just as any obedient pet would.

He was going to earn his place here, one way or another, she and Zalto had resolved to that long ago, from the moment they had decided to adopt this little tragedy into the family. And though it wasn't much of a choice, he could either pay with his sweat or with his blood.

Besides - teaching another young psychic how to control the extraordinary powers the Galochio family had been gifted was such an honor! She did not have the patience for Guillelmina's stubborn ineptitude.

And if Raz knew what was good for him, he would show more initiative than his dud of a cousin.

He managed about three bites of oatmeal before the nausea threatened to swell. Resigning himself to his fate of betraying his family and doing it without much fuel in him, he shuffled his way to the parlor, squeezing his eyes shut at the not-so-quiet sneers of Mithra's children.

It was one mistake that she was holding over his head for a laugh. It wasn't going to last long. It was fine.

If Raz had been any better at precognition at that point, he might have been able to look into the future, hopeful that this would only last a short while. Once Mithra was sick of the joke, of embarrassing him with that little slip up, she would let it go, he was certain of it.

That being said, it was all the better the young Aquato had little in the way of fortune-telling.

Mithra met him in the front parlor - a place where the children were very rarely allowed, reserved for the adults and their clients, and off limits to both him and Guillelmina at all times. But this was special - she was teaching him, now, and she wanted him in the perfect environment for it.

"Come, come, mia caro, take a seat," she chirped, gesturing to the little stool across from her.

It was just as heavy an atmosphere as when Zalto was teaching him. He had no idea what to expect from the man's wife when it came to psychic learning, and although he had agreed to this yesterday, he found that anxiety had nestled its way deep into his mind.

The smell of sweet smoke began to waft through the little space of the parlor. In the corner of the room, by the window, was a little tray of incense, which had seemingly ignited on its own. As the smoke wafted towards them, Mithra took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly. "First, we will meditate, my love. Come. Follow me," she instructed, laying her hands on the table for him to take.

A deep breath in; pause; exhale.

Simple, right?

Raz tentatively put his hands in hers, half expecting a familiar burst of unwanted energy to flow through him as her husband liked to do, but there was nothing like that. He closed his eyes and began to mimic her breathing technique.

Deep breath in; pause; exhale.

The deep inhale filled his lungs with thick, sweet-smelling smoke, and she did not move for the first few times he coughed it out. She simply remained still for him, eyes closed and hands poised to take his once he had recovered.

She would give him a chance to overcome it, first. To push through it and find comfort in the incense instead, and allow it to calm him and broaden his awareness.

"Razputin," she said softly, "are you having trouble?"

"N-No," he rasped, thinking of what 'help' Zalto gave whenever he was having trouble during a lesson. "Just - give me a minute. I'm not u-used to it."

She cracked one eye open to peer at him, then closed it again with a happy little sigh. "Good. You will get used to it, bambino. It's okay to feel uncomfortable. This smoke," she explained to him, "is jasmine and heliotrope, to aid in divination. It helps to clear the mind and connect you to the upper consciousness."

He'd never heard of those things in True Psychic Tales. Did they really help? If so, why hadn't he read about them in his historical graphic novels? Well...to be fair, he hadn't read many issues about divination to begin with. Raz would just have to take her word for it.

Another few seconds of careful, more controlled breathing, and he no longer felt like coughing up a lung. In fact, while his head still felt a little cloudy, his body felt almost lighter.

She watched him through half-lidded eyes, curious to see his reaction, pleased to see him adjust to the smoke wafting through the little parlor. Most didn't have a problem with it. Some did, but he was particularly young, and the intensity of it must have caught him off guard. But he was fine, and she smiled down at him.

"See, pet? All fine. Now, you and I are going to take a short trip. No, don't move. Have you ever been to the astral plane?" She asked him.

The astral plane? She was going to teach him how to go to the astral plane?

"No," he breathed almost in awe. The sudden lift of excitement in his eyes was very obvious. "I've never been."

"Then we will go together, si? Close your eyes, do not fight me, and I will help you reach the collective unconscious."

She took his hands again, now that he'd stopped coughing and settled down, and he felt her pry at the defenses of his mind. There was two gentle taps to the inside of his wrist as he laid his hand in hers, keeping him perfectly still as she began.

It felt awful - being forcibly pulled out of your body was never a pleasant feeling - and that was exactly why she told him not to fight her. It wasn't painful, but resisting was an instinctual reaction, to fight to stay in your body.

Unable to move, unable to fight back physically or pull away or even writhe, a startled gasp left the boy and he instinctively tried to anchor his consciousness within his head before it could be ripped out. Her grip tightened almost painfully - both her hands and her mental hold on him - and that was enough for him to try to adhere to her warning not to fight it.

He went lax, trembling and struggling not to dig his heels in while she pulled him from his own mind.

He would feel better once it was done, once they stood together in the collective unconscious and his physical body was no longer a concern for him. She felt the way he hesitated to leave his body. It was only natural, of course, but once he let go, the world dropped away entirely.

"Alright. You're okay. You can open your eyes now, pet," she told him, running a hand through his hair. He could feel it, but it felt... odd. Distant. Like the kind of touch you feel in a dream.

He opened his eyes - and his jaw dropped.

Blue. Blue and white everywhere, as far as the eye could see, in patterns so intricate he couldn't even begin to try to figure them out. And within all those patterns were...doors?

"Where...are we?" He asked, looking up at her and surprised she wasn't glowing like the infinite space around them.

"This is the collective unconscious - the shared portion of all human minds. Our most basic fears and instincts originate here," she explained to him. She held his hand, as though she were concerned about him running off in this great expanse of nothingness.

"The fear of the dark, something our ancestors passed down to us over hundreds of generations, was born here, within the collective unconscious. Our needs, our genetic memories, are all born here."

Razputin turned in a full circle, looking up and down and everywhere else at this great expanse of humanity. He'd read about this! The in-between of every mind that ever existed, where psychics passed through like bus stops as they moved to whatever mind caught their fancy.

But the way Mithra described it made it sound different than that. More dangerous. Something to be careful in.

A door painted in dark orange and locked tightly shut moved near them from her side. Raz shivered, and drew against her as if it had eyes to stare at him.

“What are we doing here?”

“Learning to navigate the collective unconscious is an important step for a young medium,” she told him. “The majority of our work involves the astral plane. If you’re not familiar with it, you will not be a successful psychic. It’s as simple as that.”

She regards the door that presents itself to her with fondness. The door was deadbolted and heavily armored, but Mithra approached it without trepidation, bringing her charge with her as she neared the ominous door. “Do you know what this is, bambino?”

The more he looked at it, the more he felt the urge to turn tail and bolt, and he couldn’t tell if it was because of the door itself or because of this entire place.

“Um...it’s...someone’s mind, right?” He asked tentatively. He’d thought TPT had mentioned that, but with her description of things - and he had no choice but to trust her, since she was the seasoned psychic - he wasn’t so sure anymore.

“Si, bambino, very good,” she cooed, as though he were an infant who had just identified farm animals. She ran her hand through his hair, attempting to calm his nerves. “This,” she told him, “is the mind of Zalto Galochio. Would you like to see what another person’s mind looks like?”

As though it knew her presence, the heavy locks undid themselves, waiting her entrance. It did not seem to know or care that she had a guest.

“Oh - oh no, no no no that’s not necessary, you really don’t have to -” the boy stumbled over his words as the mind of his family’s enemy and killer opened itself for their entry. He tried to back up away from it.

She kept a steady grip on him. “You’ll have to do this eventually, in our line of work,” she told him. “Better to experience it now with the mind of a family member than someone strange and unfamiliar. Consider it... training wheels, of a sort. You never know what kind of dangerous things are lurking in people’s minds. At least here,” she said, “you know you will be safe.”

“But - but - but!” Raz wracked his brain to come up with some excuse, any excuse to keep her from pushing him into his tormentor’s head.

He remembered something important; something crucial.

“He said I can’t do that though! He said I can’t go into your minds without permission! I - we - I didn’t get his permission!”

He was terrified of Zalto’s wrath, and disobeying that order, even at his wife’s insistence, was enough to petrify him.

Mithra smiled down gently at him. There was adoration in her features, and something like pride. He was clever, and obedient, and it would save his hide someday.

"Permission, hmm? I don't think mia caro would mind. I visit his mind all the time, you know," she told him. "But you... oh, I don't think he would like to find you poking around in there, pet. We will get his permission, first. I think that's a good idea."

As though suddenly changing its mind, the door slammed shut, locking again before Razputin even had the opportunity to realize what had happened. Mithra pushed the door back to its starting place, hanging back in the hazy distance of the collective unconscious.

"Where would you like to go, then, pet? Perhaps you would rather visit my mind? You have my permission, after all."

Relief hit him so strongly that his mental form almost flickered. He slumped, still feeling the aftermath of panic from thinking that he would be trapped in Zalto's mind. He'd take anyone's mind over that one. Anyone's.

Frankly, the option to go into hers instead felt like a godsend.

"Yes, please."

Mithra wrapped an arm around him, comforting him as he slumped against her. She pat the top of his head with affection, and moved them towards another door. It was fortified like Zalto's, but not nearly as heavily, and a pleasant, deep blue, like deep water. Quite the contrary to the frantic orange energy of Zalto's door.

"Here we are. Watch your step, please," she chirped, opening the door for him without so much as touching it. Beyond the doorframe was a dense green glow. It seemed to move, swirling and pitching like the way light shimmered on water. There were no walls to this room, and no floor. It looked as though he would pitch right off the ledge if he stepped inside.

"Go on, pet."

Raz took a careful step forward, just outside of the doorframe, then hesitated. He looked back at Mithra and her easy, encouraging smile. She wanted to train him. This wasn't a trap. It would be fine.

He held his breath as he stepped through the door.

No.

No, this didn't make sense.

He'd done something wrong, or maybe he wasn't powerful enough, to do whatever it was Mithra had wanted from him, because he was back at the parlor. the smell of incense was faint, distant, like it had been put out hours ago and only lingered in the cloth of the heavy drapes and tablecloth.

He looked, finding nothing but an empty chair where his nonnetta had been when they'd started. No doubt she'd left him there once she realized he was useless.

All of these things occurred to him within a split second, barraging his mind like an assault before he felt her hands on his shoulders, her familiar presence enveloping him again. Her grip ensured he stayed seated, and her gentle voice cooed a reassurance that she was there with him.

"There we go," she said softly, and he had to strain to hear any hint of veiled disappointment or anger, to predict where her emotions would go in the face of such a colossal failure. She did want to train him, but apparently he was too weak of a psychic even for that.

"Look familiar, pet?"

His mouth opened, but no sound came out in the wake of his failure. Any moment now would come the reprimands, the berating, the punishment for not doing exactly what was asked of him. It hadn't happened yet with Zalto, but the man had constantly reminded him that it was only a matter of time until someone found his limit or the end of his inherent talents, and to Raz, sitting here in this room after trying to cross over to another mind, they had found it.

He braced himself for the worst and acted preemptively to try to save his own skin. Maybe if he was brutally honest, she'd take pity on him. "Y-Yes, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to wake up!"

"Wake up?" Once she was sure he would be still for her, she let her hands fall from his shoulders. "Razputin, you are still on the astral plane. You've successfully crossed over into the mind of another." She gave him a smile, and sat across from him at the parlor table.

It was a perfect recreation of the reading parlor in the Galochio home. It felt real. But she seemed utterly convinced. "This is my mind, Razputin," she told him. "And here, I will teach you about the basics of traversal across the astral plane."

She seemed certain. That was the only thing that had him doubting his own eyes. Everything looked exactly the same as they'd left it, and yet, she was telling him they were in her mind. After a hesitant moment of processing, Raz came to the conclusion that she wasn't lying to him.

She was the expert psychic, after all, and she'd said herself that she hated lying. There was no reason not to trust her on that.

He folded his hands awkwardly in his lap, watching her and still having a difficult time thinking of this space as anything other than the real, physical parlor.

She could see that he was struggling to separate the space. That this, to him, felt as real as the world in which they were both still sitting tranced, hand in hand as she'd pulled him out of his body to experience something safe and familiar for his first time on the astral plane.

She hummed, watching him hold himself awkwardly. "You're having a hard time adjusting. Perhaps struggling to view this as an astral space? This will help," she told him, and before he could ask what she meant, the space began to warp. Proportions were wrong, perspective

skewed, and he suddenly felt as though he were sitting at a forty-five degree angle. Mithra seemed unperturbed as these changes shook the room like an earthquake, and smiled innocently at him as they settled.

"The mind is an interesting, flexible place. This, my dear, is merely a construct I built."

Slowly, like a stage being set back into place, the changes seemed to melt back into place, returning things to their natural state, though a lingering sense of disquiet was left behind by the cognitive dissonance of the experience, like the room itself was alive and could change at will.

"A room within my mind built specially for you."

Razputing gasped and pressed against the back of his chair, hands gripping the seat as the world around them became unnatural and impossible. It wasn't so much that he was scared, but it had startled him, having never had any experience in a mindscape before. He stared wide-eyed at the way Mithra put everything back into place. There was pure awe in those eyes.

He turned back to her, fully attentive now, and she could see that for the first time in a long time, he was excited about something. About this. Questions began flowing past his lips like water out of an open faucet.

"That's - that's - amazing! How did you do that? Does it take a lot of control? Can I do something like that?"

She chuckled as he buzzed with excitement, clearly enjoying the admiration as he looked up at her with stars in his eyes, as though she were the most remarkable psychic he'd ever met.

Come to think of it, she probably was.

"Perhaps someday, mia caro," she told him, as the curtains finished straightening themselves out, fixing the final little detail that had betrayed any change within the parlor. "You have a long way to go before you have the mental fortitude to create something this controlled. But if you work hard, my pet, you will learn. I will teach you. You will be a powerful psychic, I can promise you that, and your talents will be an asset for the family."

And just like that, his excitement dimmed. The admiration was still there, and so was the amazement, but the idea of learning these powers for the Galochio family business - betraying his own family ideals even if it was out of survival - dampened the incredible interest he'd once had in every psychic power he could think of.

Even so, he managed to force his smile to remain big, if perhaps watered down just a little bit.

"You think I can be powerful? Really?"

Make no mistake about it - that looming feeling of betrayal was entirely intentional. Mithra knew he had spent his whole life up to this point being taught that psychic powers were a terrible thing. The Aquatos had taught him to be ashamed of his natural talents - that no Aquato would allow themselves to fall prey to the call of the devil's powers.

"I know you can. It's in your blood. All of this - you're capable of this and so much more. And we will teach you all of it."

Learning psychic powers was his biggest dream. Even in foster care, when things were really bad or lonely, he would spend hours daydreaming about becoming such a powerful psychic that the Psychonauts themselves would take notice and give him a new life.

Learning under these people would be a betrayal, but maybe that dream wouldn't be so far off if he could show what he could really do. Escape the man who'd killed his loved ones, and the family who hated his guts, and even this woman who he couldn't quite figure out. If she loved him and truly wanted the best for him, surely she'd understand!

Raz took a deep breath and sat a little straighter in his chair. "Okay. I'm...I'm ready to learn."

It was almost easy to imagine that a woman like Mithra would be happy to see him escape this hellish home. If she loved and cared for him as much as she claimed to, she would want that for him, wouldn't she?

"This room is going to teach you about the complexities of the mental world. You've already seen the way the environment can shift and change. Now, I want you to meet your first mental entity. You will encounter many of these as you experience astral travel through the minds of others. This," she said, and there was a low whooshing sound like the passing of a jet. A red interdictory slammed against the far wall of the room, and a thing emerged from the center of it, twitchy and looking for a fight. "is called a censor."

Raz stared at in in amazement; it had a fancy suit and giant glasses and hoop earrings.

"What is it?"

"They're mindless little things that go around and try to stamp out anything that doesn't belong in a mind. They keep you sane. They're useful little things, but I'm afraid they're not too bright," she told him, as the censor seemed to zero in on Razputin's presence. It held a large rubber stamp with the interdictory circle on it, and pointed right at the boy.

"No!"

He stood up with his hands held out, suddenly nervous with the judging and the way it looked like it was about to approach him aggressively.

"What does it want with me?"

"Well," Mithra said, unmoving as she watched him and the censor, the way the thing approached him with a deliberate stride and how he threw his hands up in a weak defense, "You don't really belong in my mind, do you bambino? If I had to take a guess, I'd say it's here to get rid of you."

Another pause, and the thing took its first swipe at Raz.

"What do you plan to do about that?"

The boy ducked out of the way, putting the chair between them as a makeshift shield.

“Um - stop it? Somehow?”

He could punch it, but this was a thing of her mind. What if hitting it hurt her?

“Then by all means, Razputin,” she told him curtly. “Stop it.”

She was not going to let it stamp him out of her mind all together - that would be unpleasant for him and an inconvenience for her - but she wanted to see what he would do first, encountering this strange new mental entity.

He glanced her way, trying to gauge whether she was giving him permission to really go at this thing that was now circling the chair.

It seemed like she was. He'd have to assume so before it could land a hit on him.

The censor raised its stamp, ready to slam it down on its foe. Razputin ducked forward and slammed his palm into its chest, adding extra psychic force to create an orange, glowing hand outlining his own. The censor went flying.

She squealed in delight, clapping her hands at the display of psychic aggression he'd displayed, successfully squashing her censor. She didn't seem hurt - and why should she? It was just a thought she was having.

“Oh, bravissimo, Razputin!” Mithra crowed happily. “You are a traverser of the mental plane. Whether or not someone wants you in their mind, those silly little creatures are going to try and send you back to your own body. You mustn't let them, pet!”

Raz let out a breath, happy for the praise at first, until he looked to where the censor had handed and watched it disappear in a wisp.

He was horrified. “I killed it!”

“Oh, bambino, don't be silly. It wasn't alive to begin with!” She waved a hand dismissively.

“Probably. At any rate, it would have killed you, so really, fair's fair.”

What a dangerous sentiment to echo between them; but he was ten and she didn't think anything of it. Besides, at the first sign of disobedience, she would be able to put him to sleep in an instant. The censor did not have that luxury.

Even so, the words tucked themselves away deep inside Raz's mind. Fair is fair. It was okay to hurt something else, someone else, if you knew they would come after you first.

Razputin was not inclined towards violence. But some subconscious, instinctual part of him took that sentiment, held it close, and refused to let it go.

“Sit down, pet, and I will teach you how to read minds. You're doing so well. I'm so proud of my little bambolino!” She cooed, holding her hands out for Razputin once more. Late, she would

introduce him to things like personal demons and nightmares - her own, granted, but things shared by nearly any mind he would travel into in the future. The people who sought psychic help were often troubled people. Their minds would be particularly perilous.

With the censor still in his thoughts - and his nonnetta's words nestled away - Razputin went back to his seat and took her hands again. Reading minds was something he'd always wanted to do, and hearing the trickling thoughts of people who were too loud didn't count. In fact, he was rather relieved they were moving onto this so soon. She had promised him she'd teach him how to stop it so he wouldn't get in trouble.

It was one of the many reasons why she was here with him right now. One, her husband didn't particularly care for the kid. Two, to train him up for the family business, because she and Zalto weren't going to be around forever and Guillelmina was useless; and perhaps most pressingly, so that none of the adults in the household tried to drown him for being in their heads without their permission.

It wasn't uncommon, for younger psychics to pick up stray thoughts unbidden. Even Guillelmina used to do that, before she was trained out of it.

"Reading minds and listening to thoughts is a lot like a radio, pet," she told him. "When you are older, and more practiced, it will be easier to tune your mental dial to where it needs to be, in order for you to hear the thoughts you want to hear. At your age, though, your radio is... ah, perhaps a little broken. Haywire. Harder to tune, picking up frequencies you do not want. So you need to learn to turn the volume down, instead."

Raz nodded slowly as he absorbed her explanation. It made sense, and the analogy helped a lot. He had always been more of a visual learner, after all.

"And once we do that, I won't accidentally hear anyone's thoughts around the house anymore?"

"Si, bambino!" She chirped happily. "I am so glad you shared this little problem with me, so we can get it fixed subito! I would hate for you to get in trouble over something so silly." She squeezed his hands affectionately as though the idea of him getting in trouble for such a grave offense wasn't a very real danger to his personal safety.

"But I know that once you're able to keep all those stray thoughts out of your head, we won't ever have this problem again, si?"

She said it like it was a simple thing; simple problem, simple solution, and nothing to worry about afterwards. She said it like it wasn't a big deal that he'd had this issue. And yet, something about the way she said they wouldn't be dealing with it again felt less like reassurance or a promise, and more...

More like a threat.

Razputin pursed his lips and nodded. "No, we won't. I promise."

It was a simple problem and a simple solution, and nothing to worry about afterwards. Because once he had control over his telepathy, that would be that. It was only if he abused the control she so generously taught him, to read the minds of any of his elders on purpose, that they would have a problem.

And by the time they were through with his lessons, he would understand the consequences of abusing their generosity.

It was absolutely a threat - but it was said with a smile and a gentle hold.

He closed his eyes, forced himself to relax, then looked at her. "Okay. Ready when you are."

She paused, and then smiled down at him. "Tell me what I'm thinking, right now! Focus on me - nothing else," she said, as cabinet doors opened and closed themselves, curtains drawing, knick knacks rattling like a haunted house inside her mind. "and once you hear the faintest thought that is not your own, hone in on it."

Razputin jumped and his head instinctively swiveled to the loudest noises and most visible movement around them. He snapped back to attention the very next instance, staring at Mithra and trying so very hard to keep all the distractions from overtaking his concentration.

He leaned forward, gripping the edge of the table with his fingers as a cupboard slammed shut particularly violently. He'd been trained for things like this. When the crowds were bigger or louder than usual, or when they were getting rowdy or drunk, his parents had taught him how to drown it all out and focus only on the show.

He threw all his attention on her eyes - one singular thing to pay attention to in order to shut everything else out. The noise around him began to wash out. The things moving in the corners of his vision no longer mattered.

She could see the way their surroundings startled him, set him on-edge in this unnatural space where she had complete and utter control. It was her own mind - why shouldn't she? But in the very next instance, she saw his resolve harden, and the way he zeroed in on her.

She remained soft and welcoming amid the chaos of the construct. Sounds echoed from unseen trumpets and voices belonging to no one shouted over his shoulder, but he kept his gaze on her. Focused, determined. She did not resist his attempt.

Stella stellina, La notte s'avvicina.

It happened a lot faster than he had expected. One moment, he was forcing everything around the two of them to become background noise while he put all his focus on his great-grandmother; the next, a thought that was soft and gentle and most definitely not his own filtered through into his consciousness.

His eyes widened and he repeated it out loud. "Stella stellina, La notte s'avvicina...?"

“Very good my little pet!” she chirped, very pleased with him. She held onto the connection he’d forged with her with a vice grip - just to help him as they chatted, of course, to make sure he didn’t slip.

“Now, I am going to continue thinking my thoughts, and I’m going to make them as loud as possible. I want you to turn it all off within your own head. Do you think you can do that for me?”

“Uh - I can try!” He asserted, uncertain but willing to do his best. Inexperienced as he was with psychic connections, he noticed the force of her grip but had no basis to consider it unusual. He didn’t try to pull away, thinking it normal if a tad bit intense.

There was something to be said for how naturally Mithra played her eccentricities; Razputin thought it was normal, if a tad intense, only because he had no prior experience to the psychic world before. He had nothing against which to measure Mithra’s lessons. She loved him, she protected him, and when the time finally came to push his mind to its limits, it would be normal, if a bit intense, just like every other little oddity Razputin endured from her.

But that was still a long time away. For now, she wanted to ensure he could keep their thoughts out of his head. It was simple, like turning down the volume on a radio.

Stella stellina

La notte s'avvicina

La fiamma traballa

La mucca è nella stalla

La mucca e il vitello

La pecora e l'agnello

La chioccia e il pulcino

Ognuno ha il suo bambino

Ognuno ha la sua mamma

E tutti fan la nanna

...

Silence.

Fifteen seconds. That was all the time it took for Razputin to learn how to block out her blaring thoughts. Zero knowledge or practice at all to being able to keep her loudest thoughts completely out of his mind, all in the span of a quarter of a minute.

“I can’t hear you anymore,” he said, looking at her expectantly. Waiting for guidance. Unaware of how significant this was to have reached that point so quickly.

Mithra looked at him a little funny. "What do you mean you can't hear me anymore?" She asked, with an inkling of understanding that she was hesitant to entertain. Surely, he was just... confused.

She certainly was.

"I did as you said, tuning out your thoughts?" He confirmed, nodding his head. "And I can't hear you anymore."

For a long, agonizing moment it seemed as though Mithra was unsure what to make of him - how to react. He's done it already. *Al diavolo*, he was ten years old and mastering these concepts in seconds flat. She blinked, before realizing that he was small and uncertain and likely still feared her as the matriarch of the Galochios.

With effort, her expression smoothed out into a delicate smile. "My little bambolino," she cooed, "so talented! Such a strong psychic!"

The hold that she had maintained on his psyche was released, and it felt like a python releasing the pressure from crushed lungs.

"I think that is enough for today, *mia caro*," she said sweetly. "You've done very well, pet."

Mental breathing space he hadn't known had been taken from him was returned very suddenly, and his shoulders rose once as he caught up to having full control over himself again. Despite that strange and awkward and almost unnerving aspect, a timid, hopeful grin snaked its way across his face.

"Really?" He asked, looking like all he wanted to do in that moment was please her. "I did good? Really?"

She could see the way he craved her approval, and it brought a sweet smile to her lips. A look of adoration swept over her, and she nodded once. "*Si, mi amore*. You did such a good job. Zalto will be so pleased to hear about how easily you pick up these things, how quickly you're learning!"

Zalto would not be pleased to hear anything about Razputin that wasn't an obituary, but she figured lending a little bit of her husband's approval - when Razputin clearly feared him above all else - could not hurt.

His smile faded somewhat; he was no stranger to what the man thought of him, regardless of his psychic prowess.

"He'll start teaching me again?" It was not phrased as a question, but as a statement of resignation. Mithra's stranglehold on his psyche was leagues better than the overloading and the active aggression Zalto forced him to go through every session. After today's success without fearing for his life, Raz would gladly rather learn under her instead of her husband.

She looked down at her little doll. "I quite like teaching you. But, if you want to go back to your lessons with Zalto, I suppose I won't argue..." she lamented, knowing full well how rough her husband was with him, how he dreaded those lessons. It was clear how eager he was to learn, here. To explore the mental plane without threat of force or anger.

He didn't realize that Mithra was just as dangerous as her husband.

He was a child. A clever child who had certainly come across a fair share of manipulative adults, but still a child - and he had never encountered someone like Mithra Galochio. He didn't realize how dangerous she was; nor did he think to look for the signs. He was too busy feeling relieved that she wanted to keep teaching him.

"No, no, no, this is fine!" He hurried to clarify before she could set her mind to handing him back over to her husband. "I like having you teach me, too! I'd love to keep doing it - I mean, if, if that's okay with you."

She smiled, and reached across the little table taking his face in her hands. She was gentle with him, like he were made of porcelain. "Mia caro, I would be happy to teach you. I love you very much, my little bambolino. You're such a clever little psychic, and you are going to be a magnificent fortune-teller! Now," she told him, as she folded her hands on the table between them, "it is time to wake up."

The world around them did not change as he opened his eyes. It was like blinking, and he realized that her construct truly had been a one-to-one recreation of the real world they inhabited. The smell of smoke returned, fainter now as the incense had burned all the way down. The sun was lower in the sky, dusk struggling past the drawn curtains.

"How do you feel?"

Razputin blinked, feeling...off. Off like he had missed a step going up the stairs. He tried to stand up - and swayed terribly.

"Whoa. Whoa, okay." He threw out his hands for balance as his mind tried to get used to the idea of having a body it belonged to again. "A little - dizzy."

She reached out in alarm, and there was a strange force that coalesced in thin air to help support him as he swayed. Mithra's telekinesis was nearly invisible save for the slightest shimmer of air where it held him up.

"Attento, attento! Take it easy, bambolino. Slowly. Slowly. You did very well for your first time on the astral plane. We will continue to practice together, si? And you will only get better and better. You'll be used to that feeling in no time."

He didn't know that when a psychic normally astral projected, it was by their own will and direction. He didn't know that letting someone else rip his consciousness from his body was not a good or healthy thing to do.

He didn't know better, so he didn't question it. And he would get used to this unconventional way of traversing the astral plane. It was all he would know for a very long time.

"Okay. Okay, I think I'm okay now," he said after a moment of taking stock of himself. "Sorry. I've never been out of my own head before."

She would teach him how to reach the astral plane on his own someday. He would always rely on the incense as a crutch for his natural powers - the boy had months upon months of conditioning ahead of him now that Mithra had her hands on him - but she would not always have to tear his consciousness out of his body like that.

But that would come much, much later in their lessons. She was content to force his consciousness from his body for the time being. It was simpler, more efficient. It helped him access the astral plane with ease, and it taught him unquestioning trust and obedience.

So for now, she simply smiled sweetly at him and opened her arms for him where she sat at the table. "You did very good today. How did you like it, bambino? Being in someone else's mind?"

Legs still a little shaky, Raz was almost grateful for the offered arms. He went around the table carefully, letting her sweep him into her hold willingly for perhaps the very first time.

"It was...different than I expected," he admitted. "I always thought people's minds were weird and didn't make sense compared to the real world, but you made it feel so - so lifelike. It was amazing!"

"I did that for you," she explained to him, drawing him into her lap. "Minds can be chaotic and confusing, sometimes even dangerous. I built the construct of the parlor as a sort of training room for you. Once you're ready, we will venture into the wilds of a human mind, rest assured, and things will not seem as tidy and lifelike. But for you, my bambolino, I wanted your first trip to be safe and comfortable."

She smoothed his hair down as he sat there in her lap, humming softly. "And once you get older and start seeing clients here in the parlor, you'll traverse all sorts of minds. You must be ready for anything, pet. Do you think you're brave enough?"

Any other time, he would've felt more than a twinge of embarrassment and irritation from her babying. This time, it didn't become much more than a spark. He was too preoccupied thinking about the wonders of the psychic world.

"I'm brave enough," he said, firmly with a tinge of heaviness. Bravery was needed for an Aquato to survive amongst the Galochios for as long as he had, and would be. "I promise, I can do that. No need to worry about me."

"Oh, my love," she cooed, running her hand through his hair, raking his bangs away from his eyes with the motion. "I will always worry about you. You're my little bambino, how could I not worry about you?"

Along with the idea that he was her bambino came the other side of the coin, unspoken but heavy between them.

"You're going to be the perfect addition to the family business, my love."

That unspoken obligation hung over his head like an anvil waiting to drop. He swallowed and didn't meet her eyes. The faces of his lost family drifted to the forefront of his thoughts.

"Y-Yeah. Definitely."

With a delicate touch, she lifted his gaze to meet hers. There was no accusation of his betrayal in her eyes, no sneer or smirk on her lips to mock him with. Even her touch was more gentle than usual, and she pressed a kiss to his forehead.

"I love you, Razputin. Very much. You know that, don't you?"

Before yesterday, he hadn't believed it at all. This morning, he'd been uncertain if she was lying like the rest of them or if she really, actually meant it.

Now, after a psychic lesson so much gentler and nicer and with more patience than Zalto's, the vines of doubt had been shredded down considerably.

"...I know that," he said softly, looking at her almost shyly. Confusion about her kindness warred with the gratefulness of having it. "I just...wasn't sure at first, with everyone else."

"The others, they don't matter. What they think of you - unimportant," she told him, waving the notion away like an annoying bug. "So long as you know your mama will always love you. You are my perfect little boy, and nothing will ever change that. Not Ignazio or Catalda, not little Guillelmina, not Zalto, and not you."

She wrapped her arms around him as he sat in her lap, pulling her close to his chest as they simply took in this moment of peace. He was a powerful young psychic, he was training to use his psychic abilities, he was loved in this home full of people who hated him - Mithra's doting, which had felt like a curse just a few days ago, had become a blessing.

For once, her arms around him felt like a comfort instead of a trap. He allowed himself to relax into her hold, away from accusing stares and hateful words in this private sanctuary.

It was the first time he'd been able to feel any measure of safety in over a week. He'd been so tense, so guarded, in his efforts for survival here that letting it go for even these previous few minutes was something he hadn't realized was so significant until now.

Raz closed his eyes and gently, carefully, hugged her back.

It was like watching a landslide - how the pebbles were slow to roll at first. How mud slipped down the hill with impossible viscosity, barely noticeable by the human eye, until all at once - CRASH! The world was falling apart, slipping, sliding down the side of the mountain to consume anything that stood in its path.

She felt him hug her back in that moment, and only let out a happy little sigh, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. She was his sanctuary, the only safe place among a family of murderers. Her affection, her love and encouragement had made him forget.

She was a part of that family, too.

And now, so was he.

There was a scent his Nona used to have, under layers of dirt and circus and Aquato family. It was a faint, barely perceptible smell of some kind of herb.

Mithra smelled strongly of it, and he buried his nose into the crook of her neck. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed that smell.

"I don't understand," he murmured, a thought given only to her. A privilege she had just earned. "Why do they hate me so much? I know our families have bad history, but I wasn't part of any of that."

She rubbed gently at his back as he rested against her. What he was asking was dangerous territory, and if she were anyone else it would have come with consequences.

"Oh, bambino," she cooed, pressing her cheek against the top of his head. "It isn't your fault. They hate you because you're a living reminder of everything that went wrong. Your papa, Augustus, never should have been born. He was a mistake. You are, too." She smoothed his hair down, talking to him as though what she were saying was kind and rational. Like it would make things better.

"But I don't hate you, bambino. I could never hate you."

He flinched. A mistake. That word had been thrown around and at him at every turn, in both English and Italian. Usually it was about letting him live with them. A lot of times it was just about his existence.

A quiet, shuddering breath left him. All the verbal abuse was getting to him, no matter how much he was trying to keep his head high and show them it wasn't. A confession bubbled past his lips almost against his will.

"I don't want to be a mistake."

"Oh, I know, bambino," she said, saccharine sympathy in her voice. "But it's not your fault. Sometimes we can't help the things we are. You come from a family of mistakes, and there's nothing to be done about that. But by learning how to use your powers, learning how to help the family, we can turn that mistake into something wonderful! Together."

She shifted, lifting his chin and his gaze towards her again. "Don't you want that, pet?"

"I..."

Raz hesitated. He wanted nothing to do with the Galochios, or their business. He wanted to run far away and join the Psychonauts and never come back. But until that happened, he was trapped here and left at their mercy, with only one person who seemed willing to fight for him.

He didn't want to be part of this family. But he did want to stay in the good graces of his great-grandmother, and he wanted to show her he was grateful for everything she was doing for him.

"I...want to learn," he said, truthfully. "I want to fit in somewhere. And, and I want you to be happy, too."

"My darling Razputin," she said, a hand at his cheek. "I'm happy as long as I have you."

She said these words to him without so much as batting an eye, the smile on her face soft and genuine. And it was unequivocally, irrefutably, the complete and utter truth.

How long had he gone without hearing those words - that affirmation that he was enough as he was, and that he was loved and cherished and wanted, just as he was? Too long. Not since his siblings and his nona and his father and his real mother had been alive had he heard that.

He'd needed to hear that. A year of being shuffled around to wherever there was space instead of to whomever actually wanted him and then a week of life here had done terrible damage to his self-worth. He needed desperately to hear and have validation of his existence, and she had been genuine.

The boy's eyes grew watery. He didn't cry, but he burrowed himself back against her. Tiny hands clung to her shawl and dress.

She gave him time to compose himself. She was sure that after all this time in the Galochio home, being beat down by the others, the warmth of genuine and positive affirmation must have felt like the first breath of air after drowning.

"Shh, mia bambino," she soothed, "You're okay. As long as you're with me, you're safe and cared for."

He nodded without sound against her midsection. He finally, actually believed her.

She had him.

He was only ten years old; ten and alone and hurting after being forced to hide his grief for a year and three months among new foster parents and siblings who were every bit as cruel as the Galochios in vastly different ways.

It hadn't exactly been difficult.

But she still glowed with pride, knowing that she finally had her little bambolino in her arms. That this was the beginning of a new life for him.

“Come with me, pet,” she speaks softly to him. “A client will be here soon. We cannot stay in the parlor much longer.”

Raz didn’t want to leave. Leaving meant rejoining the rest of the household, where he was belittled and threatened and blamed for everything under the sun.

But now, maybe...maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, with his nonnetta looking out for him.

With one almost-inaudible snuffle, he pulled away and gave her a quiet, understanding “okay.” His hand found hers and he didn’t let go.

She wouldn’t make him let go. In fact, she would encourage this familiarity, this trust and this closeness, whenever possible. Little touches to his cheek in passing, grandmotherly affection when all he received from others was sneers. It was the grace of God that he had one ally in this house, one person who advocated for his safety and well-being, who he knew without a doubt didn’t want him dead like the others did.

It was no secret, and after the first three months of living with the Galochios, it only grew more and more obvious. Mithra treated him with kindness - she taught him how to use his powers and promised that some day, he would be her little fortuito - a happy accident.

The others were markedly less kind. Mithra’s daughters mostly didn’t bother him. Ornella was always busy with Guillelmina, and Catalda was the kind of syrupy-sweet that left a bad taste in his mouth. He dreaded to think what she was saying about him behind closed doors.

Ignazio was the worst of her children; abrasive and aggressive, it was clear that he took after his father more than anyone. He made no show of hiding violent jokes or remarks about Razputin, and was in fact eager to see his reaction. It was clear, with Ignazio, that his animosity was simply to get a rise out of the child.

Zalto’s animosity, however, was very, very real.

He never made violent remarks or casual threats, but Raz could see it in the way the man sometimes looked at him. The quiet, sober contemplation of putting him down for good.

But Mithra assured him - no matter how cross her husband may get, she wouldn’t let anything happen to him.

Razputin kept his head down. He learned fast and he learned hard that just because he had a single ally in this hell of a house, it did not mean he was safe by any means. He stayed out of people’s ways; he did chores and followed orders as instructed; he was careful to stick close to Mithra whenever possible and not to make waves when she wasn’t around to shield him from the rest of the family.

Every night, every single night, she tucked him in and he fell asleep not of his own accord. And every morning as he woke up, as days turned into weeks turned into a third month, he stared longingly out his window and felt his chance for escape slipping through his fingers like water.

He felt his will to escape slipping as well - replaced with the poison of resignation and the urge to keep the status quo so that he wouldn't get in trouble. It was a slow, insidious kind of poison, and although he was aware of it, there was very little he could do to stop it.

Only one person in that family was unpredictable in a way that he could respond to, and that was Guillelmina. Her resentment of him grew tenfold after Mithra started training him, and it took a while for him to figure out that it was because he had abilities that she did not. He would have felt bad; would have tried to reassure her, even, but her nastiness and harsh words grew at the same pace as her resentment, and more often than not he ended up matching her nastiness to the point they were both left red-faced and riled up.

Getting in trouble was inevitable - especially when he fought with Guillelmina. No matter who started it, he was the one who took the brunt of the punishment. Never once did anyone in that house raise a hand against him, though he was threatened with the wooden spoon more than a handful of times, and he feared that one of these days they were going to make good on those threats.

Guillelmina was not exempt from punishment, exactly, but she certainly did not receive the same treatment from the family as Raz did. At least, not enough to dissuade her from picking these fights in the first place. She was almost always the one who hurled the first insult, no matter how the fight actually started, and the smug look on her face when Raz more often than not received the blame was infuriating.

It was like she couldn't have cared less about anything they were actually fighting about. The only reason she engaged at all was to insult him, his dead family, or to watch as he got in trouble with the adults. And always, conveniently, when Mithra wasn't around to save her little bambino.

She didn't want his sympathy or his reassurance. She wanted him to know –

“You're delusional if you think they're actually going to let you into the family business,” she told him. “You're not a fortune-teller. You're a trained monkey.”

– that some circus freak wasn't going to come into this house and leave her in the dust.

He had been idly levitating three pencils when she approached him, making them spin and move around in patterns like synchronized swimmers.

Her words made him stiffen. The pencils dropped to the floor.

“And how do you know that?” Razputin swiveled to face her, more irritated than anything. He'd heard the 'trained monkey' nickname from too many members of the family to let it impact him.

Visibly, at least.

“I can use clairvoyance, I can read minds, and I can see at least a week into the future now. What else would I be using those powers for, huh?”

It seemed as though Guillelmina had a retort ready, but it died on her lips when he listed out everything he could do. He saw the faintest flicker of hesitation from her, before it smoothed out back into contempt.

"They just wanna see how far you can get before you screw things up," she told him. "Everyone knows it's only a matter of time. It's what you do best."

"The only times I screw up are when I let you start talking to me," he said, picking up the pencils without even giving her the courtesy of looking at her. "I've been here three months. I've made it this far."

"So you went three months without changing nonno's mind about letting nonnetta keep you. Think you can go three more? How bout three years? The rest of your life? You're bound to screw up eventually, and they're gonna realize what a mistake it was keeping you around."

He straightened. Didn't turn around. Didn't move for a solid second.

"Do you think I don't know that?" His voice came out in a whisper. "Do you think I don't spend every moment of every day hearing the things said about me or seeing the way Zalto looks at me, wondering if it's finally the day it all snaps?"

His hand around the pencils clenched into a fist. "The day Nonnetta can't protect me anymore, and I'm finally dead?"

There it is. That nerve she was hoping to strike, to get a rise out of him. She leans against the table with a wicked grin. She sees how taut he is, how ready to snap he was. Three months of pressure, three months of having to walk on eggshells and never knowing what the straw that breaks the camel's back will be.

"Personally, I can't wait for the day they ship you off back to whatever sad little orphanage you came from," she hummed happily. "And neither can everyone else."

Razputin had been about to snap like a rubber band from all that pressure and the way she was stretching his nerves to the brink, and then he stopped short.

He turned to stare at her. Gawked at her like she'd just said the sky was green and the grass was blue.

Then he laughed.

It was sharp and bitter and flabbergasted, and it was only one sound that came out before his jaw snapped shut. "You're an idiot. They're not going to send me back to foster care. They're going to kill me."

She hadn't expected a laugh. She'd kinda hoped he'd run off to nonnetta. But a laugh... it was unsettling.

And then he spoke.

It caught her off guard for a moment, the dead certainty with which he said it - but it passed just as quickly as it had come, and she rolled her eyes instead.

"Dio mio, don't be so dramatic, it's not a good look on you," she sneered.

She wasn't getting it. Or maybe she was choosing not to get it. To pretend her family was fine and wonderful and didn't have blood on their hands. Would soon have more blood on their hands, if he didn't continue to be careful.

Raz shook his head. He was still tense and taut, but it wasn't directed at her anymore. Just his terrible, fucked up situation.

"Doesn't matter if you don't believe me, it'll happen anyway. Maybe when I finally disappear, you'll find my body in the lake. Give me a burial like a lost pet."

He had no intention of dying anytime soon. He'd vowed to survive, and he was going to do his absolute best to do exactly that. But if she was too dense or too in denial to realize the severity of the situation, he wasn't going to soften the blow for her out of courtesy.

Teasing him wasn't fun if he was going to be fucking weird about it. She pulled a face, a disgusted, unsettled look as he spoke about his own lakeside grave. "You're such a freak, Aquato," she sneered. "It's amazing they kept you around this long, if you act like this around them, too. Weirdo."

If nothing else, his demeanor was certainly enough to get rid of her, and she slunk away with some terrible, awful feeling gnawing at her chest.

Razputin watched her go, and he didn't feel better about telling her off. He didn't even feel good that he'd avoided another blowup from her obviously trying to rile him up and get him in trouble.

He was riled up, all right. His family floated across his memory, and it was not pleasant.

Mina was not supposed to lock her bedroom door. But for five minutes, just to ensure that Razputin didn't follow her upstairs and start to spout more weird nonsense, she sat with her back against the door, knees hugged to her chest as she tried to put all of Raz's bizarre and dramatic ramblings from her mind once and for all.

It was probably because of zio Ignazio. He was always saying particularly nasty things about Raz, about getting rid of him one way or another... but that was just tio Ignazio. He was just like that... right?

He didn't see his cousin for the rest of the day, and she avoided his eyes at dinner. He did the same, and that was fine by him. He didn't care if she thought he was a liar or dramatic or trying to poison her against her family. He didn't care if she believed him, either, because ultimately it didn't matter.

His situation wouldn't change, and he couldn't afford to get distracted from the balancing act he had been performing for months already.

Dinner was stiff and tense. Razputin did not speak unless he was spoken to, and he refused to look at her throughout the meal. She did the same. But she decided, pushing her potatoes around halfheartedly, that it was time to strike up a conversation.

“Nonno, can I ask you something?” She spoke up, only when she was sure she wasn’t interrupting the adults. A hush fell across the table.

“Si, Guillelmina. What’s on your mind?” Zalto responded, after a moment. It was rare for their youngest to speak so boldly.

“Razputin and I were talking before,” she started, knowing full well that was in and of itself something that annoyed them. “If he messes up, we’re sending him back to the orphanage, right? He thinks if he messes up we’re all gonna drown him or something, but I told him that’s stupid. Tell him he’s just being dramatic.”

Silence.

Dead and utter silence.

Yes, something like this would get him in trouble. That was sort of the point. How dare he say something so blatantly absurd about the people who took him in, who tolerated him and his mistakes!

But as the silence stretched on, and the adults exchanged glances, the stiff and tense atmosphere of dinner became sickening and thick as tar.

“Si, Guillelmina,” Ornella purred, a hand in her granddaughter’s curls. “That’s such a silly thing for him to say. Isn’t it, papa?”

“Silly, is one word for it,” the man grumbled.

The subject of their conversation stopped breathing.

He made no sound. He perhaps could have turned to stone, if not for the way his face was turning whiter and whiter like all the life was being drained out of him.

Maybe he was just getting ready for it.

Razputin had gone still and silent, and terror gripped his very being.

Zalto stood up from the table. In that moment, all eyes were on him, but he didn’t seem to care about the rest of the family. Dark eyes fell on their newest member, white as a sheet and perfectly still. One might think he was already dead.

“Razputin. A word, per favore? Alone.”

A single breath. Barely audible, barely even perceptible. The child’s lips parted as if hypnotized.

“.....Yes sir.....”

He stood mechanically, and followed his nonno. It was clear he did not think he would be coming back.

Zalto waited for Razputin to walk around the table, to lay a heavy hand on his shoulder and march him out of the room. Out of the kitchen, out of the living quarters of the house and deep into the reading parlor at the front of it. The door that separated the shop and the house closed heavily behind him, and he was alone with his family's killer.

"Sit down."

Razputin sat down. He started trembling.

"What Guillelmina has said. Is this true, ragazzi? Did you say this to her?" He asked. There was no kindness in his voice, in the look he gave Raz, but nor was there fury or bloodlust.

He was completely unreadable.

"Yes." He whispered, staring at the empty table between them. "I did."

"You will look at me while I am talking to you," he commanded, his voice glacial. "Do you know how long you've been here, boy? Three months and six days. One year, five months, and twenty-two days since you survived the sudden and tragic flood that drowned the rest of your sad little circus, si? One year, five months, and twenty-two days I have woken up, every day, and thought about finishing what I started."

Raz could feel a pressure bearing down on his mind, insidious and suffocating as Zalto stared him down.

"I do not want you speaking to Guillelmina, anymore. I don't care who starts it. The next word out of your mouth to her, you will regret. Do you understand me?"

His gaze snapped up to the man, and his mouth opened in a wordless cry at the pressure of an assault strong enough for even him to feel it, despite the fact it hadn't broken through.

"Yes sir!" He whimpered, terrified of what that kind of pressure would do to him if - when it reached his vulnerable mind. "I won't talk to her anymore! I'm sorry!"

With his obedience, Razputin felt the grip loosen ever so slightly. With his obedience came safety.

"When we took you in, it was not out of the goodness of our hearts. It was not out of pity. We took you in because my wife wanted a pretty little plaything," he jabbed a finger at Razputin, and then settled back in his seat again.

"I do not want to have to break her toys."

The boy curled in on himself, and looked like he wanted nothing more than to squeeze his eyes shut. He kept them open and on Zalto, because his fear had become much more powerful than his instinct.

"I'm sorry," he repeated quietly, having nothing else to say that was safe. "I - I thought she knew. I'm sorry."

"Imbecille!" Zalto barked. "She is nine years old! How dense do you have to be to think we would involve her in such talk? Worthless brat! Believe me, I wanted nothing more than to dump you in the lake the moment we returned home, to watch il mano di Galochio drag you down into the depths. And when the water fills your lungs and your body floats back to the surface after the curse disappears for good, we're going to celebrate."

It was spoken with such certainty, such conviction, that for a moment Raz wondered if this fortune-teller had looked into the future.

Nine years old, he said, like the target of his hatred and want for death wasn't barely a year older.

Razputin did close his eyes, now, and shuddered horribly at the idea of suffering the same fate as his family; all while it was celebrated by this sick group. His arms were pressed up to his chest with his hands twisted in the collar of his shirt. The room was thick with animosity and it felt like there was almost no air.

"I said look at me," Zalto seethed, and he didn't need his wife's powers to command his attention at the demand. The anger fled from his voice, and his words were steady and slow. "Razputin, you have a great deal of weight on your shoulders, now. I do not like you. In fact, I would prefer you dead. But my wife insists we bring you up into the family business. I do not want your bickering with Guillelmina to get in the way of what she wants from you. You are not going to be afforded many chances. Make this be the last time I have to speak with you about these matters."

He looked down at Razputin with contempt, but the fury was all but gone, now.

"We are clear, si?"

He looked up at his great-grandfather. The fury was mostly gone, but meeting that man's gaze still felt like looking directly at the sun.

His voice was only steady by the grace of god. "Yes, sir. We're clear."

"Buono. Go back to the kitchen, and help clean up," he ordered. "Not a word to Guillelmina. Not a word to anyone."

He was confident that the boy wouldn't be too eager to speak to the others. Everyone in this house save for Mithra had it out for him; everyone wanted the same thing Zalto did.

"When you are done, mia cara will be waiting for you."

Razputin nodded, and hurried out of the parlor. He'd already taken the gag order to heart.

Tears shimmered in his eyes without falling.

Zalto watched the boy retreat. He couldn't have cared less if he made the boy cry or if he were scared. Mithra would take care of all that. As long as Razputin followed the rules and remained obedient in this household, his work here was done.

Mina watched him come back into the kitchen, and was a little disappointed to see he wasn't crying - though he certainly looked shaken up. She wondered if Zalto had told him they were gonna send him back, yet. Probably not, because Mithra was still doting over him like a little lost puppy.

But man, a girl could dream.

He remained stonily silent as he helped clean up the dinner mess. He'd always been quiet around the family as a whole, but this was different, somehow. It felt heavier. It felt more permanent.

The adults didn't pay him much mind, except for Mithra, who saw the tears shimmering in his eyes, who cooed over him and pulled him off to his room upstairs the moment he was finished with his chores.

The only other person who cared about his presence, who even seemed to notice him, was Guillelmina.

"Oh, bambolino, sweet thing, what did Zalto say to you?"

Mina pressed her ear up against the door of his bedroom, holding her breath.

He was her pretty little plaything, was what Zalto had said. But Raz had thought he was going to die that night. He could brush the comment off as the man just trying to get further under his skin, in lieu of the comfort he so desperately needed right now.

"...He said I can't talk to Guillelmina anymore," he choked out, curling up against her like a kicked puppy. "One word and I'll be s-sorry."

He wasn't on the verge of crying over the restriction. He was on the verge of crying because he still felt that vice grip pressure on his mind, a phantom threat even though Zalto was not actively threatening him anymore.

"Oh, you poor thing. I know he can be so severe sometimes, but it's for your own good. You and Guillelmina have been so harsh with each other lately. Maybe some time apart, not speaking to each other, is exactly what you need. She gets you so riled up, doesn't she? Won't it be nice to not have to worry about fighting with her?" She ran a hand through Raz's hair as she cradled him against her.

Every little touch and every movement was tailored especially to calm him. It was subtle, at first. But eventually, under her touch, the tears turned into hiccups turned into gentle breaths as she rubbed gently at his back.

“Cosa dulce, do not worry. Nothing is going to happen to you. You stay away from Guillelmina, and I will protect my little bambolino.”

Raz nodded into her shawl, still feeling horribly in turmoil but no longer about two breaths away from a panic attack. He didn't know which part he was agreeing with - that he did indeed get into fights too easily with his cousin, or that it would be nice for that not to happen, or even that he trusted her to protect him.

Maybe it was a little of everything.

“My sweet little Razputin,” she cooed, combing her fingers through his hair as he buried his face against her. “My poor bambino... You're going to be okay. We're going to get through this together. No more of those silly fights with Guillelmina, no more saying things you shouldn't.”

The gag order Zalto had placed on him didn't seem to bother her. Maybe she knew something he didn't - maybe she saw some good in it that Raz's immediate fear prevented him from seeing.

“If you cannot behave for your mama, I might not be able to protect you, pet.”

With her arms so firmly around him, she could feel the way his shoulders rose to his ears. He lifted his head to stare at her with wide eyes red from crying.

She'd been keeping that joke up, about being his mama instead of his nonnetta. Three months now, and she would still occasionally refer to herself as such; often in simple, quiet moments like bed time. He always tried not to acknowledge it or changed the subject or just laughed awkwardly, embarrassed every time.

He couldn't ignore it now. Not when it was stuck in the center of a warning.

Raz's face twisted into some indescribable emotion, and his gaze dropped from hers.

“I - I can behave. I will behave. I promise.”

She snuggled him close, and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. “I know you will, Razputin. You're such a good little boy. And now that you won't have to worry about all those silly fights with Guillelmina, you're going to be the perfect bambolino.”

Whether or not he was the perfect little bambolino by choice was yet to be seen. Because no matter what, Mithra was not going to lose her little doll.

He bit his lip and closed his eyes before leaning back into her hug. He supposed she might be right - almost every time he talked to his cousin, even on neutral terms, it ended in a fight. Everyone always got mad at him, and Mithra was always disappointed, and the times he won those verbal spats were never worth the consequences afterwards.

Maybe she was right. Maybe this was better.

Without the threat of passing information between Guillelmina and Razputin, things would be better. No more bickering, no more yelling, no more getting in trouble with the other adults. They were always looking for a reason to be angry with him, and Mina knew that. Used it against him.

She cradled him close to sooth his trembling. "So much worry in such a little boy. You have nothing to worry about as long as I'm here, pet."

On the other side of the door, Mina quietly moved away, sneering as she retreated back to her own room. Someone would be coming up soon to check her room.

Raz hoped so. Mithra had become his rock these last few months; the only reason he hadn't lost his mind or threw caution to the wind and tried to run in broad daylight.

She had her - quirks. The mother jokes, the hypnosis-induced sleeping, the insistence on babying him even when he was a perfectly capable ten-year-old. But he could live with those things - ignore them, even - so long as he had her comfort and safety.

The boy held her, and let her hold him, and was so, so grateful for this privilege.

It was a privilege - he was an Aquato, and comfort was a privilege in this house for that simple reason. He'd gotten lucky, that Mithra wanted his affection so badly, that she was willing to offer her own comfort in exchange for his trust and a facsimile of his love.

She had her quirks, but she would insist that it was all for his own good. She had her quirks, but she took care of him like his mama, didn't she? She had her quirks, but she made sure he slept soundly every night, that he never grappled with night terrors about the people he'd once called his family, or the family he knew now. She had her quirks, but she loved him, didn't she?

Of course she did.

He had to believe that. He did believe that. It, and a pair of red goggles kept carefully hidden in his room, were all he had left to hold onto out here.

Life with the Galochios was starkly different from then on. Razputin was quieter, less confrontational with his cousin, despite her best efforts. He was a ghost in his own home - though it was never really home, and it never really would be.

But there was a source of comfort that remained constant through it all: Mithra. Her little sleeping spells; the way she held him; the lessons in which she praised his developing powers. It was night and day, how the Galochios treated him compared to her love.

Their psychic lessons together were fast becoming his favorite part of the day; his favorite part of living here. Things were private and safe then, and she was patient with him, and he was learning things he'd always wanted to learn without having to worry whether one mistake would mean his death. It reached a point where he would wait for her in front of the entrance to the parlor before their lessons. Smart enough never to enter without her to grant him permission, but eager for her to arrive so they could start.

There was only one real frustration he had with her - well, two, actually, but the babying he could chalk up to being a grandmother thing. That aspect reminded him of his Nona, and so he never raised a complaint about it even when it became a little ridiculous.

No, the issue was the “mama” joke.

She still hadn't let it go. Her adult children had mostly moved on to other insults and mocking nicknames, but Mithra, for whatever reason, continued to slip the word into casual conversation like there was nothing wrong with it.

It was grinding on his nerves, and he tried his best to act as though she had never uttered it.

She started using it more overtly, demanding his cooperation. It was subtle at first, inconspicuous and easy to ignore. She would pout and pretend to be hurt by his dodging, but she never punished him for it. She had to admit, it was admirable, for a ten year old. He was almost as stubborn as she was. Almost! She still had a few tricks up her sleeve, and she wasn't going to give this up so easily.

Then it started happening at the dinner table. She would dish his food out for him, and hold it just out of his reach, telling him to mind his manners and say thank you, mama.

The first few nights she did this, he went to bed hungry.

It wasn't her fault, of course. She would happily set the plate down if he would just be polite, but instead he insisted on being rude at the dinner table. He would watch as she scraped his plate off into the trash bin, and she would tell him that maybe tomorrow he would remind his manners.

Tonight, she placed his plate on the table without any conditions.

Razputin was not easily swayed by an empty stomach. The Aquatos were poor and there were many mouths to feed, and on the worst days, he had endured hungry nights for the sake of letting his younger siblings have everything they needed.

It hadn't happened too often, but it had been enough that Mithra's new threat; new game was not enough to break his stubbornness. She wanted to be weird about calling herself his mom when she wasn't? Fine. But he wasn't having any active part of it.

So sitting at the table and expecting to go a fifth night without dinner, he was openly surprised as she set food before him. He gave her a cautious side-eye as he tentatively picked up his fork. Maybe she had finally figured out that he wasn't going to go along with this particular...quirk. Maybe they could finally forget about it and move on with their lives. He was certainly ready to.

Even though Razputin got to eat that night, he could still feel the clipped tension that had settled over his nonnetta. She was upset with him, and it was clear that she was trying not to let it get to her - let it get between them - but the way she spent dinner quiet, rather than doting over him, not even sparing him a glance...

The faintest, most distant of storm clouds were rolling in.

She didn't understand what was so hard about calling her mama. She took care of him, didn't she? She soothed his night terrors and protected him. Clothed and fed him? He was never so disrespectful - not to her. Never to her.

These thoughts stirred and boiled as they ate dinner, with Mithra barely sparing him attention that night. It wasn't until Razputin and Guillelmina moved to help clean off the table that the idea struck her, and she finally paid attention to her precious little doll.

"Not you, Razputin. Guillelmina will take care of it. We have lessons tonight, remember?"

She stood from the dinner table without a word, and moved towards the parlor, expecting him to follow.

The boy stopped in the middle of stacking plates, shocked by the disruption in routine. Lessons never happened when there were chores to be done. That had been a hard rule even when Zalto was teaching him.

Gobsmacked and feeling apprehension form in his stomach - which was stupid, he had nothing to fear from her. She wasn't her husband! - Raz reluctantly left the stack on the table and, with one half apologetic, half confused glance at his cousin, followed Mithra.

Mithra didn't look back at him even once as she led him down to the parlor at the front of the house. She struck a match and lit the incense, sitting down at the little reading table and waiting patiently for Razputin to join her.

She laid her hands out delicately in the middle of the table, waiting for him to take them. The message was clear - tonight, they were going to be visiting the collective unconscious again.

He sat down across from her and gave her his hands with a tiny little frown. They had been working on clairvoyance last lesson, and it had seemed like they would continue that concept in the next one.

Why were they going deep into their own heads tonight?

She did not afford Razputin the patience he was used to, that night. It seemed she was in a hurry for something, and he was yanked from his body before he even had a chance to settle in. She held his hand firmly, standing beside him on the impossible geometry of the astral plane, and looked down at him.

"Do you know why we're here, bambino?" She asked him. Her voice was gentle, but that underlying impatience burned through regardless.

It took a second for his mental eyes to stop rolling around in his skull, but he adjusted to the disorientation quickly. As usual.

"Uh...not really," he said, honest and careful. "I thought we were doing more clairvoyance tonight."

"We were supposed to, si," she tells him, the curt way she spoke crawling down his spine. "But I was thinking at dinner, about how you simply refuse to call me mama. And I realized... you're right."

Raz began to shrink back instinctively at her tone, and then the motion stopped at her actual words. He peered up at her. Vague hope intermingled with his caution.

"...Yeah?"

"You're ten years old, Razputin," she told him. "You're much too old to be coddled by your mama. You're a young man, and you should be treated like one."

They were moving - not walking, but certainly moving, through the intertwined, elaborate labyrinth of the collective unconscious. It seemed Mithra knew exactly where she was going - a path she had taken plenty of times in her life as a psychic, and as a Galochio.

"So, my little pet, I'm going to give you a chance to prove to me that you don't need to be coddled by your mama."

She took one step forward, dragging him with her, and the world came to a screeching halt in front of one door - heavily armored, and locked tight.

Time did not exist in the collective unconscious, but it felt like it had stopped all the same as Razputin's gaze fell on that terrible destination.

He planted his feet to no avail. Physical rules didn't work the same way here as they did in the real world, and his great-grandmother's grip was more than enough to keep him moving forward against his will.

"W-W-Wait!" He cried, as fear spiked from his head to his toes like a bolt of lightning. "He still hasn't g-given me permission yet! I can't!!

She grips him by the wrist and holds him fast, no matter how desperately he tried to tear himself away from her and that terrible door. "Enough, Razputin. I have made up my mind. This is your lesson for the evening." She approached the door with ease, and without so much as touching it, the locks undid themselves for her presence. Very few were allowed in Zalto's mind, and his wife was one of them.

"Now," she said, as it opened, holding Razputin by the shoulders between her and the swirling abyss of the opened door, "I want you to step inside. But if you are not ready, all you need to do is tell me that you still need your mama."

Raz stared into the abyss, and the abyss waited to consume him if he took a single step forward. He opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

"I - I -"

The plea was on the very tip of his tongue. Five words; five simple words were all he needed to say in order to avoid this fate. Something told him that stepping through that door would change

everything. If he didn't die by Zalto's wrath, there would still be repercussions that could not be predicted or stepped away from.

But something else told him that backing down would change things just as much. Some stubborn, fighting, determined little part of him that was still keeping its head above water, despite all odds and every attempt by the Galochios to stamp it out, was telling him that more was on the line than just a simple surrender.

His pride was on the line. His respect for his mother was on the line.

He couldn't do it.

The boy's mouth clicked shut, and remained shut. He was terrified to his mental core, but he did not give in to it. He remained firm on his principles, and he would face whatever came of it.

Mithra was patient with him; standing there behind him with her hands firmly on his shoulders, she waited for him to come to the natural conclusion that his stubbornness was not worth whatever lay beyond this door. She watched him, cool and unconcerned as he contemplated every fear that lay before him.

But she saw that resolute decision, that subtle shift in his fear - the resignation that he carried in every terrified line of his body.

He'd made his choice.

"Very well," Mithra sighed, and there was a precious moment where the possibility that the matriarch would finally relent hung between them.

Then, she gave him a firm push at his shoulders.

He fell.

And fell, and fell, and fell.

He was a speck of dust in a whirlwind; a twig in a forest fire; an Aquato in the ocean. Hatred and misery beyond anything he'd ever felt before - anything he could've even imagine existed before struck him from all sides. He cried out with no sound at the intensity and enormity of it all, curling in on himself and struggling just to keep his mental form in the wake of it all. To remember who he was even supposed to be.

Mithra stepped in after him, feeling everything that assaulted Razputin's young mind and none of it, everything and nothing, all at the same time. She laid a hand gently between his shoulder blades, quietly urging him to regain his bearings. She was there to help him - his mama would always be there to help him.

"Now, pet," came her gentle voice among the tsunami of vile emotions that bombarded him, "you're okay. Deep breath, and stand up. I'm right here with you."

His hand shot out blindly until he found hers, and he grabbed at her desperately as she grounded him and pushed him to stand up from the fetal position he hadn't even realized he was in.

Slowly, shaking and weak like a newborn deer, Raz recovered himself just enough to stand up. The assault on his emotions was still all-encompassing and far too much for someone his age to have to face even with his mental defenses keeping it from tearing him apart from the inside out.

She grasped him tightly, as though she were not the one who had pushed him into this hell in the first place. She wrapped her arms around him - protected him from the onslaught of everything horrible that swirled within her husband's mind - and brushed the tears from his cheeks. He was not weeping; it was simply a knee-jerk reaction to feeling so much animosity at once. "Shh, bambino," she cooed, "Focus on me. I'm right here. Do you know where we are, my pet?" She asked him.

Just a minute ago, he hadn't spoken because he had refused. Now, he didn't speak because he found it near impossible.

"Z...Zalto's...mind," he whispered, so airy and quiet that she could almost assume she had only heard the wind blowing in the distance. He curled against her as if that would stop the howling of hatred from all around them, and didn't dare look past her shawl.

"No, my pet," she says, running her fingers down the back of his head, down the nape of his neck, trying to soothe him from the terrible assault he was enduring as they sat there together. "Do you know where we are?"

Yes, it was Zalto's mind, but it was a very distinct scene within his mind - a memory that had grown into something of its own corner of the mental landscape, that existed in perpetuity in the man's mind.

Mithra and Raz sat in the middle of a small, sad little circus.

The boy finally chanced a peek upwards, and his eyes grew wide. It looked so much like his family's own circus when everything was set up in preparation for a show - there were the freakshow displays, and over there was the big top, and further still was the pen for the animals.

With a grimace marring his face, Raz began to lift his head and gazed at this terribly nostalgic, melancholy display.

"...We're...home? What...?"

There was life, here, though it was stiff and exaggerated all at the same time, unnatural in how it seemed to constantly shift and change just outside of the realm of perception.

A man entered, pushing past the furthest tent flaps and entering the center ring, examining how everything was set up in preparation for their show that night, and even though Zalto's animosity still pounded away at his senses, he recognized the man without a moment's hesitation.

Dad.

Razputin's breath caught in his throat. Despite the situation; despite where he knew he really was; despite the overwhelming hatred still trying to consume him, he couldn't help himself.

"Dad!"

He screamed it, grief and shock and relief all mixing into a terrible cocktail, and tried to run straight for the mental man.

Mithra tried to stop him, but he was too quick; she sat there, watching him rush towards the apparition of his father, and knew he would learn eventually—

As Raz approached Augustus, there was this horrible warping sensation that threw his senses out of whack for a moment. The image of his father flickered, then he was gone – appeared in another part of the ring, weighing knives in his hand as he spoke to Frazie.

Neither one of them seemed to notice Razputin.

There was a hand at his shoulder as he came skidding to a halt in the dirt ring, missing his father by mere milliseconds. Mithra had come up behind him, and laid her hand on his shoulders not unlike she'd held him outside the door.

"They're just a memory, Razputin," she told him gently. "They're not real. They don't see you."

"No, that can't be!" He raised his voice, a squeaky little pitch of desperation as he tried to reach his sister next. Once again, it was to no avail. "They can't be memories if I'm in Zalto's mind! He never met them! He doesn't know any of them! Or this!"

Mithra grabbed him before he could wander too far off, pulled him against her and hugged him close. He could see the figure of his mother swinging from the trapeze above them. She was elegant as always, a true artist in her performance, and entirely unaware of the woman cradling her son below.

His mother let go of the trapeze, somersaulting through the air in a flip before flickering out of existence entirely.

A single drop of water fell from the topmost fold of the tent, splashing direction down on Razputin's cheek as Mithra held him at arm's length. Slowly, like a gentle spring rain, the tent drip drip drip dripped down upon them, each splash like the tears of a young child who had lost his entire family to a flash flood that had torn through their circus just a few days ago.

"Oh, bambino," she coos, smoothing down his hair. "You know that's not true."

The middle child of the family had not been with them on that fateful day. He had snuck off for the afternoon to the local town library a few miles away to browse their comic book section, and Nona had been his alibi; telling his parents she had sent him out for fancy scented candles for her if they asked. The flood had hit suddenly and without warning; the town had been unprepared for it and claimed it had come out of nowhere, but most buildings were along a hill

and came out unscathed, including the little boy who ended up trapped in the library for three hours with no choice but to watch helplessly through the window as water tore through the valley below.

Not a single living soul had survived that had been down in that valley.

Razputin stared at the falling rain that started as a sprinkle that became a drizzle that was slowly becoming a storm. Something heavier than lead and worse than the animosity around him began to twist at his heart.

He looked up at his nonnetta, needing to ask but terrified of the answer.

“What...what do you mean, that’s not true...?”

She smoothed down his hair, kneeling in front of him with a maternal look of care in every line of her face. Sympathy, or something close enough to fool the casual onlooker.

“My bambolino,” she told him, “this is the Aquato curse. Your father, mother, and siblings were the last living Aquatos. It was only a matter of time before mia caro’s curse caught up with them.”

But not him, of course. He was her special pet. He was protected from the storm that was brewing under the little tent.

“Of course he had to be there when it happened. He’d waited so long, mia bambino.”

A figure appeared, untouched by the rain as if in a protective bubble. An old, haggard, imposing shadow with a dark cloak and a cane stood in the center of the ring of tents. Dark eyes pierced through Raz’s soul as the sound of screaming began to pick up in the air around them.

No.

No, it couldn't be. This man was cruel and wicked and hateful, but he couldn't have been there to watch like some sick audience member. He couldn't have been anywhere near their camp or the town or his family, or surely Razputin would have felt him! Surely the dangerous, powerful presence that he knew all too well would've given Zalto away!

A wail tore across the circus. His father's wail, rising louder and louder in grief until it disappeared as suddenly as a rock sinks to the bottom of a river.

Zalto smiled.

Razputin screamed.

Water raged around them, but didn't dare touch the visitors. It was like they, too, were protected here, amongst the death and misery and white-hot fury that had claimed six of the remaining Aquatos - that had left Razputin alone, to eventually fall into the hands of the Galochio family.

Mithra kept a firm hold on her great-grandson, to prevent him from rushing into the waters himself. He would be swept away in an instant by her husband's fury. And indeed, that dark figure that stood untouched in the middle of the watery carnage seemed so unlike the other figures that had populated this memory. He seemed aware of the little boy grieving the death of his family there in the middle of the circus.

Seemed aware of the intruder in his mind.

But if Zalto truly knew that this boy had trespassed in the most forbidden of places, he didn't make any move to punish him. In fact, he didn't make any move at all. He simply watched as Mithra clutched the wailing boy close to her chest, smoothing his hair down and cooing reassurance to him as the water rushed around them like a cyclone.

Razputin collapsed, only held up by Mithra's hold on him as he screamed for his family. Grief and pain and helplessness and guilt that he had once successfully stuffed down for almost a year came back up with a vengeance, leaving him sobbing and choking and incoherent within the weaponized hatred still bearing down on him.

A monster. This man was a monster. His great-grandfather was a monster. He had killed six - no, seven people in one fell swoop and had watched it happen gleefully. Young children and teens and parents and a grandmother, all gone forever because of Zalto Galochio.

Raz pressed the palms of his hands into his eyes and bawled.

"Oh, my poor, sweet bambolino," she cooed, holding him close as he collapsed against her, her touch gentle and full of a poisonous kind of care.

Surely, she had known what awaited him in this mind. Surely, she knew what thoughts her husband kept, the moments he cherished. She was his wife, she knew him and everything he held inside himself, and she knew that this terrible moment lived here in his mind. No doubt he had returned home triumphant after watching the deaths of this family that had plagued him for years.

"Do you see, Razputin? These people are gone. Tuoi genitori, your brothers and sisters, all of them. There is nothing left to tie you to these people, bambino. You're with us now. You're safe and loved here."

The child couldn't find words to respond. He could barely even register that she was speaking to him over the torrent of rushing water and his own tears. He buried his face in her shawl as if that might erase the things he'd just seen. The memories and faces and deaths.

His hands pawed at her wrists, and the message couldn't be clearer: I don't want to be here anymore.

She cradled him, and it was hard to distinguish the sound of the water rushing around them from the echoes of screams as the drowned Aquatos tried to reach for each other, tries to escape the torrent.

Mithra stroked his back as he curled up against her, and reached into a pocket adorning her shawls. It was a small capsule, only a few inches long, and decorated. Any well-practiced astral traveler kept their smelling salts accessible when venturing into the minds of others, and Mithra was no exception.

Without a word, she moved Raz away from her shawls, lifting his head and cracking the capsule open under his nose.

He woke up with a gasp. He woke up crying.

Raz was in the real world again; a dim, incense-heavy parlor, filled not with screams and water but with heavy silence. The shock of his waking lasted only a moment before his expression crumpled once more and he curled up on his chair, drawing his knees up to his chest and sobbing into them.

Mithra followed no more than a moment or two behind him. The soft, sad sound of crying was the first thing that reached her senses, before her eyes fluttered open. Razputin sat there before her, curled up at the reading table and sobbing.

She rounded the table, laying her hands on his shoulders with a delicate care.

"Mia caro," she whispered to him. "You're okay. You're safe here, with me."

He curled in on himself further at her touch, unable to reconcile her calm with the horror they'd just witnessed. Unable to reconcile her love for that man with who he truly was.

"W-W-Why?" He blubbered, and it was impossible to know what he was asking. Why she'd shown him that; why Zalto could be so cruel; why so many lives were disregarded as if they weren't people with hopes and dreams and love for each other.

"Because," she told him, "you are an Aquato. You need to understand that they're gone, and that mia caro would want to see the same happen to you. I love you, Razputin," she said, lifting his gaze to her, "so much. So no matter how silly you think it is, you are my bambino. My perfect little boy. And I need you to understand that they're gone."

Razputin met her eyes with tears streaming out of his, and although he knew why - had known why since he was little, when he'd first learned of the Galochio curse - he still didn't understand the carelessness with which they could treat his family, as if they were nothing more than flies.

"But - but, but," he heaved, trying to make her see how evil this was; to see how this damaged so many lives beyond what they thought was necessary. "But my mom - my mom wasn't an Aquato! She didn't have that blood!"

"You can think of her as an unfortunate victim, if you like, caught in the crosshairs of something much bigger than her... but she birthed the next generation of Aquatos. She's just as guilty as your father, and his father before him. No Aquato is innocent, Razputin," she told him, gently thumbing away the tears that stained his cheeks. "Not even you. But I still love you. I'm willing to look past all that, as long as you can behave for your mama."

It seemed for a moment that she had gotten through to him. He fell silent and sniffled, thinking about his mom and his dad and the fate they had suffered. Just like his grandfather Lazarus. And, delayed, just like his -

Raz's eyes widened. His grandmother. Surely Mithra did not blame his grandmother for these things either. Surely she would understand how the curse had happened well after Augustus had been born, and that Marona hadn't deserved the fate she did after her narrow survival in the Valermo Dam Disaster.

"Even...even my Nona?"

She looked down at him, his face held delicately in her grip, washed over by a wave of confusion that didn't make it to her eyes. His nona? There had only been six of them there that day, when the final tidal wave had wiped out the rest of the Aquato clan - his father, his mother, and his four siblings. All that remained was him.

"If your poor nona drowned with the rest of the family, that's unfortunate, bambino, but her daughter sealed the fate for the family when she chose Augustus. There's nothing to be done about it."

Razputin had been escorted to the morgue to identify seven bodies after the flood waters had receded. He knew all too well that his grandmother had drowned just as the rest of them - no doubt caught in her own private tent while the rest of the family was practicing for their show.

"No," he shook his head, and his gut clenched at having to spell it out for her. "No, not my mom's mom. Dad's mom. She was swept up in the accident, too."

Mithra's hold on him tightened, almost imperceptibly. The points of her nails pressed against the delicate skin of his cheek, and he could see something horrible pass over her features for a moment, before she finally released him, and moved away entirely, tidying up the mantle and snuffing out the incense.

"Don't be silly," she told him. "Your father's mother died long ago. My daughter, died in childbirth with her little mistake, Augustus. You're mistaken."

Her daughter.

The phrase shot around the inside of his head like a tennis ball, and suddenly Raz had never wanted to be wrong in his entire life more than he wanted to now.

But Nona wasn't like them; she was kind and patient and loving and feisty, and Mithra deserved to know what had really happened to her daughter. Maybe if she knew, she would finally recognize the monster she had for a husband.

"No, I'm not," he repeated, finding the strength somehow to draw himself up in a facsimile of confidence. "Grandma Marona survived that, and she survived the Valermo Dam Disaster when Grandpa Lazarus didn't, and she and my dad moved to the U.S. She's always been with us!"

Mithra's trembling hands ghosted the crystal ball next to the incense. It was a heavy thing, and looked more like something you might see at a bowling alley than an occult shop like this. She laid her hands on it, and listened to Raz as minor tremors wracked her upper body.

It was the name Marona that seemed to break her. Her breathing hitched and trembled just as violently as her hands, and without even looking back at him, some terrible force of energy slammed into Razputin, a bright flash of psychic energy.

He hit the ground hard, the wind knocked out of him and limbs trapped at his side by a psychic claw. It had him pinned to the floor like a mouse under a cat's paw, on his back and helpless as Mithra spun around to face him.

In an instant she was towering over him, gripping the crystal ball from the mantle. There was something wild and unhinged in her eyes, a look of desperate fury that demanded he shut up. "Don't you dare talk about my Marona! You didn't know her! You liar! You bastard!" She sucked in a frantic breath, and lifted the crystal ball over her head.

He could see it in her, in that split second before she finally let go: the months of tension; hatred burning just as brightly, just as violently as her husband's; a woman possessed by the desire to bash his skull in with that crystal.

And then, just as quickly as she'd raised it, the crystal ball came down with a horrible crash.

There was no time to scream. Raz saw that ball falling toward him and didn't even have the time nor the thought to grab at it psychically before it could land. All he could do was squeeze his eyes shut and wait for what would surely be a fatal blow as she held him in place while the crystal ball came down.

A crash, the impossibly-loud sound of glass shattering directly next to his right ear - pain splintered across his face as a thousand tiny pieces of crystal went flying in every direction.

It was by some miracle that none of it hit his eyes.

He gasped in terror and shock, speechless and unable to process anything other than the look on her face before she'd dropped the ball and the feeling of warm liquid seeping down his forehead, his cheeks, his right temple.

His heart pounded in his ears, grateful to still be beating.

Once the glittering cascade of shattered crystal had fallen quiet, the only sound in the room was Mithra's labored breathing. Her chest heaved, the rest of her carved from stone as she loomed over him, looking down at her near-victim.

There was a fury boiling within her, but he was alive. She hadn't broken her toy, as much as she had wanted to in that moment, but he was damaged now. She didn't care. The parlor felt claustrophobic; his words had wormed their way into her skull, his insistence, the name of her daughter from his lips... She needed to breathe. She couldn't breathe, and she felt hot tears stinging at her eyes.

She swallowed, blinking rapidly to push down the swell of grief and emotion that had tried to claw its way up her throat. She stood straight, and Razputin felt the claw ease its pressure, releasing him amidst a minefield of glittering shards.

“Go to your room,” she told him stiffly. “It’s time for bed.”

He fled like a wounded bird taking flight, holding his bloodied face and running out of the parlor like his life depended on it.

And really, he had realized, it probably did.

Guillelmina had been getting ready to head upstairs for bed when she heard the shattering, and had rushed to the parlor to see if everything was okay - or if she could help clean up whatever had broke.

Before she could reach the parlor, the door separating each parts of the house burst open, and out rushed Razputin. She jumped aside as he rushed upstairs, and – was that–

“Guillelmina,” Mithra called, and she locked gazes with her great-grandmother. “Be a dear. Fetch the dustpan and clean this up, will you bambina?”

She had a great-grandson to tend to.

Raz didn’t see his cousin in his blind terror. He took the stairs two at a time and stumbled into his room just in time for the panic attack to hit. His hands shook as he tried to stop the way his vision tunneled and his breathing picked up to dangerous levels.

She had just tried to kill him. His great-grandmother had almost killed him, and he couldn’t even say whether it was an accident that the crystal ball did not hit him directly.

There was a small handheld mirror on his nightstand, and he zeroed in on it. Red glinted off its surface as he picked it up with trembling, blood-stained fingers. His reflection stared back with wide haunted eyes and countless little cuts.

He needed something to do. Anything to bring his mind back down and away from what had just transpired.

Razputin fell to his knees on his room’s floor and began painfully trying to pull shards of glass out of his face.

Guillelmina watched as their nonnetta began to climb the stairs, and the only thing that kept her from following was a sudden fear that Mithra’s apparent fury would only be stoked if she were to follow. She’d asked Mina to clean up the broken glass, and as she crouched over the mess and began sweeping the largest shards into the dustpan, she couldn’t help but notice the streaks of blood the brush left behind. There was not a lot of it, but it was noticeable, and it made her sick to her stomach knowing that Mithra was going after him.

She didn’t bother knocking. She simply turned the knob and entered.

“Razputin. Fermarsi. Hands down.”

He froze, hearing her voice and seeing her standing behind him through the mirror. Trembling like a leaf, his hands came off his face. The action was involuntary; self-preservation taking hold over conscious thought.

He didn't turn to look up at her.

She came up behind him, and plucked the mirror from his hands, laying it on the bed beside her as she took him by the wrist and into the bathroom between his room and Guillelmina's. She sat him carefully on the edge of the bathtub, turned the big lights on, and gripped his chin, angling his face to get a better idea of where to start.

And with delicate hands and a pair of tweezers, Mithra wordlessly began to clean him up. Any stray shards removed, warm washcloth passed over each little cut, and a steely, displeased gaze through every delicate movement. Neither of them said a word.

He held perfectly still for her - either a bid for recapturing some facade of calm within the thick tension between them, or out of fear that even the slightest movement would be perceived as disobedience and trigger her wrath again.

The only indication of his ongoing panic was the rapid, fluttery heartbeat in his chest.

The right side of his face was torn up, having received the full brunt of the ball's shattered pieces. Most notable were three larger-than-usual cuts in his cheek and one that ran a ragged, vertical dash down his right eyebrow. Just an inch lower and he very well could have lost a lot more than blood.

She was upset with him, that much was clear. Not because of the attempt on his life, no, that had come and gone. But she wasn't even speaking to him, now. She wasn't cooing her reassurance or rubbing gently at his back. She simply removed the glass, disinfected each cut with peroxide on a cotton swab, without even seeming to care that it stung, and moving onto the next cut.

She was fixing her doll. That was all.

When it was done and the bleeding had stopped, Mithra put everything away and brought him back into the bedroom. “Pajamas. Ora.”

The boy didn't need to be told twice. He scrambled for his clothes, and only hesitated a single second as he saw Mithra still standing in the room with him before sucking it up and starting to change.

She stood there in his doorway - silent, distant, detached as she watched him unseeingly. She was far away, at the grand Grulovian Circus the day she had received word that her daughter was dead. Her precious Marona, her baby. Gone, killed by the bastard child that Lazarus had put in her.

This boy... this boy was a liar. He had to be. He had to be, because the alternative was too terrible to bear.

Without a word, she grabbed Razputin's arm, brought him to the bed, and had him sit.

With three quick and none-too-gentle taps to his forehead, his eyes rolled back in his skull, and he was asleep. By some miracle, the boy had survived, but any semblance of his privacy would die that night.

As she left the room and her unconscious little doll, fleeing to her son's room to ask for his help, Mithra made a decision.

There would be no more secrets.

The woman who was not his Nona was back.

Razputin sat on his circus ball, holding perfectly still as water lapped gently at it from all around him. The tent was dead silent, and he would have thought he was alone.

But she was there, just past the threshold of the dark, and they stared at each other without sound.

The waves between them began to swirl. It rose like a tiny tornado, and the woman's eyes glowed. A head formed from the water, followed by two beady eyes and long, glinting fangs.

A snake. A snake made of water.

Razputin didn't move.

It did not take much convincing for Ignazio to help her. Of all of her children, he had it out for Razputin the worst. Like father like son, she supposed, but she knew that if Zalto helped her with this, the boy might not survive at all. It was going to be delicate, and difficult - moreso now that her own mind was in turmoil.

No, no. Ignazio was perfect for the job.

Razputin was already subdued - sound asleep in his bed when mother and son came to fetch him. With a quiet work and a tap to his cheek, he moved mechanically, following her every order, just as it always should have been. She realized now she'd been too lenient with him, given him too much autonomy. He'd been so entertaining... but he was just a doll. He wasn't meant to be anything more. She saw that now, and she would fix her mistakes.

Quietly, Mina listened to the footsteps outside her bedroom. It had been a sick sense of something horrible that stuck up the gears of her mind like molasses that had woken her, and the quiet muttering in the dead of night had alerted her that something, indeed, was terribly wrong.

There was no mistaking what had happened earlier. The blood on the floor, the shattered crystal, her cousin's fear and Mithra's cold detachment. She'd thought he'd been exaggerating,

but the rational part of her was hyperaware now. There was no denying it - Mithra had come within a few measly inches of killing him, that day.

And as she crept out of her room to see Raz's door open and her family marching him down the stairs like a man on death row, that same rational part of her knew that they weren't finished with him.

The snake slithered almost lazily in a circle around the ball, but Raz only had eyes for the woman in the shadows. The tent walls began to sway back and forth in some kind of rhythm, and he knew, somehow, that he was no longer simply laying on his bed in the real world.

But he couldn't think about that while this greater threat was still before him. Her gaze bore into his soul as she opened her mouth for the very first time.

"Do you know what I am?"

Her voice sent a shiver down his spine.

"No."

Mithra brought him into the parlor, the incense left untouched and the glittering crystal shards long ago swept up by their youngest. The world was quiet as she gave her son instructions.

Razputin didn't fight as Ignazio held his arms behind his back and wrapped one strong arm around his neck in a chokehold, keeping him still. The boy was blank - awake but asleep, completely unaware of his surroundings and his situation.

She wasn't even sure if he could feel her press her fingers to his temple.

Razputin blinked, and she was inches from his face. Her fingers came up to touch almost lovingly at his temples.

The woman smiled.

"You will."

The tendrils of Mithra's power snaked into his head, wrapping around his brain. She felt the resistance of his mental defenses, the self-preservation of his sanity. He was armored like a tank, her husband had told her, after their first session together, and Mithra had taken it to heart - but even a tank could be broken.

Her power snuck its way into his addled, hypnotized mind, and pried at the seams of his defenses. Inch by inch, it was like a cloud of haze settled over his mind. It was invasive and weird, but Mithra had no intention of stopping until his mind was as open and vulnerable as possible - until those mental defenses were utterly gone.

The water rumbled. The tent began to collapse.

Nails dug into his temples. He couldn't move his arms. He gasped, and it felt like he could barely breathe.

The woman's smile grew sharper, but her hands dissolved into mist even as the touch pervaded at his face. He tried to stop it, tried to jerk out of this terrible, invisible grip to no avail. Light began to stream through the ceiling of the big top as fabric tore and ropes snapped and poles broke.

He looked up at that light, desperate for escape -

He woke up to incense and hands on his face. Something was worming its way into his mind and leaving cracks in its wake, invasive and uncomfortable.

He cried out and started to struggle to get it to stop.

Ignazio's hold on him was absolute; his hands behind his back and the chokehold around his throat kept him from gaining too much leeway as Mithra loomed over him, her fingers against his temple and her destructive power creeping through him like a plague.

"Shh," she cooed, as more and more of his defenses were pried away from his mind, "You're okay, pet. Don't fight it. I'm not going to hurt you, my love..."

But oh, that was a lie.

And he knew it. It didn't hurt, but every instinct in him was screaming to get away and make it stop before it could do anymore damage. His legs kicked empty air as he fought to escape.

"Stop!" He cried, trying and failing to jerk his head out of her grip. "What are you doing?! Please, stop!"

"No more secrets, bamolino," she told him, feeling his mental defenses crumble away like dust. "I'm going to fix everything. No more secrets... mia piccola Marona... you don't need this. These... walls, are the reason you got hurt. These secrets are the reason I lost my temper. My little doll... you don't need them."

It was destructive, but no - it didn't hurt. But it was still a horrible, unbearable thing to endure as she stripped away a part of him, leaving him vulnerable like an open wound.

His mental defenses was what he'd started with; how he first knew for certain that he could be a powerful psychic someday, worthy even of the Psychonauts. He knew they were beyond naturally strong for his age, and he'd counted on them to protect his thoughts and secrets and emotions through foster care and among the Galochios.

Now, thoughts were beginning to slip through the widening chasm of his mind like sand falling between fingers, floating around the room for even the most inexperienced of psychics to hear if they so pleased.

It's weird stop please I don't like this I don't want this stop it I don't understand I'll listen I'll be good please stop why are you doing this it's wrong it's awful stop

"I know you'll be good, mia caro," she cooed to him. Her voice was gentle, her touch delicate. She could feel his thoughts slipping past his defenses. She did stop - once she was satisfied with the result. His thoughts were bleeding out like a hemorrhage, but he would learn how to control that soon enough. He's never had to keep his own thoughts from reaching others - he's inexperienced, but she will teach him. "Be still. Be still," she whispered to her struggling little doll.

Because this is the state of his mind now - open, vulnerable, nothing hidden from his superiors, anymore. Every thought and fear and memory accessible. And it did not matter what he wanted. What he felt, in that moment. Because Ignazio had a firm grip on the little brat, and Mithra was determined to crack him like an egg.

But in that singular moment of desperate thought that crept up on every Galochio in the house, Guillelmina had frozen in fear at the bottom of the stairwell.

Tears flowed as freely as every thought in his head. He could feel the damage spreading, going beyond an open wound into a full obliteration of his mental walls, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. No matter how he pleaded out loud or within, no matter how he struggled against his great-uncle's iron grip, he couldn't keep her from doing irreparable harm.

Mithra's whispered command combined with a precise few taps at his neck, and suddenly he could no longer kick frantically. His legs felt like lead and his arms, still restrained, went limp.

Even as Ignazio felt him go limp, he did not relinquish his grip on the boy. It wasn't a kind hold, with his arm around Razputin's neck to hold him still, but that was kind of the point. He was small and fragile and the only thing that kept him from inflicting real harm was the promise of his mama's disappointment.

It felt like an eternity for the young boy before his great-uncle finally released him, leaving him limp and barely standing under his great-grandmother's influence.

"There we go," she whispered to him, wiping the stray tears from his cheeks as she slowly allowed him back in his own body. "Don't worry, bambolino. It's for your own good."

No. No, no, no, I don't believe you!

Razputin's thoughts betrayed him completely. He closed his eyes with a flinch when she touched him, still feeling the phantom pain of a hundred glass shards sprinkling against his skin.

Don't touch me, I'm scared!

He didn't know how to stop his thoughts from reaching everyone in this room - everyone in this house. He didn't know how to change them so that they didn't share the truth of his turmoil for her and Ignazio and whoever else might be listening to use as ammunition to tear him apart further.

"He's scared, mama, he's scared!" Ignazio jeered softly, and then snorted derisively. "Good. You should be. Che patetico."

“Oh, don’t listen to him, mia caro,” she cooed. “You’re perfectly safe. I’m not going to let anything happen to my little doll, now, am I?” she said, gently petting his left cheek, free from cuts from earlier that evening. “You’re done, now, my love. Time for bed, si?”

Sleep meant being put under, where he’d be even more helpless. Sleep meant waking up tomorrow to face the family and bleeding every “bad” thought and feeling all over their picture-perfect Galochio livelihoods, where he would surely be punished.

Sleep meant another night and day in this hell, with the newfound knowledge that the only person who had given him any comfort and respite was just as terrifying and dangerous as Zalto himself.

He hadn’t stopped crying, but a fresh wave of tears trickled down his face at the thought of her betrayal; of the realization that his situation was so, so much worse than he could have imagined.

As far as Mithra was concerned, nothing at all had changed. He had revealed a terrible, horrible secret, and he was one step closer to being put to sleep forever, but until he crossed that point of no return, she would continue to love and coddle him like she had for the past several months. Was it all a facade? Maybe. But it was as real as anything, facade or not.

She thanked her son for his help before pushing at Razputin’s shoulderblades, guiding him back to his room. His gait was uncertain and clumsy like a newborn deer, hesitant where every step was not his own.

When they reached the bottom of the stairwell, a bedroom door upstairs quietly and carefully shut, fearful that its occupant would be caught sneaking.

Everything felt off-kilter. His ability to walk was in no way tied to his mental defenses, but with such an integral part of his powers now gone, it was like he had lost a limb. Only Mithra’s influence ensured he made it upstairs without losing his footing.

They walked down the hallway back to his room, and he let out a quiet, mournful sob as they passed the master bedroom where his great-grandfather was still sleeping. He had wondered why someone as caring as Mithra had ever married such a cruel individual.

Now, he knew, and he wished he didn’t.

With the deed done and her little bambolino one step closer to being nothing more than a living doll for her to coo over and dress up, she sent him off to bed again.

She got him in bed and laid him down, but the gentle tapping to his cheeks did not put him to sleep this time. That was on him, tonight, to settle himself down in this new state enough to drift off into sleep. All she did was leave him there, unable to move from the bed as though he were held down by heavy chains. He had enough leeway to shift and toss, enough leeway to turn on his side as he watched her click his lights off and linger at the door for a goodnight - but not enough to run like he so desperately wanted to.

“Goodnight, Razputin,” she told him sweetly.

“I love you.”

And with that, she was gone.

Razputin didn't move until her footsteps disappeared down the hall. He held his breath and tried in vain to hold his thoughts until he thought she had settled in for the night, but he could barely last 30 seconds before he started frantically fighting the invisible weights keeping him pinned to the bed.

His thoughts drizzled through his room like a swell of rain.

Get up get up get up, you have to get up you gotta get out of here! Come on!

How panicked he was, how desperately he wanted to move from the spot Mithra had left him in, none of it mattered. With the way his mind had been blown open, there was nothing to protect him from Mithra's hypnotic influence. There wasn't a single command he would be able to fight, now, and certainly not one as important as his obedience. His complacency in the cruel things the Galochios did to him.

It was only going to get so much worse, from here on out.

Get up get up get up, you have to get up you gotta get out of here! Come on!

Guillemina clapped her hands over her ears and curled up in her own bed. She tried desperately to block it out, to think of anything else other than her cousin's terror and frustration in the next room, but with her little mental defense she had by nature - and by nurture - it was impossible to keep his thoughts out of her head.

Before long, Razputin's bedroom door creaked open again.

He froze with his knees half-bent and his head barely off his pillow. He couldn't see in the dark who had opened the door, and his heart beat terribly loud in his chest.

He didn't make a sound, and his thoughts went from coherent words to a scared flicker of trepidation.

There was no light on in the hallway, no silhouette to calm his fear. The figure, unseen in the dark, slipped into the room and closed the door behind them. If it had been just a few minutes later, maybe Raz's eyes would have had adjusted to the dark - but as it were, those few moments of uncertainty were gut-wrenching.

And then the light was flicked on.

It was just her. Just Guillemina, standing there against the door, hands held close to her chest as she watched him struggle against the bed as though something were holding him down.

She didn't move any closer to him, but that terrible question was clear in her wide, frightened eyes.

What happened to you?

Relief that one of his adult tormentors hadn't returned hit so hard that his head fell back onto the bed and a long sigh left his lungs. His eyes, however, never strayed from hers.

I - I'm not supposed to talk to you, he thought, and then grimaced. It was clear he hadn't actually meant to send that her way.

Now that she was finally getting a good look at him, there was no denying what had happened in the parlor that evening. Angry marks ran along the right side of his face, patternless like scattered freckles. They were no longer bleeding, but it would take a few days for the evidence to disappear from his skin.

He seemed to be painfully aware of it, because he curled in on himself as she stared, as if ashamed.

"Then don't," she whispered. Clearly, he didn't have to talk to her for them to communicate. Whatever... she swallowed thickly, and plowed through the thought. Whatever they'd done to him, he was perfectly capable of thinking to her without issue.

As though she'd finally gathered the courage, she took two tentative steps forward, hands still clasped to her chest. Even as he tried to curl away from her to hide what had been done to him, she could still see it - the angry red streaks across his face, one dangerously close to his right eye. She swallowed thickly, observing him like a wounded animal she feared would lash out any moment.

"What happened in the parlor, before?" She asked him. She knew she would get her answer, whether or not he wanted to share it. He was in no state to be hiding anything, and it was impossible to not think about something when asked. "What did nonnetta do to you?"

Unfortunately for both of them, Raz was a powerful psychic even without his mental defenses. Re-lived terror flickered in his eyes, and in the very next moment a series of images passed unbidden from his head to hers.

Mithra whirling around from her table like a striking snake, and the sudden sensation of being knocked down and pinned to the ground. This woman, who had only ever given a facade of gentleness and calm, standing over him with a crystal ball raised and looking like an angel of death, her face contorted in rage.

The ball falling.

She gasps and squeezes her eyes shut, throwing her arms over her head as though that meager barrier would keep his thoughts from bombarding her. It was useless, of course, and she staggered helplessly, trying not to collide with anything - knowing that if any of the adults found out she was in here, they would both be in trouble.

She sucked in a terrified little breath as the images stopped, the ear-splitting shattering of glass like a memory from a dream as his thoughts mingled with hers. She looked up at him after a moment - there was fear in her young face, and disbelief. A part of her wanted to call him a liar... but she wasn't even sure he could lie, right now. Not with how vulnerable his mind was.

"She... she wouldn't do that," Mina said, but there was no conviction to her voice. "She... nonnetta... loves us... you're her bambino... b-bambolino..."

The expression on his face said it all - he wouldn't have believed it either, if not for the throbbing of the cuts against his skin and the blown dam that was his mental barriers. There was no denying it at that point; no pretending it didn't exist when it was laid before both of them in such gruesome, honest terms.

I thought she was safe, he whispered, and it was clear that this was a thought he wanted her to hear. I - I thought she wouldn't hurt me. I'm so scared...

She didn't know what to do. He was struggling like he was pinned down - something clearly wasn't right, and if she had to guess, it was because Mithra had left him like this on purpose. His caseworker had told the family that he was a runner - he'd run away from three different homes in foster care, and they were expecting him to run from here, too, she'd overheard the man tell nonno.

He'd told the caseworker that wouldn't be a problem.

"She..." She's not going to hurt you, is immediately on her lips, but it's a lie and she knows that now. His cuts are proof of it, no matter how much she wants to say otherwise. "She... must have been real angry with you, is all," she whispers, knowing as the words pass her lips that it's a terrible excuse.

She doesn't know what else to say.

Raz's fingers curled into fists. His fingernails bit hard into the skin of his palms.

"You liar! You bastard!" Mithra had screamed at him before making an attempt on his life. And then, just a little while ago...

"These... walls, are the reason you got hurt. These secrets are the reason I lost my temper. My little doll... you don't need them."

She had lost her temper claiming he was lying, when all he had done was tell the truth. How much worse was it about to get, he wondered with a painful twist of his gut, now that every truth and secret he carried would bleed out for the whole family to dig their fingers in.

I have to get out of here, crossed the air between them. I have to get away before I get hurt again, or worse.

"They told us you would try to run away," she tells him, her whisper tense and dripping with apprehension. "They won't let you. Mithra won't let you... you're stuck, aren't you? Right now?"

She's keeping you here..." It wasn't exactly a question, but it was tinged with uncertainty all the same.

"You can't run away." She wrung her hands together, hesitant to speak at all. "But I know a way to make sure you don't get hurt anymore."

Stuck. Such a simple, clean way of saying "trapped." Held against his will. He swallowed and let out a shaky breath. Escape was his number one priority, but if she knew some way to prolong his chance at surviving until that happened...

What...what's that?

Her face twisted up into something miserable. She knew he, of all people, the Aquato who kept fighting them tooth and nail, wasn't going to like this.

"You could... let her put you to sleep. You won't get hurt if she keeps you."

The hesitance in her voice gave it all away - this wasn't a ploy or a taunt. This was, in her mind, the only way to ensure he wouldn't be hurt again.

The room fell clear of her cousin's thoughts at the suggestion. His mind had gone completely blank.

...Put him to sleep?

If he was asleep, he wouldn't have to worry every day about which misstep would turn out dangerous or fatal. But if he was asleep, he had no way to run or defend himself if Mithra or Zalto decided he wasn't worth the effort to keep around.

But even if they never grew tired of him, there was the other, looming question: how long would he remain asleep? Would he even be able to wake himself up, in the state he was in now? Would they ever let him wake back up?

Something wriggled in his mind about that, and he didn't ignore it. For whatever reason, the idea of falling asleep for an indeterminable amount of time set off his instincts in a warning, and he always trusted his instincts.

Guillelmina could hear the entirety of this thought process. He knew it, and hated it, but could do nothing to stop it.

...I have to get out of here, he repeated in lieu of a direct answer. I can't escape if I'm asleep. Please, just, please help me get up, and I can get out.

He was asking her to... what? Help him run away from home?

She wrung her hands together, looking at him laying there in the bed, unable to move for Mithra's orders. She knew that at any moment, one of the adults could come upstairs. That even now, they may be listening to this conversation being broadcast god only knows how far his thoughts were reaching.

He really, truly is desperate to get out of here, she realizes. And worse, he really, truly was in danger of far more than just unkind reprimands. Even in the dim lights, she could see the marks across his face where the shards of crystal had cut him. Mithra had hurt him more than once today.

She swallowed thickly, and Razputin had no choice but to lay there and watch as she slowly shook her head. "I— I can't," she whispered back, taking a half step away from him, back towards the door. She needed to go. She needed to leave this room. Things would be better tomorrow. Things would be okay tomorrow, she was sure of it. Because even if she had wanted to aid in his escape...

...she had no idea how to undo what Mithra had done.

"Don—" The half-word escaped his mouth before he could stop it, and he shut his jaw with a hard click before it could become a full plea. The terror of almost slipping up with his gag order was written all over his face just as much as everything else that had happened just today.

Please don't go! Came through instead, a plea full of desperation and fear. Please don't leave me here! You can say anything you want to me, or, or I can do your chores! Anything you want!

This boy, who held his head up high and refused to bow before the youngest Galochio, who matched her wit and barbs word-for-word with his own and never stooped so low as to ask her to leave him alone or brought his "protector" into it - was begging. Begging for her help. For her mercy.

Guillelmina could feel her heart thundering in her chest, trembling as she froze with her hand on the doorknob. She went still as a statue, barely even breathing as she listened to him beg. She screwed her eyes shut and grit her teeth.

Slowly, she moved, and it felt incredibly surreal, as though she no longer had control of her own body, anymore. Every molecule of her was screaming to just leave, to go to bed, to let things fix themselves like they always did... but instead, her hand slipped from the doorknob, and she moved, mechanically, back to his bedside, where he remained trapped and pinned to the mattress by some unseen force.

"I can't help you," she whispered, every word feeling like tar in her mouth. "I don't know how." She looked at him, something uncertain and hesitant struggling in her eyes. In his desperation to move - to get up - to escape, he'd kicked off the blanket. It lay in a tangled heap around his ankles.

Gently, she grabbed it and pulled it back over him. She had cleaned up his blood from the parlor floor today.

"I'm sorry. Really, I am."

She had cleaned up the mess he'd left, and she was doing it again. Swept away and hidden; out of sight, out of mind, just the way the family preferred.

Just the way he was preferred.

The Aquato boy's body went slack. His head sank back against the pillow as he stared up at what had been his last hope, and as she made her confession while carefully wrapping the blanket back around his shoulders, something left him in the same moment. Something strong that had been fighting to stay burning all this time had finally been doused.

Hope.

It was tragic, how differently they viewed this act. To him, it was being swept away and hidden. Out of sight, out of mind, just the way the family preferred.

To her, it was an act of self-preservation. Don't give them any reason to punish you - any more than they already have. Please and submit and don't raise your head or speak unless spoken to, and survive. For him, these lessons were more important than ever. For him, knowing how to placate could mean life or death. She understood that, now. There was no foster care to go back to. When the Galochios got tired of him, that would be the end.

But even as she replaced the covers over him to hide his desperation and sweep his fears under the rug, she did not leave his bedroom. She didn't leave him alone while he was frightened and hurting.

She curled herself up at the foot of his bed, hugging her knees as she watched him.

Razputin watched the way she sat to stare at him, as if he was a spectacle. A circus freak. A zoo animal.

A pet, a nasty voice whispered in his ear.

He shivered, once, and turned his head away from his cousin. He wouldn't be able to sleep at all tonight, but he could at least try to pretend he was going to until she decided to leave.

He didn't want her to leave.

He turned away from her, and it was another moment after where he heard the gentle thunk of her head resting against the wall his bed was up against. She settled in, watching her circus freak cousin through half-lidded, tired eyes.

They were going to get in trouble, tomorrow. There was no doubt about it. She was out of her room past bedtime, and there would be consequences for that. But Razputin had no choice in the matter. He had no way to force her out, unable to move as he was. When the morning came, this would be on her shoulders, and she would take whatever punishment with grace.

She couldn't help him, but she also couldn't just leave him here.

She was going to stay with him tonight. Just until he fell asleep, she told herself. Then she would sneak back to her room. They might even get away with it.

Ha.

Right.

"Tomorrow will be better," she whispers, in equal measures for her own reassurance as it was for his.

She spoke so quietly, but it still made him curl his fingers so tight his fingernails left marks in his skin. It wouldn't be better tomorrow. After today, nothing would ever be better. He was on borrowed time and no one was safe anymore. No one was ever safe.

A tiny, choked sound like a sob left him, and then he fell silent for the rest of the night.

Guillelmina woke with a start the next morning to the sound of a door slamming. Second floor, not far away; her bedroom door. Immediately, she was on her feet, standing ramrod straight as her father threw open Razputin's bedroom door. Immediately his gaze fell upon her.

"What are you doing in here?" He asked her, a crack in his normal silent stoicism.

She was silent and wide-eyed before her father for a moment, hands behind her back as he stared her down and waited for an answer. She knew she only had precious few seconds before her silence was far too long.

"I had a bad dream," she lied, "and didn't want to wake up you and mama. So... I asked to stay here for a little bit until I felt better, but I... fell asleep on accident. I'm sorry, papa."

Raz had barely drifted off in the early hours of the morning, and it was not nearly enough. He flinched awake, still facing the wall, and didn't dare look back at Zanobi or his daughter.

There was a displeased grunt from Zanobi as he turned his gaze upon the still form of Razputin. "Get up, both of you. Get ready and come downstairs."

With that, he left the children, and Mina let out a breath of relief, her entire body slouching. They'd managed to dodge that bullet, at least. She turned back to her cousin, whose back was still turned to her. Gently, she shook his shoulder. "Can you get up? Should I get nonnetta?" She whispered to him.

He shrank away at her touch, but began trying to get up anyway. With some effort - that seemed more due to his exhaustion than any hypnosis - he was able to sit up.

He didn't look at her as he slowly turned and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Of course he could get up now. It was morning, and the spell was broken just like always. He shouldn't be surprised.

She backed up when she realized he could move again. It seemed Mithra had implanted a very specific set of instructions in his mind. She gave him room, and backed toward the door.

"I'll... see you downstairs," she offered him, softly. It was unlike any way she'd spoken to him in the months he'd been here. It was almost kind.

More than anything, though, it was full of pity.

His eyes flickered up to meet hers only once before dropping back down to the floor. He drew his arms around himself and turned his head away until she left, and it was only then that he wiped his face. His fingers touched scattered marks and he drew in a long, heavy breath.

Time to get ready for a new day.

Both children got dressed without further incident. It seemed Zanobi had bought Guillelmina's excuse, and there would be no punishment for the meantime. At the very least, none of the adults bothered them.

When Razputin finally made it downstairs, he found Guillelmina must have still been getting ready for the day. She was nowhere to be found, and as he emerged into the kitchen, all eyes were on him and the little red marks that peppered the side of his face.

"Good morning, bambolino," came Mithra's sunny song. "Come here, pet, sit with me."

Nervousness curled around him like smoke for everyone to sense as Raz moved stiffly over to where his nonnetta was sitting at the dining room table, already nursing a cup of coffee. He slid into the chair next to her and tried so very hard to keep his mind and thoughts blank to no avail.

There were scowls and jeers as his thoughts bled out into the air for the adults to hear whether he wanted them to or not. Mithra reached over, one hand combing through his hair, the sharp points of her nails raking against his scalp as she angled his face up towards her.

She sighed sharply. "I'm sorry about last night, pet," she tells him. "I didn't mean to lose my temper like that. Oh, look at you..."

Discomfort. Worry. Fear. The constant realization that everything was being broadcast and trying in vain to stop it. He shook almost imperceptibly under her touch.

"It's okay," he said.

It's not okay, he thought.

"Razputin," she cooed, stroking his hair. The other adults watched on like a jury ready to condemn him. "Is that really how you feel, bambolino?"

Which conviction was she talking about? The Galochios sitting at that table could hear everything he said out loud and everything he didn't. He said it was okay when it really, really wasn't. He was a liar.

Mithra hated liars.

"I - I - um - I -" he stammered, feeling the mob surrounding him, ready to condemn him, even though no one had moved an inch. His thoughts seized up in panic and became incomprehensible even to him - his only saving grace.

Zalto took a long sip of his own coffee, sitting across the table from his wife. He seemed utterly disinterested in Razputin's panic, but certainly did nothing to discourage it. The jumbled thoughts were like radio static filtered across the room.

He placed his cup down and looked at Mithra with a business-like composure. "Dico di gettare il suo corpo nel lago e farla finita."

Mithra sighed deeply, an almost resigned sound.

"Razputin," she cooed once more, the patience in her voice merely for show, "I asked you a question."

They're going to kill me.

It came through clearly in his own head and out in the open, and he zeroed in on it to ground himself, as messed up as it was.

They're going to kill me if I don't answer.

He swallowed. The buzzing panic died down in volume by sheer force of will.

"Y...Yes," he whispered, and it finally matched his thoughts. He might die for this confession anyway, but it was not a guarantee like if he didn't respond at all.

"So, the little bastard finally tells us the truth," Zalto said stiffly. "I'm impressed. I didn't know it could do that."

"Razputin," she said to him, "we all had a long discussion about your... accident, yesterday. Those terrible things you said. The way you lied to me." Her hand is no longer in his hair. Instead, it cups his uninjured cheek, and angles his gaze up to her and her alone. He could still feel the glares of the others, burning against him. "And we have decided," she tells him, thumbing just below his left eye, "that you have learned your lesson, and will not keep awful secrets or tell ugly lies anymore. Isn't that right?"

Ignazio scoffed, disgusted. Catalda was dead silent. The various temperaments of the family didn't matter, in that moment. Raz could feel it. Each and every person at that table, save for Mithra, wanted one thing and one thing only.

He was ice cold from head to toe. Memories flickered in his head of last night - the assault, the clean-up, the destruction of his barriers. Somehow, against all odds, he did not lose his voice.

"Yes." It was less than a whisper. He couldn't look away from her. Didn't dare. The skin under his left eye burned at her touch.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes what?" Mithra asked as she angled his face towards her, in a tone that suggested she hadn't heard him - but, oh, he knew better. She'd heard him just fine.

She was just giving him a second chance to get it right.

There was movement out of the corner of his eye - a figure coming into the kitchen who was much smaller than the adults who were all still watching him like sharks.

He didn't even register it.

"Yes, Mama."

The moment he uttered that word, everything about Mithra softened. She smiled down at him and brushed the hair from his eyes, leaning down to press a kiss to his forehead. "My sweet little pet, you'll see. You'll be just fine. I wouldn't let anything happen to you. You know that!" She chirped, sitting straight again as Mina took her place across the table.

She caught Razputin's eye, and the young girl gave him a small smile that was gone just as quickly as it came.

Today would be better.

Right?

Raz felt dirty. He felt like a horrible person with guilt weighing heavily down on his whole body.

It was easy to misinterpret by the entire family, as Mithra touched lightly at one of the cuts on his cheek, making him flinch at the same moment those thoughts trickled out of his mind.

He bowed his head and didn't do much of anything after that. The fight had been hammered straight out of him.

There could all see it, too. The way he submitted without any more fight. He called her mama, in front of the family - something he had refused to do for months. It was an incredible moment of triumph for Mithra, who sat there with a kind, contented smile on her lips as her hand slipped from his cheek. "Good boy," she told him, with the same intonation of someone speaking to a dog.

Then she looked to her husband. "See, mia caro? I told you he would behave."

Zalto didn't even spare the boy a glance, going back to his morning paper with an indifferent scoff. "I suppose even an Aquato can be trained right. Some of the time."

The subject of their conversation did not react to the humiliating words. He simply stared at the grain of the wooden table with exhausted, despondent eyes.

Training an Aquato was sort of like training a sewer rat; even if it could do tricks on command, it was still a pest. Still vermin to be poisoned or have its neck snapped by a spring trap. Zalto had been foolish enough to let an Aquato live in the past, and look what had happened: just like a rat, it had reproduced.

He wasn't going to make the same mistake twice.

But even as Zalto stewed over the best ways to do away with the bloodline, Mithra cooed over him happily. He was finally, finally calling her mama - like she'd deserved all along, mind you - and though yesterday had been... a bit of a rough patch in Razputin's stay with the Galochios, she felt like this was a turning point.

He was finally well-behaved.

And quite frankly, doting over her precious little pet kept her mind off of much more unpleasant things that had recently been dredged to the surface.

It was a turning point.

Razputin had called her mama - would continue to call her mama, from now on. He no longer had anything to hide behind when he was secretly upset or frustrated and was trying to keep it to himself.

But most importantly, that neither Mithra nor Zalto nor the rest of the family even knew yet, was that he'd lost hope. Months of fighting for the sake of his pride, autonomy, and the belief that he would escape from this place had finally been extinguished in one fateful night.

Only one other person knew, and, well, he couldn't even ask her to keep it a secret for him. He wasn't allowed to ask her anything at all.

The only other person who knew was silent at the table that morning. She sat with her hands in her lap and her eyes downcast as she contemplated the previous night. He was fine, sitting right across from her, but she couldn't get the image of him desperate and trapped, the fear in his eyes; the fresh cuts decorating his face and the even fresher anguish pouring out of his mind as his mental defenses were ripped apart.

The utter hopelessness she herself had felt radiating off of him, worming its way into her mind with nowhere else to go and no mental defenses to keep it contained.

No matter how much she didn't like him, no matter the fact that he was an Aquato, Guillelmina desperately wished she'd been able to help him, but she could barely even see the future. What would she have been able to do but sit there with him? To grant him the request of not leaving him alone in such a terrible, vulnerable state and kicking him while he was down.

She wished, in that moment, that she was stronger. Maybe she could have done something to help. But instead, she was just Guillelmina.

There was a look in the boy's eyes the rest of the day - or perhaps, a lack of a look was a better way to put it. It was like the vibrant green had dulled just a little bit. He moved around the house like a zombie, and only reacted when someone snapped for him or some stray thought got a little too loud and had someone snapping at him.

He looked detached. He looked distant. He almost looked hypnotized.

Guillelmina tried desperately to stick around him that day, to keep an eye on her despondent cousin while she wasn't doing chores or working on her lessons with Ornella. She never said anything to him, but she was sure to stay with him, careful to keep her distance, in hopes of offering some kind of comfort to the young boy who desperately begged her to help him escape.

Eventually, they were told to go upstairs and occupy themselves while the adults took a client. Without a word, she grabbed Razputin by the sleeve and they headed up to get out of everyone's way.

There was a very powerful spike of anxiety as she grabbed him, and the moment they were upstairs he pulled away from her, tucked his hands under his armpits, and began traipsing like a wraith down the hall towards his room.

She followed him close behind, still without a word. The adults didn't really care what they did up here as long as they stayed out of the way; they were too focused on the act of impressing the clients to care if the kids were mingling.

She pushed him between the shoulderblades towards his room, shoving him in and following before he had the chance to protest, shutting the door behind her as she listened for signs of the adults' displeasure.

When none came, she let out a long sigh, and looked up at Raz.

He looked back at her, unreadable, before sitting down at the little writing desk that didn't actually have anything useful for writing. He pointedly avoided looking anywhere near his bed or the window, and avoided her gaze.

Are you here to gloat?

She could gloat. She had a lot to gloat about, these days. It would be easy to mock him for being a mama's boy, for finally bending to Mithra's incessant insistence that he call her mama and let her coo over him.

But the very thought of it made her feel sick.

She moved quietly to his bed, sitting down at the edge of it.

"I'm not here to gloat. Nonetta h—hurt you," she said softly, as if she feared the very words leaving her lips. "Why would I gloat over that?"

Why wouldn't you?

It flitted into her head so matter-of-factly. She was a Galochio, and he was an Aquato. He was the family charity case; the pity adoption that was only here because their great-grandmother wanted someone to dote on and play with.

It seemed pretty clear cut to him.

She looked at him funny for a moment as she took in exactly what he was saying. Not only did he think she had some hidden motive behind this, he thought that hidden motive involved getting the attention of Mithra Galochio. She frowned gently, a guarded irritation crossing her face.

"This isn't about nonnetta's attention. This is about the fact that she nearly bashed your skull in and nonno wants to drown you. You were right, okay? If you disappear, it's not gonna be because they sent you back to foster care."

She stressed her outstretched hand between them.

Well?

Raz blinked in shock as she admitted he was right. He'd never expected that admission in a million years about anything from her. This was serious. She was serious.

Hesitantly, he reached out and his hand closed carefully around hers in the most awkward handshake of both their lives. Disbelief still warred with acceptance within him.

Mina pulled a face, grimacing hard as she realized just how crucial a skill mind reading would be for him. Without a word, Mina perked up, moving to the window and peering out past Razputin's blinds to see a car pull up the dirt path that led to their house. That was the client.

Within a few minutes, the Galochio family would be putting on their show - and they would all be too busy to spare a thought for the two kids they left upstairs. Mina darted away, the client catching no more than a glimpse of the little girl in the window before she was back at Raz's side, pulling him away from the door, into the center of the room.

"I'm gonna teach you, okay?"

O-Okay... He stood there awkwardly, unsure of what to do with himself and not entirely certain this wasn't some kind of trick. Even if she was genuine, they would be getting in a lot of trouble for doing something like this.

He barely managed to keep himself from thinking about it, and kept his eyes on his cousin.

She looked at him, pausing as he tried to reign in his thoughts. They'd have to work on that next, because nothing was more dangerous for him than broadcasting his every thought to the people who wanted to hurt him. But for now, she capitalized on his inability to control his thoughts.

"That! What you're doing right there, trying to pull in your thoughts, I can feel it. That's how you read minds, but you have to do it to other people's thoughts. You have to think what they're thinking."

Think what other people were thinking?

It sounded like an impossible task. If you didn't know what someone was thinking, you couldn't just guess until something ended up right. That was how it sounded to him, at least.

With a skeptical tug at the corner of his mouth, Raz closed his eyes and tried to picture what she meant, focusing on her.

It sounded like an impossible task - and for most people, it was. But they were psychics. And more than that, they were Galochios. They were natural-born psychics. Even if he was part of the Aquato family, he still had proper psychic blood in him. He could do this.

"Pull it in, what I'm thinking," she whispered, "just like you're trying to do, but not to yourself."

That's all you have to do.

It's easy!

His eyes snapped open. He stared at her incredulously, and it was hard to tell whether it was because he had successfully read her mind or because she was encouraging him.

You...you're being so nice? It was stated less as a question and more of a statement of shock.

"Only because being a jerk isn't gonna help you learn how to read minds," she told him, flippantly, "and you really need to learn how, now. I'm going to try and keep you out of trouble, until we can figure out what to do about... you."

No offense. Mostly.

Raz made a face, but no mean thoughts drifted to the surface. Either he was finally figuring out how to keep them at bay or he truly wasn't thinking anything awful about his cousin.

He gave a tired sigh and nodded instead, then closed his eyes again to continue working at it.

With the client downstairs, they had their privacy. They would have to be very, very careful to maintain it, but for the time being their little lessons in psychic powers that Mina barely had a grasp on were working.

They were both utterly silent; neither of them spoke so much as a single word, sitting together on the floor of Razputin's bedroom and focusing on sending and receiving thoughts as clearly and discreetly as they possibly could. Because if the adults ever found out they were talking to each other like this in secret, there would be hell to pay for both of them.

One more than the other, of course, but Guillelmina tried to suppress that thought

Half an hour later, the sound of a car starting up outside made them both jump and stop their practice abruptly. Raz's lips thinned, but he gave his cousin a grateful look.

Thank you.

She sits ramrod straight, eyes wide open as she hears the car leave and their mental connection suddenly severed. She scurries over to the window once more to watch the car pull away before finally turning back towards her cousin.

Don't mention it, she tells him. Seriously. If you do, we're gonna get in trouble.

He swallowed. I know.

The hardest part would be keeping his mind off of it until Mithra deemed it necessary to teach him how to keep his thoughts from bleeding everywhere. But he was already starting to figure that out on his own, just a little bit, so he desperately hoped it would be enough.

You should probably go before someone catches you in here.

She gives him a long, concerned look. She, too, knows how hard it will be for him to keep his thoughts in his head, and she knows how dangerous it will be for them. If the adults catch them sneaking around and talking in secret, they'll assume the worst.

And the punishment will be much worse for him than it will for her.

Quietly, she gives him a nod and turns back to the door. He was right about that, at least. If they didn't want to get caught, she would have to go back to her room and pretend like nothing at all had happened between them.

Razputin trailed after her, stopping in the doorway to watch her move almost reluctantly down the hall. He continued to stand there, knowing that he would be called soon so that Mithra and whoever else worked with the customer gave a rundown of the encounter, expecting him to retain it to replicate in lessons later.

Going back into his room was pointless, and he didn't want to be anywhere near the adults downstairs until it was explicitly commanded. So he stood in the threshold and waited like a little lost spirit caught between the living world and the afterlife.

His suspicions were correct; soon after the car pulled away from the house, Mithra was singing up the stairs for him, the musical lilt to her voice barely masking an impatience that truthfully hadn't been there just two days prior.

She was still upset.

His hands twitched at his sides, and he winced. It did not take long for the matriarch to see her bambolino's eyes peer owlishly at her as he descended the stairs.

Despite the impatience in her voice, her eyes were soft and kind as she saw him peer over the banister, moving slowly. "Come here, pet," she insisted, her arms open for him.

It was a trick. It had to be. She was still upset with him, and this gentle kindness was a facade.

Right?

He didn't know what to believe anymore. He didn't know what to trust anymore, and that was so much worse than if she was as openly spiteful as the rest of her family.

Raz reached the bottom of the stairs and gingerly sidled up to her, never taking his gaze off her face as he let her pull him close.

She wrapped her arms around him, hugging him close. She pressed a kiss to his cheek - the one free of cuts. "No lessons today, pet. No chores, either. I just want to spend time with you. We're going out today. Doesn't that sound nice?" She brushed his bangs from his eyes, with a gentle smile.

'Going out' meant being put to sleep for the entire trip without fail. 'Going out' didn't happen when Razputin was conscious, "for his own safety." 'Going out' meant lost time and disorientation and maybe two new shirts and a shiny new wall decoration he wasn't allowed to touch showing up in his room.

But 'going out' only happened when Mithra was in such a good mood as to want to bring him along. When she put her arms around him, despite the gentleness of her hold, he felt it.

Subtle tension.

His mouth was dry when he spoke. "Yes.....Mama. That - sounds nice."

She hummed happily, and pulled him in, sitting on the steps with him for a moment as she pressed a kiss to the top of his head. He was ten, but he was also this slight little thing, perfect for holding and fawning over. "You know I love you, don't you, bambino? I'm sorry about yesterday," she told him. "I didn't mean to lose my temper like that, pet, but, oh, you just struck such a terrible nerve, sai?" She combed through his hair as she held him.

A jumbled mess of reactionary thoughts came up around them both, try as he did to keep them down. But the event was still too fresh in his mind to be ignored when brought up.

You tried to kill me!

I'm so scared...

I don't know what to trust anymore.

His lips pressed together so tight they went white. He didn't dare say a word out loud to contradict any of the damning things she'd just heard from him.

There was no reaction from Mithra as those thoughts floated unbidden between them. She simply endured them, watching him patiently. Gently, she raised a hand to his cheek, thumb grazing gently at one of the smaller cuts on his cheek. "My love," she said softly, looking down at him. Her index finger tapped once at the hinge of his jaw. "You don't have to be scared, my little bambolino. You have nothing to be afraid of. Let mama sooth your worries..." she cooed.

Her words, combined with her gentle touch, seemed to melt his stress away. The thundering of his heart slowed, the ceaseless pounding against his ribs fading away into calm. It felt like a sedative - the world was far away as she calmed him, and she didn't seem to mind the way he sagged in her hold ever so slightly.

Everything felt...soft. That was the only way he could describe it. Soft and quiet, like doing Mirtala's hair in the early morning before a show or helping his Nona patch outfits in the evening while on the road. Soft and quiet and warm, somehow.

Raz let out a long breath through his nose and leaned into the arms cradling him. This felt nice. He missed this feeling. Why had he been upset before?

"That's better, my love," she whispered to him, as he leaned into her hold. She wrapped her arms around him and pressed her cheek to the top of her head. She was gentle and smelled strongly of home - that same faint scent that had lingered on his nonna.

"Isn't this nice?" She asked him. "I can keep you like this. Just like this... calm and happy and awake. You want to stay awake, don't you, pet?" She lifted his chin to look up at her. "Do you think you can behave if we keep you like this?"

Behave...he had been misbehaving? Was that why he'd been upset? Was that why she'd been upset? Oh, that wasn't good. He needed to apologize. But she was also asking him if he wanted to stay awake.

He wanted that. He couldn't remember why, but he knew he wanted that.

"Wanna stay 'wake..." He murmured. His eyes locked onto hers, but they were clouded. "Won't be, bad. Promise. Sorry."

His world began and ended in the warm, distant image of her smile. She stroked his hair, seeing how clouded his eyes were and reveling in such a wonderful display of her own power.

"Oh, I know you are," she whispered to him. "I know you didn't mean to make me so angry," she wrapped her arms around him once more. "And I forgive you, pet. We'll go together, si? You and me, away from the house for a day, just like this. It sounds nice."

She stood up, and held her hand out for him to take.

It did sound nice. It sounded so nice. He was always cooped up in the house, never allowed to leave, and it was so hard to deal with. Going out seemed like such a wonderful, luxurious thing to do. It was a privilege he wasn't going to let go of.

Raz got to his feet, just a little unsteady as he found his limbs were just a tad bit heavier than he remembered them ever being. He giggled as he swayed; the sound was like a rare chime. The boy took his nonnetta's hand and gave her a smile obscured in the haze of hypnosis.

He was a sweet little thing, only half-conscious in this state of hypnotic sedation. She couldn't help but chuckle in return, taking his hand and walking at his pace towards the front door, where she grabbed her purse and her coat, and led him to the car.

He was so young, so trusting under her influence - she knew that he would wake up later and feel the cold chasmic emptiness of having been tricked. Spending all this time with her believing that he was safe and loved, unable to truly recall anything that would cause him distress. He

was going to spend a day out and about with the woman who had nearly killed him, and completely unaware of it.

Raz paused as he was climbing into the backseat of the car. One of the curtains in a second-floor window had been pulled back, and he squinted to see familiar black curls on a tiny silhouette. Oh, his cousin. She probably wanted to come, but Nonnetta seemed to want this to be just the two of them today.

Maybe next time.

He waved up at the window with a sunny little smile, then pulled the car door shut behind him.

By the time Mithra realized that Razputin was waving at someone and turned to look, the second floor curtain was already back in place, nothing but a gentle sway alerting to the fact that there had been anyone there at all. She frowned gently before getting in as well, adjusting the rear-view so that she could see her dazed and docile little pronipote, the smile returning easily to her.

"Where shall we go today, pet?"

The boy was idly swinging his feet up and down, humming a distracted and aimless tune. Her voice drew his attention.

"I dunno," he said, all smiles. "I don't anything in town, I don't think. Where do you want to go?"

"How about you and I go to the park? There's a lovely little place just on the outskirts of town. Nice, quiet, perfect for an afternoon walk," she hummed. Free from anyone who might ask questions about her little boy's... peculiar behavior.

"Okay!" He was especially excited, now. He loved nature, and sorely missed it. "When we get there, you wanna see how high I can climb a tree?"

Mithra smiled coyly, an idea already forming in her mind as she glanced at him through the rearview mirror. "You know what, pet? I would love to see how high you can climb a tree," she cooed, and for once, it was genuine.

Razputin beamed. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had expressed interest in his physical talents. Even before the Galochios, most of the foster homes and social housing he'd been placed in had been very strict about not doing anything "risky" and he was always berated or seen as a weirdo for what he could do.

But now he had someone who wanted to see him do it! Surely she was going to be so impressed by his abilities! Maybe he couldn't quite go all out if he was still unsteady by the time they got there, so no hopping from one tree to another, but climbing the tallest one for her would be a piece of cake.

He giggled again and leaned back in his seat, watching the world pass by through the window, outside of his reach.

She hummed, loving the look of enthusiasm in his young features. She really was looking forward to watching him climb a tree at the park - but she was much more interested in what was going to happen when he finally came down.

"Now, my pet, you have to promise me you'll be careful," she sang. "All that acrobat nonsense is dangerous, and I would hate for my bambolino to get a scratch." Any more than he already had, of course.

But those couldn't be helped.

"I'll be careful!" He replied instantly, confidence and pride shining in his half-aware eyes. "I was the best climber in the whole family. I never fall! You don't have to worry about me!"

"oh, my pet," she sighed happily, "I'm your mama. It's my job to worry about you."

At long last they arrived; she parked under the shade of a towering oak tree, and opened the car door for him, taking him by the hand as he began to search for the tallest tree in the area.

It didn't take long for him to find it - a giant oak with gnarled roots and long, thick branches near the base that an adult could easily sit comfortably on. Raz began tugging his nonnetta towards it, excitement growing and feeling the itch to be active overtaking everything else in his mind.

It was an unfortunate instinct his old family had instilled in him - to climb things like an animal, like the little circus freak he was. She, too, had once been part of the prestigious circus, but those days were long behind her, and she would never dream of performing in a ramshackle mess like the Aquatos had been running before their untimely end.

But still, she kept the smile on her face as she let him pull her towards the tree. She held him back for a moment as he made to grab at the gnarled roots.

"Be careful, my pet," she says to him gently. "If you fall, you will get hurt."

"I won't fall!" He repeated. "I never fall! Watch me!"

As soon as she let go of him, he scrambled onto the roots, then took a running leap to catch the first branch with his hands. He swung back and forth before hoisting himself up on top of it.

Mithra watched as her little acrobat swung from branches like he'd been doing it his whole life, despite the fact that he hadn't trained in acrobatics in over a year and a half. Surely, none of his foster parents had tolerated such barbaric, dangerous behavior - and she wasn't going to, either.

"My! Look at you go, pet! How strong you are!" She called up to him, her voice saccharine and terse, the ingenuous tone of it completely lost on the half-dazed little boy who was tasting freedom for the first time in months.

Raz's grin was wide and wild, climbing higher and higher. The breeze in his hair, the feeling of rough bark under his hands, the natural sunlight and chirping birds and everything was invigorating him like he hadn't felt in ages. This feeling couldn't be replicated by hypnosis.

He paused to take a breather about halfway up the tree, surprised at how heavily he was panting. He might not have lost the movement or the flow, but a year and a half had taken its toll on how much his body was able to take at once. He was no longer used to rigorous training every day, and it showed in the sheen of sweat on his brow and the quiet gulps of air he took. Even so, he peered down at the old woman standing at the base of the tree and waved enthusiastically.

Mithra merely waved back, tolerating the show for now. He could have this little outburst, enjoy the wild, unruly manner with which he grew up for a short time out here, away from the vicious fury of the family. Surely, if any of the others saw him climbing around like a monkey - if her husband saw him like this! - he would be doomed the moment his feet touched solid earth again.

But Mithra was patient, and kind, and loved him even if he was born and raised an uncouth little heathen.

She would cure him of all that soon enough.

Done with his short break, the boy looked up and set his sights on a spot near the very top of the tree. It was quite a few feet up still and the branches there were considerably flimsier, but he'd had enough time to get into the hang of things again and recognized his limits. He'd totally be able to make that.

Raz began climbing again.

Mithra watched him like a hawk watching a mouse, an undeniable hunger in her eyes. She'd be a liar if she said there wasn't a small, instinctual part of her that wanted him to fall. She wondered if he would be able to catch himself from that height - surely he knows how to fall, his parents being who they were. But did he know how to recover? Did he know how to float himself down gently against the force of gravity?

Surely not.

But she knew that watching him fall would damage him. And she didn't want her perfect little doll to break...

Up and up and up Raz went. He didn't let himself take another break, determined to push through and reach his goal to really impress his audience. He was unsteady only once, on the branch right below the one he was aiming for, as it turned out to be a lot more bendable than he expected. He hugged the trunk of the tree as it creaked under his weight, holding his breath until he was certain it wouldn't break. A close call, but not a catastrophe.

Besides, if he did fall, he could catch himself easily. He was sure of that.

It would be so easy to snap that branch he was on, and she actually stood there and thought about it so hard that she had to take great effort for her powers not to cause him to come crashing down.

Instead, she simply watched him with a fond look as he climbed higher and higher, taking each new and unsturdy branch with care.

“Razputin, pet? How much further?”

His head swiveled down her way, and he pointed at his target.

“Just that one! I’m being careful, promise!”

And with those reassuring words, Raz reached up and grabbed the branch he’d set his sights on from the beginning. Sticking close to the tree trunk, he pulled himself onto it and perched on his heels with one hand clutching the tree and the other shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun, so much brighter without the shelter of the leaves that were once around and above him. He stared out at the rest of the park with a contented smile.

He felt like he could sit up here forever. He hadn’t realized how much he’d missed heights like this.

She clapped for Razputin when he finally reached his goal. It was rather impressive, if you weren’t disgusted by the fact that he was climbing like an animal.

She watched him, eager for him to get back to the ground. She was going to be -patient; it would all be worth it in the end.

It would have been so nice to stay there on that branch for the rest of the day, but that would be rude when he was with his nonnetta. She couldn’t do things like this, and he shouldn’t leave her out of the time he had away from the house.

Reluctantly, with a squirming feeling in his gut, Raz let out a sigh before beginning to climb back down.

She held her arms open for him when he returned to the ground; she was so glad to see him still in one piece - and more importantly, out of that accursed tree, swinging from branch to branch like a chimpanzee. She embraced him happily. “Oh, you’re so brave my pet!” She cooed. “To climb all the way up there, even though it’s dangerous! Oh, I’d never be able to! Surely, you know how dangerous it is... come, come, sit with mama,” she urged, pulling him gently to a park bench, “and tell me what it was like up there.”

His smile only wavered for a millisecond as she called herself mama, but it was fully back in place within the next blink of an eye. He sat down happily next to her and began babbling about the bird’s eye view, the sky, and all the other people looking so small in the distance.

“And I’m not as rusty as I thought I’d be,” he ended on with a cheerful swing of his legs. “It was like riding a bike! Next time we come out here, I’ll try jumping to another tree while up there. I used to do that all the time, I bet I still could.”

“I’m sure you could too, pet!” She chirped happily, brushing his bangs from his eyes. Her hand came to a rest at his cheek, gentle and maternal. Her fingertips lighted against the hinge of his

jaw, and she looked down at him. "But do you really want to risk that?" She asked, tapping one finger to his jaw. "After taking such a nasty fall?"

She held his gaze, blank and gentle as she held him there.

The smile finally dropped completely, and he stared at her. "What? I didn't - fall..."

His voice trailed off as she began tapping at him, eyes locked, and suddenly the half-dazed state became fully dazed.

"Don't be silly, pet," she told him, a sad tone to her voice as she tapped rhythmically at his jaw. Lull him into a soft state of agreeability, leave him malleable, just the way she liked him. "How else," she asked, "would you have gotten such a nasty cut on your face?"

Her free hand comes up, grazes the cuts that still marked the right side of his face from where the crystal had cut him.

"Don't you remember, pet? You fell, and scratched your face on a branch on the way down. It's dangerous up there, isn't it?" She cooed, sadly. "I don't want to see mia bambolino get hurt..."

"No, that - that wasn't how it...happened..."

His consciousness flickered. Trauma and truth warred against powerful suggestibility. His own hand came up - perhaps to get her to stop touching his face - but his fingers ran along bumped skin instead and he wavered, uncertain.

"I was being...careful. I was...I...."

"Oh, I know you were being careful, pet," she cooed to him, pulling his own hand away from his face so as not to interfere with her gentle touches. "But you weren't careful enough, were you? That's what happens when you swing from branches like some kind of animal. It's a good thing I was there to catch you before you hit the ground, si?"

Raz fought it valiantly. He truly did. But with his mind already in a muddled state to begin with, he was no match for Mithra at 100%. Slowly, the confusion was buried deep, deep into his psyche, and manufactured relief took its place.

"...Yeah, good thing..." He said, sounding not all there anymore. Distant and disconnected. "Are you...okay? Did I - did I hurt you....when I fell?"

"Oh, no, no, pet," she purred, hugging him close. She looked down at him with concern and an odd, perverse pride about her. "You didn't hurt me. I'm just glad you're safe and sound. No more climbing around like that, si bambino? Si? All those silly little tricks are dangerous!"

"Dangerous..." Razputin murmured, limp in her hug. His eyes clouded over as what little of him was still fighting the conditioning was locked away. "Dangerous. Si. I didn't mean to...scare you. I'm sorry..."

“Oh, mia amore, I forgive you... but we won't be doing any more of that, from now on, right?” She asked, lifting his dazed eyes to her. Her touch was soft like cotton, “For your own good.”

Two birds, one stone.

His lips moved without sound, and if one could read lips, it would be obvious that he was trying to protest it. Trying to say he'd just be more careful instead of throwing it all to the wayside.

But when he finally found his voice within the haze of his head, what came out was - “No, I won't. I know better now.”

“Si, bambolino. I know you do,” Mithra said, brushing a thumb over the largest of his cuts. “All that climbing around is dangerous, but you're a clever little boy who knows I just want to keep my baby safe.”

He had all but served it to her on a silver platter, the ability to unmake the most fundamental part of him - his identity as an acrobat. It wasn't the first time the Galochios had caught him climbing trees and acting like an animal around the house, but it was the first time she'd been able to truly capitalize on it.

He hadn't fallen - in fact, he'd climbed and descended the tree with great skill and ease! But he didn't need to know that.

And now, he never would.

Even as he was agreeing with her, hesitant as it was, she continued to tap away at his psyche as they sat on that bench and “talked”. Her blow-up, the assault, the clean-up, and the destruction of his mental defenses afterwards were all sealed away, one by one, into the deepest pits of his mind where it would take outside help to even begin to unbury them.

If not for her calculated attack on the walls of his mind, this would not have been possible. He was powerful and headstrong. But now, with no way to psychically defend himself from even the slightest hypnotic suggestion, she faced almost no resistance. It was only a matter of being patient.

Mithra was, if nothing else, patient. It was her greatest strength, aside from her power; the ability to play the long game, without so much as even batting an eye.

He would be happier like this. He would finally be able to forget about all the nasty things that happened, and go back to being her perfect little doll. She was doing this for him, after all, and his peace of mind.

Five minutes. Five minutes of empty words and careful, constant conditioning. It was a long time, for sure, but her patience won in the end. Razputin's unfocused eyes blinked once, twice, and suddenly he came back to himself with a surprised little shake of his head.

He looked around them, then up at her, and there was no more need to keep him blissed out just to feel comfortable with her. His eyes were clear and contained no distrust anymore.

"We've been sitting here a while, huh?" He noted. "I'm fine, I promise. I didn't get all that hurt. Really."

Mithra gave a contented little sigh, as though she had been holding her breath in wait. She cupped his cheek in her hand, angling his face up towards her as she looked him over once more. "If you insist you're alright, we should continue on with our day. Don't you think, pet? I'm glad you're okay..."

She stood, and held a hand out for him. "No more climbing, pet, alright?"

Raz took it and stood, happy to find that he wasn't wobbly at all after the fall he'd obviously had. He was really lucky if he didn't hit his head or hurt his legs!

"No more climbing," he promised, sincere but with a sad ring. It would be more devastating later, when he was alone to think about it, but right now, on the other side of a bad scare and knowing he couldn't do such a thing in the Galochio household without getting in trouble anyway, it was a bit of an easier promise to make.

"Good boy," she praised him, happily patting the top of his head before she took his hand and led him down the path of the lush and picturesque park. "You're so well behaved for your mama. It makes me so happy, you know," she cooed, as they walked together, slow and relaxed.

There was nothing to worry about, anymore - not with her perfect little doll so compliant now.

His face twisted at her words, but something kept him from saying anything about it. Some strange, uneasy twinge in his gut kept his mouth closed and his thoughts from escaping his head.

He'd...called her "mama" very recently, hadn't he? He remembered not liking it, and he couldn't for the life of him remember why he had finally gone along with her weird charade after pretending it didn't exist for so long. But trying to think of why was giving him a headache.

She said she was happy now, and he remembered her being happy then, too. Maybe if he just kept going along with it, she would eventually be happy enough to stop.

Yeah. That was fine. He could do that.

It didn't matter if he couldn't remember. The only thing that mattered to Mithra was that he continue going along with it. The only thing that mattered was that her perfect little doll called her mama. She deserved it, after all, didn't she?

She kept him safe, she showered him in affection, she took away all the bad feelings, all the bad dreams, all his worries.

She was his mama, and she wasn't going to let anything - not even him - try to convince her otherwise.

Raz decided to try and put it out of his mind while he was outside of the house. It was so rare as it was, and even rarer that he wasn't asleep for it, so he wasn't going to let it be spoiled by any

means. He was going to enjoy this time with the one person who made him feel safe and wanted and loved.

He looped his arm around hers as they walked, drinking in the quiet park path and committing it to memory.

It was... peaceful. It was more peace than Raz had known in months, as Mithra curled her arm around his. She loved him, that much was clear, but it was a kind of love that curled around him like a python trying to squeeze the life out of him.

The day was pleasant, after his little accident. Things were finally right again with her little bambolino.

It was late afternoon by the time she began prompting him back towards the car, and his heart clenched with dread even as he obediently climbed into the backseat. He didn't want to go back. He wanted to stay in the park forever and pretend the life waiting for him at "home" didn't exist.

She could sense his trepidation, even though he tried desperately to mask it. He didn't want to disappoint her with disobedience, and that fact alone brought a smile to her lips as he hesitated outside the car. She opened the door for him, smiling sweetly.

"Something the matter, my love? Do you want to sit in the front with me, instead?"

Raz chewed his lip and shuffled his feet. "I - um - sure. I can do that. And nothing's - nothing's wrong. It's fine."

He crossed his arms as a chill hit him and made him shiver.

She helped him into the front passenger's seat with a kindly smile, buckling him in and pressing a kiss to the top of his head. "Nothing's wrong," she repeated, with a gentle touch to his cheek, "It's fine. You're right, my love. Now," she said, finally getting into the driver's seat and turning the engine over. "I for one had a wonderful day, despite our little accident. Didn't you?"

He wrung his hands, watching her set the car into motion with a flip of his stomach.

"Y-Yeah!" He said in a rush. "I did! I did. I...it makes me wish I could - we could - do it all the time."

Staying out in town with her forever. Staying out of the house forever. Staying away from the rest of the family forever.

He couldn't keep it completely to himself.

She smiled at him through the rearview mirror. "Now, pet, don't be like that. You're a Galochio, now. La famiglia e tutto. Do you know what that means, pet?" She asked. She didn't expect him to. The Galochios had been speaking Italian for generations. She didn't expect and Aquato to have quite the same cultural background, of course.

La famiglia e tutto. The family is everything.

His mom had used the phrase many times through his life. Most often, it had been spoken when sibling squabbles had turned into fights and she'd had to remind her children that they needed to respect and love each other even when they didn't get along.

He should have expected to hear those words in this household, what with them being Italian too, and yet it caught him off guard. He stared at her, not realizing how much his thoughts had already given away, and nodded.

They came to a stop at a red light, and it took Mithra a moment to register that he did, indeed, know what those words meant. He understood the phrase, and as they sat at the red light together she turned her head fully towards him in surprise.

"Escusi?" She asked. A moment of floundering, and her grip tightened on the steering wheel. "Si? What does it mean, then?"

Raz had never uttered much more than a "si", "signore" or "signora" around any of them. He'd never given any indication that he understood what they were saying when they switched to Italian in front of or near him, although on occasion he would get coincidentally uncomfortable and try to leave the room.

They had never met Donatella. They had no reason to believe this child had any Italian heritage or upbringing beyond the one that was being forced on him now.

So when he looked up at her, without any hesitation, the words that came out of his mouth should not have been perfectly-accented Italian.

"Yeah, la famiglia e tutto - family is everything."

They were the only car on the road at this intersection - the path to the Galochio home seldom used - and even when the light turned green, Mithra did not move. She simply looked at Razputin with a disturbed look about her.

"Ci capisci, allora, vero? Quanto sai?" she asked him, keeping the tension out of her voice as she spoke, despite how her knuckles were white as she gripped the steering wheel.

Something icy gripped his heart when the car stopped moving, and it squeezed at her words even though her tone was not technically off in any way. He didn't know why. She wasn't dangerous or cruel like everyone else was.

But he trusted his instincts.

"Um," he stammered. All confidence left him and he drew in on himself just a little bit. "N-Non abbastanza per essere fluente. Solo...solo abbastanza da tenere una conversazione..."

There was no sudden reprimand, no cold looks or even a glance of disappointment. She was simply silent for a moment, mulling it over as she refocused on the road. They finally got moving again, all without a word.

"Vedo. Sei davvero impressionante, pronipote. Perché non l'hai mai menzionato?"

She would see how far these skills went. Once they got home, she would figure out what to do about them.

He swallowed. For some reason, the compliment did not feel very much like a compliment. “Tutti mi chiamano cose cattive. Non volevo che peggiorasse se sapessero che ho capito.”

And it was true. They called him all kinds of terrible, terrible things, in both English and Italian, and it was bad enough knowing what it all meant. He feared the names Zalto and the others had for him if they knew he understood.

That was why he had always tried to clear the room when he knew he couldn't keep the hurt look off his face.

“Oh, lo sarebbe. Ho paura di pensare a quello che direbbe mio marito se sapesse... che stai mantenendo così tanti segreti, Razputin,” she says.

Mithra falls silent, letting the possibilities hang between them for a moment as she glanced at him through the rear-view mirror again.

“We don't like secrets, you know.”

Raz's hands curled around his seat belt in a death grip. His heart hammered in his chest as he remembered the terrifying ordeal with his circus uniform.

He shouldn't have sat in the front seat. There was no hiding behind her shadow as she turned to look at him, now, and all he could do was stare out the front window.

“...I know,” he whispered, because he did. She had told him this herself. “I - I just - thought it wasn't - really a big deal. Not like my o-outfit.”

“Bambolino,” she says softly. “You know I love you, but if you keep misbehaving like this, I'm not going to be able to protect you. You're going to end up being punished, and then what? I've already protected you before, with your silly little outfit. And now this?”

Despite Razputin's apparent fear and tension, she made no move to reprimand him beyond her little lecture. She sighed, clearly put out by his behavior. “All this time, understanding what we were saying, all this time... those sorts of things aren't meant for you to hear, bambolino. Important things.”

There was no two ways about it. She would have to tell her husband about this, before he said something truly compromising in front of the boy.

He knew what she was implying. He knew exactly what she was implying. He closed his eyes tight and drew his feet up onto the seat, pulling his knees to his chest.

She was going to tell Zalto, and there was no way to get out of it like last time. He was going to get hurt for this.

He shook. He wished they could have just stayed in that park forever.

“Oh, my little love, don’t be afraid,” she cooed, reaching over to weave a hand through his hair, pushing his bangs back lovingly. “You know I would never let him hurt you.” Not in any way that would last, at least.

And really, if he hadn’t kept such an important secret, they wouldn’t be here at all. It was his own fault. He would have to learn, eventually.

The thing was, he’d never intended for it to be a secret. Hearing the awful, awful things directed at him in Italian just in his first few days with the family, he’d first assumed they knew about Donatella, because why would they insult him if he wasn’t going to understand it?

But by the time he’d clued in to the fact that they didn’t know he understood almost every word, it had been well over a week, and he’d barely managed to “settle in” by then. Disturbing the peace with such a revelation seemed the more dangerous option at the time.

Not that it mattered now. Now, he was going to suffer, once again, for something he had no control over, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Raz kept his face buried in his knees the entire drive back, and didn’t make a sound.

It wasn’t long before they turned off the main road, onto the dirt road at the end of which sat the Galochio home. Mithra didn’t urge him to get out of the car when it finally came to a stop. Instead, she sat there with him, letting him gather his courage.

Eventually, they were going to have to face the music.

“I’ll do the best I can to shield you, my love,” she told him, smoothing his hair down as he sat in the seat next to her, “but if you hadn’t wanted mia caro to be so upset with you, you shouldn’t have kept such a secret all these months.”

“Questa è colpa tua proprio.”

The boy let out a quiet whine of a breath at the declaration, and his shoulders rose once and then fell. He finally lifted his head; it was by some miracle he hadn’t started crying yet.

He had a very bad feeling he was going to be crying soon.

Like a prisoner on death row, he opened the door and stiffly climbed out of the car.

Mithra met him at the front of the car, one hand held out for him so she could lead him inside. They’d had a pleasant day at the park together, and she looked quite happy for it, clearly oblivious to Razputin’s dread.

“When we go inside, my pet, I want you to greet your nonno in his own language. Show him exactly what you can do!”

The door opened and closed behind him, and he was trapped in this house again.

Zalto wasn't in the living room when they entered. They had to ask Zanobi, who directed them upstairs, and Raz was forced to march alongside his nonnetta to a delayed doom.

His cousin's door was cracked open. Razputin didn't try to see if she was in there as they passed her room. He kept his gaze straight ahead because it was the only way he could keep himself from bursting into tears.

Mithra kept her hands firmly on his shoulders as she directed him up the stairs, the only thing that kept him moving forward to find her husband despite the dread that coursed through him

"Zalto, my love," she sang in cheery tune, almost as though she looked forward to her husband's likely violent reaction. Almost like she looked forward to his wrath and his anger. "We're home! Razputin has something he wants to tell you!"

The man turned a disgusted eye down on the boy, who suddenly wasn't so sure he even knew how to speak English anymore.

"Uh, uh," he stuttered as his brain short-circuited.

Zalto looked supremely irritated to be bothered, and bothered by the Aquato boy no less. "Out with it, ragazzaccio."

The Italian word jolted through his head. His mouth moved of its own accord.

"Ti capisco."

Zalto looked at the boy as though he'd stepped in something vile. "Mi scusi?" He hissed, almost affronted. What the hell did the boy mean, he understands him? He looked up at his wife, perhaps in the belief that she'd taught him some cute little tricks while they were out.

But the look on her face, patient and expectant, told another story. Slowly, he looked back at Razputin, and took two decisive steps forward towards his great-grandson.

"Cosa vuoi dire, mi capisci, ragazzo? Tu parli italiano?"

Crying wasn't going to garner any sympathy. It would probably make things worse. But Raz couldn't stop the tears starting to flow as his great-grandfather loomed above him like the grim reaper.

"Sì," he choked out, and at Mithra's insistent nudge, "d-da quando ero p-piccola."

Without preamble and without warning, Zalto ripped the boy from his wife's hold, holding him roughly by the upper arm at an awkward and painful angle for his shoulder.

"Piccolo disgraziato ingannevole! Cercando di intercettare conversazioni a cui non appartieni!" He hissed, clearly irate. Raz could feel it. He could feel the man's anger pressing in from every side. The room began to swim.

Mithra simply watched.

There was no protection from the man's fury. No walls, no natural defenses to save his young mind from such a powerful, angry psychic. His breathing picked up as pressure from all around held his psyche in an invisible vice grip.

"I'm sorry!" He cried out, terrified that another word in Italian would set him off even further. "I wasn't t-t-trying to e-eavesdrop! I'm sorry!"

"Bugiardo!" Zalto barked. "Bastardo! Proprio come tuo padre e il padre di tuo padre! Tutti voi, feccia! Do you understand that, boy?"

The anger that emanated off of him was unbearable. It mounted, greater and greater against his mind, until Raz was certain that he was going to snap like a twig. The world fell away, and his own body felt far away, the contact of Zalto's hand around his upper arm burning like fire and the rest of the world falling away entirely.

The only thing that kept him from breaking in two was the delicate veil of Mithra surrounding him. He could feel her, her presence there enveloping him softly as she bore the brunt of her husband's wrath.

Despite everything, she was protecting him.

She was all he had to cling to in the sea of fury that was Zalto Galochio, and it was only enough to keep his metaphorical head above water. His legs buckled and he fell to his knees, limp and held up by the man's iron grip on his arm as his vision exploded in violent color.

He gasped like a fish, feeling like he couldn't breathe under the assault, and his voice was barely audible.

"Sorry, sorry, yessir, sorry...!"

Zalto didn't want his placating apologies. There was nothing that the boy could say to him that would make up for his very existence, but being blindly apologized to was not helping his case any. It was disrespectful, and with a scoff, Zalto tossed the boy's limp body to the ground.

He was caught, mercifully, by Mithra's telekinetic power, cradled in one glowing hand as she let him curl up, curl away from the terrifying power that was her husband.

Mama was there to make it all better...

Everything hurt. Everything was too loud and too bright and too sensitive. He didn't exist. He didn't want to exist. He wanted to disappear and feel absolutely nothing in the wake of the the anger that had torn through his mind like wet paper.

Razputin curled up as small as he could and tried to make the world go away.

As Zalto finally released the boy, Mithra took over. The hand that cradled him lifted him up, and she took him in her arms, cradling him against her as he desperately tried to recover from her husband's wrath.

“There there, pet,” she cooed. “It’s over now. You were so brave...”

Her touch felt like a million ants crawling all over his skin. He whimpered, tiny and tearful with eyes squeezed shut, and hoped that either his senses would stop being on fire or that they’d shut down completely. Whichever came first.

If he could even still feel physical touch, he would have felt Mithra’s fingers light upon his face. She wipes away his tears, before laying her fingertips delicately against his temples.

He hoped that either his senses would stop being on fire, or that they’d shut down completely, but neither happened. Instead, the world simply ceased to exist.

It seemed impossible for the child to be even more limp than he already was, but as dreamless sleep was placed on him, his entire body became practically boneless. His head lolled to the side like a pose-able toy.

All the buzzing hurt coming off of him in droves vanished like a candle blown out.

The effect that Zalto had had on his mind wouldn’t just go away - once he woke up, he would still feel like he’d been mentally beaten senseless. A headache, at the very least, would linger for days. Zalto had wanted nothing more than to break him in half; his wife’s presence was the only thing keeping him from doing so.

But Mithra put him to sleep, laid him in bed, and pressed a kiss to his head, letting him rest for now. He would wake up when he was good and ready.

It was two or three hours later that the door cracked open, and fear spilled into his room.

Razputin didn’t stir to it. Even though he wasn’t deep enough under Mithra’s spell to be forced to stay asleep, his mind was hurting and it was doing its best to pull itself together. He remained sleeping of his own accord, looking haggard and pale with sweat staining his brow.

In crept Guillelmina, quiet and concerned, having heard - and felt - the exchange between her cousin and her great-grandparents.

He was breathing, and that alone settled her nerves. It was hard to tell with him asleep like this, but... he seemed okay. He seemed alright, even despite all that had just happened.

She simply remained by his bedside, clutching something close to her chest. She’d come in to show him, but she felt wrong waking him up.

Eventually, his brain registered that he was no longer alone in his room, and his eyes fluttered open. He sucked in a sharp, pained breath and squeezed them shut again very quickly. Everything hurt and his head throbbed terribly.

She shrank in on herself as he hissed and groaned; she... she hadn’t meant to hurt him. She wasn’t sure how to help, but...

“I know you don’t feel good right now,” she whispered, “but you need to see this.”

The little thing she was clutching to her chest was a paper... or, more accurately, a pamphlet.

Turning his head was one of the most difficult things he'd done in a long time. But he managed to do it, and he cracked his eyes open just enough to identify his cousin and what she wanted him to see.

His vision was too blurry to read the words on the front of it. He couldn't even tell what the blobs of colors were supposed to be. His mental voice came out weak and only halfway coherent.

...What's...?

"The last client left this," she told him, softly. "It's all about a summer camp, for psychics. This could be it. They might be able to help!"

She kept her voice down delicately, partly out of consideration for what seemed to be his terrible headache... partly out of fear that they would be found out, up here.

He closed his eyes again. It was hard keeping track of her words. A summer camp? Psychics?

Help?

Raz didn't know how any of these things were related. He didn't have the ability to connect what she was talking about together. His mind still felt like a scrambled egg.

She paused, confused and uncertain. How was she supposed to communicate something so important to him like this? He needed to know about this place... because if they could figure out how to get him out of here, he might actually be able to escape.

Even as that word crossed her mind, private as it was, she glanced over her shoulder fearfully. She knew that if any of the adults found out about this, they'd both be in so much trouble.

But after seeing the way Mithra had hurt him, she knew he needed to get out of here. And Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp was his best option.

Unfortunately for her, she'd be lucky if he remembered this interaction at all. He'd only had a few hours to recuperate from Zalto's attempt to break him in half, and even with Mithra's protection it would take a lot of time to recover.

Time that they didn't have much of - every moment of that pamphlet being in this house was a greater risk, but Raz was just not in any state of mind to understand why, much less how significant it was to both of them.

Guillelmina looked at him, saw how dazed and barely-aware he was, the way his eyes were glazed over, and made a decision there in his room. Slowly and quietly, she tucked the offending pamphlet back into her vest pocket.

He was in no state to understand her proposal; she wasn't even sure he understood how dire his situation was.

And she knew it was a dire situation, after that night with the crystal ball - but she had no idea just how dire things were.

For now, though... he needed to rest.

"I... I want to help you," she whispered, her voice small and frightened. "We'll talk when you're feeling better, okay?"

Okay... He responded distantly, more out of habit than for any real agreement. His eyes began to drift off in some odd direction before he closed them with another wince and a hiss as a wave of pain washed over him. He curled in on himself under the covers just a little bit more, and seemed to have already forgotten she was in the room.

She looked forlornly at him, knowing how badly this boy was hurting because of her family. Mithra had done terrible things to him - things even an Aquato didn't deserve. Sure, his family had caused a lot of problems, but she'd never thought that her family would actually go so far as to try and hurt him like this - the crystal ball incident, the horrible deconstruction of Raz's mental defenses, the way Zalto tried to break his mind... all of it was just too much.

She took a step back towards the door, feeling like every step was a terrible mistake. She couldn't shake the feeling like they didn't have a lot of time left to waste. If he couldn't get out of here... who knows what was going to happen to him next?

"You're hurting."

Something wet and watery brushed against his cheek. Raz opened his eyes to the inside of a tattered circus tent.

He wasn't on the ball anymore. He stood in water up to his shins, and felt a powerful presence just behind his left shoulder. The touch settled against one side of his face, gentle like Mithra's hand and yet so much heavier.

"You don't want to be hurting anymore."

He didn't respond; it wasn't a question.

"You can't flee from it," the voice stated, sounding less like the woman he couldn't identify and a lot more like his own voice. "And you can't hide. We've tried both, and neither has worked."

That presence leaned forward, and he turned his head to see glowing green eyes and purple skin inches from his face.

"What else are you going to do?"

She had made her decision when she'd had to clean his blood off the floor that night. It was too dangerous, here. They hated him that much, and even Mithra, who claimed to love him, thought nothing of nearly bashing his head in.

She would get in trouble, without a doubt, but there was no other option.

She had to help him get out of here.

Whatever punishment she would endure once the Galochios realized he was gone for good, she dreaded to think about - but she knew it would be so much less than any punishment he might receive, if they were caught.

That's why he needed to know about this summer camp. She couldn't help him - she was young and tiny and weak. But the Psychonauts? The Psychonauts could do anything.

Razputin was bedridden for two days. Even with hypnosis keeping the brunt of his pain away, he was disoriented at best and nearly comatose at worst when he was awake, and his recovery took an agonizing amount of time for the cousin trying to wait patiently for him.

Little by little, he became more coherent, and the constant debilitating migraines became occasional distracting headaches.

It was an incredibly tense two days, and she lived with the constant paranoia that the adults knew. She was quite the little actress, keeping her intentions close to her chest and the pamphlet even closer.

She did not bother him for the days he was recovering. When she approached him about this, he needed to be coherent, and ready to run.

Unfortunately for her, Mithra got to him first.

The woman was there when he opened his eyes without the cloud of hurt filling them. She was there to soothe him as he realized why he'd been in so much pain and remembered the terrible ordeal her husband had put him through.

She was there to whisper in his ear about how it couldn't be helped, because he'd been keeping secrets, and she might not be able to protect him from permanent harm if it happened again.

Really, it was all his fault.

She sat at his bedside and stroked his hair, cooing softly to him, knowing that he must still have a dreadful headache after what her husband did to him.

"It if weren't for me, you might not have survived," she whispered to him, brushing his bangs from his eyes. "But mama will always take care of her little bambolino."

Mina stood at his door, listening to Mithra's quiet cooing. She swallowed thickly, feeling fear creep up her chest at the woman's gentle words. If anything happened to Raz, she was pretty sure it was going to be Mithra's fault in the first place...

Raz had started crying somewhere during the flashback of Zalto's assault and had gone into full-blown sobbing as Mithra blamed him for all of it. He was pressed up against her, trying desperately to keep it quiet as if terrified that his great-grandfather would burst into the room if he heard him.

"I'm sorry," he bawled into her dress. "I'm sorry, please don't let him hurt me again."

She cradled him in her lap as he sobbed against her. The world was quiet, just the two of them. "Oh, pet," she sighed, gently rubbing his back, "You know I can't promise that. Whatever happens to you is entirely dependent on your behavior, you know that. When you lie and keep secrets, it makes us so, so mad. You don't think we should just let you lie to us, do you, pet?" She asked him, all gentle words and delicate touches.

His expression contorted. He wailed, muffled into the palm of his hand as well as her side, and shook his head at her question. He didn't want to get hurt anymore. He was going to get in trouble at the slightest, most innocuous thing, and all he could do to buffer it was to let them have full reign of his mind, his thoughts, and his feelings.

He could sense the implication of it in her words. She wanted him to come to this conclusion, and agree with it. The worst part was - it was starting to seem like his only choice.

In the fight for self-preservation, giving up everything that constituted himself as himself to scrutiny and control seemed the best option.

It was the best option, really.

There was nothing that he could do that would ensure his safety, nothing he could say that would placate his tormenters. Letting Mithra protect him - letting her finally take it all away - was the best thing he could do.

And she was going to let him come to that conclusion all his own.

"My pet," she cooed, "no crying now. You're just fine, my love."

Raz's breathing hitched, and he clutched a little tighter at her shawl for just a moment, trying to commit this comfort to memory in the precious few seconds he was still allowed it. Then, with a bodily shudder and some rather pitiful sniffles, he somehow managed to stop his crying at her request.

He was exhausted, and his head throbbed, and all he wanted to do was lay back down or bury his face back against her. But those luxuries had ended, now, and he needed to suck it up and move on.

She watched with a gentle smile as he ceased his crying right then and there - without the aid of her hypnosis. Pure obedience, born from the fear of what would happen to him if he didn't do as she said.

She reached out and laid a hand at his cheek, gently thumbing away the tearstreaks left behind.

"Promise me, pet. No more secrets. No more misbehaving. Because I've already protected you twice. You have one more chance to show Zalto that you belong here, with us. I want to keep you, you know I do, but he needs convincing. You don't want to disappoint your nonno, do you, pet?" She asked.

One more chance. One more chance. One more chance.

The words - the warning, the threat, the promise - shot through his brain like a bullet. Razputin stared up at his great-grandmother and suddenly he understood. He could see his future laid out for him, in perfect clarity, despite not using precognition at all.

This was his life now. There was no way to escape the Galochio family. He was here until he died, and only his obedience would ensure that wouldn't be any time soon. Trying to run was not a guarantee to freedom, but a guarantee of his death.

Something deep and primal echoed up through his mind and into the open air. It was his mental voice, and yet it felt...heavier, somehow. Weighted. More.

I don't want to die.

Raz opened his mouth. There was nothing but pure, terrified honesty in his eyes. "No, mama. I don't want to d-disappoint him. No more secrets or - or misbehaving. I promise."

She heard him as his thoughts trickled out between them, out into the open air. There was no hiding these things, anymore. Not for him. Not since Mithra had destroyed every defense in his mind. The gentle, caring smile never left her lips as she looked down at him, his head in her lap as she ran her fingers through his hair and hummed gently. She didn't seem to pay any mind to the terrible weight with which those words were thought.

"That's my good boy. No secrets... and no one gets hurt. Simple as that." Simple as that, as though his life weren't riding on their arbitrary standards, as though he stood a fair shot when the judge, jury, and executioner all hated him.

Even Mithra, who loved him, hated what he was at his core. Like keeping a tarantula for a pet. Reviled and disgusted, but fascinated by its miserable existence.

"Now, my pet," she cooed, looking down at him with that saccharine sweetness. "You're going to stay here and rest. The adults have important business to attend to in town today. I'll be back around sundown to tuck my little bambolino in for the night." She pats his cheek once, twice, and then lingers. He can feel the points of her nails against his jaw. "I don't want any misbehaving while I'm gone, si?" She said.

It was not a question so much as it was an order, her words creeping through his brain as her touch and her eye contact seeped into him like poison through his veins.

That order, that extra force added to his already eager-to-please situation was the final nail in the coffin. The family would be away and he'd be left alone in the house for the first time in months, but there would be no attempt to escape today. He couldn't risk it. He literally couldn't do it.

And even if he could, he wouldn't. Not after her warning and his epiphany. They were going to leave him alone for hours right on the tail end of his recovery from his last screw-up. This wasn't trust.

This was a test. A test he was determined - desperate - not to fail.

"Si, mama. I'll be good," he whispered. "I'll be good for everyone."

Her smile softens into something dangerous and self-satisfied. "I know you will, pet. You're a good boy for mama. You just need a gentle hand, is all. You'll get it, eventually. I know you will."

She stood up, leaving him laying in bed as she moved toward the door. A hand on the door frame, she paused, and turned back to look at him. "You don't have a choice."

And with that, Mithra left him alone, to ready herself for the day's business.

Raz sat there on his bed for an eternity of a minute, head hung low as he put everything he could into not crying again. This was his life. This was his place. All he had to look forward to was continued survival and his nonnetta's gentle care.

He squeezed his eyes shut tight, took a shaky breath, and laid back down dutifully in the hopes his headache would go away.

The headache would ebb, eventually. Once the Galochios all piled into their cars and headed into town for the day to perform whatever spectacular feat they'd been commissioned to do, the headache would slowly relieve the pressure against Razputin's parietal lobe.

At the tail end of his headache, one the world had cleared up a little and the tears had been all but dammed up, there was a gentle knock on his door.

"Razputin?" Came the voice, soft and feminine and without the bite that any of the Galochios, even Mina, had when his name passed their lips. "Are you awake, sweetheart?"

It was Adelasia.

Of course she hadn't gone with the others. By some cruel twist of fate, she - a non-psychic - had been folded into their powerful ranks.

"I - I'm awake," he called hesitantly, not wanting to get in trouble for not "fully" resting but fearing the repercussions of being caught lying so much more.

He didn't interact much with the woman. Several months in this house and he barely knew much more than that she was Guillelmina's mother, she was non-psychic, and she didn't share the same animosity for him that everyone else did. But she wasn't someone he could turn to for help or comfort; Mithra had already stepped into that role day one, and besides, he saw how most of the family summarily ignored her for her lack of powers.

If his life hadn't been on the line, he probably would have spoken up for her from the beginning. But they lived in entirely different worlds, and he could not afford it. She didn't seem to have the kind of will it would take to return the favor, anyway.

It was unusual for her to approach him, and he wondered if it had anything to do with the fact that her relatives weren't around to snub their noses at her for it.

The door clicked open gently as Adelasia peeked her head in. She wore a gentle smile, and carried a plate of food. "Mithra told me you weren't feeling well today, asked me to check up on you a few times today." To ensure her little spell had held, of course, though she didn't say as much to the mother. "I brought lunch. Thought you might be hungry - it's okay if you're not, though..." She moved into the room, sitting at the side of Raz's bed and offering him the plate.

The boy sat up tentatively, keeping his wince internal as his head protested the simple movement. He didn't take his eyes off her as he gingerly took the plate.

"N-No, no, I can eat. Thank you."

She doesn't make any sudden movements as he watches her, carefully taking the plate as though he were afraid she was going to snatch it away from him without warning. She was aware, to some degree, of how the others treated him. There wasn't going to be any of that in this one moment of reprieve from the cruelty and the horrible things they said about him.

"You're very welcome, Razputin," she says. "Do you want company? I can leave if you'd rather spend some time alone. You don't get a lot of alone time with Mithra around, I've noticed."

He hesitated. On one hand, being alone for once sounded nice. His nonnetta looked after him, but sometimes it felt more smothering than comforting. He hadn't had time to himself except for the interim between sleeping and waking, both morning and night.

On the other, he also didn't want to be left to dwell on the terrible thing Zalto had just done to him. He didn't want to be left alone with his thoughts.

His thoughts were starting to scare him.

"Um..." He said, uncertain. "It's...up to you."

She regarded him with a peculiar look; he was hesitant to make his own decisions, and it seemed to barely register on Adelasia's red-flag radar. Perhaps she just thought it was a byproduct of him feeling so unwell... yes, that must be it.

So she handed him his plate, set the cup down on his nightstand within his reach, and shifted at the foot of his bed, to properly face him.

"You've been with us for a few months now, and I feel like you're still such a stranger. Why don't you tell me about yourself, Razputin?" She offers.

His fork paused halfway up to his mouth, and now it was his turn to give her an odd look. What was her angle, asking that question? What was she trying to learn about him? Was she hoping he'd slip up and reveal something he didn't even know was damning until it was too late?

Was this part of the test?

Raz carefully put his silverware back on his plate with a quiet clink. "Uh, well, there's not really...much to tell. I'm, uh, learning the family business. I like learning that."

Adelasia actually seemed surprised for a moment, before forcing her expression back into the realm of neutrality. "Is that so?" She asked, almost a little too casually. "I always worry they push you kids too hard, with that psychic stuff. I, uh, don't share the same talents, so I don't really know what it's like, but Guillelmina doesn't seem to care much for her lessons."

There was a pause, as though she were going to say something, but thought better of it. Instead, she just smiled at him with kind, tired eyes. "I'm glad to hear you like learning about your powers, though! Mithra seems like a good teacher. She knows so much, you know. She's been doing this since before her children were born, the family business. Zalto, though... he was born into the circus, you know."

Nervousness coiled in his gut as the woman simultaneously badmouthed the Galochio talents and praised Mithra's teaching style. He squirmed when Zalto's name and history was brought up.

"Yeah, uh, yeah. I know."

He'd chosen to talk about his psychic powers because it had seemed safe and smart if this was indeed a test of his loyalty. But he knew for a fact that talking about his great-grandfather behind his back - no matter if that wasn't technically what was happening - was a dangerous thing to be doing, and he couldn't afford any more chances.

Raz went back to eating, hoping his quietness would be enough of a hint that he really didn't want to keep talking, much less about this topic.

She might not know him all that well, but she could sense him obvious discomfort. He was withdrawn, and maybe it was because of the way the others regarded her as a non-psychic. Perhaps they had already planted the ideas in his head. If that were the case, so be it. She still smiled kindly down at him, and kept him company as he ate.

"They say you're very powerful, Razputin. They... may not show it, but they're very impressed. You should know that."

There was a sharp, almost inaudible inhale, and he glanced up at her past his bangs. Whatever open, vulnerable look was in those eyes disappeared the very next instant as they dropped back to his food.

He wasn't powerful anymore. Not since he'd lost his defenses. And while he couldn't really...remember, how that had happened, he still remembered the terrible sensation of those walls crumbling all around him.

No. He wasn't powerful at all, anymore.

".....Yeah."

She watched sadly as he practically shut down. There was no avenue of conversation that didn't elicit this reaction from him, and that worried her. With his lunch safely delivered, Adelasia

couldn't help but feel like she was overstaying her welcome, here. For whatever reason, he was withdrawn, and she didn't want to push him when he was so clearly uncomfortable.

"Alright, Razputin. I'm gonna give you some peace and quiet. I'll be back in a bit to check up on you and take your plate, okay? Don't worry about cleaning up." Mithra had insisted he stay in bed today, and Adelasia didn't want him risking the stairs in... whatever state this was.

"You get some rest, okay bambino?"

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, almost robotic. It was the only way he managed to keep the relief off his face that there were no more dangerous questions to be asked. It was also how he kept himself from pleading for her to stay; to hold and comfort him while he was still hurting.

He should have been old enough not to need it, especially for a headache that was so minor compared to what had come before, but Mithra's conditioning had left its mark. It was like an addiction now. The only problem was that this was not his nonnetta, and he didn't want to betray her love like that.

Adelasia didn't seem to register any of that. Mithra would have. Mithra knew her little bambolino, and could hear all his errant thoughts floating around. Adelasia didn't know him well enough, even after the months he had spend in their home, and couldn't pick up on his thoughts even if she'd tried.

And so, she gave him one last smile, and a pat on the head, before taking off and leaving him in peace.

She lingered, just for a moment, outside of his door, as she contemplated whether or not it was the right thing. He seemed reserved, almost afraid, and Adelasia had a pang of fear for the boy... before quickly swallowing it back down and heading down the stairs to finish cleaning up.

Raz found he wasn't very hungry anymore, but he couldn't be disobedient in any way, shape or form, now. He picked at his food slow and dutifully, and pretended to ignore the throwing of his head and the lonely clench of his heart.

He wouldn't have to be lonely for very long, at least. Adelasia was not psychic, after all, and Mina knew that when she heard the din of the vacuum downstairs that it was safe to make her move.

Slowly, almost silently the door opened and Mina poked her head in. She was mostly sure he was awake, with all his thoughts as loud as they were, but it was hard to tell.

Owlish eyes appeared in the crack in his door until she was sure he was still awake, and she moved in, shutting the door quietly and carefully behind her.

"Are you feeling a little better? So we can talk?"

Her cousin blinked up at her without any recollection of what she was referring to.

"Talk about what?"

She didn't seem to notice his blank reception, chalking it up to the fact that he'd been barely conscious earlier. With him more lucid, she pressed her back against the door and reached into her vest, producing a pamphlet.

She unfolded it as she approached him, with something nervous and excited in her eyes. "Our last client, she saw us in the window on the way in and gave me this. It's for psychic kids like us!" She whispered. "This could be it! This could be how you get out of here!"

A lot of things hit him at once the moment Raz looked down at what she held in her hands. The moment he recognized the stylized font and famous name.

Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp.

Adoration. Idolization. Realization. Fear. Panic. His eyes flew up to meet hers as his entire body flushed cold. His mouth parted and the terrified beginning of a word, a question, almost made it through his lips.

"Wh-"

His teeth clicked shut so hard they both heard his jaw rattle. His hands began to tremble at his sides.

He took a half step back.

The look she gave him was fraught with concern and confusion. He seemed... afraid? He wasn't supposed to be afraid, he was supposed to be overjoyed! This was it, this was his ticket out! They could go together, and he would never have to return to this place. If the Psychonauts were really everything he thought they were, then they could help him!

And even if they weren't, it had to be better than what he's experienced here. Mithra and the crystal ball, his mental defenses, the way that Zalto put him out of commission so easily with his anger - it was all spiraling out of control too fast. They had to do something!

So why did he look like he wanted to run and hide, instead?

"What's the matter? I thought you'd be excited about this. It's the Psychonauts training grounds!"

This was a test. This was a test. This had to be a test. The adults were out of the house, he'd been left to stay put and behave, and now Guillelmina was trying to steer him towards escaping. Pushing him towards the Psychonauts, who he thought the world of - the one group that probably could actually help him.

But they couldn't help him if he was dead. If he tried to run to that camp, and didn't make it before the family caught up to him, then there was nothing they could do.

It was a test. It was a trap. There was no other explanation. Razputin took another step back and his calves bumped against his bed. He shook his head with wide, wide eyes.

No, no, no. I'm not going to misbehave. I'm not!

“Misbehave? What are you talking about?? This is more important than behaving for nonnetta! For anyone! You’re not safe here, you know that! What, do you wanna stay all of a sudden? After what she did to you?” It was a horrified whisper as Mina clutched the pamphlet.

There was no way he wanted to stay here.

“You begged me to do something, to help, when she tried to kill you and then blasted open your mind! You were terrified! And now you want to behave?? I don’t get it...” She muttered, confused and defensive.

Tried to....kill me? The thought swirled around her, not at her - a thought not meant to be let out. Raz was still panicking, but there was a distinct tinge of confusion in his eyes now, too.

What are you talking about? Our nonnetta never tried to kill me. She's the only one who's been protecting me!

There's something horrified and disgusted in her eyes as those words finally reach her.

“What do you mean?” She asked, and she knew she didn’t want the answer. “Wh- where do you think you got all those cuts from? Nonnetta tried to smash a crystal ball over your head! I was there! I cleaned it up!”

His hand came up automatically to touch at his face. The marks there were almost completely gone now, all faded considerably except for the scar slashing down his right eyebrow.

That's - that's not what happened, he replied slowly, looking at her like she'd just grown a second head. I fell out of a tree when she took me to the park the other day. That's how I scratched my face. Why are you lying about nonnetta?

You're being baited, whispered the back of his mind, fearful and wary. She's trying to get you to lie and slip up.

Last chance, Razputin.

“I’m—” she stammered, her voice hushed but frantic as she clutched the pamphlet in both hands. “I’m not lying, Razputin! I wouldn’t lie about that! I saw it, I was there! There was glass everywhere, and you were bleeding! You begged me to help you escape, and now this is it! This is how you can get away!” She stressed, shaking the pamphlet in his face.

She couldn’t understand why he was suddenly denying what had happened to him. What had Mithra said to him while they were at the park? What had she done?

“Razputin, if you don’t do this now, you might be stuck here forever. Is that what you want?”

What I...want?

He pressed up against the side of his bed frame as she crowded him, holding that damning leaflet out as if she expected him to actually touch it. There was nowhere for him to flee to.

His cousin was speaking nonsense. Insisting that what he remembered had happened to his face wasn't actually what happened, and now acting like he had any say in what he wanted. Wanting was a dangerous game to play even when alone, and Mithra had reinforced the warning over and over in his head every time she held him close, protected from the rest of the family. He wasn't allowed to want. He wasn't supposed to want.

Trap. Trap. Trap. Danger!

Admitting he wanted anything, much less escape, might as well be the same thing as serving himself on a silver platter for the entire family to rip to shreds.

No, he whimpered, wrapping his arms around himself and cowering before her. No, no, I can't. I can't.

She takes half a step back as that thought reaches her, stunned and feeling sick as she watches him cower. The righteous anger flees her, leaving her a little girl standing in the middle of her cousin's room as he tries to make himself as small as possible. Both hands clutch the pamphlet that she brought him.

She looks down at it.

Soar across the astral plane! Wage psychic warfare against the enemies of free thought!

Guillelmina stared down at the little army man on the front of the pamphlet, and she made a decision. Her fist closed around the pamphlet, holding it tight.

"Fine," she said, not looking up from the paper she grasped. "If you can't, then I will."

Guillelmina took a deep breath.

"Mama!"

"No-!"

The word passed his lips in a gasped scream before he could stop himself. He lunged forward as if to - grab her, maybe, or push past to flee the room, but before he could even touch her he pulled back again in terror, as if doing so might burn him.

He heard Adelasia's voice raise in response from downstairs, and his breath picked up dangerously fast. His mind reached out to Mithra's, crying for her, hoping to tell her what was going on before anything could be blamed on him, but he ran straight into a mental brick wall. His nonnetta, it seemed, did not want to be disturbed for any reason whatsoever.

She gave her cousin one long, sad look before she turned from him, back towards the door and the expectant voice of her mother. He didn't make any move to stop her, and she didn't expect him to.

"Mama! Look what Raz showed me!" She called down the stairs.

Without another glance at her miserable, frightened cousin, she bounded down the stairs, practically levitating her way down as her feet barely touched the steps.

She was getting him out of here, one way or another.

He was dead. With those words, "look what Raz showed me", she had just condemned him. It didn't matter what the truth was. It didn't matter what her intentions were. She had put his name on that forbidden paraphernalia, and there was no lying to himself about whose word the family was going to believe.

Razputin let out a strangled, broken noise and sank down onto the floor in a crouch as he wrapped his arms around his legs.

And he lost himself to despair.

Adelasia watched her daughter bound down the steps with little effort, curious exactly what the kids were up to that Mina was... talking to Raz again. Those two never had the most... friendly relationship, unfortunately.

But when Mina presented her with that little pamphlet, she took it and read it over. At first, she could barely believe that someone as meek and quiet as Razputin had given this to her daughter, but... she supposed it made sense. He did come here with all those comic books, after all. Perhaps he held onto this after all this time.

"Huh," the woman muttered, scanning the pamphlet. "Okay. I'll... talk to papa about this, Guillelmina."

There was no way the subject of their conversation could have heard them talking, but black terror drifted down the stairs and washed over the two of them in almost the same moment.

Even Adelasia, non-psychic, could feel it. She shivered and glanced around with a frown, confused, before tucking the pamphlet into her apron.

It took everything in her to keep that terror from causing her to burst out, to take the pamphlet back, to say it was all just a joke. It wasn't, she'd never been more serious about anything in her life and if he didn't get out of here soon, who knew what was going to happen to him?

She she bit down on the inside of her cheek and looked up at her mother with wide, terrified eyes and a lump in her throat as terror that wasn't hers threatened to claw its way out of her.

Stop it! I'm doing this for your own good, you know.

The only response was a brief, overwhelming swell, the mental equivalent of a cry, and then it all receded from the room entirely. Back upstairs, into what felt like nonexistence.

It felt like he was trying to fade all of himself into nonexistence.

It was an eternity later that the door to his room slowly opened. Guillelmina stood there, looking... guilty. She did what she'd done for a reason, but that didn't stop her from recognizing the cold terror Raz felt in the wake of her actions.

"I know you're probably scared, but you have to go. They're going to hurt you again, and I don't know what Mithra did to you to make you think the crystal ball thing didn't happen, but it's not okay. It's not right, what they're doing to you. I thought you were being dumb and dramatic when you were afraid of them, but... I'm worried you're right."

Raz hadn't moved from his spot on the floor, curled up with his face buried against his knees. He didn't say anything, at first, and for a moment it seemed almost like he hadn't even heard her.

"...They're not...going to let me go...." Came the whisper, finally, without lifting his head. He spoke because he saw no point in keeping up the gag order. His lifespan had just gone from uncertain to until tonight, when the rest of the family returned. What happened now didn't matter.

"When Zalto gets home, he won't let me go. He'll just..." A shuddering breath, far too close to a sob but kept tight against his chest. "He'll just..."

"First of all," Mina said, sitting next to him on the floor, "Nonno isn't going to do anything that would upset nonnetta. That's just a fact. And she likes you. Even if she's doing... weird things to your head, you're her bambolino. She wouldn't let him do anything to you. Trust me."

She sounded so certain - and why shouldn't she be? She'd known these people her whole life. She knew them well.

Or, she'd thought she knew them well. Maybe she wasn't so sure, anymore, but she had to be - for his sake. For both their sakes.

"Second of all, if they do get mad at you, I'll just tell them where the pamphlet really came from. Some lady gave it to me when she came for a reading. Her son was psychic and said she sent him there. I just told mama that it was yours because... if we can convince them to let you go, you won't have to come back."

He didn't look up as she sat down beside him. He didn't even flinch.

"You don't get it. You really don't get it." Unlike the last time, when he'd told her off in bitter, incredulous anger, now there was nothing. His tone was matter of fact and so very, very resigned. "She told me this morning that she couldn't protect me forever, and if I lied or kept any more secrets, th-then that was it."

His shoulders rose, and that same black terror began to creep in the corners of her mind, but then it was stamped back down just as quickly.

"You told your mom I gave you that thing. That's what she's going to tell them. That was my last chance, and now it's...now it - now I'm -"

His breathing hitched, and he couldn't say the last word out loud.

Dead.

His fear settles in her stomach like black lead. Ice creeps through her veins as his breath hitches.

Gently, she reaches over and lays a hand at his arm, still hugging his knees close to his chest. "If anyone gets in trouble, it'll be me, for hiding the pamphlet and lying to mama. I only told her that so she'd think you wanted to go to that dumb camp. If she's mad at you for it, I'll tell the truth, but— if this gives you a way out of here, Razputin, you have to take it. You have to."

Just the fact that he was convinced this was a death sentence was proof enough that he needed to get out of here. That he couldn't waste time trying to appease the Galochios if he was given an out.

"You might not get this chance again."

She was right, he wasn't getting another chance like this again. He knew they wouldn't let him go. Her mother wasn't his guardian. Zalto and Mithra were, and even if the former didn't kill him for the mere suggestion of it, the latter would never let him go away for so long, even if he kept his mouth shut. He couldn't leave the house without her; couldn't even walk out into the backyard by himself.

Static began overtaking his head, drowning out any coherent thought. His shoulders began to shake again, and this time he didn't try to stuff it down.

Muffled sobs wracked his frame.

The hand on his arm did not shy away once he began to cry in earnest. Truth be told, for a moment Guillelmina didn't even realize it was still there. She was shocked as she realized that in all this time, through all of their petty fights and all of the grief that this child had endured, she doesn't think she'd seen him cry even once while he was here.

Not even to mourn his family.

Her grip on his arm tightened, just a fraction, before slowly, Guillelmina shifted next to him, wrapping her arms around his huddled frame. They sat there together, on the floor of his bedroom, and he simply cried.

"I don't want to die," he whisper-choked, leaning into her only the tiniest bit as everything finally became too much to contain. "I don't want to die. Please don't let me die. Please. Please."

His desperate pleas lodged something horrible in her throat and she felt hot tears stinging at her eyes with the uncomfortable realization that... it wasn't just his misplaced emotions. In fact, almost none of what she was feeling in that moment was his overspill. It was the very raw, horrible connection between them, two children, who understood the danger on the horizon from those who were supposed to be taking care of them.

He was going to die, a quiet voice in the back of her head told her.

She had been able to see the future before, and in that moment, she was glad for it.

"I won't," she whispered back to him. It came out without her really thinking about it. Don't think about it. Don't think about it. "I promise. I won't let them hurt you."

They both knew she couldn't promise that.

Razputin sobbed into his knees, letting her hold him and make empty promises to him. It didn't help - not the crying or her attempt at comfort - but now that it was happening, he didn't want it to stop, either.

All he could do was break down and pretend to hope that when the family came back home, the aftermath would be quick.

He couldn't even manage that.

It wasn't long, after that - or maybe it was an eternity, it was hard to tell - that they both felt the family approach. They were still far off. Miles, even. But the psychic connection was growing stronger and stronger.

The Galochios were coming home.

It was like the kid in her arms stopped being alive. Everything of him became still; even the crying and the mental anguish permeating the room dropped off so sharply it was like neither had been happening at all.

Only the rapid bump bump bump of his heart betrayed him.

She wrapped her arms tighter around his slight frame, burying her face against his shoulder. Together, they waited. They could feel the presence of the Galochios coming home - the quiet conversation that took place downstairs between Adelasia and Zanobi.

The flurry of everything that cascaded after it.

The house was buzzing with conversation, both verbal and psychic, and none of it was calm. There were words exchanged - loud and frustrated - and flares of psychic communication between the Galochios so that Adelasia couldn't hear.

Then, in the midst of cold silence—

"Children! Downstairs, subito!"

For the first time in hours, Raz lifted his head. Despite the red of his eyes and the blotchy wetness all over his face, there was no emotion to be read from him. He picked himself up, pulling her with him almost on accident, and shuffled out of his room like a zombie.

With his wide-eyed, thousand yard stare, he certainly looked the part.

Guillelmina followed behind him, careful not to seem too compassionate. She didn't know how her family was going to react to this, but she knew that it would only be made worse by seeing her showing any kind of sympathy towards his despondent fear.

She took a deep breath at the top of the stairs, and followed him down to find the entire family gathered in the kitchen. Her father held the pamphlet, skimming it as Zalto and Mithra hissed and whispered feverishly to each other in the interim before the children finally arrived in the kitchen.

Razputin stopped just past the doorway, giving his cousin enough room to squeeze inside - or have room to flee, if she wanted. If she preferred not to watch.

His eyes were just a little unfocused as they fell on the group of adults crowded around the kitchen table.

Zalto was the first one to step forward, to tower over Razputin in all his fury and disgust. "You're nothing but trouble, you know that? Little cretino. Sick of your attitude, your stunts, sick of it all!"

"Zalto, per favore. You're over reacting! It's just a piece of paper, mi amore!"

"The Psychonauts, Mithra? The Psychonauts! We burned those damn comics when he got here, I refuse - I refuse to entertain the idea! No one under my roof is going to be brainwashed by those brutes!" Suddenly, Zalto turned back to Razputin, grabbing him roughly by the upper arm. "I warned you about keeping secrets, didn't I? About telling lies?"

His lips parted in a soundless cry as he was jerked forward, far too close to the man who wouldn't show a child any mercy. He tried so hard to remain numb and impassive, but every furious word spit in his face made his expression twitch and tremble.

"S-S-Si, signore," he whispered.

"I think it's a good idea."

The entire kitchen went silent. Zalto's grip on his arm tightened, as though he were to blame for the words that cut through the atmosphere like a hot knife. Slowly, he turned towards the voice that dared speak up.

"Adelasia," he said slowly, "you really shouldn't talk about things you know nothing about."

It was an order of silence and deference. She wasn't allowed to think. Not here. Not now.

Slowly, she took the pamphlet back from her husband. "I know my daughter. And I know how hard she works to see the future like the rest of this family. And I know that none of the psychics in this family have been able to teach her how to see the future like you can. I might not know the Psychonauts, but I know enough about my own daughter to say that sending her to this camp is a good idea."

Guillelmina suppressed a gasp. The blood drained from her face, and she dared a glance at her cousin. Wait—

“That’s why I called the camp.”

Razputin blanched. For perhaps the very first time in his life, he shared the same thought as every Galochio standing there in that kitchen.

...What?

Adelasia didn’t go against the grain. She didn’t argue with anyone but her own husband, and even that was rare. She most certainly didn’t make such quick, important decisions that would affect the family so significantly.

Raz had no delusions about the fact that he wasn’t going to camp. But to hear this woman, of all people, announce she had called the Psychonauts, even for his cousin, was such a shock that he nearly forgot he’d be dead within a few minutes.

Just for a moment.

“It’ll be good for her. I think it’d be good for Razputin, too. Just one summer, around kids their own age, and professionals—”

“Professionals? We are the Galochios! No one knows more about precognition than we do! This has been our family business for centuries, and you want to pawn your daughter off to – to some government psychopaths in the middle of the woods?”

“Whatever she needs, whatever help she needs to learn how to do this, she’s clearly not getting it here. Ornella has been training her for years and she can’t even guess what card you’re holding up!”

Mina shrank away from the accusation. It was true, of course, but it stung all the same. Quietly - sheepishly - she glanced at Razputin.

This had not been part of the plan.

“Absolutely not! We’re not sending out children out to be babysat by a bunch of—”

“You don’t have to send your kids anywhere. I’m sure they’d be happy to stick around. But Guillelmina is going to that camp. It’s paid for. It’s arranged. It’s not open for discussion. And if you know what’s good for him, you’ll let Razputin go with her. I already discussed it with them – they have a reservation for him. Twenty four hours. But I’m not his legal guardian—”

“Dannatamente giusto, you’re not. I am. If you want to send your daughter to be brainwashed by the government, fine, but my baby isn’t going to even speak to those awful people!”

Raz closed his eyes, still painfully aware of the rough grip around his arm but doing nothing to draw any more attention to himself. The longer the adults argued, the more precious seconds he could enjoy having an intact mind and a living body. He only barely acknowledged Mina’s look with a flick of his own gaze very briefly. Terror still blared through his head, but there was now an undercurrent of morbid curiosity about the entire fiasco.

Would his cousin actually be allowed to go to this camp run by the people the Galochios hated so much? Maybe she would, and maybe she'd get good enough to learn how to see the future, or even become an agent herself someday.

If they did let her go, he hoped they let him live long enough to see her off. He couldn't believe he was thinking this, but there was a smidgen of care for her after she'd finally started treating him like a person.

Mina felt something bubble up in her chest, and before she could realize that it was panic, the words had already pushed their way past her lips, out into the open between her quarreling family members.

"I don't want to go without Raz!" She blurted, and immediately felt his dread settle itself in the back of her mind. She swallowed thickly and looked over at him, pointedly avoiding the surprised look her mother was giving her, or the dangerous glares from her great-grandparents.

"I... camp sounds fun and all, and— I want to learn! — but... I— I— I don't want to be alone all summer..."

Her cousin's eyes snapped open and he gaped at her in shock. Why was she sticking her neck out for him? Why hadn't she realized yet that it was pointless to try to change their minds, and that it'd only make them more upset?

The worst part of it all? The absolute worst part of this entire scenario?

He was right.

Her efforts, her plan, her little white lies, it was all futile. Pointless to try to change their minds, and it only made them more upset. The way Zalto practically tossed him aside, into his wife's waiting arms, to turn on Guillelmina, was careless and cruel.

"If you go to that God forsaken camp," Zalto hissed to her, "then you had better not come back."

"That's enough." The room fell silent, with Zanobi's deep voice cutting across his grandfather's cruel hiss. "You don't have to agree with the Psychonauts," he said slowly, coolly, and deceptively calmly. "But you don't get to talk to my daughter like that. And you don't get to decide where she spends her summer. If Addie thinks this camp is a good idea, then we're sending her away for the summer. That's our decision. We're her parents."

Raz stumbled into Mithra's arms, flinching as her grip on his shoulders turned sharp, almost possessive. He didn't dare turn his head more than was strictly necessary to watch the entire fight out of the corner of his eye, for fear of drawing any more attention to himself.

The room was charged with powerful psychic energy from all sides, defensive and prickly and dangerous, and he felt like a fly trapped between bug zappers.

He was a fly trapped between bug zappers, and they were all eager to fry him to a crisp. Mithra's hold on him was paralyzing in more ways than one, and she refused to let go. If anyone were going to fry him alive, it was going to be her.

At long last, Zalto buckled, positively sizzling with his own explosive psychic energy, and told his grandson to send his daughter to that god forsaken camp if he really had to, but he wouldn't be held responsible for the kinds of things they put in her head!

And with that, he stormed out of the house.

Dead silence followed the patriarch's furious leave. Razputin didn't let go of the breath he was holding. It was still too risky.

"Well," Mithra said softly, the woman's voice shooting down Raz's spine like lightning. "You'd better go get packed, bambina," she said to Mina. "You need to make sure you have everything you'll need to be all alone."

Mina swallowed thickly, and backed away slowly, gaze locked on Razputin.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

It wasn't how she had wanted it to go, and Raz knew it would have been stupid to hope for such a thing. He stopped meeting his cousin's eyes to bury his face into his nonnetta's shoulder, clinging to comfort before it was taken away.

Mithra wrapped her arms around him, the sharp points of her nails gone from his skin and her hold delicate and full of care once more. "Oh, my love. Don't worry. You're not going anywhere, my pet," she soothed.

He didn't trust himself not to burst into tears if he said a single word out loud. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her and tried to make himself small.

I didn't know about that thing! He pleaded so quietly against the outskirts of her mind. Really I didn't! I tried to call you when I saw her holding it! I didn't want to keep secrets, I wanted to be good, I promise!

"Oh, pet," Mithra cooed, holding him close. She smoothed his hair down with one hand, feeling the way he trembled minutely against her. He was so small, so frightened. He wanted to be her perfect little pet - she knew he did - but no matter what he did, no matter what he said or how he let her pose him like a little doll, he would always, always just be a loathsome little mistake.

She held him at arms' length for a moment, and lifted his chin to bring his gaze to hers.

"I wish I could believe that."

Pupils shrank to pinpricks. All color drained from his face and the shaking grew so visibly terrible it could be mistaken that he was suffering frostbite.

It was a miracle he didn't burst into tears.

"P-P-Please," he tried again, holding perfectly still under her touch. His voice was one wrong tremor away from giving out completely. "Please, I d-didn't know. You can ask her, you can - you can search my memories! I didn't know about it, mama, I really didn't..."

"I told you, Razputin," she said, her voice soft and dangerous. "I gave you one more chance, and this is what I come home to? I saw all that psychonauts garbage you brought into this house. All those comic books. You expect me to believe that Guillelmina of all people just happened to find something like that?" Her touch against his face was gentle, incongruent with the cold look in her eyes as she gazed down at him.

She caressed his cheek delicately, and smiled down at him. "You're a liar, Razputin. And now you're going to be punished like one."

That was the final straw to break the dam, and Raz began crying all over again.

He was going to die. Zalto would either fry him or drown him, or both, and he had nothing left to protect him. He was going to die a painful, gruesome death, and the only person who had started to realize how awful that was was leaving. Was the one who, for all her good intentions, had been the one to damn him.

He keened, tears falling like miniature rivers, and closed his eyes so that he no longer had to meet her cold, cold gaze.

Even if he couldn't see her, the delicate touch against his face was more than enough to remind him of her presence and the predatory was she looked down at him. He could feel it in her gaze, in every touch: no matter how much she loved him, she never saw him as anything more than an Aquato to be snuffed out of the world, just like the rest of his family.

"I love you, Razputin. You know that, don't you?" She asked, brushing a thumb at the crest of his cheek. "I love you so much... I can't bear to lose you."

"I - don't - w-want to - die!" He sobbed. "Please mama, p-please don't let m-me die! I'm sorry! I l-love you too, mama, I'll do - do anything! A-Anything for you!"

Anything so that you'll protect me. Anything so that you'll let me live.

She hummed, and smiled down at him. "I know you would, pet. I know you would."

Truth be told, she didn't care whether or not he'd brought that pamphlet or if he was telling the truth and Guillelmina had somehow gotten her hands on it from somewhere else. The truth didn't matter. Whether or not Razputin was lying, honestly, did not matter.

What mattered was that the boy had finally, finally reached his breaking point. He was completely and utterly convinced he was going to die, today. That she and her husband would drag him out back and hold him under the glassy surface of the lake until he stopped twitching - a mercy compared to some other things her husband had talked about in his frustration.

And now...

Now was the perfect moment. She looked down at her cowering little pet, sobbing and pleading and afraid for his life. It was so beautiful.

"I don't want to lose you... and if you trust me, Razputin," she told him, "I think I know how I can give you one last, final chance."

He latched onto those words with everything he had, even as he continued to hyperventilate and bawl his eyes out.

"I trust you! I do! Anything!"

His fear was fascinating, but just a bit too noisy, a bit too messy for her liking. Not nearly pretty enough. His panic was overwhelming him in all the wrong ways, and as she brushed her thumb against his cheek to wipe away his tears, he felt the first wave of manufactured calm wash over him.

He still trembled, still knew that his death lay just on the horizon, but the outward symptoms of his terror were muted, now. Picturesque, as he looked up at her with big, watery eyes and trembling lips, clutching onto her blouse as he desperately begged her mercy.

She cupped his cheek delicately, feeling the way his breath hitched and hiccupped, and smiled down at him.

"I'm going to put you to sleep," she told him. "Safe and sound, forever."

For a single moment, the terror in his eyes was not only for his death. For one single moment, the flash of primal panic that lit his gaze was for the suggestion itself.

He feared being asleep. He feared not knowing. He feared losing control.

But that all fell to the wayside as he faced his own, very real mortality.

The flicker of hesitancy disappeared, and Raz, forced into calm and cute silence, could do nothing but nod.

I'll do it. You can do it. I don't want to die.

He looked up at her. He had no choice. He could already feel the warm haziness of Mithra's hold over his brain already sinking in. She was gentle and maternal even as she presented him with a terrible decision, and though every movement was already under her control, his will was his own. She wanted him to give it up freely, and she wasn't disappointed.

Mithra let out a happy little sigh, smiling down at him with something unmistakably triumphant in her eyes.

"You're going to be perfect," she told him softly. "My perfect little doll."

And the world went black.

The little Aquato boy didn't even slump forward as she took his consciousness. Everything in his eyes simply faded, dulling the beautiful green, and his head lolled forward not even enough for his chin to hit his chest. He stood there silent and docile and waiting, and only the tear tracks on his face were any indication of what situation he had found himself in, for such terrible deal to have just been struck.

Mithra admired her work, how he was completely blank and obedient for her in that moment. Finally, the Aquato in him was snuffed out, leaving only the lovable parts of him behind. He was a doll, and a wonderful replacement for the great-grandchild she was losing to those government hounds.

But oh... sometimes sacrifices had to be made for the things you truly wanted in life.

The tent was no longer a tent. Such a large hole had been ripped into it from above that there was no shelter to be had from the rain coming down relentlessly. Raz stared up at dark storm clouds as water pelted his face and body.

He was lying flat on his back, and couldn't get up. Or, perhaps, he simply didn't want to. Sure he was soaked, but there was no cover to be had around here anyway. Might as well stay in this spot and drift.

Something bumped lightly against his head as his strange companion laid down next to him. He didn't have to even glance their way to know they no longer resembled the purple woman.

Now, it was just him.

He found he appreciated the company.

Guillelmina couldn't stop herself from trembling as she helped her mother pack her things. She was... going to camp whispering rock. She didn't want to. She desperately didn't want to, because she knew that when she left, she was never going to see Raz alive again. Something wicked in the back of her mind was certain of it.

She tried to confess - tried to tell her mother that she didn't really want to go to this camp, that she'd thought it would be something fun for her and Raz to do. Adelasia was always pushing her daughter to get to know her cousin better, after all. But the rest of the Galochios wouldn't hear it.

He wasn't going to that camp, and she was, and the world seemed so upside down.

"Mama, please, you can't make Raz stay here all on his own! They... they don't... they treat him mean! I don't want him to be on his own! Please, you have to let him come with me, or let me stay here! I promise we'll get along, I promise!"

"You're not being punished, bambina," Adelasia said sweetly, smoothing her daughter's curls.

"You're just going to be away for a few weeks while the psychonauts teach you how to use your powers. They'll teach you in different ways than you're used to, so maybe it'll help you figure it out!"

"But—"

"Enough chatter. We have to get you packed!"

"We had no other choice, y'know."

Raz stared up at the dark sky. "I know."

"They were going to kill us otherwise."

"I know."

The other him seemed surprised at the easy acceptance, because they fell silent for a few moments. Even though they were also facing upwards, Raz could feel their eyes on him, somehow.

"Do you regret it?"

"...I don't know."

Guillelmina hauled her suitcase down the steps one at a time, unable to just TK it downstairs. She was going to be leaving soon, and the world felt slow and unreal as she struggled down the stairs.

She came to the bottom, watching her great-grandmother and her cousin standing there in the foyer after the fallout of the argument that had just rocked through the Galochio household. He was still for her, blank in her hold.

Her grip tightened against the handle of her suitcase as she watched Mithra smile down at him. Razputin was completely gone.

Mithra caught her gaze, and the smile didn't even flicker.

In an attempt to avoid death, it appeared he had accepted a fate worse than death. Deep in the recesses of his own head, Raz mulled over this fact with the same detached thought he'd had since falling asleep.

He wondered if that was Mithra's doing, or a sign of his own mind finally breaking from the stress of it all. Maybe it was both.

"I didn't want to fall asleep," he admitted softly. His counterpart let out a toneless hum.

"But you wanted to survive. You need to survive."

"Maybe...there was another way..."

"If there was," Other Him responded, sounding both saddened and quietly seething, "it stopped being possible when she blew our defenses to smithereens."

Anger was too exhausting. Hurt was numbed by something beyond his control. Raz shrugged and didn't dwell on the past any more than necessary. That was Other Him's job now, it seemed.

"Can't he come with me?" Mina asked, in that tiny, frightened tone of voice she often used with her elders. "I— I don't want to go alone." It was a lie. She didn't want to go at all, but she wanted to leave him alone even less. He was blank, unresponsive, unaware that he was even being talked about in that moment.

"Of course not," Mithra said sweetly, reaching one hand to Mina's cheek in the same way she'd soothed Raz. "He has to stay here, with me. I would be so lonely without him, since you're going out to betray the family, and all."

Mina winced, feeling her stomach churn with guilt. She didn't want to! But to explain her pleas to Mithra would only get him in even more trouble. If she couldn't get him out of the house... out of Mithra's grip...

"He... he's..."

"Safe and sound," their great-grandmother assured her. "Nothing's wrong with him, and I'll be able to keep him out of trouble like this, don't you know?"

She hummed uncertainly, eyeing her cousin.

Mithra turned her attention back to Razputin, unwilling to entertain Mina's whining complaints. "Trust me, bambina, he's better off this way."

Perhaps it was because he was so separated from all his emotions. Perhaps, it was because his companion no longer resembled a terrifying stranger. Whatever the reason, Razputin found himself finally willing to ask the question he'd been wondering for a long time.

"Who are you?"

Zanobi didn't like this. He didn't like the idea of shipping his daughter off to a bunch of strangers to teach her what they, the Galochios, knew better than any government psychics. It was absurd.

But, at the same time, he couldn't deny that his daughter was... lacking, in her powers. He hauled her suitcase into the back and made sure she was properly buckled, not even giving the house or the little boy standing on the porch a second glance. He looked out blankly, watching Mina's departure with his keeper, her hands on his shoulders - greedy and possessive, unwilling to let her prize go. She might have lost a great-granddaughter that day, but she'd finally won the prize she'd been working towards for months.

Blank and obedient, Razputin was no longer a person.

Hands landed feather-light on his shoulders, even though he was still laying down. The dark sky was blotted out by a dark silhouette leaning over him.

And yet, somehow, it was not nearly as foreboding as it felt like it was supposed to be.

“I,” they said, staring down at him with eyes that glowed, “am the reason we’re going to survive.”

Guillelmina twisted in her seat, trying to sit up on her knees as the car pulled away from the house. This was it. Everything had gone wrong, and she can’t help but feel like if she had listened to him months ago they might have been able to figure out how to avoid this fate.

Her heart hammered in her chest, a part of her afraid that the moment she couldn’t see him, he would be gone. Gone gone. Afraid that her family was going to—

“Mina, quanto bella, Sit down,” her father said, glancing at her through the rearview mirror.

Obediently, as though she were the one under her great-grandmother’s influence, she sank back into her seat, feeling small and alone and utterly, entirely responsible.

Fury and desperation and fear washed over Razputin like water at Other Him’s declaration. He found he didn’t really mind it.

At least there was some part of him still feeling.

Mithra and her little doll stood on the porch and watched until the car was out of sight. With Guillelmina gone, there would be no more bickering, no more skittish nervousness, no more trying to undo the carefully crafted hypnosis she held him under. She smoothed down his hair.

“Well, pet,” she sighed. “That’s that. Let’s go inside. You and I are going to have a wonderful summer together.”

There was a ripple through Razputin’s awareness.

It wasn’t the usual kind of ripple, when a Galochio directed their general animosity towards him for any number of reasons he wasn’t awake to actually know, but that his psychic consciousness picked up anyway in its hypervigilance to stay alive. Those were normal. Those were standard. Those were what he was used to.

This was a ripple so powerfully full of hatred that he very nearly lost the mental form he’d worked so hard to maintain from the shock of it. It wasn’t directed at him, either, but more in some random wave that felt almost like the explosion of a bomb.

Whatever it was, whatever the reason for it, it woke Raz right out of his dreaming and into the grey limbo of his mindscape.

This was unacceptable! Unbelievable! The family was unprepared for this - and even if they had been prepared, they didn’t want to entertain the idea! The energy that rippled through the Galochio home was rancid, seething and boiling over with outrage.

Distinctly, even through the haze of the hypnosis that Raz existed in, he could feel Mithra's presence. She was his shepherd, his whole world. She was the only tether to reality that existed in his mind anymore, and she made sure to maintain the strings that she'd woven carefully around his mind. But not even her manufactured calm could mask the fury that the Galochio household felt - and the bolt of nervousness that lay at its center.

As she flooded his senses and wrapped around his wavering mental form, trying to bury that bolt under vague reassurances, he couldn't help but let his worried curiosity shine through to her.

What's going on, mama? Did I do something wrong?

No, pet, the reassurance washed over him like a warm tide. This isn't about you. Be a good little pet for mama and go put the kettle on, Mithra's gentle command came through. It wasn't a request - there was nothing Raz could do but obey.

We have company.

He was too far back in his own head to feel his body move without his consent or control, and it had been that way for so long that he had long stopped trying to fight it. He hunkered down in his mindscape instead, a little mote of light instead of his bodily form to show her he was docile and obedient even when there was nothing he could do against her anyways.

Company. The word had been spat more than said, and he couldn't for the life of him figure out why. Most of the company the Galochios had were clients, and the rest friends of Ignazio or Zanobi for evenings of drinking and complaining and screwing with him within his mind. What kind of company would make them react so terribly?

Maybe...? No. No, there was no hope for that. She was long gone, and he couldn't risk the bitterness that rose at the thought of her out right now. Not when he was showing how good he was for Mithra.

He knew the consequences of misbehaving when the Galochios had company over; whether it be a client who didn't have the slightest idea about the situation he endured, or friends of Ignazio and Zanobi who treated him like a trained animal on display, there was a price to pay for fighting back, Mithra had made it clear that even the most minor pushback against her hold, against her orders, was going to be met with punishment.

She never punished him, of course. She was there to soothe him hurt, to cradle his weakened consciousness in her astral arms until he was ready to face her commands once more. No, Mithra was never the one to dole out punishment for his infractions.

That pleasure went to her husband.

So naturally, as the Galochios fret and fussed over this guest in their home, Razputin went about his business, emotionless and obedient, and set the tray to be taken into the drawing room for the Galochios and their... guest.

He had been doing this in his sleep for what felt like an eternity, but even if he hadn't, it was such a familiar set of motions that he would have been able to do it awake, too. Tea had been properly steeped at just the right temperature, poured perfectly into the cup, then set on a saucer on the tray, alongside a little pot of sugar and a bite-sized sandwich - which had also been expertly dolled up by him.

Razputin, eyes blank and body without emotion, lifted the tray and carried it into the other room with a grace that would have fooled any stranger.

Mithra waited on her little servant, sitting primly in the drawing room across from her guest. To be quite honest, she didn't feel like taking tea with this particular person. Very few in the house did, it seemed, and her husband refused to so much as look at their guest.

She sat there, across from Mithra, calm and cool as though half the Galochios weren't trying to light her on fire with their pyro in that moment. It was remarkably warm in here, but she didn't even blink.

"I was worried I might have missed you. Glad I managed to catch you before the seasonal move," Guillelmina said. "It's been a while. I wasn't even sure if you still came back to this house anymore."

"Mm." Catalda examined her nails, filed to dangerous points, from her position on a nearby plush chair. "And I'm surprised you remembered the address, or the house at all. Certainly seemed like you forgot everything else, didn't you?"

"Hardly," Mina said to her great-aunt. She heard the kitchen door open, pushed through by someone tending to his duties around the house. "Not a day went by where I didn't think of this place and the people living here. I learned a lot with the Psychonauts," she said. "But I couldn't forget about this place if I tried."

"Real heartwarming," Ignazio glared at her with folded arms, "but your disappearance for nine years says otherwise."

A new person entered the room. His face was devoid of emotion - of anything - and he set the tray down carefully in front of Guillelmina without actually looking at her. His gaze was a million miles away.

Razputin, nineteen years old, and still miraculously alive.

She could hardly believe her eyes, and if she weren't under the scrutiny of the rest of their family, she would have wept. She felt the lump in her throat despite her best efforts to swallow it, to remain passive and unexpressive.

When she'd left this house nine years ago, she had been sure. She'd been sure that would be the last time she would ever see him alive again.

She took a deep breath, and accepted the tray with a quiet thank you.

"Like I said. The Psychonauts had a lot to teach me," she managed to say with a level voice, her gaze falling upon her great-uncle. "I kept waiting to come home, until I could divine, just like you always wanted me to."

Zanobi had been sitting in stony silence between Ornella and Zalto, and it was clear by the tension across the three of them that they, if not the entire family, laid some of the blame for Mina's escapades on him.

Now, however, he finally raised his gaze to hers. His voice was low but with a tint of something...almost forgiving. "Then...can you?"

In the background, Ignazio snapped his fingers, and Raz stepped to his side instantly.

"Go get me a beer. I'm too sober for this shit."

Her cousin disappeared through the door again.

"See the future?" She asked coolly. This... this was something she was prepared for. Something she'd been prepared for for a long time. "No." It was spoken flatly, unconcerned and without regret.

"They straightened me out within the first summer. Told me I'd never be able to see the future. Told me about a power called retrocognition - the ability to divine events of the past. Just like fortune-telling, but backwards. Funny, right?" There was a dry humor in her voice that suggested there had been absolutely nothing funny about it when the Psychonauts had first broke the news to her.

But comedy was tragedy plus time, and Mina had had a lot of time, and a lot of training in her inherent powers, to help her see the brighter side of things.

"As you can imagine, I'm not here because of the family business."

If she had thought the smoldering silence in the room was bad upon her arrival, it was nothing compared to the moment she finished her confession. One could hear a pin drop in the room as every member of the family gaped at her, incredulous. Fury took its place, and Zanobi's eyes dropped to the floor again as Zalto gripped his cane so tightly no one could tell whether the creaking was caused by that or his teeth grinding.

Razputin came back into the room, can in hand, and all their gazes swung to him, full of hatred and shock and disdain. He stuttered in his step for half a second as if short-circuiting under the brunt of all of it. Mithra's eyes stayed on him a little longer than the rest, and he righted himself like nothing had ever happened.

"Then what. Pray Tell. Are you here for?" Zalto hissed every word between his clenched teeth, looking like he was a moment's notice from reaching across the table to shake Guillelmina by her hair.

Guillelmina didn't answer for a moment. She took her tea in her hands, and blew gently on it. It was piping hot, and she didn't dare let the near-boiling liquid touch skin. The warmth was pleasant in her hands, though, and she simply sat there, held it, and waited.

"To visit my family, of course. It's been nine years, after all. I only meant to spend a summer there, but things... got out of hand, I guess you could say." Things had gotten out of hand, certainly, but it had nothing to do with the Psychonauts. She pointedly avoided looking up at her silent, obedient cousin.

"Got out of hand? Got out of hand?!" The patriarch snarled, poised as if to leap out of his seat. "You were stolen from us, Guillelmina! Stolen by the government! And then you betrayed us by refusing to return when we were finally able to find you again!"

A long, heavy silence followed, and she looked at Zalto with some nebulous, unknowable expression. Tactical fear and sadness warred on her face for a moment, before she finally sobered up enough to speak again.

"I told myself, when I was little, that I would train with the psychonauts until I was the best psychic I could be. I spent so many years here, unable to divine like the rest of you. When I left I felt like I finally had a chance to do something right," she said, and everything that came out of her mouth had been true, once upon a time. "The Psychonauts know everything about everything about being psychic. If they couldn't teach a dud like me, who could?"

It had taken her quite a few years to unlearn the idea that she was a worthless psychic, a dud, someone whose powers wouldn't - couldn't - amount to much of anything. That her natural talents were worthless. When she'd been younger, all she'd really wanted was to return to the family and set everything right.

But that was then, and this was now, and in the now, her cousin waited obediently in the corner. She'd held this secret close to her chest for years. She had vowed to be the best psychic she could be once she returned to the Galochio household, but not for her own benefit - and certainly not for theirs.

Zalto's expression darkened with every mention of the Psychonauts and Mina's lack of psychic prowess, and by the end of it he was barely keeping himself from exploding at her only because of the other family members in the room. He was always in full control of his powers, but one could never be too careful when dealing with white hot blind rage.

"And clearly they could not, since you come back to us a failure regardless," he said lowly. "You turned your back on your family and put your faith in strangers, all for nothing. And now you think you can simply drop by for a visit, unannounced, as if the last nine years we hadn't thought you were dead or brainwashed or worse?"

Now, he stood, jabbing his finger at her and then the front door.

"You are no longer welcome here, Guillelmina. Just as you have renounced us, we now renounce you. Se ne vada."

Mina didn't flinch under her great-grandfather's barely-contained fury or his renunciation. She sat with the teacup in her hands. She was prepared for fury and threats and hatred, prepared for cold silence from the rest of the people who were supposed to love her. It had been nine years.

"I'm not here for Galochio approval." She said, and turned her gaze upon her great-grandmother. "Like I said - I'm came back to visit my family. All of it."

The truth many of the Galochios had likely long-suspected was out, now. She hadn't come back for any of them.

She'd come back for Razputin.

Shocked silence fell among them for a second time. Mithra's eyes widened at the same time Zalto's narrowed, and no one could help the collective glance at the young man standing in the corner, forgotten by everyone.

Until now.

The patriarch opened his mouth in a snarl, ready to give his great-granddaughter another scathing rejection, but he was beaten to the punch by laughter. Mithra's laughter.

"Topolina! You're still so silly after all these years," she chuckled, cruelly delighted. "I forgot you had left us before my pet was properly in his place. No, dear, no, he is not family, and has never been. I thought you understood that even as a child. Were you simply that ignorant, or did the Psychonauts warp your understanding of things?"

Her breath caught, and it was her turn to stare in shock. She looked at her great-grandmother's poisonous joviality. He's not family, and he's never been twisted cruelly in her stomach as she looked up at him. He was a servant, to them. A particularly useful decoration.

"You..." All of the cool, collected confidence left her. She felt nine again, under the hash stares of her family. "All that time, you wanted him like this? All that talk about protecting him, about second chances, then, was - what? Just..." Just an act. They were performers, after all.

It had all just been a means to an end. A way for Mithra to win control over him.

"Mm, it seems my little bambolino wasn't the only one who fell for the illusion," Mithra purred through her smirk. "You used to get so upset about the attention I gave him, do you remember? So jealous of the Aquato, you were. I would have clued you in, but dear, you were never very good at keeping secrets, and I was worried you might throw the truth in his face during one of your adorable little squabbles. I couldn't risk my hard work being undone so carelessly, you understand!"

She didn't snap her fingers like Ignazio. She didn't need to. She simply gave one glancing look and the subject of their "conversation" was at her side in a flash. She hooked an arm around his waist to pull him closer to the couch arm she leaned against, and her gaze never left Mina's.

Mina felt cold as Mithra gloated over the long con. She'd pulled the wool over her eyes all these years, and Mina felt like a fool for ever having thought that the Galochios had ever given him a fair chance.

"You can't keep him like this," Mina told her great grandmother. "It's monstrous." But even as those words left her mouth, she knew they were falling on deaf ears.

"'Keep him like this'...? Guillelmina, this is how he's been since you left. It's the only existence he deserves." She made Razputin crouch so she could grip him by his jaw. He never lost the see-through stare. "Your nonno was only going to tolerate a living Aquato for so long, you know. He gets to live this way. Isn't that what you wanted?"

Mithra remembered a dinner conversation long ago, when her great-granddaughter asked - hoped - that her cousin's talk of being killed was just dramatics. The empathy had been endearing if not a little annoying.

Now, it was just funny.

Guillelmina had not believed, at the time that conversation took place all those years ago, that her family was capable of such things - threatening to kill a child just because he misbehaved, just because they didn't like him, it had seemed impossible at the time. She had learned quickly, when she was little, just how wrong she'd been.

But now, it was dawning on her, she'd had no clue. This whole time, no clue how horrible, how cruel and compassionless her family truly was towards this boy.

"What do you mean," she asked, her voice low and measured, "that's how he's been since I left. Mithra... I've been gone for nine years."

The older woman met her gaze with such calm coolness that one might think she had just been asked what her pet's name was, instead of the life of a person she'd held between her fingers for nearly a decade.

"You heard me perfectly well the first time, Guillelmina."

She placed her cup of tea down on the table between them with trembling hands. Nine years. Almost a decade, she'd been away from home. Almost a decade, they'd kept him like this. They'd refused to let him be a person, and it made her sick to her core. She swallowed thickly, her throat tight with some unidentifiable emotion that raged through her, and stood. For one brief, shining moment, it looked as if the turncoat Galochio was going to take her leave.

"Wake him up," she said, and the tone of her voice was unmistakable. Trembling, certainly, but an order nonetheless.

The cold turned to ice as Mithra visibly bristled at the younger woman's command.

“Now, dear, I’ve tolerated your disrespect quite a while - your unannounced arrival, your insistence on defending the people who turned you against us, and the informal way you’ve been addressing me. What I will not tolerate is for you to order me around in my own home.”

She paused as a thought occurred, and the corners of her mouth began to slide back up.

“But I love showing off my powers and my pet, so perhaps I’ll let it go, just this once. If you can ask nicely. Like how you used to. You still remember how, yes?”

Guillelmina went silent, and felt her ears and the back of her neck grow hot, praying the discomfort did not color her face. She bit the inside of her cheek, and cast her gaze down to the tray between them.

“Please, nonnetta,” she said, eventually. It may have been years since she had lived here, but she never forgot the deference. “You’re the only one powerful enough to wake him up. Your hypnosis is unparalleled. Please wake him up. Let me speak with him.”

Let me make sure he’s still in there.

The matriarch smiled, and there was nothing but condescension in her eyes. She turned to her husband and patted his hand.

“Look at that, mio caro. Her manners are still there, deep down. She is not lost to us yet.”

When the man only grunted in reply, clearly trying to keep his temper in check, Mithra patted his hand one more time before turning back to Mina.

“I suppose a demonstration wouldn’t hurt. One more reminder of everything you’ve lost before you leave, yes?”

Deep, deep inside Raz’s mind, he felt something shift. The hatred and fury were still pressing down from all around him, and Mithra’s attention had been so divided that she had failed to notice how nervous he had gotten about it all.

What was going on? Who was here? Why was the family so upset? What if it had to do with him? What if - what if they were finally going to go through with the threats of putting him out of his misery?

The nervousness, hidden under the facade of a calm little mote of light, was quickly bubbling up into terror and desperation. He couldn’t die. Mithra had said she’d protect him. She’d promised she wouldn’t let them do all the things they wanted to do to him.

What if they wouldn’t let her protect him?

“Si,” she conceded, defeat in her voice. “I’ll go. I’ll accept that my disobedience cost my my home and my family. I won’t bother you again, signore,” she said to Zalto, lying through her teeth. The moment she was out of here, she was going to reach back to the people who had taken her in - the people who had trained her up properly to be a defender of free thought - and plead for a rescue mission. What came of the Galochios past this point was beyond her control.

"But please," she breathed, "just let me know he's still in there."

He needed to trust Mithra. That was how it went. She protected him, and he was good for her; back and forth forever. But his panic was morphing more and more into thoughts of her being trapped like him, and it made that old, familiar instinct crawl up his metaphorical throat straight into his psychic senses.

He felt a shift from the outside, too. One he wasn't familiar with. Someone was upset and worried about - about what, he didn't know, but what else could he guess when the hatred and contempt began swelling like a storm again.

Oh, god, they were overpowering her. Forcing her into submission so that they could finally finish the job.

He couldn't let them do that to her. He couldn't let her get hurt. He couldn't let them kill him.

"Mmm," Mithra hummed in the waking world, taking immense pleasure in her great-granddaughter's subservience after acting so high and mighty before. "Well, alright. Just this once, since my bambolino has been so good for me. I'm sure he's dying to see you again."

With everyone's attention on the exchange between the two woman, no one - not even Mithra - noticed the twitch of Razputin's hand at his side.

Razputin always knew that his time on this earth was limited so long as he was under the Galochio roof. Mithra could only protect him for so long, and once she was gone, what would happen to him? His fate lay with the Galochio family one way or another. His fate, no matter the circumstances, was always the same.

He was going to die here.

In the waking world, Guillelmina swallowed thickly, her gaze locked on her cousin as Mithra had him kneel before her, preparing him to wake up after God only knows how long in that terrible limbo of manufactured unconsciousness.

Hands gripping her knees, she found herself holding her breath, fear and apprehension warring in her chest as she prayed he would wake up, safe and sound.

Mithra began tapping at him, but none of her soothing calm was drenching his mind. She wanted him to be confused and worried as he awoke, so that it could all be directed at his cousin as soon as he laid eyes on her. It was going to be fantastic.

He was being pulled out of his head, but it was all wrong. She wasn't reaching out to him; she wasn't letting him know she was doing it and not to worry, and that it wouldn't be for very long. All he felt was a brick wall when he called out, and it spiked his terror too high to keep under wraps any longer.

Pressure in the back of his mind was building, building, building too fast to stop, but he was starting to think he didn't want it to stop. Maybe if he fought back, he could help her. Maybe if he

fought back, she'd break free of whatever situation they'd stuck her in to make her back down, and she would protect him again.

There was a single moment, in every rare instance that Raz was allowed to surface, where he could feel the collective connection of the rest of the family attached to his psyche. He'd paid close attention to it and never forgot it. And now, he could do something with it.

There were eight people in the room - he knew because Mithra had said they had company. That meant seven people to stop in one go, and he didn't dare second guess himself as his senses started coming back to him one by one. He only had one chance before it was too late. He had to make it count.

Raz's energy spiked, coalescing into one powerful controlled point. All he had to do was avoid the energy of whoever was worried for him. That had to be Mithra. He couldn't hurt her.

He just had to remove everyone else.

Mithra tapped the center of Razputin's forehead. He gasped, sharp and quick, and his eyes snapped open. Glowing.

Seven people hit the ground.

Guillelmina felt a shockwave of... something burst through the room. It was incredibly violent, like being centimeters from a bolt of lightning, and in the blink of an eye the rest of her family collapsed, bodies slumped against each other, heads lolled back or forward against their chest as each of them succumbed to the incredible jolt of psychic energy that had just ripped through the room.

She, too, gasped, the bright flash from his eyes and the power that burst forth from him catching her wholly off guard. He was powerful, and he was afraid, and she and her cousin were the only two people left in the house still standing. Zalto, Mithra, Ornella, Ignazio, Catalda, Zanobi, and Adelasia, all unconscious - breathing, alive, but unconscious and scrambled - left her alone with her cousin.

"Razputin..." She breathed.

She moved without thinking, not even realizing it before her hands were on his face, examining him, ignoring the bodies of her former loved ones. "Oh my god. Raz. Raz, please, tell me you're in there," she begged, trying desperately to get him to focus on her.

There was a split second - kind, concerned features, a gentle touch, dark curls... but no. This wasn't his caretaker.

This wasn't his caretaker at all.

Razputin's eyes were spinning and still glowing, trying to focus on the face of the person so close to him while his senses rode the waves of hypersensitivity and the aftermath of his

psychic explosion left his head feeling like someone was driving a pickaxe through it. His disoriented gaze finally managed to identify her eyes, her face, the lack of wrinkles and -

He froze. This wasn't Mithra. This wasn't Mithra. This was Guillelmina, his traitorous cousin, and he had just made a very big mistake.

A cry bubbled out of his mouth, disjointed and off, as he tried to tear out of her hold. It sent him sprawling backwards, hitting the ground with another gasp as the world spun and his skin buzzed and she was still there. She was still there instead of Mithra.

How long they had kept him locked inside his own head - how long he had gone without input from the real world, how long he had not had any real control over his own limbs... how powerful a blast that had been, to incapacitate seven people in one swift movement, and to pass over her without so much as a scratch.

But then he cried out, and hit the ground violently, crashing into the coffee table and sending tea and shattered china across the living room floor. She scrambled after him, trying to get him back to a stand - she was slight, and not exactly the strongest, but she would have been able to lift a car with the adrenaline that was coursing through her in that moment.

She lifted Razputin from the floor, catching him under the arms as she tried to haul him back to his feet.

"Razputin, you did it! You did it. It's okay, but we have to go, now," she grunted.

He writhed in her hold, getting too much input all at once by senses no longer dulled by hypnosis, on top of the double whammy of a panic attack he was experiencing over the fact that he'd been wrong, he'd messed up, he'd hurt the family, he'd hurt Mithra, and oh god, oh god, he needed to make sure she was okay -!

All his struggling managed to accomplish were a few jerky kicks of his legs and harmless pawing at her hands with his own clumsy, uncoordinated fingers. He opened his mouth as if to argue.

"N - N - N!"

But his tongue felt too heavy in his mouth to do anything else but be a hindrance.

She misunderstood. With Raz so out of his own senses, it was hard to make out exactly what he was protesting... but if there was one thing that Mina knew, it was that they didn't have time to protest, to soothe his complaints and his fears.

She kicked the front door open and dragged him out of the house. It was the first time in ten years that he'd felt the sun. First time in ten years that he'd had a breath of fresh air. He'd been trapped in that home for a decade, and now Mina was breaking him out of this prison.

"It's okay. It's okay, Raz, it's just me. It's me. It's Mina. You're okay, you're safe," she tried to soothe him, to help him understand that he hadn't been woken up to be drowned or damaged.

The sun, the fresh air, the grass, the sound of birds. The world outside the Galochio home still existed, and was greeting Razputin's return with more sensory input than his dormant mind could handle.

Raz became boneless as the overwhelming everything hit a crescendo and left him unable to make sense of what was even up or down any more. The sun burned. The light breeze in the air felt like a blast of an open freezer. Birds and trees and all the natural sounds were driving that headache hammer deeper and deeper into his head.

His chest fluttered with panicked, quick, shallow breaths, and it was a miracle he didn't pass out right there on the front lawn.

"N - n - n..." he tried over and over again, failing to climb over the hump of forming an actual word with his actual mouth. He couldn't even manage a mental message - his mind was too focused on not completely falling apart from all the new and strange and terrifying things happening to him all at once.

Keeping him upright while she opened the car door was a feat in an of itself, but she was eventually able to deposit him in the passenger's seat before rushing - heart thundering in her chest - to the driver's seat herself. She buckled them both, turned the engine over, and tore out of the little dirt driveway of her childhood home before anyone still inside the building could even consider coming to their senses.

He sat there with his head buried in his hands, riding out all of this new sensory input after a decade of existing under the heel of the Galochio family.

And she wanted to say he was safe now. She wanted to, desperately. But she knew that the moment the Galochios woke back up, it would be a new and terrible kind of danger he found himself in.

They needed someplace quiet and out of the way, for her to stop and help him. But in this moment, they just needed to get away from this god forsaken house.

The car's constant rumbling was simultaneously too much and exactly what he needed. It was far, far too loud, drumming into his head with the intensity of a rock metal concert, but it was also constant and consistent, which meant he wasn't reeling from the slightest change of anything around him.

Even his own hands covering his face felt like the sting of a slap. It was a small price to pay so that he didn't have to look at the person essentially kidnapping him. So he didn't have to think too hard about his terrible, terrible mistake.

The idea that he might not have wanted to leave never even crossed her mind. All she knew was that if she didn't get him out of there, he would be dead once the Galochios came to. There was no way a concentrated blast like that would go without dire consequences, and the Galochios were already always a breath away from ending his existence.

She waited until they were well out of the way of the house, down a secluded road where no one in pursuit would be able to just stumble upon them. It was there that she rolled to a stop, kicked the car door open, and moved to the trunk.

A psycho isolation bonnet had its uses, when you were an active agent. Even if she was still young, she'd been with the agency for ten years, and had learned a trick or two. Cops carry spare cuffs.

Mina carried a spare bonnet.

Her own mental defenses had been built rigorously over the years. His had been shot to hell when they were kids, and the moment the Galochios came to, they were going to search for him. They were going to try and hurt him the same way she'd had to endure their psychic onslaught all those years ago.

The bonnet clicked heavily into place, and she apologized for the inconvenience of the stiff, heavy material. She knew it was cumbersome. She knew it felt weird, stifling your natural powers. But she couldn't imagine it felt any worse than ten years asleep.

Her cousin didn't respond to her apologies and reassurances beyond curling further into himself the moment she stopped touching him. He didn't dare look at her for fear that he'd burst into tears. Hiding his face like that at least gave the illusion that this was just a really bad dream, or that maybe if he couldn't see her, she couldn't see him.

It was childish and stupid. He knew that. But he was still a child.

They drove for what felt like hours. The car didn't stop, even once the sun had left them alone, silent, together in the car. It was around the three hour mark that the first trickle of psychic energy started to filter in through her defenses.

They were looking.

She didn't stop. She didn't pull over. Her knuckles went white against the steering wheel and she braced herself to hold against the Galochios' oncoming onslaught. She'd been training ten years for this moment, she reminded herself, with a quick glance at her cousin curled up in the seat next to her. Ten years, and he was finally safe.

They wouldn't be able to get at him - not through that bonnet. Not even the Galochios were that powerful. She wasn't even sure they would be able to sense him there.

She took a deep breath, and braced herself.

The trickle was deceptively weak, like sticking a blade of grass into a still pond to cause tiny, imperceptible ripples. It lasted about five seconds, testing the waters, and then someone - six someones - cannonballed straight into her mental walls.

Where are you! Zalto's voice led the charge, snarling and spitting with fury unfelt since the days of the circus. Where is he!

Raz, for all that he was supposedly unreachable, flinched and curled tighter with a terrified whine.

It was not enough to disorient her, although it was for certain enough to make her feel sick. She gripped the steering wheel, turned her hazards on and slowed down. She wasn't going to stop. She was going to push through this and force them all out. Ten years of building her mental defenses for this very moment...

I left. You wanted me out of your hair so bad, so now I'm gone. You don't have to worry about him, she told her great-grandfather. For the first time in ten years, he's actually safe.

Give him back, the man hissed, venomous and deadly as he and the rest of the family pounded against her mind with everything they had. As the seconds trailed on, confusion began to rise in the background among them - either because they couldn't get through to her vulnerable psyche, or because they couldn't find Razputin at all.

That boy's borrowed time is over. He belongs to us, Guillelmina, and it is time for this feud to be done. Bring him back, now.

Like hell I'm going to bring him back - so you can take him out behind the house and drown him? You're never going to see or hear from either of us, ever again. It's done.

She said it with startling conviction for someone whose vision was starting to swim from the onslaught she was fielding. She pulled over on the side of the road, hazards still on, and pressed her forehead against the steering wheel, gritting her teeth and riding it out.

Get through it. Get through it. Get through it. Get through it.

You don't own him. You never owned him.

You have no right! None! Piccola disgraziata traditore! Amante di Aquato! Give him back!

Zalto grew louder and louder at the front of her mind, screaming insults only ever directed at a particular family line. His rage was white hot and did its best to sear into her skull despite not having broken through her walls.

Raz flinched alongside every word, pressed against the passenger door and finally peeking at his cousin between trembling fingers. He gasped and hid his face again right as a second presence rose to speak directly with Mina.

Topolina... Mithra's voice was the polar opposite of her husband's in tone and sound, but the undercurrent of poison couldn't be more clear. This little rebellion of yours needs to stop. I understand you're upset about being cast out of the family, but you should not have brought my bambolino into it. Please bring him back to me. He must be terrified.

"I stayed with the psychonauts because I knew they would be able to help us," she ground out, shuddering with every breath. "I was there. Whatever you did to him, I still remember. I cleaned

up blood and glass and kept my mouth shut because you were my nonnetta. I took that pamphlet and tried to get mama to send him to camp. Anywhere was better than with you."

Guillelmina picked her head up. The world was swimming as she rolled down the windows, desperate for fresh air. and gulped down her dizziness. The other Galochios were not strong enough to break through her mental defenses - not even just to speak with her, though she was sure they all had choice words for their youngest. It was only Zalto and Mithra beating against her defenses.

She blinked rapidly, patient as her vision swam back into focus. The fresh air was good, it helped clear her head.

"You didn't send him, but you still made a mistake," she said, and put the car in drive, pulling back onto the road. She sat rigidly in her seat, hands gripping the steering wheel with a vice grip.

"You sent me instead."

Simmering silence was her answer for a long moment. It seemed as though Mithra didn't have an easy response, or perhaps she had realized that Mina was pushing back against the assault and had to redirect all her focus just to get this tenuous connection. When she spoke again, it was low and quiet and dangerous.

You have no idea what you're getting involved in, grulla. He loves me. He adores me, and you are the one he hates. I am the only one he is loyal to. He'll come back to me in the end, and you will fail.

Yeah, well, that's the one good thing I got from the family: determination; stubbornness.

It was getting easier to breathe - to focus, now - with the connection between them superficial, it was easier to push them out and keep them where they belonged in her mind.

I'm not going to stop. Even if he goes back to you, in the end, I'm not gonna stop until I know he's safe. He was just a kid. He's my cousin, and I care about him. La famiglia e tutto.

Oh, Guillelmina, Mithra cooed, seeming to sense that she was fast losing ground and hoping to get the last word in. All these years and you are still such a silly, stupid little girl. I'll have my pet back soon, and he'll get what's coming to him for his little stunt. Mark my words - you can't protect him forever. You can't even protect him from himself.

And just like that, her voice was gone.

They were going to kill him. They were going to kill him. They were going to kill him.

Mithra's words rang like a death knell in her head, and her blood ran like ice in her body. With the sudden silence in her head, she glanced over at her cousin in the passenger's seat.

No.

No, as long as Mithra couldn't get into his head, as long as she couldn't control him like a puppet with her commands, then they could get through this. He could get through this.

Quietly, she locked her gaze on the road ahead of them, trying not to dwell on how small and frightened he looked, sitting there with her.

Razputin shivered, feeling more alone than ever now that Mithra had left. They couldn't reach him through this strange helmet that his cousin had strapped onto him, but he could feel them going after Mina, trying to make her break down. After nearly a decade of being fine-tuned to the psychic energy of the Galochios while in the limbo of his own head, a contraption like this wasn't enough to override those survival instincts.

They had finally left, either to regroup or to try again another time, or maybe use a different tactic entirely. Whatever the case, he really couldn't say he was relieved by the absence. Now he was alone with his kidnapper, the one who had tricked him into doing the stupid thing he had done, and he had no way of knowing what she wanted with him.

The first time they'd seen each other in so long, and of course she had found a way to screw him over again.

The silence that followed Guillelmina's little call with her great-grandparents was suffocating. She wanted so badly to speak to him, but... what do you say after ten years? What do you say to someone who hasn't been a real person in a decade?

Something gnawed at her heart. No. It wasn't what do you say. It was where do you start.

She looked at him through the rear view mirror, and figured it was as good a place as any. "I'm sorry it took me so long to come home," she told him softly. "I didn't want to be gone for nine years. I didn't want to leave you there."

His fingers clenched where they still covered his face. Now that he wasn't in the throes of about three different panic attacks at once, it was hitting him that she was speaking to him. She was talking to him, out loud, and he honestly couldn't remember the last time anyone had done so.

No, that was a lie. He could remember quite a few times since his slumber had begun, but thinking about any of the Galochios and their threats was...not a good idea, right now.

His eyes became visible again, just a little bit, staring at her and completely unsure about what to do. He couldn't speak even if he wanted to. His tongue had clearly stopped working a long time ago. The actual meaning of her words flew over his head as he struggled to simply parse through the concept of talking without using a mental connection.

No response. Her smile falters, just for a split second as she looks over at him in concern. They can't communicate mentally, right now. Not without taking him out of the psychoisolation bonnet, which she wasn't going to do until he was in a more secure area.

"You were amazing, back there. I know they probably didn't tell you often, but you really are a powerful psychic. It's incredible. That kind of concentrated power - and the ability to fine-tune and target with it... all right out of god only know how long under hypnosis."

She knew it was probably nothing more than a self-preservation instinct. But still, to pass over her so easily, it required some amount of cognition, to pull something like that off. It was impressive, even if it was a reflex.

"I'm sorry about the helmet, too," she added, on the subject of his powers. "I promise, its just so they can't hurt you. Once we get where we're going, I'll take it off you."

He blinked nervously at her with shimmering, owlsh eyes. Her words were like daggers into his heart. She was praising him for his screw-up, praising him like she thought he had meant to avoid hitting her, and all it did was make his stomach twist into knots.

And now she was confirming that she was taking him somewhere. That she had a destination in mind that wouldn't require that she use the helmet anymore, and oh, with what he'd grown up hearing about the Psychonauts, what a horrifying thing that was to learn.

He swallowed and tried to find his voice, if only to make her realize that he didn't want any of this.

"....Ah...I...y-y-you..."

Mina gave a bewildered little breath of a laugh when she heard him. "Yeah, me. God," there was something distinctly heavy in her voice, and she could feel her throat tighten. "For a while there I never thought I'd get the chance to talk to you again."

For a while there, she hadn't thought he'd survived these years alone with the Galochios.

But now they were out of there - both of them, together - and the Psychonauts would help him. It was going to be a long and grueling process, but they were the only ones Mina could think of to help in this awful situation. She'd told her colleagues that she was going to visit her family. When they hadn't anticipated - what no one had anticipated - was this young man, ten years under hypnosis.

She wasn't getting it. She was laughing and smiling and not understanding that she was taking him further and further away from the only person who could protect him. Or maybe she did understand, because she'd obviously had some kind of conversation with Mithra before the connection had been cut loose. He desperately wished he could have heard what that was, so he'd have some idea of what was going on.

"....I-i-i-ssss...." His expression twisted miserably at the pitiful attempt of forming a word, but he had to keep going. "M...m...m-m-mama.....oh-oh-oh-k-k-k-ay?"

Her nervy, barely-held-together smile fled her when he strung his words together. She glanced over at him with some measure of disbelief before she realized that no - no, it wasn't a joke. It was dead serious.

He had knocked Mithra out cold with his power, and now he was worried for her. Mithra, who had tried to kill him at ten years old. Mithra, who had made his life such a living hell that he'd asked to be put under to save his own skin. Mithra, who had kept him like that for ten years. He was nothing but an object to her. An object that had learned one way or another that she was his entire world.

She was all he had.

"Y-yeah," Mina conceded. "Yeah, Mithra's okay. Your blast didn't do any serious damage, it just put them all out for a little while."

There wasn't any release of tension from him at the statement. He simply closed his eyes and took a long, shaky breath, sounding on the verge of tears. Guilt and regret and fear warred all across his features, and now that she wasn't rushing on adrenaline to give them physical distance or fight off her family, it couldn't be more obvious.

Razputin didn't want to be here.

Mina gave him a long look through the rear-view, eventually turning to face him for a moment before making her decision. "It's a long drive back. We should stop for the night. Next exit, we'll get off and find a place to stay. I'm sure you're exhausted," she told him. "You've... been through a lot."

Maybe, with a little bit of time and the comfort of someplace that wasn't the car interior, they would be able to talk a little bit.

Maybe she would be able to explain herself.

Raz didn't respond. His eyes stayed closed and he tucked himself into the corner of the seat against the door, and pretended it was just a bad dream.

Forty minutes of silence in the darkened car, before they pulled into the parking lot of a motel. She sat there, hands still on the steering wheel as she realized they had two options. Either he could take the bonnet off now, or he could march into the lobby wearing the thing.

Of course, there was no question. Take off the helmet before they're in a secure area, and the Galochios would descend upon him like vultures. But she still couldn't help but worry that someone would... notice something was amiss.

She looked over at him, small and miserable in his seat. "You... stay here for a minute," she said, pulling the keys from the ignition, "while I get us a room. Don't... do, anything. Until I get back."

She didn't want to treat him like a captive. He wasn't! But she was a cautious warden.

As she got out of the car, she paused, and locked the doors behind her.

His fingers twitched at the sound of the lock, but there was no other outward reaction as she left him alone. For all intents and purposes, he didn't exist in the waking world right now.

At least, that was what he was trying to convince himself.

It was so much easier being asleep. He could drift or dream or just...not exist for however long the family forgot about him, and it was peaceful like that. Sure, there were times that they came tromping through his mind, tearing and breaking things as they pleased, but those always had a reason. He might have been too slow to respond to a mental call, or didn't show up as the form Mithra expected him to look like even though she rarely articulated what she wanted, or they had company over who were also psychic and wanted to see his state of being for themselves.

And even though it was awful and hurt a lot, Mithra was always there to comfort him afterwards. She could make the pain and fear and mental exhaustion go away, and he desperately tried to replicate the sensation here in this little car of a dark motel parking lot. It was a futile effort.

The quiet solitude lasted not but fifteen minutes before there was a gentle knock on his window. The car door unlocked, and Guillelmina opened his door when she was sure he wasn't still leaning against it.

She didn't order him out. She didn't demand he get out and follow her directions. She just held a hand out for him.

"I got us a room. You'll be more comfortable there. And... maybe we can talk."

There was a lot to say, over ten years' absence. Mina just hoped she could make sense of it all.

A pair of wide unblinking eyes stared out at her from the perceived safety of the inside of the car. Raz glanced from her face to her hand to the imposing building behind her, and it was obvious he wanted nothing to do with any of it.

That only lasted a few moments before resignation covered it all up, and he took her hand with his own shaking one. He tried to get to his feet and nearly toppled over. His free hand shot out and latched onto the open car door as he took ragged breaths and did his best not to let his trembling legs collapse out from under him.

She placed herself underneath him, slinging his arm around her shoulders and placing her arm around his waist while he tried to regain his bearings. These were the first steps he'd taken on his own in ten years. There was no rush. She didn't expect perfection on the first try like the rest of her family did.

It took them another few minutes to make the short journey from the car to the motel room, and Guillelmina helped settle him on the bed once they were inside.

"I know it feels weird moving again, but your motor functions should come back after some more routine use. We can take things slow for now," she told him, locking the car from the window and shutting the blinds.

There was a silent pause between them, and Mina took a deep breath.

"Today's been a lot for you."

Raz stayed hunched over where he sat on one side of the bed, looking downright exhausted. His gaze flicked up to hers as he began to open his mouth, thought better of it, then pointed up at his head. Or more specifically, the helmet.

She shook her head. "We can't take it off until we get you someplace secure, I'm sorry. I know it feels weird, but it's protecting you. If they could get in your head right now... they'd hurt you. I just want you to stay safe."

She moved to him, gently tipping his head to check the latches. "It's called a psychoisolation bonnet. It keeps psychic energy from getting out... or in."

His hand dropped back into his lap, and he was limp as she touched him. His eyes weren't quite in the present.

"...W-w-w-wh-ere are y-you..." he fought to get out, wrestling with every syllable. "...t-t-ak-ing m-me...?"

She pauses, and looks away for a moment. "To a safehouse, where they won't be able to hurt you," she told him. She took a deep breath. It wouldn't be right to lie to him after everything she's put him through. "It's property owned by the Psychonauts. They're going to help you."

Razputin's breath caught in his throat. The Psychonauts. He had already suspected as much, but it was a whole other thing to hear it confirmed out loud. He swallowed and stared at the dark carpet.

A long, long time ago, he'd thought the Psychonauts were heroes, who could save kids like him trapped in a nightmare of psychic involvement. A long time ago, he'd had a half-baked plan to run away to them for help.

A long time ago, his cousin had pulled the rug out from under him with a single, innocent pamphlet, and his life had gone from bad to exponentially worse.

Slowly, like it was remembering how to do it, his face pulled back into a scowl. The way he peered up at her was not nice in any way, and there was no need to take off the helmet to tell what he was thinking.

They never helped me before. You never helped me before. Why should I think otherwise?

She closed her eyes, and let out a slow exhale. "I know," she said softly, looking back at him. There was no challenge in her gaze meeting his. "I know, after all this time, you have no reason to trust any of this. To trust me. I..." she wrung her hands together, and swallowed thickly. "I left you there, and I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Razputin, that I let them do these things to you. But I— I spent every minute of my time away working towards this very moment."

She moved to him, sitting at the edge of the bed at his side.

"You're out," she stressed. "You're finally out, and they can't make you go back. They can't make you do anything, anymore!"

He drew away from her as she neared, looking and acting more like a wounded animal than a young adult. Her promise didn't make sense. It was hopeful and empty to him, just like it had been nine years ago. Okay, yes, he was "out" and wasn't technically under Zalto's thumb or Mithra's warm embrace, but that didn't mean anything. That was just how he was currently, and knowing the family, it was only a matter of time before they found him and dragged him back.

His lips thinned at the thought of that, and what was at the end of that road. He didn't want to die. He'd been so careful, all these years, and now one stupid mistake that she had caused - once again!! - had made it all for naught. Now Mithra couldn't protect him any more. In fact, she probably hated him for what he had done to her.

Raz's mouth curled into a snarl, leaning out of Mina's reach, and the bitter anger could be felt across the room like they were children again and his mind had been leaking all over the place.

This is your fault. This is all your fault!

She moved back when he pulled away. She was already forcing him into such an impossible, uncomfortable position. She didn't want to force him to do anything else he didn't want to. But she couldn't just let the Galochios find him. She refused to let them hurt him any more.

Mina pulled her arms close to her chest, looking over at him with wide eyes. She could feel that bitter anger, that animosity leaking through the bonnet. It wasn't supposed to do that, and it stood as a testament to just how strongly he felt those words that flit through the air between them.

"I- I know. I know it is," she whispered to him. "It is my fault. I should have helped you. Back when we were kids. Back when you begged me to help you escape, after Mithra..." The words caught in her throat, and her face twisted up into something ugly and painful. "I should have helped you. I was just... afraid. But... so were you, I suppose."

Raz couldn't remember what incident had left him begging for his cousin's help, but he remembered the begging itself. The primal terror that had emerged from his mind's vulnerable state and morphed into something beyond description was something he still carried with him. It was the reason he'd lasted for so long. He'd done what he'd had to do to survive.

And now, she was expecting him to put any kind of trust in this unknown situation where everything could go wrong, and he didn't know the rules of the game - and that was if the family didn't catch up to him. She was expecting him to trust her, who had at first refused to believe the reality of his fate, and then had either failed to help him or had actively made his balancing act even harder. The day she left for camp, he'd truly thought he was going to die, and all because she had been stupid enough to think the adults to let him leave; nevermind the fact that she put him in a position where it looked like he had been hiding something so significant and then had passed it onto their youngest when none of them were home.

Then, he'd slept, and any lingering hope that she might come back with outside help had been painfully snuffed out by Zalto and Mithra's scrutiny of every corner of his mind.

Their nonnetta had been right about one thing: Razputin well and truly despised Guillelmina.

Mina didn't go to the Galochio home expecting her cousin to collapse in relief at the sight of her. She didn't expect his love or his forgiveness for what had happened. Hell, it wasn't like they were exactly on good terms when they'd been kids - after ten years under the heel of the Galochio family, Mina didn't exactly expect things to be any better between them.

She knew it was her fault that he was in this position. At least, it was her fault that things had happened the way they had. She had been the catalyst for his sleep, but she knew that this had been Mithra's plan all along. He'd never stood a chance in that home. They were either going to kill him or put him to sleep, and every little mistake, every little slip up would have been grounds for punishment no matter if she'd brought out that pamphlet or not.

It had only been a matter of time, but that didn't mean Mina hadn't been responsible. She'd hurt him in more ways than one when they were children.

But for right now, they sat together, in a little motel room with nothing on the horizon but uncertainty. Mina, for all her wrongdoings in the past, was determined to make this one count.

"And... I know you're scared now. But things are different, Razputin. Things are better now. When was the last time you had peace and quiet in your own head? Thoughts that weren't watched over by people looking for an excuse to hurt you? Mithra wasn't protecting you. She was just as bad as the rest of them, but it's over now."

He stared at the floor, and it was clear he didn't believe her. Mithra was the only good thing in his life. She'd comforted him and let so many bad thoughts slide, promising not to tell the rest of the family about his traitorous mind. If there was ever going to be a realization about the woman who had held him captive in his own head, it wouldn't be for a very long time.

But....maybe Mina had a point about the peace being nice. Maybe it was a little relieving to feel this anger and not immediately being reprimanded for it.

He glanced up at her, not quite meeting her eyes. Of course, she could just be letting him relax first before bringing down her wrath. Make him think he was in the clear for his animosity towards her, and then hurt him for it anyway.

He couldn't risk relaxing. The rules were still unknown.

Mina sighed, seeing the way he clearly didn't trust her words. And why should he? All she'd ever done for him in their youth was get him in trouble - sometimes on purpose - inching him closer and closer to the precipice of disaster at the hands of Zalto or Mithra.

And now, she was asking him to follow her into the wild unknown. Well, not asking, exactly. Guilt twisted her insides despite the fact that she knew this uncharted territory was safer than the life he'd just escaped.

“Things are going to change, Razputin. You’re not going to be punished for every little thing anymore. I’m not going to hurt you,” she offered, knowing they were hollow promises to him. “And neither are the Psychonauts.”

Raz’s mouth twitched at the mention of the Psychonauts. That was a subject that he held so many more conflicting feelings over. They’d been his heroes; a shining beacon of psychics who could do anything and weren’t afraid or ashamed of their powers. That level of awe and idolization had been incredibly difficult for the Galochios to tear apart, and even now, on some level, he still respected them.

But just as Mina had never come for him, neither had they. And he knew that there was even less of an excuse, because his cousin had been a child in a powerless situation. The Psychonauts, supposedly all-knowing and all-powerful, were not.

“W....why-ee, d-d-d-didn’t the Ps-Psychonau-t-t-ts...help?”

Mina’s expression crumpled. All these years, that’s the one thing she hadn’t been able to figure out, either. “I— I don’t know,” she said, hesitantly. “I was just a kid among adults. I tried to tell them about what had happened, but...” She remembered Sasha offering to teach her to build her mental defenses, if it was really so important to her. Milla listening to her talk about her cousin. Oleander, even, handing her blueprint after blueprint over the years that would ‘make extraction a no brainer (not that anyone would lose their brains, of course).’

“The Galochios are very good at covering their tracks,” she said, bitterly, “and the higher ups in the organization said there was nothing they could do. I wasn’t old enough to be considered verifiable intelligence.”

It was a physical blow to hear. Her cousin looked like he had just been slapped, and he curled his arms around himself without sparing her another glance.

He didn’t want to hear anymore. He didn’t want any more proof of how worthless he was; how disposable his life was to everyone who encountered him.

He just wanted to sleep and never wake up again.

She didn’t move to comfort him. It wasn’t her place. He despised her, and any comfort that she had to offer him would seem ingenuous at best and manipulative at the worst.

Instead, she sighed, and moved away.

“I’m sorry. I know none of this is easy. I know it’s a lot for someone who’s been asleep for ten years. But it’s going to get better. You’re safe, now, and everything else we can take in stride. I’m not going to let them hurt you anymore. I know it doesn’t mean much right now, but you have my word on that.”

Razputin’s only response was to turn a little further away as he layed down on the bed. The helmet sat uncomfortably on his head, but he didn’t dare touch it.

She was grateful, at least, that he wasn't trying to tamper with the bonnet. Perhaps he thought doing so would get him in trouble. Perhaps he understood that taking off that helmet would mean he'd be vulnerable as the Galochios continued to search for him.

Perhaps he knew that if they found him after everything that had taken place today, he was a dead man.

Whatever the reason, he didn't mess with it, and didn't do much of anything else, either. He simply shut down, staring unseeing at the far wall, and looked so much more like the doll he'd been made into than the person he was supposed to be.

It was chilling, to see him pass so easily into this lifeless state. She stared for a moment, just to make sure he was still breathing, before carefully covering him with what blanket he wasn't already laying on top of, and getting in the other bed herself.

Neither of them would sleep very well, that night, but Mina tried. The rest of the drive back to the safehouse still lay ahead of them. The Motherlobe was a long ways away from here.

A lullaby. Hands on his face. Whispers of love and safety and care. Dark storm clouds. His own voice hissing about survival, being careful, doing what needs to be done.

Nails digging into his face. A screech. A shatter. Glass tinkling as a million tiny shards -

Raz woke up with a start.

"You okay?" Came Mina's voice in the darkness.

She was not asleep. She'd slept for about half an hour and had been woken up by nightmares much the same as her cousin, except hers were manufactured, implanted into her brain by her own family. At least awake, she could hold down the fort of her mental defenses.

"Nngg..." The sound escaped him before he remembered where he was and whose voice that belonged to. Immediately he tensed, and his mouth clicked shut.

His breathing was still uneven, but he stayed as still and silent as he could as if that would convince her that he didn't exist.

"Razputin...?" She asked, softly, keeping her voice down. If he was still asleep, she didn't want to wake him up, but... she was concerned about him, regardless.

A soft sigh, and she laid back down. "Okay," she whispered.

He didn't drop his guard for quite a long time, and it was only so that he could let out a sad little exhale. The nightmare had left a strange headache at the front of his skull. There was no more sleep he was getting tonight.

A small, recklessly optimistic part of her hoped that tomorrow would be better. That the shock and fear of his psychic blast and being removed from the Galochio home might be diminished

by tomorrow. A little bit of sleep, a few hours between then and now, and breakfast in the morning would hopefully put them both in better spirits for the coming trip.

The small, recklessly optimistic part of her was wrong, of course.

Razputin was exhausted by the time light filtered through the closed blinds. He blinked, trying in vain to wipe away the blurriness in his vision, and waited without moving an inch for his cousin to decide what she wanted him to do.

She didn't want to disturb him; in fact, she let him rest until he was ready to get up. Whether he slept or simply laid there awake, Guillelmina didn't give him any orders.

But she also didn't leave him alone. It wasn't that she didn't trust him, but she couldn't afford to take her eyes off of him and run any risks.

He didn't get up. He stayed laying down, and the minutes trickled by into nearly half an hour with the only sign of his wakefulness being the subtle tension of his shoulders from behind. With his back turned to her, neither could see each other, and both were waiting for a sign to react.

Eventually, Guillelmina made the first move, by getting up and putting on coffee with the little pot on the front table. It sent the warm scent through the motel room, and Mina made two cups, placing one on the nightstand in front of him.

When she set it down gently, she noticed he was awake, and gave him a smile. "Morning," she said softly. It was evident that neither of them had slept very well. "Coffee? We're gonna stop and get breakfast somewhere that isn't... here. But for now..."

Slowly, as if he wasn't entirely sure whether he'd be scolded for doing so, Raz sat up, watching her carefully. It seemed what minimal rest he had gotten had at least helped in making his movements a little less disjointed. Not a lot. Just a little.

He took the mug with uncoordinated hands and clutched it close to his chest, but didn't take a single sip.

She watched him take it, clutching it close to his chest, and didn't so much as ask him to take a sip. If he wanted to drink it, he'd drink it. If he didn't... "There's more sugar and creamer on the counter if you want more. Or, if you don't like coffee..." She shrugged, and took a sip of her own. She liked hers more sugar than actual coffee.

"Whenever you're ready, we can get back on the road. If we don't hit traffic, I'd say it's probably another... six or seven hours to the Motherlobe," she told him.

He stared at her, then the cup, and his fingers curled a little tighter around it despite it being far too warm to be comfortable. A light puff of air left him as he tried to figure out how she wanted him to prepare it to drink. Because obviously she expected him to drink it if she'd made a cup for him.

But he didn't know how...to...

“...I...” His voice came out so soft, so nervous. He feared her reaction, but honesty was the safest route. Lying and keeping secrets always led to worse things. “I’ve....n-never had...c-c-off-ee...how mu-ch d-do I...?”

His voice trailed off as his eyes darted over to the extra ingredients she’d left out “innocently” for him to use. Too little added, and she’d probably think he was refusing her kindness. Too much, and she’d either call him greedy or be offended that he thought what she made wasn’t good enough without help.

“Well,” she stared down into her own cup. “It’s really bitter if you don’t put anything in it. Some people like it like that, but most don’t. And...” Mina, whose blood was about seventy percent caffeine at this point in her life, was beginning to realize that this was probably a bad idea.

He’d gone ten years without sensory input, was already a nervous wreck, and the last thing he needed was his first cup of coffee. “Uh... you know what,” she backpedaled, “on second thought, if you’re not used to coffee, it’s probably not... the best idea before a seven hour ride?” She chuckled nervously, and buried her awkwardness in her own cup. “You can try it if you want, but I... wouldn’t drink the whole thing. We can get you something at breakfast. Are you hungry? When was the last time you ate?”

“U-Um...” Raz wasn’t sure why she’d changed her mind, but he wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth. If she said he probably shouldn’t drink it, then he wasn’t going to drink it. Just as carefully as he’d picked it up, he set the cup back down.

“I don’t...re-mem-ber, the last t-time I, um...M-Mama al-ways t-t-took care of...” He shrugged one shoulder, lost and helpless about how to convey the fact that he honestly couldn’t remember the last time he’d been awake for any kind of meal.

She’d changed her mind because she didn’t want this already frazzled and frightened abuse victim to think he was actually dying because his heart was trying to beat out of his chest and everything was moving a thousand miles an hour from his first caffeine rush.

But she spared him the details.

“That’s okay!” She assured him quickly. It was difficult, getting a handle on what he did and did not know from the last ten years of his life. “We’ll go to breakfast, and if you’re hungry, you can eat. If you’re not hungry, you don’t have to. Let me know when you’re ready to go, okay?”

He nodded with his chin tucked low. His hands started to pull at each other before he realized what he was doing, and suddenly they were tucked flat under his legs.

There was a long pause, and then he nodded again, a little awkwardly. There wasn’t really anything to do to get ready.

No, there wasn’t really anything to get ready for either of them, but Mina didn’t want to force him out the door if he felt he needed time. For someone who had been asleep for a decade, everything must have felt like so much.

But once he felt ready, she stood up and grabbed her bag, slinging it over her shoulder. “Do you need help getting back to the car?” She asked, opening the door.

The walk to the door alone looked like it would be a marathon. The walk to the car felt like a cross-country sprint.

Face flushed, Raz gave a third nod without meeting her eyes.

She didn’t complain when he admitted he needed help. She didn’t chastise him for being helpless. She simply smiled and moved to him, offering her hands to pull him to a stand and support him as they made their way, at his pace, back to the car.

His legs weren’t nearly as wobbly as when they’d first arrived, but his feet still felt like cinder blocks to lift and move. He stumbled and struggled and did his absolute best not to let any of his shame show on his face. If any of the rest of the family could see this, they’d never let him forget it. A few of them would have probably pushed him over to send him flailing for even more of a laugh.

He kept his gaze on his shoes and pretended the heat in his face was from the sun he wasn’t used to feeling.

If she noticed his embarrassment, she didn’t make comment on it. She simply took it slow with him, helping him back to the car. She was sure that he would grow more used to his motor functions over time. After all, it had only twenty-four hours since he’d come out of a ten-year psychic coma.

Once he was in the car, she helped him get buckled and rounded to the driver’s side, turned the engine over, and off they went.

Raz had said that all these years, Mithra had ‘taken care of him.’ It seemed that she’d commanded him to eat and drink and take care of himself, so she hoped that his physical health wouldn’t be too much of a hurdle for him.

Razputin leaned his helmet-clad head against the window, watching the passing scenery without really seeing it. His situation had already sunk in the moment he’d opened his eyes to his cousin staring back at him, but now that the immediate mix of overload, danger, guilt, fury, and fear was on the backburner (relatively), he was finally starting to grapple with the fact that he was in fact really awake, and would probably stay that way for a while. The walk to the car had brought it into clarity in a way that nothing else had really seemed to.

He was awake. He was awake. He was awake and being allowed to move and talk and think again, and it was absolutely terrifying. All these years he had mourned the loss of everything he was, wishing there had been another way to keep his life without sacrificing all his control, and now he had it, but now that he had it, he had no idea what to do with it.

He was still in danger. He was still being controlled by someone, even if his cousin was being a lot softer about it. He was still ten years old, in a body that hadn’t been his for nine, and instead

of the overwhelming relief and overwhelming joy he'd dreamed of if he was ever truly awake again, all he was feeling now was...overwhelmed.

If he ever found a way to articulate these things to her, she wouldn't blame him for the way he felt. Of course it was overwhelming. He had existed as a ghost of himself, a specter inhabiting a body that had been stolen from him, for nearly a decade. She had gotten to live her life while he had remained obedient, and compliant, still a child.

Though their limited interactions didn't hint much at his current mental state aside from his apprehension and his lack of motor controls, she could hazard a guess. She'd heard stories - tragic, terrible stories - about what sensory deprivation did to a brain. To a person's sense of self.

She wondered if his state of hypnosis produced the same effects.

At any rate, Razputin had a lot to unlearn, a lot to re-learn, and a long way to go before he was safely out of the grasp of the Galochio family. She had wrestled control of her cousin from Mithra, but she had no intention of keeping a vice grip over him like their nonnetta had. She was simply getting him safely from point A to point B, upon which he would be free to control his own actions.

As that thought passed her consciousness, she cringed inwardly.

What was going to happen if it came to pass that giving him freedom to control his own actions meant he would go back to the Galochios?

If she only knew how close to home she was with that thought. Did he want to die? Absolutely not. Did he want to go back to the family who had made his life hell in every conceivable way, waiting for the moment he broke so they could remove him completely? He hated even the fleeting idea of it.

But the family was where Mithra was. Going back was the only thing he could think to do, because she was all he had in the world. She was the only person he could trust, and she loved him, and he loved her, and he had no idea how he was going to smooth things over with her about his psychic assault but he had to do it, somehow. Otherwise, he was completely and utterly lost. Hopeless. Helpless.

Worthless.

Something wet tickled his skin, running down his face and hitting the car door with a tiny little 'plip'. And it didn't stop.

Even with his face mostly turned away from her, staring out the window, she caught him through the rear-view, hunched over and silently crying. He was perfectly still. Not even his breath hitched as tears fell onto the car door.

Gently, Guillelmina reached one hand out and laid it at Razputin's arm. "Hey," she said softly, as they came to a red light. "I know it's a lot. But you're going to be okay. I promise. Do you want to

tell me what's on your mind?" She asked, doubting she would get so much a response from him. He was mistrustful and withdrawn.

Her touch made his shoulders rise, just for a moment, before they came right back down. There was no point in useless displays of self-protection. It always lead to more hurt than just submitting and accepting what was coming.

And she had phrased it as a question, but he knew better. Refusing to answer was bad, bad, bad, and he couldn't risk making her mad at him while she still held so much power.

He desperately wished the stupid helmet could come off so he could speak properly. Talking out loud was awful and anxiety-inducing and made him feel even worse about himself.

"I - it's - I'm - I," he whimpered. "I m-mess-ed up. I - I'm - so - s-s-so -"

"You didn't mess anything up," she told him, voice soft and soothing as she reassured him.

"You've been doing really good so far. I'm proud of your, Raz, because I know this is probably all really hard and frightening. Whatever you're afraid you messed up, you didn't."

She didn't know, specifically, that he was talking about his display back at the Galochio home. She didn't know that he'd intended to knock her out and spare Mithra. To Mina, his display of power had been the perfect opportunity to get him out of the house safely.

"All of this is just going to take some getting used to, but you're going to be okay. Really, you are. We're going to do this together, for real, this time."

Raz shook his head almost violently, feeling that rising anger at the casual way she spoke about all of this. Who was she to tell him what he'd screwed up on? Who was she to tell him that he was going to be okay?

She didn't know a goddamn thing.

"N-No!" He cry-gasped, and the only reason it didn't come out as a scream was because he didn't know how to make his voice that loud. "Y-Y-You d-don't get-t-t it! I f-felt ev-er-y-body! I - I felt their a-anger a-a-at you! I w-w-wasn't tr-y-ing to es-escape! I th-thought you w-were Mama! I thought I w-was-!"

He couldn't finish the sentence. Whether out of fear of her wrath, of because his heart was already clenched so tight he thought it might burst, he didn't have the willpower to say the rest out loud.

They sat at that red light - agonizingly long - and she looked over at him. He didn't bother looking back, so what kind of expression she wore would remain a mystery to him. She pulled back, her hand leaving his arm slowly, returning to its post on the steering wheel.

"You... thought I was... Mithra? You... were trying to pass over her, instead," she said, with a heavy understanding. It made sense, of course. Razputin, who believed that Mithra was truly his

caretaker, someone who existed in his life to protect him, couldn't fathom the idea that she was the most insidious abuser of them all.

She took a deep breath and swallowed thickly. "I'm sorry, Razputin," she said, and even if he didn't look over at her, he could hear the faintest hint of something hard in her voice. "I'm not letting you go back to that. To her."

She hated to tell him what he was and wasn't allowed to do - him, who'd been under hypnosis for ten years. It twisted her stomach as the light finally turned green, and the car moved forward.

It was a command. A real one, not passive or framed as a question. She wasn't letting him go home. He couldn't go home now.

He had to listen. He'd been conditioned into doing so against any will or want he had, and it was too powerful to overcome even with his kidnapper. He had no choice but to listen until - if - Mithra came for him.

Raz's expression twisted for one second of trying in vain to keep his composure. It shattered, and everything broke free. He stuffed his knuckles into his mouth as sobs wracked his frame, muffled and mournful and despairing.

It felt worse than she'd expected it to. And she'd been bracing for this moment for ten years. The idea that he still loved Mithra - even after everything she'd done to him - was something that was posited by her friend, mentor, and colleague Sasha Nein over the years, once he understood the predicament she'd left home for. She hadn't believed it at first. Raz was desperate to get out of there. He knew the kind of danger he was in!

But ten years under hypnosis changes a person, he'd told her.

And he'd been right.

She glanced over at him, brow knit, and wanted nothing more than to comfort and console him. But she wasn't Mithra. She was his traitorous cousin, who had already caused so much misery in his life - who had disappeared for ten years when he'd needed her, and who had shown back up out of the blue to cause more misery than he'd thought possible.

Her heart clenched, and she fixed her sight on the road ahead of them. She knew getting him out of there was the right thing. They'd kept him hypnotized, blank and obedient for a decade. They saw him as an object rather than a person, and the moment the novelty wore off they were going to kill him just like they'd killed the rest of the Aquatos. She knew she was doing the right thing.

But it felt wrong.

It was an eternity for both of them; one crying his eyes and heart out over the loss of someone who, for all that she'd manipulated and hurt him, had also been the only one to show him any kind of love for so long; the other stuck listening to it with no way to help or comfort when she had been the catalyst for it.

Eventually, Razputin's sobs tapered off into exhausted silence. He laid his cheek against the cool window and fell back into that familiar pattern - that familiar coping mechanism - of retreating into his head and shutting down entirely on the outside.

He wished he could sleep. He was so tired.

The drive back to the safehouse was... uncomfortable. Long, and difficult, and incredibly uncomfortable between the two of them. But it was also uneventful, which was all that Guillelmina could ask for at that point. As long as they could get to the safehouse, back to the Motherlobe and away from the Galochios without any further incident, she would not complain.

She took a deep breath, and resolved to break the silence between them.

"As soon as we get back to the compound, we can take that helmet off you, okay? I'm sorry you had to wear it this whole time. I know they're uncomfortable."

The compound, for all its monotonous suburbia, was safe. Reinforced, for psychic privacy. Perfect for someone looking to hide from psychic intrusion.

Raz sniffled, and didn't respond. She could do what she wanted with him. It hadn't stopped her so far, and it was the only thing he was good for, anyway.

Things were going to be different. He'd see! They really were, and he wasn't going to be the family punching bag anymore. He wasn't going to be stifled and controlled and treated like an object.

But she couldn't let him go home. She couldn't let him go back there. They were going to kill him if they got their hands on him again, and the thought terrified her. All she could do was get him to the safehouse and try to help him understand - he couldn't stay that way. It wasn't fair.

She knew she was right. No one should live their life as a possession to be kicked around and abused at the whim of people who hate you.

But god, it felt selfish.

Her cousin stayed silent after that. He didn't stir to anything, didn't seem to notice anything they drove past, and didn't emote beyond a carefully blank face.

He had given up - or at least, resigned himself to his new fate for the foreseeable future.

The rest of the drive was uneventful. Silent, stiff, uncomfortable, and uneventful, until they finally neared what looked like a military settlement.

Identical, manufactured-looking cookie cutter homes lined the trimmed and pristine street. Everything was clean and sleek and uniform, and vastly different from the exterior of the Galochio home, which was so old it was a miracle it was still standing there in the middle of its secluded wood.

And yet, despite the same-ness, Mina didn't even pause as they reached what he could only assume was her house, pulling into the driveway and killing the engine.

For a long moment, she simply sat there, hands still firmly grasping the wheel and breathing deeply, as though composing herself, before she turned to Razputin with a strained smile.

"Welcome home."

His fingers clenched at the fabric of his pants, but that was the extent of his reaction. He was determined not to show any apprehension about this whole thing anymore. He didn't want to risk her anger by making her think he was "ungrateful."

Which, he was. It was obvious he was. But by god did he not need to give her more ammunition than she already had.

She didn't really expect a reaction beyond that, but... No. Okay. She shook herself mentally and got out of the car, moving to his side to open the door for him and holding her hands out. Getting him into the house was going to be just as much a feat as the move from the motel.

"Come on," she coaxed, "I promise nothing bad will happen to you, here. You're safe. Really, you're safe."

Raz eyed her dubiously as he let her help him out of the car. This time, as they began walking, he kept his gaze on the house she was leading him towards instead of his feet. His shaking wasn't only from the exertion of walking.

This was her home. It was surrounded by so many neighbors that he honestly wasn't sure how she got any privacy, but she seemed content to live here anyway. Once he stepped through that door, he'd have to learn her rules fast, because "disrespecting the owner of the roof over your head is so terribly rude, Razputin."

He swallowed. He could do this without hypnosis aiding him. He could totally do this. He'd be good for her, and survive just like he always had. He could do this.

Inside was... a normal home. It was tidy, and quiet, and quite comfortable, even if it would take him a while to adjust. She helped him over to the living room, to the couch where she sat him down and gently tilted his head, fiddling with the clasp on his bonnet.

"The homes here are lightweight psychic barriers," she said as the clasp clicked open, and she removed the bonnet, running a hand through his hair to straighten it out a bit. "They won't be able to hurt you in here."

Everything was... quiet. There was no angry presence in his head, no feeling of dread creeping up in the back of his psyche as it sensed their approach. For the first time in ten years, Razputin was conscious and alone in his own head.

"I know it'll take some getting used to," she told him. "I remember when I first lost the connection, too. It feels weird. But... that's how it's supposed to feel. You're not supposed to

have people in your head twenty-four seven if you don't want them there. I won't hop in unless I have your permission first, or if it's some kind of emergency, which I don't really anticipate anyway."

There was a pause.

"How do you feel?"

He held perfectly still and straight, eyes shifting back and forth like he was expecting to see the family pop out of hiding at any given moment. When the seconds ticked by and nothing beared down on him, he finally looked at Mina.

Wrong. It feels wrong. The words filtered through to her far easier than he could ever manage when spoken aloud. I'm not supposed to be alone.

She blinks, almost caught by surprise as his thoughts filter into hers. She'd nearly forgotten that he used to do that. That he refused to speak to her unless necessary. Unless there was no other way to communicate. Briefly, she wondered why.

Instead, she shook her head. "Yes," she told him, "Yes you are. It's okay, Razputin. You're not their property. You don't have to abide by their rules, here."

Raz was more than relieved that he could finally communicate properly; not only because talking out loud was incredibly awkward and difficult, but because this was just how it was supposed to be. And it hadn't just applied to his cousin any longer. Hadn't in a long time.

Dolls didn't talk. So he didn't.

Her statement made his eyebrows twitch like they were headed in the direction of a frown, before smoothing out back to something neutral again. He stared at her, trying to figure out her angle, and how much she might snitch on him for doing if Mithra found a way to contact her again. Because clearly that was the only explanation for saying those things.

She could see the disbelief written in every line of his face. The mistrust, the conviction that she was lying, that she wanted to use this to hurt him. Gently, she moved towards her cousin, palms out in peace.

"The family isn't here, Razputin. I haven't had contact with them in a long time. You know that, don't you? You know they were mad at me for leaving. It's just you and me, now. They're not going to hurt you for being alone, or for doing something they don't like, or - or for speaking," she added gently.

She stepped up to him, and laid one hand on his cheek, looking up at him. She looked at him, examining him just the same way Mithra did— except... there was something about the way she looked at him... something different than the cold, possessive stare his mama looked him over with.

Like she was looking at a person.

A beat passed, and a smile struggled onto her lips.

"I missed you."

He was a flinch away from curling into himself at her touch, but he didn't. He held still for her like he knew he was expected to, and acted like he comprehended the promises she was making. He understood that she'd been on the outs with the family for a long, long time, and that her taking him had made them extremely angry, even if it paled in comparison to what he knew had to be directed at him. He understood that it was going to be just the two of them for....however long that ended up being.

But he couldn't wrap his head around the idea that she wasn't out to get him for stepping out of line; that the Galochios wouldn't catch up to them and learn every additional transgression and make him wish they'd have the mercy to drown him first.

He couldn't believe that when she looked at him with that strange, unfamiliar kind of love and said the words "I missed you" that she really, truly did mean it. It was simply incomprehensible.

Eventually, she moved away from him. There was no ultimatum to her apparent love, no cruel twist to her touch. "You have a room here. It's not much right now, but... it's yours. And," there was a distinct nervousness about her now, "I brought something home for you the other day. You might be interested in it."

The room had been built over the years, furnished and fixed up to be a comfortable, livable space.

This, Raz was used to. Having a room already made for him, with clothes and trinkets and things "for" him that weren't actually his to use or even touch. He nodded, showing he understood, and stood when she did.

She moved to the bookshelf, and picked up a thin magazine that was resting on the shelf. It was one of many, and Mina held it out for him. "I know a lot has changed, but... I figured you might still like these," she said softly. "They're, uh... on loan from the Motherlobe archive."

She handed him the magazine, its glossy pages smooth under his touch.

True Psychic Tales, Issue #01.

Razputin went still.

He stared down at that cover, heralding six incredible people with incredible powers who had done incredible feats.

Compton Boole. Cassie O'Peia. Otto Mentalis. Helmut Fullbear. Bob Zannotto.

Ford Cruller

The names were branded in his mind - heroes whose achievements and impact on psychic society could never be completely snuffed out by Mithra or Zalto or any of the others, no matter

how they tried. He had clung to the idea of them, among other Psychonauts, when there was no hope he could make by himself.

He was still ten years old, after all.

Something made his vision swim. He barely noticed, too focused on taking in every detail of the cover of that comic book like a starving child seeing a beautiful ripe fruit.

"They're for you. I remember you... when you came to stay with us, they got rid of your things... so, I figured, you might... like to have them back. Something to help you feel a little more settled, here."

For a kidnapper, she seemed meek and uncertain, utterly concerned with what he thought about his new living arrangements. "It's gonna be a little while before you can leave the house without the bonnet," she explained, "but if there's anything you need to be more comfortable here, I want you to tell me, okay? I know this is a huge change, but this isn't gonna like how it was back home. You're not just a decoration, Razputin. You live here."

He didn't respond. He continued to stare at the comic book, and it could have perhaps been mistaken as a similar coping shut down as what he'd been doing since she'd escaped with him, except for one subtle little detail.

His hands were shaking.

It didn't go unnoticed, and she laid a hand gently at his elbow as they sat together at the edge of his bed. Her touch was gentle and careful, ready to pull away if he expressed discomfort.

"Are you okay?" She asked softly. "It's alright. You're not going to get in trouble for them, if that's what you're worried about."

His lips parted imperceptibly as she gently directed him into sitting, and for a dangerous, scary moment, he thought his composure might crumble completely like it had in the car. For what reason this time, he couldn't even identify.

It had been nearly a decade ago, but he remembered it so vividly, and not just because his perception of time was hazy at best. The smell of paper burning; the sight of colorful pages curling instantly into black ash under a bright flame; the sound of fire crackling and a harsh voice berating him for even thinking of bringing that filth into this house-

Raz's mouth wavered and pulled tight with a sharp inhale - and then it all disappeared. He was back to nothingness. Back to no emotion.

Back to safety.

I'm okay. Thank you for the room and the gifts. That's very generous of you.

The comic book fell to his lap, held limply between loose hands.

She paused for a moment, watching him teeter dangerously on the edge of collapse before pulling himself back. It was heartbreaking, that he was afraid to even show strong emotion. It was going to take time, for him to understand that things were different here. He wasn't at risk of being broken for acting out or experiencing emotion in a way that wasn't pretty or palatable.

"Okay," she said softly. "I'm... gonna make a few calls. You can stay here and read, if you want, or you can come into the kitchen with me. I just have to check in with work, let them know we're back and what the situation is."

He hesitated at the choice. Would she find it annoying if he went with her, or think he was snooping? Or did she expect him to follow her and always be in whatever room she was in, and staying here would look like he wasn't obedient, or up to mischief, or cared more about this gift she had graciously given him than her?

Raz studied his cousin's face, and faster than she could blink, he came to a decision. The comic was set gently aside and he stood back up, hands clasped in front of him, ready to follow her.

She didn't complain. She didn't make any indication if the choice he'd made was the right one. There was no right choice, but of course he didn't understand that yet. Everything was precarious to him, every choice came with consequences.

She let him follow her into the kitchen, where she picked up the phone and cradled the receiver against her shoulder as she put a kettle on. Tea would probably be a bit more manageable for his system, and there was nothing like a nice hot cup of tea to help relax the nerves.

The phone rang, and a feminine voice picked up the other end. "Hey! Hi, Milla. It's Mina. We just got back. I wanted to check in with someone at HQ. Yeah, safe and sound. No. No, I didn't," she said. "Uh, yeah, about that... I was hoping you'd have the number for the H&M department on hand? No, I'm fine. It's a long story, but I gotta schedule an appointment or two with them. Yeah... Yeah," she sighed. "Well, that's the Galochios for you."

Mina paused, stepping away from the steeping teabags to grab a pen and paper, jotting down the number Milla gave to her. "Alright. Thanks, Milla. You too. Tell him I said hi."

Razputin was a ghost in the kitchen with her; standing just to the side of the doorway - easy escape - across the room from where she was steeping tea and chatting over the phone - too far away to eavesdrop - and without touching anything or even leaning back against the wall - respectful. If not for her painful awareness of his presence, it would have been remarkably easy for him to fade into the background.

His formal and uncomfortable position did not escape her notice. Treating himself like an ornament. As she said her goodbyes to her colleague, she motioned him into the kitchen with a cup of tea in one hand and the phone in the other, making her next call to... H&M, whatever that was. She gave him a smile as she set the cup of tea down in front of him.

"Careful, it's hot," she told him as the phone rang. After a moment of fixing her own cup, she sat down at the table across from him with a notepad, her phone, and her tea.

He sank into the chair and carefully took the offered cup, never taking his eyes off her face. She had invited him to “participate” in her world for the moment, more or less, but he was ready and waiting for the first sign that the invitation had reached its end.

The tea was nice, though.

She wanted him to participate in her world. That was the whole point of bringing him here - so that he could live a life as more than a shelf ornament.

He sat there and watched as she made appointments with some branch of the Psychonauts. Something about getting a physical and mental wellness check, but done through this specific department. Why? “Well,” she said hesitantly, eyeing her cousin, “it’s just a unique case, is all.”

Most of the terminology flew over his head. He knew what a mental wellness check was, but only because of his hyperfixation on psychology in order to absorb every scrap of information potentially related to the Psychonauts. Everything else he couldn’t even begin to piece together. Doctors and tests were expensive for the Aquato family, and he was certainly never conscious during any check-ups Mithra had scheduled for him over the years - if any.

He simply took another silent sip of his tea, watching how quickly she was scribbling things down and making note of every careful pause she made in her conversation.

The conversation seemed general positive, if a bit vague and frenetic. She seemed pleased with whatever the person on the other end had to offer as far as scheduling went, and she only paused in her conversation to look up at him and ask for incredibly basic scraps of information - if he knew his birthday. If he knew his full name. If he knew his parents’ names. - before relaying it to the other end.

After about half an hour, the call ended, and she looked up at her cousin with her hands wrapped around her mug, a smile on her lips. “Alright,” she said, “It’s all settled. You and I will take our first trip to the Motherlobe the beginning of next week, so they can make sure you’re in good health and mentally sound.”

Raz’s feet pressed together nervously, hidden under the table. It was the only outward sign of how he felt.

Yes, ma’am, he agreed all too easily.

He kept his anxiety buried, but Guillelmina could still feel it radiating off of him in waves. She gave him a soft smile, and lifted her mug.

“You’ll be just fine. I’m going to be there the whole time, and if they do anything that makes you uncomfortable or afraid, you can tell me and we’ll work it out together. Will you do that, Razputin? Tell me if something - anything - makes you afraid of uncomfortable? Even if it’s something I say or do.”

She knew that living under the Galochio roof meant he didn't get an opinion. Being under Mithra's hypnosis meant he didn't get to have feelings. Complaining meant punishment. Speaking up meant getting hurt.

But that wasn't the case, here, and she was certain it would take him some time to learn that.

Yes, I can do that. He wasn't allowed to have opinions or feelings, but that didn't mean Mithra hadn't told him to come clean about every little thing anyway. He was all too familiar with honesty to his own detriment, as well as scrutiny so strong he might as well be a bug under a microscope.

It was actually a tad relieving to hear his cousin ask for it. A set rule he could rely on, even if consequences might be dire.

She let out a little sigh of relief. Finally, some headway. Even just this little bit of cooperation would change his situation here for the better, she was sure of it. He was going to be open and honest with her about discomfort.

There would be no consequences for honesty - not here, not anymore - and eventually he would learn that too.

Raz relaxed when Mina relaxed. As long as she was happy and content, he'd be too. The idea of getting a mental health check - well, all the tests, but especially that one - scared him. He knew he wasn't in a good place. He knew there'd be...things, that the Psychonauts would probably probe at, because the Galochios had done the same, and he couldn't predict what the reactions would be this time.

But he'd take it like he took everything else; without complaint and just thankful that his caretaker was happy.

Mina knew he wasn't in a good place, either. That's why the mental wellness check was the most important one. Maybe the Psychonauts, the Hypnosis and Meditation Department specifically, could offer her some guidance on what the Galochios had done to him over the last ten years. How to help him.

But for now, she set her phone down and looked over at her cousin. Now that they weren't making their escape or making arrangements, she had a moment to really just... take it in.

"I really... Never thought I'd actually see you again," she admitted softly. "I thought you were... Well."

He froze with his cup at his mouth. Carefully, neutrally, he set it back down without looking at her.

...I thought I'd be, too.

The words were broadcast so perfectly calm and emotionless that it was all too obvious he didn't dare express what he was really feeling. When the terror of what he expected to happen

back then subsided under blessed sleep, all that was left to cultivate was festering bitterness and simmering anger over his cousin's careless actions. It had come out the night before at the hotel, but now he was in her home, and it was no longer safe to do again.

Mina gave him a strained smile that wobbled a bit at the edges. For years, Razputin had lived under the thumb of the Galochios. Every day he's loved there, he'd danced with death. They wanted him dead, there was no doubt about that, and as much as she hated to admit it, Mithra's hypnosis probably was the only thing that kept him alive all this time.

"I want you," she said, and took a pause to clear her throat and steady her voice, "to know that the balancing act you've been doing for the past ten years? It's over. You don't have to do that anymore. The threat of violence and death that they held over your head for a decade is done. We're not doing that here. You're safe."

Nevermind, of course, that they were in the domain of the Psychonauts. Nevermind that he was scheduled for a mental check up by an agent he doesn't know. Nevermind Guillelmina had been incorporated into their fold, and there was no telling what they would do to him.

What she would let happen.

Finally, Razputin met her gaze. There was a careful, calculating glint in his eyes as he processed her words and decided how much truth he believed there to be in them. It was a very fleeting glint, and was smothered in a blink the next instant.

Okay.

Still neutral. Still toneless. Still very, very cautious.

She couldn't blame him for being cautious. He's spent half his life in a dangerous balancing act where letting his guard down could cost him his life. But she didn't know how to reassure him. She didn't know how to prove to him that the life he's lived up to this point was over. That he was allowed to be a person again.

She gave him a long, hard look, trying to find some kind of crack in his facade, but he'd become good at pleasing those he felt held his life in their hands.

"It's your first night home," she told him, slowly, "how do you want to spend it?"

However you want to, came the immediate, automatic response. He didn't even pause to think about it. I'm happy to see you happy.

His feet pressed a little harder against each other, still hidden.

She shook her head. "I'm not making this decision," she told him. "You're not my servant, you're not an object, you're not a pretty decoration for me to order around. You know what would make me happy? To see you comfortable, here."

Something tensed along his shoulders. His expression didn't change.

I...am comfortable, he tried a second time. If she was happy when he was, he needed to work with that. I'm good like this. I'm happy.

It was a horrible, emotional standoff between them. She could feel the stress coming off him like radiation, like poison. Poisoning himself to make his existence more palatable for others. For her.

"So," She started cautiously, "if I told you that I really wanted to go upstairs and read comics, and I really wanted to stay down here and watch a movie, and I also really wanted to go for a walk because it's really nice out at night... but that I wanted to do all those things an equal amount, and asked you to be the tie breaker... which would you choose?"

The calculation was back, a little more frantic this time. He searched her face for clues with much less subtlety.

She looked really tired. That had to mean the walk was out, because then she'd complain that he was selfish enough to want to go outside when she clearly didn't have the energy.

Reading comics was harder to gauge, because it was a simple activity, but then he considered the fact that she was an adult. She might be happy to show off the generous things she'd gotten for him, but surely that didn't extend to actually engaging with such childish things.

So that left....

M-Movie...? He suggested tentatively, fingers curling nervously around his empty mug.

Her gaze lingered. She could see the way he was desperate for some kind of clue, searching her for the supposed right answer. They would have to take baby steps, and this decision was their first.

She sighed softly, yielding. "Movie it is. I have some DVDs in the cabinet," she told him. "How about you go pick a movie while I make popcorn. Then we can just take the first night easy, okay?"

He nodded, shoulders dropping, and immediately stood to rinse out his cup in the sink before hurrying off into the living room to get the task done.

And then he came across another roadblock. He had no idea what movie to pick. He didn't even recognize most of them.

Zanobi was the biggest movie watcher of that family. Could he rely on his traitorous daughter to have the same taste, or opposite?

Raz stared at the shelf and tried very hard not to panic.

He could hear the popcorn popping in the kitchen, Mina humming tunelessly. Out of sight, if Razputin closed his eyes and pretended hard enough, she almost sounded like his mama.

Her movie collection was not extensive, exactly, but there were still enough choices to make picking one a dangerous task. She seemed to have a lot of science fiction movies - old movies, full of old practical effects and a soft, grainy film quality.

He closed his eyes and let the sound wash over him. No panicking. No need for panicking. He could do this.

Opening his eyes, Raz decided to grab the first one that his gaze landed on. He pulled it gently from the shelf and looked at it. It was one he didn't recognize.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers.

Huh.

She came back into the living room with a bowl of popcorn and two mini cans of soda, coming up to him with a smile.

"What did you pick?" She asked, peering over his shoulder. Almost immediately, he could feel the shift in her.

"Have you... ever seen this movie before?" She asked, cautiously.

Razputin shook his head, shifting his weight at the strange reaction. She didn't seem...upset by the choice, per se, but there was something still very off in a way he couldn't identify, and that made him nervous.

Do you want to watch something else?

She hums, a noncommittal sound. "N-no, it's a good movie, I'm just not sure that you're... Well, it might hit a little close to home for you. It's all about aliens, though, so... you might not hate it? We can watch it if you want, but like I said - if anything makes you uncomfortable, I want you to tell me, okay?"

This was a bad idea, she told herself curtly. But so was wrenching the decision from his hands. She wanted him to feel comfortable and confident having wants and making choices again... But she also didn't want movie night to be the reason he spends his first night here with a terrible sense of dread.

At least, not any more than he already felt.

He bit his lip, glancing between her and the case. Why would an old movie about aliens "hit close to home"? What did that even mean?

Okay... He conceded, hoping that would make her feel better. I can...do that.

She paused for a moment, looking him over. If he was being honest, about telling her when he was uncomfortable, she would let him watch the movie and judge for himself if it was something he could enjoy.

“...Okay,” she said after a moment, with more conviction. “Okay. Yeah, let’s watch Body Snatchers.”

She held her hand out for the DVD to set it up, trading with him the bowl of popcorn.

It hit Razputin very fast what his cousin meant.

Emotionless beings overtaking the people that were once people. Loss of love and feeling and humanity.

He sat stiffly on the couch as the plot of the movie unfolded, fingers digging deeper and deeper into the fabric at his knees with his eyes wide and unblinking.

She wasn’t really watching the movie, but she wasn’t really watching her cousin, either. Or, at least, she was trying not to stare outright. She couldn’t help but pay attention to his little movements out of the corner of her eye. She could feel the way he tensed, caught the minute curl of his fingers against his knees.

Gently, she reached out and laid her hands over his. Her fingers curled around his palm, and she looked over at him. “We can turn it off if you want,” she told him, voice soft and understanding.

He just about jumped right out of his skin at her touch - and wasn’t that a funny thought.

I - I’m fine, he began automatically. I’m totally -

"Keep your eyes a little wide and blank," said the man on the screen, hoping to hide among those already lost. "Show no interest or excitement."

.....fine.

She studied him for a long moment, and eventually turned away - just for a moment - to pause the movie. Her body language shifted, and she turned in her seat to face him more properly, one leg tucked up underneath her as she leaned against the back of the couch.

“Razputin,” she breathed. “We don’t have to watch this. We can, if you really are okay, but—” but it was obvious, from the way that he held himself to the way his own mental voice stuttered, “—but if you aren’t, I want you to tell me. Look me in the eye and tell me what you want to do.”

Looking her in the eye was easy. Telling her what he wanted - having even a concept of a thought about it - was not.

Raz stared at her, and his wide eyes were the only external sign of how terrified he was to do what she was asking. He wasn’t trembling under her touch at all.

I...I...

Honesty was always better, even when it got him in trouble. It was so much better than if he was caught lying.

I....don't w-want to...watch anymore.

There was no scoff of disgust, no whine of inconvenience. She did not seem put out by this. Her expression was tight, wide-eyed as she looked at him, and gave his hand a squeeze. "Okay," she said, with a little nod. "We don't have to watch anymore."

There was no catch, no ultimatum, no consequence. She hit stop, without trying to convince him to push through it, or that he was being irrational.

She listened.

If he were not so conditioned to showing no emotion, he might have slumped with relief. As it stood now, all she got was a further widening of his eyes for a brief moment before he schooled his expression.

But the gears were clearly turning in his head.

Let them turn. Let him unlearn everything that the Galochios had put in his head, both subliminally and through threat of force over the years. She wanted him to feel things and want things and express for himself discomforts without fear of reprimand.

She gave him a smile as the tray ejected the disc. "Thank you for telling me," she said. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable, or afraid. Especially while we're supposed to be unwinding on your first night here."

You're welcome. The response came at its usual automatic speed, but there was a hint of an actual tone behind it. Confusion and something too mixed up to identify within two words.

In the end, they settled on The Twilight Zone - most of which were tame or absurd enough to not be upsetting, and therefore safe enough to avoid any more significant road bumps in their night. Each episode was just short enough to focus on without letting the mind wander, and Mina kept a keen eye on his body language for the rest of the night.

For now, though, it seemed that this would be the most peace they would have.

Raz never fully relaxed through the rest of the impromptu movie night. Whether that was because he was still shaken by what had happened earlier or because this was just how he thought he needed to be, it was impossible to tell.

At the very least, he no longer felt like he wanted to crawl out of his own skin.

It was an improvement, at least, from his state earlier. She didn't anticipate him to be comfortable and relaxed here his first night. Not after being so abruptly divorced from life with the Galochios - life under Mithra's hypnosis.

She hoped that he would learn to be at ease here, but they would have plenty of time ahead of them for him to get there.

When the evening was late, her cousin watched her put things back on the shelf, and waited for an indication of whether she wanted to stay up longer or go to bed.

She was looking for the same indication - a yawn, or a bleary-eyed stare. He'd been under hypnosis for ten years, and she wasn't sure how much of him was still ten years old.

"Been a long day, huh?" She asked, sitting back down next to him. "I know last night was kinda rough. Are you tired?"

She would be in for a rude awakening on that front at his check-up, but right now he was more statue than child or adult.

A little, he admitted, keeping all traces of said tiredness out of her senses. But I can stay up if you want to.

"No, I think you're right. I'm kinda tired too," she admitted in turn, "Now's probably a good time to head to bed." She stood, and stretched, and held her hands out for Razputin.

After all, they had an appointment at the Motherlobe tomorrow morning.

He took them without hesitation and stood up, following her like a little duckling as they walked back to his room. He hoped she would actually put him under for the night this time. He'd barely slept at the motel, and he doubted it would be much better here.

Even if Mina were the type of person to see no qualms about putting him under to sleep, she simply couldn't - even if she had wanted to. Very few Galochios since Mithra had learned their matriarch's power of hypnosis, and - to no one's surprise - Guillelmina was not one of them.

Or, at least, she had never before ventured to try. Just the thought of it had always felt strange and uncomfortable, having seen firsthand the haze and lifelessness that her nonnetta's hypnosis created.

She brought him to his room, and showed him where to find the nightclothes - how long had she been preparing for his arrival? - before bidding him goodnight with a gentle smile.

Raz watched her leave to retire to her own room, and then simply stood there for a long, silent minute. His eyes landed on the small dresser where his clothes were supposed to be, and suddenly he felt nervous. Being in this body up until now had been...difficult, to say the least, and not just because of the hypnosis. He wasn't used to being so tall, and he knew his coordination was still terrible unless he was very, very careful.

Changing clothes was going to be incredibly difficult, but he didn't dare call for his cousin. He...he'd figure it out, somehow. He hoped.

She'd told him before she'd parted that if he needed anything during the night, her room was just two doors down, on the right. An open invitation to ask for her help, for anything he might need.

But she wasn't going to micromanage his life, here. She wasn't going to encroach on his autonomy and treat him like a doll who exists to do as she says.

Even if that came with a little... trial and error.

Trial and error lasted a whole ten minutes, it turned out, and by the end of the ordeal Razputin was extremely grateful to be done with it. He put everything away as neatly as he could before climbing into bed, glancing at the closed door. When no sound drifted down the hall, he turned to stare up at the ceiling and hoped that organic sleep would find its way to him.

He wasn't going to hold his breath.

As stillness enveloped his room, he noticed quite a few things about the quiet, peaceful nighttime in Mina's home.

The way the moonlight filtered through the leaves outside his window. The way it felt like the whole world was quiet around him. The way he could still feel his cousin's presence a few doors down, a peaceful, calming aura that drifted into his room like gentle music.

Raz couldn't remember the last time he'd been awake at night. Even before the long-standing hypnosis, Mithra had put him to sleep before bed every single night, and although he was apprehensive about how much rest he was actually going to get, he couldn't deny that there was something almost mesmerizing about the world around him at this late hour.

It reminded him of nights staying up in the caravan with his siblings when they were all too excited about a new destination to sleep. His heart clenched painfully at the thought, and he turned onto his side, trying to focus on falling asleep so that the memories would go away.

It wasn't simple, but it wasn't impossible. It's easy to underestimate the power of exhaustion, and the toll that stress can take on the body and mind. Razputin had endured a lot in the last forty-eight hours.

Mina, laying half-asleep in her own room, kept her senses tuned to Razputin's presence. It was meek, and never too tangible, but she latched onto it and held it, projecting her own calm sleepiness in hopes of coaxing him to sleep as well.

Miraculously, surprising even himself, it only took an hour for his eyes to become too heavy to stay open. Another ten minutes, and that barely-there presence tapered off even further into sleep.

As soon as she felt that presence fade off into comfortable sleep - the first natural, organic sleep that he's had in a decade - she, too, let her consciousness fade to black, content knowing that he was safe.

Tomorrow, she would wake him, and together they would head to the Motherlobe. For now, though, she drifted off towards the astral plane as a dream took hold.

Raz didn't have good dreams that night - it would be amazing if he did, with the stress piled on as it had been - but neither did those dreams wake him up. When he opened his eyes again, it was definitely too early to get up comfortably, but light was visible through the blinds.

Raz woke up just as the sun was peeking over the horizon. As his senses came back to him, he realized that the house was, as before, silent, still, and that Mina's gentle presence... was different. Faint.

She was still asleep.

Guillelmina was asleep, unaware of the world around her... and Razputin was awake.

The moment the realization hit him, he froze where he was laying. He'd never been in this situation before with any of the Galochios, and it was so far out of his element that he couldn't even rely on his usual tactics.

He stayed in bed and didn't move, opting for the tried and true "become one with the room until I'm needed" strategy.

It wouldn't be long before Mina woke up - she was so tuned to his presence, that it was only a matter of time before she realized he was awake, and woke up herself.

The fact remained that, for all intents and purposes, Guillelmina had kidnapped him. She'd taken advantage of his careless mistake to spirit him away from the people who had raised him, who had shaped the very person he was. She'd taken him away from his mama, and he didn't even know if she was okay after what he'd done to her. What Mina had tricked him into doing.

Right?

And now, he was awake, and she was asleep, and he wasn't wearing that stupid helmet.

And as that realization hit, Raz went tense for an entirely different reason. He took a deep breath, let it out, and closed his eyes.

For all their hatred and treating him as an object, the family had still taught him tricks to help with the business. Mithra could only do so much with her hypnosis, after all, and they'd needed help with clients. He knew how to reach out to a mind; he just needed to find a way to do it without someone hovering over his mental shoulder to make sure he didn't say or do anything that would make them all look bad.

Tentatively, fully sensitive to his cousin's state of sleeping, Razputin tried to call out for his mama.

The safehouse was just that - safe. Mina had been living here since she was old enough to stay on her own, as an added layer of protection against the creeping horrors that her family had tried to plant in her head once they realized that she had turned on them. It had been years, but the young Galochio would never forget the hallucinations, the nightmares, the guilt and anxiety that had descended upon her like a plague.

But as safe as the house was, it was not infallible. Dampening the connections was so much harder when an occupant actively reached out. And as Razputin searched, reaching back through the partially severed connection that Mithra had forged with him over the years, he felt it.

He felt her.

My baby... my little doll... oh...

Mama's missed you...

The thrill of relief that rushed him head to toe was like lightning, and it jolted through the faint connection he held with her. It was immediately followed by overwhelming guilt and apologies.

I'm sorry! He stressed, hoping she understood how much the weight of his mistake had been weighing down on him. I thought you were in trouble! I felt her presence but it felt like you usually do, and I - I panicked! I'm sorry, mama!

Three days I don't hear from you and the first thing you tell me is that you mistook your horrid, traitorous cousin for your own mama, came her voice. Bambolino, I'm hurt, that you couldn't even tell me apart from someone as vile as her. Do you really think so poorly of your mama?

She didn't give him so much as a moment to gather his racing thoughts as he lay there in the dark.

Never mind. What you did was shameful, Razputin. To attack your own family and run off like that. To hide. I never thought you would turn your back on the people who have taken care of you all these years. That's not how I raised you.

There was a pause, and Mithra seemed to realize something through her berating.

Where are you?

Every harsh word was a blow to his whole being, threatening to topple everything he was into a useless, whimpering pile. His heart hammered in his chest for more reasons than simply worry over his cousin waking.

We - I'm - I'm s-somewhere west. I don't know for sure. She made me wear this...helmet thing, the whole time, and I couldn't reach you, and it was - really hard to think.

He paused, and then, in a much smaller voice, I'm really sorry, mama. I didn't want to go with her at all. Really, I didn't.

But you did. All that destructive power, to knock everyone out cold, and you couldn't even put up a fight as she stole you from me? You're a disappointment to your poor mama, Razputin.

Even as she chided him, it was clear that the information he was giving her was not glossed over. She took in every word, and Razputin could almost feel something cold and terrible bubbling up between them.

Find out where you are, then tell me. We will make the trip out west and come collect you. I wouldn't take too long, pet. The longer you make us wait, the angrier my husband will be when we find you. And he's already eager to get his hands on you, you know.

Raz shuddered and curled in on himself. Just the thought alone had a ghost of a headache throbbing at his temples. I - I w-w-won't, mama. I won't m-make you wait. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. P-Please let me live. I'll do anything, I know I messed up bad. I'll fix it!

Yes, you will, came her voice, curt and displeased. You don't deserve my protection, after what you did. Whether or not I can forgive you this time depends on your obedience. Don't mess this up, Razputin, or Zalto will make sure that the next time I see you will be the last.

Tears threatened to spill over at his caretaker's cold promise. Guilt and terror churned in his gut in a horrible concoction that made him sick.

I'll find out, he whispered. I will. Anything for you, mama. I promise.

Guillelmina woke with a start. Her blood ran cold as she felt the burst of terror seep into her mind from her cousin. Something was terribly, horribly wrong, and she leapt out of bed before she could even see straight.

Good boy, Mithra cooed, her voice soft and maternal now. Oh, I can't wait to have you back in my arms, safe and sound. If you behave, and do what you're supposed to, pet, we can put this whole silly thing behind us.

Don't disappoint me.

"Razputin? Raz. Raz!"

The connection severed between them, but whether it was from Mithra's or Razputin's end, he would never know. He snapped back into the real world with a gasp as Mina banged on the door, barely a second before she stepped into the room.

He hadn't realized how badly he was trembling this whole time. The tears had blessedly stayed in his eyes, but it was clear how shaken up he was about - something. He pressed further against the wall along his bed, looking like he wanted nothing more than to disappear entirely.

She stood there in his doorway for a moment, confused and still sleep-addled. She blinked blearily at him for a moment before a concerned frown darkened her features.

"You're not okay. Do you want to talk about it?" She asked gently as she moved to the foot of his bed, assuming he'd had some kind of nightmare in his sleep. Assuming, of course, that he had just woken up.

Raz flinched almost violently at her approach, watching her like she was a snake ready to strike him. His mouth twitched. By some miracle he didn't start crying.

N-N-N-No. I'm - fine. I'm fine. It was said very faintly and very much still full of fear.

"No, you're not," she told him, flat but gentle in her tone, "you're shaking, you're terrified." Mina held a hand out for him, patient and hoping against hope he would let her bridge this gap between them. "It's okay. Whatever it is, whatever happened, whatever it is you're afraid of, it's gonna be okay. You're safe, here."

She thought he'd had a nightmare. She thought the monsters that had terrorized him were safely tucked away in his imagination, never to do actual harm.

But he knew better.

Raz looked at the offered hand, and heard Mithra's voice accusing him of choosing his traitorous cousin over her. After a long moment of hesitation, he took it. He wasn't actually looking for comfort. He was just...playing along until he learned what he needed to.

Yeah.

He could almost feel her let out the tiniest breath of relief as he took her hand, and whether or not he was looking for comfort, he found it in her. She squeezed his hand gently, scooting in closer.

She had thought he'd had a nightmare, it was true. But she was not under the delusion that the monsters he was afraid of were mere figments of his imagination. She knew full well that the monsters he was afraid of were very, very real indeed.

Still, and as she sat there with him, letting him clutch at her hands and helping him use his breath to calm his racing heart, it was clear she was none the wiser to his little call.

It took an embarrassingly long time to get back control over himself, and Razputin would have been mortified by it in any other situation. But with both such a significant task and a powerful threat hanging over his head, he found he couldn't find much more room to be upset at himself for it. Especially since she hadn't found him out.

He hunched forward, hands clasped tightly in hers, and drooped in exhaustion. The morning hadn't even started and he felt like he'd been hit by a train.

...Thank you, broke the silence after a few minutes.

As he drooped, Mina leaned in, hands still clasped tightly in his, and pressed a cautious little kiss to his forehead. "I'm sorry you had a rough night," she whispered to him. "I know a few tricks for nightmares if they keep bothering you. It won't be this way forever. I know it probably feels like it will, but it won't. We'll get there together, okay?"

She gave his hands one more squeeze before pulling away from him. They both had to get ready for today.

They were headed to the Motherlobe.

He had about three seconds of relief at her words, thinking she was referring to hypnosis-induced sleep, until she pulled away with a look of determination. And then he remembered what was happening today. Suddenly, he felt sick all over again.

But he didn't complain and he didn't drag his feet. He didn't want to put her in a sour mood, and leaving the house could give him some clues about where exactly they were, so he could report back to Mithra as soon as possible. He could work with awful discomfort for a little while longer if it meant blessed sleep and his mama's forgiveness was coming.

Mithra's forgiveness could fix everything. She would welcome him back with open arms and protect him like she always did. No matter how angry Zalto was with him, she wouldn't let him do permanent damage.

At least, not a lot.

But even if leaving the house in broad daylight would help Razputin identify where they were, so that he could report back to Mithra, Guillelmina had him wear that stupid psychoisolation bonnet. Even if he were able to pinpoint their location - or even give her an approximate - he was completely unable to reach her. The bonnet was so much stronger than the reinforcements of the safehouse.

There was no psychic energy in or out.

"Welcome," Mina interrupted his thoughts, as a bridge lowered in the road before them, "to the Motherlobe."

Razputin stopped in his tracks at the sight before him. A giant brain-shaped building, shiny and silver, stood before them from across a giant lake. He'd read about this place. Seen pictures and drawings of it in True Psychic Tales. But he'd never thought he would ever get the opportunity to see it in person - much less visit it.

The irritation about the helmet disappeared in an instant as he stared in open awe.

Mina couldn't help but smile as she caught the look of awe and wonder on his face. He was openly gawking at the building - they hadn't even made it inside yet. Oh, he was in for one hell of a surprise today.

Whatever the Galochios had taught him about the Psychonauts over the years - and she could venture a guess or two - it all paled in comparison to actually being here, among his childhood heroes.

She hoped he would quickly see that whatever the family had said, the Psychonauts were generally good people who just wanted to help. They weren't a threat - they weren't the enemy. They weren't people to be despised or feared.

And most importantly, they were people who could help him.

The amazement was safely tucked away by the time they reached the building's entrance, but it still came off of him in waves - along with no small amount of apprehension. He hadn't forgotten the real reason they were here, after all.

The moment the two of them entered the Motherlobe proper, Raz was well and truly stunned. He froze in the middle of the lobby, surrounded by agents and office workers casually using psychic powers and chatting like people gathering for a Sunday potluck. He was more than a little overwhelmed by everything, and struggled to take it all in.

Mina was right there by his side through every wave of amazement and apprehension. She gave him some time to take it all in - accounted for in their schedule, of course - before she ushered him along down a long hallway that had been marked "AGENTS" in the atrium.

They stood outside one door in particular, and Guillelmina stopped him, hands on his shoulders as she held him at arms' length.

"I know you're nervous about this, so before we go in there, I want to run you through a few things," she told him. "We've been using these methods since before I was a camper, so even if something seems strange or intimidating, I guarantee you it's safe. I want to encourage you to go through the whole routine, but if there is something that you feel unsafe over, you have to let us know. We won't do anything without your consent, Razputin. Do you understand that?"

His mouth flatlined just a little bit, and he glanced between her and the closed door. Mental wellness check, and probably a hundred other exams to study and probe at and declare everything that was wrong with him.

Truthfully, he didn't want to do any of it. But he knew better than to risk her wrath, and he needed her to be happy so his reporting back to Mithra would go unnoticed.

Carefully, hesitantly, he nodded.

She gave him a smile, muted and sympathetic. She knew he didn't want to do this, but she figured he understood the importance of it. What child ever looked forward to the doctor's? Who looked forward to getting shots that would protect you from illness, or to being examined, poked, and prodded, no matter how necessary it was?

She had no idea that there were ulterior motives at work.

So she took out a set of keys and unlocked the door, holding it open and leading him into an open room full of machinery, blinking lights and flashing displays.

Mina tsked, and flipped one of the displays off. "I told him to dial down the ambiance for this visit," she sighed, putting a peculiar accent on the word.

Razputin very nearly chickened out at the sight of this place, freezing mid-step as his eyes darted across unfamiliar machines and bizarre displays all around them. He huddled close to his cousin and took a deep, shaky breath to steel his nerves.

A man in a lab coat stepped out of the little side office, and all thoughts left Raz's mind. That was Sasha Nein. The Sasha Nein. He was in the same room as Sasha Nein!

"Good morning, Guillelmina," said the agent, looking between the two of them. "And - Razputin, is it?"

He knew his name? He knew his name!

Raz nodded, too shell-shocked to do anything else.

"Morning, Sasha," she said, as Razputin huddled next to her. "We have an appointment for full physical and mental wellness check. I'd like to discuss his unique circumstances before any mental checks are made."

Sasha looked him over, and hummed. "Yes, I have some questions as well."

Guillelmina had checked in with Milla, who had undoubtedly told Sasha about the nature of her extraction, but there were still details they needed to go over.

"We'll answer anything we can - right Razputin?"

Her cousin's mouth opened and closed, almost like a fish. He couldn't stop staring at the man before him.

Y-Yes.

Mina gave him a little nudge and a smile. She could only imagine how he felt, meeting Sasha Nein after all these years - after so many conflicting feelings about the Psychonauts.

Zalto had warned him never to meet his heroes, but Mina had known the man for ten years. He was a great guy, and an even better scientist.

"Agent Nein and I have already agreed, I'm going to be staying for the entire check up, unless you ask me to go, in which case I will give you your privacy. Does that sound okay with you?"

Yes, he replied quickly, as if she might rescind the offer. As star-struck as he was by Agent Nein's presence, Raz would much rather his cousin be involved in these exams. In fact, he'd rather she did them herself, because for all her traitorous actions, she was still family, and he did not want this hero to see how screwed up he was.

Sasha nodded when he got Mina's confirmation. "Good. Let us begin immediately. We have a lot to do today."

If he wanted her to do the mental exam, she would. She was not quite as experienced as Sasha Nein in mental exploration, but she'd seen her fair share of mental landscapes.

But with Razputin's consent, the exam began. It started with a physical - the most basic measurements that one would have taken at a doctor's office for a standard visit, blood work, and an eye exam.

Then, they had him lay down on an examination table.

The only consolation Raz had, as he laid down and stared at a well-lit ceiling, was that he was in good physical shape. Mithra had always made sure to take care of him.

He swallowed and tried to quell his rapidly beating heart as the agent placed a closed psi-portal against his forehead. He'd never seen one in real life, but this was not a great way to see it in action for the first time.

Sasha, as if sensing his apprehension, paused before opening the door. "Who would you prefer to visit your mind, Razputin? Both Guillelmina and I are well-equipped to do so."

Raz took a careful breath. His eyes flickered to his cousin, and that was all he needed to say.

She nodded once, pulling up a stool as she sat next to him. One hand slipped into his, confident and reassuring. "Once the door to your mind is opened, you're going to experience a trance state. It's harmless, and once I'm inside your mind, you will have full control over when you wake up. All you have to do is tell me and we can take a break."

Sasha knew that Mina had, for some time, suspected their family of putting him under a strong hypnosis. Altered memories and trance states were a frequent topic when she spoke of her cousin.

With that, Mina closed her eyes, and Sasha opened the door.

She opened her eyes to a bare room.

No windows, no obvious doors, bare walls and floor. The only thing of note was a small table in the center of the space, and a single chair tucked in against it.

She looked around the barren little room and let out a little breath. Oh, Razputin... Not even his mind was his own anymore. Ten years of Mithras hypnosis, culminating in a blank, obedient little doll.

She moved to the table and brushed her hand along the circular edge. She felt wrong, sitting down here, but pulled the chair out anyway, hoping to trigger something in his mind.

"Razputin?" She called. "Are you in here?"

There was no verbal response, but the moment she pulled out the chair, a handheld picture frame appeared on the table, face down.

She blinked. It was strange, the way things appeared in a mind without triggering any sort of awareness in your senses. She was certain that hadn't been there before, but she hadn't noticed it arrive.

Carefully, she reached for the picture frame, picking it up and setting it right on the table.

A boy without a face was in the frame. No eyes, no nose, no mouth. Auburn curly hair and a green turtleneck shirt were the only indication of who she was actually looking at.

Words were carved in the wooden frame below him. "Who would you like to speak to?"

That was... unsettling. She grimaced, and couldn't help but glance over her shoulder. The room was empty. There was no one here.

The question was framed so strangely that her first instinct was to ask what her options were, but she knew that didn't matter. She was here to speak to

"Razputin," she said to no one. "I would like to speak to Razputin."

A single blink, and suddenly the child she had left behind stared back at her.

He tilted his head. The emotions he kept hidden in the physical world were all on display here, but muted - muted to make him look the picture-perfect representation of a doe-eyed, needy child.

It was eerie, and her stomach turned unpleasantly. With her attention locked on the little picture frame, she sat clumsily at the table, hands splayed on the threadbare tablecloth before her.

"Hi, Raz," she said softly. He was the perfect manifestation of picturesque - everything Mithra had wanted him to be, and nothing more. "Do you know why I'm here?"

Raz nodded. "You're here to decide how healthy I am."

"S...ort of, yes," she told him. "Can I ask where you are? This is your mind, but it seems..." She pressed her lips together. She really didn't want to just say 'empty.' That was rude. "... uninhabited. Usually, people have a mental representation of themselves in their mind, but your, uhm... picture, is a bit unusual for someone's mind. Perhaps you can explain this to me?"

"This is how mama likes it," he replied matter of factly. "It's easier for her and the family to deal with me if they enter my mind."

He paused. "This is how I usually look to everyone, but you can choose something else, if you want. I can...be whoever you want me to be."

Guillelmina paused for a moment, digesting this information. "I... want you to be you. However you're most comfortable being," she said, "but I would like to see the rest of your mind, if that's okay. I promise, you're not in any trouble and I'm not here to hurt anything."

"Oh, um..." Now Raz visibly hesitated. "Wouldn't you rather stay here? It's nice here, and I can do anything for you. See?"

The room shifted around them. Suddenly, Mina was sitting at a parlor table, and Raz looked a little more presentable in his picture frame.

"Fortune telling, see? Like how Ornella likes - your grandma? Or, or -"

Another shift. A plush chair under her, a poker table before her. Raz was dressed like a dealer.

"If you like games more, like Ignazio, I can do that too! Or maybe if you want to know what you look like in the mental world -"

Wardrobes on every side, and she was sitting at a vanity. Her cousin had become its mirror.

"- I know Catalda does, or maybe -"

"Raz– Raz– Razputin!" She interrupted him, looking no small bit frazzled by the way the room changed in rapid flurried like that. She held her hands up between them, a silent plea for him to stop and listen to her.

"I'm not here for any of that. I'm not– I'm not here to be entertained," she told him. "I'm here for you - the real you. The you that you want to be. To make sure you're okay. To make sure they didn't... hurt, anything in here. And if they did," she said slowly, noting his hesitation, his insistence he find something to entertain her - to keep her out here, "then I need to see it, so we can know how to help."

"Please, Razputin," she pleaded with him. "I'm not going to force you to do anything you don't want to, but it would help us a lot."

The room was slow to morph back to its bare state. Razputin appeared back in his original frame, visibly nervous at her plea.

"Um, well, it's not really a...place that the family likes to see," he tried to sway her away one last time. "It's...messy."

"I don't mind messy," she tells him, gentle. She isn't oblivious to his apprehension. She expected it, even. How the Galochios must have treated him in his own mind for him to be so apprehensive about letting anyone in to see the real him.

Was this self-preservation or had they conditioned him to hide everything away? She tried not to let that thought surface in her expression.

"Whatever you show me, I promise it'll be okay. I won't be upset. I just need to do a quick check up, that's all."

There was one more long second of silence, and then Razputin bowed his head obediently. He knew better than to disobey a Galochio.

A breeze blew over the back of Mina's neck.

An open doorway existed in the wall behind her, pitch dark and impossible to see inside.

She turned in her seat, startled by the sudden breeze and no small bit surprised at the appearance of the door. She looked back at Raz's little portrait, and let out a singular, relieved breath.

"Thank you, Raz. It's gonna be okay, you'll see," she told him.

And without placing the picture frame face-down on the table again, she stood up, pushed her chair in again, and made her way to the darkened doorway. It was pitch black - unnaturally so - and placed a pit of nervousness in her stomach as she approached the void.

Praying that Razputin couldn't sense her apprehension, and all too aware of the fact that he probably could, Guillelmina stepped through the doorway, into the unknown.

She stepped into a down pour.

Rain cascaded down from an open sky visible through giant holes in some kind of tattered sheet. Something vaguely human-shaped was a ways ahead of her, impossible to make out in the storm.

Guillelmina held a hand over her head, stopping the downpour around her like an invisible umbrella that extended over her, the water falling sideways before it could come in contact with her.

She hesitated there in the dark, but only for a moment before she moved forward with tentative steps.

"Raz? Is that you?" She called out into the darkness.

As she moved forward into the knee-deep pool, solid things bumped into her legs from within the water. They seemed to be mechanical - cogs and gears and reel tapes.

The silhouette was sitting hunched over, and the closer Mina got, the more obvious it became that they were doing something with their hands.

An eerie, tuneless hum drifted through the rain.

She had told the Razputin in the portrait that she didn't mind 'messy,' but she couldn't suppress the rising feeling of unease that was settling itself in her stomach. Something was very wrong here, and she tried to swallow the apprehension she was feeling as she approached the figure.

"H—" she cleared her throat, to steady her voice. "Hey," she said softly, crouching next to the figure, still - somehow - obscured by shadows and the way the rain fell around them. Gently, she reached out, and extended her hydrokinetic umbrella over their form as well. "What are you doing?"

It was Razputin. Or....not.

It looked like him, certainly - familiar hair and attire - but his skin was almost purple, and when he lifted his head to look at her, black stains ran down his face as if mocking tear trails.

"Hello," he said, eyes shining a little too bright to be natural. "I'm helping."

In one hand was a crude tool almost like a homemade screwdriver. Pinned under the other arm was a limp memory vault, half pried open.

It was just her cousin, she told herself, as she fought the urge to shoot up to a stand and stumble away from this mental projection of the young boy. It was frightening, to say the least, her cousin terribly transformed. Instead, she took a deep, steadying breath as she gave him a strained smile.

"Helping?" She asked. "How? I've never seen anyone help a memory vault before. Can you explain to me what it is you're doing, here?" Her heart ached for the poor little vault that been wrestled into submission, and for the young boy who was in here mutilating his own memories for reasons unknown.

Gently, she reached for the vault, to see if there were any scraps of film still left inside.

"Oh, I'm not helping the vault," 'Raz' clarified. He twirled the tool between his fingers before jamming it violently back into the mouth of the thing before she could get close enough to see what was inside. "I'm making sure it stays open. Don't you know? There aren't any secrets in war time."

"W--wartime?" She breathed, and there was no denying the tone of unease in her voice, now. "Razputin, there's no war. If-- if you're not doing this to help the vaults, who are you helping?" She asked, before the young boy could do much to process the trepidation in his younger - younger? older? - cousin's voice.

She got the distinct sense that every question was brave, foolish step forward in a minefield, but she needed to know. She needed to understand what they'd done to him.

The child studied her, and it seemed he was almost equal parts surprised and amused by her trepidation towards him.

"I'm helping Raz, of course."

He gestured around them, just in time for another broken reel to bump into Mina's knee as it was moved along by the lapping waves.

"He gets hurt when he keeps secrets. I'm here to make sure there aren't any secrets to be found."

She reached for the loose reel as it bumped her knee, holding it up and wicking the excess water from it with her hydrokinesis. She examined it for a moment, then looked back at the form of her cousin. "If you're helping Raz," she asked, "Then who are you, exactly?"

That was a bad sign. There was some personal disconnect, here, that suggested deeper psychological issues were on the horizon. Her mind went a mile a minute as she waited for some kind of answer. Was this indicative of a traumagenic identity disorder? Did his mental denizens simply forget how to take proper forms due to years under hypnosis, without external stimuli to inform his mental landscape.

Speaking of his mental landscape... she looked up and around them. This place was strange, too. Where were they?

One question at a time, Guillelmina. Whoever or whatever this mental construct was, she didn't want to overwhelm him. He was still just a child, after all. She'd have her answers in due time.

She hoped.

"You know," he replied almost thoughtfully, "Raz asked me the same thing, once. I didn't really have an answer except knowing how I was supposed to help. But now that I'm thinking about it..."

The vault gave a single, pathetic kick. He looked down at it, then appeared to have an epiphany. His unnerving gaze met hers and the ends of his mouth twisted unnaturally upwards.

"I'm the body snatcher."

Mina's blood ran cold as ice, but she didn't even flinch. She merely dragged in a breath, and swallowed thickly, nodding once. Whatever this thing was, it was definitely bad news.

"So," she said slowly, "if you're the body snatcher..." the words tasted vile, and she dreaded the answer to this, but needed to know. Needed to ask. "...where is the original Raz?"

A shrug was her answer.

"I dunno. I'd say you already met him in the masking room, but I'm not really sure how much of the real him is even left."

He considered the direction in which she had come. There was no sign of the door she'd come through.

"He used to be here with me, until the family found this place. They, uh..." Something sad and protective glinted in his eye. "Didn't like that he had a 'sanctuary', so to speak. So he's not allowed here anymore. And I haven't been able to check on him, cause I'm too busy -"

Another stab at the vault.

"Keeping us alive."

She didn't get the sense that this thing, whatever he was, was necessarily... dangerous, for his psyche. It seemed concerned with self-preservation, with doing everything in its power to help Razputin survive the unfair wrath of the Galochios.

Mina, her stomach twisting, had a faint idea of what this version of Razputin really was. She'd asked to see the rest of his mind, and had been granted access, only to find that this... protector, of sorts, had full run of the place, while the rest of him - whatever was left, it had said - presented itself in the front 'masking' room. To please the Galochios, while protecting the rest of his fragile psyche.

She watched him pry the faceplate off of the poor little memory vault, and gripped the reel just a little bit tighter.

"Wh.. what else do you do in here, to help protect him?" She asked.

He sighed, but it seemed less out of exhaustion and more that she kept distracting him from his task.

"Oh, lots of things. Keeping our powers as dim as possible when asked to use them in the parlor; wiping away any risk of anger when something unfair happened; having all our memories at the ready for whoever wanted to comb through them; figuring out how to respond to open-ended questions and things that might be a trap. It was a lot easier when we were asleep, because I only had to do all that when someone came into our head. I've had to work double-time since you showed up."

Something dangerously close to bitterness began to creep into his tone. It disappeared the next instant as he started working at the vault again - a practiced, careful reaction.

"You know," she said cautiously, seeing an opportunity present itself. She was essentially speaking to Raz's subconscious right now, after all. No better way to get through to him than that. "All those things you did to keep the Galochios from getting angry and hurting him, you don't have to do here, with me. There aren't any traps. If I do something unfair, I want him to speak to me about it, so we can make it fair. And I'm not going to comb through his memories if he doesn't want to show them to me. I'm not looking for anything from him, like they did. He's allowed to have things he doesn't tell me."

She knew it was a long shot that his subconscious would believe her, but it was something she had to try. It might be the first significant step to helping him understand that he wasn't a captive, here.

That he wasn't just an object that had changed hands.

"I don't want to treat him the same way the others did."

His work stopped. He went still.

For a few moments, perhaps it seemed as though he was really listening to her reassurance. And then he opened his mouth.

"You know, just because we're just a kid doesn't mean I'm an idiot," he said, low and prickly. "I know your type. You feel really bad about the way things are, so you offer help and love and support while it's 'safe' to do it. Then the going gets tough, and all that support disappears in a heartbeat cause you're too busy protecting yourself first. And then, when the dust settles, it's right back to you feeling guilty and offering your fake love again. Don't think I don't know how long it took you to come back for me. Don't think I don't know how bad you felt about leaving me there - about putting me in the position in the first place where I had to beg for my life by asking to sleep forever."

'Razputin' let go of the memory vault so he could stand and face Guillelmina directly. It shuddered and crawled away into the rain as his heated gaze burned into hers.

"Maybe you really are trying to 'make things right' or some other bullshit. Fine. Great. But don't expect me to roll out the red carpet for you when you tricked me and made me betray the only person who actually does love me. You rocked the boat and I was the one who fell in the water. That's how it was back then, and that's how it is now."

She went perfectly still, still crouched in the water as he stood to face her, perfectly level with her as he spat his grievances at her. She didn't argue, didn't interrupt. She just waited, listening to every harsh word he had to say.

He was Raz's self-preservation instinct, and history had taught him that she was dangerous.

"This isn't about mending fences or winning your approval," she told him carefully. "This is about making sure you're safe. Making sure you don't have to destroy parts of your mind in order to keep yourself alive, anymore. You can hate me till the day you die, but I'm going to make sure you get to do it in peace, awake, and free from the Galochios."

Slowly, Guillelmina stood up. The rain stopped, frozen mid-air by her power. Droplets hung in suspension as she looked down at him.

"You and I want the same thing. For Razputin to be safe. He won't ever have that with the Galochios, because Mithra didn't love you as a person," she told him, "and you're not just a doll."

Self-Preservation visibly bristled at the suggestion that Mithra was anything but a loving caretaker. His hands clenched and unclenched, and the only reason she didn't get a psychic slap right then and there was out of that learned instinct not to act on his impulses.

Then, his eyes darted sideways where the memory vault had run off. It was no longer visible, just like the entrance, and all the fight seemed to leave him. He sagged, looking so much more like the waterlogged child he was masquerading as than the ingrained, overgrown brain function he truly was.

He turned away abruptly, crossing his arms and facing the wall of rain instead of her.

"If you really care," he said quietly. Warily. "Then you'll leave me alone to finally do my work in peace."

There was a tightness in his voice that could easily be picked up, but not so easily identified. He was testing her - testing to see how she would react to a command he dared to utter. Anyone else, and he would already be regretting it.

He braced himself.

She was silent for a long, agonizing moment. They were both waiting for the other shoe to drop, testing the waters of each others' company as he dared to spit a command at her like that. Her eyes widened, just a bit, as she watched him turn his back on her.

The silence stretched on between them for what felt like an eternity, before Guillelmina finally spoke. "O... okay," she breathed. It was hesitant, but resolved. "I'll leave you alone now. But.." With his back turned to her, she reached out, laying one hand at his shoulder. There was no force behind it; no pain; no punishment in her touch like there had been so many times before with the rest of the Galochios. "You don't have to destroy parts of his mind anymore. He's safe, with us. You're safe. Let that vault go. Let me prove it to you. It's your choice."

And with that, she let her hand slip from his shoulder, and made her way back to where the door she'd come through had been.

The rain came flooding back down on him the instant she disappeared, obscuring his form just like everything else in this drowning big top. He only glanced back once, eyes narrowed, to take in the fact that she really had left him in peace.

He felt a nudge at his leg. The vault was back, leaning against him in a pitiful display of affection. He crouched beside it and laid a careful hand atop its head. It flinched but did not retreat from the one who had mutilated it so horrifically. The affection had it staying.

"Keeping one secret in wartime, huh?" He murmured, mulling over her request. "Something tells me she's never actually been to war."

A crack in the vault's body flickered a still image at him, only visible this close.

Razputin laying in his new room, contacting Mithra Galochio.

"If she insists."

Mina left peacefully, returning to what the figure in there had called 'the masking room.' His ability, born out of a desperation to please the Galochios, to be anything anyone in the family wanted - the only sign of who he truly was lay in that other room. The tattered, torn up circus tent.

As she pushed through the darkened door, and emerged into the bare little room with the picture frame waiting patiently on the table for her, she felt cold dread settle in her stomach. It was going to take a long time to repair his mental landscape, to make it his own again. That would be their most difficult hurdle.

That, and getting rid of the destructive denizen just beyond that door.

But she put that from her mind for now, and sat back down at the table.

"Razputin," she said to the picture, "are you still there?"

Her cousin's face came back into frame, looking incredibly apprehensive. "Y-Yes. I'm here."

He watched her as if waiting for a reprimand or a taunt.

"I would like to speak face-to-face," she told him. "Are you able to come out here?"

She waited patiently; no reprimand or taunt came, even once she'd uttered her request of him. She was simply there to speak with him, it seemed. But no one was ever here just to speak with him.

His eyes widened, clearly caught off guard, before he nodded. Light spilled out from the frame and with a flash there was a little, shining ball hovering in front of her.

"Yes?" He asked, still so hesitant.

She cupped her hands around it, gentle and slow. She didn't want to frighten him, didn't want to make him think she was here to hurt him. "Do you have a full form?" She asked, tentatively. "It's okay if you don't, or— if you can't," she explained. "But remember how I'm here to do a check up?"

"I..." Shame crept into his voice. "I'm sorry. This is all I can do."

"That's okay," she said quickly, "That's alright. I'm not upset with you. I just wanted to check. The more I know about what's going on in here, the better we can understand how to help you. You're gonna get to be a person, again," she said, "That's what this check up is for. You don't have to put on an act to entertain anyone anymore."

Guillelmina set the little orb of light on the table before her, letting her hands rest in her lap. "Thank you for letting me know. And thank you for letting me see that other room. There's another construct in there, you know. He said you used to visit there, but... the Galochios didn't like it, so you stay out here, now."

Raz visibly wilted, fluttering to sit down idly on the table. "Zalto found it first. He...got really angry, and I never really understood why. Mama convinced him not to fry me for it, as long as I never go back in there, and the Other Me never comes here. She told him, 'this was to be expected eventually'. I never understood that, either."

"Do you want to go back in there?" She asked him, gently. "You don't have to if you don't want to, but you're not going to be hurt for it."

Breaking down the expectations he's made from the Galochios is an important step, and doing so inside his mind is the most direct route. Take a threat that the Galochios implanted in his subconscious and prove it wrong, and he may come around on other apprehensions as well.

"...I don't know," he admitted. "It's been so long, and I don't....I don't like the water."

She gave him an earnest smile. "I'll keep you dry. I'm a hydrokinetic, after all - it's what I do best." She held her hands out for him as an offer. It would be his choice and his choice alone, but if he chose to enter that room again after all this time, she was going to be there to make sure he stayed safe and dry.

Raz wavered nervously. It was an awfully tempting offer, but he wasn't sure how the Other Him would react to seeing him break the rules so blatantly. He was playing a dangerous game as it stood already, listening to his cousin this much.

"That's...that's okay," he finally said. "You don't have to trouble yourself."

Mina gave him a sad sort of smile, understanding his hesitancy. She wouldn't push, wouldn't berate him for his choice. "Alright," she said softly. "I'm not going to make you do anything you don't want to. I really appreciate how much you've shown me already. You did really good today."

She had no idea what had been in that poor, broken memory vault. She just knew that both sides of her cousin had taken great risks today.

"You know how all this is a checkup, right? I want to know how you feel about it. About me being here. Are you okay, after all that?"

"I'm okay!" He was quick to reply, bobbing up and down. "I'm fine. You don't have to worry about me. I know what's going on."

"Razputin," she told him with a gentle smile, "not one in nine years have I stopped worrying about you. I'm not gonna start now. I'm glad you feel okay, after everything that happened today. This - all of this - is going to help us a lot. It's going to help you a lot."

The little mote stopped jumping, and fluttered back down against the table. "I know. I know that."

It sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than anything.

"Is there...anything else you want?"

Mina could hear the uncertainty in his voice. Even if he was trying to convince himself, it was still a great effort that he was putting forth to trust her, to trust the Psychonauts.

Gently, she shook her head. "I think we're good for now. This was just a check up, but I might come back soon," she told him. "We'll know more soon about what to do next, and we're not going to do anything without your permission. Thank you for helping us, today."

"You're welcome."

With her confirmation that she was done, Raz disappeared within the picture frame. His face showed up muted and photogenic once more, and he gave her a tiny little smile.

She gave him one last smile in return, and opened her eyes in the real world. His hand was still clasped firmly in hers, and she blinked as awareness came back to her, looking down at her cousin as he, too, came back to his senses.

Razputin tensed as the real world came back into focus, then he slumped. He'd half been hoping he would stay in that trance when she was done. No such luck.

He glanced nervously up at Mina, wondering what she was thinking. He was well aware his mind was a mess.

His mind was a mess, but that was only to be expected after ten years of hypnotic sleep and mental abuse. She would be speaking with Sasha at length about the secondary manifestation in his mind, the body snatcher. She didn't like the implications of something like that, but he'd seemed to operate as a... misguided protector of sorts.

When Raz came back to his senses, she smiled down at him and told him to take it easy as he sat back up. The trance hadn't lasted, but what else was to be expected from the woman who had stolen him away from the Galochios to begin with?

He rubbed his eyes, still not used to the sensation of his vision being bleary. Then Sasha spoke and he jumped. He'd almost forgotten the man was with them.

"How was your check, Guillelmina? Any pressing matters?"

She laid a hand at his shoulder in hopes of steadying him, his nerves undoubtedly already shot.

Then she looked at her colleague, the unsettled look in her eyes was telling, even as she kept her voice steady. "A few irregularities. Underdeveloped landscape and the inability to form a full mental projection," she explained, and then she paused.

"And... there's something else there."

The agent had started scribbling down notes, but he stopped at her tone. Slowly, his eyes met hers from over his sunglasses.

"From your vague description, am I to assume you can't identify it?"

Mina grimaced a bit. "It wasn't a normal mental denizen. It looked like Razputin, almost, but it wasn't really him, either. It said that it was helping, that its job was to help keep Raz alive. I found it in a secluded part of his mind, mutilating memory vaults."

"Mutilating...?" Sasha looked perturbed by that information. "That shouldn't be possible. Minds often resort to self-sabotage or even self-destruction in extreme situations, but the most basic of functions tend to stay intact. For a mental denizen to even have the ability to do that, it -"

He cut himself off, glancing at Razputin, who stared back. A careful, readjusting clearing of the throat, and he turned back to Mina, gesturing towards his cluttered little office.

"Would you be willing to step this way with me for a moment."

"That's what I'm saying. I don't think it was a normal denizen. It's like... whatever it was, whatever it is," she stressed, "it's a product of ten years under hypnosis. Ten years of severe abuse. His mind was separated into two rooms," she told him, gesturing. "The front room, they called it the masking room, where Razputin can be anything anyone wants him to be. Then, a hidden room, flooded, with rain coming through what I think was a circus tent. He was an acrobat, before he lived with us. I think... I think that was his real mental landscape, but it's been

destroyed. That's where I found this... thing. It called itself a... a body snatcher," Mina muttered, with no small amount of embarrassment, and admitted it in a low grumble.

"We watched the movie, the other night."

Sasha put his hand to his chin, stock-still and silent as Mina went through her description of the state of Raz's mind and the bizarre being she'd encountered. The name it had given itself, despite the unorthodox origins of the phrase, had an alarm bell ringing in the back of his head.

"So this..."body snatcher." You said it looked like Razputin, but was not actually him," he repeated slowly. "Was there any obvious indication that it wasn't, besides its words? Something about its physical appearance? Like, say, a Nightmare wearing a disguise?"

Mina ran a hand through her curls, pressing her palm against her forehead for a moment. "Uh, yeah," she managed eventually. "It was purple, for one. Its skin, was purple. Yellow eyes. Streaks down its cheeks, almost like... tear-stains..." she described the nightmarish vision that had presented itself to her. "But it wasn't a nightmare, I don't think. Its job was to keep Raz safe. It said there were no secrets in wartime, because... the Galochios punished him for keeping secrets."

Purple skin. Yellow eyes. Keeping the owner of its mind safe at all costs. The agent gave a sharp inhale, and strode quickly over to his computer.

"Guillelmina, I'm going to pull up a picture. I want you to tell me if this...thing, you saw, looks anything like it."

A pop-up appeared onscreen - a young woman, no older than sixteen, with glowing yellow eyes and purple skin much darker than the look-alike Raz had. Her teeth bared were bared, one hand raised to her temple and the other stretched out towards the perspective of the camera in what must have been a moment captured right before disaster. She didn't have the same stained cheeks, but instead there was a thick ring of black around her eyes like a smudged bandit mask.

Mina swallowed thickly, and found that she'd stopped breathing all together. She moved slowly towards the monitor, looking down at the image of this poor girl with wide eyes.

"That's it. That's almost exactly what I saw in his mind," she croaked out. Wide, frightened eyes turned up towards the agent. "Sasha," she hissed, "What the hell is that thing? What is it doing to him?"

Sasha's mouth pressed firm. "This is an image from a case in which a group was busted for performing unethical experiments on psychics and how it pertained to brain functions. The girl in question here had been kept awake over an entire week, and then subjected to rigorous psychic assault. She snapped, and the resulting explosion was what alerted us to the group's hidden base that we had been tracking unsuccessfully. She didn't recognize us as friendly and had to be sedated from a distance. The unusual pigmentation faded over the next several days as her body and mind recovered."

A second picture popped up, of the girl asleep in a hospital bed, looking more brown than purple.

“However, the entity that had been...”awakened”, so to speak, had taken over her psyche to the point that she refused to believe we did not mean her any harm. She continued to be combative and psychically dangerous for months. As best as we could figure out, the entity was a manifestation of her survival instincts, brought to the forefront by her situation and developing a consciousness of its own from the degradation of her mind.”

“Survival instinct...” she echoed, one hand hovering over her mouth. She worried at her thumb as she looked at the case images, and thought back to the strange little boy she’d met inside Razputin’s mind. “The Galochios, our own family, they... every day of his life was spent under threat. For nine years, Sasha. The hated him. They hurt him.”

It was no wonder his survival instincts had grown sentient.

She glanced back at Razputin, trying to keep the overt alarm from her features. She didn’t want to worry him more than he already was. She just wanted to help him.

“If he’s removed from the environment that created this... overgrown fight complex in the first place,” she whispered to her colleague, “then over time it should fade back into a manageable instinct. Subconscious, instead of superconscious. Right?”

The man hesitated.

“In...theory. It depends on how long the entity has had reign of his mind, and...the state of his mind to have given those instincts the chance at all to grow to such an extreme. Most people who experience overwhelming trauma don’t develop a manifestation like this, even psychics. For it to come to the forefront...”

He eyed her, expression pinched.

“He must have been placed into a particularly vulnerable state at some point, and was unable to recover from it before having to fight for survival again.”

Mina stood there, and the world outside of the little office space ceased to exist. Sasha could see some horrible epiphany taking place, and as she swallowed thickly, it was entirely possible that the only thing keeping tears from welling in her eyes was her own discipline over the water.

“He was ten years old when Mithra put him under. Then she just... kept him there.” It was a horrible reality, that they had continued to abuse him while his mind was in such a vulnerable state.

She was starting to understand the threads holding together his contempt for her.

Nine years, then. Sasha smothered the urge to peer through the door and at her cousin, who was still sitting obediently on the exam table.

"I see," he said, trying and failing to keep his tone neutral, to hide how disturbed this information made him. "And...as far as you're aware, he was never able to wake until now?"

"N... no. I don't think so. Mithra said he'd been under since I left," she managed, taking a shuddering breath to steady herself. "I don't know if she... ever woke him up, in nine years."

Nine years. Nine years he'd existed as a half-person, with his psyche working overtime to protect him from the cruelty of their family.

Nine years, and now that overgrown survival instinct had another reason to fear for his life.

"Well. Hmm. I suppose...at least we know what we're facing, yes?" Came the attempt at offering hope. "We certainly have our work cut out for us, but as long as Razputin remains in a stable environment with plenty of resources and support, I'm sure that his mind will pull itself back together, even if it's not to the level it once was."

The agent looked her over, and tentatively placed a hand on her shoulder. "You did a good job by bringing him here, Mina. Don't forget that."

She took a deep breath and nodded once. "Anywhere is better than with the Galochios," she told him, without so much as a waver to her voice. For someone who had once put so much faith in her family, the conviction in her voice now was unshakeable.

She looked back at her cousin, still sitting up on the examination table. "I think we should be up front with him. He's still a child, in his mind. He hasn't had the chance to develop, under Mithra's hypnosis... but he deserves to know what's going on. We owe it to him to treat him like a person."

Sasha nodded in agreement. "That's a good idea. If we're going to help his mind recover and reach his physical age, showing him respect and that he can participate in conversations such as these will be vital. I just wanted to get a better understanding of the state of his psyche first, since you seemed...shaken by it. After you."

She nodded, and looked back at her cousin for a moment before moving back into the main lab, over to him as she gave him a muted smile and folded her hands at the side of the examination table. "Sorry for the wait," she told him, and he could already see her apprehension.

"We want to keep you informed on what exactly this check up brought to light about your psyche. You spent a lot of time in your own head because of Mithra's hypnosis, so I guess, first thing's first... how much do you know, about what it's like in there?" She asked him.

The look Razputin gave her was flat and a little incredulous. He'd lived half his life in his own mind. Just because he'd been asleep for a lot of it didn't mean he wasn't aware of how much it had been degrading over time.

I haven't been in the...Other Room, in a while, he responded instead, careful and watchful. Otherwise I know all of it.

She nodded, and steepled her fingers, looking over at her colleague, uncertain if Razputin's thoughts were picked up by the scientist as well. Either way... "G-good. It's good that you know. Then, you also know about that part of you, who lives in the Other Room. Who does what he can to help protect you?"

She took a deep breath. "That other part of you isn't like most mental denizens. It's a representation of your survival instincts, and survival instincts don't typically... take forms, like that. You haven't done anything wrong, by letting that part of you... grow, the way it has," she reassured him, "but our first goal, now that you're safe from the Galochios, is to make sure that survival instinct settles back into its natural role in the subconscious - smaller, and quieter, without so much control over your mind."

He stared at her, and as the seconds ticked by in silence, his brow furrowed lower and lower in confusion and no small amount of worry.

Survival instincts. That's...yeah. That's right, that's what he is. Raz said the words almost more to himself than to her, as if confirming something he'd suspected for a long time. His gaze flickered around the room at the flashing lights and machinery before settling back onto her.

Why would we - want to do that? What's wrong with him staying where he is?

Mina took a deep breath. "For someone in your position, quieting you survival instinct sounds like a dumb idea. I know it does, because right now, you still don't feel safe. I understand that, and I'm not saying you have to feel safe right now, you have to get rid of him right now. But in balanced mental health, the survival instinct stays in the lower part of the consciousness. It doesn't take a prominent role like yours has, and that's because you've... been through a lot of trauma. Nine years of nonstop threats against your life, Razputin," she explained.

She gestured vaguely, trying to get the concept across while fully knowing he would be resistant to it. "If you allow your survival instinct to go unchecked, it can have a serious and dangerous effect on your mental health. He's destroying integral parts of your psyche because it's what he finds has kept you safe under the Galochios all this time. Which - I get it. You're doing what you have to to survive. But you don't have to do that anymore. And reigning in your survival instincts before they get too out of hand, right now, is just as important as all those things he's done to keep you alive."

Raz's eyes dropped down to his hands, sitting limp in his lap. He swallowed, and a muscle twitched in his jaw at the action.

What if he decides not to - he cut himself off, then restarted a lot more carefully. What, um, what would happen if he wasn't... 'reigned in'?

Mina reaches gently, laying one hand over his.

"You've been living with your survival instincts in this heightened state for years, Razputin. It is unlikely right now, but there's the possibility that severe stress of trauma can activate your survival instincts and supplant the part of your mind responsible for your decision-making

process. You will see everyone and everything as a threat. We... we don't want that to happen to you. It's incredibly dangerous for your psyche."

He tensed, but not from her touch. He already saw everyone as a threat - because everyone was. Her. Agent Nein, as cool as he was. Zalto. Clients and visitors. The entire Galochio family.

Well, almost the entire Galochio family.

I, um...I'll think about it, he said without meeting her gaze. Was that the biggest thing you found in my mind?

"There wasn't much else," She told him. "Your survival instinct controls the most prominent part of your mind. Razputin," she said gently, "he was the biggest thing we found in your mind. That's... I know that's how you've survived, but that's not something insignificant, and I don't want to see you get hurt because of it."

As soon as those words were out of her mouth, she prayed - prayed to any God that would listen - that he didn't take that as a threat.

"What I mean is," she corrected herself, "letting that go unchecked can hurt your psyche, and I don't want that to happen to you. It's still manageable, right now. We can get your survival instincts back to where they should be. Not gone, just... back down to appropriate levels, that's all."

If he followed her suggestion and did that, there was no telling if he'd be able to survive returning to the family. If his instincts weren't so prominent, he wouldn't have survived so long, and he was already dreading the fallout from this escaping stunt. If he tripped up even before he was reunited with Mithra, he was dead.

Raz's eyes became just a little unfocused as he stared at his cousin, taking her words in but not really taking them to heart. She clearly didn't know what she was talking about. Obviously she didn't, because that important part of him had kept his secret from her, against all odds, and she just didn't understand that he couldn't lose it. He couldn't afford to even think of losing it.

Okay. If you say so.

Mina gave him a grateful little smile, and leaned forward, pulling him into a hug. She wouldn't deny that what she had found in her cousin's mind had left her more than a little shaken. She was afraid for him. She really had meant what she'd said to that little mote of light in his mind; she wasn't going to stop worrying about him. But mostly, she was just glad that they seemed to be on the same page - that he was willing to try and curb his fight complex and put things right.

She knew he must be frightened - of the idea of this dangerous, overgrown instinct; of the thought of losing the thing that's helped keep him alive all this time; of the Galochios and the life he still expected to be dragged back into.

But she was finally there - really, truly there for him, and she wasn't going to make him face any of it alone.

Never again.

The sound of Agent Nein clearing his throat caught both their attention, and they turned to see the man in question closing the distance he'd given them for privacy.

"That's about everything I need from you for now, Razputin. It will take at least a day for some of these test results to give me conclusive facts, so I highly recommend taking that time to rest and situate yourself to your new environment. Thank you for being willing to come in today."

Raz drew in on himself, still as intimidated and awestruck as he was three hours ago when they'd started. O-Okay. You're welcome.

"Guillelmina, I will update you on anything that sheds light on what we discovered. Please keep me informed as well."

She withdrew, cheeks lightly flushed as she straightened herself in front of her colleague. "Yes - of course. We're still working on... acclimating, to the new living arrangements, but I think we're going to be just fine," she shot her cousin another smile, so confident that things would be okay - not able to see the disaster just on the horizon like Raz was.

"Thank you for having us today. If anything else comes up, I'll be sure to add it to Razputin's medical file."

"Excellent. I will see you both soon."

Raz's gaze never left Sasha until the lab doors closed behind them. Then, it was back to watching the floor as they made their way through the hustle and bustle of the rest of the Motherlobe again.

He still didn't have an exact location for Mina's house, but he did have an approximation - because he knew it wasn't too far from the Psychonauts headquarters, and he knew exactly where the Psychonauts headquarters was.

All he had to do now was tell Mithra when there wasn't a chance that his cousin would overhear him.

It was hard, living with her. The little home they lived in was not terribly big, and the only time she wasn't within thinking distance of him was... never. He was her case, now. Her job. Her paperwork was done from home, her assignments completed on a secure network laptop as she looked after him, and never left him alone for more than a few seconds at a time.

It was a matter of catching just the right moment and hoping Mithra would pick up the other end before he was caught. His call while she slept in the early, early morning had been a miracle... or maybe, it had been a fluke.

Either way, contacting Mithra again was going to prove difficult with his vulture of a cousin watching over him.

It was agony to be under so much scrutiny. He was used to the situation itself, but he was on a time limit now, and every hour that passed with Mina hovering near him both physically and psychically was one more step towards the uncertainty that the Galochios would let him live by the end of this.

He was a nervous wreck by the time evening rolled around, and it was only because he'd spent a decade learning to hide it that nothing seemed obviously amiss to his cousin.

Mina truly had no idea what a disadvantage she was at, trying to take care of her cousin. She had no idea the depths of Razputin's emotional and psychological damage after all these years - she'd only been offered a glimpse of it through his mental landscape. It would come out in behaviors and emotional numbness that she couldn't possibly anticipate.

And that, ultimately, is why she believed everything was going well for them. That he was adjusting. That he understood that he was no longer under the heel of the people who wanted wholeheartedly to hurt him.

She couldn't have been more wrong.

Eventually, finally, Raz found an opportunity. He knew his cousin stayed up later than he did, either because she had work to do or because she wanted to make sure he didn't fall asleep straight into nightmares. He could sense her energy, still vibrant and awake, even when his own would begin to drift off.

So, he just had to hold out longer than her, and make her think he was asleep. Easier said than done, but he'd spent so long in a trance, it couldn't be too hard to replicate it for such a simple trick.

He had plenty of practice, making his presence as small and unassuming as possible. She didn't expect him to scheme like this, so when she felt his presence start to wane at night, she figured it was because he was finally falling asleep. She waited up, paying close attention to his signature to make sure he did not suffer nightmares, before she too lay down and clicked her bedside lamp off, drifting quickly into sleep.

He held that position for barely five minutes after feeling her signature drop off, and his beating heart kept him anchored in his little room as he reached out into the astral plane.

Mama? Are you there?

I was beginning to think you'd forgotten about me, bambolino, came her voice, gentle and cool in his mind. Every day that goes by, I have to face the possibility that you've turned on us for that awful turncoat cousin of yours. Zalto is losing his patience, dear. Tell me you have good news!

I didn't forget! I do have good news! I'd never betray you, mama! He barely managed to keep his frenzied energy between their connection without bleeding out into the real world. She took me to see the Psychonauts - she only lives ten minutes away from them!

You let her take you to those awful people? Came the question, full of disgust and disappointment. Oh, bambolino, what awful things do they do to you? What lies did they tell you? You poor thing... don't worry, pet.

Mama's coming for you.

He could have wept - more from relief or more from guilt, he wasn't sure.

Thank you mama, thank you. I missed you so much, and I tried! I really tried to reach you sooner, but she's always watching me so closely, and I was scared she'd move me to someplace I didn't know if she caught me talking to you! It doesn't make any sense, some of the things she says....

That cousin of yours is vile and will say anything to confuse you, Mithra told him, her voice seething in the back of his skull. You know who your family is, Razputin. You know where you belong. You know who really loves you. She's just using you, trying to take you away from me.

You're not going to let her, are you, bambolino?

No!

If there had ever been any question of Raz's convictions, of where his loyalty truly lied, it was answered in that single word.

No, no, I won't! I know better, mama. I know you love me, and you're the one who knows best.

Good little pet, she purred into the recesses of his mind. There was no faking that kind of conviction, that kind of undying, unquestioning devotion. Even if Guillelmina thought she'd finally pried him from the clutches of the Galochio family, it was Mithra who had won, with an unshakeable control over her property.

Be ready for us, pet. We will come to bring you home, and your cousin will try to keep you for herself.

He was shaking again. Surely it was just at the idea of Guillelmina trying to turn him against Mithra.

I'll be ready! I won't let her keep me away from you. He would have clutched at her hand if they were in the same room. I miss you so much, mama. I'll do anything to stay with you.

I know you would, pet, she cooed gently. It was all part of her influence, after all - to love and rely on her, unconditionally. Mama's going to come take you home, where you belong.

Now be good, she told him, and let us surprise your cousin, hmm?

Okay!

The line dropped off, leaving Raz shivering but not completely shaken to his core like the last time. He turned onto his side to stare at the moonlight streaming through the bedroom window. He'd done it. He'd succeeded in what she'd asked of him, and she was pleased.

He felt like laughing. He felt like crying.

He didn't do anything, so as not to disturb his cousin.

Of course he would do anything Mithra asked of him. She'd spent nine years meticulously breaking him down to ensure that he barely resembled a person anymore. He was her little, obedient doll, and nothing more.

He remained quiet through the rest of that night, his cousin undisturbed. Even an object could learn to reign in its volatile emotions. This quiet deference was much more suited to something like him, than the outburst he'd had the last time Mithra had spoken to him. Mama would be proud of that, too.

But Mama wasn't here, now. It was just him and his thoughts and his cousin in the next room, and the world of the Psychonauts just beyond that door.

I did the right thing, most of his mind whispered as he lied there in the dark. The family would've caught up to us one way or another, no matter what Guillelmina did to prevent it. This is damage control.

I'm in so much trouble... Whispered another, smaller part. I'll be lucky if there's even a trace of me left when Zalto is done with me.

Guillelmina took me to the Psychonauts, came the smallest voice, rarely ever heard anymore. They're so strong...they might be able to...

No. No, that's traitorous. Don't think like that. That's just her talking. She doesn't know what she's talking about. I can't fall for that. I can't risk it.

Back and forth he went within his thoughts, until all the doubts about what he'd just done were completely squashed. There was no time for doubts anymore. Now he had to wait, and brace himself for the wrath that was coming. If he could survive that, he'd be okay. He'd be fine. And his mama would be on the other side, ready to embrace him once more.

Guillelmina was, perhaps, the only Galochios that hadn't planted thoughts and ideas in his head. He did not have those thoughts because she put them there, like the others so often did.

Those traitorous thoughts - thoughts about safety and escape and the Psychonauts - those thoughts were his own.

The next morning, when Guillelmina came to check on him, it was quiet and still, save for the knock on his door that came once the sun had positioned itself in the morning sky.

"Hey," she said, peeking her head in. "Sleep alright?" She asked him, hoping that he was settling into his new arrangements a little better now that he'd been here for a few days.

Green eyes within heavy dark circles greeted her. He had barely slept an hour at a time, always woken up by mutinous thoughts and an anxious swirling in his stomach. He pulled himself into a sitting position at her appearance, listless and without a word.

Her smile thinned, and she moved into the room. "You didn't sleep," she states, and its simple fact. "If there's something on your mind, keeping you awake, I might be able to help. The Psychonauts even teach us how to deal with nightmares, if that's what's keeping you up."

It wasn't. She would have felt a nightmare, she's sure of it.

She sat at the edge of his bed, and held a hand out for him. "You can talk to me, you know."

Raz gave the offered hand a blank stare. He took it after a long moment of deliberation, and didn't meet her eyes. His muscles shook from exhaustion - or perhaps something else.

".....I....I can't..."

Her hold was gentle, even as she gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. He says that he can't, and that worries her. He should never feel like he can't speak his concerns, or ask for help.

"Whatever it is, you won't get in trouble for it. I just want to help. If it's keeping you awake at night..."

He swallowed. She absolutely couldn't know under any circumstances. If she learned the truth, she'd be so angry and would hide him again, and that would upset the family even more, and it would all crash down on him.

"I...."

But she needed an answer, and he needed to keep her from getting suspicious.

I can't - get rid of hi- my - instincts. I can't. I don't want to...

There was a moment of shock as she took in his words, but the look that bloomed on her features afterwards, it... wasn't anger. If anything, she looked saddened. She pressed her lips together and nodded.

"N-no, I know, you don't," she whispered to him. She traced her thumb against the back of his palm, in a gentle semi-circle. "I know you're worried, Razputin, but... I just want you to be safe. That's what we're going to focus on, for now, okay? Just making sure you feel safe."

Perhaps down the line, once he was out of the fight-or-flight response that life with the Galochios had locked him into, his instincts would recede back into his lower subconscious. Perhaps it would simply happen naturally once he started to heal from everything they had put him through.

But for right now, he relied on those instincts.

“No matter what happens, we won’t get rid of your instincts.” And it was true. Putting them back where they belonged didn’t mean they wouldn’t still respond when he needed them. “I promise.”

Raz took a deep, sharp breath, and still refused to look at her. She sounded so kind, like Mithra did when she was comforting him. She sounded genuine. Maybe if she had come back for him sooner, he would have believed those words and promises. Maybe he would have felt safe out here, and would have lived for a little while in peace, thinking the family wouldn’t be able to find him.

It hurt his head and his heart to think about for too long. That was a pipe dream, and unrealistic anyway. The family always knew. They’d always find him.

Okay, he whispered, because there was nothing else he could think to say. Okay.

She looked at him for a long moment, and he wondered if she was contemplating whether or not he was honest with her. The chance that she suspected something was overwhelming, before she simply sighed.

Guillelmina leaned forward and pressed a delicate little kiss to his forehead.

“Rest,” she told him, gently. “You’re exhausted.”

Letting his hand finally slip from hers, she stood, and closed his door behind her.

He slumped as soon as she was gone. Tears threatened to spill for some reason he couldn’t name, and he hurried to wipe them away.

Mithra would be here soon. He just had to wait. He could do this. He could do this.

The mantra repeated in his mind over and over as he laid back down and tried in vain to rest.

Mina paused outside of his door, swallowing thickly.

She hated to put him through all this. She hated to make him endure even more stress and fear at the thought of taming his survival instinct, but if he didn’t– she thought of the file Sasha had shown her.

She couldn’t let that happen to him.

Id Mithra where they were early in the night. It would take over a day for the family to get here, even if they traveled immediately without stopping. That meant another full day of going along with his cousin and pretending nothing was different. He’d had to be emotionless under much worse circumstances. This would be difficult, but he’d be able to do it.

He stayed in his room another few hours, unable to sleep, before admitting defeat to himself and finally emerging.

By the time Raz joined her, it was nearly noon, and she was in the kitchen preparing lunch for the both of them. She gave him a careful smile as he joined her, welcoming him and setting two plates down on the table as something sizzled on the stove.

"Feeling a bit better?" She asked politely, seeing how he seemed just as if not more tired than she'd left him.

Not really, he responded, knowing it was pointless to pretend otherwise when she could obviously tell he wasn't. Coming clean was always the best course of action. I'm sorry, I wasn't able to rest more.

"Hey, it's alright," she assures him. "You can head back inside if you get too tired. For now, though, I made lunch. Are you hungry?" She asked, turning back to the stove.

No.

Y-Yes.

She placed lunch on the table, and sat down with him. It was difficult to gauge what was genuine and what was his tendency to please those he felt would reprimand him if he upset them. So, as they sat down for lunch together, her cousin looking worse for wear across from her, she couldn't help but keep an eye on him, a small part of her afraid that he was going to pass out right there in his plate.

He was exhausted beyond belief and nausea ate at his stomach with every bite, but he somehow managed to get through most of what she set in front of him. God, he missed being asleep. He never had to deal with these kinds of issues when he was oblivious to it all.

She tried not to watch him throughout the meal. He had been acting off since she'd taken him from the Galochio home - abuse and conditioning, fear and apprehension all warred inside the mind of a ten year old.

But something was... different. He was more withdrawn than before, and that was saying something. She looked up at him, trying to pinpoint exactly what it was.

Was it because of what she'd seen during his checkup? Did he feel embarrassed? Afraid that she was going to use this new information to hurt him somehow? He didn't seem to like the idea of quieting his survival instincts. Was that what was causing this upset?

She wished, desperately, that he had the capacity to be honest with her. Because with how he was so well-trained to the Galochios' particular brand of caretaking... there was little he would respond to that wasn't his norm. You're safe if you can know what to expect - and with the Galochios, he had that security. Here...? Forget about it!

She set her fork down, and looked up at him for a moment, lips pressed into a thin line as she thought about the next words out of her mouth.

“Would this be easier for you if I... acted different?” She asked. “I know it’s been a huge change, from how the Galochios treated you, and... I’m not going to treat you like that. But maybe some more... stability? Will help put you at ease?”

Raz blinked at her, caught off guard by the question. No one had ever asked him if he wanted their behavior to change to suit him better. It was such an unthinkable concept that he had to take a few moments to simply process it.

You...don’t have to change, if you don’t want to, he eventually said, treading very carefully. I can get used to anything you want to do. And I, I don’t really know how...what you mean by stability, without acting like the family.

“Well,” she ground out, and hated every word out of her mouth. “You... were under hypnosis for a very long time, and haven’t been... they made all the decisions for you. I want you to get used to being your own person again, Razputin, but if you’re— upset, or overwhelmed, I don’t want you feeling like I’m just throwing you in the deep end and saying good luck. I can...” she shifted, tugging nervously at the end of her sleeve.

“What I mean is, if you feel uncomfortable with so much... self-guidance... we can ease into it. We can create a routine, or rules, or any kind of structure you feel might help you feel more comfortable, here.”

Routine. Rules. Structure. All of those things sounded wonderful, but they weren’t going to matter after today. Even so, the suggestion was enough to almost make him wish that wasn’t the case.

That sounds...nice. Did you, um, have anything specific in mind...?

She dreaded to ask, giving a nervy little chuckle and already regretting this. “Well... what kind of rules are you used to? Simple things, like... lights out at a certain time, like when we were kids. Or... speaking, when we’re in the house together.”

It would be a good way to get him in the habit of using his voice, at the very least.

He stiffened, rather subtly, at the mention of speaking.

Oh, um, s-speaking out loud wasn’t...really allowed. At least, um, not...not around you.

“Well,” she said, her voice more confident than she felt. “These are new rules. These are my rules.”

His mouth twitched and his fingers tightened against the edge of the table. Okay - um -

“O-O-Okay...”

Oh, that felt bad.

But still, she smiled at him. "Thank you, Razputin. It's good to hear your voice. We'll work on rules, and routine, if you think it might help you feel better. If it doesn't - if something is upsetting for you - I still want you to tell me, and we can work through it together. And, one more thing--"

She reached a hand out for him.

"-- these rules will never, ever be an excuse to hurt you. Alright?"

"Al-Alright-t-t," he stuttered, taking it with a noticeable nervousness. Perhaps he didn't quite believe that.

Or perhaps it seemed as though he expected consequences from someone else for going along with this.

Even if he didn't quite believe her, she was determined to prove it to him. There was no punishment on the other end of a bad day. He wasn't going to be punished for mistakes, and she certainly wasn't going to be taking her frustrations out on him like some of the other did. He was not her punching bag.

Raz looked down at their interlocked hands before giving her a shy glance. "Is th-there any-thing e-else?"

Five rules. Five rules was a good groundwork for him, right? Speaking while in the house was one. Lights out by ten seemed like another good one, and she grabbed a piece of paper to list them out for him.

Knocking before entering a room that isn't a common area like the living room was number three.

He wasn't allowed to leave the house without the psychoisolation bonnet, was rule number four. This would be lifted, she explained, once Sasha Nein helped him rebuild his mental defenses.

And rule number five, she told him, was the most important rule of them all, and he'd been doing very good to follow it while he was here with her. Rule number five was to tell her if something was wrong.

They were awfully simple rules. All easy to understand and easy to follow, and seemingly no underhandedness to any of them.

Rule number five, though...

No. It was fine. He wasn't actually breaking rule number five, because nothing was wrong. He was good and fine and things were going to be even more good and fine very soon. He would tell her if something was wrong, but something needed to be wrong in the first place.

Razputin nodded along at the end of her discussion, and promised, sincerely, to follow every rule she had made.

She let out a little breath of relief. "Good. Thank you, Razputin. I care about you, very much, and I just want you to feel comfortable, here. I trust that you'll follow those rules well."

She didn't know if they would help him. She hoped they would. She hoped that having some metric by which to judge his own actions, he will not fear reprimand and consequence quite so much.

"I w-will. I can d-do that." It was one weight off his shoulders to have structure, just as another settled deeper into his heart the more he thought about rule number five. He pushed those thoughts away. None of it was going to matter soon, anyway. No purpose in stressing himself out for nothing.

He was so close to understanding that Mithra coming for him was something dangerous, something wrong. He could feel it in his core, even if he couldn't recognize it for what it was, consciously.

But Mina did not seem to realize his apprehension. She didn't pry into his thoughts like the Galochios did - and perhaps that was her greatest mistake.

Razputin played out the charade of innocent ignorance the rest of the day. He struggled to talk out loud the most and slipped into mental speech more than a few times, but all other rules were followed to the letter. It surprised him at how lenient she was with his mistakes, and he filed that information away within his mind.

Not for any specific reason - and certainly not because he had any delusions that he would be staying with her for much longer. Just...force of habit, he supposed.

Gentle reminders were the only thing that met his slip-ups. She was not condescending about it, nor did his mistakes invoke the anger he was so used to from his caretakers. She just politely reminded him to use his voice, and carried on with the conversation as if nothing had happened.

Maybe she wouldn't be so lenient down the road, when he should have been able to remember these rules without mistakes. Maybe she was just more understanding about mistakes than her elders.

Maybe... maybe she had been honest when she'd said there would be no dire punishments like there had been.

Whatever the reason behind her actions, he took notice, and it became obvious how much it was catching him off guard as the day went on. He started openly staring at her, looking as startled as he was confused by it, and the delay began to last a full second or two before he came back to himself and went back to what he had been doing or saying.

She caught him staring at one point, and asked him if everything was okay. The look he was giving her was... peculiar, and slightly unsettling. She understood, of course, that he was still adjusting - he would be adjusting, for quite some time, she suspected - and she wasn't going to question his... process.

But the stare really was unsettling.

The question made him flush with embarrassment, and he averted his eyes immediately. "Sorry! S-Sorry. I was - I was j-just - I'm not used t-to it. I'm sorry. I w-won't do that a-anymore."

"Hey- hey, you're alright. What aren't you used to?" She asked him, certain that there were quite a few things about their current arrangements he wasn't used to.

"J-J-Just...when I s-screw up, you d-don't, you don't - um. You c-c-correct me without, um..."

For some reason, he didn't want to say it out loud. Which was stupid, because it was just a normal thing, but he had a feeling it would upset her anyway. His voice trailed off as he lost all his steam.

"...It's...different."

"Well, for starters," she told him gently, "you haven't screwed up anything. You've made a few mistakes, but you haven't screwed anything up. You're doing really well, actually, and I'm really happy to hear you speaking again." She gave him a smile, amazed that it had actually been that easy.

"Secondly... that's how it's supposed to be, with rules. You shouldn't be hurt or threatened because of a little slip up. I told you, these rules won't ever be an excuse to hurt you - I meant that."

Something about the way she said that last part rubbed him the wrong way. He felt...defensive, almost, of the way his cousin was implying things about how Mithra had raised him. His hands came up to grip at his elbows.

"Not - an ex-excuse," he murmured. "Just...I n-needed it, sometimes. I'm not v-very - smart. B-Bad b-blood. Nothing w-wrong with - with a heavier h-hand, or else I would-not learn."

She gave him a hard look, thoughtful but clearly displeased. "You know," she started, "You and I are exactly the same amount Galochio. Did you ever hear them saying I was bad blood? My mother's not even a psychic. It's bullshit, Raz. It was always just bullshit. Just another excuse."

There was something almost hostile in her voice, though she stamped it down, not wanting him to think it was directed at him.

"You don't need a heavy hand. Every time I've pointed out you trying to use telepathy instead of speaking, you corrected yourself. Did I need to hurt you for that? Did I need to threaten you?"

"N-N-No, you d-didn't, but..." His expression twisted, and he looked away. "I've just...g-gotten better, is all. I used to be really, r-really bad. Really...."

Why was this so hard to say? Why did it feel like a bad thing to tell her about this, when it was just the truth?

"D-Disobedient."

“Disobedient how? Because I doubt it was anything that warranted the way they treated you. I doubt it was anything that deserved a crystal ball to the skull. They could have killed you. It’s a miracle you’re still alive, Razputin,” she caught herself, and sighed deeply, stymied her fury.

“All I’m saying,” she softened her voice deliberately, “is that no matter what happens, no matter what mistakes are made, you’re not going to be punished for it.”

Razputin stared at her. The gears in his head were clearly turning, and the look on his face was pinched with some indefinable emotion. He opened his mouth, maybe to thank her for her mercy, or continue to refute her claims about how he was raised, but what came out instead was:

“What...are you t-talking about? C-Crystal ball to the...s-skull? No one ever d-did any-thing like that.”

Raz could see the steam leave her. Her back straightened, and the stony look fled her features as she processed his question. She looked away, and suddenly it felt like the tables were turned.

“Forget about it,” she muttered, sadness to her voice. “You didn’t believe me back then. You won’t believe me now.”

“B-But -“ he caught himself before he actually started pushing, and closed his mouth with a swift click of his teeth. It wasn’t his place to ask. It was never his place.

“Okay. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” she told him.

She paused, and looked over at him. There was something profoundly sad in the way she looked at him, something that suggested this very conversation was one they’ve had before. That this conversation was something she carried with her for nine years.

Without a word, Guillelmina moved towards him, one hand coming up to his face - the pad of her thumb brushed gently against the scar that ran jagged down his right eyebrow.

“Tell me how you got this.”

He didn’t remember the conversation they’d had back then about this subject. He had been out of his mind in panic at the time.

“Oh! This...?” He confirmed, eyes flicking up to her hand against his face, to the point she was touching. “Mama t-took me to the p-park, and I c-climbed a t-tree against her w-wishes. Th-Then I f-fell, and sc-scratched my face r-real bad. M-Mama was s-so worried.”

“Mithra’s the most powerful hypnotist I’ve ever met, and I work with the Psychonauts,” she said, her voice distant, as though the comment had nothing to do with their conversation.

She looked him dead in the eye.

“How do you know that’s really what happened?”

Raz drew back, stunned by the question, by the mere suggestion that Mithra would do anything so underhanded. He was ready to tell her otherwise -

And stopped.

Something about her words rang a little too uncomfortably in his head. He knew what his caretaker was capable of, more than anyone else. He knew she could easily alter memories and thoughts and dreams - because he had begged her to do so, more than once, after a particularly bad session with Zalto. She only did it some of the time, to ease him into comfort, but it had been enough for him to know just how powerful she truly was.

But she only did those things when he asked, and he didn’t remember ever asking to forget anything regarding his fall.

“I...remember g-going out,” he said, slowly. “I r-remember the t-tree I c-climbed. And...”

A black pit of nothingness for a solid minute afterwards.

“I...but...wh-why would she t-take it away if I d-didn’t ask? Sh-She promised she would only d-do it if I...asked...”

His head was starting to hurt. He pressed his palm up to his right eye, struggling to understand why he was drawing such a big blank the more he dwelled on the memory.

She pulled his hand down gently, taking both of his in hers as he tried to parse through his shambled memories.

“I’m sorry, Razputin. I tried to tell you, before I left, but you didn’t believe me. You were... you were so frightened when it happened, and Mithra had me clean up, all the broken glass, and there was blood, and then a few days later you thought that it had happened from falling out of a tree, and... I didn’t know how to make you believe me. I still don’t know.”

And he probably wouldn’t believe her now, either. Because Mithra loved him - and had made sure that no matter what, he loved her too. No matter how she treated him, no matter what she did to him, she could take it all away and smooth it all over, and have her perfect little doll adore her at the end of it all.

“It... it doesn’t matter, now, though,” she tried. “We’re both finally safe. You don’t ever have to go back to that.”

He had no idea what she was talking about. The family was harsh and could be very cruel at the best of times, but none of them had ever done anything like what she was implying. Just because he had some alarming gaps in his memory that he couldn’t remember the reason for didn’t mean they’d done that to him. And besides, they’d always told him his life would end by water - not by a crystal ball or anything else so unusual.

You don’t ever have to go back to that.

Very slowly, Razputin began to shake his head. And found he couldn't stop.

She let her hand slip from his cheek as he started to shake his head - a deep, hypnotic denial that what Mina had told him was the truth. Her heart clenched and her throat was tight as she watched him.

"Whether or not you believe me," she told him, scrambling for some ground amidst what looked like the beginnings of a panic attack. "I promise. I swear. No matter what happens, I'm not going to let them hurt you. I'm not going to leave you to face them alone like I did last time."

He couldn't stop shaking his head. He couldn't stop shaking. What was wrong with him? He shouldn't be affected by her words like that - he knew better! He knew better than to trust anything she said, or believe she wouldn't leave him alone again, or that she wouldn't let him get hurt.

Stop reacting, you idiot! You're going to give yourself away!

But he couldn't stop. To his horror, his vision grew watery, and he took a step back in self-preservation before anything could get worse.

Guillelmina held her hands up, palms bared, in gesture of surrender or understanding. She would give him his space; she would give him time to process or grieve or come to terms with this, whatever was going on in his head.

"Talk to me, Razputin," she pleaded gently. "You're okay. Deep breaths, cugino."

Deep breaths. Deep breaths, right. He needed to calm down. Calm down, Raz. You know how to calm down.

His breathing slowly began to even out, and he blinked the tears away before they could fall. His hands still trembled.

I'm okay, he repeated with her. I'm okay. I'm okay.

She reached slowly, his hands in hers as she held him steady. "There we go. Slow down," she spoke softly, and did not correct his speech. He was in distress - clearly not in the best place to be remembering to speak. She hoped he didn't notice, she didn't want him worrying about something so inane right now.

"You're okay," she smiled up at him as his breathing evened out.

He met her gaze and his breath caught in his throat for half a second. Then he swallowed it all down. His shoulders dropped heavily.

Sorry.

She shook her head gently. "No need to apologize. It's okay. You come first, always. Do you need to sit down?" She asked. "Or some water, maybe?"

She gently pulled him towards the kitchen table, pulling out a seat for him.

Raz sat down with no resistance, wrapping his arms around himself as he watched her fill a glass for him.

Thank you, he murmured, still feeling a second away from mental overload.

She set the glass in front of him on the table and sat down with him, hands folded loosely against the table as she watched him carefully. "You're having a rough time, lately," she mentioned. It was obvious, with how... strange, he'd been acting. "If there's anything I can do..."

Stupid, stupid, stupid! If he was being this obvious now, she'd figure out what was happening in no time! And then he'd be in even more trouble from all sides!

He stared into his glass. His fingernails felt rough against its surface as his hold tightened. N-No, you're fine, I'm fine, I just -

He caught his mistake and ducked his head lower.

"I just...the, the ch-check-up with the a-agent, it just...g-gave me a lot to th-think about."

She nodded, listening. "It's been a lot to take in," she agreed. "And you've been under a lot of stress. It's okay to take things slow. You don't have to make any decisions or come to any conclusions right away."

She had no idea that he was under the most dangerous time crunch of his life - there would be less than twenty-four hours before the Galochios arrived here to take him home.

She was being so nice to him. He didn't understand it. She was the traitor, his awful cousin; the one who used to taunt him for his heritage and goad him into fights and rat him out with no regard for what would happen to him. Had leaving really changed her this much?

It was a foreign concept to him. It almost made him want to....no. He couldn't risk himself like that. When the Galochios learned about all the rules he'd been breaking, even if just to please her, they'd be even more furious than they already were. He couldn't risk their wrath any more.

But she was being so nice, and suddenly he found himself hoping that she, at least, would get out unharmed from their return. She deserved to keep the life she'd obviously made for herself, because it seemed to make her happy.

Razputin glanced up at her, shyly, and came to a decision.

"What's...what is it like, f-for you? Out here? Are you...happy, I-like this?"

The question caught her off guard, and she blinked at her cousin in stunned silence for a moment.

"Y-uh- yeah... yeah, I am," she said gently, and the sincerity in her voice couldn't be disputed. "I didn't realize how... aggressive, our family really was, when I was with them. I didn't realize

how...not normal a lot of our homelife was. Being out here taught me a lot. That's... part of the reason why I brought you here," she admitted, her voice soft - almost haltingly so. "I hope it can teach you the same things."

Things like confidence and self-worth, and that the Galochios didn't control his life any longer. That he was his own person who deserved kindness and respect... but it seemed he was a long way from that realization, now.

He was more than a long way from that realization. As far as he was concerned, kindness and respect were meant for actual people, and he wasn't even that.

"A-And, you, um, you feel better about your...p-powers, now?" He asked, ignoring her gentle turnaround to him. "I...remember you, um, were really up-upset about them."

Upset had been an understatement. He hadn't been fully aware of her situation, but he'd gotten enough from the context clues - especially when he started learning how to see the future and she got downright nasty about it towards him.

She searched him for a long moment, contemplating her answer.

"I do," she said, at long last, her voice slow and thoughtful. "They wanted me to see the future, so that I could be a part of the family business. That's ultimately why they sent me to camp, so the Psychonauts could teach me what they couldn't. And you know what happened?"

Mina gave a short, exhausted chuckle.

"The Psychonauts couldn't teach me, either. I'm never gonna see the future. And I'm fine with that, now."

The casual way she spoke about it was shocking. There was definitely an echo of old hurt and struggle, but she'd clearly made her peace with all of it a long time ago, and he was stunned by her ability to do it at all. Seeing the future was everything. The family business was everything. Zalto had hammered into his head more than once that the only worth he had was in the powers he'd stolen from the Galochio bloodline, and most of the family's anger at Mina over her betrayal was because of the carelessness with which she had disregarded her duties.

He couldn't wrap his head around it. But then again, he didn't need to. This was her life after all. This would be her life after he was gone. If she was content with how things were, who was he to question it?

He just had to make sure of one more thing. He had to make sure she could protect herself. She'd done an amazing job of it when she'd driven him away from the house, but that was very different than dealing with the family in person - and Raz prayed that scenario didn't happen.

"So...wh-what can you d-do...?"

"I learned a lot of skills from the Psychonauts over the years. I learned pyrokinesis and levitation and psi-blast. I learned I have retrocognition, which is why I'll never have precognition," she said, as though that made everything clear.

Guillelmina looked up at her cousin. "But the thing I'm best at - the thing I've always been best at - is hydrokinesis."

She spoke it with a heavy finality. She wielded control over rivers and oceans, and her power - which she had discovered long before Razputin had come to live with them in their youth - had only grown in might under the care of the Psychonauts. It was her psychic specialty and strongest, most integral power.

Razputin went pale. "Oh."

She could kill him. Any minute, any moment, she could lose her temper and snap her fingers and he'd be gone. She'd been so lenient with him all this time, but that didn't mean anything. Power like that, in his mind, rivaled even that of Zalto's, because it was just as deadly for him.

His gaze dropped to his water. It was still and tranquil, but he couldn't trust even that anymore.

He should have known this was all too good to be true. Mithra was right. There was only one place he was safe, and that was in her arms.

"I know exactly what you're thinking," she said, her voice solid as she examined him. He'd gone white as a sheet, and was looking at his glass of water like it was going to leap out of the cup and attack him. Like she was going to attack him. "All this time, they've told you that all Aquatos are destined for a watery grave. You fear hydrokinesis."

She reached both hands out for him, an invitation.

"But you don't have to fear me."

Just as easily as she could drown him with her power, she was keenly aware of the control she held over the water, and knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that should something terrible come to pass, she could stave off the curse, as well.

He didn't know that. He couldn't trust that. It was an unknown, a leap of faith, and he'd learned the hard way that those never ended well. Going back to how things were was what he needed to do to survive. He knew the rules, he knew the people, he knew what to do and what not to do, and he knew he could rely on his caretaker to look after him no matter what.

He knew nothing, here. That was very, very obvious.

"O-Okay," he whispered, afraid to look away from his glass and afraid to take her hands. "Okay."

"Razputin," she breathed. When it became obvious that he wasn't going to meet her halfway, she turned her hands over, remaining there between them but not expectantly. "Please, look at me."

It took far too long for him to do so. The emotion in his eyes, the fear, was already starting to recede into the safety net of blankness.

"I care about you, Razputin. So much. That's why I took you out of that house - not because I wanted to take you away from Mithra, not because I wanted to make things hard for you, or get you in trouble. Because I want you to be safe. Because I love you. I - I do. I really do, and I know we haven't seen each other in nine years but I never, ever stopping trying to get back to you."

She could see the way he was receding into blankness, into the safety of obedience and shutdown as best he could without Mithra's hypnosis.

"I will never use this to hurt you."

His bottom lip began to tremble, giving him away despite his attempt at shutting down. His chest was moving so even and slow it almost didn't seem as though he was actually breathing.

Slowly, and without any sudden movements, Guillelmina stood up and rounded the table to his side. Without a word, she draped her arms around his shoulders in a hug.

"Listen to me," she said softly, turning his gaze up towards her with a gentle hand. "Nothing you could ever, ever say or do would make me angry enough to use my hydrokinesis on you. You're my cousin - you're my family. And I don't care what that means to the others. To me, it means we take care of each other. That's how it's supposed to be. That's how it was always supposed to be. You're safe, Razputin," she told him.

"I promise you, you're safe with me."

Something snapped. It flickered in his eyes before the rest came crashing in, and suddenly he looked ready to collapse into her hold. His expression crumpled and he put his face in his hands, no longer able to face her with the crushing weight of guilt bearing down on him.

"I - I - I - I'm s-s-sorry-y-y!" He sobbed, curling in on himself as if her touch burned. "I'm s-sorry! I'm sorry!"

Now he understood why he had mistaken her for Mithra - she was kind like her. She was loving and caring and good like her. She was someone who wanted to keep him safe; who thought he was worth the effort of keeping safe despite it all.

And while he did not regret reaching back out to his mama, it despaired him to know that he'd brought the family's wrath down on her. She didn't deserve that. She didn't deserve him. She deserved so much better than him, and all he could think to do was apologize for what was coming to her doorstep.

She hushed him, cooing gently as he finally let out the dread and distress that had been pooling in his chest for the last few days. Whatever had changed in the last twenty four hours had taken a significant toll on him, and she wanted him to get it out of his system as thoroughly as he

needed to. She rubbed gently at his shoulder as he rode out the tidal wave that had crashed down on him from the burst dam.

"You don't have anything to apologize for," she told him. "I understand. Really, I do. It's okay. It's okay..." she tried to sooth him, patient and understanding, unwilling to reprimand him for this display of grief and guilt and every other awful emotion that was gnawing at his insides.

She had no idea what was coming for them, what intended to burn her and her entire life down to the ground to get its hands back on Razputin.

Once he started, he couldn't stop. All those ugly, terrible emotions that he'd been stuffing down since the first night when he'd made contact with the Galochios again came bubbling up, demanding to be seen and heard and felt, and there was nothing he could do to stop them. No way to tone it down or make it more palatable or easier for her to deal with.

It was as liberating as it was terrifying.

He sobbed into his hands and wished Guillelmina had someone much better than her awful, worthless, Aquato cousin.

She didn't ask him to stop them. She didn't demand he make himself more agreeable, softer, quieter - she took him as he came, without judgement. She just wanted him to experience a better life.

She didn't care that he was an Aquato. She didn't care about the feud or the history between the two families. She didn't care about the circus they'd both come from. But she cared about him, in the here and the now.

She never once told him to suck it up, never told him he was too much or too emotional.

For the first time in almost ten years, Razputin was allowed to just feel his emotions as they came.

It was a messy, beautiful, sad thing to witness. He cried and cried and never seemed to lose steam, and although he didn't lean into her touch or hold her back, he also never pulled away as she hugged him a little closer. All his heart and soul poured out of him, and by the end of it he couldn't see straight and felt like he'd been run over by a truck.

Raz collapsed in his chair in an exhausted heap of stillness and sniffing, raw all the way down to his core.

Once the sobbing had subsided, Guillelmina leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. She TK'd paper towels from the kitchen counter, handing them to him until she could get him a proper box of tissues for this emotional tumult.

"Easy," she cooed. "Take it easy. I'm so sorry, Razputin," she sighed. "I'm sorry you've been through so much..."

He didn't respond. The emotional turmoil had risen and then crashed, leaving him with nothing but the cathartic aftermath and a dull ache in his chest. Distant eyes tracked her movement.

She wouldn't complain, and happily gave him as much time as he needed to gather his wits. The glass of water was removed, replaced with a hot cup of tea that she hoped would bring some warmth back to him.

It took a lot of effort just to hold it, but he managed somehow to take a tiny sip. He closed his eyes and pressed the hot mug against his chest.

Thank you. I'm sorry.

"It's okay," she said, one hand at the top of his head as he sat there and pressed the hot mug to his chest. She was his caretaker now - not in the same way that Mithra had been. She was taking care of him to see him get better. Mithra had taken care of him to keep him unwell.

"Take all the time you need, okay? I'll be here when you're ready."

There won't be enough time for that.

He wasn't sure if the thought had slipped out of his head while he was exhausted like this, but he found he didn't care. Not right now. Not when he was finally finding himself allowed to just exist.

Mina went still, looking down at him.

Seemed that thought had indeed leaked through to her. That's what happened when your mental defenses were obliterated at the age of ten, she supposed.

"What do you mean, there won't be enough time?" She asked, without accusation to her voice. If anything, she sounded confused. Concerned.

Raz closed his eyes again.

....Not enough time for me to pull myself together. You....you'll just be waiting forever.

Waiting until you can't anymore.

Her shoulders slumped, and she gave him a sympathetic little smile. "I know it feels like that right now. But things don't stay bad forever. And you know," she said, a hand at his shoulder, "if it takes you forever to pull yourself together? Then I'll wait forever."

That's very kind of you.

He said it without opening his eyes. He was afraid that if he looked at her now, he'd either burst into tears again or his secret would burst out of his chest.

And he was too tired for tears.

I don't understand. I'm not worth your time. But that's very kind of you. Thank you.

"Well there's your first mistake, right there," she tells him lightly. "You are worth my time. You're worth more than the Galochios might have led you to believe. And - rule number six - I don't want you saying otherwise." That one was tried and true, and Mina knew that there were plenty of people in his life already who had derided his worth as a person over the years. He didn't need to do it himself.

She stood there behind him with her hands on his shoulders as he tried to catch his breath after his outburst. She would wait as long as it took.

"That's my cousin you're talking about, you know?" She gave him a little nudge, not even enough to disturb his tea.

Rule number six... He repeated quietly to himself. It was enough of a distracting thought to keep him grounded, and he opened his eyes to stare down at his cup. Okay. I can remember that.

She ran a hand through his hair, happy to see him starting to calm down. "Rule number six - you're not allowed to talk bad about yourself, or put yourself down, or say you're not worth it. That's an important one," she told him gently, combing his hair back rhythmically.

This was nice. He could let himself enjoy it, he decided. While he still had the chance.

Raz leaned back against his chair so she didn't have to stretch so much to reach him.

Why is it important?

"The less you tell yourself you're worthless, the more you believe you are worth it," she explained, watching how he started to relax under her touch. "The more you tell yourself you deserve kindness and respect, the more you believe it. I want you to believe you deserve good things."

But...why do you believe that? You would know better than anyone what I am...

He clamped down on his next thought, knowing it would definitely break the new rule she had just placed.

"Here's a better question - why do you believe that you aren't worth the time to care about? Because the Galochios told you so? Because they spent years making you feel like a mistake? I care about you, Razputin, and I don't need some big important reason to treat you with respect."

There were countless reasons he could give her about why he wasn't worth it, and most of the ones off the top of his head had to do with tomorrow.

He fell silent instead, staring out at nothing.

Mina, not knowing about what was looming just on the horizon, couldn't attest to any of those reasons, but even if she had known about them - and she would know about them, very soon - she would not have thought any less of her cousin.

He was worth it.

The two of them sat in the kitchen together as she combed through his hair; one feeling content and the other feeling...something. Certainly not happy, but not upset either.

The closest thing he could compare it to would be sleeping peacefully. For once, he didn't mind having this over the other.

Raz closed his eyes and let out a soft sigh through his nose.

They remained like that for what felt like a lifetime. She did not move from his side until he was content, until the terrible tidal wave of emotion had subsided into a manageable seafoam.

She was content to simply stay there and hold him as long as he needed. After all this time, he deserved a gentle hold.

Eventually, he started feeling more in control of himself, and slowly began to extract himself from her. It wasn't all that late yet, but he felt like he could sleep forever. It was a surprisingly nice sensation to be tired in this way.

She let him go when he started to sit up, allowing him to call the shots where her comfort was concerned. It wasn't long after that she helped him up and to his bedroom. It was clear he was exhausted after the evening he'd had, and she wanted him to try and get some rest.

Razputin doubted he was going to get any, but he was going to try. That way, he could at least look a little presentable tomorrow.

At his door, he hesitated as she bid him goodnight, and called out as she was just starting to turn away.

Wait.

She paused without hesitation, turning back to him with a gentle little hum.

"What's up?"

Can I....

His hands clenched into fists at his sides. If it weren't for knowing this was the only chance he had, he would have lost his nerve.

But he pressed on for her sake.

C-Can I...hug you?

Here she hesitated, only for a second as she tried to parse exactly what he'd just asked her. After that second was over, she smiled gently and moved back into the room.

There was no quota of affection - no threshold, it seemed, where he would be denied or called a nuisance for his need for comfort or reassurance, if indeed that's what this was.

She merely opened her arms for him, wide and welcoming.

Now it was his turn to pause, if only to actually be certain that she was offering this, and that he was really going to accept it.

Carefully, like a wounded animal, Raz came in for the hug and let her wrap her arms around him. It would have been silly to see - he was considerably taller than her, after all - if not for the way he began to tremble and squeezed his eyes tightly shut.

It was almost... sad, though she couldn't understand why.

It almost felt like he was hugging her goodbye.

Without a word, she rubbed gently between his shoulder blades, humming an aimless little tune as he wrangled his trembling under control again.

At long last, she held him at arms length and smiled up at him. "I'll see you in the morning, Razputin. I love you."

He looked down at her. Something crossed his face that could have, should have been a smile in another life.

"I...I I-love, you, too."

But it wasn't quite there.

She was still concerned for him; there was something off about the way he was acting, but he'd also had one hell of a day, and his emotions were probably a little bit all over the place because of it.

She decided to reassess the situation tomorrow. Perhaps he just needed some sleep...?

Still, she gave him a gentle smile in return, and closed the door behind her.

Razputin stood there for a long time. He stood there until he felt his cousin's presence draw away to her own room, and then drop off into sleep.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and let it out. Only then did he begin to move again.

There were things to be packed for the trip home, after all.

The night passed uneventfully, with Guillelmina none the wiser for what was coming their way. She slept lightly, still hyperaware of her cousin's distress, should there be any during the night.

But she was still asleep, and there was a lot one can miss when they're sleeping.

He wasn't in distress. He wasn't feeling much of anything.

Enough clothing packed together for a two-day trip, Razputin cracked open the door and slipped into the hall without a sound. He moved carefully and quietly into the living room, and paused as his hand brushed the doorknob of the front door.

Mama, can you hear me? Are you close?

The air was still in the witching hour, and for a long, agonizing moment, the only thoughts in Razputin's head were his own.

He was so close to escaping his kidnapper - kidnapper, right? - and so, so close to being back with his mama...

I'm here, pet, she said, and he could all but feel her presence - the only thing keeping her out of his head entirely was this damned house. We're so close... where are you?

I'm here.

He opened the door, mind free and unsafe of the psychoisolation bonnet.

He stepped outside.

I'm right here, mama.

The moment he crossed the threshold into the wide open world, he felt her - he felt Mithra, and every other Galochio crowding into his mind all at once. She took the forefront, gentle and happy to finally be back in his mind, but he couldn't ignore the fury simmering just behind her.

Oh, bambolino. We've found you! We're coming, pet, don't you worry. Mama's coming.

Raz's knees went weak, and he nearly collapsed onto his hands and knees on the grass. Staggering, he placed a hand to his head and closed his eyes as his vision swarmed from all the sudden crowding.

He didn't dare ignore the fury, but neither could he let it overwhelm him when so many things were still so precariously balanced.

She's asleep right now, he stressed, but she wakes really easy and I'm trying my best not to let her know what's going on.

You don't need to do anything, pet, came her soothing voice, wrapping around his mind like a warm blanket, chasing away the fury that seemed to eager to rip him to shreds. Just stay where you are. Do not move. Do not make a sound. We will come for you.

Like a spell had been cast, he went slack where he was standing, eyes glazed over as his mind disappeared into soft clouds of peace.

Oh, how he missed this. How he missed her.

Raz remained there on his hands and knees - not hypnotized, but the world swam around him in a state of altered consciousness as Mithra's calming presence soothed him.

He caused no psychic disturbance as his cousin slept peacefully inside, nor as a car pulled up on the darkened street, its headlights the only sign of life amongst the quiet row of houses.

He barely had the ability to lift his head just enough to watch as those headlights fell upon him, alone and vulnerable on the front lawn like a lost kitten. He stared with a half-mast gaze as the car came to a slow, quiet stop. The heat of the light on him combated the cool night air, and he shivered.

Headlights still beating down upon him, warm and blinding, Razputin saw the darkened silhouette of a figure emerge from the passenger's side. Like an Angel swathed in a golden halo, Mithra descended upon him with open arms.

"My bambolino..."

Raz would have cried if he were capable, seeing her approach. The most he could do was screw his face up almost adorably, tears brimming but not spilling, as her hands landed on him.

The dull ache in his heart pounded away within him. He closed his eyes and turned his face into the crook of her shoulder, letting all his relief and love and guilt pour out over their shared connection.

Mama, mama, mama....

She knelt there in her great-granddaughter's front yard and embraced her perfect little pet.

"Oh, my little doll," she cooed sweetly, her hands on his face. Her touch was gentle, but didn't carry with it sweet sleep. "Mama's here. You've been awake for such a long time, pet... What sort of trouble have you gotten yourself into?" She asked, caressing his cheek gently.

His thoughts were barely coherent in their overwhelming emotion. A rush of jumbled half-concepts swirled from him to her - waking up for the first time and not even realizing what was going on around him until he was in a car, being driven far away; his cousin hovering and watching and never letting him out of her sight; a blur of lab equipment and blinky dials and that stupid helmet and his cousin in his head.

Her telling him to get rid of the things that made him obedient and him knowing better, knowing not to listen.

She listened to all of his swirling thoughts and emotions with the patience of a mother. She held him, and waited, silent and understanding. "Oh, you poor thing," she sighed. "All this time, you've been through so much... I'm so sorry that this happened, my pet... I thought I taught you better than this. None of this would have happened if you hadn't pulled that little stunt back home. You know that, don't you?"

She thumbed gently at his cheek, and he could feel her steal control of his body, locking him in place there before her.

Sorry, sorry, didn't mean to, sorry, wasn't thinking, sorry, sorry, scared, thought you were in trouble, sorry...

It was a whirlpool of guilt and pleas and understanding that he was still in so much trouble. Understanding that he deserved to be in trouble. His lips parted barely an inch as suddenly he couldn't move, still half-crouched in the grass like a child or an animal, but not once did he protest it.

He deserved this. He had hurt her and hurt the family. He deserved whatever was coming.

She was glad he felt that way.

"You know how much I love you, don't you pet?" She asked, thumbing just underneath his right eye. "But when you ran off like that, you know, Zalto was so angry with you. Furious, even. He wanted to hurt you, but we couldn't find you..." With one index finger, she began a rhythmic tapping at his cheek.

"He wanted you dead, you know."

Raz couldn't even shiver - from the touch or the reminder of Zalto's wrath.

I know, I know, I'm sorry, I'm sorry....

"I tried to defend you, pet. Really, I did. But you broke my heart, running away like that... after everything I've done for you, I couldn't believe that my little bambolino would do such a thing. Attacked in cold blood, in my own home!" She tsked, and Raz felt... funny. Lightheaded.

"Oh... I really wish you hadn't done that, pet," she sighed, and sounded almost sad. "I was having such a good time with you."

Something didn't feel right. Her hypnosis never made him lightheaded. Never made him feel funny or queasy or like he was having a hard time holding himself upright. He stared at her with wide eyes and forcefully-calm breaths, and her words crawled up the back of his neck like ice.

Oh.

Mama, mama, please, his inner voice started out small and pitiful, and gradually began to rise in panic the more his limbs tingled uncomfortably. Please, I didn't know, I didn't mean to, mama, please, I'll be good, I'll do anything, please, please, please!

She held his face in her hands, and looked down at him with calm, cool pity. "Oh, I know you didn't mean to," she cooed to him, and he was vaguely aware that he was losing feeling in his limbs. He couldn't feel the ground beneath his palms or the pain of his knees on the concrete.

"But all that time away from you, pet, made me realize," she told him, and the driver's door opened, another dark figure looming over the pair crouched in the driveway of Guillelmina's home. Zalto moved towards them with uneven steps.

Mithra's hands slipped from his cheeks as she stood up, joined by her husband.

"You're more trouble than you're worth, and I've grown bored of keeping you alive."

No, no, please, no, please no!

They stood together in front of him, silhouetted by the car lights. No longer did he see angels come to save him. Now he saw them for what they truly were:

Angels of death.

Raz couldn't scream. He couldn't move. He couldn't even begin to cry or hyperventilate as a gnarled old hand, harsh and cruel, started reaching for him. His cheeks were flushed purple.

Please please no no no no NO -

The hand touched his forehead. He felt power welling up behind it, ready to send him into eternal oblivion.

I'm going to die. I'm going to - I want to -

Something within him snapped.

I WANT TO LIVE

Something within him broke free.

The world went white and he screamed.

Guillelmina woke with a start, breath caught in her chest and ears ringing as someone screamed bloody murder. Before she was even awake, her feet hit the ground and she stumbled out of her bedroom to find her cousin—

His door was open. His door was open and he wasn't in his room and he was gone and oh God, where was he?

She felt it, the sizzle of unbelievable power through the air, and Mina threw open the front door to a scene of destruction. A single car had come up the road, and now lay smoldering on its side. There were other people out here, but she barely registered any of them - neighbors - Psychonauts - old familiar faces...

All she cared about was one person.

"Razputin!"

He was crouched out on her front lawn, hands over his ears, and his head whipped around at the sound of his name. The bare streetlights gave just enough to reflect purple skin and manic eyes. A command ripped through the air, hitting her and every gawking bystander in the neighborhood.

STAY AWAY

She held her hands up and took a decisive step away from him. People were crowing outside their homes, agents preparing for a fight. He was hurt, vulnerable, in danger, and the people

around her - the Psychonauts that she spent the last decade with, that she trusted - were preparing to fight and subdue him.

Gently, quietly, she made the connection with her cousin.

It's okay. It's just me. Forget about everyone else - just me. Razputin... What happened...?

Static answered her. Alarms of danger, danger, danger rang in her head as he scrambled onto unsteady feet and wrapped his arms around his middle.

His eyes alighted on two bodies lying near the wrecked car - less an answer to her question and more a realization of something - and he hunched over with a hand to his mouth.

Oh god oh god oh god

Her gaze followed his, and she didn't even need to ask. Of course.

Of course.

God, what had they done to him? What had they been trying to do? This was his survival instinct, unchecked and overwhelmingly powerful. He was hurt and frightened and in the spotlight for causing destruction and mayhem.

He was just a child.

Mithra had taken everything from him, locked him away in a preserved state, never to learn or grow, and expected him to stay that way forever without any negative consequences.

The Galochios, in all their pride, had always been fools.

"Razputin..." She started out loud, hoping someone else on the block would realize - she knew him. She cared about him. This was not a senseless or random act. This was a tragedy in all the ways they could never understand. She just prayed she could diffuse this before the Motherlobe descended upon their street. "Raz, listen to me. I'm going to come closer, so I can help you. I'm not going to hurt you. We're not going to fight. It's okay..." She said, voice strained, knowing full well none of this was okay.

Oh god oh god what have I done oh god oh god oh god oh g- don't come close stay away!!

His eyes jolted back to her as she started to talk. Terror and instinct had them glowing in the dark and he took a stumbling step back even though she had yet to move.

Stay away don't touch me don't touch me!

The ground rumbled around him. The streetlights began to shake.

"It's okay! It's okay - no one is going to do anything! No one's going to touch you. No one is going to hurt you," she held her hands out, looking around at the other agents who had readied themselves to fight - silently begging them not to make any drastic moves.

“Razputin, I need you to listen to me, very carefully. I just want to help. If you come back inside,” her voice was soft, everything about her body language cautious, “then I promise, nothing bad will happen. We can work through this, together. You don’t have to be alone anymore.” She took a single step forward, and reached out a hand. “You don’t have to be afraid.”

Raz took another step back. He was hyperventilating.

Don't trust you can't trust you you'll hurt me you'll kill me stay away from me don't want to hurt you oh god what have I done stay back or I'll-I!

The ruined car began to rise off the ground by its nose. Someone shouted and he swiveled his head in their direction. Purple ran down his neck like a poison.

“NO—” she sent a mental blast to her colleagues. No one make any aggressive moves. He can still be reasoned with. You don’t understand what he’s been through.

Then, more desperately: please, don’t hurt him.

She didn’t move, didn’t advance on her cousin. “No one is going to hurt you, she spoke out loud, hoping to spur her colleagues into standing down. “No one wants to kill you. I won’t let anyone hurt you, Razputin. No one here is allowed to lay a hand on you - but you have to calm down. We can keep you safe. We can fix this. But only if you let me help.”

Everyone and everything around them froze. The world held its breath as one young woman tried to keep her cousin from attacking or being attacked. Razputin shook, appearing on the verge of collapse if someone so much as poked him.

The look in his eyes promised otherwise.

Not safe not safe I'm not safe with you not with anyone - his thoughts were a maelstrom and impossible to tune out - she hurt me they hurt me you're just like them can't trust you or you'll hurt me too you made her mad at me this is all your fault!

The crack of his mental voice as it reached a violent pitch was the only warning Mina got before pure psychic energy ripped through the lawn in a wave, tearing up grass and dirt and rocks as it barrelled straight at her.

Guillelmina knew it would be a setback, but she has no other choice. As the wave of psychic energy rocked toward her, the sprinkler system exploded, a torrent of water being siphoned out by her hydrokinesis to take the brunt of his blast.

As his psychic energy collided with the water it created a magnificent spray, droplets carried by the wind in a fine mist that sizzled and crackled with power. Immediately - as soon as the wall of water had absorbed his attack, she dropped it, not wanting Raz to believe she was going to use the water against him.

She had told him before, that she would never use her hydrokinesis to harm him, and she intended to stand by that promise.

With the water gone, she held up her hands once more. "Maybe it is!" She called back to him. "But I never wanted to see you hurt. I never wanted this for you!" She took one tentative step closer. "I just wanted you to be safe, Razputin."

He recoiled in shock and terror as his attack was countered by the water, and it was almost enough to make him fall. He barely caught himself before he could hit the ground.

Not safe! He screamed at her and the world. Never safe! I'll never be safe!

Another blast came flying at her.

You don't know! You never knew! You laughed! Got me in trouble! Your fault! Your fault now and your fault then and I'm not safe!

The water protected her, but that's all it ever did. As soon as his second blast had dissipated, so did the spray, and Mina's control over it.

"I know! I know, Razputin! I was horrible, and I'm sorry! I didn't know what they were like back then! I never thought my own family could be capable of what they did to you! But ever since the day I left I wanted nothing but to protect you; to make up for how I treated you when we were kids! You can be safe - finally, truly safe. You just have to let us help you."

No! You won't help! It's a trick! It's always a trick! You'll hurt me like everyone else!

A prelude to a third attack began charging the air around him, lighting up his face in a terrifying display of panic and frenzy, of someone pushed past their breaking point.

They hurt me! Over and over and over and she was the only one who ever stopped it! She took care of me, she loved me!

His expression cracked.

She loved me, and I - I ruined it, and now she's - she's - she's -

The psychic energy fizzled out like a dying fire. All that remained was a scared little boy crushed by the weight of what he had done and what had been done to him.

She's...oh god, what have I done?

The power fizzled out pathetically, and Guillelmina took it as her opportunity to move closer. She kept her hands visible at all times - which didn't really mean very much for a psychic, but it was the best she could do.

He was ten and wounded - wounded by years upon years of abuse, of being forced to take it, of sleep, of hypnosis, of false memories and very real threats. He'd been broken down, stripped of everything that made him a person, all for the entertainment of a twisted and spiteful family who saw him as less than human. Mithra had been no different. He'd been an object to her - the only difference between her and the others had been her ways of hurting him had always been sweet.

Mina's footsteps sloshed in the wet grass as she approached him. Several of her colleagues held their ground, sending her mental warnings. She was just going to add to the casualties tonight if she didn't back off.

But she wasn't going to back off. She wasn't going to leave him hurting, ever again.

"Help me understand, Razputin," she whispered to him, her voice alarmingly soft - she was so close. Too close. She could touch him if she wanted to - and God, did she want to reach out and close the gap. But she kept her hands to herself. Kept her body language open. "If she can't love you anymore - if she can't protect you anymore, if she can't stop people from hurting you, let me."

For the longest minute in the world, Razputin did not respond. He had collapsed to his knees, completely still like a statue, staring at his hands limp in his lap. Liquid stained his cheeks, looking pitch black in the low light.

When she said those words, when she reached out to him, hoping to help and not hurt, he shuddered violently.

Everyone hurts me. His voice crept into her mind like a child seeking comfort from a bad dream. I'm so tired. I just wanted to sleep again so it wouldn't hurt anymore.

He closed his eyes. It was resignation. Resignation to let her do what she wanted, because he no longer had the will to fight it.

I just wanted to live.

Mina crouched to meet him. She could feel that resignation, how quickly he had burned through the power afforded to him by this unleashed instinct. It had flared violently, but it was not sustainable for someone like him - still so young despite his age, harboring so much hurt. He'd been surviving for so long.

"No more," she whispered, there in front of him. Carefully, she brought her hands up to his cheeks, her touch gentle. "No more fighting. No more hurting."

She looks away from him, over at her nearest colleague, her neighbor. Something goes unspoken between them, and as she sits there with Razputin, they slowly sidle their way across the lawn, slow and trepidatious, never taking their eyes off of him as they slip through the open door of Guillelmina's home.

"They came here to hurt you," she whispered, acknowledging the cruel reality of the Galochios. There had never been any love there, but she didn't bother trying to convince him of that now. "But you wanted to live." It was spoken with such gentle understanding. His outburst - this destruction - had been nothing but self-preservation. Survival Instinct.

Self defense.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her neighbor slip out of the house again. Her touch was gentle as she wiped away the tears that stained his cheeks. The water was warm on her skin, delicate fingers wiping away a little boy's pain. She cradled his face in her hands, whispering to him as her neighbor came up behind him, slow and silent as though they were trying to corner and catch a frightened, feral animal.

"You deserve to live," she told him. "You deserve to be safe, and happy, and your own person." As Razputin stared at his hands, she looked up at her neighbor hovering over them. She looked back down at her cousin. "We're going to take care of you."

The bonnet clicked into place.

It wasn't complete relief, but the burning overload of psychic adrenaline vanishing with that click still made him slump. He practically collapsed against Guillelmina, skin prickling in residue terror at the touch and the closeness but not having the energy to even try to move away.

Raz wanted to live. He couldn't trust his cousin not to hurt him, but that didn't matter anymore, so long as she let him live.

His hollow gaze strayed to the broken car, to the gruesome scene he had caused.

He closed his eyes.

His cousin wrapped her arms around him as he slumped forward. She was going to take care of him; she was going to make sure he was treated gently every step of the way. She mouthed a silent thank you to her neighbor, before turning her head and pressing a kiss to his shoulder.

She wanted to get him inside; she wanted to get him away from the stares and the destruction that had taken place on this street. She wanted to get him someplace safe and comfortable.

She could see the lights of a jet off in the distance - the quickest, most direct way to the base housing. Motherlobe officials would be here soon.

"Please, come inside with me." She said, her voice soft. She wanted desperately to get him away from this horrible scene, but she didn't dare move him herself. "The Psychonauts are coming. I'm going to keep you safe, Raz. We're going to get through this together."

A sound left him, something like a whine. He took a deep, trembling breath before opening his eyes and giving her the slightest nod without actually looking at her.

He stumbled to his feet with her propping him up, and together they entered the house. Razputin kept his gaze on the torn lawn and didn't look back even as the whoosh of something huge began to land behind them, blasting his back in cold air. He only had the energy to keep putting one foot in front of the other, so that was what he did.

And that was all she asked of him; she couldn't expect him to react any other way, after what he had experience that night. The sun was first starting to peek over the horizon, illuminating the

scene that had unfolded on the quiet street of a military base, and Guillelmina caught the startled gaze of the Second Head as she ushered Razputin inside.

She trusted her fellow Psychonauts; they'd had the understanding to help her cousin through this, by not escalating the scene further. They would explain to agent Forsythe the nature of the situation, while she took care of her cousin.

It was not going to be easy; there was a body count, now, and someone was going to have to answer for that. There would be an investigation, and more evaluations than she cared to think about. But he was no longer a threat.

And more importantly, he was no longer in danger, himself.

Razputin lasted about halfway to his room before the last of his adrenaline faded and everything hit him full force. He sagged in the hallway, slumping between her and the nearest wall, and found himself unable to really move his jellied limbs any longer.

He also found he didn't much mind that.

She did her best to support him one side, but he slumped against the wall without much to support him on the other. A shimmering blue materialized under his arm on the other side, and Mina - after he rested for a moment - hauled him up with her TK to help him in the rest of the way.

She would handle the Grand Heads.

He needed to rest.

The instant his head hit his pillow, he was out like a light. Stress creased his face even in sleep.

There was a knock on her door, but she hovered for a moment, taking in the terrible sight of her cousin. This was exactly what she'd been afraid of, but she'd been afraid for all the wrong reasons. She tried desperately to put from her mind what had happened outside.

Somebody was going to have to answer for this, and it wasn't going to be him.

There was another, more urgent knock.

Leaving him to rest, finally subdued and no longer at risk with that bonnet in place - god, she could kiss whoever invented those thing - she moved hesitantly from his room, to the pounding at her front door.

She tried to ignore the flashing lights and the patchwork of emergency response tarp covering up the scene beyond her doorstep.

"He's sleeping," was all she could offer, dazed.

"Fantastic," was Hollis' dry answer. She stood on Mina's tiny porch with her hands behind her back, her face pinched with nerves. "Since our main suspect of a double homicide is resting comfortably, would you mind telling me in his stead what on earth is going on?"

Mina couldn't help but grimace. Yeah, that was about the reaction she expected. "I don't have details," she admitted, "but I know that it was self defense. They were here to hurt him - they were here to kill him, Hollis," she said, voice terse. "He's been unstable for years because of them. His survival instinct is out of control, he was just defending himself."

She knew that Razputin had been teetering on the edge of a disaster like this since she brought him here. She knew that if someone was going to be held accountable for this, it should be her.

What she didn't know, is how the Galochios had found them.

The Second Head pinched the bridge of her nose and took a long, deep breath. "Okay. Okay, so let's go along with that theory for now. That's your cousin, right? The one Agent Nein has been telling me about. Frankly, from what he's reported, I'm not surprised there was a blow-out from him."

She opened her eyes to stare Mina down. "But he still killed two civilians, Guillelmina, in a populated neighborhood. And from what witnesses have already started telling me, he attacked you as well. You say he's 'sleeping', but is he contained? Is he at risk of blowing up again as soon as he wakes up?"

"We have him in a psychoisolation bonnet," she sighed, "until we can figure out how to re-teain his survival instinct and fight response. That's all this is, Hollis. He's not a murderer. Hell, he's not even a full adult. My lunatic great-grandfather had him under hypnosis for almost a decade straight. He's just a kid."

She was afraid for him. She was afraid of what consequences he was going to face.

Being afraid was easier than processing what he'd done, a quiet voice reminded her, and she shoved it deep down.

Hollis studied her. Whatever she saw past her agent's worried, pleading expression, it brought her to a decision.

"I was going to ask you to See what happened tonight, so we'd know what happened and I'd be sure you weren't compromised by anything." Or anyone. "But...I think it would be better to get someone uninvolved here instead. Get some rest, Mina. Don't let him leave the house until we've had the chance to figure things out. I'll update you when I can."

Guillelmina was tired - dead on her feet tired, and trying hard not to obsess over the worst case scenario. She couldn't let him get hurt again. She couldn't. She couldn't let the Psychonauts hurt him. They wouldn't, would they? She felt a pit of dread in her stomach as she found she wasn't really sure.

"I- I- I can still see for you, but... I have to take care of Razputin. He needs me, Hollis." He was asleep, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to wake up in a panic. She needed to make sure she stayed calm. Stayed safe.

"I want to be an active part of this investigation. I just need time to help him settle and calm down. Tomorrow morning. So I can keep an eye on him. We won't go anywhere. He won't leave the house."

"Tomorrow morning," she conceded. "Alright. That should give us plenty of time to...take care of more pressing things in the mean time."

The street behind them bled in blues and reds.

"Just...be careful, agent. I understand you have him in a bonnet and are taking other precautions, but nothing about this situation is safe - for anyone. The last thing we need is another casualty."

Whose it might end up being, she left without saying.

She watched as Hollis left, feeling something in her deflate pathetically. She knew, deep down that her boss was right, but she just couldn't think of her cousin as a threat. He had attacked her, but not out of malice. He was scared and exhausted and fighting for his life.

She just... had to prove to him that she wasn't a threat to him. She had to live up to her promises. She had to protect and take care of him.

Razputin didn't wake up as his cousin closed the door and came back into the house. He remained fitfully asleep - exhausted emotionally, physically, and psychically - and dreamed of lulling voices and cruel hands.

She peeked into his bedroom, a quiet, irrational part of her afraid that he wouldn't even be there. Afraid that the whirlwind of tonight would only get worse. But he was there, collapsed on his bed and sleeping through what must have been one of the worst nights of his life.

She watched him there for a moment, her heart aching for her cousin. He was so young... He was older than her, of course, but he was still so young in his mind. Mithra had kept him young and dependant, and she hated to think of how frightened he must be. Hurt and confused and fighting for his life.

She watched the gentle rise and fall of his chest - saw how blotched his skin was, speckled with purple like some kind of psychic infection. Mithra had unleashed something from deep within his mind, and she feared putting it back wouldn't be easy.

Without uttering a word or letting any of her thoughts reach her sleeping cousin, she shut the door and left him to rest.

It was light out when Raz finally opened his eyes. He laid there, staring at the wall, and wished with all that was in him that last night had just been a bad dream.

The weight of the helmet pressing uncomfortably against his head told otherwise.

He didn't move to curl in on himself further. He didn't start crying. He just lied where he was as nausea and numbness and deep-seated paranoia rolled up his body like a static shock.

She let him rest, didn't bother him at the crack of dawn. She couldn't imagine what he must be feeling right now - so when she checked on him and he was finally awake, she moved carefully and quietly into his room, shutting the door behind her.

"Hey," she whispered, hoping to catch his attention without startling him. She moved to his bedside, and gently brushed his bangs from his eyes as best she could from beneath the bonnet. "I spoke with one of the leaders of the Psychonauts last night, after you fell asleep. We're gonna figure things out. I just want to talk right now. Are you feeling up to it?"

His eyes tracked her movements far too sluggishly. Purple prickled across the bridge of his nose, looking more like harmless freckles instead of the indication of danger and desperation it really was.

He pursed his lips and did nothing else.

"You're not in any more danger," she reassured him. "And I'm not... mad, at you. I don't want to hurt you. I won't hurt you. But please, Razputin. You need help."

That much, she was sure they could agree upon. So much was against him right now that she didn't know what they would do if he wouldn't accept help.

Raz was staring through her, now.

What help could he possibly get at this point? He was a freak. A screw-up. A mur - a murd....a terrible person. There wasn't anything that could help him, and even if there was, he didn't deserve it.

She didn't see him that way, and that was the crux of it. She never saw him the way he saw himself. They'd eroded away his sense of self-worth, and everything that had happened only strengthened the self-loathing they'd instilled in him.

But she saw someone who didn't need to prove he deserved help and compassion. She thumbed gently at his cheek, looking down at him with that compassion - for him, without any strings attached. He didn't need to earn her love like he had Mithra's.

"Amor tutti eguaglia."

His hand twitched at her touch, her words, and the purple splotches threatened to spread for just a moment. Then they receded the very next. He had no way of defending himself like this. The bonnet kept what little power he had left at bay, and he didn't have the strength to fight back physically.

He closed his eyes, and a sad little puff of air left him. He didn't want to see the way she looked at him. It hurt too much, especially after everything that had just happened.

Guillelmina watched the way he sunk a little deeper into his pillow, as though the very idea of moving was enough to physically exhaust him. Without a doubt he was unwell, with so much on his mind and last night's outburst having taken much from his body.

"Rest," she told him. "I'll bring you food in a little bit. You need to recover a bit before we talk."

She wished desperately that she could take that bonnet off him; show him that she didn't want to keep him powerless and defenseless in this vulnerable state. But he was a danger to himself and others, until they managed to reign in his haywire instincts. She knew that just because he was exhausted and docile now didn't mean something wouldn't trigger another outburst.

It wasn't that she didn't trust him, or that she thought he was a dangerous person. They just had to be careful, was all.

"It's gonna be okay. You'll see," she offered, giving his shoulder a gentle squeeze before she took her leave again.

Listless, despondent eyes trailed after her until she was gone.

Raz didn't want to rest. He didn't want food, nor did he want to recover. The very last thing he wanted to do was talk or or discuss or dwell on anything. He just wanted to live, but no longer exist.

Was that too much to ask? Probably, because the only person who ever understood was - was now -

His breathing hitched. Stop thinking. Stop feeling. Stop being.

Once you start, you won't be able to stop again.

There was nothing wrong or shameful about feeling things. He'd been through a lot, and the more he let himself feel over time, the easier his recovery would be. It was something they would have to work on, but for now, Guillelmina retreated with a heavy heart.

It was time to find out what had happened.

She already had her target - that was the easy part. Glancing back at Razputin over the last twenty-four hours should help her better understand what had led to the tragic events of the previous night.

And so, determined to put her skills to good use, she sat at her kitchen table.

She hesitated.

There was only one other way to get answers, and that involved diving deep into Razputin's head, combing through his memories as the rest of the family had often done, either to find something specific or just because they felt like doing it.

She would get no direct help from her cousin.

She desperately didn't want to See the events of last night, but she was a Psychonaut, and her cousin needed her to shed light on the situation in order to help aid his cause. So she closed her eyes, felt the world drop away from her, and was standing on the front lawn again.

The world went by in flashes - forwards, then backwards, then forwards, then backwards, like rewinding a tape to find the part you were looking for. She watched everything, from start to finish, looking away only when the first blast send bodies sprawling across the street.

She went back further.

Back, to where Raz stumbled out onto the grass, onto his hands and knees, with an expression that could only be described as euphoric, and then froze where he was for a full five minutes before a lone car crept down the street and flooded his face with ghostly light.

Back, to Raz packing a little bag of things in his room as quietly as possible, then tiptoeing out of his room, past his cousin's closed door, and into the living room.

Back, to Raz laying in bed, holding his breath and waiting for Guillelmina to fall asleep. To his eyes going unfocused as he very clearly reached out somewhere unknown with his mind.

Sweat broke along his forehead and he began to shake, but the childlike smile that spread unconsciously across his face could only be described as sincere.

She sat there at the table - her knuckles white as she gripped the knees of her pants. She could feel herself trembling in shock and confusion - though, really, she should have seen this coming. She should have expected this. He had been a reluctant rescue - a kidnapping, even. Her heart clenched, and she finally understood how the Galochios had found them after all the precautions she'd taken.

Raz... Raz had brought them here. Razputin had reached out to them in the dead of night. Raz had waited for her to go to sleep, and left the house without the bonnet, just so they could find him.

Just so he could go back to Mithra...

Just so he could go home.

She felt sick. Sick and bewildered and upset, and absolutely, without a shadow of a doubt, guilty.

This is your fault, he had accused her at the motel room that first night he'd been awake in years.

Maybe he had meant for it to be about her hanging him out to dry when they were children. Maybe he had meant it about the circumstances that had led her to spirit him away; a fatal mistake he had made because her arrival had disrupted the family order, and spooked him into reactive self-defense as a result.

You're making me work double-time, said his instincts, his body-snatcher, ripping apart a memory vault piece by piece by piece. Everything was perfect the way it was. We were surviving.

I was loved, he had admitted to her. She kept me safe. She was the only person I knew who really cared about me anymore.

Razputin was ten years old with a child's perspective. The woman most responsible for his suffering had carefully cultivated his mind so that he never saw it for what it was, and he had missed her so desperately that he had risked Zalto's wrath - the entire family's wrath - just to be reunited with her again.

Nine years ago, her cousin had begged her to save him. Nine years later, he no longer believed there was anything he needed to be saved from.

She sat there, and for the first time since she'd left the Galochio home, made herself as small and quiet as she possibly could, drawing all of her own mental energy into herself so as not to disturb those around her with unpleasant emotions. She didn't want to worry him. She didn't want to give him any more cause to worry.

Ten years, and nothing had changed. Ten years, and she was still screwing things up for him. If she hadn't come back into his life, none of this would have happened. He wouldn't be in psychic overload. He would be back home with Mithra, not the prime suspect in a double homicide. He would be—

He would be—

Asleep.

Shaky breath came to a stand-still as she blinked down at the barren table before her.

He would still be asleep, wasting away under Mithra's hypnosis. He wanted to live, but whose life was he even living in that state? Treated like an object, abused and kicked like a lovelorn puppy by the very same people who were supposed to have protected him.

What the hell was she thinking?

She sniffled and wiped hot tears from her eyes with the scruff of her sleeve.

This had been her fault.

But even if she had known what the outcome would have been, back before making the decision to pay a visit to the Galochio home - if she had known what they were doing to him, how they were treating him, would she have stood down? Would she have left him there?

No.

No, she wouldn't have.

When the Galochios had first discovered Raz's overgrown instincts, they had been disturbed by it, but not entirely surprised. Mithra had even said, within his earshot, "this was to be expected eventually." He had told Mina as much when she'd asked.

Perhaps he would have lived the rest of his life asleep, never to wake or experience real love, content to drift through the fate they had decided for him until they finally grew bored and ended the Aquato line. Or, perhaps, his survival instincts would have kept growing, kept self-destructing his own mind until he did the job well enough for them in an entirely different way.

Perhaps, like the girl rescued a little too late, he would have reached a breaking point all on his own, and turned that desperate destruction outwards. Perhaps it had only been a matter of time before he no longer recognized friend from foe from 'family'.

Perhaps it was a remarkably lucky thing that his cousin was there for him before any of these perhapses came to happen.

Discussing this with Razputin was going to be difficult, in his current state. Any mention of what she saw - of the fact that she knows - could trigger his barely subdued survival instincts, if he thought that her knowing how he'd contacted the Galochios would put him in danger.

Of course, he would. He was waiting for the other shoe to drop in some way, shape, or form. He'd killed two people and destroyed a government housing district. The Psychonauts were on his case, now. He'd broken her most important rule, to never leave the house without his bonnet. In his mind, it wasn't a matter of if he would get in trouble - just a matter of waiting for someone to bring the hammer down on him, whether it be the Psychonauts of Guillelmina herself.

She got up from the table, finding it difficult to sit still amongst the stress and catastrophe of the night. She needed to talk to Razputin. She needed to get him the help he needed before anything else happened.

But first, he needed to rest.

And so, Guillelmina, wired and wide awake, aimlessly busied herself until morning.

It was an eternity later that the sound of bare feet on carpet echoed from down the hall. It would have been too carefully quiet to pick up on in any other circumstance, but both cousins were painfully aware of the other's presence in the house.

Just outside the kitchen, there was an overwhelming sense of hesitation, dread, and resignation. Then a quiet knock resounded at the doorframe, asking for permission to enter the room.

She sat there at the kitchen table, hunched over a slip of paper and tapping her pencil distractedly against the tabletop as she stared down at it unseeingly.

When she heard that hesitant knock, her head snapped up and she made eye contact with her cousin. She flipped the paper over, out down her own, and welcomed him into the kitchen with a gentle smile that she couldn't say wasn't at least a little bit forced.

She was happy to see her cousin safe and sound, up and about of course, but there was precious little to smile about today.

Raz looked like a zombie. He shuffled into the kitchen with a notepad clutched against his chest, and stopped a few feet away from her.

His mouth opened, then closed. It had taken most of his nerve just to show his face, and he wasn't sure he had enough for why he'd actually come in here.

"What do you have there?" She asked gently, preferring to focus on the oddity that was his notebook rather than any of the other things she'd been stewing over for the past several hours. "C'mere, sit down. We can talk..."

Talk. The word sent a line of ice down his spine. He eased into the chair across from her as though it physically hurt to do so.

He opened his mouth again, but no sound came out. With the heavy acknowledgement that he wasn't going to get his voice to work, he gingerly placed the notebook on the table and slid it over so she could see what was written there.

What are you they going to do to me?

She slid the notebook closer, staring down at it with a dread that crept through her bones. Oh...

"Raz, honey," she sighed, and the sound was full of pity. "No one wants to hurt you. I... I don't know what exactly is going to happen from here on out, but it's not about punishing you. It's about helping you. About making sure you're safe and healthy and in control of your instincts again."

She pushed the notebook back to him, letting him communicate however he was most comfortable.

"I'm not going to let anyone hurt you. I promise."

Raz took it slowly, keeping his eyes on her. He didn't believe her. He couldn't believe her. He'd trusted Mithra so much more, and she had gotten fed up by the trouble he'd caused her.

And even if Mina was telling the truth, she had no way of knowing what would happen, or how the Psychonauts would respond to something as terrible as he had done. Why wouldn't they do something about it? He had just mur - mu - mur -

Done that.

Shaky scribbling filled the chasm between them. The notebook came back towards her.

I deserve it. I'm a horrible person.

"No," she said firmly, before he has even finished pushing the notepad towards her. "No, you aren't. What you did was in self defense. No one can blame you for that, Razputin." Her voice was gentle. No part of her was willing to reprimand him.

She opened her mouth, and then shut it quickly again. She wanted to tell him about her retrocognition, about her ability to see the past - his past. That she understood everything that has brought them to this moment.

But not yet.

Unsteady, she took a slow breath, and looked at him. "You're not a horrible person. You're a child who has been abused for ten years, who protected himself. There's nothing evil about that."

He stared down at his notepad, miserable and blank. There was no denying what he had done. No justifying it or sugarcoating it for his sake just because he was still a kid. He might have reacted out of preservation, but to go so far as to....

Raz shook his head. Don't think about it. Stop thinking about it. He began writing again, and didn't look at his cousin as he presented it.

Why are you being so patient? I know what I did. I know how much trouble I'm making for you. I don't understand.

She reaches across the table gently, and lays a hand at his arm. Her touch is light enough to pull away from if he wanted to.

"You aren't making trouble for me. I just want to see you safe, Razputin. That's it. That's all. I went back to that house after ten years because I couldn't leave you with them. I came back because I love you, and want you to be safe."

Love and safety were all he'd ever wanted, but they never came without a price. There was always something he had to do or be to get them. Even his old family, the Aquatos, had seemed to have conditions to their acceptance - that he wasn't psychic, and if he was, then he had to pretend he wasn't.

Love was a transaction, and Raz didn't know what Mina wanted in return.

It was written all over his face as he looked at her hand on his arm. Although he didn't pull away, that rapid-fire calculation was back and turning the gears in his head; trying to figure out what was expected of him in return before the soft touch, gentle words, patience and love were taken away.

There was no price to pay, no transaction he had to fulfil before Mina was willing to care for him. There would be things she asked of him, certainly - to go through with proper treatment, for one

- but the love she showed him would never rely on his compliance. He was a person, after all, and she intended to show that to him through the way he would be treated from now on.

“Razputin,” she said softly, and the hand on his arm raised gently to his cheek, to lift his gaze. “I can’t force you to believe me, but if you give me the chance, I can prove it to you.”

He barely kept himself from shaking as she lifted his face. Did she have any idea how often her great-grandmother did that? Did she realize how much it hurt, and yet how much he didn’t want to lose it?

Raz didn’t reach for the notepad again. His lips moved, and it was crystal clear what he was asking even though no sound came out of his mouth.

How?

She hadn’t spent affectionate time around Mithra since she was nine. She had no idea; but there was something so ingrained in them, some kind of hereditary similarity that informed her every movement in that moment without her knowledge.

But still, she held him there, gentle and lovingly, looking up at him as he dared to ask her - even if no sound came out of his mouth, the question still hung between them.

How?

“By treating you with care and respect - by treating you like a person. By not putting conditions on your safety. You don’t have to earn respect or safety. You already have, just by being you. And it’s not something I can just take away because I feel like it. Not something you need to uphold.”

Razputin couldn’t comprehend that. It was obvious in every aspect of his expression, the way his eyes danced across her face looking for deception or omission or anything to prove to himself that his way of thinking was right, and her promises were wrong.

When he couldn’t find any of that, the crease of his eyebrows became heavier in confusion and nervousness. He didn’t understand it. He couldn’t predict it. And that made it an unknown, which in turn put him on edge.

She looked up at him, and could see how unsettled he was; how the idea of not having to earn his safety was new to him. “I know you don’t believe me right now. That’s okay, but... just a chance, Raz. That’s all I’m asking.”

Just a chance. One chance. He could do that. It wasn’t like he had anyone else to look after him now, after all.

Don’t think about it.

With a careful inhale, her cousin nodded.

She smiled at him, gentle and full of what seemed like adoration. "Thank you. You'll see. You'll see, you're going to be alright. No matter what happens, I'm gonna make sure you're treated right. I understand what happened and so will the Psychonauts, and I'm so glad you're okay."

She didn't want to yet discuss with him the worst case scenario possibilities. The possibility that there would be a trial, the possibility, slim as it was, that a jury of his peers would not rule that Razputin's outburst was self-defense. It was a possibility, but it was a possibility that she wasn't going to let happen.

"We're going to have to go back to the Motherlobe," she told him, "so they can evaluate you. We'll talk to a few different people, but I'll be there with you the whole time. Not today - not right now. Don't worry. But sometime soon. The sooner we get you in, the more... transparent, it will seem."

It was a lot of information all at once, and Raz's head threatened to start spinning as he tried to keep track of everything she was saying. Going back to the Motherlobe. Another evaluation. Examining. Scrutinizing.

Punishing -

He went rigid, in the way a deer does as they're caught in the glare of an oncoming truck. No concept of fighting or fleeing - just freezing, knowing what was coming, and not having the will to stop it.

His hands went blindly groping along the table and found the notebook by some miracle.

why not today

The sooner the better, she had just said. The sooner it happened, the better the outcome, and perhaps the lesser the consequences. He knew that concept all too well.

Frankly, he'd rather get it over with than stress himself into sickness waiting for it down the line.

"Because," she said, her voice low and measured with calm. This was not something to whip himself into a frenzy over, and she wanted her calmness to reflect that, "you experienced a high-level psychic overload last night, and you mind and body both need to rest. I've already spoken to my boss - she came by last night, and will be emailing her soon to keep her updated - but she knows that you're not in a good state, physically or mentally right now. She'll forgive you a day to rest after such a toll on your body."

She saw the way he went horribly rigid - how he was already anticipating being punished, incapacitated, hurt—

"You're going to be taken care of. I'm going to make sure of it, Razputin. You haven't slept properly since you got here - the only reason you slept last night was because you were so exhausted you practically collapsed."

He couldn't deny that. Even getting up and coming into the kitchen for this conversation felt like far too much to handle. In some ways he was relieved by her insistence that he recover a little bit longer first, but he also knew it was going to drive him out of his mind to think about what was going to happen.

At least it gave him something to distract himself with, something different than -

Don't think about it.

Razputin nodded again, acquiescing to her firm decision without any protest. He didn't have any choice in the matter anyway.

Mina did not want to be making decisions for him - not after he had spent so many years as the ghost of a person amongst the Galochios, forced to do their bidding, never having a say in what happened to him. But the beginning of his new life was going to be... volatile, to say the least. She wanted to help guide him through it. Wanted to make sure he did not drive himself to collapse before he had fully recovered from the traumatic events of last night. He was mentally and physically unfit to be amongst the Psychonauts right now.

"You're going to be okay," she reassured him. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you. We can do this together."

She kept saying that he would be okay; that she wouldn't let him get hurt. That they were together in all of this. She'd said these things, too, before the - before he - before things.

She hadn't stopped saying them after what he'd done, when he'd caused so much trouble for her. And even more befuddling, she was still so sincere.

Huh.

She had already abandoned him once, ten years ago. She'd abandoned him and left him to rot away in a prison of his own mind, and she had resolved, long ago, that once she had him back she would never, ever again allow that to happen.

So yes - she was sincere. When she said that she would be here to help him, to guide him through this tumultuous time in his life, she meant it. She was going to stand by him, and she honest to god meant it.

His mouth opened, seemingly without a voice to accompany it once more. If the room were not so quiet, she would not have heard any differently. But a word, too soft to seem real, drifted out in the space between them.

"O....o-o-o-kay..."

She pauses for a moment, surprised by the use of his voice. She blinks at him. Then, slowly, a smile graces her lips. "Okay," she reaffirms, nodding. "We can talk however you want - we can keep the notepad if you want, but it's good to hear your voice."

Telepathy was not offered as a method of communication; they couldn't speak telepathically with that bonnet on his head, and she... couldn't take it off. Not until they were sure he was stable again.

He knew telepathy was out of the question until further notice. He knew taking off the bonnet also wasn't happening until further notice. And as much as he loathed both of these facts, he couldn't quite shake off the...relief, that wearing the thing kept the buzzing of his mind at a minimum and the headache from becoming overwhelming.

Talking out loud took so much effort, though. He wasn't sure he could do it very often. Raz picked up the notepad and held it against his chest. He was just happy to have a way to communicate at all with his cousin. That had been a luxury at best among the family.

Guillelmina intended to meet him where he was; if he found it easier to speak with the notepad, then she was happy to let him keep it. He needed to feel comfortable and secure. That, more than anything, would help him subdue the fighting instinct that had run rampant in his mind.

Eventually, she hoped that speaking would be easier for him. But for right now, this was more than enough. She was going to help him acclimate to a life without the Galochios; she was going to help him take things one step at a time.

As soon as he had confirmation that this was okay, it felt like a weight had been lifted off of him, and he was left weak-kneed as a result. He was suddenly very happy he was still sitting down.

She could see the relief in him, and was glad that he could at least feel at ease about this, no matter how small a detail it was.

She smiled, and offered to make him something to eat. Without the consequences of his disobedience to the Galochios looming over him, and with Mina's assurance that the consequences of what had happened last night weren't being dangled over him like the Sword of Damocles either, she wanted him to try and eat something.

Resting was only one part of the equation through which recovery would be possible, after all.

Food didn't sound appealing at all, but he accepted her offer anyway. He was painfully aware of how he was running on below empty, and Mina looked...haggard. She looked like she needed something to occupy herself with just as much as he did.

He ended up watching her bustle around the kitchen, limbs slack and eyes at half-mast.

It was true; she was happy to have something to do that didn't involve staring at that damn sheet of paper until her vision swam; she herself hadn't slept at all last night, trying in vain to compose some semblance of an intelligent report for her superiors. The sheet of paper still sat face-down on the table, her writing hidden from view as she busied herself in the kitchen.

She would... figure out how to compose such a daunting email. She had to.

And by the end of the night, no less.

Raz slowly began to lay his head on top of his folded arms, not even giving the innocent paper across from him a second thought. He wasn't giving a lot of things a second thought, now that he was here like this. Now that he knew Mina wasn't going to hurt him for what he'd done, or turn him over to the authorities.

It was almost nice, to simply watch his cousin work. He closed his eyes in a blink...

And was asleep before she was even done cooking.

When she turned back to him to ask if he liked eggs, the first words didn't even make it out of her mouth before she realized he was asleep again. She paused, the pan sizzling behind her as she looked affectionately at him.

She turned back to the stove; she'd wake him up when breakfast was ready.

The smell of fried eggs in front of his nose and a gentle touch at his shoulder woke him up. He blinked, groggily trying to remember what he was doing and why he had been asleep at the table.

She let him wake up slowly, hoping he'd be able to stay awake long enough to eat. "I don't think the kitchen table is the most comfortable place to nap," she told him with a tone of warmth to her voice. "Try to get something in you and then you can head back to bed, if you want."

She wanted him to be a little more aware - and a lot more comfortable in her company - before she sat down and discussed her Vision with him. The first step?

Eggs.

Raz let out a muffled noise and sat up, rubbing his eyes so the food didn't look so blurry.

He hadn't been hungry before, but not even he could ignore the allure of the eggs placed before him.

He stared at them for a moment, and Mina reached across the table, pushing the plate just a little bit closer to him. "Eh? Eeeeh?" She egged him on, handing over a fork. "You'll feel better once you eat something."

Something that perhaps resembled the beginning of a smile crossed his face when she started doing that. It was surprisingly nice to be doted on like this. He couldn't remember the last time that had happened without feeling incredibly uncomfortable at the same time.

Raz took the fork and took the bite, and then looked like he was happy he'd done so.

As soon as he took a bite, as soon as that look crossed his face, she felt her shoulders lose a little bit of their tension. Good. Good, thank god. A part of her had been afraid he would have turned it away. The last thing she needed was for him to not eat.

She, too, sat down and started eating. They were already feeling more at ease together than they had in the last few days since his arrival; the knowledge that the impending wrath of the

Galochios was no longer on his horizon might have had something to do with that, but more than anything, Guillelmina hoped that it was the beginnings of the realization that she truly meant everything she had promised him.

Maybe they would be okay after all.

Razputin finished his food and, after a careful side glance at his cousin to ensure it was okay, folded his arms back on the table so he could rest his chin on them. In the kitchen light, the purple splatters across his skin almost made him look more like a painting than a person.

He still didn't think things would be okay. He wasn't an optimist anymore. But he could appreciate the quiet and the contentment right now, and treasure the peace of her company it as it existed.

He wasn't an optimist anymore, but Guillelmina knew that if they wanted to get through this together, she had to have enough optimism for the both of them. Maybe someday, Razputin would regain some of the optimism he'd lost over the years - but if he couldn't manage it right now, she wouldn't hold it against him.

When they had both finished, she, too, lowered her head, cheek propped up on folded arms as she looked at him, the two of them simply appreciating each other's company.

"Thank you for eating," she told him, voice slightly muffled from how her cheek was smushed up against her arm. "How are you feeling?"

He didn't want to move in order to use the notebook. His voice would have to do.

"T-T-T-Tired," he murmured, struggling to get the words out at a volume she could actually hear. "A-A-And...."

Don't think about it!

"....N-N-Numb, I g-g-guess...."

Guillelmina sat up, leaning against the table as she looked her cousin over. "I don't want you sleeping at the table. You'll mess up your back. Come on," She said, standing up and waiting for him. "We'll get you back to sleep."

As he stood with her, she offered for him to sleep out in the living room on the couch if he would prefer not to be alone for a while. She had some things she needed to do for her boss, so she'd be sitting at the kitchen table. It was hard to ignore the sheet of paper sitting there for much longer.

Raz took the offer. If he actually managed to fall asleep, she seemed like she'd be willing to wake him when he was inevitably hit with nightmares. And if he couldn't sleep, then....yeah. Some company would be nice.

He curled up on the couch with a blanket and a pillow, watching her stare at that piece of paper like it was going to come alive and strangle her, and slowly drifted off to sleep.

Of course she would wake him up; even as she focused intently on her outline, trying to cover all the facts in the most logical progression possible, she kept a third eye on Razputin at all times. To make sure he was okay.

To make sure he was still there, a small, hesitant voice told her.

She shook that thought when it presented itself to her. She trusted him, of course; underneath everything that had happened in recent days, he was just a frightened kid, and his... recent stunt had been the result of a misunderstanding. Of manipulation. She didn't think he was at risk of trying to take off again.

Or, she hoped, at least.

Luckily for both of them, Razputin didn't wake up to try and make another break for it. He didn't wake up either, even with the occasional twitch of his body and furrow of his brow. He was exhausted, and simple bad dreams weren't enough to combat that now that his mind was actually allowing itself to rest.

Every time he made a significant movement in his sleep, she would look up, freeze, and stare at him for a solid minute before she was satisfied that he wasn't going to wake up, before going back to her work.

She was glad that he was finally resting his body - after nine years of hypnosis, an explosive psychic outburst that led to his escape from the Galochios, three days of fear and uncertainty, an attempt on his life, another explosive psychic outburst, and the emotional turmoil that came along with everything he'd been through in one short week, she was sure he desperately needed it.

He ended up sleeping through the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon. It was nearly evening when his eyes finally fluttered open and he shifted in a way that was clearly not caused by a nightmare.

The rest had helped a little, but he still felt awful. He had a feeling that would be the case for a very long time.

If in fact that was the case, then they would take it one day at a time. Every little bit of rest and recovery helped, after all. She would take care of him until he was feeling better - and after that...? Well, like she'd said. One day at a time.

When he finally stirred, she looked up from her paper, flipping it over again.

"Hey," she said softly. "Feel okay? Do you need anything?"

His eyes flickered over to the notebook she'd placed on the coffee table next to him. It took a lot of effort to grab it and write, but he knew that speaking would take even more effort than he was willing to use.

I'm okay. I don't need anything, thank you.

She read his response, and nodded, turning back to her work after a moment of certainty that he was okay.

The only time Mithra had ever doted on him like Mina was, had been after particularly nasty run ins with her husband or son - when one of them had taken their frustrations out on him and gone just a little too far in their fury or fun.

She'd nurse him back to health, sequester him away from the cruelty of the family until she was sure he would not break on accident—

—and then she would throw him back into the fray, good as new, for her family to take their frustrations out on once again, with the assurance that they wouldn't be nearly as rough this time.

But they always were.

It was downright bizarre to experience these check-ins from his cousin; the kind words and offers of food or anything else he needed, without something having happened to put him in a state to need it. And while technically something had happened, he would have only received enough leeway for however long it took for him to be "okay" again. Then it was back to hearing things like "you're old enough to handle yourself" and "you're too old to ask for things like this" and "you're still a child, baby, you don't actually know what you need".

He wasn't complaining. Oh no, not at all - he wasn't going to squander such rare good will by tempting fate. But it was so odd, and unprompted, and Raz was left wondering why his cousin's doting made him feel so much better in the span of ten minutes than even Mithra could manage in nearly half a day of looking after him.

She hoped that by the time she sat down with him to have the conversation about what had happened last night, he would be feeling well enough to... endure it.

She wasn't mad at him. What he'd done prior to the Galochios' arrival wouldn't be grounds for any kind of punishment, and she wasn't going to withhold any kind of care from him after they had the conversation about it.

But she wanted to be up front with him; that she knew, that she'd Seen him contact the family that night.

As Raz came out of the sleep-fog hanging over his brain, he sensed immediately that something was off with Mina. More than the obvious stress she'd been showing with...everything lately. She had turned back to her work when he had woken up, but he could see the tenseness of her entire body, and knew, somehow, that bad news was coming.

He sat up on the couch, watching her closely and waiting for whatever this was to come out.

Someone like him, who had spent nine years trying to survive by gauging the reactions and body language of anyone who might visit him in his mind? It was hardly surprising that he was able to read her like that.

Eventually, it happened.

She sighed, and flipped her paper over again, turning to look at him, to see if he was still awake and how he was doing.

"You have a minute?" She asked, stiffly.

His eyes tracked the movement of that paper, and it hit him that the thing he'd seen at the kitchen table earlier might actually be very important.

"Um...y-y-yes...?" He answered, uncertain but with no real reason to lie.

She let out a breath - a sigh - and stood, moving into the living room with him. "I just want to get this out in the open between us, because I've been working on what I'm going to tell Hollis, about everything that happened," she explained to him as she sat. She fiddled with her hands, twisting her fingers as she thought about the best way to start this.

Eventually, she spoke. "I have retrocognition," she explained, uncertain if Razputin knew anything about the power. "It's like how the Galochios can see the future - but instead of the future, I can see the past. Hollis, my boss... asked me to See what had happened."

He sat on that couch, staring at her in confusion. The confusion slowly gave way to realization, understanding, as he connected her words of "See what had happened" to "what I did the other night."

His face drained of all color. Even the purple was pale in the wake of his dawning horror that his cousin not only knew what he had done - all of it, not just the end result out on the front lawn - but had witnessed it as if she'd physically been there. She had seen him call out to the family, revealing their location and betraying her safety and her trust in exchange for what he thought was his own.

He didn't say anything to that. There was nothing to say. He simply sat there, no longer breathing, and waited for the other shoe to drop.

"I'm not... Razputin, it's okay," she said gently. "I'm not telling you this because I want you to feel bad, or afraid. Literally the opposite, I wanted you to know so that it's not something on your mind. A lot is gonna be happening in the next few weeks and if that's one less thing you have to worry about, then good."

She held her hands out for him, gentle and patient as she stayed there and waited for some kind of reaction.

"I'm not mad. I just want to know how you got in contact with them. That's it. That's all, I promise."

Not mad, she said, but he knew how these things went. She was just waiting until he told her exactly how he'd done it. Waiting until she'd wrung every shred of truth out of him. Then she'd bring down the consequences of his actions.

There was no point in lying now. She already knew. Lying would just make things worse.

"I -" he struggled to speak past the thing lodged deep in his throat; the thing that had rendered him speechless in the kitchen earlier. "I - I - I -"

Notebook, notebook, remember the notebook, idiot!

Fast scribbling. Shaky scribbling. Trying to get his answer out before she ran out of patience.

i did it at night when you were sleeping

i called out to her like they taught me

She read his response and was silent for a long moment, quiet and contemplative. There was something distinctly sad about the way she held herself, the look in her eyes. So much of this could have been avoided, a little voice in the back of her mind told her - but at the same time, she knew that wasn't entirely true.

Razputin had just wanted to go home. Just wanted to be reunited with the one person he thought had loved him. Even if this hadn't happened when it did, it would have happened eventually, because she took him away from his home and his 'mama.'

She hummed softly, and then sighed. "You just wanted to go home," she sighed, resignation in her voice as she extended a sort of tired understanding to her cousin. "I'm so sorry, Razputin."

The apology puzzled him, caught him off guard. He gave her a long, confused look, before a hesitant nod confirmed her statement. She understood, which was good. Even if he got in trouble for this, she understood what it was he had really been trying to do.

Mithra had rarely ever done that, if at all.

“Y-Y-Yes. I - I - I’m sor-ry for p-p-putting you a-at risk-k-k.”

She blinks at him, almost as though not comprehending. “For... putting me at risk,” she repeats, slowly. She holds out a hand for him, sitting there next to him on the couch, and does not say anything. There is no wrath in her body language, no harsh words ready to boil over from her lips.

“I wish you hadn’t done that,” she tells him quietly. So much could have been avoided. “But I’m not mad at you. I get it. I took you away from her. From... everything you knew, for ten years. I probably would have done the same thing,” she sighed. “But it was never me I was worried about.”

Raz didn’t have to ask who she was really worried about. That much had become obvious. He still just didn’t understand why.

He took her hand after a single second of caution. His eyes never left hers, and the tremor of his fingers was obvious. He braced himself for something to happen.

“Wh-What are you g-g-going to d-do...?”

Do? What was she going to do?

She sighed again, and gave him a gentle smile. “I’m going to ask you not to contact any of the Galochio family again,” she told him. “And request that once you’re no longer in a psychic fight-or-flight mode, to undergo training with Sasha Nein to rebuild your mental defenses and keep them out for good.”

Her smile, then, faltered. “Once that bonnet comes off, I can’t keep you from contacting them. That much is... clear. But after what happened, I’m afraid for your safety if any of them should find out where we are. I want to protect you. I want to keep you safe from them. But you have to let me.”

There was no reason to contact the rest of the family anymore. There was only one person among them who had protected and loved him, and who he had loved back, and the remaining Galochios would have no reason not to erase him from existence once they learned that she was - that he had -

Raz squeezed his eyes shut. “I...w-won’t. C-C-Call them. They will j-just d-d-drown me or...w-worse.”

she nodded, seeming herself a bit lost in thought. "Thank you, Razputin," she said, giving his hand a squeeze. "I... can't promise they won't try and reach out to us, once they find out what happened - and they will. They have to. But I won't let them hurt you. They don't get to hurt you anymore."

The Psychonauts were not in the business of giving their agents' addresses to anyone who asked, of course, but the Galochios had always been underhanded when they wanted something they couldn't have. She had to be prepared for them to find the two cousins. And she had to be prepared to keep Razputin and his overgrown fight response under control if that were to happen.

Because she wasn't worried about any of the Galochios physically harming him. That was a non-issue, with the Psychonauts keeping such close watch over the boy.

What she was concerned about was his powers cracking through that helmet like cheap pottery if he were to be threatened with another life-or-death situation. And that...

That, she feared more than any Galochio.

He didn't know her fear. Didn't know that there was something inside of him worth fearing in any capacity. As far as he knew, he had been overwhelmed by the realization of dying, of being cast aside by someone who was supposed to care about him, and had blacked out in a need to survive. It might have been a really bad, bad reaction, and he was definitely freaking out during and afterwards, but that had still all been him. His decisions, his actions, himself.

And maybe he was a little relieved that the bonnet was staying on, too, but that was just because of the headache he knew was waiting to surface if he even thought about taking it off. Nothing related to his state of mind whatsoever.

He shouldn't be allowed to defend himself, anyway. That had been drilled into his head for nearly ten years, and it had been proved beyond a shadow of a doubt when he came back to himself with a dozen people staring at him in horror and half the street looking like it had just been bombed.

Mina was promising she wouldn't let him get hurt anymore. He was going to trust her, because he had no other choice. He didn't trust himself with that choice.

Mina did not fear some nebulous thing inside of him that was laying in wait to be unleashed, nor did she fear him. He was right, in a way. What had happened was him, without a doubt. His decisions, his actions, himself.

What she feared most was how his mind would try to process the trauma of what he's been through. What she feared most was that his survival instincts would be unable to tell friend from foe. That everything would look like a threat to him. That everything would become a threat to him.

She was not afraid of him.

She was afraid for him.

For his mental state, and the consequences of what the Galochios had done to him over the last near-decade.

It was delicate, trying to navigate this new development. She didn't want to push him into that state of heightened response, ever again. And she knew that if the rest of the Galochios were to come after them regarding the deaths of Zalto and Mithra, that's exactly what would happen.

Raz allowed himself to relax just a little bit, knowing that his cousin had goals in mind that didn't involve him getting hurt, and that she seemed determined to protect him even if the Galochios came knocking. Then he frowned, because something she had said earlier poked at his brain.

Working with Sasha Nein to rebuild his defenses, so that he wouldn't need that extra protection someday.

"...Um. The th-thing you said, ab-b-bout, my d-defenses," he brought up tentatively, with the scar of old hurt still in his voice even after all these years. "Th-They c-can't, um, come b-b-back. They are - gone."

She looked at him with no small measure of surprise in her features. "Razputin," she said, "Mithra was a powerful psychic, but... very rarely, can you completely destroy integral parts of a person's mind. You can suppress it, and you can wrestle it into submission, but getting rid of it entirely? I... I don't think even Mithra's capable of that, Razputin. Just because she told you otherwise..."

Of course Mithra would lead him to believe something like that - to make him entirely dependent on him. To make sure he never tried to rebuild them.

His fingers gripped at the fabric of his pants, tense and uncertain. Bad memories made his face pinch tight with pain. "I - I - I don't...th-think I can...it wasn't j-just the, the one t-time, um. The fam-il-y....they, um, th-they ch-checked. A lot."

Mina paused, uncertain herself now.

“How about this,” she said softly. “When we go back to the Motherlobe to get you checked out and submit my report, we’ll swing by and talk to Sasha Nein, and see what he thinks of the situation? He knows more about the workings of the mind than anyone I know. If it’s possible to completely be rid of mental defenses, he’ll know.”

But in the meantime... “In the meantime, we don’t have to worry about that yet, right? If it turns out you can’t, then obviously I can’t make you. We’ll take everything one step at a time.”

Razputin nodded, wanting nothing more than to disappear even as she promised not to push. Shame colored his cheeks. The wreckage of his mental defenses was a mortal wound that had not only never been allowed to heal, but actively tampered with to ensure it couldn’t. It was, perhaps, the single thing Mithra did that he would ever admit thinking was wrong.

She could see the way his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. She lifted a hand to his cheek, and gave him a gentle smile. It wasn’t something to be ashamed about - if they couldn’t rebuild his defenses, then they would figure something else out. Simple as that.

“Listen,” she says gently, “whatever happens, happens, and we handle it together. Right?”

He swallowed, and it took a lot of effort to meet her eyes. “...R-Right.”

What a mess he was. Broken defenses, overblown survival instincts, and perfect control of powers only meant for passive use. It would take a miracle for his cousin or the Psychonauts to sort him all out, if they were even willing to by the end of their investigation. He wasn’t sure if he wanted them to actually try or not.

She didn’t see him as a mess. His situation was a mess, sure, but he was just her cousin. Broken defenses, overblown survival instincts, and perfect control of powers only meant for passive use, and all of these things were entirely circumstantial. Broken defenses weren’t the end of the world, if they couldn’t be fixed. Overblown instincts could be dealt with; the Psychonauts had done it before, after all. And Razputin’s powers could grow and expand if he so chose once he was in a better place.

Instead, her smile brightened, happy that he seemed to agree. She leaned up and pressed a kiss to his cheek (his forehead was currently unavailable thanks to the bonnet), before standing from where she sat next to him.

“We’ll figure things out. You’ll see.”

She said it so confidently, he felt like he had no other choice but to believe it. Or, believe that she believed it.

“Ok-kay.”

She didn't want to force him to believe it. But she certainly believed it, and she wanted him to believe that - to understand that none of this was just hot air, that everything she told him, she meant.

Raz stayed with her the rest of the evening, content to simply sit and watch from a distance as she went back to her work. He had originally planned to hide back in his room after the conversation they needed to have was over, but found that being in her company was much better than the empty and quiet loneliness that gave him far too little to distract himself from going over the events of last night.

Even as she finished her work, finally completing whatever she was scribbling down on that sheet of paper and moving to her laptop, she talked to him - included him in her evening, was happy to talk with him, glancing up to see what response he'd written down in his notebook from time to time.

A week since they had been reunited, and this was one of the first open, honest moments between them, where neither was guarded by fear or ulterior motives.

It was actually nice.

It was incredibly nice, and it was also not lost on Razputin that this only happened after the ordeal they'd just experienced. Maybe it was a shared trauma thing. Maybe it was because he recognized that there was no going back to how things used to be, and was trying to get used to being around Mina as a result.

Whatever the reason, which he couldn't even guess himself, they both really seemed to need it.

Regardless of what had happened, she was happy to have her cousin back. She'd spent so much of her life striving to be back with him, striving towards this moment, that - even if things hadn't happened... exactly the way she'd hoped, she was still delighted to simply share these moments with him in relative safety.

She was glad that he seemed to be acclimating to being around her; no longer seeming to constantly dread the wrath he expected from her. It was just the first steps of his recovery, she knew, but they didn't go unnoticed.

He realized that he barely even noticed how late it was getting until the sun started setting, so quietly engrossed in what she was doing and the amicable little conversations she had with him. He also realized that even though he was still very tired, he didn't want to leave just yet. It was the first time in recent memory that he had been able to have a real, normal interaction with another person without it being a prelude to something terrible, and now that he'd gotten a taste of it, it was all he craved.

She never once suggested that he was overstaying his welcome or that he had to go inside now. She was able to finish her work and send her email without complication, and afterwards, her attention was his as they talked about anything and everything that they'd missed out on in nine years apart.

She seemed glad to have his company, even. Happy to speak to him, happy to spend time with him, without conditions of consequences looming over him in return for her attention.

And this, she hoped he'd realize, is how it was supposed to be - and how it would be from now on.

It would be an adjustment period, taking quite a bit of time for this understanding to truly sink in - that it wasn't just a one-time miracle but a common, every day occurrence so long as he was up for it. But right now, it was clear how much this meant to him.

When his cousin moved back to the couch to be closer to him as they - mostly she - talked about themselves, Razputin began to subtly shift towards her. When he was close enough to touch her and she still hadn't moved away or said anything about it, he tentatively leaned his shoulder against hers, watching carefully for any sign that this wasn't okay.

Mithra had loved how he craved her affection, her closeness as she visited his mind, but it was only allowed when she said so. The rest of the time, his mental projection was told to leave her alone - that she didn't have the energy for his clinginess. By the time his projection had molded itself into a convenient picture frame, the little mote only came out when she felt like cradling what was left of him like a rare trinket in her hands.

Razputin found that even as he moved closer, Guillelmina did not have the adverse reaction that he expected. She simply let him move closer at his own comfort. Soon they were shoulder-to-shoulder, and Mina looked over at him, realizing that he'd slowly inched his way across the couch.

She did not reprimand him or tell him that he was being too clingy or to get away from her.

"You okay?" She asked gently, and shifted for him, opening her arms.

He nearly shrank back at the movement, having to take a moment to recognize the offer for what it was. The moment it clicked, he practically dove into her arms, mindful of the bulky helmet as he snuggled into her side.

"Y-Y-Yes," he replied, sounding considerably happier just in that one word. Ten years of being touch-starved had taken its toll, and he had always been a physically affectionate child.

This was practically a balm to him.

She held him close, leaning back so that he could rest more comfortably against her. She had no idea about how touch-starved he was; how the only physical contact for ten years had been rough and cruel, and how even contact in the mental world - hardly a substitute - had been conditional. It would not come as a surprise when she eventually puts the puzzle pieces

together - the Galochio elders had always been distant, even with her when she was young, and it could have only been so much worse with Razputin.

As he rested against her, she rubbed gently at his back as they continued their gentle conversation.

Raz relaxed so thoroughly that it was a wonder he didn't melt. He closed his eyes, still listening and responding attentively, and didn't ever want to move again.

They would have to move eventually - but as darkness crept over the little house, she figured it wouldn't have to be for a while. Eventually, the soft conversation petered off into a comfortable silence, the cousins just happy to share in each others' presence.

And as they both lay there, Mina just hoped that he would finally get some decent, restful sleep tonight.

His breathing evened out as the minutes of quiet ticked by. His arms around her middle no longer felt like a death grip as they loosened almost subconsciously. His head slumped down against her shoulder, and he let out a tiny contented hum.

He was relaxing; for possibly the first time since she brought him home, he was truly at ease, and did not feel the weight of the inevitable bearing down on him. She let out a contented little sigh, and hugged him close to her, happy to finally have him here, safe and sound with her.

Her hold was gentle, full of genuine love. After nine years, and with more than a little pain to get there, he was finally free from the Galochios.

Razputin committed this moment to the deepest, most ingrained part of his memory. He never ever wanted to forget the feeling of someone who cared about him giving him comfort, nor the feeling of being so at ease that he could almost forget the world around him. Even if there were more of these times to come - a suspicion and a vague hope - this was the first time he'd been able to experience it in half a lifetime, and he was going to treasure it forever.

The corners of his mouth lifted just the tiniest amount.

Guillelmina deeply, desperately wished things hadn't happened the way they had. She wished that Raz hadn't had to endure the things he'd endured just to get them to this point; that he could have been safe and comforted without having to blow his survival instincts out of proportion; without a potential criminal charge hanging over his head.

But nothing - not even the weight of what it took to get here - could take this moment away from them.

Tomorrow, they would go to the Motherlobe under supervision and start determining how best to help Razputin. But for right now - just for tonight - they were at ease.

Morning broke through the living room window, casting a new light on the pair of cousins who had fallen asleep together on the couch despite their best efforts not to. Raz stirred just enough to crack open his eyes. He sighed, still remarkably relaxed.

Mina simply lay there, wide awake though resting with her eyes closed and fully aware that her cousin was not going to like what came next.

Hey, Raz! You know that government organization that currently thinks you're a dangerous murderer? We're gonna go pay them a visit today! Aren't you excited to be barely conscious and vulnerable around these people you've been taught your whole life would hurt you given the smallest reason?

Christ.

He knew it was coming. That it was only a matter of time before he had to answer for what he'd done, and delaying it would only make it worse. His cousin had told him as much yesterday.

But god, he was terrified. And as he felt Mina's apprehension grow next to him, he knew it couldn't be put off any longer.

His head hurt.

Well... It could be out off a little longer. They could both feel it, what loomed just past the comfortable sunrise. But Mina's hold didn't falter as they lay there together.

It was a sigh of resignation that broke the morning silence.

"Hey, Raz," she whispered, nudging him gently.

Razputin let out a soft little sound to show he was awake and listening. He doubted he was capable of speech right now.

She didn't expect him to. The rules in her house weren't hard and fast like with the Galochios.

Except for the bonnet.

Instead, she opened her eyes and looked down at him, trying not to let her apprehension show on her features.

"We have a meeting with Agent Nein today," she told him. "I'm gonna be there the whole times, but we have to go."

Raz met Guillelmina's gaze for a long moment with eyes a swirling cauldron of fear and worry, then separated himself from her so they could both get off the couch.

"O-Okay."

Huh. Guess he could find his voice.

She could see the apprehension in him, and as he sat himself up, she caught hold of his arm. "You don't have anything to be afraid of - you know that, right?" She asked, looking solemnly up at him.

He hesitated, and couldn't directly meet her eyes. "Y-Yes."

Even if his cousin could reassure him, even if she was right about there being nothing to worry about, he couldn't help it. This was a very big deal with potentially very big consequences, and it all depended on what they decided about his mental state.

She didn't expect him to feel no apprehension at all; this was an incredibly stressful situation for him, and all she could hope was that she'd be able to curb some of that fear in him.

Gently, she released him, letting him go get dressed for the day. "I mean it, Raz," she said softly. "I'm in your corner here. No matter what happens - not that I think anything's going to happen, mind you," she hurried to correct herself, "but no matter what happens, I've got you."

This, at least, earned a look of gratitude. Raz nodded as he stood, and gave her hand one quick squeeze with his own - understanding and a genuine promise to try and trust her - before he went off.

She sat there and watched for a moment as he went off to his room to get dressed; the moment he wasn't in her line of sight, she slumped, burying her face in her hands for a moment before raking them through her curls as she took a deep breath and pushed her hair back.

Okay.

Pull it together.

Pull it together, because Raz needed you to lead by example. If you're not worried, he's not worried! Simple as that!

She stood up, stretched, and went to get ready herself, knowing full well that she had one hell of a day ahead of her regardless of what happened with the higher-ups. She just prayed that she could keep Razputin calm and in control through this experience.

Something not quite enough to be a headache thrummed at the forefront of Raz's head. He took a moment once he was in his room to check himself; his breathing, his emotional control, his thoughts which weren't actually at risk of leaking thanks to the helmet.

He was made of stone. He was a wall without cracks. He was a wooden doll with no feelings whatsoever.

He had to be all of these things. He was all of these things. If he was going to trust his cousin and prove himself before the Psychonauts and not let panic and blind reaction cloud his mind, he couldn't allow himself to be anything but completely in control.

When he came back out, ready to go, there was a distinct, distant blankness in his eyes.

Guillelmina met him at the door, ready to go and carrying her laptop and Raz's files all within her work bag. She was dressed in a green jumpsuit - standard uniform, necessary for reviews.

When she saw that distant blankness in his eyes, she couldn't help but give him a long, sad look. "Razputin," she said to him, hoping to catch a little bit of his awareness. A hand came up to his cheek, hoping to draw his gaze. There was a moment of hesitation, where she so desperately wanted to tell him not to bend so far in the other direction that he broke in a different way.

Those words never made it out of her mouth.

"Just... be careful."

He stopped where he was at her touch, and hesitantly met her gaze. The blankness receded just a little bit, if only at the reminder of support.

"I...I w-will."

She gave him a gentle smile, and opened the door for him.

She had marched him towards the inevitable - but at the same time, she was marching alongside him, and everything about her in the moment they entered the Motherlobe's front doors only reinforced her conviction that she was going to be at his side through it all.

There were a few familiar faces scattered throughout the lobby - people who had lived on Mina's street, who had come to the aid of their fellow Psychonauts when a strange force had rocked through their little neighborhood.

They'd stared then, and they stared now, at the stranger being paraded through the halls of the Motherlobe in his psychoisolation bonnet, a statement piece that said to the world, I am dangerous, and need to be subdued.

But Mina didn't see him that way. When she looked at him, standing outside of Nein's office, she gave him a gentle smile and held her hands out for him. They were alone in the little hallway, but once they walked through those doors, they were going to be the subject of scrutiny from all sides.

"Ready?"

Raz felt eyes prickling the back of his head and neck, and it took everything in him not to hitch up his shoulders and make himself appear smaller than he was. He latched onto Mina's hands as if they were a lifeline.

This was it. No going back. Keep calm and put on a show for everyone, Razputin. Your life depends on it.

Like always.

"R-R-Ready."

She holds his hands back, matching his grip ounce for ounce as he holds her like a vice. This meeting, important as it was, was not life or death. They were not going to sentence him to the electric chair just because he failed to keep his cool.

But that didn't mean there weren't still very real consequences looming over them.

The doors slid open, and the room was far more occupied than it had been the last time Raz had visited. Sasha Nein was there, yes. At his side was Milla Vodello - Mina had requested her presence. She remembered being nine and frightened, and no one on this earth was better at soothing scared little kids than Milla was.

But aside from the pair of psychic superstars stood a severe looking woman, and a man in a suit, both of whom Mina greeted as Grand Heads.

That was them. The leaders of the entire Psychonauts organization - the two people who had final say in what happened to him. They were the paragon of psychics, the foremost leaders in the metaphysical.

"—And this is my cousin, Razputin."

Razputin didn't need introductions. He recognized every single one of them, and was frozen solid through Guillelmina's speech. His expression struggled to stay neutral under the weighty gazes of four of the most influential Psychonauts - either to the organization or personally - he'd ever heard of.

Someone - Truman, he thought maybe, but maybe it was Sasha - spoke, and it was underwater static to him. His heart hammered in his chest.

"—skin doesn't look good. I wasn't aware he was in such bad shape it had already become so physically obvious."

"He killed two people, Truman. Ah, in self-defense, supposedly. What were you expecting?"

"It's been less than forty eight hours," Mina said, her voice staunch and business-like— but she took his hand as he stood there on the verge of panic, and there was nothing mechanical about it. Fingers laced with his, a silent reassurance that she was there as she continued to speak to her superiors.

"I've been trying to keep his stress levels down. Combined with the Psychoisolation bonnet dampening his powers, it's managed to keep him within reasonable limits," she said - and then, to emphasize: "He's not a threat."

The subject of their conversation and scrutiny certainly looked the farthest thing from a threat in that moment. Wide eyes, unmoving, and clearly grasping at his cousin's hand like it was the only thing keeping him breathing.

"Why, the poor thing," Milla cooed, floating gently across the room at a pace that was easy to track. "He looks terrified."

She utterly ignored the other agents grumbling to each other about whether Raz was at risk of an explosion with or without the bonnet, and came close enough that Razputin caught the movement and swiveled his whole head to watch her. She stopped several feet away with an easy smile.

“Darling, we’re not going to hurt you.”

The hand that Raz didn’t have an iron grip on came up to his arm, gentle and grounding. “This is Milla Vodello,” Guillelmina told him, her voice gentle as Hollis and Truman argued amongst themselves for the moment. “She’s one of the kindest people I’ve ever met, Razputin. She’s not going to hurt you. Why don’t you talk to her?” She urged him gently.

His mouth opened. “H-H-H-H-Hi-”

And closed.

Milla smiled anyway. “Hello, darling. It’s nice to meet you. Your cousin has told me so many wonderful things about you. I know this is probably rather overwhelming, but I promise we’re not here to make you do anything you don’t want to do. We’re just here to understand.”

Raz stared at her with owlish, unblinking eyes. They darted sideways towards Mina.

She gave him a reassuring smile. She seemed completely at ease with Milla there with them; there was no distress, no apprehension in her features. It really did seem like she trusted this woman entirely.

“See?” She whispered to him, “I’ve known Milla since I was a kid. I’ve been talking her ear off about you for almost ten years,” she gave him a little nudge. “And she’s right. Everyone here, they just want to help. They just want to understand.”

She ignored the hard gaze of Hollis Forsythe.

“If either of us thought otherwise, we wouldn’t make you stay here - right, Milla?”

“Exactly, darling,” the older woman said with an emphatic nod. “Today is as much for your well-being as it is our understanding. We won’t make you do anything you don’t want to do, okay?”

“Agent Vodello -” interrupted the Second Head. Truman placed a hand on her shoulder and she let out a put-upon sigh. “Well, yes. We won’t do that. But it would help everyone on this case immensely if we were allowed to proceed with everything we have planned.”

Razputin’s fingers tightened minutely against Mina’s. He swallowed, and that seemed to break the frozen spell placed over him.

“Um, y-you c-c-can...d-do what you n-n-need t-to...” He whispered. The whole room seemed to strain to hear it.

They had the greenlight to go ahead with the tests and examinations; but even so, Mina squeezed his hand back, and pulled him gently to face her.

"I'm not going to let them do anything to hurt you. You understand that?" She asked, her voice soft. "I'm going to be helping out today. Just like I went into your head last time, I can do it again if you don't want any of the others going in. How's that sound?" She asked him.

She was well aware that the Psychonauts had a litany of tests to run him through now. Assuring public safety was of the utmost importance, and she agreed entirely. But it was a matter they had to approach delicately.

That was vastly preferable, and an option he hadn't even been aware was one he had until she voiced it. Raz nodded so quickly the helmet slid up and down over his eyes. The two Grand Heads exchanged glances, but neither said anything with the young man present.

"An internal check is probably the best place to start," Sasha piped up, already pulling out a psi-portal. "That way we can assess the state of Razputin's mindscape, how unchecked his instincts are, and how difficult it might be to reign them back in."

She quietly pulled her hand from his, just to re-adjust his helmet.

"Remember, Raz. I'm going to be in your head, but if you need me back out here, I'll be out in a flash. We're going to be under together, but that doesn't mean I won't have your back in the waking world too," she explained to him as she led him over to the examination table in the center of the room.

She looked up at Sasha, apprehension coloring her features for the first time as he held up the psi-portal.

They wouldn't be able to use that with the Isolation bonnet on him. It was going to have to come off if they wanted to do an internal check.

Her hands hovered uncertainly over the clasp as he laid back.

He recognized the reason for her hesitation, and tensed. He didn't want to scare her. He didn't want to hurt her or anyone in this room, or anyone at all. He was going to do his damn best to keep that from ever happening again.

It was Truman who surprised both of them, coming up and placing a hand at Mina's back. "Go ahead, Guillelmina. We've got it all covered out here for any situation."

Mina's back straightened just a bit when Truman came up behind her. If he could sense her apprehension, then she was certain Razputin could too. She didn't want him to worry. She needed him to trust these people, and to do so she needed to trust them as well. So she forced her shoulders to relax, and looked down at him with a gentle little smile.

"See you on the inside." She said, voice hushed as he felt the click of the lock on his bonnet.

"Ok-kay," he responded in a whisper as a headache immediately blossomed in his skull. It was not agonizing like the night of the Incident, and he found that he could manage to ignore it in lieu of everything else happening around him.

Stray items began to lazily float upwards around the room. A few careful pushes from Milla and Hollis had them back in place. Truman gave a smile and a thumbs up.

The psi-portal was placed against Raz's head. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Guillelmina ran her hand through his hair to straighten it out, a gentle little gesture of care as she sat down next to him. Just like last time, she would be the one tasked with entering his mind.

"And just like last time," she told him gently, "you're in control. If you want me out, all you have to do is say so - tell me - and I'll leave."

And with that, Guillelmina opened the door, sitting straight. There was the faintest light from beneath fluttering eyelids before they slipped closed, and she was pulled into her cousin's mind, no small amount afraid of what she'd find.

She opened her eyes to a familiar empty room, but something was very wrong.

The walls towered over her. The ceiling was higher than ever, and yet felt claustrophobically oppressive.

She was no longer alone.

The Bodysnatcher was pacing the length of the room, looking just the same as the last time she'd seen him, except for one significant detail - he was about twice her height now. He didn't even glance her way as she appeared. He just kept pacing, eyes roaming over every inch of each wall he walked beside.

Oh God.

She'd known that the body snatcher - his survival instincts - were overblown and in charge now, but she couldn't have imagined...

With a blue shimmer, Guillelmina levitated herself up to his level, not unlike an annoying insect. She kept a respectable distance from him, not unaware of the chance he might take a swipe at her out of anger or alarm.

"I thought you didn't come in the masking room anymore," she told him, hoping to catch his clearly distracted attention. "Where is Razputin's picture frame? The little more of light, what happened to him?"

The manifestation didn't stop moving, but he finally gave Mina the time of day with a single, withering look.

"Stay out of this," he hissed. "My job is already hard enough and you are not about to ruin it for me."

He turned back to the walls. "Besides, Raz is somewhere safe. Don't worry about him."

"I always worry about him," she said, dropping back down to the ground as she followed him. "I worry about you. A lot's happened in the last few days. I don't want to ruin anything for you, I just want to help. Can you tell me what it is you're doing?" She asked him.

Somewhere safe didn't mean much in this state. Somewhere safe could mean anything, and if this imbalance in his mind caused any destruction in here - and he was being remarkably careful about, she noticed - then 'somewhere safe' wouldn't mean much.

Better safe than sorry, after all.

"I'm holding everything together," was her vague answer. "He's not going to stay functioning if I don't. Everyone out there will tear him to shreds."

A floorboard creaked across the room. The bodysnatcher zeroed in on the sound and hurried to it, pressing his palms down flat on the ground until it stopped. He stood up, brushed himself off, and resumed pacing.

"Everyone out there came to help him, because they want to see him - to see both of you - get better. I wouldn't allow anyone near you if I thought they would hurt you," she stressed.

She followed him, and examined the floorboard once he'd brushed himself off. It didn't seem to be doing much of anything anymore, and her attention turned back to him.

"Please, Raz," she trailed closer, still mindful of the fact that he could lash out. "Let me help you."

Finally she had his full attention. He whirled around, towering over her like an angry adult over a helpless child.

Exactly like one.

"No. The last time you convinced me to go against my instincts, everything went wrong. I'm not going to let that happen again!"

The room gave a subtle rumble. Razputin didn't seem to notice.

She held her hands up in a gesture of surrender, and took a step back. He might have been a facsimile of an angry adult, but she wasn't going to play the helpless child.

"I'm not here to hurt you. Somewhere, deep down, you know that. All last night, you let me close, and nothing bad happened. Right? You relaxed, and you didn't get hurt."

She held one hand out, keeping them both where he could see them. "Let me help you, Razputin, and you can feel that again. You can feel that all the time."

"You think I don't understand that?" He scoffed, incredulous and offended. "Of course I understood, of course I want that. That's all I've ever strived for! But there's always a price for it, Mina. Just because you have good intentions doesn't mean I'm not going to be punished by someone else for letting my guard down."

Another rumble. Raz glanced around, but when nothing came out of place, he rounded back on his cousin.

"I know what this meeting is about. I know why those people are here. If I don't be perfect in whatever they want me to, I'm a goner! I know what they think of me, I've seen the way that woman looks at me. They all think I'm a -"

A crack resounded behind him. His eyes went wide, whipping around to slam his hands against the wall with enough force to make it shake. Water sprayed out of the break, all over his arms and chest, but he didn't flinch.

Don't think about it!

The crack mended itself in a patchwork job of splinters. The water ceased to leak through. Raz's shoulders slumped with relief.

As his shoulders slumped with relief, he felt a hand - small and insignificant as it was - at the middle of his back. She was close, and though he was still twice her size, she held herself delicately over him.

"Razputin, that's not true," she told him. "Those people are out there because they're the best at what they do. Because they can help you. I never would have brought you here if I'd thought there was a chance that any of these people were going to hurt you in any way."

Mina wicked the water off of him, letting it evaporate in her hold. He was scared and exhausted. Even though he called himself the body snatcher, Mina knew better.

This was just as much her little cousin as the ball of light had been.

"We're here to take care of you. There's no consequence for needing help."

His arms trembled minutely where they still pressed against the fixed wall. It was his only tell.

"Don't lie to me," he said, sounding more tired than accusatory. "I've felt your stress all morning. You're just as worried about this as me. Maybe more, cause you know what'll happen if they decide I'm not worth it. I can't let that happen again, Mina. I'm trying so hard not to let anything be wrong with me. I have to be worth keeping."

Her heart ached for him. She had been stressed all morning, but not for the reasons he believed. Not because she thought they would end him if they were displeased with what they found - but because she didn't want to see his own fear unravel him.

And that's what it was doing.

He was trying so hard to not let anything be wrong with him, and that's exactly what was wrong.

"I don't care what happens," she told him, "I don't care what anyone out there thinks of you. No matter what, Raz, you're worth keeping. Nothing - nothing could make me want to hurt you like she hurt you. To throw you away like that. Nothing."

"I know you don't. I...I understand that now. But it's not just up to you, it's up to them, too. It's just like how it was with the family, Mina. She looked after me, but when I caused too much trouble, Zalto overruled her."

His eyes squeezed shut to keep tears from falling. Something wet began to trickle down from the ceiling.

"Every time, Mina. Every single time, no matter what she did or said to try and stop him. And I've seen how you are around these people, they're obviously higher than you. They could decide I'm not worth it and then it won't matter what you want. Only what they want. I can't - I can't risk giving them reason to get rid of me. I can't let it happen again. I have to survive."

"Razputin, I've been around these people for most of my life. Sasha and Milla - even the Heads! Even Hollis and Truman! I know them. I know who they are, as people, and I know they want to help." She stopped the leak in the ceiling, her hydrokinesis absolute even here.

"I know you're afraid. I know survival is everything that matters right now. But I need you to trust me when I say that no matter what happens here, you're going to be okay. I'm not going to let you get hurt, anymore. Not by the Galochios, and not by the Psychonauts. But you have to let us help you."

The room was going to fall apart, without the bonnet keeping his powers in check. The whole place was coming down and the body snatcher would be forced to lash out just to keep his head above the water again - so on and so forth, a vicious cycle that they needed to interrupt.

"Raz... You're safe. Honest to God, you're finally safe."

He was crumbling under the weight of trying to keep his emotions to himself - of trying to be blank and empty and good under the brutal knowledge of what he had done in the name of self preservation. It wasn't going to hold, and they both knew it, but he was too terrified of the consequences of letting it be to allow her to take care of things for him.

"I can't," he whispered as water pooled around their feet from below. "I can't trust that, I can't get hurt again, I can't..."

She wasn't looking at purple skin and glowing yellow eyes. She was looking at a familiar little boy no longer trapped in a photo.

"I....I...."

Razputin began to cry, and the walls began to cave in.

"Please help me, Mina."

She kept the water at bay, a dry spot warbling pathetically around their feet as the water threatened to spill over and claim them both. He stood there before her, small and terrified, crying as the world around them began to crumble.

She hoped they were braced for impact out in the real world. Even if his survival instincts didn't erupt like they had on the night of Zalto and Mithra's death, it was still bound to be a handful when this place came down.

She opened her arms for her cousin, a promise in the way she held herself.

"I'm here, Razputin," she whispered, her voice cracking under the strain of everything he felt. "You can let it go. I've got you."

That was all it took.

Razputin wailed and dove into her arms, right as the facade of the masking room finally broke down all around them. Floods poured in from around, above, below, threatening to sweep both wayward souls off their feet and into oblivion.

Raz buried his face into his cousin's stomach, mourning everything he had lost. Everything he had done.

The floods swallowed them whole. Without hesitation, the water crashed into the room, swirling around them and colliding violently over their heads. Walls were obliterated, plaster and drywall swirling through the rushing water.

Soon, there was nothing but endless, salty sea, and not a drop of it touched them.

She held back an ocean for him, kneeling down to hug him properly as the world turned blue around them.

Guillelmina held him tightly as he sobbed into her, keeping the floodwaters at bay. She'd promised she wasn't going to let anyone hurt him anymore, and that included himself. She wasn't going to leave him here to drown under the weight of his own emotions.

He cried for everything that was and wasn't, could and couldn't be, and above all what should and shouldn't have been. He cried over innocence lost ten years ago and innocence forced on him through those ten. He cried over a decade of abuse and excuses and cycles, over and over and over again.

He cried for Mithra. He cried for his family. He cried for himself.

Razputin cried out every emotion that had never been allowed to surface; grief, anger, hope, joy, loss, and love. The ocean around them trembled in tune, creating a maelstrom of masked and suppressed and scolded experiences that would have overwhelmed and consumed him were he to face it alone.

But he wasn't alone anymore.

He cried for that, too.

And he would never have to be alone again. He would never have to bear the brunt of what had happened to him without someone there to share the burden. Mina had spent nine years trying to get back to him - trying to get him out of that horrible place, and away from those horrible people - and she'd finally reunited with her cousin.

The circumstances weren't exactly what she had planned all this time, but the circumstances didn't matter, really, because they could manage anything together.

What mattered was that he was finally allowed to experience every smothered and stifled emotion that they'd punished him for over the last decade. Everything that wasn't, everything that couldn't be, and everything he should have been - he could cry for it without fear of repercussion.

But everything that was, everything that could be, and everything he turned out to be... it was enough.

It was more than enough.

It was him, Razputin, her cousin, and she loved all of it dearly.

So she let him ride it out, until the maelstrom had passed, and the sea they sat at the bottom of together was calm once more. And once he was ready, they would find dry land - together.

In another time, in another situation, Razputin would have felt embarrassed for how long it took to come back from his emotional overload. But there was no shame coloring his cheeks or sheepishness tainting his body language when the crying finally reached its end and he began to pull away from Mina, if only to wipe his eyes to look at her properly.

The black tear stain markings that had once ran down his face were no more, replaced with the real thing and so much more potent. But it was no longer a mockery of what he wasn't allowed to have. Now, it brought with it a level of catharsis that he'd never thought he could experience.

Raz, enveloped in truly loving arms for the first time in forever and wholly safe in them, looked up at his cousin with nothing short of awe, gratitude, and overwhelming love.

She didn't keep him pinned to her when he tried to pull away, giving him room to breathe and truly experience whatever emotions grabbed hold of him in the moment. She didn't demand that he remain sad and docile for her, picturesque in his emotions without a hair out of place. This was hard to experience, ugly and chaotic, and she simply let it happen until that catharsis was spent.

She let him pull away, let him look up at her with tearstains and hiccups and relief and pain coloring his features, and all she did was reach forward and gently wipe the tears from his face.

They would find their way out of here together, and she would have to return to the real world and pray that the others had been able to do damage control while she consoled her little cousin here.

But for now, she simply leaned down and pressed a kiss to his forehead.

"There you are," she whispered. Her throat was tight and she bit back tears of her own, seeing him so emotionally exhausted but still looking at her with that love. She sniffled, and gave him a smile. "I missed you, Raz."

He sniffled to keep from bursting into tears again - out of joy instead of misery, this time - and his eyes shimmered as he mirrored her smile with the smallest one of his own.

"R-Really?" He hiccuped, hanging the moon on her and her love and the fact that she'd missed him, the fact that she cared about him after such a disaster barely averted.

She hummed and nodded, the ocean around them casting light on their underwater reprieve. "I knew you were in here somewhere. The whole you. And when you're ready, we can go find somewhere you can rest. I won't leave you at the bottom of the ocean." She assured him.

It seemed to dawn on him where they were, and he looked around apprehensively. She was keeping the water at bay, but it was still so all-encompassing on all sides.

"I don't know if there is a place," he admitted dubiously. "Everything got swept away when the - when I lost control. I don't know if there's dry land anymore..."

"There's always dry land," she told him. It wasn't a challenge, and there was no condescension in her voice. She wasn't berating him for being wrong. Instead, she held out a hand for him, as the ocean parted for them, their little bubble moving and expanding as though it were going to lead the way.

"You just need to know where to look."

Razputin's eyes went round in amazement. He took his cousin's hand, curling tiny child fingers around adult ones, and got to his feet as she did. He was afraid of the water, and afraid of the unknown, but it was all washed away under the overwhelming trust he now had in her.

Time in the physical world crept by as the cousins found a place to wait out the floodwaters. Things would recede eventually, she told him. They were going to make sure of it. But for the first time, he was not confined to that horrible little parlor room, nor the tattered circus of his past.

The demolition phase was over. It was time to start building again.

When Guillelmina opened her eyes, she found that her cheeks were wet. She sniffled and wiped it away embarrassedly as she came out of her trance, watching her cousin stir back to life as well.

This was it, a voice told her.

Moment of truth.

The room was hushed as Raz woke up. There was a tenseness to everyone, as if they expected something to happen. Perhaps something had already happened, while Mina was out, and now they were just waiting for it to get worse as he came back to consciousness.

Razputin opened his eyes. Stared at the ceiling. Blinked once. Twice. Dropped his gaze to his cousin.

Reached out for her with tears running down his face.

Her breath caught as she watched him lie there and cry, reaching out for her. She didn't even hesitate, meeting him halfway and clasping his hand in both of hers as she gave him a shaky, watery smile. A welcome back.

"See?" She croaked, her voice betraying her. "You're okay. You're okay."

His head was still free of the bonnet, but he couldn't even form a coherent mental answer to her reassurance. He simply let out a sound in a mix of grief and relief and buried his face into her shoulder.

Around the two of them, objects everywhere in the lab glowed orange but remained where they were, metaphorically nailed down by four practiced agents who had been on the look out since the entire ordeal started.

Milla came up and put a gentle hand at Guillelmina's back, giving her a smile. She didn't need to say a single thing for the message to be clear:

We think he's going to be okay.

She wrapped her arms around her cousin as he buries her face against her shoulder, holding him close as love and relief and what she hoped was a sense of safety crashed into him not unlike the tidal wave in his mind.

At the feeling of Milla's gentle hand at her back, she twisted to look up at her colleagues. She could tell that at some point, she had been crying; she was out of breath and she felt the telltale signs. She had felt everything her cousin had felt, and quite frankly she couldn't bring herself to muster the energy to be embarrassed about anything her superiors might have seen.

Milla's reassurance was more than she could have hoped for in that moment; even if his powers were still haywire, they were going to be able to help him. He was going to be okay.

She'd made a lot of promises over the years - to her cousin, to herself. Some of them had fallen apart, but this one she had seen through, just as she'd always sworn she would.

Razputin was safe.

Truman and Hollis met her gaze with matching expressions; one that told her there would need to be a lot of discussion and planning about the entire endeavor, but also promised support and understanding for her and her cousin.

Sasha, at his console, shared a muted smile with Milla.

And Razputin, finally allowed to love and live and be someone again, looked up at Guillelmina with watery eyes and words on his lips.

“Th-Thank you, Mina. Thank you.”

She had saved him from the Galochios, the world, and himself.

It was going to be a long road to recovery. It was a road he wasn't going to travel alone.

It was a road they would travel, together.

Everything that Razputin had feared had come to pass - he had disobeyed the family, forced to reconnect with his cousin. He'd lost Mithra's love and incurred Zalto's wrath. He'd committed acts of violence against those who had been supposed to take care of him, and caught the attention of the Psychonauts, just like they'd always warned. He'd lost control of the most primal parts of his mind, and been brought into their psychomedical labs to determine if he was a threat and what should be done about him.

And he'd survived all of it.

There was a long road ahead of them - he was right about that. But he would never have to suffer alone again. That was another promise that Guillelmina had made, and one she intended to keep.

After all this time, they were finally, truly together again.