Weeks of meticulous study and planning all gone to waste because no one told Mia the Firstborn was a stubborn, contrary, and intractable man.

The stories said plenty about his skills and accomplishment, with truth mixed with lies as was standard practice for newsprint, and she watched the video of his standoff against Uncle Sandy in the Sherrif's Office more times than she could count. Even a famed gunfighter like Revolvers Rossi appreciated the Firstborn's skills, killing four men dead in five shots while shooting with his left no less. At close range of course, maybe 15 feet at most, but it wasn't his accuracy which everyone found impressive. It was his decisiveness, opting first to let Uncle Sandy go about his business, only to draw the second he saw a disguised guard go for his gun and killing anyone who did the same.

All while standing in front of the lovely, air-headed Innate playing with the baby cow behind him, ready to take a Bolt for either one if need be.

It was a frighteningly professional display of gunplay, courage, and determination that few could match. Mia herself had seen as much, as there were times in those early years when Uncle Iggy's war for Mount Rimepeak bled over into their daily lives. Papa did his best to shelter her from the worst of it, but she'd seen plenty of

blood-thirsty killers come out of shadowy corners with guns blazing, only to miss every shot on daddy and his guards from only a few feet away. They'd hold the gun out at arms length like they were afraid of the flash and recoil and pull the trigger without thinking, then keep squeezing it until their gun clicked empty.

Not the Firstborn though. No, he was a man with a plan and he executed it flawlessly, drawing, aiming, and shooting from the hip in the space of a heartbeat, then doing it again, again, and again until only Uncle Sandy remained, and only because he never went for his gun. There was no fear or hesitation in the Firstborn's actions, and though the grainy, low resolution, poorly-angled video made it difficult to tell, Mia was fairly certain he didn't blink from the moment his gun cleared his holster until Uncle Sandy was disarmed and on the ground. That level of control and restraint in a high stress situation was enough to tell anyone watching that the Firstborn was an experienced pro, a cold-blooded shooter with military training and plenty of experience too. Even if the Marshal didn't warn Uncle Iggy to stand down, Mia was all but certain the family wouldn't have gone after the Firstborn, because that wasn't an enemy you wanted to make. Sure, he shot four thugs down while they were working a job for the family, but that was just business. They were operating in the Firstborn's town after all, and he'd shown willingness to live and let live until one of the goons got spooked and went for his weapon.

Which told Mia the Firstborn wasn't some squeaky-clean, strait-laced, upstanding citizen. No, he knew how things worked and was willing to turn a blind eye so long as him and his weren't threatened. Soon as you crossed that line though, you had best be prepared, because the Firstborn would come at you fast and hard, because he was a killer and a survivor to the end.

From the first time she watched that Video, Mia was spellbound by the Firstborn, and saw in him a most intriguing opportunity to stir the pot and shake Uncle Iggy a bit. There was a time when the Don was a firebrand who relished any and every opportunity for a fight, but ever since the family succeeded in taking over the mining operations in Rimepeak, Uncle Iggy's appetite for risk and bloodshed had wasted away, while his greed and gluttony grew more and more with each passing day. Rather than guns and gear for their heavies to keep their operations safe, Uncle Iggy invested in marble statues, gilded chairs, spider-silk suits, and extravagant foods. Instead of fighting for more territory so his Capos and Soldatos had more opportunities to earn, he gave up on any and all operations outside of Rimepeak and took a bigger cut from the crews still turning a profit. In lieu of training or opening up the books to new blood, Uncle Iggy let himself get fat on the profits and paid no mind to the sharks circling in the waters, not just the Zampanos looking to muscle in on their territory, but the Jews, Blacks, and Raghead gangs too, not to mention the Qins Triads and other Asiatic syndicates as well as anyone and everyone with a gun and a reason to use it.

A cardinal sin for a mob boss, to cast aside your roots and the people who got you there. Uncle Iggy figured that so long as he held onto Rimepeak, nothing else mattered, but he forgot that he still needed the Family to hold the mining operations, a Family he'd neglected for far too long.

No one was thriving in the Family, no one besides Uncle Iggy and his chosen few. Underboss Gio, Capo Dom and Capo Matty, they were the fat cats who took in the lion's share of the profits, while Papa all but beggared himself keeping the rest of the Family afloat. While the other leaders were buying expensive and impractical handguns that never got used or extravagant fur coats for their third mistresses, Papa was buying guns, ammo, and food to keep his people armed and fed. How were their people supposed to collect on debts owed or threaten shop owners into paying protection if they were better armed than the Family was? Or keep the other Families from poaching their people with better jobs and better pay than what Uncle Iggy had to offer? They couldn't, meaning at this rate, it was only a matter of time before the Pugliano Family met a bloody and violent end, one in which Mia would be better off dead than captured.

Which was why she though to use the Firstborn as soon as she saw that recording. Since Uncle Iggy refused to see the error of his ways, then they were all better off getting rid of him and putting Papa in his place. He was a Pugliano too, one who was pivotal in taking everything the Family held now. Without Franky the Phantom lurking in the shadows and taking out the leaders of

the competition, Uncle Iggy would never have been able to take Mount Rimepeak. Back then, he'd been relegated to shaking down the surrounding settlements for food and ammo, going from one ramshackle village to another just to keep him and his people from starving while Papa paved the way for the Family's success. He was the one who kept their enemies on their toes and fed information back to Uncle Iggy so he'd know when and where to hit to inflict maximum damage. The Soldatos all rallied behind Uncle Iggy because he was the one leading the charge, but the Capos who knew what was going on behind the scenes all knew that Papa was the real brains behind the whole operation.

That's why Underboss Gio, Capo Dom, and Capo Matty were given control of the mines after all. There was a time when they'd been Papa's strongest backers, but Uncle Iggy won them over with the hard-earned profits that rightly belonged to Papa. Not to say he didn't get a cut either, but it was hardly an equal share even before accounting for what they all had to kick up to the Don. Even then, Papa stayed loyal to his European cousin, even though they only met once before passing through the Gates on the Advent. Wasn't until last year when Antonio grew insufferable and Uncle Iggy started dropping hints to Papa about how in the 'Old Country', second cousins hardly counted as family and how Mia and Antonio would make for a 'powerful' couple.

Gross. Not just because he was her second cousin, but also because Antonio was a greasy, disgusting pig of a boy who cried

and whined about everything until his daddy did something about it.

So to avoid such a thankless marriage for Mia, Papa started considering other options. Betraying the Family outright was never in the cards, because then it'd be the second time Papa did all the work only for someone else to benefit. Sure, he could serve all of Mount Rimepeak up on a silver platter to the Zampanos, the Cattaneos, the Manfredis, or any other Family West of the Divide, but once all was said and done, he'd likely be killed out of hand and Mia and Mama along with him. No one liked a rat, not even if the rat ended up helping you out, so there was no chance Papa was dumb enough to double-cross the Family he helped build. No, the only path forward was to seize power from Uncle Iggy and take over as the new Don, but they couldn't do that without winning over Underboss Gio, Capo Dom, and Capo Matty first. Which was impossible since they were paid well for their loyalty and knew Papa had different ideas on how that money should be spent.

Which meant they had to drive a wedge between Uncle Iggy and his closest, most powerful supporters before making a play for the title, and the Firstborn presented them all with the opportunity to do just that.

Everyone knew Uncle Iggy had an explosive temper. That's why he was the Firebrand after all, not just because of his Spell of

choice of Scorching Beam. In the old days, he'd turn his rage upon their enemies and burn them to cinders for even minor grievances, which was why he'd been forced out of the fight for Mount Rimepeak for so many years. All the other major players hated him and were happy to join hands to kill him first if he dared step foot in town, and only Papa's meticulous methods kept the Family in the fight long enough to win. Uncle Iggy was a General, someone who called the shots in the heat of battle, but Papa was better suited for the role of Don. He was the strategist, the mastermind who knew who to bribe, who to threaten, and who to make friends with to keep things running smoothly.

That was the truth, one no one argued against, but they all supported Uncle Iggy as Don all the same, because he promised them wealth and luxury, while Papa wanted the Family to be so much more. Why rule Mount Rimepeak when they could take over operations across the whole Divide? Forget Las Vegas. With a bit of careful planning and a little luck, they could be running everything West of the Divide, not just from the shadows but as a legitimate business or possibly even as a politician later on down the line. Uncle Iggy wouldn't have it though, because he was content with what he had. Why wouldn't he be? He was here eating 75% of the pie, so why would he need to go fight for more? As for the remaining 25%, 20% was split between Papa, Underboss Gio, Capo Dom, and Capo Matty, while the remaining 5% was for everyone else, and if that wasn't enough for them, then too bad.

The 5% were mostly behind Papa already, because he was keeping them all afloat while the Don and his people lived large. As for that other 15%, Gio, Dom, and Matty were content with the status quo and unlikely to back a different horse unless Uncle Iggy mis-stepped. Problem was, he'd grown timid and fat in recent years, giving concessions to the Zampanos to keep them out of Rimepeak and refusing to support any operations outside of town for fear of getting drawn into conflict. He thought himself safe in his bubble and refused to move beyond it, not even to pick up easy money lying well within reach. Take Vanguard National for example. Last year, Uncle Mikey tried to get Ronald Jackson a meeting with the Don, just a face to face to talk about linking up and working together, but rather than even consider it, Uncle Iggy just threw a temper and stonewalled Uncle Mikey for daring to reach out to another outfit, which led to the Family losing out in a price war against Vanguard National and not knowing about their explosives manufacturing business until it was too late to matter. A massive loss he'd been sulking about for weeks now, which was the only reason he'd agreed to Papa's plan to ally with the other Families to break the Vanguard National prisoner out of jail so they could learn what he knew about their operations, a failure which cost him a veritable fortune in the aftermath.

So no one would blink twice if they learned that Uncle Iggy sanctioned a hit on the Firstborn, because he'd done far worse for much less.

It was perfect really. It didn't matter how much Uncle Iggy tried to deny it, no one would believe he was content to live and let live, because no one else stood to gain anything from the Firstborn's death. Only the infamous Firebrand would be so reckless as to disregard a warning from the Marshal, or at least the Firebrand of old. These days, Uncle Iggy wouldn't say boo to a mouse if he thought it was working for another Family, but he still put on a big show of bluster and bravado every chance he got. Putting a hit out on the Firstborn was absolutely in character for Don Ignazio, while Franky the Phantom was far too smart and cautious to do something so foolish.

Making it the perfect move for them to make. Whether the Firstborn lived or died, Uncle Iggy would be left with a powerful enemy and few allies willing to support him, while Papa would be perfectly poised to denounce the Don's actions and make a play for power before smoothing things over by delivering Uncle Iggy to the Feds. As for Mia, she wanted to take things a step further and win over the Firstborn for herself. Not for the Family necessarily, at least not right away, because he was still enough of a straight arrow to balk at becoming a criminal. Thing is, he was grey enough to cross over with the right motivation, which she figured she could provide in spades, given how he liked surrounding himself with pretty ladies. All she had to do was show up for the big dance in her best dress and bat her eyes a little bit, and she figured she'd have him drooling in the palm of her hand after a single dance.

Problem was, the Firstborn wasn't behaving like he was supposed to. She figured he'd take one look at her and get that wide-eyed, slack-jawed look most men had been giving her since the time she turned 14 and her boobs started coming in. Most men fixated on those and never moved beyond, but Mia could hardly blame them seeing how it was a fantastic sight. Especially in her favourite black dress, one that kept her mostly covered, but exposed her neck and collarbones all the way down to just above her belly button. Add in her gorgeous youthful features, with her big brown eyes, perfectly coifed hair, long, shapely legs, and perfect skin, and she figured she'd have the Firstborn eating out of the palm of her hand with nothing more than a smile and a bat of her eyes.

Make no mistake, he liked what he saw. She saw it in the way his eyes lingered on her face, chest, hips, and legs while ignoring her offered hand and pedicured toes displayed prominently in her lovely black heels. That's what some men liked after all, hands and feet, and Mia had gone all out to make sure she looked perfect from every angle. Not just because she wanted to charm him, but because she wanted to win him over too, play the part of calm and confident partner that he would no doubt jump at to work with. The Firstborn was a pragmatist, one out here fighting alone, because he wasn't the Rangers' golden boy anymore, not since they disavowed his father and doubly so after he burned down all of Vanguard National. All she had to do was show him the profits to be had, and maybe even play to his dreams of being a righteous hero by framing his efforts as curtailing the mob. So long as he supported her and her papa, the Family would do

everything they could to spare the innocents, a concession easily made considering it wasn't much of a sacrifice at all.

The protection racket was small potates compared to what they made in the bars, brothels, and gambling dens. Why go to the effort of taking their money when civilians flocked to those establishments and willingly threw it all away?

Add in the temptation of Mia herself, and she figured the Firstborn was easy game, but despite taking in all the sights with an appreciative eye, he grimaced when she tried to fawn on him and offered a hand for him to kiss. Looked at the back of her hand like she'd just offered him dead, rotting fish and scowled something fierce before blowing her off. Wasn't because he disdained her manner of dress, because two of the women he was with were dressed even more brazenly, with their legs and stomachs on full display and tight half-shirts stretched over their scrawny frames. A most intriguing fashion, one Mia intended to steal for herself soon as she had a chance to talk to her tailor, but first she had to reel in the Firstborn.

Except he refused to take the bait and was doing his best to run off, leaving Mia so desperate she not only had to grab his arm and hold him in place, she was forced to skip ahead and reveal her identify for fear he'd go back to his gaggle of girls and stick close to them for another hour of dancing. A grave mistake, because without having plied her charms to build a rapport, the

Firstborn now saw her as an enemy first, as evidenced by his piercing gaze as he stood ready to strike her down when she stood. Having grown up around all manner of dangerous men, she'd seen more than her fair share of frenzied butchers and cold killers alike, but few were as cold as the Firstborn. Didn't matter if he wasn't strapped, because he could kill her a hundred different ways without even trying, and countless more if he really put his mind to it. So much so that he'd already dismissed her as a threat, which was both aggravating and fortunate at the same time. Aggravating because she'd trained hard to learn Papa's craft and had killed several men under his tutelage, but fortunate because she wasn't sure she could withstand the sheer fury radiating from the Firstborn if it was all directed her way.

And make no mistake, the Firstborn was murderous with rage. All he needed was a target, one Mia intended to give him so long as he didn't rip her throat out with his bare hand.

"That so?" he drawled, sounding utterly unconcerned by the fact that she just told him that the head of a powerful crime Family wanted him dead. "And you're telling me this because what? You fall for my big smile and roguish good looks?"

If anything, Mia hated his big smile, and thought his looks only passable at best. It wasn't that he was ugly. He was perfectly presentable in almost every way, with clean skin, clear eyes, a strong jaw, and an impeccable manner of dress. Which mean a

whole lot more than most men realized, doing the bare minimum of wearing your clothes right. Wasn't all sloppy or baggy like so many preferred, with a properly fitted jacket that showed off his slender figure quite well. His black pin-stripe suit was Sicilian cut, which meant it was narrower at the waist and sat low on his shoulders for a more form-fitting look, instead of the wider, boxier American cut or the flared shoulders of the British one. Even in the summer heat, he kept his jacket buttoned, tie neat, and hat on, all of which presented a neat and tidy image of a disciplined Qin man.

That said, he looked much more fetching with a dark glare than he did with a smile, and Mia almost found herself swooning to see it. Gave him a darker, brooding look that screamed confidence and competence in ways cousin Antonio could never match, and even made her reconsider how far she was willing to go to win the Firstborn over. If it wasn't for the fact that the Family books were only open to those of Sicilian blood, he would make for the perfect future Underboss. Her Underboss of course, and maybe even her husband too, because that was the only way to control a dangerous killer like the Firstborn. Align yourself with him, and he would die to see you safe, like something out of those vapid storybook romances the other girls were always gushing on about.

So she wasn't entirely playing to his ego when she replied, "I'm only a little smitten." She gave him a hungry look and bit her lip for good measure, because she'd seen the dark-skinned girl do it

often enough over the course of the night, and the Firstborn always responded well to it. He barely even blinked here, and she even spotted his lip curl ever so slightly in disdain, which wasn't even remotely fair. Sure, the other girl was a beauty, but Mia was ten times the woman she was, so why wasn't the Firstborn intrigued? "The truth though? Whether you live or you die, the Family suffers for it, and I don't want the Don's wounded pride to be our downfall."

"Now it's 'the Don', is it?" The Firstborn asked, scanning his surroundings and the crowd of girls he was escorting while keeping Mia in his sights. His one hand flexed, eager to grab hold of a gun and start shooting, but thankfully, he had no weapon or targets. "Before it was your uncle. Why the change?"

Mia paused and counted to three, all so she could better play the part of conflicted young girl who was in over her head. "Because even though he's blood, the Family always comes first. That's why I came to warn you. So that when you survive, you know it was only one man who's responsible, not the Family as a whole. My father, Franky Pugliano, is the Don's Consigliere, his right-hand man, and he tried his best to convince him not to do this. Said outright that it wasn't worth it, that a war with the Rangers or the Firstborn could cost us everything with nothing to gain, but he wouldn't listen." Shrugging, Mia shrank back and slumped down, looking small and vulnerable as could be while staring down at his feet. No tears, as that would be too much, but she came close, or at least that's what it looked like. A trick Mama taught her many

years ago, because nothing draws a man in faster than a vulnerable woman.

“All men are hunters,” Mama said, with smile that was hard and cold as could be. “All drawn to helpless prey. Some will strike then and there, while others will seek to guard and protect, so that they might strike another day. How they respond matters not; all that matters is that you understand that they will all strike if ever given the chance.”

And the Firstborn? He was a killer sure, but also a protector, so surely he’d jump at the chance to swoop in and protect Mia. Or so she thought, because he merely sucked his teeth and asked, “So?” Unsure what he meant, Mia glanced up to meet his piercing gaze with a raised brow, to which he responded with, “You came here to warn me you said. Got any useful details like a time, place, or name, or did you travel all this way to share a vague and general threat?”

Frustrating man. All the evidence painted the Firstborn as someone with a weakness for women, which was why Papa allowed her to make the approach as she suggested. He wasn’t acting like someone who favoured the fairer sex though, and paid Mia’s beauty no mind as he emanated cold disdain where he stood, like he was looking at a silly girl who was wasting his time instead of a gorgeous and competent woman risking her life to go against the Don. Wasn’t even grateful for the warning, though Mia

realized he was right in that she had yet to give any real details, but she was loathe to give up everything without gaining anything in return. Unfortunately, no matter how she wracked her brain, she couldn't think of any way to turn things in her favour without earning the Firstborn's ire. Demand a dance? As if. He wouldn't thank her for it, and in fact might well resent her for withholding information on a silly request. Nor could she barter for it, since he had nothing she wanted or needed besides his cooperation, and that had to be given freely lest he balk or worse.

So she settled on taking the immediate loss in hopes of long-term profits, even though it rankled her something fierce to lose out. "All I know is your life is in danger," she said with a shrug. "I can't give anymore details, because I don't have any. This isn't an officially sanctioned Family hit, so there's no real plan to share. The Don made it very clear he was displeased by your interference, and that's enough to give anyone ideas. Anyone looking to get in good with him will be willing to take a run at you in hopes that the Don returns the favour, and I overheard whispers about something going down here tonight during the festival." Mia gave another shrug, and this time, she caught the Firstborn's errant glance down towards her chest. So he was still human then, and his focus could be broken if given enough incentive. "It could've just been empty talk, but I wasn't willing to risk it. I'm just hoping that if something does happen, you reach out before retaliating and maybe we can work something out."

It was long seconds before the Firstborn responded, seconds that stretched on into eternity as Mia waited with bated breath. “Tell you what,” he said, dismissing her with both his tone and his actions. He wasn’t subtle about it, taking his eyes off her completely to turn and face the girls he’d been dancing with, all of whom were glancing over at them by now. “I’ll let you walk away here and now. Tomorrow morning though, I’ll come looking for you, and if I catch you, then I’ll ask all the burning questions I got that you won’t want to answer. You playing a game here, and I don’t much like it, but whatever it is, I ain’t one to play along.” Stopping beside her, he leaned in and whispered in a tone full of fury and rage both, “Thanks for the warning. Now get out of my town.”

And with that said, the Firstborn stalked off with his glowing Mage Hands beside him, leaving his cups of juice behind on the table next to Mia. Choking back her fury as she stared daggers in his back, she took a breath, counted backwards from three, then melted back into the darkness with a Cloak of Shadows Spell. It wasn’t invisibility, and a discerning eye would still be able to track her as she moved, but a few twists and turns would see her free and clear from any trackers, while anyone who saw her for the first time under the Illusion Spell’s effect would only see a wisp of a dark figure passing them by, like a silent ship in the night. Even though the Firstborn hadn’t touched her at any point in their conversation and couldn’t possibly have left any Arcane Bugs, she quickly undid all her jewellery and threw it into her clutch, which was lined with lead sheeting to block out all Divination and most magics. Then she took a roundabout route back to the home

the Family kept in New Hope as a base of operations for events such as this, where she found Louie P and a couple of his goons sitting around a card table and drinking the night away.

They all went wide-eyed and slack-jawed like most men did when coming face to face with Mia, and tonight, she let their looks linger longer than she usually would if only to prove she still had it. “Change of plans,” she began, fanning herself with a hand and setting the straps to her slinky black dress to fluttering, only to frown as she noticed the rest of the house was suspiciously empty. “Where are the others?”

“They ran off to look for the Firstborn,” Louie P replied, first to recover his faculties and showing why he was the Capo here instead of anyone else. That’s all he’d ever be though, because he noticed her sour grimace and didn’t understand why she was displeased, and instead tried to smooth things over with a chuckle. “Eager little beavers, I’ll give them that, but the little Hulk got good reason to be.”

“I told you all to sit here until I got back,” Mia said, and Louie P had the gall to just shrug. Rather than waste time, Mia scowled and asked, “How long have they been gone for?”

“Fifteen minutes maybe?” Louie P replied, and the others all nodded along even if they didn’t agree.

That settled it then. There was no turning back now, so best to get going while the going was good. “Pack up,” Mia said. “I want us out of town before the shooting starts.”

“We’re going now?” Louie P asked, the first to recover his faculties and showing off why he was the Capo here, and not anyone else. “I thought we was gonna lay low until morning?”

“Not anymore,” Mia replied. “Because if the Firstborn survives, he’ll come looking for me, and I don’t want to be found.” Suppressing a shudder, Mia idly wondered if she should leave her clutch behind and come back for it another time. They were all unique pieces, and easily tracked with a Spell, which was reportedly well within his skillset given new information. Would be best to sell them all and be done with it, they were some of her favourite pieces, most of which she wouldn’t be able to replace anytime soon. No, she could just bring them home and not wear them for a few weeks. By then, this will have all blown over one way or another, and she’d be free and clear once again.

Drunk and lazy though they might be, Louie P’s boys were quick on their feet once he gave the orders. They were out the door in less than a minute, and less than five more before they were riding out the side gate, let through by a guard sergeant who was in deep with a bookie and more than happy to keep their names

off the books in return for settling his accounts. He'd be in deep again within the month no doubt, if not sooner, but that wasn't Mia's concern. No, she was stuck going over everything she'd said and wondering if she'd overplayed her hand, or worse, misread the Firstborn entirely and set a disaster in motion, one that might well spell the end of the entire Pugliano Family, and not just Uncle Iggy as planned.

Maybe they'd all be better off if the Firstborn died tonight. At least then, they'd only have to deal with the Marshal, who by all accounts was a good man who followed the rules and upheld the laws. The Firstborn though? Even though he looked like a straight shooter, there was no doubt in Mia's mind that he'd do exactly as promised, and would have no qualms about torturing her for answers and killing her after the fact. Up until now, she figured Uncle Mikey's missing men had been killed and eaten by Abby, but now? Now she was certain the Firstborn was responsible for their deaths and made all three of them disappear without a trace.

An intriguing and infuriating man, the Firstborn, and Mia wasn't sure if there was anyone who could tame him. Forget Underboss. If the Firstborn ever came over to their side, he'd either end up running the whole operation, or burning everything to the ground and salting the earth behind him. That's just the sort of man he was, not a leader, not a follower, not even a lone wulf like they all suspected. No, the Firstborn wasn't a guardian or protector, a hunter or killer. He was all of those things, but also so much more, because he was a product of the Frontier. Someone like her

who'd grown up seeing all the darkness hidden within the human heart, a darkness most old worlders liked to pretend didn't exist so they could go about their lives in blissful ignorance. It wasn't about the laws, justice, morality, or anything in between. It was about doing whatever it took to survive, an outlook many old worlders adopted early on, then abandoned once things settled down and Feds showed up to run the show.

Not the Firstborn though, and not the Family either, because they both knew that the rule of Federal law was nothing more than a sham. A lie civilians told themselves so they could sleep better at night, but truth is, the Frontier hadn't changed one bit. It was still a kill or be killed world out here, one where the strong ruled over the weak, and the Firstborn wasn't one to be ruled over, nor was he even remotely weak. There wasn't much of a difference between the Family and civilians, no matter what anyone of them might tell themselves. The only real difference was a willingness to inflict violence upon another person, a difference that didn't seem like much, but could spell a world of difference in the right circumstances.

And the Firstborn? He wasn't just willing. He was ready for it, eager almost, though not in the crazed and deranged way so many killers were. No, he just knew that some things needed to be done, and all he needed was a reason to do it.

And as Mia rode away from New Hope, she prayed that she had not given him a reason to come after her, because she wasn't sure if the Family could keep her safe for long.

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“So no description to look for,” Tina says, arriving at the crux of the matter right quick. “What’s the plan?”

“Head home and bunker down,” I say, wishing she had a second 1911 for me too, but if she did, she’d have passed it over without asking. Even offers me the only gun she got, because she thinks we’d be better off if I was armed instead of her, but I shake my head. “You the quicker shot,” I say, and despite the dire circumstances, she beams to hear it. “I’ll take lead, you bring the rest along about fifteen paces back. I don’t have Force Barrier or Shield, only Warding Wind, so getting everyone into cover is your first priority. Understood?”

“Got it,” Tina replies, tapping the necklace I made for her sitting in the hollow of her throat. “My Shield’s wired, charged, and ready,” she says, and I blink hard while doing my best not to let my eyes wander and look for where she might have tucked the Aether tank away on her body.

“Good,” I say. Glancing over at the other girls, I note that Chrissy and Elodie are still dancing, but the other two know something’s up. “I’ll talk to Josie and Noora. You round up Chrissy and Elodie.”

Rather than grumble about it, Tina nods and says, “Don’t worry. I won’t let nothin’ happen to my new sister-in-law.” Grinning from ear to ear, she sees my surprise and rolls her eyes in feigned exasperation. “You bought her an engagement ring Howie, and she’s wearing it on her ring finger. Don’t take much to piece the clues together.”

Or figure out why I’d be in such a rush to propose without talking to her or her mama first, but thankfully, Tina just gives me a look that conveys she’s not gonna help me with Aunty Ray, because those are my own just desserts. That’s something to deal with later though, so I focus on the here and now as I head over to collect Noora and Josie. Though a sweet and gentle soul, Josie got some heat to her too, and she greets me with open arms and a kiss that says I’m her man, a message delivered for all parties involved, myself included. “Who was that and why does Tina have her gun out?” Josie asks, all calm and collected like she didn’t just leave me breathless and panting with nothing more than a kiss.

“Mob daughter,” I reply, keeping things short and sweet. “Believes her uncle the Don unofficially sanctioned a hit on my head, so she came to warn me because she don’t want no beef with the Rangers.” Which is a story I don’t buy, but I also ain’t about to risk anyone’s safety just to appear brave and macho. “Afraid it’s time we headed home,” I continue, tearing my eyes away from Josie long enough to continue scanning the crowd. Ain’t nothing jumping out at me, but there plenty of eyes directed towards us, including Sarah Jay who’s dancing with Errol and silently asking if

I need help. In reply, I ask if she's carrying, and she shakes her head and purses her lips, so I gesture for her to go back to her man and keep dancing.

"And here I was hoping to dance the night away," Josie says, gamely linking arms with me and Noora both without any fuss. Me, I gotta pull my arm out of hers and quietly motion her over to Tina, who's struggling to explain to Elodie why we gotta leave while Chrissy silently pouts at the side. She won't fight it though, because Code Red is all you gotta say to let her know there's trouble afoot, that and grab her by the elbow. Not hard or anything, just hold her there until she notices, because that means there's serious business. That's how Tina's got her right now, and Chrissy is locked in as she ever is waiting for further instruction. Even meets my eyes in search of reassurance, ones I can't promise but give anyways because I will die before I let anything happen to her, or Tina, Josie, Noora, and even Elodie.

Speaking of… "Elodie," I say, in a curt and commanding tone. "Listen to Tina please. Questions can come later."

"Okay Howie," she says, pursing her lips and falling in line with Tina and the other girls. Like planned, they stay a good distance behind me to avoid stray shots delivered by poor shooters or the Warding Wind I got readied and waiting. The dance floor is tucked away in a little building right off the main thoroughfare, which I would much rather avoid if I could, but there's no helping it now.

Taking the side streets would add maybe 15 minutes to our travel time, so we keep to the brightly lit thoroughfare and make our way through the crowd of stragglers heading home or to another event. There's plenty to keep everyone occupied here tonight, from games and contests, plays and lightshows, music and drinks, and more, so there are a good number of folks heading this way and that since the night is still young.

All dressed to the nines for their big night out, meaning it takes me a little longer than normal to put names to faces. Doesn't help how well known I am, so lot of folks looking and nodding in my direction, not to mention paying more attention than they should to the quintet of lovely and diverse ladies trailing along behind me. In heels no less, or at least 3 out of the 5, which means I gotta move slower than I'd like so Tina, Josie, and Noora can keep up. Josie's taken over keeping Chrissy in hand, freeing Tina up to have both hands on her pistol, though truth be told, I'm fairly certain she's more comfortable shooting from the hip than she is aiming down sights.

It's always the little things that give you away. A glance here, a double take there, a hand on the friend beside you as you tell them to play it cool and draw their attention my way. That's all it is, and at first glance, I pass it off as nothing more than a few unfamiliar kids wanting to take a second glance at the girls behind me, but then I notice their attention is all on me. They ain't nothing more than kids though, maybe 15 at most, which I suppose should count for more now that my soon to be wife is the same

age and probably pregnant to boot. Still, it ain't just about the years, but how you lived them, which I can prove by pointing out all the old worlders who live in town and are less mature than I am. They cling to their childish fantasies of how the Feds are gonna make everything all right and cure all the woes what ail them, while ignoring the truth in front of their faces because it's too scary to admit they still here on the Frontier, and not back home in their suburb or whatever.

And while a few months ago, I would've said Josie is much too young for my tastes, she's done a whole lot of growing up in the time since. Not in the biological way, or any perverted sort of sense, but rather the fact that she lost both her parents has forced her grow up right quick. Wouldn't wish that sort of hurt on anyone, but Josie pushed through the pain and came out smelling like roses, which is more than I can say for most, myself included. Been 17 years since my mama's passing, and 3 and change since my daddy's, and I still ain't forgiven myself for my part in their deaths, or the Qin Republic for theirs. Josie though? She's accepted the facts as they are, and though she ain't entirely ready to move on from their deaths, she don't wallow in it no more, aside from an hour every Sunday after church to visit their graves.

These kids though? The ones mad-dogging me from across the street and trying to play it cool? They're bonafide children dressed in ratty clothes and with regard to their appearance whatsoever. The mafiosos are criminal scum, but at least they know how to present themselves, but these raggedy urchins look like they

been running wild in the streets for weeks now. Which I only now realize is a problem, because ain't a soul in New Hope that would let these kids run around in tattered, grimy clothes like this, not unless they want a horde of 'concerned visitors' knocking at their doors nonstop.

So I give the kids a second look, and realize some have gone running to fetch more while a few have reversed course to trail behind us. They try to play it cool, but they keep glancing my way every few seconds, and only stare at the girls behind me when they lose focus. Should be the other way around really, which gets my jimmies to rustling, and just as I turn back to give Tina a signal to take cover, I spot a face in the crowd behind them that makes me stop in my tracks.

Well, not a face really, as it ain't all that familiar. Instead, it's a tall, bulky figure of a teen who could be anywhere between 14 and 20 if I'm being honest. Got them youthful looks atop a body that belongs on full grown adult but is only half-cooked, meaning he still got a lot of growing to go. The kid's got the build of a linebacker and might well one day grow to rival Marcus in physique, because he got all the markings of a brawny brawler and an ugly mug to match it.

None of which is why I freeze up at the sight of him. It's his hair that's got me shook, or rather the complete lack thereof, because even though he look like any other over-muscled kid from below

the eyebrows, those have been replaced with fine blue spikes. The same goes for the hair on his head, all neat rows of blue crystal conical nubs that slick backwards like quills on quill shrew. An Innate Branding, one I've seen before on a dead man who I fed to the Abby of Lake Last Chance only a few weeks back, only this fella is much younger and angrier than Joseph was back then.

"Take cover," I shout, as the burly young Innate bellows in wordless rage and Conjures up an Ice Knife in his hand and hurtles at me in one motion, with no care or regard for who or what stands between us.

Namely Josie, who's standing there with her big doe eyes all wide and bright as she tries to process what's going on. I scream, but there's no sound as the world goes silent and all I see is red. Red rage and crimson blood as the Ice Knife pierces through the back of my lady love and explodes into a hail of razor-sharp shards that explode out of her torso. Even then, Josie is still standing, her eyes locked on mine and so full of pain and confusion. Moving faster than I've ever moved before, I arrive at her side just in time to catch her before she falls, but even then, it's much too late. There's no time for goodbyes, no final words to share or comforting touches to give, because my Josie, my beloved bride to be and the child she might well have been carrying is dead and gone, and so too is our future together.

As I lay her body down on the cold hard ground, there's a part of me that just wants to lie down there beside her, to follow after her and our unborn child so they won't have to make the journey alone. I can't though, because there is still work to be done. Drowning my pain and despair in a deluge of fury, I rise from the sidewalk and charge forth with a Spell on my lips and vengeance in my heart.

Because that's all I got left, but it'll be more than enough to get the job done.