What is Dead Will Never Die
by angeldescendant

Summary

Hibari's past finally catches up to him. Namimori won't ever be the same.

"If you win, I'll tell you everything behind this," he said with a tone of indifference as he tucked the ripped photograph back in his tonfa.

By this, Reborn and Dino stared at Hibari. He was not wearing his usual smirk.

"And..." Dino paused. "If you win?"

Hibari takes out his Cloud bracelet underneath his school vest and raises it up for them to see.

"I'm leaving the Vongola."
Chapter Summary

Full summary:

A series sequel, 1YL. There are things that should remain buried. Hibari Kyoya's past was one of them. Because it was no bedtime story. There was no happy ending. But his herbivores won't let him face his demons alone. Maybe there is hope in that.

Chapter Notes

Please read the tags and beginning a/n's because there will be potentially triggering moments in some chapters.

This is my most personal work. Some scenes are inspired by personal experience, and there are plenty of chilling coincidences of life imitating art that made me go on long hiatuses. But this is not a melodrama for the sake of making the characters cry because they are oversensitive pieces of shit and just a small dose of tragedy won't make them move forward. Writing this fic, putting myself in the shoes of the characters changed my perspective on them. Hibari most especially. He was the first character I loved in KHR and the first one I dismissed as I grew up to be an axe-crazy and unsympathetic deus ex machina. But of course, I wrote this fic because his extreme sociopathy merits a story that doesn't merely involve ambivalent rich parents and a powerful clan. The major question I posed while writing this fic was: Can Hibari change? The answer I ended up making was quite straightforward and will make more sense as we tread towards the end.

Yes, he can. But he can't do it alone.

One more thing: His past is mired with an existential loneliness and dread that he may not be able to fully quell. But he learns to sleep with his ghosts all the same.

I'll say it in advance already: Thank you for reading. This will be my last KHR multific.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*The child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth.*

-African Proverb
It had been a year since Sawada Tsunayoshi, aka 'Dame Tsuna' aka Neo Vongola Primo, defeated the forces of evil, saved the world, and remained too chicken to ask his crush Sasagawa Kyoko out.

He also managed to keep Reborn by his side, something he had been, he assumed at least, selfishly fighting for. He never got the reward that could equate to his combining forces with everyone, from past foes to uneasy alliances to his loyal acquaintances but at least, somehow, he got the peace of mind he duly needed now that Namimori, for him, remained the same as before the Kokuyo fiasco happened. Every month of the past year he had been waiting for another cataclysm to occur like the four consecutive ones from Mukuro to Xanxus to Byakuran and the Shimon but so far so good?

Yeah, at least somehow all was well. If not for Tsuna, then at least for his guardians and friends. They may not be suffering from Reborn's Spartan training every afternoon of the week or getting withheld from leisure trips for HQ infiltration simulations but at least somehow, things were the same mundane happenings he hears them complain about whenever they do have the time to meet at lunch in their place.

"Wish we'd have another turf war or a world-ranging catastrophe going on. It's been fucking boring," sighed Gokudera one day while they were munching some fries at the local diner one free weekend afternoon. Tsuna choked on his cola.

"That would be nice… the next season won't happen till two months in," added Yamamoto, making Tsuna sputter further. Shit.

"What's wrong, Tenth, err I mean, Neo-First?" said Gokudera. This was the final straw and Tsuna gagged on the comfort of the restroom sink.

"D-Don't call me that again," Tsuna said when he returned, wagging a finger weakly. "P-Please don't jinx anything, ok? Things are good, everyone's happy, no one's… permanently absent. D-Don't you want to graduate middle school without any problems?"

"Can't believe we'll graduate with the Turf top though. Wish he stays in the hospital or something so the classroom would be less noisy," the half-Italian rolled his eyes. "At least a battle or two will make him useful for the Vongola."

"That's kind of rude," Yamamoto laughed, but quickly. To Tsuna's surprise, Gokudera mumbled an apology and began complaining about Yamamoto's flailing test scores instead (Yamamoto starts being lively again) that Gokudera couldn't seem to doctor. He had been suspicious of their chummy behaviour for the past few months since the Arcobaleno incident but ignored his qualms and beamed at their interaction instead.

His relationship with Kyoko and Haru, though still awkward, had been steadily improving since that confession. He had been inviting them to his house for barbecue on Reborn's request. He was also the object of jealous eyes for the boys in his grade when they caught wind of their meetings. It still gets on his nerves sometimes, but not in the same way it did when they began noticing him. He could not understand why they still perceived women as mythical beings they felt unworthy of approaching.

" Took you quite a while to come around," commended Hana while they were walking home. Kyoko already bade them goodbye ten minutes ago. "Always thought you were a wimp. Couldn't be anymore wrong when you confessed to my BFF. Or when I found out about your… future
position in the underground."

Tsunṣa laughed. "You're exaggerating. It was not something I earned getting. Plus, I don't want to
be a Mafia Boss-"

"Dunno," she yawned. "You'll be eating your words soon. Kyoko told me she was thinking of
joining as well. She has been training nonstop since-"

"W-What?" Tsuna could only blink owlishly at Kurokawa, who could only roar with laughter
when she saw his expression.

"Aww man," she said, wiping her tears. "Same. She's been with her brother doing roadwork and
lifting weights for the past year. Not as frequent as her brother though, but she had been worried
with what happened to you guys and wanted to help."

"W-Well she can help by not getting involved-"

Hana made a face. "So fucking misogynistic. This is so why I hate dating boys our age. You'll
realize sooner or later that you'll need the likes of us to join your little boys-only clique-"

He shut up on the way home since he could not bother getting into an argument with Hana and get
a bad image from her best friend.

Everyone had been telling him, predicting that another fateful shitstorm will happen to them and
things would become perilous again. Another save the world scenario. Another otherworldly
asshole making his life hell again. Same old, same old.

He never imagined it to happen this way though:

One, that it would begin, in all places, at the abode of the person he greatly feared.

"We'll be having a Neo-Vongola Primo Inter-Family Challenge to celebrate our formation as a
family," said Reborn that Friday afternoon. That was the only afternoon Reborn was lenient on
training and had him finish early to hang out with Gokudera and the rest. Maybe Reborn was bored
so-- "And also because I'm bored and there's no news yet from Nono when the Inheritance
ceremony will be." Ok, yep.

"And why are we doing it here, in Hibari-san's house? Especially when the owner isn't around?"
Tsunṣa brings up in exasperation. Creepily on cue, Kusakabe shifts from the back of the sliding
door just behind Reborn and waved at them in earnest. The Disciplinary Committee was still an
intimidating presence in Namimori as ever, but Hibari had been absent often, mostly to duel Dino
and flip the fuck out of everyone outside his turf. Other than that though, Tsuna wasn't sure of what
Hibari's shady dealings were, and he sure as hell did not want to find out.

"Kyo-san's training with Fon-san and won't be back until next month," he assures, most especially
to Tsuna, who was close to having cardiac arrest both at Kusakabe's entrance and the fear of Hibari
finding out of their trespassing on his property. "He gave permission to use his house, with some
restrictions, such as not entering a few rooms."

"Fon's updating me about Hibari's progress. It might take him awhile before he returns," added
Reborn as if he was just a few inches away, making Tsuna backtrack more beside the vice-
chairman.

And, two, it would begin without that person's knowledge.
"Does Hibari know about this?" he whispered to Kusakabe, who gaily shook his head and began laughing.

"If he had, you would see my head on top of Nami-chuu and my body somewhere in the grounds," he chuckled without missing a beat and making Tsuna queasier by the second. "Do you think I'm an idiot, Sawada-kun?"

Tsuna wanted to say that he was for becoming Hibari's slave but that was rude and he was scared of Hibari finding out and he was content of having a head attached to his body, thank you very much.

"If you search Hibari's house and you find the most number of interesting tidbits from him, I promise you one million euros and a house of your choosing near any Vongola HQ in any 200 locations worldwide."

To his horror, Fuuta, I-pin and Lambo were already discussing their potential fortress while Gokudera was thinking of how many sticks of dynamite he can buy and upgrade with that money. Yamamoto meanwhile, was happily babbling about how his team mates would appreciate them having a solo staycation house while Ryohei was animated at the thought of buying new gym equipment and training in the Sahara. Chrome was deep in thought still, but Tsuna can hear her saying 'Mukuro-sama' between her mumbles, making him realize that her connection with his other Mist guardian hadn't entirely disappeared. Kyoko and Haru meanwhile, were talking about eating at that Milkshake place in New York if they had the money.

"Forget this Reborn, I'm out!" Tsuna protested.

"Eh, Sawada-kun, I think you should join," Kusakabe said, his sweat from his head now visible. "Just remind them not to go inside the room beside the attic and the room in the second floor with the black smudge."

Tsuna raised his right hand the way Italians do when pissed, but then brought it down again when he remembered Kusakabe wasn't Italian. He waved it off.

"On the count of three," Reborn then said. "One… Two…” Everyone's eyes were eagerly focused on the house. He could hear Gokudera barking at Yamamoto their dilemma of who Tsuna's Right Hand would be settled there once and for all.

He couldn't focus anymore and wanted to faint then and there, but the terrible thought of Hibari baring his fangs on his neck made him frightened and strangely… turned on? Fuck, he was becoming delusional now.

"…three, go!"

On cue, three. He'd be stumbling on the skeletons of his most elusive guardian.

Sawada Tsunayoshi thought things will remain the same when he did enter that house, avoided the rest, and tumbled onto a room that was untouched for years.

It didn't.

Chapter End Notes

What this fic will address:
1. Hibari and Fon's backstories
2. How Tsuna will become the Vongola Boss in the worst possible scenario (with Reborn's help, of course)
3. Yamamoto becoming your best guardian lol (and whatever happened to his mom)

The title is inspired by GoT, aka the Greyjoys' favourite line.

You can say this is a culmination of some things I learned in my humanities classes and my major in psychology, along with my fascination with the dark and tragic stories that centre on humanising characters. It will not be my opus, but I guess this is the most balanced and accessible work I can offer that doesn't centre on romance and fanservice.

I wrote this fic more like a manga instead of a novel. That's why you'll notice that I care less about overtly long descriptions on most chapters and more on sketches of how the scenes would go. I don't want to waste your time because writing this honestly is a waste of my time too. But hey, I love making up bullshit about Hibari's redemption arc in canon so fuck me.

To end this note, I just want to remind you to prepare your emotional state for this story. I had been thinking nonstop if I should write a story that centred on Hibari, since it is quite difficult to write a drama about him without becoming OOC. I will be making the beginning as light as possible, leading you by the hand and then pushing you into a rabbit hole full of dreadful things. This fic will be dark the more we go down the rabbit hole. There will be mentions of gore and extreme violence, murder, child rape and abuse, infanticide, incest, psychopathology, depression and suicide, law-breaking, and talks about death. This might be a triggering experience for some of you so at least be aware of that while you read the incoming chapters. I don't want to make this story go full torture-porn. I also don't want to glorify and romanticise shit that isn't supposed to be glorified or romanticised, but I might more or less make this an uncomfortable experience for some, and I want it to be that way. Hibari has a story to tell, and given his personality and behaviour, it is not a nice tale.
Chapter Summary

Mukuro, Tsuna, and Fon each made their own respective decisions. They sucked.

Two weeks before Hibari returned to Namimori from China, he challenged the Mist Guardian, Rokudo Mukuro, to a duel to the death. The illusionist gladly obliged and made sure not to tell Chrome of the possibility that his head might be the only thing she'll be able to visit in Kokuyo Land.

The battle lasted for nearly half a day in Namimori shrine. Would-be visitors who were enchanted by the purple and indigo flames reported returning back home in terror after hearing sounds that were not friendly to commoner ears or for those who have not popped their cherries yet. It ended not with a bang, but only when Mukuro managed to make Hibari collapse in exhaustion and tauntingly point the ends of his trident to the Cloud Guardian’s throat.

Hibari leaned forward even when blood started trickling as he attempted to aim a chain strait to Mukuro’s teeth.

"Stubborn aren't we?" Mukuro breathed, as he idly watches the chain burst into flames and disappear. "Even in admitting defeat?"

"You haven't killed me," Hibari seethed. "Remember the rules?"

"Kufu… still as obsessed with rules as ever," he clicked his teeth and let vines bind Hibari's hands and feet. "For a deranged megalomaniac, I do not get your fixation with them."

"Only when I make them," Hibari said under bated breath as he slowly got immersed by six feet deep of pool water Mukuro conjured, his hands now bound on both sides of his body. His eyes fix on Mukuro's multicolored ones, full of utter resentment.

"I often break even my own rules," Mukuro cackled. "Makes me feel… unbound?" he nods at his direction.

"Such as… staying in the Mafia?" Hibari drawled. "And submitting to your enemy? How is that… unbinding? Do tell me."

"There is no greater pleasure for me than to gouge out your eyes and cut your tongue, Hibari-kun," preened Mukuro, eyes still as calm as his hands as he continued to direct Hibari into the center of the shrine. "Or say, humiliate you by calling the entire Namimori population to watch you do animal tricks. You are in no position to act in command right now. If you want, you can do a sea lion impersonation sans unnecessary clothing?"

"I will see to it that all your hard efforts are paid in kind when my hands are functional…"

"Oh sweet joy! I have finally made Hibari Kyoya mad. Such an eventful day!" Mukuro laughed as he sat down on the grass, head tilting slowly as he watched Hibari's body bob along. "I should
thank you. For making my last day in Namimori memorable."

Hibari froze. Mukuro waited for him to quip back at his sudden remark and it surprised him when Hibari began instead to violently wrest himself off his bindings.

"I've discussed it already with Sawada Tsunayoshi and the baby a few months ago," Mukuro paused as he now sat down on the grass, keen not to break eye contact with his captive. "Your position as the strongest in the Vongola will no longer be questionable." He waited for the cloud to counter his words, and when he continued ignoring his patience, he continued: "Of course, they believed my promise of returning, as they should. Little Chrome will remain here under their care…” Nothing came from Hibari's mouth as he by then began biting through the tendrils that begin wrapping around his face; the mist chuckled. "It's unbecoming of you, being passive under this kind of peace."

Hibari continued gnawing through the tendrils in his feral manner. "Sympathy doesn't suit you; The baby and Dokuro don't need it."

"Fuu…” Mukuro's smirk faded just as quickly as it crossed his lips. His chest heaved deeply as he stood up. "Is that your way of asking me to stay, Hibari Kyoya?” His eyes crinkled as the tendrils now began knotting over his neck. "Your charms won't work on me, you know."

Hibari doesn't relent even under the pretence of getting a crushed windpipe. Mukuro chose a crooked smile before raising his trident nudging it quickly. Hibari lands on all fours, under the dry grass, his head the only part dry from the mist's illusions. "You're quite predictable. Your opponents will tire of your challenges if you continue letting your hot head win."

By then, Hibari could not say anything more as his limbs give way and lets him pass out. Mukuro gently nudges his bruised and unconscious face with his foot, examining it closely as he recalled Reborn's warning about his decision.

If Hibari finds out about this, he'll definitely come and fight you.

"I...didn't want to win,” Mukuro said quietly as he lovingly stomped onto Hibari's face one last time.

He remembers his answer to the baby that time.

He would be the best person to change my mind then...to forget my past. He has done so well in that department for so long, isn't that right?

Forgetting something or ignoring something aren't exactly synonymous actions for Sawada Tsuna. For him, they differ through the presence of effort.

Hibari Kyoya would have done the latter, as showed by the amount of dust caking the place. The future don tried to prevent himself from coughing and making enough noise to summon Hibari's ghost to come bite him to death as his eyes tried adjusting to the minimal lighting. It was a medium sized room, with a queen-sized bed and a small drawer on its right; across was a long drawer against the bare wall, devoid of any paraphernalia.

Despite his fear, Tsuna's chest constricted from feelings of something else. There was a reason this bedroom was pristinely left like this. Hibari did not like disorder, except when he was instigating it, and maybe this was the kind of order he preferred when it came to places like this; places that he would rather leave alone than disassemble again and again to erase the significant incidences it once held.
Is this Hibari-san's room? he wondered as he tiptoed at the right end of the room in case there were planted minefields around. The bed seemed to be a bright yellow in another lifetime, immaculately made but already suffering from pest bites. Tsuna then attempted to pry open the drawers but only found folds upon folds of black silk kimonos, all having prints of different flowers, from sweet peas to white and yellow camellias and pink roses. Yet every kimono that filled each drawer each had the same print despite the different flora bordering each one: All of them had prints of butterflies. Only one kimono stood out from the rest at the bottom drawer. It had moths bordering its sleeves with white roses; the moth's wingtips each reminded him of a snake's head. He had never seen that kind of moth ever. Its wings disturbed him.

He wanted these clothes to be the only things that he saw, and even if his brain was already rapidly firing signals in every part of his body to take flight, he kept reaching out for any foreign texture beyond the smooth clothes and wood until-

"Ow-" he supressed a howl as he clawed through something hard. By then, he reached out and managed to procure a small round box that looked like it was made of concrete. It was not too heavy; there was no lock whatsoever. The lid was painted in kanji he could not understand given his poor grades in the test last week.

It was strange. This place was lacking the resistance he was preparing for in case an idiot like him attempted to enter. Perhaps Hibari had never imagined someone would have the gall and stupidity to defy his orders. He tried not imagining Hibari's expression if he does find out about this. At that terrifying thought, Tsuna quickly opened the box.

Inside, there were five pictures and plenty of yellowing envelopes. At the bottom of that box, under the robes was a small cassette tape.

Tsuna would eventually take that tape, the only thing he was unable to know the contents of, Hibari's fury be damned. He saw the envelopes, but he was unable to understand the difficult kanji and had them returned to the box the soonest. His hands were, however, shaking when he saw the pictures. It was not because Hibari was absent in any of them.

He returned the contents and left just in time before the Reborn sounded the bell because he recognized two subjects in those photographs. Two people, who, he later regrets, be the first two casualties in a conflict he would unknowingly stumble into.

Fon was not ecstatic to find Hibari Kyoya in one of his schools one day and attempting to incapacitate his disciples for not revealing their master's whereabouts. His strained smile will disappear all too quickly when Hibari then unleashed a string of threats that were tailor-made for him and would send people laughing hysterically if no one other than he said them.

The former Storm Arcobaleno often did not have the time to respond to Hibari Kyouya's thirst for battle. He had to attend to his ten schools; he could then handle more than a hundred for every style he had learned, but he also wanted to have time to make gyoza so the latter won. He was getting older as well, in the Arcobaleno sense. Reborn was the only ex-Arcobaleno who wasn't growing, and they joked about that during their last meeting.

His disciples then were more than happy to sign him up as an idol in the wake of that Korean wave or whatever, so he had no choice but to abide to their wishes for the sake of him buying them his favorite mapo tofu. His disciples, most of them girls, said he looked like those Korean idols and was horrified when they told him minutes before his audition to sing and dance something in a language he had zero knowledge of. He really did not know how it happened exactly, but the martial arts he performed made the music producer enter him in as a trainee. Seeing that he had no
time to go to Korea and teach his disciples, he asked his children and Reborn for advice. During one of their meetings, he pranked Hibari to enter in his stead, and he never received a call from that studio again.

Hibari was incensed to the point of nearly destroying the entire airport, but Fon managed to appease him enough with a battle that lasted the entire night.

That made Fon enjoy a one day off supervising his disciples’ training and getting a chuckle out of it with Reborn.

"I like his energy, reminds me of my youth," Fon tittered that time, glossing over Hibari's potential to raze towns to the ground. He was enjoying a break with his students in his seventh school that day. "Quite rambunctious and nearly decapitated me plenty of times during our spar. He took it quite seriously," he adds the last statement with a laugh.

"Has he improved?"

"He still hasn't perfected the gyoza he makes me, so there's that," he nods. His disciples were playing with his pet monkey along with Hibird and Roll on the side while some continued their training.

"Tsuna is anxious of his return."

"The young Vongola must wait a little more. Taming a juvenile dragon takes time. Please ask I-pin if she is progressing with her training. It might take me awhile to visit her."

"Roger that." Reborn's end crackled for awhile. Fon by then places it below and begins to enjoy his mapo tofu.

"When Kyoya gets back I'll make sure to send you some mapo tofu," he says.

"You rarely get attached to people. Hibari must remind you of the things you threw away to become what you are now."

"I never saw Kyoya when he was a child," Fon muses. "Maybe that is all?"

"I never knew what you were like before you became a Storm Arcobaleno."

"It took me quite awhile to be at peace with the things I have seen. I merely want him to accept that darkness. It will always be a part of him, and only in that darkness can his flame burn like mine."

"Do not overestimate your ability. Only he can change himself."

"That is true," Fon looks at the moment to the looming verdant mountains in the horizon, along with the salmon pink sky. Summer seemed to have come early. "But he needs us to realize that." He turns off the phone and quickly finishes the rest of his meal. Hibari still hasn't come out yet to challenge him to another duel.

Fon attempted to surprise Hibari by bringing with him a tall glass of water and a bowl full of chili shrimp from their catch that late afternoon.

Hibari did not lunge at him as he lowered his meal at the table beside him, a first. Instead, he looked at Fon, who shifted quite uneasily from his standing. It was quite a tiring day no thanks to
their fight earlier. In addition, he had talked with the Vongola HQ of a possible partnership to training their men and had to arrange a meeting with them in the coming month. After getting his new pupil's empty bowl, he should catch some sleep.

"You never came to visit Namimori," Hibari said, letting his pets squeal when they tried the shrimp and begged for him to lower his glass.

There was a long pause. "No," Fon goes, "I haven't."

Hibari drawled, "You were always her favorite. Maybe more than me," he continued to stare intently at the glass he swirled before shifting his attention at the man in front of him. "Are you afraid?"

This made Fon look at him finally. He looked at his pets that were now spilling water over the glass and then at Hibari's wide grin.

"Do visit next time," he said then, losing interest at his complacency. "There is a small pine tree somewhere with plenty of butterflies. She was fond of butterflies."

The man hummed.

"Nami never resented you. For not coming back."

He shifted his hands from his robes, letting them rest behind his back as he leaned against the wall, bowing his head and sinking into his thoughts.

"Think about what flowers you can give her."

"What flowers do you give her?"

Hibari inhaled deeply before standing up. He stared at the floor, and then at Fon. His animals continued to eat his scraps.

"Asters. They were not her favorite, but I don't dislike them. They make me remember."

Fon let out a small smile as he sank his head back at the wall. "People like her make the bad things harder to forget, don't they?"

"She never dies. Namimori will never die."

He stared at the floor again. There was a thud and he saw Hibari taking his rice bowl and glass of water. "Thank you for the meal," the boy said, and left him in that room along with his pets and the things that shouldn't be left alone.

Daybreak was almost peaceful in the temple, with the exception of Fon who was woken up when Hibari shoved a plate full of gyoza on his chest.

"Y-You are too early Kyoya-"

"Taste it. You promised if I passed, I may return to Namimori."

This was unprecedented for Hibari Kyoya. Fon's eyes opened in bewilderment at this shift in his approach. He took one with his hand and then bit. A small frown wormed its way to his lips.

"You pass," he said, almost like a plea. He did not like how good it was. What would make Hibari
cancel his plans for a rematch with him? Was it so urgent that it was worth disregarding his ego for?

"I'm leaving in ten minutes. One of your disciples had a boat readied. The Vongola arranged a small jet nearby."

Fon cursed himself quietly for not lying.

"There's mapo tofu in the kitchen. Please give some to Reborn."

Hibari stroked his monkey for a moment before leaving the room. He jumped out of his cot and ran after him. By then, he stopped just as Hibari was in the kitchen and calmly taking out the tofu.

"Kei called me yesterday. He said father died. They're waiting for me in Namimori."

Fon's blood ran cold as he heard those words. He knew by then that no matter what he will say, Hibari had already made up his mind. He was going to let him leave, and there was nothing effective he can do. He laughed in his head and remembered what Reborn said. In the end, he could not help him at all.

"It was wise of you to not try stopping me. They have been gone too long. I have to welcome them properly."

Fon's frown grew. "I promised to not involve myself with our family's affairs."

"You value your principles above your blood ties. You and I are alike, no matter how much you deny it," Hibari smiled, and Fon did not like the sight of it.

"You don't have to sugarcoat it. I'm a coward," Fon's smile faltered. "But I am sensible enough to not partake in their agendas anymore."

Hibari said nothing as they walked and he wore his uniform. They traversed the path leading to the banks where a ferryman was waiting for them.

"What flowers then? I can give them to her on your stead," Hibari said as he jumped on the boat, much to the chagrin of the ferry man who nearly fell on the waters. His pets fell on the boat one by one.

Fon looked on, biting his lip. Hibari's smile never left his face as the boat left the bank, and he was now quickly drifting away. He shook his head and tried to laugh. He goes, "No. I can do it myself when the time comes."

Hibari raised his tonfa until Fon could no longer see a tonfa. He shuffled into a quiet walk, alone with his monkey and then.

Only then he was no longer alone.

He did not need to look and find out who it was.

"Why did you not chase after your brother?" he says, his voice becoming quieter, and now more akin to a wolfish growl. His pet perked up and left by then, screaming as it went.

A figure slowly emerged from the sea of trees. Fon removed his robes to reveal bare muscle he had trained for this moment all these years. He could stand the morning cold. He longed that somehow, he could feel the same shred of pity he had for Hibari Kyoya.
But he could not. And he would not. Pity was something he reserved for those who can be saved.

Hibari Kei was not one of them.

"He can wait," he says in a soft voice, unfitting for his tall frame. He was the spitting image of them both, only his dark hair was longer and almost reached his nape and was almost like a nest of black. It suited the finely-pressed suit he wore. "You have ten seconds to call anyone to say your final words, jii-san." By then, his grin grew wider.

"You are a polite one. Saito has raised you well," he bowed as he took out the phone from his pocket. There was only one person he can call now. Kei drew his blade, a katana with a long handle, a weapon Fon knew from his younger days. The phone rung, and the moment it clicked, he closed his eyes and let all the aural energy he had run through his entire body, leaving his enemy shielding his eyes from the light.

"Fon?" the hitman's distinctive voice called in the other line.

"Protect Kyoya. Promise me," he said in his last moment of peace before dropping it to the ground.

"Father never resented you. It was not father's will for us to come and kill you. Please remember that," his assassin said, raising his blade and showing the same vapid eyes he never loved. He began to walk.

He now knows. Maybe after this, he would surprise her with morning glories. The bluest and largest bouquet of morning glories she would ever see.

Fon smiled in the most sickening way he could before looking at the fire-lit sky. He imagined a faraway place, a memory. The smell of burning yakiniku. Hibari Kyoya's mother and father. Another memory. Someone else, a child, about five. She is screaming, tears rushing through her face, begging him to stay, even as her nails were drawing blood on his legs. He laughed darkly. The sky was still making him not forget.

*Even at this quiet hour, you are a cruel one,* he cursed as he prepared to fight.
Chapter Summary

Tetsu has a story to tell.

Shogunai.

"Guys, you won't believe this is happening," said Miura Haru, fanning herself for good measure. "Hibari-san kyaaaa-mphh!"

By then Gokudera stuffed his hand over her mouth because that was often what he did when it came to annoying hags like her who wasn't his sister.

"Jesus, geez!" Haru then made sure to sink her teeth onto Gokudera's palm and it was enough to flip Gokudera's switch as he attempts to light up one of his mini bombs. By then, Lambo now took out his rocket launcher and was aiming it point blank at Gokudera's face.

"Bakadera's hurting Haru! I hate Gokudera's face!" he yelled and this made Haru nod behind his back and was raining more expletives than Gokudera's brain could keep up with.

"I'll give you something to crow about you stupid-!" Gokudera was about to light more dynamites with his cigarette when a hand pulled it from his mouth. "What the f-

"Sorry Gokudera!" Yamamoto said, jogging away and saluting all of them. "Can't have you smoking again!"

"Y-You stupid baseball freak!" By then, Gokudera retreats from Haru and Lambo and charges after the rain. "That's my last cigarette for the day. If Reborn-san finds out about this!"

Tsuna can only look on while he finished his bento box. Haru was making the best of her flipping out this time as she tries proclaiming that the Namichuu Chairman was trending all over social media for his audition as a K-Pop trainee, adding that he razed the venue to the ground. He could hear the screams from her phone and merely narrowed his gaze. Hibari Kyoya still hadn't lost his touch for causing a memorable scene. Whatever, he had to finish his bento box that the person beside him personally made for yours truly.

"Thanks for inviting everyone, Tsuna-kun," said Kyoko Sasagawa brightly. They chose the best spot in the place for sakura viewing. Thank the heavens Hibari wasn't there and Kusakabe was letting them do whatever they please.

"Yeah, it was supposed to be only you and Kurokawa but it blew up..." He could spot Ryohei and Aoba sparring somewhere and scaring the hell out of the other visitors. I-pin and Lambo were also trying to catch falling blossoms with Fuuta as Haru stay close behind them. Hana was trying to catch some sleep just beside her, but keeps getting hives for some reason and couldn't stop scratching herself. Chrome was busy chatting with Julie and attempting to imitate his illusions. Reborn was with Kusakabe not far from them, both were having the nap they deserve, chaos be damned. His mother was somewhere too, buying more food or something, he reasoned.
"Pretty sure you're used to this by now," she tittered.

He grinned. "You're right. Should be getting used to- W-What are you saying Kyoko-san? I don't want this noise! And I definitely don't want to be the Mafia Boss!"

"Good luck with that," she stuck her tongue out at him and making Tsuna turn red. "I think you're enjoying this though," her smile grew taut as she took one last bite from her takoyaki. "You belong here."

"Ehehehe, you're making me look like a deranged person, Kyoko-chan…"

She covered her mouth as she laughed. "Even if you weren't, you will be. Maybe that's what all of us need," with that she makes her left hand into a fist and strikes at Tsuna, who stares as it grazes his left cheek. She smiled as she opened her palm to let the captured petal flutter away. "A person crazy enough to shake the status quo."

Kozato Enma and his family were the first to leave. Kyoko was busy laughing along with Haru by then as they discuss the Hibari video. Tsuna stuffed his hands on his pockets.

"Took you awhile though to go back to your town though. I mean- we'll be high-schoolers soon."

Enma beamed. "We were supposed to return after the Arcobaleno incident, but staying here was too much fun."

Tsuna looked as though Reborn announced another Vongola bullshit traditional game. "Didn't you think it was noisy and annoying being here?"

His friend laughed raucously. "That's the point isn't it?" At the back, Julie and Adel were bickering at the top of their voices over who will sit beside whom at the train later. "You should savor these moments, because when you become the Boss, they may never come again."

Tsuna remembered the terrible things that befell Enma when they were on opposing sides. They were so long ago, and they felt so difficult to forget. He did not like feeling relieved at this; his repercussions were not as traumatic as Enma's and won't surpass his if he decides not to become the Vongola boss.

"Sorry the rest aren't here to say goodbye," he nodded at his sodden guardians. All of them had stuffed themselves full and were lying on the grass.

"Psshh, 'tis nothing Tsuna-kun," he waved off, putting his hand on Tsuna's shoulder. "You don't have to carry your burden alone though," he patted it, and it made the sky remember that terrible house and those memorabilia and the two people he knew in the photographs…

"Jesus, I'm really that easy to read? Fuck me," Tsuna laughed nervously.

They firmly embraced each other.

His voice was low, almost a whisper. "Treasure your family. They'll be the only thing you've got when the time comes."

"Yeah," Tsuna closed his eyes. "Take care of your family too. I'm sure you'll be the best Boss the Shimon ever had." He let go.

"Same, even if you say no." he chuckled back at the future Vongola Don. "Later then."
"Fuck Enma, you're messing up my eyes," said Tsuna as he begins wiping them in earnest. The earth just laughed as he and the Shimon waved one more time.

A voice was telling him that their reunion won't be later than they thought.

---

Reborn was sleeping on Bianchi's lap a couple of safe yards away when he carried a bento to Kusakabe, who was idly leaning on one sakura tree.

"Uh, Kusakabe-san…" Tsuna began nervously. "Mom wanted me to give you this. Said you looked like you haven't eaten yet."

Kusakabe looked surprised at this thoughtful gesture. He forgot to say thank you as he took it from Tsuna's trembling hands.

"So…" Tsuna attempted to engage him in conversation when he finally sat down and inhaled the food. "Now that Hibari-san's gone for awhile, you'll finally have the time to catch a break or something."

"I don't think so, Sawada-kun," he said with a laugh. "Kyo-san wouldn't like it if he catches Namimori in shambles while he's away."

"Uhuh…” Tsuna was annoyed that he couldn't transition the conversation as smoothly as he could. "How long were you under Hibari-san? You stayed with him the longest, haven't you?"

Kusakabe stared at him, scrutinizing him for a moment before looking at his meal quite sheepishly.

"You're not good at this kind of thing aren't you?"

"I-I don't know what you're talking about-"

"It's fine. You got the guts for asking me." By then, he asked for Tsuna's thermos bottle and drank the chai tea inside. "Guess you can say I really didn't have a direction in life and Kyo-san set me straight."

He hesitated as he looked at the tamago in the box encased with nigiri and unagi. He takes a bite.

"They taste very good. Thank Sawada-san on my behalf," he said after chewing. Tsuna waited as he took another bite.

"It was four years ago. I was an arrogant dick back then," Kusakabe's eyes grew sombre as he stared at the rice hanging on his chopsticks. "I thought I was the strongest anywhere. It got pretty boring after awhile."

He took a quick draught from the thermos.

"Just outside of town there was an underground fighting arena. Anything goes, that shit."

"Wait, like those in mangas? Those really exist?"

He nodded. "I requested to fight the current champion. They say the strongest out there is the strongest in the world. I wanted to reach that peak," he couldn't stop himself from taking another bite. "I only found out that night that the champion I was supposed to fight was dethroned. The person who faced me was a kid. A thirteen year old kid. I couldn't believe it," Kusakabe began to laugh, not at the memory, Tsuna muses, but at his arrogance. "How a man, with so many fights could lose to a teenager. But when I finally fought Kyo-san…” he finished the rest of his meal. "It
turned out that I was the only person he spared. Me. I've always wondered but never got to ask Kyo-san what he saw that time. What he kept seeing."

"You never asked him?"

"You already know how Kyo-san's like. There's no chance, even when I die, that he'll tell me why," Kusakabe shook his head again. "And I guess I'm fine with that. I'm content with this. With you and everyone here…"

Tsuna waited.

"It was the first time that I have ever heard his name. No one in Namimori had ever heard of the Hibaris before. With his fighting prowess, his family would have been well-known," by then he folded his arms. "That time, after he defeated me, the first thing he wanted to do was to enrol in Nami-chuu. I relented. The Disciplinary Committee followed."

"And yet- and yet you still won Reborn's contest!" Tsuna exclaimed. "W-What did you tell Reborn that made you-"

"Kyo-san was weak to alcohol," he flatly stated. "I guess alcohol is the best way for you to know his repressed thoughts, to catch him off guard and reveal what a person truly is."

"And what did you tell Reborn based on that?" Tsuna's forehead sweated.

"That Kyo-san had left Namimori for five years. He only returned after fighting me. That… there's a reason why there is no taken photograph of Kyo-san." By then, Tsuna suddenly felt light headed as Kusakabe leaned closer to him, his mouth curling into a frown. "You must have asked that yourself when you saw that room, right Sawada-kun?"

He swallowed his own saliva. "Have you told Reborn that?"

He shook his head as he leaned on the tree again. "Kyo-san said the reason why he stayed in Namimori was he was waiting for them. Maybe those pictures you saw show what he meant."

The rest were still asleep and Tsuna could only sigh at the irony. It was not him who was controlling the conversation in the end.

Kusakabe Tetsuya sat in the most respectful manner he could without losing eye contact. "It's my turn to pry then, Sawada-kun. What did you see?"
Chapter Summary

Tetsu said he wasn't done telling his story. They disagreed.

*Ikuso.*

Kusakabe Tetsuya was getting too old for this.

He was getting too old to retake middle school for the fourth time after this last semester. He was getting too old to be involved with the Chairman's shenanigans and lying about his age when he clearly looked like a middle-aged adult playing house with people who think using weapons of mass destructions to decimate their enemies is an everyday occurrence.

Also, he was too old to get a student discount in his favourite diner. But that was an exemption to his self-invented rule, so fuck it; he loved being sixteen thrice in a row and he can stuff himself with as many big bacon-and-cheese-smorgasburgers as he wanted.

"So, Kusakabe-san, are you in?" said Tsuna after finishing the last of his ninth burger. This sight got Kusakabe moving on from his ruminations and stare at Tsuna as he wiped his mouth.

"I can't believe Dame-Tsuna is actually good at something." He really had to say that out loud, didn't he? "We'll get-

"Kusakabe-san, even if you get everything from the menu and I pay for the bill, I'm a future Vongola boss- and not by choice," he added the last few words with quick emphasis. "We can do this all night and I'll pay for our food, this restaurant chain, and your contract to Hibari-san," he drank his twentieth glass of tap water. "You have to either accompany me tonight and break into Hibari-san's house, or get beaten up if you try stopping me."

"And this is the part where I surrender and let you walk me to my doom," Kusakabe sighed, waving his arms to the waitress to get the bill. "Why am I even here, listening to you and letting you unintentionally brainwash me into getting bitten to death?"

"Um," the teenager crossed his arms and began to think. The waitress handed them the black faux leather bill holder and turned away. "I'm actually threatening you… Kusakabe-san. Uh, please?"

The vice-chairman slapped his face on reflex and kept on wondering how the hell his boss was still serving this kid. Shit, he was not getting enough credit to stay on his job even if the only alternative was certain death. This absurdity was enough to cause cardiac arrest. Damn it, he should be looking for a girlfriend by now or enter a blue-collar job instead of engaging into more tomfoolery. After two hours of pondering that actually lasted for two seconds, he handed Tsuna the bill. "Fine. Just pay, and forget this shit ever happened by the time Cinderella hour's over."

"This is so cool!" was Tsuna's excited voice, and Kusakabe was half-crying inside when they finally stepped in front of the wooden gate of the Hibari abode. It was already 12 AM. "S-Sorry about that," he then said on cue. "Reborn ends his Sunday binge-watching at 11 PM, and I had to
tell mom I was sleeping at your place."

"Wouldn't she get suspicious that you left at 11? And with a person that is feared as the second most infamous hooligan in Namimori?" This was getting ludicrous, and Hibari could call any moment now. He usually called at dawn and interrogated him with a series of questions that would make his Yakuza granddad blush.

"Your list is outdated," Tsuna snorted as he took out his wool mittens. "Fuuta-kun said Mukuro's the second most infamous, with his posse taking the other spots. You're in sixth I think. Shit, I'm actually gonna use this for real finally!" Kusakabe instinctively slapped his face again, his free hand on his phone for safety reasons. "Uh… so what's the plan? Do I have to fly you overhead and guide me in disabling the alarms and laser beams in the yard? Is there any vicious beasts he has lurking outside and inside the house? Do I need to worry about an ancestral ghost that exclusively appears at dawn? I'll get to use Reborn's stupid training, alright!"

Kusakabe tried to think of a fresher way to show his exasperation. The facepalm thing was getting stale. "Uh, Sawada-kun, Hibari-san only had me guarding the place. I have the key." He hoped that this would end quickly.

"Oh, uh, yeah. Ah," Tsuna laughed in embarrassment. "So one year of training, down the drain. Gosh, I want to crawl into a hole right now."

"I'm sure you'll get to use them someday," he said as he fished out a small brass key and inserted it on the fully noticeable lock in the middle of the gate. "And if you don't, that's for the best. And not in the sarcastic way."

"Yeah…" Tsuna could only nod, but his frustration was still apparent. "Yeah, I don't need to get worked up on it. I don't even want to be the Vongola boss anyway."

It was a crescent moon that night. It was a good thing the cloud guardian's home situated at the edge of town. The stars were brighter there. It was easy to navigate through the lightless lawn and porch without tripping on the stones.

"You are a self-contradictory kid, Sawada-kun. Full of contradictions. You keep lying to yourself on what you truly want to be," Kusakabe said gently as his hands turn on the lights reflexively left of the entrance.

"I guess I just don't want to change," Tsuna then took of his woolly mittens and put them on stuffed bagpack. "I don't want this, Namimori, us, to change. If I become the boss, I know things won't ever be the same."

"You are fighting a losing battle if you oppose destiny," the older man said as they now opened the sliding doors.

"Is it really destiny?" he laughed nervously. "There are times I feel that I don't deserve this or you guys. I sometimes beat myself up over it. I'm so damn lucky to win my battles, like some hero in a shonen jump series, always in that cycle of adventure. Gokudera-kun and Yamamoto-kun fawn over me, when I'm still the fucking same dame Tsuna I was the first time they laid eyes on me. Still dependent on Reborn, on this stupid power."

"You underestimate yourself too much," Kusakabe said, and a wave of sadness came over him. This lack of confidence was something he was never used to following, to understanding. For years, he held unwavering loyalty to a man that never had any room for self-doubt, that was beyond human comprehension, hence, a fucking god. Knowing that Sawada Tsuna was possibly
stronger than his aforementioned god, bearing such insecurity wasn't something he was fully prepared for.

Tsunam did not answer and went on ahead without any fuss upstairs. He took a metal heart-shaped container he must have gotten from Valentines (or Gokudera Hayato) and pulled back the wood-and-paper door for the first forbidden room. Kusakabe coughed as his eyes adjusted to the amount of filth covering the room. There was something soft coming off this place. Yes, of course he remembered this exact place. How could he have forgotten? His head was hurting.

"Kusakabe-san?" He must've noticed the cold sweat running through his neck and that annoying sensation of vertigo. He was afraid. Shit, he wanted to tell Tsuna, but he went on ahead to get his needed evidence, leaving him barely standing as he stared around the room.

This was the first place they went to when Hibari finally came home, four years ago.

He had forgotten about it because it was necessary. The original state of this place was too much.

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Hibari Kyoya was laughing.

*He did not understand what it meant, but it was something he did not expect to come out of his mouth when they entered it. Was he happy, pretending to be, or did not know how else to convey his emotions?*

"Clean this room after, herbivore," he said as he stared at the horrid sight in the far end of the room. Its face was still twisted in agony, hands chained to its back, the skeleton draped in a kimono embroidered with butterflies that had wings of a snake's head...

The boy continued to stare at it, at its hideous form, at the bony limbs still holding onto a crumpled envelope of faded blue. Hibari seizes it then without a second thought.

"They left you like this," he said quietly as his eyes turned at the blackened room. "And let me find you like this."

*He effortlessly lifted the nearly skeletonized corpse and went past Kusakabe's petrified state.*

"It's been five years, and this place remained as droll as I remembered."

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He could then feel a hard tap on his shoulder. Tsuna's round eyes were peering at him from below, sending him in waves of shock and dizzy spells.

"What did you remember, Kusakabe-san?" he asked as he looked at the room with his flashlight again. "This wasn't Hibari-san's room, was this?"

Kusakabe wiped his brow as he looked around.

"This place feels sad and warm at the same time," Tsuna said, a small smile forming from his mouth.

"This was his sister's room," Kusakabe said as he looked at the floor and gingerly wiped it with his knew. It was still clean. He did a good job in making this place pristine. "He never did set foot in this room. This was the first room I cleaned."

Tsunam did not ask further. He understood what secrets he should not uncover yet. "I hope Hibari-
san can visit this room again."

"I don't think he'll ever want to," Kusakabe gave a pained smile. "But he doesn't hate this room. If he had, then he would have locked this, as he had locked the other room."

"This sucks," Tsuna sighed, swirling the tea they nicked from the kitchen coffers. "You sure we shouldn't ask for Chrome or Mukuro's help? They can probably open the door without anyone noticing."

"They're not answering your texts. And didn't Rokudo Mukuro leave already?"

"Yeah... Chrome must be really distraught by now. I'll probably visit her," he sniffed and wiped his snot. "It's so cold," he said as he rummaged through his backpack.

Kusakabe chuckled. He had forgotten that he was still talking to a typical teenager, who'd get cold and gossip and think about their friends' troubles. He was truly unlike the chairman, who's so secretive and bottles himself from everyone.

"Why are you so fixated by Kyo-san's past?" he asked. "It won't do any of us good."

"I know. But Hibari-san never does talk about himself. I want to, you know, actually get to know Hibari-san more and be a good friend to him. Plus, I want to see the look on Reborn's face when I tell him. Oh, he'd be so pissed he's missing in on the gossip."

He also has shallow reasons for doing things. Maybe that's one thing that Hibari does have in common with his peers. Only, his reasons were a little fucked up. Kusakabe snorted at this.

"He doesn't think of you as his friends though."

"Yeah, we're just small animals or herbivores under the Hibari goggles," Tsuna said as his encircled fingers covered his eyes. "It sucks to always depend on him. That's why I really want to pay him back one day. If you know, maybe I can look for his family. He must miss them."

Kusakabe opened his mouth but then closed it again when he remembered the first time they set foot in the vicinity.

"I'm glad that Kyo-san had met you and everyone else," he said. "He's starting to let people in. He never really liked crowds. That's why he never had his picture taken."

Tsuna's eyes widened. "So that's why there's no picture of him anywhere!"

"You know, I rarely get sentimental so thank you-" he said just as Tsuna flipped through the photographs, shutting out Kusakabe's rants at Tsuna's wrongly-timed epiphanies. Kusakabe drank the rest of his tea to cool his head off. Maybe the tea can make him sleep too.

He couldn't wait for later. He would be able to nap at the roof and take a break from the sentiment and Sawada's madness. He took a quick glance at the teen rummaging through the box before splaying his body on the floor and nearly getting a concussion from being an eager beaver.

"Shit..." he mumbled as Sawada continued peering at the pictures with such concentration he rarely ever see when they pass through their classes for instruction. Gossip can be a good motivator for high attention. He should probably press this on the chairman next time to boost their school ranking and not depend on Gokudera again. Was he even making sense? He's not making sense, is he?
"Do you know who Hibari-san's sister is?" Tsuna asked pressing the photos to his face and making his hands spill over through the scalding tea.

"Swear that you won't let the chairman kill me if he finds out about this," Kusakabe said, wiping his hand gingerly with his shirt.

"Deal. What happens in Hibari manor stays in Hibari manor."

"Jeez, it's not like anything did happen. Anything naughty anyway," Kusakabe sighed as he grabbed a picture with three children. He pointed at the youngest girl, about eight in the far right. "That's her. The one with the long hair."

"Uh, her back's turned…" Tsuna trailed off. From the left was a girl with short hair mussed in fierce waves while beside her was a boy in a buzz cut, his missing tooth visible as he smiled to the camera. Both were the spitting image of Hibari. They seemed to be on top of a hill with tall grass all around. The girl Kusakabe identified was clad in a peach yukata blooming with red poppies. It was a normal image of his siblings in a ski trip, but Hibari's absence was unsettling.

"I know this person. And this one," said Kusakabe at one of the photographs that was still tainted in sepia.

"Yeah I'll probably visit that person tomorrow. Couldn't contact the other one since he's a country away," Tsuna blew a raspberry. "So I can finally get to the bottom of this and Namimori will be boring again."

"Sounds like you're bummed when that happens."

"Yeah… but it's better than the ruckus last year," he said before sneezing. "Feels weird. I mean, aside from the Hibari mystery, I still keep thinking when Hibari-san will retire from being the chairman in Nami-chuu. I mean, he did in the future but I never got to ask him when."

"Where did that question come from?" Kusakabe laughed. "The chairman will do what he wants and grow tired from it whenever he wishes."

"Yeah, but you're tired of it, aren't you?"

Sawada Tsuna had the bad habit of knowing what people were thinking. Hibari Kyoya should find this an irksome trait in a person, but he was an exemption.

He had to concede. "So what am I supposed to do?"

"Uh, tell him?"

"This is Hibari Kyoya we're talking about. Doubt means death. Should I add caps lock on the death?"

"Are you really afraid of death, Kusakabe-san?" Tsuna said and it made Kusakabe shudder because this person was less useless bullheaded protagonist and more shaolin temple master. "Or are you afraid of Hibari-san abandoning you?"

Damn, Kusakabe thought. The kid was watching too much martial arts movies.

"Sawada-kun, please return to your old self. You are flipping the shit out of me-"

"Dude, chill out. I'm only reading your heart. Or your prefrontal cortex? I forgot what part of the
brain influences all the meta shit. I'll ask Gokudera-kun tomorrow."

Oh god. "Can we go back to normal inane mulling over our shallow existential worries about the future because I don't want to talk about anything else right now."

"Uh, okay," said Tsuna, shutting up and letting Kusakabe finish his cup in peace.

Maybe he was not used to this. Opening up this much. No one really wanted to know about his thoughts. His fears. Or know him as Kusakabe Tetsuya. It was strange, to upgrade into a secondary character in a teen soap opera and be in awe of the cookie cutter hero. It feels good.

"Back home," Kusakabe started under the crickets and the soft hooting of the owls. "I have this little brother. Really talkative. Pisses me off constantly. Kept talking in that high pitched, mousy voice of his that he wanted to be like me when he grew up. Me, his wayward, good-for-nothing onii-san. He died when he was seven."

Tsuna did not interrupt. Kusakabe could only stare at his empty cup, at the bits of tea leaves that accumulated at the bottom left. "I was eleven. I left him in the pool because the cutest girl in our street came to ask help in our homework. I should've not come. Should've known how fucking stupid it is to do that shit. But yeah, fuck me, when I came to, he was floating there. I still wish we did not sneak out to swim that time. Wish that there were people. Fate can be cruel when it wanted to. Never saw my parents' after then. Too busy running. Still haven't stopped. Don't know how to.

"So, you're right. Hibari-san gave me direction. It would suck when I fail another person again. Like what you're egging me to do, Sawada-kun." He inhaled as he looked at Tsuna.

His mouth was lolling open as he lay facedown at the floor beside his teacup. Kusakabe sighed. He really had bad timing when it came to sharing the sentimental.

And yet Kusakabe Tetsuya remained in the uncomfortable position of hearing other people's melodrama. He should ask that ranking kid Tsuna mentioned about his current ranking and make a bet with his fellow DC members if he can break in the world top five.

"You've overstayed your welcome here, Boss," he heard the old man Romario say from behind. Shit. He thought he would be able to get his much needed nap now that Tsuna was absent from sleeping late and it was lunch time. He should be propping a sign on the door warning them the chairman was there even on his off days. The student body will probably fall for it.

"Teaching children is more fulfilling though," he heard Romario's boss respond airily. "And the female teachers are cute."

Well, Dino did have a point. It just sucked that having relationships weren't allowed in the DC because Hibari was proven to be asexual. They asked him when they had a drinking party and one asshole was unlucky enough to serve him gin tonic by accident. He was promptly 'decommissioned' the day after.

"Yes they are, but we need to secure our position with the rest of our allied families, and if you aren't in the main HQ all the time-" Romario attempted to return to the subject, but despite being twice Dino's age, he was unlucky to be born in a lower social caste.

"You are my most loyal friend, Romario," trolled Dino without hesitation, startling the older man. It took a while for him to regain his composure. Kusakabe slapped his face again. It sucked to be Romario.
"Thank you, Boss and I appreciate the gesture but our idling here-

Dino raised a hand. "I'm waiting for a call." He leans on the railings and looked at the Namimori rooftop, at the entrance where Hibari usually sleeps on the right side, at the chunks of cement and metal they have destroyed during their fights, and finally up at the afternoon sun. He blocks his eyes from the light. "But you're right. I guess I loved this dream too much."

Romario shook his head. "No. You just grew up too fast."

The noise from rooms were now getting louder. They were probably having their music sessions. Kusakabe prepared his earmuffs; he got them from the tail-head baby probably by accident because he was wearing the same gakuran as Hibari.

"Damn," Dino covered his ears. "Kyoya should take care of the noise…" he then laughed as he looked at Romario. "Look at me, becoming a grumpy old man and raining on their parade."

His listener could only look on, a strained smile following afterwards. At the sight of it, Dino stopped laughing and stared at the sky instead.

"We'll be leaving when Kyoya arrives," he said, now lying down to watch the swaths of clouds. The wind was still blowing. He closed his eyes, only to get irritated by the racket that continued to steadily deafen him. "I should be telling Tetsu to stop the noise- Oh, hi Tetsu!"

Said Tetsu groaned. Oh my god, he only wanted a one-day holiday from the chaos. He prayed silently, switching from multiple religions to find the deity who could answer his pleas.

"Kyoya's not answering my calls," Dino pouted. "Did he call you recently?"

"He did not send a hoot last night."

"I kinda miss my sadistic tutee… ooh, someone's calling! Oh, it's Squalo!" he said, showing the Varia- Superbi Squalo' on the contacts list, along with an old picture of his during their high school days that Squalo didn't know he saved and scattered across the Vongola and its allied families. Kusakabe did not know this yet but he would years later. "He's in Wuyuan now to see Fon. Vongola business, top secret but not really? He must've met with Kyoya too." He pressed the receiver in his ear excitedly. "Yoo-hoo~ Have you seen Kyoya?"

The voice was taut on the other end. Maybe because Dino accidentally pressed the speaker, or maybe because Kusakabe had learned to use his ears properly, but he could still remember his message word for word.

He got a call from Hibari approximately fifty minutes after hearing Squalo's voice, obscenities non-existent.

"Nah, I heard from the HQ he left at dawn. We went to the main school and found the former Storm Arcobaleno. He's dead."

"Hello, Kyo-san? You didn't call last night, I was worried-"

"I'll be at Namimori in three hours but I won't return until later. I still have things to do."

"Oh, thank god. Namimori will return to normal. I have a list of gangs you might want to put under your jurisdiction-"
"Tetsu, that's enough."

"Kyo-san?"

"Set the house in order. My elder siblings are coming. I also sent a message of my further requests."

"Ah, yes. Of course, Kyo-san."

"After accomplishing your errands, I want you to leave your armband in the office. You are no longer my vice-chairman and will be hereby banished from Namimori Middle School."

"I- I don't understand."

"I no longer require your services. I don't want to see your face in Namimori again. You disobeyed my request and let Sawada Tsunayoshi in her room."

"Kyo-san, I'm sorry please."

"Delete this number and my Line account after this. If I see even a strand of your hair in any square inch of Namimori, I will make sure to bite you to death in the most excruciating manner I can offer."

"Kyo-san- Shit. Just. Shit- fuck- I won't-"

"You will. Of course you will. That's what herbivores do. They don't follow orders. I thought you were more than that. I apologize for overestimating you. I will not do it again."


Hibari Kyoya was never wrong.

Of course he will stay. Of course, he will remove the two strongest players in Hibari's side of the board and steer them away to more inane battles.

Of course he's a herbivore. Herbivores weren't perfect. They liked groups to make up for it.

And of course, Hibari was right in correcting himself. This was all he was. Nothing more.

"You are unexpectedly weak," the woman said, her voice like lava. The same girl in the pictures. She raised a hand, and he could feel invisible strings lifting him up and making the blood flow faster. He was really flying in the air like that damn Sawada. He had been losing blood for four minutes now. Through sheer fear he closed his eyes to not know what limbs he lost as she approached him and made him lose his footing, and then his cellphone.

She must've literally taken an arm and a leg. Goddamn.

Shit. I don't deserve to meet Kyo-san in the afterlife like this. Or Sawada-kun. "And you had the audacity to call yourself his most trusted..."

Why had he had kept disobeying Hibari Kyoya for the first time in his life? Was this because he was as stupid as people say? Was this because he was tired of being a fucking doormat to an amoral slavedriver? Or maybe because he had seen another side of him, that shone brighter and brighter ever since he involved himself with Sawada Tsuna?
Was it the reason that he really kept following him? That he wanted to warn Tsuna, why he used up his remaining load to call him instead of an ambulance?

By then, his life be damned, he opened his eyes. Her short hair were like waves that framed her small face, with eyes as impassive as Hibari's. She was clad in a beautiful navy furisode, dotted in yellow poppies and lilac hydrangeas. He proceeded to spit on her right eye.

"Kyo-san's happier now. He won't join you," he said, earning him another sliced limb. He no longer cared what limb it was. He could barely keep himself conscious.

"I don't care what he wants. He never deserved anything," he heard her say quietly.

"You're right," he mustered up the rest of his strength as he braced himself for the end. For a supporting character, he had to have the most memorable death to make up for his shitty life. "He never deserved your opinion as well, you arrogant bitch--"

*Kyo-san thank-
Chapter Summary

They are home.

**Tadaima.**

It was a windy day, freezing to the core and not enough for Tsuyoshi’s double layers to hole up from. This place was nothing like Namimori; the winds did not make their feet nearly leave the ground there. The leaves and grass did not turn this vivid russet and yellow and red like this place. He exhaled. Dammit, and still in this cold he could not pretend to breath air cigarettes.

"The sky's gnarly today," he said to his companion, a boy his age, poring over a book, his feet freely dangling near the edge of the rocky cliff they were perched on, completely ignoring the cold with his brown corduroys. "The sky was orangey and blue but the sun was white."

"Yeah, the weather here can get totally weird," said the boy, eyes still on the text. "Thought you'd be like, with Fon and Akari planning your next move."

"Barf me out dude," Tsuyoshi said, now lying on his back and on the grass just beside the boy. "This ain't gonna work. Hitomi will definitely think I'm a total dipstick than a stud. I don't even know why I'm trying anyway."

"I'm waiting for you to do what Patrick Swayze did in *Dirty Dancing*. Akari promised to record it," he said, his warm hazel eyes now landing on him.

"Not you too. Shit, this is getting out of hand. It won't change anything anyway. I'll still be working for you guys whether she says yes or not. You're still gonna stay here? I can't fucking stand the wind."

"Yeah, you're right. The wind's getting shitty," he laughed as he closed his book. "Hate to break it to you though, but you need to find a new best man. Father's getting impatient on who the next head's gonna be and Fon's doing his best to shit all over it."

"Ah, fuck you for bringing that up. I thought I can place Hitomi was my biggest headache. Thank you for making it so damn difficult, for sure." He stood up, only to feel the boy's hand clasp on his shoulder.

"Don't forget the *Dirty Dancing* schtick before we leave Dounan. I want to see you happy for once by sticking with us," he said with a small smile. "Your face may not make her say yes but she'll have a cow once you take off your tee."

"Oi!"

He grinned all the more as he put his hands in his pockets. "Stop wigging out, dude. Just tell her. With a straight face, ok? So it will look good on the TV when we rewatch it again. Wonder how your babies will react."

"You're a piece of shit," Tsuyoshi sighed as he also buried his hands in his pockets. "Don't change
Tsuyoshi groaned once he relieved that memory again and complained about it during breakfast.

"Dammit, Takeshi. I had the strangest dream again. The days of yore when your old man was one hell of an Arnold Schwarzenegger and wooing all the ladies."

His son couldn't believe what he was hearing and nearly choked on his milk. "Ok?"

The TakeSushi owner didn't seem to notice this, eyes closed and his left hand carefully stroking his chin. Dammit, he was serious here for once. "I rarely dream about my old life before I had my darling son, and I only got to dream about that time when I told my best friend that I was going to ask this girl out."

"Eh, and what did your best friend say?" Yamamoto was also going to ask why his father would be telling him about his past only then. The last time he told him this was more than a year ago before his match with Squalo.

"I'm getting to that part! You see, my best friend always knew I had a crush on this girl for three years since our first year in high school. So he and his siblings would often try pegging us together."

His son laughed. "What did your crush say?"

"That I was creeping her out," his father said in a deflated voice. "And she would never date me in a billion trillion years."

"Wow, so what did she say when you tried asking her out?"

"You're getting ahead of me again, Takeshi. I did not even get to dream ahead of that," he said, sighing deeply. This was another errant conversation that led nowhere. Maybe he was right in telling him that time he was never really that good in telling stories. "My friend managed to save my ass that time. I tried to woo her with my dance moves, but she got really pissed off. My friend talked her out of it and we tried to dance again. The next day I asked her for dinner. Then another followed and another."

"W-Wait, is this mom?" his son was truly giving his attention to him for the first time, his mouth forming a big 'o'.

He nodded. "The last thing I remembered was asking my best friend to remain the best mate I ever had."

"Did he?"

It caught him off guard. Looking at Yamamoto's genuinely wide eyes reminded him of someone else. He swallowed and continued chopping the tuna they got earlier.

"I wonder where he is now," Tsuyoshi said as he began rolling the rice and seaweed for the maki. "You know how young we were. Things just didn't go the way we wanted them to."

"So he's dead?"

"Fuck what?" Tsuyoshi was wondering whether his son's train of thought was innocuous or psychotic at times. "No. Hmm… No, I don't think he'll die that easily."
Ok. What about mom? Don't you think she ran away with your best friend? Isn't that how soap operas go?"

"Uh…" Tsuyoshi scratched his temple nervously. "Can you just go to school and pretend this never happened?"

Yamamoto did not really feel bad after that. He, however, relayed this to a stunned Gokudera Hayato that morning. They had passed by Tsuna's house, only to find out that he had a fever after being carried off by a groggy Kusakabe several hours ago. Reborn was also busy making an overseas phone call. They had to say thanks to a flustered Nana instead.

"Shit, you guys sure are bad with subtlety aren't ya?" Gokudera concluded. "What the heck, you're your old man through and through."

"I'm really happy though," said the rain guardian. "My dad rarely shares stuff about his youth. All he shares most of the time are sushi recipes and baseball."

"How sad that your brain couldn't contain anything else," his friend responded. "Well, your dad did drop plenty of truth bombs there though. Like he was involved in some dark and sad shit."

"Yeah," Yamamoto thought deeply. "My dad never talked about mom. I don't hate him though. That's just the way it is." He remembered back in the future when they learned about Gokudera's past and the lack of love he received from his peers growing up. Yamamoto was still luckier.

"Do you wish you have met her?" Gokudera's eyes were softer. "It must have sucked attending parent participation days."

Yamamoto mulled over it carefully. "I don't think it sucked much. My dad was enough, I guess. And thanks for helping me for the last two ones! My dad was real proud."

"You stupid nutcase!" Gokudera punched his elbow. "Geez, if you only left enough space in your brain for math…" he trailed off, looking at the tatami.

Yamamoto looked on quietly.

"It must suck to have people asking you all the time about your mom."

"I guess it would have. I really don't think about it too much, haha…" He was more concerned about Gokudera's inability to state his apprehension for him. "It was harder for dad. He often cried when I asked him why I had no mom back when I was a kid, so I stopped asking him about it."

"You… are an amazing person," Gokudera surmised, his voice a tenth of how he usually talked. "It was harder for me to accept that mom died…"

"It just shows you loved her very much," Yamamoto said reassuringly. "That's amazing too," he paused, almost afraid of this ease at conveying his feelings to a person like Gokudera. "I don't even know how to feel about my mother. I mean, I never met her- I don't even know what she looked like," he laughed emptily to hide this sense of detachment he had. He immediately looked up in case Gokudera noticed this lack of mirth from his voice.

"It's fine," Gokudera said, refusing to break eye contact. "You can tell me anything. Use me as much as you like. I'm sure you're tired of me ranting all the time."

Yamamoto did not know how to respond. This Gokudera was something he had to get used to. The
storm merely lit up another cigarette and took a long puff.

"This blows though. With the Tenth being sick and all. Guess I have to hang around with you till baseball practice is over. Maybe we can visit the Tenth afterwards?"

Yamamoto nodded earnestly. "We can buy some snacks before then? I could really do for some banana milk."

Tsuna couldn't believe he slept for fifteen hours straight. He also couldn't believe he'd be getting a message from Reborn telling him that doomsday was imminent.

"You're what?" he moaned as he hid under the covers.

"Dino and I are coming to the airport to pick up your elusive guardian," said Reborn. "We don't want any shit happening to him since Fon died to tell me that. Shit. It still fucking hurts."

Tsuna's stomach turned. It was the first time he heard Reborn becoming this frustrated before. "I'm sorry," he could only say.

"Contact all the allies you can," his tutor continued to bark over the phone without missing a beat. "This is urgent. If the enemy can kill a fucking full-grown Arcobaleno, then this won't be a walk in the park."

"R-Reborn," Tsuna had to be honest then and there. He had a gut feeling that if he didn't spill, things could get ugly. "I-I think Hibari-san's family has something to do with this. I went to his house last night in one of the forbidden rooms. I think I know someone who can-"

"Ok, do what you think is right. Just heed my advice and get reinforcements. Namimori may be in for another hell ride."

"We have such bad timing," Tsuna huffed as he downed his pills. He grabbed his jacket and prepared to leave. "Get Hibari-san ASAP, ok?"

He only needed to visit one person. This might get ugly.

"Woah, Saito! Lookie, your friend's back!" said the dark-haired boy with the fringe. He jumps effortlessly from the topmost building with little recoil from his legs and stuffs his hands on his pockets. "You already know we can kill you and no one will care if you keep coming here, right?"

Tsuyoshi flinched. His bandaged cheek and left side were still tingling. The man's slanted eyes continued to peer at him rather curiously. He continued staring at them despite his sore throat.

"Oh, Fon-nii's right!" a girl in a high ponytail said from behind a building, bearing the same face as the other teen. "Say, Fon-nii, you remember what father told us in one of his missions? You know, the man who they hammered with nails while he was still alive? He was still twitching even when he stopped breathing. Do you think that's true?"

"Oi, Saito!" Fon now hollered, scratching his ear. "You were defending his ass yesterday. Akari would torture him if you continue hiding there."

"H-He should just get out of here!" bumbled a voice from a few yards away. "I don't want to get involved anymore!"
"That's not what you said last night though," the elder teen sighed. "Look, if you come here I promise I'll let you play Pac-Man on my Atari. Deal?"

"Are you forreal?" A head poked out from a building near the entrance to the left.

"Yes, Saito-han. Three hours max."

"Five!"

"Three and a half."

"Ok, deal." The boy who came out had unruly hair. His eyes were also much bigger than the two and made him less mature despite the Kierkegaard tome adorning his left arm. He was also shorter by two heads than Tsuyoshi, his gakuran a poor hand me down probably from Fon. He could barely look at Tsuyoshi's eyes.

He finally understood why when he noticed the purple bruise on his right eye.

"Ok, now that this petty drama's over, I can finally chill with my friendship group. You coming, Akari? You should be back in Nami-chuu instead of hanging with us."

The girl huffed. "My school mates are lame. They're scared when I tell them about one of our tamer missions. They said I'm a monster. It sucks."

"This is why father invoked the 'shut it' protocol. Geez, you are still a kid," Fon said in exasperation.

"Excuse me? I had my period a few weeks ago. I can finally go boinking."

"That's totally grody, Akari!" Saito flushed.

Fon laughed as he dragged Akari to where Tsuyoshi came in, leaving an eerie silence between the two.

Tsuyoshi couldn't help but stare at Saito's black eye.

"I couldn't beat Fon. He wanted to eliminate you. You weren't supposed to see us here yesterday."

"S-So you really did kill Merry-sensei?"

Saito looked away. "Fon and Akari promised they won't come after you. You shouldn't come here again. I-If you do, I'll kill you myself." His hands shook as he raised his fists and letting his book drop with a heavy thud.

Tsuyoshi could only look at his frightened expression. His lip continued to throb as if he was preventing himself from tearing up. "You don't want to though, don't you?"

"I- I do for sure!" he squeaked and began steadying himself again.

"Dude, it's obvious the black eye's not the only thing you got from that Fon guy," Tsuyoshi sighed. "And you could have killed me instead of challenging me from the get-go." He walked forward, sending a squeak from Saito who tried to stop his tremors. "You don't want to. And I don't really want to fight you like yesterday. Look, this is like those movies where we form an unbreakable bond and all that bull. I'm one of those dufus characters who believes in their friend even if their friend is a radical killing machine."
"Shut up! You already know that in real life, it doesn't work that way," he was tearing up from his right eye. "You'll end up regretting it!"

"Shit man, stop with all the drama already. This is real life. You said that too," said Tsuyoshi as he whacked him in the head. "Let's begin with this then," he raised his hand in front of him. "I'm Yamamoto Tsuyoshi. Only child. First year and future sushi restaurant chain owner."

The boy tentatively shook his hand. "Hibari Saito, first year. I-I always wanted to be Namimori High class president. Like Fon-nii is." He turned a shade of puce.

"What, you should aim higher!" said Tsuyoshi, now locking him in an arm bar. "Like future world overlord or something!"

Saito tittered. "You said I won't make a good villain. Because my heart is pure and all that."

Tsuyoshi shook his head. "Then become a good overlord. People like you in series become people who will change the world one day. I'm not really cut out for that shit."

The other teen merely looked at the floor. For a moment, his mouth opened to object, but instead, a smile lifted his face. "Yeah. Maybe someday."

Maybe this was Tsuyoshi Yamamoto's one bad day. He had read this in a comic once. A long time ago.

There were a lot of things that were resurfacing. For one, he did not expect a phone call after lunch.

"Hello?" he picked up the receiver.

"Tsuyoshi-san," a deep voice said on the other end. "They're coming."

"Oh. It's you. I thought you were your father," Tsuyoshi's tone hardened. "So this is your way of atoning?"

"No. I'm merely keeping my word from 14 years ago. You will not see any trace of us," Hibari paused. "But I cannot guarantee that if you stay in Namimori."

"...What changed you, Kyoya-kun? I've heard you liked to play with my son."

"Indeed. You raised him well. It's a good thing you left."

"It's a good thing they left too. And you're still here."

"I plan to meet them."

"I still won't forgive you for what you did. Even if you do warn me."

"I am aware."

There was a long pause. Hibari had no intention of breaking it. Tsuyoshi couldn't contain his contempt.

"Is that all you have to say?"

Hibari did not answer right away.
"She might be with them. Make sure she came for nothing."

As Hibari hung up, he heard the door slide open.

"Yamamoto-san," he turned around to see a sweating Sawada Tsuna catching his breath at the front door. "I-I want to ask you about this," then said as he pulled out a picture that made Tsuyoshi shift his steps in unease. There he was, wearing an expression that didn't feel as normal as it had then, surrounded by the people he thought he had forgotten.

Who knew how one image can trigger a lot of senses, the smell of the cooking beef strips, the crackling of the coal, the heat of the summer sun, the cool silk from their kimonos…

And those voices, the cacophony of laughter and errant conversations amidst the smouldering fire.

There was Fon, wearing an expression he had never seen again since they last saw each other; Akari's eyes were alive, mouth in full swing; she had been chatting nonstop about *Dirty Dancing* since she saw the flick three days ago; his then-lover, a woman with hair in a braided bun had a look like she was about to cry from the smoke as she flipped the strips over.

And there he was. Saito, hands hidden from his sleeves as he looked on from near the back, at his own younger self, squabbling with the woman over the grill. He was about to confess to her then, just a few minutes after this picture was taken.

"I don't know those people. Not anymore," he said, just as the door slid open again and made his terrible dream come true.

"This is the last of them?" Akari yawned, letting her weapon disappear in a cloud of purple flames. "Can we go home now? I don't want to miss the last *Akira* showing."

Fon kicked the body aside and promptly burned it in scarlet. "Yeah, we can make it." He stood up as Saito sheathed his blade. Tsuyoshi and his girlfriend promptly made way for Fon and began to douse the place in gasoline. "Can you leave us for a moment?" he said to them. Both nodded and left the room.

"So," Tsuyoshi said. "This is gonna sound lame, but you want to watch *Akira* side-by-side?"

"Look man, you really need to step up your game," she laughed. "You don't need to ask that. Akarisama's been giving me this weird look whenever you get overtly polite. It's not like you. We've already been together for a year now. Don't act all stiff."

"Yeah," Tsuyoshi scratched his nape. "God, I look like a dickwad don't I?"

"What happened to the confident Tsuyo we envy?" she pecked him on the cheek affectionately before leaning her head on his shoulder. "Man, I'm pooped. Can't wait to sleep. We've been in this mission for three days now."

"Wanna sleep at my place then? Get horizontal, if you catch my drift?"

"Jesus, Tsuyo we're not on that base yet and you lack fucking subtlety," said Hitomi promptly before hitting Tsuyoshi with the hilt of her katana. He yelped in surprise more than pain. "We'll get there, eventually. I want to make our wedding night extra special."

"Whatever, not like any man would attempt to woo you and survive. Like this guy has."
She made a face and folded her arms. "In college, we learned a term called cognitive dissonance. You know, like it's easier changing your attitude than the behaviour. You were a fucking relentless fly. I had no choice but to make you stop buzzing."

"You cried when you said agreed to date me though. I have Akari's camcorder as proof!"

"Guess I have to sneak in and burn that damn tape then," Hitomi sighed as Fon left the room and passed by them. He had lost that wild look he sported back in their high school days. Most of the time he wore a small smile with brooding eyes. It pissed Tsuyoshi off because it suited him more.

"Saito's waiting for you," he noted at Tsuyoshi. "You can spend your lovely-dovey time later in the theatre. We'll go on ahead."

Hitomi winked behind her master as both left. Tsuyoshi could only sigh before entering the room again. Saito was busy lighting up the bodies, his face blank.

"You're no longer throwing up when doing this," Saito said as Tsuyoshi assisted him with his matchbox. He never really got used to the lighter. "Back then you'd get all vomitty and make a larger scene than getting the job done."

"You're really going to make fun of me now? Let's hurry so I can sit beside Hitomi later."

"Ok," said Saito as he let his blade shower the place in multiple flames.

"You were never a fan of small talk," said Tsuyoshi as he followed Saito from behind. "What's with you? What did Fon say this time?"

Saito's pace didn't shift as they made their way to the grass and the cool night outside. "If I told you to stay at the Hibari manor no matter what, will you do it for me? Even as a favour, Tsuyoshi?"

"Shit man, just get straight to the point already. I already told you when I took up my Shigure Kintoki that I'll follow you no matter how messed up your path will be."

"It's over now, Tsuyoshi. This is the end of the line. Father told my brother the main branch couldn't wait any longer and demanded the next Hibari head to be declared. It was supposed to be tonight, but Fon-nii had it pushed till tomorrow," he said in a monotone voice.

"Shit," Tsuyoshi muttered. "Look, we can discuss with Fon and Akari. Maybe we can talk to your father-"

"You don't understand. This was the path that I was always destined to walk, Tsuyoshi-san. Fon often told me that he never wanted to be the head, but who will agree with him?"

"You can be the head. Saito, you often told me how rotten the family is. You can change that."

"Everyone wanted Fon to lead the family. We're not as mighty as we once were and many believe that Fon would return us to our former glory. I believe in him too."

"What is the point of telling me then if you know how much I'll object to this? The only reason I'm even here is because of you."

"You have a better reason to stay. Hitomi-san loves you so much. You can give her a normal life if you're there with her-"

"Oh my god," Tsuyoshi said, now brandishing his katana. "Goddamn, you don't get it do you? Do
you think I'll just slink in quietly and let you die? Do you think that I enjoy hacking people to death like the lot of you? I already told you, you fucking idiot! You are the killing machine, and I'm your doofus friend who doesn't give a shit. I'll fucking knock you out and make you miss that succession if I have to."

"This is the main reason why I like you, Tsuyoshi," Saito smiled as he released his blade and turns around. "You call me out. You know how to object and to fight for what you think is right. But this is why you will always be an outsider to our family. You are all too much bounded by reason."
Both prepare their stances as they circled each other. "And if you don't understand that the world is the opposite, then there's no reason for you to stay anymore." He released his blade.

"Tsuna-kun," muttered Tsuyoshi as he inched closer to the counter. "Run. Keep my son safe," he said as he opened the curtains for Sawada to run past through.

Three people came in, all of them clad in black and wearing the same ink-coloured masks with mouths that protruded like beaks. The two people whose stature must have been nearly seven feet moved to the sides of the room. Tsuyoshi continued to glare at the first person who entered and seemed to be the leader, a woman it seemed, from the ample bosom that showed from her black zipped-up parka. She was shorter than Tsuyoshi by a head, her braided hair was as dark as her clothes. Her mask covered the upper half of her face. Her thin mouth was a straight line, unreadable.

Cold sweat trickled down his neck as he positioned the sharp end of his blade upwards.

"You look well. Guess being a traitor suits you more," she said impassively. Tsuyoshi grinned at her mockingly.

"You've come back," he said, planting his feet firmly on the floor. None of her companions seemed to be making a move. He did not want to die. Not yet, not while he has yet to see Takeshi go to Koshien. "Hitomi," he adds, but only out of spite.

"Saito-dono always suggested that you run a sushi restaurant," she said, her voice wispy, cool, on edge. It was the same tone he remembered when they first met. "He would be proud to see this."

"...He's dead isn't he?" He was cutting lose all formality as he took out the hidden sword. "That's why you're here?"

"The young masters wanted to see Namimori again," she said as she unsheathed a long blade from her back. "They want to see their brother again."

"Bullshit!" he spat as he backtracked a little, now raising his blade. "They killed Saito, didn't they? And now they're here for Kyoya too."

"The young masters let me go while they meet with Kyoya-sama," she said as she moved a step forward, letting her katana slash through a table, which broke clean in three. "They are kind to me, unlike you and Saito-dono ever were-"

Tsuyoshi smiled. A sad smile. The tears were flowing unceasingly as he continued to move his hand back at the counter, brandishing the same steel blade as the woman had.

"Takeshi was always asking about you. Always, always, always asking me why you weren't there. I could never answer him." He raised the blade to the eighth stance of the Shigure Souen Ryu. "I loved you. You were always a star to me, distant and dying, but I loved you still."
"Where is the truth in there this time?" the woman said derisively as her black steel clashed with his.

Gokudera couldn't believe his ears as he and Yamamoto left the locker rooms and were on their way home.

"Tenth, are you sure about this?" he said quietly. Yamamoto was still whistling a quick song while the rest of the team continued their chatter.

"No matter what, don't let him go into his house. There was an entourage that entered and Tsuyoshi-san was holding them off. I promised him I won't let Yamamoto-kun get harmed. Kusakabe was asking for help earlier as well. I have to attend to him first. I'll be asking Gamma-san and the rest of the Millefiore to go there immediately."

"Aww, but babysitting Yamamoto's fucking boring," Gokudera blew a raspberry. "Can't I get into the fighting too?"

"Gokudera-"

"Look baseball freak I'm kinda busy- Yeah sorry Tenth, but can't the eyepatch girl or the girls distract Yamamoto instead? I don't even know how the fuck-"

"Uh, Gokudera-"

"Fucking hell, what do you want…" Gokudera trailed off as he stared at the forest just a gate away from Nami-chuu.

A man was coming out. A man that eerily had the same build and fashion sense as their cloud guardian. When he walked closer it was almost unmistakable.

Ten years later Hibari.

Or was it? Both Vongola guardians rubbed their eyes again to make sure.

Their eyes met almost by accident. He was about to adjust his bag strap, only to see the two just a few yards from him. His brown slanted eyes widened at the sight of them, almost as if in fascination. He could pass off as Hibari's twin, at least as far as they can remember how Hibari of the not-so-distant future looked like.

"Are you students of Nami-chuu?" he asked. Both of them jerked awake and looked at each other, unsure of whom will answer. There was something in his tone of voice that made them think twice about their reply and disappear if they answered incorrectly.

"Yes, what about it?" Gokudera was the first to break out of the spell, trying to regain control of his actions.

"Back then, our uniforms were gakurans," he said with an elated expression that made Gokudera think he was biting something more than he could chew. Weed probably. "Just like our fathers before us. Isn't that right… Yamamoto-kun?"

The rain guardian's expression changed. His mind went blank. This sudden influx of new information suddenly did not make sense to him.

The man laughed. "Yes, bingo! So you are Takeshi-kun! You are so tall now. How's your dad
doing? Our family couldn't get enough of his cooking."

If Gokudera did not let go of his arm, he would have fallen then and there. Every word he said seemed to pack a punch. The world seemed to be disintegrating in front of his eyes.

"Tsuyoshi-san didn't tell you?" he laughed softly. "Of course he wouldn't. He chose the wrong time to join our family," by then his eyes lingered at Yamamoto, who was starting to tremble. "And to leave."

"Who the fuck are you?" Gokudera barked, which surprised the man. He suddenly scratched his head.

"Oh, sorry for forgetting my manners. This is embarrassing," he laughed again. "I am Hibari Kei, the second eldest of Hibari Saito. I take it you know Kyoya?"
Chapter Summary

The story so far: Tsuna plays Detective Conan, Hibari comes home, and someone gets murdered.

Mitsuketa.

When Tsuyoshi entered his room he did not expect to see a bogeyman sauntering in one of the plush velvet cushions.

Naturally, he screamed until the bogeyman spoke.

"You got fat since you started dating her."

"Eat my shorts!" he coughed, going into his mini refrigerator to get his glass of water. "Again, grow up with your jokes. You should get out of here. You know the rules."

"Saito's been breaking the rules since you got accepted in the family. Plus I got disowned two hours ago so I can do anything I want."

His listener wasn't prepared for this information, his throat forgetting to use his oesophagus. He wiped his nostrils. He could only look at the supposed Hibari patriarch, his mouth splitting into a real smile in awhile.

"You don't have to pretend you didn't see it coming," He chuckled in a self-deprecating sort of way. "Saito did not want to see me go."

"Asshole, he believed in you to be the head. You just dashed everything he was building up for."

"I can count on you then. To help that idiot start over again," Fon said, now standing up and taking one of Tsuyoshi's coats from his drawer. "I'm finally free from this cesspool…"

Tsuyoshi understood. He could only look at Fon who was taking so long in buttoning up his coat until he made up his mind of what to say.

"We were given orders to eliminate you on sight. You killed the heads of the family council during the ceremony."

"I know. But I also know you're more than that," he grinned. "Just continue taking care of my clumsy brother, 'kay? He needs more people like you by his side."

"Akari hates you. She cannot stand the thought of Saito being the head."

Fon finished buttoning up. "I'll drop by occasionally to piss her off then. It's no different to how the family thinks of me in retrospect." By then, he opened the window, letting the evening breeze in the room. He looked like a floating spectre when as both his feet touched the bare end of the windowsill. "Don't get too fat."
"So you do know Kyoya-kun," Kei said pleasantly, hands still clasped on the straps of his bucket bag. Gokudera's stomach shifted uneasily within the folds of his flesh as he continued hearing the sloshing sound inside. He took a step forward and made the storm quickly hold onto Yamamoto's arm. "We were not really close. What was he like?"

"He-" Gokudera could not sense anything from this man at all. There was no killing intent that was as potent as his younger brother's. His eyes were not as laced with malice and his tone of voice sounded so genuine and reminded him of the palazzo and the piano and that woman's voice.

"Ehehe, we're not really that close too," laughed Yamamoto off. "Most of the time he scares us. But he's a really good person deep down. At least that's what our friend says."

Gokudera nearly cried because he knew who that friend was. Dammit, if I wasn't shitting myself I would be hugging this baseball freak.

"Really? That's strange," Kei said. The sloshing sound further nauseated Gokudera. Kei finally looked at the storm and noticed his expression. His mouth formed a thin line of concern. "Oh, sorry. I had an errand to run before coming here. So you are friends with Kyoya."

"Not exactly… more like partners? Eh, that's not right," said the rain. Gokudera tightened his grip on him. Kei was only two feet away. "But he does help us from time to time. Not for us but for him, you might say, but when our goals align, he's a dependable guy."

"I'm glad that Kyoya's adjusting well with people his age," Kei chirped. "And Tsuyoshi-san has raised you well. I now know why he left."

Gokudera's grip was loosening. This bastard was making him believe the shit he was telling them. This must be his skill. Shit. This guy was dangerous, probably more dangerous than his little brother. He shouldn't drop his guard. He grabbed hold of his gear.

"You look more like your mother though. Tsuyoshi-san was never really that good-looking, no matter what he said. Don't tell him that," he said with a laugh.

"You know my mom?"

Gokudera could not believe how quickly Yamamoto's tone would change.

"Of course. My elder sister often said she was our best swordsman, but I think Tsuyoshi-san's a tad more skilful…"

"D-Do you know where she is?" his tone made Gokudera's hairs stand on end.

"Hmmm… She was with me a moment ago… Ah," said Kei with an eerie smile. "She said she would come visit your father. Wouldn't you want that? A family reunion!"

"Fuck-" Gokudera couldn't stop himself from swearing as Yamamoto began to run back without a word. He had to use his flames to bar his way.

"Eh, what are you doing Gokudera?" he said quietly, staring at the flames.

"You don't get it do you?" Gokudera growled, now taking out his Vongola gear. "You are not yourself. This guy is messing with us."
"Oh, but she did say that. That's really what I heard."

"You are not helping!" the storm barked at Kei, who could only laugh.

"But you wanted to see Hitomi-san, didn't you?"

Gokudera finally let his flames blaze as he unleashed his stick of dynamite. He wanted a night fighting side-by-side with the Tenth. That was strike one. Yamamoto's abnormal actions were strike two. This bastard's appearance was fucking three.

"I have to go," said Yamamoto as he began to run past the flames.

"Wait- shit-" Gokudera said as he stole a quick glance at Kei, who was getting delighted at the developments.

Only.

"Cambio forma," he heard the cloud guardian's deep baritone and saw an extravagant burst of purple from the school entrance where Yamamoto left.

"Hiya," waved Kei as Hibari paced the grounds, the earth seemingly cracking from each step. "It's been nine years. Did you miss me, Kyoya?"

"You are interrupting herbivore," he said to Gokudera as he passed. His face was a manifestation of pure, unbridled fury. His scarlet flames grew smaller. Everyone, apparently, was going out of character that evening. Great.

"You should hurry!" he heard Kei holler as he bolted to chase his friend. "I don't think their reunion will turn up well!"

"Look who's talking," Gokudera muttered under his breath before becoming full magical girl and getting the hell out of their bloodbath.

The manor embodied stillness when Tsuna entered, alone.

He already made calls. Ryohei and Chrome would be dropping by later. Gokudera should be by Yamamoto's side in case any harm does befall him. Lambo was with his mother right now. Hibari was coming home.

God, that last statement was unexpectedly comforting. Hibari-sama was truly the Namimori saviour. Someone in heaven must be singing piercing hallelujahs about now.

He froze at the smears of scarlet on the garden grass. It trailed up to the steps of the front door of the house, its door closed. The house looked normal. This made his heart beat more erratically.

"So you're here." Tsuna turned around at the source of the voice, a crisp, smooth like velvet in his ears. "Come. Let us talk." There was a woman on the open door. She was tall, far taller than Bianchi, with none of the petite curves that embraced Gokudera's sister. This woman reminded him of a cotton tree, all perfect thinness. Her robes though suited her dainty body perfectly, a midnight furisode embroidered with silver edelweiss. Her hair was severely cut despite the wavy curls. A short fur cape hung from her back. She had a strong aura around her. Pernicious. Suffocating.

If it was someone else, this would be both intoxicating and threatening at the same time.
Tsuna just couldn't breathe. He looked down. The bloodstains ended at the door.

"Sit." She was already sitting on a zabuton a few sweeps across the room. There was a table with a blue and white tea set in the middle. A small thin vase lay by the side as well holding a freshly picked white camellia.

Tsuna did not move. He could finally look at her properly. Her lips were stained in a pale, rosy rouge. He had seen those eyes before. Steely and impatient, but not coloured brown.

"Sit, if you please," she nodded at the only zabuton in front of her. Tsuna looked around. The place was as immaculate as they left it. Her hands were clean, nails cleanly trimmed as they poured an empty cup piping hot tea and set it in a coaster in front of Tsuna's supposed seat. "I did not poison the tea, nor do I wish to kill you."

Yeah right. "W-Where's Kusakabe-san?" he tried to mask his apprehension.

She gestured once more at the seat and then poured herself a cup. Tsuna quickly obeyed and stared at her.

"You went into my sister's room," she said. There was no judgment, nor was it a question. She did not wait for Tsuna to open his mouth and continued, her voice like gravel. "That boy did not give you his permission."

Tsuna wanted to ask how she knew that but instead said, "Where is Kusakabe-san?"

"You are an outsider," she said after drinking her tea. He could barely look at his own cup and was drumming his thumbs. "You have no right to rummage through our things and seize what is not yours-"

"I can't afford to pretend you're not doing this to waste my time," Tsuna stood up. "Where is Kusakabe-san?"

"I SAID SIT DOWN!"

Her roar could not mask the sound of gunshot and the surge of pain Tsuna felt as he collapsed at the table, spilling and bathing in the hot tea. She did not move and only lit a cigarette she fingered from her sleeve.

Her eyes coldly looked down at his. "You have nothing to threaten me with, Sawada Tsunayoshi," she lazily moved her forefinger in a circling motion. "Does a real bullet hurt?" Tsuna would have liked it if the men hidden in the house would come out. They did not. Of course. This wouldn't be easy. He wiped his eyes right away.

He closed his eyes and willed his body to move. The seconds continued to tick and only then did he realize the flames in his mittens were not appearing. Yuu's head was inches away as she finished her teacup with disinterest at his despondent state. He could not even feel the wound in his leg anymore.

"My father told me when he was in a state to give sound advice to wait for your questions to be answered," she then said as she let her cigarette butt run through his cheek. Tsuna attempted to raise his fist but could only scream as he saw his hand disappear. "Your unlucky accomplice is here." Tsuna could not suppress his snarl when he looked at the finger's direction, at the wall above the doorway.

Kusakabe's body was still twitching under the nails hammering his body.
"Effective, isn't it?" she said coolly, blowing another puff above. "Grandfather was right; they do move even after death."

Even in his rage, he couldn't burn.

Hibari Kyoya was taught to suppress his oceans. Never had he betrayed his training even when the questions bordered on life or death. The Vongola would call him an impressive force, his calmness relying on almost nothing of the angry oceans he bore beneath. A monster, as some of them said behind his back. He always knew of the whispers, and he did not give a damn.

For the battles did not concern him. He always wanted to scale higher, more intimidating masses and cut them down. Fight or flight, as they said when faced with a big obstacle. He always chose to look ahead. His instincts were his compass, and they only pointed north.

The strongest. Even that title meant nothing to him. He merely did not like the idea of being an insignificant pebble in the road.

But now. Now.

It has been so long, so long since he let his oceans consume him. He did not want anyone to notice this.

Except, perhaps, them.

"That's his sword," he said, his voice like lava.

Kei grinned. He led Hibari into a deadly goose chase up to an empty classroom. His older brother had been the best of their lot keeping his emotions in check. His ocean was a hurricane he hid so well underneath. "You still remember? It's been ten years!" He let down his bag and opened it. Hibari's nose crinkled. "I even have a gift for you!" He carelessly turned his bag upside-down and let the contents topple on the floor. "Wait, it's here somewhere..." he scurried through the heap. Hibari was secretly relieved that the two herbivores were not here to see this. "Here it is!" he said triumphantly as he threw the gift in front of Hibari.

His mouth was a thin line once he saw what it was.

"It's not as clean as Yuu's, but I had ten schools to visit and sister did not want me to be late in meeting you." He gestured at the mass of skinned faces, a small mountain of evidence of Kei's legitimacy as a pureblood Hibari.

What was left of Fon's kind face was lying at his feet, the blood coagulated already under his eyes and on both ends of his mouth.

"You know, Father wanted you to inherit this," he said pleasantly, eyes twinkling. He removed both ends of his sword to reveal two blades on each end, the back a large degree shorter than the other. "Even when we left he was always muttering your name in his sleep. It was also his last words before sister rammed this through his throat." He smiled again.

Hibari was no longer listening and was already beginning his assault towards his brother. He knew he could never defeat him when it came to suppressing his oceans. With combat, however, it was a different story.

"I don't care about Father or the family name," he said, his flames blazing brighter and brighter. He stormed through his brother's blade. Kei's smile remained intact.
"That's what Nami would say too," he says, flashing his row of pearly white teeth.

"Don't you ever shut up?" Hibari drawled as he rammed his tonfa past his sword again. A first. Another first would be his desire to bite off the flesh from his brother's throat.

They were nearing the boarded TakeSushi now. Despite his flames, Yamamoto was still two yards in front of him.

"Hey!" his friend called out when he opened the door. "Dad- Eh?"

Yamamoto froze as he looked on at the half-open door.

The Storm Guardian knew that something was terribly wrong with the way Yamamoto's expression became more indecipherable. He ran for his friend as he drew out the Vongola necklace and shouted the magic words, wearing an expression that he never saw from his friend before as the blue flames engulfed his body completely: a look of terrifying rage.

Only when Gokudera the outside blew apart did he realize why.

Near the counter was the mangled mess of a body wearing the same white apron and head scarf Tsuyoshi used, a sword sloppily sticking out from his back. In front of them was a woman, holding two pieces of what seemed to be a mask. When she looked up at them, drawing out her scarlet-stained katana, did he understand why Yamamoto was in tears.

Both of them had the same eyes.

Only, hers looked dead.

"You look well, Takeshi," she said as she readied her blade in uncannily the same style as the fifth offensive form that Yamamoto often performed. "And now you will die."

The rain guardian meeting his mother again and in the worst way possible.

Hibari gritted his teeth as Kei's foot ferociously lands on his head. He could feel his jaw crack through the tile and concrete. This taste of defeat felt so familiar and it made him sick to the stomach.

"So why Nami-chuu first instead of our house? Yuu's there. She said she got tired of torturing your subordinate." Kei's voice, though still nonchalant, was dripping with hubris. He looked at the metal tonfas with disinterest before throwing them away. "I can't believe you still use these toys. It was father's last gift to you, I recall?"

"You used the same moves as that man," he spat. His house never felt like home to him. It was never like Namimori Junior High, where he was free to roam and destroy as much as he pleased. However, he could not help but curse. The fool disobeyed his orders.

"Oh, jii-san?" his brother laughed heartily. His foot drove Hibari's head deeper and deeper into the ground until his nose bled and he had to breathe between his teeth. "Father was always afraid of him. I don't understand why, since he was not that strong."

He could no longer speak, his hands and feet now too broken to do the speaking for him. But he shook, unable to contain his rage in his worthless state.
"I'm sure you're wondering why we bothered coming back to this wretched place. Don't tell Nami I'm blabbering again," his good-natured laugh was more distant in his ears. His bastard of a brother apparently intends to finish him off. "I've wanted to see how much this town has changed before burning it to the ground. Just like what jii-san did."

Hibari stopped convulsing. He saw Kei's hand disappear into his jacket for a moment before unveiling a small remote. He wagged it playfully at him, like a dog owner holding a ball. By then his shoulders fell and his face broke into a sardonic smile, something sad around the edge of his mouth.

"I wonder what father saw in you. You are a weak little herbivore; as weak as the birds you care for. You are of no use to us."

He pushed a small button and everything was white noise.

---

Yamamoto was murderous.

That was the last thing Gokudera would ever think of witnessing when it came to his other best friend (the first one being the Tenth, of course). Despite his obvious latent skills, he had always held back out of respect for his opponent's life.

He did not experience the feeling of desperation to survive like Gokudera did before joining Tsuna's family. He grew up the most normal out of the rest of them, in a sense. Maybe that was the other reason why Reborn chose him. That kind of oblivious normalcy was absent in the Mafia.

Now though, Yamamoto was fighting with abandon. It reminded him of his old self.

He was fighting for meaning. For a reason to exist.

Seeing his father defeated, a mass of blood and flesh in the corner must have shaken Yamamoto to his very core. Gokudera was aware of how large a presence his father was in his life. His mother felt something like that too.

And here was the woman who took it all away, someone who should have been a constant to Yamamoto, but instead decided to erase everything altogether.

Gokudera knew that this time, it was his turn to save him. He had to make sure Yamamoto snaps out of his trance of rage and misery. He needed to check on Tsuyoshi, to make sure he was still alive and force Yamamoto to retreat.

It wasn't going to be easy. He had to use Uri as he changes form, keenly intent on keeping out the liabilities from his plan in the form of the woman's bodyguards, or opponents, whatever. He whispered to the cat to know if Tsuyoshi was still clinging on.

He eyed Yamamoto for a moment before resuming to destroy the fuckers. He may not be an expert in the art of Shigure Souen Ryuu, but he was aware at least, that Yamamoto was getting tired. Though his thirst to kill was stronger, she was more accomplished, removed of unnecessary movements, her face a *tabula rasa* of emotions.

Uri mewled as it kneaded its paws on Tsuyoshi's arm. Gokudera's heart leapt in jubilation. There was still hope. They will get through this.

Then there was light.
Reborn couldn't stop pulling the trigger.

A finger flew and left a smear of blood on the wall. There was no sound as it landed on the carpet, like Tsuna's hand. Ryohei had no time to look in awe as the hitman effortlessly shot all her men lying in wait in the rooms as he began to use his flames to stabilize a near dead Kusakabe. He couldn't stop himself from shedding his extreme manly tears, however when the vice chairman coughed up red.

Chrome managed to carry her boss out of Reborn's range. Her illusions were covering up Tsuna's leg and his stump quite well.

"Tsuna arrived five minutes ago after hearing Kusakabe's call. You idiot student of mine. Get his hand," Reborn said bracingly. "And then the two of you can carry both of them to safety."

The two grunted and began their work. Chrome grabbed Tsuna's limb and stuffed it in her illusionary ice box. Ryohei's Kangaryu swiftly carried their boss with his master.

"No. Chrome, stay and tell me what you see with your lenses," Reborn raised his pistol and aimed it at the woman, who picked up the vase and put it under the armpit of her mangled hand.

"This is an honour. I finally made the greatest hitman use his gun," she said impassively as she lit another stick. She began to rise. "They were my most loyal men."

"I will put this gun to really good use if you don't answer my question," Reborn replied curtly.
"Who the fuck are you?"

"That is not your real question," she said, reaching to grab her finger with a free arm. "I will answer that one instead."

"R-Reborn-san," Chrome said in a hushed whisper as she hid her lenses. "I- I don't see anything. I don't know how but they're not working-"

"So you are one of those kinds of people..." he drawled. "Ok then, why didn't you kill Tsuna?"

"He is not the reason I'm here," the woman said, wiping his hand with the folds of her sleeve and taking out a small device bearing only a single red button. "Nor is it my bastard brother, nor this damn manor, nor my birth right as the head of a dying clan. I only want one thing: To destroy Namimori."

"Sh- Chrome!" Reborn called out before their entire world burned.
VII

Chapter Summary

Hibari gives an ultimatum.

Sou.

Gamma- and irritably at that- knew they were late and it was Byakuran's fault. He only told them of Tsuna's pleas for assistance half an hour later because the ex-Millefiore boss had kept his priorities straight. He had been gorging on his second pack of marshmallows that Yuni gave as his souvenir on her business trip when he mentioned, off-handedly, that Tsuna requested for backup.

This sent him on a rampage and made Byakuran quite disappointed that he wasn't partnered with Yuni. He gloomily went off with Bluebell and Kikyo to Hibari Kyoya's house while he and the Giglio Nero boss made their way to Yamamoto's restaurant before going to Gokudera's. Zakuro and Daisy went on to assist Dino.

He was only calmed down by a flustered Yuni, who kept promising again and again to Gamma that she won't give Byakuran too many marshmallows. He was a little embarrassed by then for being pacified by a teenager.

"Don't apologize too much, Yuni-chan," he said as he led her forward. By then, both of them froze, because they heard clashing steel and smelled gunpowder.

This was not like any mundane night.

Gamma rushed on ahead, his cue at the ready along with his volpi.

He catches sight of Gokudera, battling two masked thugs twice as big as he was. He was trying to move past them and reach a body in the corner, where his cat was now luging it on its back.

On the far left, and the one who made him unable to move, was none other than Yamamoto, attacking another woman, her hair now blowing in the wind. She was the mirror image of her opponent and Gamma realizes why Gokudera kept frantically looking by his right.

Yamamoto was losing, his entire face was caked in blood from the deep gash on his forehead. His chin was also bleeding. Only his left arm was free of slashes.

He now knew who to help first.

Before he was about to take another step, Yuni shrieked his name. As he dashed to her side to protect her from the force she must have foreseen, he heard an earsplitting cacophony of bombs and felt the searing heat enveloping his body. By then, as he was about to die in vain, he felt someone hold his hand. Yuni is by his side, a hand close to her chest as if reciting a sutra, her Sky flames continuing to envelop them.

"I hope my flames reached them in time," she choked, and led Gamma on ahead, her sprightly figure running feverishly as Gamma held out his cue to protect her. Behind their shelter, he could see nothing but devastation. Even behind him, he could not believe how his eyes can only catch
He knew Byakuran and his crew will be fine, along with some members of their family. They were on the far edge of Namimori. What he feared, however, was the rest of the populace, who are either in their beds or pissing themselves drunk by the road.

"Thank god," she cried as they come across Gokudera, his hair singed but his body unburnt. Beside him was none other than the body of Yamamoto's dad. He felt his pulse. Yuni sobbed when Gamma confirmed a faint beat.

"Tell the cat to help you move them to Reborn," said Gamma as he now opens his earpiece. He has to find the Vongola Rain guardian. "Byakuran, how're things on your end?"

Byakuran laughed good-naturedly. "There was a big explosion, but I managed to save Sawada-kun's maman and his little friends. Gokudera-kyun's sister managed to warn us in time of a bomb near the lamp post. She said she traced a faint beep a few minutes before. I think Kikyo got to Shou-chan in time?"

"Yes, Byakuran-sama," Kikyo breathed on the other end.

"Umu, got the flames put out on my end!" he heard Bluebell chirp.

"Daisy, how's the Chiavarone head?" he then changed connections.

"Uuh… there was an explosion… Zakuro nearly got fried…"

"Fuck you! You pushed me on that side!"

"Uhm… he's fine… I think… We haven't seen him…"

"Whatever, just come here to whatever's left of TakeSushi. Assist Yuni-chan. We have to save Yamamoto's dad-"

"Eh, what happened Gamma-kun?" Byakuran asked innocently.

"He was attacked," was his flat response. "Zakuro, please check the other areas. See if anyone's still alive." He felt his stomach drop as he saw Yamamoto, spread-eagled on his back, his katana a few inches from his side. His chest was not rising.

Dino did not make it when the battle of the Hibari siblings was ongoing. He did not also make it when Namimori Junior High was still intact. He arrived a minute too late.

But he did make it in time to save his tutee.

"Boss-" he heard Romario say, but Dino ignored him and used his whip to climb onto a nearly falling beam, jumping out of the way onto the second-floor window. He ran up into the most likely place that Hibari would be in aside from the rooftop, which was cleanly blown off: The reception room.

Dino coughed and threw his parka aside. He took off his shirt and let it dampen over a broken fountain nearby. He covered his face and crawled through the fire.

It felt like a miracle to see Hibari on the side of the building, his entire clothes and face caked in soot, tucked away at the edge of the room. A weak Roll was getting smaller and smaller as it snuggled beside its master. Hibird was on top of Hibari's head, tweeting intensely at the sight of
Dino. He managed to shield himself in time. He sighed in relief.

His limbs were angled in awkward places, and Dino bit his lip until it bled. Someone apparently wanted to kill him, but an explosion happened before he can finish the job.

The reception room was apparently the farthest from ground zero, so Hibari was still lucky. He managed to seize the two metal tonfas a few feet beside him and hoisted them on his belt. He carried Hibari on his back before jumping out of the window, down to a flabbergasted Romario.

"I'll have Reborn here tomorrow to examine the place," he nodded curtly, his other men producing a stretcher for his fallen student. "I can question Kyoya in the morning at what the heck happened here," he scratched his nape. The last thing he needed was another reason to stay in Namimori. Or what was left of it.

"According to the data given to us by Zakuro-san there was a minimum of twenty-seven bombs going off through random vicinities in Namimori," said Ivan.

"How are maman and Tsuna's family?"

"They're fine. So far we have confirmed that Irie Shouichi and co, Kurokawa Hana and co, Miura Haru and co, I-pin, Bianchi, Lambo, and Sawada Nana are safe."

"The Vongola?"

"The Mist guardian and Sawada Tsuna are with Reborn. The Sun guardian was last seen carrying Kusakabe to safety."

"What about the rest of the townspeople in Namimori? Can the hospital be used?"

"Uhm," there was a long pause. "So far the Millefiore and the Giglio Nero are still collecting data. The hospital, according to Kikyo-san, has been destroyed."

Dino cursed. "Okay, what about the Storm and Rain?"

"They're with the Giglio Nero boss."

*Good.* He can breathe easy.

But something was still not right. Who else had he missed?

He had heard every name, hadn't he? *Who else was there?*

Hibari stirred somewhat, and as Dino was about to give him the tonfas, they clattered to the ground. Apparently, he did not fasten them properly.

He was about to pick them up when a compartment opened and a slip of paper fell out. Romario was quick to seize it before a strong gust of wind was intent to keep it out of their reach.

As Dino thanked him and saw the contents, his phone rang. It was Reborn. He could barely even concentrate on the paper as Reborn asked if he had seen Ryohei's sister.

They managed to book a private hospital in the next town. Hibari Kyoya and Yamamoto Tsuyoshi were given private rooms along with Sasagawa Ryohei.

They did find Ryohei's sister, but none of them was able to talk to her at all, even Miura Haru and
Sawada Tsuna. She locked herself in her brother's room.

It turned out that an approximate total of forty-five bombs exploded within the vicinity of Namimori, four from Namimori Middle School. Out of the rubble in the Nami-chuu reception room, the CEDEF had discovered a heap of fried or blackened flesh. The total number of skinned faces roughly equalled the total number of disciples in ten martial arts schools spread throughout the northern provinces of China.

Fon was among them. Reborn confirmed this with a fist that cracked the hotel concierge table in half when Squalo grimly gave him the sample.

From the almost three thousand residents in Namimori, about forty percent were either dead or missing. Reborn commended Yuni's and Byakuran's last-minute effort for saving a lot of people, but Yuni left early on, her body supported by Gamma throughout as she sobbed into Reborn's hotel room. She did not show up the rest of the day. Most of the inhabitants decided to live with their relatives in other parts of Japan for the meantime. Those whose houses were almost unscathed tried to live their normal lives. Nana had to come with Iemitsu to Italy along with I-pin and Bianchi, despite her angry insistence that her son comes with. Tsuna refused.

Tsuyoshi survived, but the damage to his hands was so severe the doctors and even the Sun users agreed that he may never be able to use them again.

Kusakabe was luckier thanks to Ryohei's flames; Giannini confirmed that he can replace three of his missing limbs.

Yamamoto, upon waking up two days later after the incident, said nothing. He continued to stare at his bedside window that Gokudera fervently insisted they swap with. He could barely even look at the Storm guardian, and Gokudera never uttered a word of protest at his friend's silent treatment.

Reborn was the only one unharmed from the incident. Chrome suffered first-degree burns when she shielded the baby before making her mist flames finally appear. Tsuna was lucky to get his hand attached. It was still unusable at the moment and was hidden in a thick cast.

"What about nii-san?" Tsuna asked hollowly, three days after the incident. Reborn had to turn to Dino first before straightening his seat.

"According to Kusakabe, a masked man stabbed him in the head. It might be the same man who attacked Hibari, according to Gokudera's testimony." said Reborn quickly. "Sasagawa Kyoko was present when it happened. She said she had karaoke night with Haru and wanted to surprise Ryohei en route to Hibari Kyoya's house when…"

"Shit," Tsuna couldn't control his word outtake. "Fuck, what the fuck-"

"Either the suspect has immense skill, or the blade was too sharp, because it cut cleanly through some nerve endings. It might be a miracle, I don't know even," Dino continued. "But he's still alive. Only, we don't know if he'll wake up."

"What about their parents? What about them?" Tsuna's voice was rising and his feet were tapping on the floor vehemently.

Both looked at each other again, but it was Reborn who answered. "They were near the blast site."

Tsuna buried his face in his hands. "Goddamn Reborn, why didn't she kill me?"

Dino could not even tell Tsuna to stop his string of curses. He could understand Tsuna's frustration.
"The Ninth is coming in five hours. He'll tell you everything. I don't know if I can explain it properly, but the Hibari household is not an enemy we must cross."

"Then what am I supposed to do? They destroyed our town, nearly killed my friends and my friend's families, and left me without anything to- to-" Tsuna tried to stop himself from saying any more expletives. "Why didn't they just kill me?"

"Will revenge be the answer though? Is that where you're getting at? It is not a cycle you are ready for. They may kill your loved ones for real," Reborn said grimly. "This is not a matter of protecting your family, Tsuna. This is not like all the past battles you had where you fought to prevent them from getting killed. I can't even assure you that you can even call them to your side. They're not like Mukuro, or Xanxus, or Byakuran, or Kozato-"

"So what do you want me to do then?" Tsuna thundered, his eyes clouded and wet. What do these people know about being powerless? What do these people know about having people who decided to follow you despite being a branch you should prune?

Reborn stared at him deeply, his black eyes unwavering. "I want you to listen to what the Ninth has to say and have an idea of what's at stake here, young Vongola. If I were honest with you right now, I would have gone already on a rampage when I found out they killed my friend. They did not kill yours, did they? Well, they killed my fucking friend!"

Tsuna sat down, unblinking. This was the first time he had felt this brunt of Reborn's rage. He suddenly felt small, weak, silly, tactless.

"If you make the wrong decision, you may end up destroying not only the Vongola, but the entire Mafia. Do you now have an inkling of how crucial your talk with the Ninth will be?"

"Fine. Fine, then let me decide in peace," Tsuna then broke eye contact and walked out of the door, slamming it shut.

Gokudera did not know which sin weighed more: His failure to the Tenth or his failure as a friend.

Yamamoto's attention was still at the window. Whenever the right-hand-to-be woke up, even during the middle of the night, his gaze did not relent.

He had mentioned already that his father was alive. Yamamoto, his first 'other' friend, only said 'That's swell' before staring off into space again.

He wanted to know what Yamamoto was thinking, but with his current state of mind, he was apprehensive of pulling triggers.

His awakening of measured tact was something he wanted to laugh at with someone, but he did not know to whom to divulge this to. His sister was busy collecting data of the dead with the Giglio Nero, that perverted doctor was- wait, why did he fucking care even where the hell he was? The hag and that retarded cow was out of the question. He was not comfortable with telling that pineapple girl his feelings also because she was a girl and she might secretly judge him for opening himself up. The Tenth… He did not want to trouble the Tenth now, since there was a lot in his mind already, starting with what happened to the lawn head's sister…

"I'm fucking tired," he mumbled to no one in particular before covering himself with the quilt his sister gave him. Being vulnerable was some second skin that took some getting used to. His friend's vacant gaze made him angrier at himself as well, for being unable to offer beneficial support.
Yamamoto did not answer him when he drifted off to sleep.

He wanted to join Tsuna when he went off to visit Namimori with Dino yesterday, but he opted to stay and guard Yamamoto in case he tried doing something stupid again like the time he broke his arm. He did not know why he chose his friend's well-being rather than his chance of getting furious at the damage Hibari's siblings committed. Maybe because he would feel ashamed of knowing his fury will never measure to the Tenth's and Yamamoto's. Namimori was not a town he lived in for most of his life, and he never had a place he'd literally call home like they had. He never had the best definition of loss, his childhood peppered with a sense of not belonging anywhere.

This was also why he felt angry at himself for sympathizing more with Hibari's siblings than with the rest of his makeshift family. He'd also want to blow a place sky high if it reminded him of something unpleasant, or something with unbearable attachment. He saw it in Kei's eyes when he recalled his days in Nami-chuu fondly.

Maybe that was why he stayed with Yamamoto. He wanted to understand him. Why he continued taking covering him with his quilt at night. Why he continued to force-feed him with Uri's help even though his hands clawed through his face as he tried pushing him away.

What the fuck, I feel like a house wife. He chuckled to himself. Just in time before Tsuna opened the door.

"Yamamoto-kun," he panted. "I want to talk to your dad."

"You did not have to tell me." Gokudera turned at Yamamoto's reply. His friend responded, and was looking straight at Tsuna. He looked down. The Tenth did a much better job than me, huh? Of course. Who was he to think that he could make Yamamoto speak? Of course.

"Yeah, but I feel like I have to tell you. Since it involves your mom," said Tsuna, taking out a photo of multiple Hibaris and Yamamoto's parents. "I don't think any of us are ready to face the truth alone."

"Mom… huh?" He could feel Yamamoto's discomfort of even uttering that word. But of course, he'd stand with much difficulty and make Gokudera support him when he walked. Of course, he'd say 'ok' at the Tenth as they led him to the room beside theirs.

Gokudera never knew how to comfort somebody. It was always others who reached out to him. Or maybe, for Yamamoto Takeshi, his presence wasn't enough.

"You're heavy," he muttered, and instead of laughing, Yamamoto said a 'sorry.' For Gokudera, this wasn't what he was apologizing for, but nonetheless, he continued letting him lean back on him as Tsuna knocked on the door and entered.

Tsuyoshi looked worse than he remembered, eyes sagging, his lips dry and parched. But the moment he saw them, his face seemed to age backwards.

"And what do I owe this pleasure?" he lit up, trying to move his hands that were tied securely in front of him. By then, he felt Yamamoto tremble a little. Gokudera held an arm, assuring him of his presence.

His boss showed him another picture, this time of a teenage Tsuyoshi and three multiple Hibaris. One of them unnervingly reminded him of the last Storm Arcobaleno. "Please tell us your story."

Tsuyoshi looked at his son, and then at Gokudera before turning to Tsuna with a mechanical smile. "I've never been able to tell you why I created the eighth form of the Shigure Souen Ryuu, haven't
I, Takeshi?" He took a deep breath and removed his head from his pillows. "It was for Saito, Kyoya's father and my best friend. It happened during the middle of a civil war against Saito's elder brother; he called himself Fon."

Dino sighed after Tsuna left. "You did not have to go that far."

"I wanted him to grow up and stop believing that the world revolves around him," Reborn huffed, sipping the rest of his black coffee. "I thought I taught him enough to be prudent, but he's still as greenhorn as you were on that age."

"He did his best to save Kusakabe though. If he did go to get reinforcements, he wouldn't have made it in time."

"So you are defending him now?"

"You can get really petty sometimes…"

The door opened again.

"Tsuna," Dino stood up. "Reborn was being uppity-"

Instead of seeing the familiar shade of brown, he got a mop of black hair and grey eyes.

"You," the newcomer pointed his tonfa at Dino. His cuts and scratches were already healed, along with his body. "I'll bite you to death."

"Kyoya, now is not the best time-" Dino was about to fling his usual challenge away when Hibari presented the ripped piece of paper Dino had taken a picture of two days ago before returning it.

"If you win, I'll tell you everything behind this," he said with a tone of indifference as he tucked it back in his tonfa.

By this, Reborn and Dino stared at Hibari. He was not wearing his usual smirk.

"And…" Dino paused. "If you win?"

Hibari takes out his Cloud bracelet underneath his school vest and raises it up for them to see.

"I'm leaving the Vongola."
Tsuyoshi tells a story, while Dino and Hibari engage in a final dance of death.

_Ikinaide._

The day prior to Hibari's challenge to his tutor, he requested a meeting with the baby.

"He asked me to give you this," he said as he thrust a sack full of Mapo Tofu, bigger than what Reborn's body could handle. Reborn landed on the floor just to save them.

"Thanks," said the baby, unsure of what else to say. He opened his hand and lets his pet chameleon land on it. After a short burst of unexplainable light effects, the beast opens its mouth and regurgitates what seems to be a black velvet box four times wider than his hand. "Here's my end of the bargain too." He hesitated. "Where do you intend to put him to rest?"

"There's a meadow at the outskirts of Namimori Middle School," Hibari said as he hid the box on one of the inside pockets of his gakuran. "There's someone there waiting to meet him."

"That's good to know," Reborn took off his hat and spun it around. "Fon never talked about you, or even about himself. I always thought no one cared about him."

Hibari began his exit. He did not like the heavy atmosphere that clung like film on their bodies. He already had enough weight to carry. More and he would not be able to be the cloud any longer.

"You were wrong."

It was a wrong Reborn was grateful of making. He gave a quick smile at the boy before he closed the door.

"Someone came here," said Kusakabe, a basket full of _sayuri_ and red tiger lilies on his lap when he noticed a large white rose on top of a mossy rock in front of a short pine tree.

Hibari merely hummed as he continued to violently push Kusakabe's wheelchair, making the vice-chairman surer that there's a sinister reason why he was chosen to accompany him there. This may be his resting place, fitting for his failure of going with Hibari's orders of staying out of his personal issues. Lost and forgotten, his corpse bared for the earth to decompose.

Hibari stomped on the rose and kicked it aside before he came to get the flowers.

"Those are not the usual flowers you give her," noted the vice chair as Hibari lay the basket in front of the rock.

"They mean goodbye," Hibari said, standing up slowly, hands fastened on his sides. "I won't be coming here again." He circled Kusakabe's wheelchair and seizes a small spade on a bag behind him. He paces a yard from the rock and promptly begins to dig.

"You won't visit your sister again? But you promised-"
"I'm leaving Namimori," said Hibari, eyes transfixed on his work, hacking and digging his way through the dirt and critters and other filthy things.

"What? W-Wait Kyo-san, your hand-

"You don't seem happy," he said softly. "I'm setting you free. You can finally see your family again."

"You don't understand, Kyo-san. They're no longer my family. This is my home now. You are-" he couldn't say anything else and bit his lip, trying to hold back the shock and the tears that were fighting to come out.

"Oh, but they are. Just like my flesh and blood. I can try to deny it, but it still won't change a thing," he continued to say in the quietest voice he ever heard from him.

"Is that the reason why you're leaving? To avenge Namimori? To avenge your sister? T-That won't change a thing too."

"It won't," Hibari agreed. He threw his spade in front of him and examined the hole he made. "However, you also don't understand that-" he said taking out a thin black box and dropping it to the bottom without a sound. "This is my duty as a Hibari. This was what my uncle set out to do… what my sister failed to accomplish." He then began to cover the grave. "You did not heed my warning and lost your limbs and your position. Pride was your downfall, Tetsu. The next stop will be death if you continue to defy me."

You needed protection. You refused. The chairman rarely said such sentiments out loud.

"Then let me stay here. Please, Kyo-san. I'll help rebuild Namimori. I'll stay then and wait for your return, as your sister will always-" by then his functioning hand made its way to his mouth, aghast at saying what could potentially be a taboo word.

"Hanging with those herbivores have changed you," Hibari said, plucking a red tiger lily from the pile and dropping it in the freshly-dug grave he fashioned. "I would have bitten you to death if you ever mentioned her then."

Kusakabe understood. They changed you too. "Is that the true reason why you're leaving?"

"I think my rule no longer suits this town." He began dusting off his hands. "They need a new leader. Will you not defy me this time?"

He bowed his head and shouted a reverberating yes. Hibari could only look back at the dead he was leaving behind before pushing his friend forward back to the land of the living.

"You'll do well, Tetsu," Hibari said before closing his eyes.

If something good came out of this week it would be the Mapo Tofu. No thanks to the events of three days ago, despite the invitation of free food (and overflowing champagne!), only Dino and Reborn lapped it up in a hospital room they reserved. If only the staff knew.

Lambo's appearance would have counted if not for the bite he took that burned a hole in his tongue. It sent him into a champagne drinking frenzy that ended with him half-naked and reeling outside the door, hiccupping incessantly (Reborn assured Dino that Tsuna would think of getting him back to Haru's room just two floors below).
"Even the free drinks didn't make anyone come!" Dino deliberately ignored the Thunder guardian's appearance. "The souvenir he gave was good too!"

Reborn continued chewing his tofu even though it melted already three bites earlier. He was getting a little dizzy with the wine. His infant body was getting the better of him, unfortunately. But the slight mention of Fon made him take another shot.

He opted to change the subject. "Shouldn't you be preparing for your duel with your student instead of drinking?"

Dino shot a wild look at Reborn. "Shouldn't you be used to Kyoya's incurable fighting mania?"

Reborn hummed. "He looked serious."

"Had you seen him 'smiling from his heart' then? He always knows the best way to rile us up. Thinks he's a sanctimonious bastard, but still acts like a total child, always wanting and wanting," Dino said absently, pouring another glass. They had two bottles to go. A pang shot through him. He forgot most of the Namimori citizens were underage. He should have laced fruit punches instead and served those.

"You're at fault for spoiling him rotten," Reborn interjected, making Dino nearly spill his champagne. "When will you ever learn as well?"

He snickered, ruffling his hair. "You really know when to hit it hardest."

"I'll hit you for real if you keep accepting his challenges. He was barely moving his left arm. He still hasn't fully recovered."

The Chiavarone head ate another bite before talking back. It had been awhile since Reborn and he had a moment like this. "It will be the last duel I'll have with him for awhile. My men are beseeching me to return to Italy. Said I spent too much fun playing with Tsuna and you." He tittered half-heartedly.

"When will you be leaving?" Reborn asked, staring at his glass. Throughout their talk, he never once shot a glance at his former student.

"Later, broken bones and all," he winked, now forecasting his injuries. "I've already reserved a plane."

"F*ck you too," Reborn deadpanned, making Dino fully burst into mad laughter. "You really have to show off, don't you?"

"Don't worry, I'll give a decent parting gift," he said, standing up, almost dancing as he skidded past his men, who earlier were drinking in a corner but immediately rushed to his aid, who made sure he did not trip on his boots again. "I'll make sure Kyoya stays." With that, he then fell down garishly, already drunk before hitting the floor.

His ex-student downed three bottles by himself. Jesus. Reborn shook his head, half-mockingly, half-wistfully at his leftover tofu. He wanted to call Tsuna, but given his current state, he wouldn't be a match against even a single-handed Hibari. He really had no choice but to rely on his erstwhile student. He grabbed his first glass of alcohol.

Dino never broke his promises. This might be the first.
If Tsuyoshi’s hands were still functional, he would have ripped these papers to shreds.

This was the first time he had seen his son again. His injuries seemed to have miraculously disappeared, but it was still difficult for him to stand. He was supported by his silver-haired friend, whom Tsuyoshi wanted to thank. All of his young guests wore expressions that were unfitting for their age. They looked tired. There was barely any light in their eyes, like his son had originally back when he still tucked him to bed and told him stories.

He beckons Tsuna to scatter the photographs on his lap. They lie within his sight quite accusingly.

"I," he starts before laughing lightly. He did not break the tension in the room at all. "Please sit down," he said first, motioning his head to the three chairs near the window. All of them obeyed without any fuss and encircled him; his son by his right and the Sawada kid and the silver-haired kid on the foot of his bed and on his left respectively. His eyes lingered on the oldest photo in the pile again.

"This was a week after my first mission with the Hibari children at that time." He paused. Takeshi's eyes were still fixated on the picture.

"What was the mission?" It was the Sawada kid who asked in a soft voice.

"To wipe out a certain family in Namimori. That was the primary mission of the Hibaris. To maintain discipline while being clandestine about their executions. I was the one who took this picture," he points at the picture with Saito's three children, the one where his youngest daughter's back was turned. "Their mission was the same as ours."

"Hibari-san's not doing a good job on the clandestine part."

This comment from the brunette made Tsuyoshi laugh.

"Yeah, I guess he made a terrible effort on that part. And on the killing thing," he boomed heartily. "Overall though, he really did a good job in keeping Namimori safe. Especially by himself."

"Hibari-san is amazing, isn't he?" Tsuna looked at his two friends. Even his son tried to soothe his statement with a quick smile.

Looking at this kind of interaction from the three youngsters made him wish he was their age again eating grilled meat outside his best friend's house. There were plenty of mistakes he still did not make. Hitomi and he were not even together then. Saito and his elder brother were still in good terms.

Pictures can only do so much.

"Saito introduced me to his family. I was just like the lot of you once, an unassuming first year from Nami-chuu. Was never into sports, but I liked lounging around on the rooftop. That was where I met Saito. That was also the time I let him ruin my life."

"Ruin…?"

He smiled disarmingly at Sawada. "Yes. But I only realized it too late. Because of this mistake, I could not save the woman I loved."

Hibari Kyoya looked on impassively as the Bucking horse and the baby, entered. None of them were bearing the same insipid looks his subordinates and other herbivores gave as he proceeded to
bite them dead. They looked aware of the danger, fully intent on taking in the bait he offered earlier.

Perhaps another morsel of truth would make things more exciting.

"Before we begin," he said, taking out the piece of paper he carelessly ripped from the keepsake she kept in a perlite box in her room. How long has it been since he entered it? Did that melancholic thought matter even? "I have three elder siblings. I am the youngest, Yuu is the eldest, and Kei followed her two years later. I care for neither of them."

"Then…" It was the baby who said something first, his voice hushed. "You tore that from a picture didn't you?"

He hummed. "This… was from the first family photo I was allowed to participate in." He pointed at his younger self, a herbivore with bright eyes and a smile that made him inwardly shudder. He nearly cooed at how docile he looked, a small animal who grew into a fitting beast. Father must be proud. "My sister forced my father and mother to let me be part of it. That is why we were almost out of the frame."

"Your sister… who is not Yuu?" the baby asked again.

They are nibbling the crumbs. He wanted to try tugging it, to see if they will follow.

"Her name was Nami. My family killed her, nine years ago," he looked at the picture of his sister, whose hair had been long and lustrous the day before the picture was taken. It was the price she had to pay for having him sit on her lap. He hid the photo once more inside his weapon and took a step forward. "If you defeat me, I will tell you the rest."

It had been a long time since he was the one who raised the stakes. If they wanted to play, then they play by his rules. He was the dealer. Let the games begin.

"The Hibaris never allowed strangers inside their manor. But Saito was of different stock from his parents and his ancestors. It was there that I met Hitomi, Takeshi's mother."

"She… had the same eyes and looks as your son," said Gokudera, peering at his son. On cue, Takeshi gave a quick laugh.

"I guess you'd say it was love at first sight," Tsuyoshi wanted to scratch his nose, but he leans back on the pillows instead. "We passed her by on the way, training. I was by then asking Saito a lot of questions. What was her name? Her age? Her likes and dislikes? Typical slambook stuff. Saito was in stitches by then. It was dang obvious that I had a crush on her. When I was about to go home, I plucked enough courage to talk to her. Told her she was pretty. She nearly had my head offed."

By then, his son began to laugh along with his friends.

"She was the reason why I looked forward to going to Saito's place. I even became a disciple with her on Saito's endorsement. Was the only one pleased with the arrangement. It turned out that she was from a long line of people dedicated to serving the Hibari household. And I guess all of them disliked the idea of an outsider learning the Shigure Soen Style, and eventually surpassing them."

"You really have to brag, don't you, old man?" His son spoke.

"Well I was a dang good swordsman then!" Tsuyoshi huffed. "Christ, shishou will laugh at the state I am in now."
He grinned when his son scratched the nape of his neck in reply.

"During that time, I was able to meet Saito's other siblings. He was the middle child. Fon was the eldest while Akari was the youngest. They were wary of me at first. It was unheard of for a Hibari to make friends. They eventually accepted me when I served under them during their missions. Plus they always made sure that I was the cook! Fon loved my Mapo Tofu and asked for the recipe." He looked at their young faces once again. He couldn't deny that he had some happy years there.

"Do grandma and grandpa know about your missions?"

"Of course they didn't. Saito warned me beforehand to never share personal stuff with him or with his family," Tsuyoshi replied. "I thought those days would last."

"But they didn't."

His son's eyes were downcast as he uttered those words.

He frowned. "No, they didn't. I thought Saito was the only rebel of the family. Fon was worse."

"What happened, Yamamoto-san?"

"Fon was more vocal against his family's traditions than Saito ever was," his eyes flitted at their old picture again. "He was also the desired heir of their clan. He was the prime candidate in terms of skill and bloodlust. Those two aspects did not mix well. Saito's parents wanted to make him pay. 'No' was not a part of the Hibari auditory vocabulary, so they started a war. My friend was stuck in the middle of it all."

Their first encounter was peppered with contradictions. Hibari Kyoya, who despised complications, would rank that fight with Dino as one of his worst. He had severely underestimated his then-future tutor and costed him extra duties as part of a family he had no lingering attachment to.

For one, he thought that Dino was foolish in choosing a whip as his go-to weapon. It was unpractical and costly for a whip practitioner to use it, especially in one-on-one combat.

Secondly, he misjudged the whip's speed and overestimated his. He had forgotten that he was fighting the baby's former pupil and even when Sawada Tsunayoshi was armed with nothing more than a pair of bathroom slippers he was still able to land a clean hit on him.

During their fourth encounter he had greatly overestimated his capacity to take damage. Though it wasn't as painful like most weapons he encountered, in the long run of getting knocked down by the tail end countless times made him winded enough for an opening in close quarters. He learned in their sixth encounter that Dino was also proficient enough four feet below the whip's danger zone, hiding a stiletto knife within his left sleeve.

"Reborn handed me to one of his masters when I was getting insufferable," Dino then said afterwards as he let him nurse his wounds. "Paranza Corta. Nearly got killed too. He was better than Reborn in the sink-or-swim method."

"Teach me," said Hibari and that was that.

He lunged before Dino had any chance to extend his whip. By then, he smirked as Dino gritted his teeth for the expected blow, but of course, that was not how Hibari did things. He struck where it
hits the hardest, and where they least expect it.

So he hit his left wrist. He immediately lets go of his knife.

"Now it's a fair fight," he said with a sadistic smile as he dashes for the kill.

"The Hibari family practiced this custom for generations. They always bore three children. Two boys and a girl. Saito, Fon, and Akari were the products of that practice. It was intended to keep the Hibari blood pure and strong."

"What do you mean by that, Yamamoto-san?"

"One son will smite the other and then marry his sister."

"What?"

"Can you repeat that, old man?"

"Fon was the black sheep of the family. He was never obedient to the family code, but he was without doubt the strongest. Saito even said his parents hailed him as the best Hibari child the clan had ever produced. But he was not much a team player, quite standoffish in school, and there were times I felt like he was manipulating us. But I guess for all his flaws... he still cared a lot about Saito. He left so Saito could ascend the title and live."

"But you said there was a war."

"Saito… was not a Hibari in the best definition of the name. He was too kind. He had no great ambitions, like his parents and ancestors did. He wanted nothing more than to uphold the discipline in Namimori. Fon visited from time to time. He was present at their wedding and during some family outings with Saito and Akari's children. He was fond of Nami, their third child. This picture was taken when Nami was five, three days before it happened," he pointed with his lips the picture of Fon and Saito's offspring. "Fon had a way with people. It turned out he had built an army strong enough to hold us back. The battle lasted for ten weeks. It destroyed Namimori.

"I created the ninth form during our encounter. Fon was at the helm. Hitomi was out. She lost a lot of blood. Saito was no match for him. Akari was in another unit. I was the only one who could fight from our unit then. He was about to strike Saito down when I kept him away with the form I made. I tried engaging him so Saito could get away, but I got defeated as well."

"His men wiped a lot of our clansmen. We were fully crushed. He was about to kill his parents too when Saito surrendered. He requested an armistice. He would let Fon leave Namimori for good. Fon agreed and that was the end of it. I have never seen him since."

"Why did we never know about this? Did a lot of people die?"

"I already told you," Tsuyoshi laughed. "The Hibaris uphold the discipline in Namimori. Silencing the population who survived was a piece of cake. And you're right, there was a lot of lives lost. The Hibaris were nearly wiped out from both sides."

"Was that the reason why everyone left except Hibari-san?" asked the Sawada kid.

Tsuyoshi shook his head slowly. "I had left the Hibaris by then. I have no answer to that."

"Did you leave… because of me?"
He turned at his son, his mouth a small, thin line of confusion.

He shook his head again, angry at being unable to embrace his son.

"No. It was because of Kyoya. He was three years old when he tried to kill you."

Hibari was starting to feel his vulnerability, and he was sensible enough to know that was not a good sign.

Dino was able to maintain his distance even with a fractured wrist and evaded most the Cloud guardian's critical strikes, sans the one near the base of the throat. He wasn't able to exploit the opening when Dino gagged on reflex because the Chiavarone boss made sure to strike his left forearm to get away and catch his breath.

It wasn't the same evasive tactic as last time. His tutor always had a way with mixing old and new movements. His hands were deft and made up for his subpar footwork. He was not as good in hand-to-hand combat as Kei and Fon were, he may have been slower, but he was still more skilled than him.

Then there it was again, that right sidearm and that overhand flick. It was the same move that helped maintain Dino's distance several times, ripping his uniform in the process. Always in vertical and diagonal planes, never leaving room for horizontal angles, always intimidating with a defensive screen of fast moving leather.

He would always try looking for that blind spot, would let himself get surface cuts on the way before meeting Dino's dagger or the loop for the chokehold. He had trained himself again and again to move past this, most of the time he succeeded.

Still, this fucker, he thought detachedly as he raised his functioning arm to shield one side of his face.

The outcome was always the same. He always lost.

How many battles did he had again with Dino? He could not bother counting as he begins to charge, his protected side in front. In all those encounters, had he learned something from them? He wanted to be outside Dino's shadow, and yet, no matter how strong his desire was, he could never win against him. Can he not graduate from this cycle of obsession? Or… whatever his answer may be, yes or no, was this cold hard fact, not something he forced himself to believe?

So many questions… coming from this man… it was pissing him off.

"Why..." the Chiavarone boss added another, and he was sure he was being forced to explain himself this time. "...would you want to leave? Does your family really motivate you that much to die?"

He was itching to get his Vongola gear from the Bucking horse's herbivore to finish the fight already, but of course, the last thing he needed was to be dependent on the Vongola even when he was about to leave.

"My family had always upheld the discipline in Namimori. I failed my duty due to Vongola interference. Without you and Namimori to tether me, I can do what I want."

"You might die," Dino paused. By then, Hibari seized an opening and made his way to strike him again. Unfortunately, he used the thong and reversed the handle on his whip to block his tonfa.
"I'm aware," he said flatly before lunging again. Dino retaliates by hitting his injured shoulder tendon with the hard handle. Their blows and parries were in his favour. Dino said otherwise by hitting his base pelvis and slipping away again. "Your worries don't concern me. When I bite you to death, nothing you say will matter."

It was getting more and more difficult to stand. He was chipping away his defences, slowly but surely. More visible wounds for him, but the damage he was doing was becoming significant.

His body was not used to long fights. This was the price he had to pay for winning quickly all the time. The Bucking horse had to adapt with his weapon by having a strong stamina. He was used to dragging out his clashes.

"If you had met with Reborn and me none of that would have happened. Namimori might have been saved."

Hibari's eyes narrowed. "You are still naïve. The sole reason why the Vongola herbivores are still alive is because you were absent. They will not kill herbivores, but if they find someone like you... and if you did attempt to save my hide from my brother... you would willingly die in my stead," he checked his damage again. He can still go on. His functional arm was still barely damaged. "That is just who you are." By that, he stands up again.

His smile was insufferable. "You know me so well now, don't you?" He then fastened the stiletto at the end of his handle through a ripped cloth he was hiding. "Are you still this arrogant? Do you think that by leaving us to our own devices, you can protect us from your family? You know that there are consequences for leaving the Mafia, Kyoya. It's-"

"Ah," he laughed, with Dino and the rest shuddering as he did. "You misunderstood me, Bucking horse. I chose to fight you because you were the first human who wanted to be my mentor. Therefore, if I defeat you, I am right: I don't need you."

He detested those eyes. They looked at him pitifully. Always looking at him like there's something beyond him, like they have seen the world already. Those were the same eyes she also had. "It's always the same arguments, Kyoya. Do you know why I keep up with this charade? Why I keep accepting your challenges, even though we already know who will win?" He began recoiling his whip again with his free arm. This time, however, his bemused expression was gone. "Because I believe that in one way, or another, you'll learn to accept the blessings of loss. It's how you learn. It's how you become a better person."

"You only say that because you win," said Kyoya, still impassive as he began his steps toward the danger zone again. "I've been living like this ever since I was a child. You did not matter if you lost. It will get you killed."

"Kyoya-" there was that attempt to soothe him. He did not understand why Dino reminded him of an irksome fly, always hovering above him, ready to land his appendages on his shoulder-

"My dad lost, and sister told me he was never the same. That's why I was even born. So what do you know?" He covered his tonfa with spikes by then. He checked his unused arm if it will move. Good, a few minutes will be enough. He could hear his bird twittering mournfully just above them. He could not look up. "You know nothing," he said with such clarity and contempt, savouring each syllable as he readied his arms. That arm still hurt sharply, but it had to do. He was banking it all in this last attack.

Dino shifted his weight again and began looping his bullwhip carefully. The danger zone will end up in four to six feet, and he was ready for close-quarters. Hibari took a mental note of this.
"Reborn taught me to choose my battles," he was wearing the same tired smile she gave him before she died. It made him lose his balance a little. "And then there are battles you can't ignore, that you will find yourself losing. Yet you still fight. Not to prove you're right, not to win. You fight because these battles must be fought. Maybe after this, you'll understand why I kept up with you, Kyoya."

"You regret it then?" he smirked as he extended a chain from his tonfa, hitting the thong as he readied himself for this short yet potent burst of energy from both sides. It was time to close the curtains of what could possibly be their final show.

Dino can still recall the first time he and Hibari crossed arms. It felt like a long time ago now. He can still recall that sour expression and that glint of malice in his grey eyes, tonfas bared.

"If I win in a serious fight," he said, brandishing his whip in response. "You will join Tsuna's family."

He simpered as he felt cool metal steadily pressing against his throat. He closed his eyes, his knees then giving way as he continued facing forward, unable to face his tutee behind him.

"You were right then," the victor said coolly. "There was virtue in defeat."

The Chiavarone Boss let out a joyless laugh. "Well, you did have a point. Losing definitely sucks."

He looked at the pictures again. There was the torn picture hidden from the rest. He asked Tsuna to get it.

"I only learned of their three-child policy when Saito's children were born. Hitomi and I were thinking of getting children too, by then. The aftermath of the war though, made us push back the date a couple of times.

"Kyoya was born three years after Fon left. He… being the unexpected fourth child in a long tradition of three children changed everything."

"Have you asked Saito-san why he wanted to change tradition?"

He swallowed. "No. Saito… was never the same after the war. He couldn't stomach seeing the people he grew up with dead, and his brother being the culprit. I- I guess you won't understand. You guys are young-

"We'll try old man," he could feel his son's hand on his shoulder. He must be shaking again, just like that time when Takeshi asked about Hitomi's whereabouts. He gasped.

"I guess, you can say he couldn't move on with his life. And… he wasn't able to make sound decisions. To cut the long story short… Kyoya was born and, uh, his presence was not welcome."

He waited for the questions that would sprout. None came. All of them seemed to understand Hibari to know why he would say something like that.

"Kyoya… wasn't an ordinary child. He was like… the undesirable code in the human gene pool. He- I don't know if this is too strong a word, but, Kyoya was insane. He was almost two years old when he choked our first child to death, your older brother," he paused as he looked at everyone's expressions. "Saito, that son of a bitch, commended it. Said he might be the successor they were waiting for. Hitomi never cried when she found out. She agreed with Saito and was willing to produce another child for his pleasure. It was only then that I woke up. I was able to see the true
colors of the Hibari household. I never really understood them. And when you were born, I decided that I did not want to. I left."

Tsuna excused himself as his phone vibrated. None spoke. Takeshi looked at his hands. Gokudera Hayato's eyes were focused on the window behind his son.

"I thought that they would chase after me for my treachery. I think it was Saito's doing that I'm still alive. I tried to stay. I loved Hitomi, but who was I- to believe she wanted to be saved? She was the last successor aside from me. Shishou died in the war. I never was on top of her list. She… we… we were already over before it even started."

Tsuna's heart was going to burst. Life really did not want to give him even a day break to decide on how he will go on. Just when he finally thought things would go his way this happens. He opened the door just in time to see Dino scoff, hands on the dirty floor, the metal tonfa on his neck.

He knew that one day or another, the Vongola would begin falling apart. He never imagined it to happen like this. He expected a major cataclysm that would destroy them. Not like this. Definitely not this.

"This would be the part where you kill me," Dino said sardonically. "You've become softer. Did we get to you?"

Hibari smirked. "You don't deserve to be killed by my hand."

But Tsuna understood why as Hibari walked away. He could barely move both of his arms. He used the last of his brute strength to make his tutor grovel to the ground.

"And I know about your arrangements. You'll be leaving, and with my victory, there is a high chance of us never crossing paths again."

"What-" Tsuna found his voice, and everyone's eyes were on him again. Instead of shrinking, he found his feet walking on their own, straight to his Cloud guardian's direction. "What do you mean, Hibari-san?"

His malicious grin began to fade. His tone was softer, less imposing now. "I'm leaving the Vongola, Sawada Tsunayoshi."

Tsuna wanted to ask why, but of course he knew better after listening to Yamamoto's father. Instead, he asked, "Is it because of Nami-san?"

There was an ugly pause.

"You no longer have the power to make me answer your question," he said dismissively. Hibird fluttered to his shoulder. "As you," he said, his voice becoming softer still as he turned to Hibird's direction. "Have no more reason to stay with me. I'm leaving Namimori for good."

"Hibari-san… can I ask you another question then?" Tsuna then asked as Hibird began to chirp uncontrollably before viciously nipping Hibari's ear. "As a final request?"

Hibari looked at him.

"Were we good friends to you?"

He stared before giving an empty and cruel laugh.
"You kept me in check. I did not like it. Three nights ago was the final straw."

Tsuna continued looking at Hibari, absentmindedly chewing his lip. By then, he procured the velvet box and took out the robes and threw it to his direction.

"Then go. But-" he said hesitantly. "If you want a place to come back to…"

He knew that no matter what he would say, Hibari was as stubborn as he was, perhaps more greatly so.

His outgoing guardian stares at the black clothes in his arms for a moment before walking past his direction. He thought he would receive a response.

There was none.

Dino waited for Hibari to close the door to the rooftop before staggering up. Everyone looked shaken, especially his little brother, who did not even turn to follow his ex-guardian's back.

He glanced at his hands. Kyoya made sure to expose his wrists to damage. It might be difficult for him to even climb the plane or walk. The family wouldn't tolerate absence due to wilful injury however, so he can use his flight to rest.

Reborn was wearing his usual poker face. He could barely say anything as he handed Romario a small parcel in exchange for the Cloud bracelet. He returned a weary expression when his black eyes met his.

"You idiot student of mine," he said, kicking him squarely in the face, sending him sprawling on the floor again. "You've grown weak."

Dino let out a weak chuckle. "No. Kyoya just found his resolve." Yes, Kyoya has begun to follow his own path to his destruction. It's easy for him to see now why he did not try walking that path.

"I'll kill you if I see your face again," said Reborn, just in time for them to cover their eyes and ears to the tornado of helicopter blades.

Dino was the second one to climb after Romario. Tsuna by then was walking at his direction with glassy eyes.

He tried thinking of a good comeback, a quick fixer-upper to prevent Tsuna from wiping his eyes, but he couldn't think of a genuinely optimistic way to console him.

He places a hand lightly on his shoulder, just enough for his right wrist to stop tingling too much.

"Believe in Kyoya. He'll come back," he said as Tsuna tried to laugh while rapidly wiping his face.

"Maybe if I was a better friend, he would have stayed. If I was stronger then-"

Dino wanted to say it was his failure as a worthier opponent that made Hibari leave.

"Tsuna, listen to me." By then, he let go of his shoulder and removed his mangled parka, covering Tsuna with it. "Kyoya has been used to fighting the world since he was a child. I am sure you can see it in his eyes. By this moment onwards, the world will be much harsher and more uncontrollable than we'll ever imagine but-" He patted Tsuna's head. Just a year ago, it was easier to ruffle it due to the wide height difference. Oh how he had grown. The burden will be heavy, but compared to when he assisted Tsuna during the Ring Scramble, he was sure Tsuna is more
prepared this time. "No matter how difficult it will be, I hope you won't let him battle it alone. You have your friends, Reborn, your family to rely on. Believe in Kyoya, and believe in yourself too."

*You'll get through this.* He said silently, raising a hand at Tsuna's direction before letting Romario carry him up the ladder. He knew, and Reborn knew, that this would be the push needed for Tsuna to shatter the glass ceiling he set on himself. Maybe he'll embrace his role as the boss, maybe he won't. Either way, he'll be forced to make a decision with consequences not extending beyond himself. *You fight differently for those you love, isn't that right, Reborn?*

He cursed himself for failing to help. Hibari was still too young to walk off to his doom.

He really did care too much.

There was a ramen place two blocks away from the hospital. Tsuna invited Yamamoto and Gokudera to eat their worries away there after hearing Tsuyoshi's tale.

"You know," Tsuna said as he finished his ninth bowl and ordered a tenth, to the surprise of his friends. "I never imagined that things will change so much in a single night. That things would happen like this, that our family will fall apart like this."

Tsuna noticed Yamamoto's mouth curling ever so slightly but pretended to have not noticed as he sipped more noodles. None of his friends spoke.

"And here we are, eating ramen. What the hell…" Tsuna said as he pretended his eyes were not wet. "What the actual hell are we doing…"

"At least the ramen's good," Gokudera said, as he bit on his egg. Yamamoto continued to plough through his bowl.

"Yeah, worth our walking here, right? Let's go see the stars after. There's a park a couple of minutes away."

"You sure we'll be able to see anything though?" Gokudera scoffed. "We're in the city, baseball freak. This is not Namimori anymore."

"Geez, Gokudera-kun don't be too mean on Yamamoto, ok?" Tsuna said, his spirits peaking up again at seeing their normal squabbles.

"Ehehe, but Gokudera has a right to be mean while I'm here though," grinned Yamamoto after emptying his bowl. "I'm coming with Hibari-san."

Gokudera looked away. Tsuna understood. He knew about this.

Yamamoto's earnest eyes continued to pierce at him. "I'm sorry Tsuna. I also wanted things to be ok, but they're not. They won't be if I stay."

"Honestly, baseball freak," Gokudera said, putting his hand on Yamamoto's shoulder just as the sky's eyes began to rain. "Let's go to the park. There might be stars. I want to see them with you guys." *Let's just live this lie for a moment.*

The drama was killing him. He could use a puff right now.
IX

Chapter Summary

Sasagawa Kyoko does what any fanfic writer will never attempt in their wildest dreams: Sock Hibari Kyoya.

Usotsuki.

A lot of things happened that day, comparable to the Namimori massacre three nights ago not in terms of collateral damage but in sheer revelations and psychological scars.

At least that was the case for the Tenth and Yamamoto, Gokudera surmised as he puffed another joint. Nicotine wasn't enough to calm him down this time, and Yamamoto would definitely lose it if he finds out he was smoking again, so he does this outside, a couple of meters away from the hospital. He blew the *happa* one last time when Yamamoto appeared in front of him, making him emit a high-pitched scream. His unnaturally large grin also helped.

"What did I tell you about smoking?" he asked, making Gokudera take five steps back in a span of two seconds.

"W-What are you talking about, stupid baseball freak-" laughed Gokudera nervously, just as Yamamoto closed the distance.

"At this rate, you won't be able to last by Tsuna's side. More and more people die before they reach the age of thirty due to lung cancer."

"S-Since when did you become an expert in cigarettes? And this is weed, totally different-" Well shit, that came out badly.

"Where did you get that?" Yamamoto said, just as Gokudera broke into a run and furiously began to fumble through his pockets for another. He spent almost three-fourths of his salary on fucking *happa* every other week, on some small-time drug dealer and made do in his apartment. It was a good thing his dynamites made good hiding places. His relationship with cannabis was as old as Gokudera's affinity with dynamites itself (no thanks to that stupid doctor) and the last thing he needed was Yamamoto finishing his father-son talk ahead of schedule.

"Jesus-" he cursed after three seconds as Yamamoto's long legs and baseball experience had him tumbling down the grass and made his last joint roll several feet away. His hands were tied and he couldn't even aim a kick at Yamamoto's own because the baseball freak's were far heavier. "Look, I did what you want ok? I quit on this shit since last year but-"

"Tsuna would be disappointed," said the baseball freak, his grip becoming tighter and tighter it made Gokudera more pissed off in case an asshole passes by and causes a scene when he sees them.

"What do you want me to do then?" Gokudera spat and turned away from those honest eyes. "I can't be the last person to fall apart. Especially with all the shit's happening. That's not fair. I want to be the dependable guy this time, y'know."
That escalated quickly for Gokudera, who wanted to laugh and believe that he was fucking high. Shit, he needed that last joint.

Yamamoto loosened his hold, but Gokudera did not move when his friend lowered his eyes.

"The Tenth texted earlier. He told me Hibari was leaving the family. I'm sure it's the same for you, isn't it? For your fucking selfishness, you're leaving the Tenth behind."

Yamamoto ran to get the roll instead. The storm gradually stood up and walked to his direction.

The rain picked up the roll and stared at it for several seconds. He could not ratify Gokudera's words. Instead, he holds out the rolled paper and says in a quiet, pained voice, "Please?"

Gokudera's hand ached as he dug through his pants for his lighter but stopped midway. "No. The last time I need is to teach an underage how to smoke." The Tenth would attempt to join too and brag about it to the baby, which was actually the last thing they needed. Instead, he sat by Yamamoto's side, hands settling on his crossed legs. The sky was pinkish black, devoid of those white dots but whatever. "How did the old man take it?"

Yamamoto shrugged. "Better than I thought, I guess? He didn't cry. Like he was prepared for me telling him that."

"That's usually how adults are, preparing for the worst," Gokudera agreed. "I guess that's what I admire about them the most, those adults that do grow up. Knowing they can never own up to their mistakes, but they still try to. Get my drift?"

"He said that I was still a kid," Yamamoto. "I didn't want to argue with him, so I agreed. He told me to leave after."

"Well, technically you are fifteen and a block head. At least you're sensible enough to agree."

Yamamoto reached out to hand the happa, but Gokudera waved it away.

"Keep it, in case you forget that you're still in the Vongola," he said. His phone vibrated. The Tenth invited them to ramen. *Probably to discuss earlier too.* "You're going with Hibari, huh? Do you think that asshole will agree?"

"Do you really have to ask that?" Yamamoto laughed. "I'll be trailing him. Trouble usually finds him, so my mom will definitely show up."

"Yeah good luck with that. It's gonna be a different world out there, though. We won't be there to watch your ass. I doubt that maniac would watch your back too. You still up for it?"

"It's weird that you'd agree to this," Yamamoto said as both of them walked. He returned Gokudera's present to his back pocket. "Is it because there's no more competition?"

"Dude, I got over that two villains ago. I'll be the right hand man. It's a no-brainer," Gokudera rolled his eyes. "Maybe because I get it. Rejecting your regrets. Facing your questions head on."

"That's not the reason why I'm leaving though," Yamamoto smiled, and Gokudera had to stop himself from trembling as his friend said his answer. "It's because of Gokudera. It's because of my best friend, who stuck with me even though I began thinking of jumping once more. I can't thank him enough, you know. He'd probably say, 'that stupid baseball freak' and hit me on the head again."
The storm guardian looked away. "Nah, he'd probably say, 'Stop speaking in third person' and cry."

By then Yamamoto turned at his friend. "Gokudera?"

That was ten minutes ago. Tsuyoshi could only close his eyes as the moonrise began.

"You don't have to hold your breath, you know," the man sighed as he opened one eye. "Just close the curtains a little. The light's killing me."

"Hiya, Tsuyoshi-san!" Kei chirped from behind the curtains and enthusiastically began to bathe the room in grey darkness. "Didn't think you'd be here."

"Pretty sure I'm the only reason why you even bothered to come," Tsuyoshi snorted. "Where are Yuu-chan and Hitomi?"

"They're somewhere in France meeting another client, I suppose," Kei said, stuffing his hands within the pockets of his windbreaker. "Pretty chilly tonight. I'll be catching the plane to follow them if Yuuya requests it."

"You visited Nami-chan, didn't you? Takeshi told me of your meeting," he noted, making Kei's grin falter ever so slightly. "How did it feel to see her again six feet under?"

Kei laughed fretfully. "Are you sure your heart can take this much drama, Tsuyoshi-san?"

"Figured you'd be upset," Tsuyoshi gave a mirthless chuckle. "Hitomi taunted me about Saito's death. Told me how he kept saying my name and Kyoya's, again and again even when he gurgled blood. That would have been entertaining to watch, wouldn't it?"

"He hated himself even at death's door," Kei said, his eyes losing their twinkle. "Kept blaming himself for not being a good person until the very end. It was upsetting."

"Do you sleep well at night, knowing that you played a part in his death?" Tsuyoshi's eyes glistened with malice, a sardonic smile playing on his lips. Kei's frown continued to grow bigger and bigger as Tsuyoshi began to laugh again. "I still wish Kyoya died by your hand though. That would be the irony to end all ironies."

"Tsuyoshi-san," Kei warned, his voice dropping several degrees.

"I never thought I'd see you again. Was hoping not to, you know?" Tsuyoshi said. "But here you are, the only Hibari I ever understood, but now couldn't."

Kei said nothing as Tsuyoshi continued to look at him with the utmost loathing he could muster.

"What is dead will never die," he then said as he sunk his head back in his pillows. "It took a long time to understand that stupid family catch phrase of yours. I had to lose Hitomi and Takeshi. Was it worth it?"

"Leaving sure made your tongue sharper, Tsuyoshi-san," Kei smiled.

"Doesn't matter now," Tsuyoshi sniffed. "My son is going to die, and there would be none to blame but the person you're talking to."

Sasagawa Kyoko had steadily built her own prison over the past few days. It was scary, letting other people in and hearing their anxious voices as they look at her brother's state. Tsuna and Hana
visited this morning again, mumbling their well wishes and biting back their apologies. Bianchi and Haru came as well, telling her to call them. She didn't like the thought of knowing what they really meant under their thin veils of empty hopes. She was fucking tired.

She may not know how her brother looked like when he was born, but she looked at his face when he died.

Her brother had the ingredients of being unlikable. He was ebullient, outspoken, crass in his declarations of protecting her. He was the last person to be a date in mixers and dinner parties. There were times when she saw in her parent's eyes how grateful they were to have her alone in the table as he trained late for matches three months in advance.

Before she had met Hana by the end of elementary school, she had to listen to her friend's hushed voices as they spread the thought that Ryohei was retarded, autistic, dangerous… not just a person they would poke fun of like a zoo animal.

That was the time Ryohei got the gash near his eye. Kyoko made sure to hit every single one of the girls who called her brother names and got threatened by their brothers. She did not stop crying until after morning when they returned from the hospital. Ryohei cradled him in her room, tucked her to bed, promising he wouldn't fight like that outside the ring again.

His brother said those words between his teeth though. He was a terrible liar. She was the better one. Always lying in herself to believe, even when he joined Tsuna's family, that her brother knew what he was doing.

But that doesn't matter now. Sleeping with that kind of guilt at calling out her brother's name was like nibbling through rancid meat and swallowing it because you don't have a choice. Everyone feels like ghosts that appeared and disappeared as she held her brother's hand and refusing to let go.

Another spectre came to visit again. The horrible kind. The kind that Kyoko fears and despises the most.

"I thought you left," she said in a strained voice.

The ghost replied back. "You don't need to keep watch. He's not going to wake up."

"That's what I expected you to say," she addressed him, eyes still fixed at her brother's device. "Nothing more from Hibari Kyoya-san."

"There is no point to this," said Hibari as he paced the ends of the bed. "You are only keeping him alive for your own benefit."

Her laugh dripped irony. She folded her arms. "He's still fighting though. Always had. Even before your loving brother stabbed him in the head he fought to protect me. Why should I rob him that option, tell me, you heartless bastard?"

"People don't really come up with creative insults," Hibari drawled. "Couldn't expect more from his sister-"

Kyoko did not expect her fist to land and send him reeling on the floor. Three steps and a cheap shot were enough to make this tyrant fall on his knees. She cringed as she felt her hand ache and gingerly covered it with her sleeve. This was what her brother felt, what the others felt when they were fighting. She thought it would make her feel powerful. That was what her brother looked like whenever he landed a blow.
“This is your first time hitting a man,” Hibari noted as he cupped his cheek. "Well done."

“You think letting me hit you is going to make me satisfied?” Kyoko murmured, gritting her teeth. "I wish you were there when that— that monster sneered at me and gave me this," she rubbed her bandaged throat. "I've been training nonstop since Tsuna-kun and you guys came back, but still nothing changed. I'm still a liability. I am still not strong enough to do anything."

"There's no point in letting yourself get tethered to the past. Be done away with him and begin anew. You can only move forward, Sasagawa Kyoko."

She raised her fist again, but could only hide it under the folds of her blanket as she winced at the pain. God, nothing did change.

"Is that the lie you often tell yourself, Hibari-san? Look where it led you," Kyoko said, turning at his direction, eyes wild, mouth unable to form any clear expression as she bore her gaze at his empty stare. "You're alone again. Back to where you started."

“You are in no position to pity me,” Hibari said. "My siblings decimated your family."

"I can't help it. My friends often told me my kind of character wouldn't fit scenarios like this one," she said tiredly. "And you saved my brother three years ago. I will never forget that. I still think there is good in you, even when you don't believe it yourself."

"That was what my sister said as well. It costed her life," said Hibari with no hint of remorse. He stood up. "All of you herbivores think the same. It gets boring for long."

"Did you stay in Namimori because of her?" Kyoko asked. "You don't need to answer, Hibari-san. It just shows that you're lying to yourself again. And that's the worst type of liar."

"The Vongola has severely underestimated your way of getting into people's heads, Sasagawa Kyoko," Hibari smirked.

She shook her head, her sight dulling as she looked at the beeping device again. She held onto her brother's warm hand again. "No. I guess it's because I know you're every bit as human as I am. Take care, Hibari-san."

Tsuna and Gokudera were the only people Yamamoto embraced before leaving.

"You sure you can walk without my help?" said the storm when he gave his katana.

"I'll be fine," Yamamoto gave them the thumbs up. Tsuna could only rub the sleep from his eyes as he waved.

"You should hurry. Hibari-san's waiting for you," he yawned as he leaned on Gokudera's arm. "Jesus, you could have left after the ramen thing. Then I would be having a good night's sleep."

"But you were bawling your eyes out," Yamamoto grinned.

"Don't insult the Tenth!" his friend said heatedly. "Just get out of here. Don't fucking stall."

"Sorry…” Yamamoto scratched his head. "Later then."

"At least think of something cool to say. The heck, this just shows how bad you are at saying goodbye," Gokudera yelled back as Tsuna began to cry again. "Come back in one piece, you hear? I'm counting on you! Jeez, I sound like a third-rate shounen character what the hell… And don't
look back- What the fuck, baseball freak I said-

Yamamoto couldn’t help it as he turned to their direction one last time and gave them one last enthusiastic wave. They were home. He must come back. He has to see their smiles again.

He did not expect Tsuna to be right and see Hibari Kyoya several yards away, leaning back on the concrete wall, eyes narrowing as they caught sight of him.

"Are you sure about this, Yamamoto Takeshi?" he said softly. "There is a possibility that you will not see those herbivores again after this."

"Woah, I didn't expect that you'd agree with Tsuna's request of letting me tag along."

Hibari's eyes darted on the sides as he let Yamamoto drone on. "I needed a crony herbivore capable enough of following my orders. Our goals align somewhat. I do not care what you call this contract. Before you interrupt-" he said just as Yamamoto was about to open his mouth. He nodded in assent. "-I want you to listen closely because I have no intention of repeating this again. I will be asking you to cut down people, to ruin families, to break every single rule your father and this society has forced you to make. There is a chance you will be branded as a felon and you may get imprisoned and not see your fellow herbivores again. I have no intention of letting you live if you do not abide by my orders. Do you understand, Yamamoto Takeshi? I do not believe in the power of friendship, in family, in all that pretentious bull because they do not matter. I only want to bite to death everyone that stands in my way."

"Ehehe, you really sound like a scrooge, Hibari-san."

"You are wasting thirty seconds of my time," he said, looking at his watch. "Three seconds. Will you agree or will you return to your fellow herbivores?"

After a few minutes of seeing his friends, this man was asking him to throw them all away to make way for his war path. This man was asking him to lose his humanity just to see his mother again.

"I'll follow you," said Yamamoto, just as three consecutive black sedans park in the lane opposite them and began to open their windows. He could only below his surprise as he heard the sound of bullets as they ricocheted of his double katanas. Hibari was already running through one car, throwing hand grenades and letting them explode. Five more cars where still on the road opposite them.

"They are early. This must be her doing," he snarled, just as he sliced through the front and rammed his before jumping again to avoid enemy fire. "You wasted five seconds already. Make up for it. Impress me."

"Eh, you know who these people are?" Yamamoto said in bewilderment as Hibari continued to rain more bombs from his sleeves. "And how did you get those bombs?"

"The baby's parting gift," he said simply. "Leave a car. I have two stops before leaving this place once and for all."

"But who are these people, Hibari-san?" he shouted as he began to unload his blue flames.

"The people who are not allowed in Namimori," he drawled just as the Nami-chuu ringtone began to play across the din. Hibari continued to rush towards them, more and more bombs sliding down easily from his sleeves. Yamamoto could only stare as Hibari throws him his phone.

Reborn was on the line. "Yo, apparently you're already on the most wanted list of multiple families."
"What?" said the rain guardian as he rushed to look for a car that wasn't occupied by men in suits and not yet blown sky high. Hibari's presence was not helping him make it any easier.

"Yo, Yamamoto. Tell Hibari to watch out just in case and destroy this phone afterwards. It won't be smooth sailing from now on. I've also arranged the boat that Hibari requested. It will be leaving the port in thirty minutes."

"Eh, ok thanks…" he managed to catch a car but managed to avoid multiple bullets from the people inside it. He had no choice but to burn the car in his flames for the men to slowly climb out with blank smiles on their faces…

Only to get stabbed in the throat by the erstwhile cloud guardian.

"Hm. Looks like you're busy. Ciao ciao!" The line went dead, along with the phone as Hibari crushed it under his left foot. Yamamoto could only look on as Hibari removed his half-burnt shirt and removed a blood-spattered polo from one of his victims. He could only stare at the carnage he made. The sky was turning blue.

Hibari's expression was coy. "We're wasting precious time, herbivore. Do not tell me this is the limit of your resolve." He wrested a body off the wheel. Yamamoto stared at its vapid eyes before Hibari nonchalantly kicked it away.

"How-"

"No more questions. I'm getting rusty. It's been five minutes. You only have two seconds to-" Hibari broke into a smile when Yamamoto shoved a body out and made his way to the back seat. "I see. I like that expression," He turned the keys. The engine roared. "Let us begin."
Chapter Summary

Reborn gives a crash course on ethics and developmental psychopathology to a bunch of teenagers. He doesn't let it end there.

"We are all powerless in the face of evil. No, no, that's not true. We are powerless when we wait for other people to act on our behalf. Yes, that's it. The truly powerful man is the man who stands alone."

-F.H. Batacan, Smaller and Smaller Circles

Ussëndayo.

[play]

Woman's voice: Hello, Kyoya-kun. How are you today?

Kyoya: It's a good day.

Woman: That's great! On a scale of one to 10, how will you rate today?

Kyoya: A ten.

Woman: Wow, such a high score. How old are you now, Kyoya-kun?

Kyoya: Nine.

Woman: I see then you're in elementary school?

Kyoya: No. Mother and father said I won't be going to school like Yuu-nee and Kei-nii and Nami-nee-chan.

Woman: Oh can I know why?

Kyoya: Teacher was boring, so I stabbed teacher's face with the pencils jii-san gave me until there were lots of holes.

Woman: How old were you?

Kyoya: Six.

Woman: Oh, I see How did you feel when you did that?

Kyoya: Happy.

Woman: Why did it make you happy?

Kyoya: Because I thought that someday I was going to kill somebody for real.
Woman: Did you ever try?

Kyoya: I choked Tsuyoshi-san's baby.

Woman: Do you think that's the reason you're here?

Kyoya: No.

Woman: Then why do you think you're here?

Kyoya: [long pause] Because no one likes me.

Woman: That's not true, Kyoya.

Kyoya: But mother and father don't visit. Nami-nee-chan's gone. You look at me like everyone does. And I can't keep it away. It keeps building up, and then I have to do it. I have to bite you all to death.

"Let me ask a question," said Reborn a minute after Tsuna pressed the stop button. The tape Tsuna nicked had presented some juicy information in piecing together the enigma known as Hibari Kyoya. It may tell them why he left the Vongola as well as bridge the events from where Yamamoto Tsuyoshi left off until Kyoya's return to Namimori. Their faces, however, showed none of the fascination he expected them to wear on hearing a child Hibari expressing his murderous tendencies. Chrome and his tutee were tremulous, eyes fixated on the wall as they continued processing what they have just heard.

It had only been less than eighteen hours since Dino left for Italy, two hours since he made final contact with Yamamoto Takeshi and forty-five minutes after Tsuna shared everything that happened from when he opened Hibari's sister's room. The past few days were a lot to take in. He had been used to lasting up to 97 hours per mission in his days of yore, killing or losing his partners, but losing a comrade like Fon was a first time in forever. He felt he was getting old, but laughed at himself whenever he looked at the mirror. Stress was not enough to make him grow up, unfortunately. He looked at the remainder of Tsuna's guardians in the semi-circle, sans the Bovino kid as he went, "Let's pretend that each of you is on the way to the airport to catch a flight, but your car breaks down in the middle of god-knows-where. What do you do?"

"Uh, Reborn…" Tsuna trailed off. "How does this have to do-

Jesus Christ, it had been a year of preparing this dunce for this moment and nothing seemed to have entered his head. "I called Hibari this morning." Reborn placed his phone on the table. "His desertion ruffled a lot of feathers. Made factions of the Vongola go on a full-scale manhunt to track him down. If you want me to keep talking, answer my question, dame-Tsuna."

"Ok, I'll call a friend or you to pick me up," Tsuna pressed, intent to keep the conversation rolling instead of letting Reborn bide his time. This must be what frustrated him the most about him, he mused with a smirk; his hyper-intuition rarely, if at all, left a dent on his home tutor.

"I'll book a later flight," Gokudera grunted.

"Look for a taxi," suggested Chrome.

"And what if those options don't work?" Reborn said, tapping the table. These kids are naïve. As expected. These were teens conditioned to embrace conformity than deviancy. Products of a collectivist culture. They gave reasonable options, but not his kind of option.
"Geez, then commute, take a bus, train, whatever..." Tsuna rolled his eyes. "This is Japan, for crying out loud..."

"Or get a tow-truck driver," was the mist guardian's meek reply.

"Well, here's another possibility," Reborn said. "You could take a taxi, but not pay for it when you get to the airport. It's a quicker and cheaper way to get there on time. Have you thought of that?"

"...You're crazy," Tsuna said in shock. "Why would I-"

"Precisely, you don't think of that, because that's not a morally good thing to do," said Reborn. "You blind yourself from the possibility of immoral actions, but it wasn't impossible until I suggested it." He turned at Gokudera. "You thought of that option, haven't you?"

"It's not a question of what you can't but what is inadvisable to do."

"You do understand what I'm trying to say," said Reborn. "Ok then, I will ask another question. Listen to me, because I am trying to ingrain into your head what kind of person your ex-cloud guardian is. Why do you think my suggestion was wrong?"

Tsun bit his lip and let Gokudera speak first. "If I do that, I might get arrested."

"If my mom finds out she'll kill me. Dad... not so much," Tsuna shrugged.

"Then it's not because it was immoral per se, but because we did not play by society's rules like we were conditioned to. We expect punishment then." Reborn was getting pissed off. He was looking for a different answer. Gokudera was not even trying to help him at all.

"Because it will make me feel bad," said Chrome, making the baby turn his full attention at her. "Because... the taxi driver may have kids and-"

"Ok, then let's go back to Hibari's example." They were finally getting somewhere.

"I don't understand," his tutee interjected. This was getting cumbersome. Reborn began to tap furiously at the table. "You still haven't explained to me why you decided to help Hibari even though you said he's now an enemy of the Vongola."

"Answer me first then. Why do you think Hibari's actions were wrong, if that's what you got from the tape?"

It was Chrome who answered again. "Because he hurt someone. Because he wants to do it again."

Reborn nodded. "Do you see where I'm getting at now? It's no longer merely an issue of deviancy. He harmed another human being and a person of authority. A person capable of punishing him." His tutee wanted to open his mouth, so he continued. "He doesn't fear punishment, nor does he fear performing acts of cruelty. He even admits to relishing it. People like him don't have a moral compass, and this is rare. But it's rarer to have a person like Hibari who never developed a moral compass since he was a child. He did choke Tsuyoshi's child to death when he was barely three, didn't he?"

"Gee, maybe it's because his parents were a bunch of assholes," his student put forward.

"Yeah, but didn't you say the same thing about your parents? I'm sure Chrome and Gokudera's were worse than yours. Why then didn't you grow up to become like Hibari Kyoya?"
Tsuna finally looked at him dumbly, eyes wide and then sombre. He finally got it. He stuffed his hands on his pockets as he paced to the left corner of the room. Gokudera merely looked on at Reborn who only nodded at his direction.

"Maybe it's not just because you had a shitty life that made you want to kill everyone. It's just that shitty life made it easier for traits like Hibari's to manifest. And that's what's unfair. Life dealt him a shitty hand, but he still plays with what he has. If he had been given the choice to change, like us normal people have, then maybe he would have stayed, if not for your sake, then for Namimori's sake." Reborn drank the rest of his doppio on the table. "Just knowing the context of this recording is enough for even a dunce like you to think that Hibari never had a chance even as a kid to live a normal life."

"What, so I'm supposed to dance to your melodies about empathy now?" Tsuna said bitterly. "I'm not that stupid Reborn. What's in it for you, helping him if he is what you say he is? You haven't been bending your self-imposed rules of immunity and loyalty to the Ninth until his siblings came and-"

"Murdered and skinned my friend's face, set Namimori on fire, and killed a lot of people who were a major part of my other idiot student's life," Reborn said flippantly. "I'm a gambler through and through, you know that. It began by accepting the Ninth's offer to go to Japan and training a kid who had zero chance of making a difference. It's still a game, but the stakes are higher now. I'm not just staking my reputation anymore. I'm staking my position as the Ninth's close associate and your home tutor to make sure they pay. But I've got my hands tied. I don't have any cards left. That's why I'm gambling it all on this one card. Your wild card. I'm no longer playing this game alone."

Fucking hell. The look on his tutee's face despite his attempts to drop his guard seemed to not be working.

"But this is not a game, Reborn," he said, in an expression that made him both proud and livid because it was a side he showed only once. Back at Namimori shrine, on those steps. When his student became the teacher. When he made a promised he kept. "This was never a game. If this was a game, then it would have ended by now. Our checkmate." Tsuna said in a wistful tone as his gaze penetrated Reborn far better than his orange eyes could. "I'm sorry, I thought you were thinking we're collateral again."

"If you were, I wouldn't have shot Hibari Yuu and her mooks who sniped you," Reborn sighed. "And this is not a fucking chess match, you got that?" he added in a gruff voice. The whiny Tsuna two days ago was not manifesting this time. It shook his very core to see this aura emanating from him. He was using his rawness and melancholy with such ease in shooting him down. His training was paying off. He had to congratulate himself with the leftover champagne later.

"Yeah. I never got to thank you," Tsuna said with a smile. "Sorry, I've been forgetting a lot of stuff nowadays. Too wrapped up in my bubble."

"W-Why is the Tenth a-all brooding all of a sudden?" Gokudera gasped, ruining the moment and making the baby draw out his gun.

"You really have to fawn at the wrong time, don't you?" Reborn snorted as he pointed his gun at him. "Anyway, I should thank you for steering us on track again instead of going into more sappy shit. Hibari's the most wanted man in the underground right now. The Vongola's more than happy to get his mangled body for a generous sum. By generous, I meant enough to buy a fucking country."
"I thought the Ninth-

"Yeah, he's losing support and power even outside the family," Reborn's onyx eyes darkened further. "Who knew our wild card could bring down the biggest underworld power to its knees… The other families are also in chaos since it was unheard for deserters to be ceremoniously left alone. Paranoia's the number one problem in the underground now. A lot of them are killing would-be deserters. The Vongola is also clipping its members as we speak."

"Reborn’s not telling us everything," Tsuna said as he took out his phone. "Dad called earlier. He told me to check social media. We’re trending on Twitter and Google."

"What?" said Gokudera and Chrome in unison as they turned on their phones.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Now Reborn was more than pissed off.

"Oh right, I forgot you're an old timer," his tutee said, enough to make Reborn smack him in the face at the insult. He took the remote of Reborn's hotel room and turned on the TV.

Every Japanese news channel was showing the outside of their hotel. The tutor could not help but curse as he saw the headlines: The heir of the Mafia could be Japanese. The future Mafia Boss is a junior high school student? Video captured shows the future Don in Japan. Teenage Boss linked to Namimori incident…

"The Ninth had to stay in Italy to do damage control. My dad will be picking us up in two hours."

Reborn scanned the newsfeeds and livestreams from Gokudera's smartphone, only to throw it at Gokudera's unprepared arms when the thumping from the locked doors become more prevalent, followed by rowdy voices and jibes. Based on what the TV was feeding them, they were at the other side of the mahogany.

"Dad told me the Omertà had been broken. You were right. We chose the wrong people to cross."

"Didn't expect you to call so soon," said a brash voice on the other end. "How are things?"

"We're leaving Japan in half an hour," Reborn said as he put on his Leon sunglasses and recoiled on his leather seat. It pays to get a good stretch sometimes, especially inside a private jet.

"That's not the best course of action," the voice noted. "The family's in an uproar. Consolidating with companies in Silicon Valley, using their moles to lessen the damage, but it's been done. It doesn't stop with your wimpy student. Law enforcers are ramming through our hideouts from different countries… The leaks are appalling. Everyone's pointing fingers everywhere. They might even use that pipsqueak as a scapegoat."

"And where are you and your lackeys now, Squalo?" he cackled. "It doesn't sound like you're in the HQ."

"Voi, we're on a mission right now. Your pal, remember? We finally got a lead on where they are. Mammon's another key to this fiasco. The CEDEF head may debrief you on arrival."

The baby hummed. A seat behind him, his student was succumbing to sleep, his right hand's shoulder the perfect pillow. The mist guardian was across his aisle, eyes looking out the airplane window in wonder. This must be her first time. "Hibari gave me a quick run through about his siblings before he left," he said before a pause. "Take care of yourselves."
His laugh was static on the other end. "Are they really that dangerous?"

"The eldest was enough for me to draw my gun to kill. I only got her finger. She did not even try showing her abilities to me. Hibari warned me that flames wouldn't work on them."

"Now that gets my blood running. Finally, a fucking challenge," he boomed. Reborn could imaging Squale's mood whiplash as he continued over the phone. "You helped Hibari escape didn't you? It won't help you. I've been tracking their whereabouts."

"Oho, did you put a tracking device on your disciple's phone?"

"Nah, my stupid disciple's posting on Instagram. Fucking hell, I've never met a buffoon like him. It's like the entire Mafia's not watching his every move."

"You really care about Yamamoto a lot, don't you?"

"Not a fucking chance," Squale scoffed. "If the militant knew about you helping Hibari escape his death sentence, it might cost you."

"I know what I'm doing."

"Jesus Christ, you are as reckless as they say. My Boss' old man can't protect your student anymore. He might lose both his candidacy and his life if you keep this charade going. You are not doing what's beneficial for the Vongola."

"I am doing what I think is beneficial."

"This is fucking insane. You want my honest opinion? Leave that fucking pipsqueak, let him be strip off his rank and live a normal life. What you're currently doing will lead you nowhere."

"What are you talking about?" the baby cooed. "I'm taking the quickest possible shortcut."

He could see the revelation dawning on Squale by then. He was a good player, but of course, Reborn was better. Squale may act brazen, but he is calculating, aware of when he will lay down his cards. He is nothing like Reborn. He plays just for the thrills and seeing his poor opponents not knowing what hit them.

"This is the last, Reborn." Squale finally said his name. "Leave Sawada Tsuna and not risk making the Vongola your enemy."

By then Reborn began to laugh. The audacity. The boldness. The _fear_. He could taste it all, and more. "I should say the same to you," he said coldly, his grin wide. "Don't forget who you're talking to." He hung up.

No turning back. That was a declaration of war. He will respond in kind, but now he needed his nap.
XI

Chapter Summary

Hibari makes three assumptions that day, and then one more.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I feel no compulsion to do right by the people who interview me. In fact, sometimes I want to do wrong, even if the only person who suffers is myself.”

-Chuck Klosterman, Something Instead of Nothing

A prologue

No one knew of this except Hibari Kyoya, the man he called, and I, the storyteller. It happened a year ago.

“Father,” he said with nary a hint of respect. “Lend me a helicopter. I have to make sure my herbivores return to Namimori alive.” He had gotten hold of his number and address through patience and hard work, as well as a few head rolls.

“Is that you, Kyoya?” he heard his father say. His voice was weak, his melancholy stronger. “Are you still in Namimori?”

“I have no intention of seeing any of you,” he said flatly over the receiver, asserting himself over the person on the other end. “I only need your answer. Will you assist me or not?”

“...Don’t you want to see your father again? Or your beloved mother? She misses you so much.”

“Mother never acknowledged my existence. Even when my sister had me eat dinner with you one time. She could not even look at me.”
“Really? But your mother talks to you in her sleep. She wants to hold you in her arms, Kyoya. Come home.”

“No.” He will keep repeating it until necessary.

“Kyoya, come home. You have been gone for too long. Don’t you want to see us, your family?”

He was wasting his time letting his father ramble on about times that will never return. “Nami was the only one who treated me like so.”

“Nami? Who is this? Then let her come with you. Your mother will cook for us your favorite hamburger steak.”

“Even in your state you haven’t forgotten my preference for hamburgers, and forgotten about your daughter.” There was no judgment or pity. “Will you accede to my request or will you waste my time begging?”

“…Will you come back if I send it to you?”

“No.”

“Will you say ‘I miss you daddy’ if I do?”

“No.” He will repeat as necessary.

“I need something succinct in return.”

“Then there is no need to talk-“

“Wait, ok!” his dad gasped, voice breaking. Vulnerable. It was unbecoming of him, a Hibari patriarch. There were times Hibari wished that he did not have this man’s blood in his veins, but wishes can only go so far. “Just- just talk to me. How are you? Please. I only want to hear how you’re getting by. If you’ll ever forgive us.”
“I want to kill you.” There was no hesitation in his answer. “I want to kill you, and mother, and sister, and brother. I am preparing myself for that day. Are you in high spirits to meet me then, father?”

“Kyoya-“

“I need the helicopter in three hours. My subordinate will be in Okinawa to get it.”

He did not wait for his father to reply.

Doke.

There were three things Hibari Kyoya postulated that day.

Firstly, he knew he was different. He had a childhood he did not believe was worth mentioning, no matter how Nami would say otherwise. He knew how much he stood out like a big and shining middle finger from the population at large and that it wasn’t his fault. Instead of wallowing in reasonable self-hatred and insecurity against crowds in general, he resorted to ways that wouldn’t acknowledge his self-pity.

But that was only when his sister died and life presented another new prison for him to enter. His parents must have thought by exiling him in a remote area with no one but people in lab coats and uniforms to talk to, it would be enough to break his spirit.

Ah, but of course, he was used to being underestimated. They did try though. He can commend that.

He was also used of people giving him indiscernible expressions when he expressed his feelings, or told the truth. The last doctor who left him in solitary confinement did try his best, but he could not suppress that expression and the emotion that was so hard for him to grasp. He would find out that he was diagnosed with a disorder that painted him as a threat to the population, as they should. The passing guard kindly explained to him the best way his ten-year-old mind could grasp.

“You are insane,” he said, adding extra spittle to make Hibari clearly understand that he resented him. “Your likes don’t deserve to be even born.”
He had heard worse. His mother pretended that he didn’t exist whenever they were in the same room. She did not fill his plate with food like with his siblings. He tried throwing food at her though, or the small butter knife, but she made extra effort to not get mad even if her cheek bled or her mouth was not spared from the hot miso bowl.

His elder brother nearly strangled him when he set his mother’s kimono aflame one day.

“You are not family. You can’t exist. You are nothing. You do not deserve to breathe the air we breathe. Die die die die-“

Nami saw this of course and proceeded to risk her life to get Hibari out of his hands. She could never walk the same way again.

It was also the same kind of emotion Yamamoto Tsuyoshi gave as he raised his katana to nearly slit his throat when he tried choking his other child. The child who eventually would be sitting behind him and talking inanity that unfortunately, concerned him and the events last night.

Hence, he approaches his second truth: Yamamoto Takeshi was going to die. But not now. And not by his hand.

“What? No way!” The baseball herbivore shot a nervous glance at the rearview mirror before lowering his voice, “Kyoko-chan was the one who did the bruise on Hibari-san’s cheek? I thought that was Dino-san’s!”

“If you spell that out again, Hibari will kill us!” The silver herbivore hissed from the other end. “And why the hell are you calling us? This convo could be tapped!”

“Oh, right I forgot we’re fugitives now,” Yamamoto laughed. “I called because I missed you guys.”

“Then call us elsewhere, geez. Don’t forget to throw this phone away when you’re done!” Yamamoto continued to guffaw at Gokudera’s exasperated orders. “I have to go. The Tenth’s gonna spill everything he knows to Reborn and I don’t wanna miss that. And the stupid Miura girl was really ballistic earlier mumbling about Hibird being missing or something- ugh, good morning too, bitch…”

Hibari’s knuckles whitened at the mention of the yellow puffball but he kept himself fixated on the
road. It must have drowned itself or flew to Namimori Junior High, its natural habitat. He should have let it burn along with its fellow Hibirds in the reception room.

He had been used to improvising. Things do not need to necessarily go according to plan. Isolating these factors was a wall he was unafraid of breaching.

He let the baseball herbivore make the first move.

“S-Sorry about that, Hibari-san!” he said, palms pressed as he gave a quick bow.

“You were talking about me.” Not that it mattered. He did not like chatter, but he disliked the current playlist on the radio to get him occupied.

“Oh, you heard?” the herbivore laughed nervously. “Y-Yeah, you’re just so mysterious Hibari-san. I mean you always were the talk of Namimori. You and your origins…”

“That is one thing herbivores are good at,” he replied loftily. “Gossiping in your little groups and piecing apart a person outside your group... Embellishing points, omitting parts that do not suit your needs, spinning your own lies… quite a pernicious way to destroy a person. But it will not work on me. Do whatever you wish.”

“Eh…” the herbivore scratched his nose and began looking at the window instead. “My old man talked about you the last time before I left though. He painted you in a bad light,” he paused. “I- I couldn’t accept it.”

“That was how your father remembered it.” Hibari was unperturbed. The first hypothesis he had for himself still rang true. He knew he was a monster. “Anyone can choose what they want to remember.”

“He hated you. He did not need to spell it.” Herbivores can surprise him sometimes. Sawada Tsunayoshi was a jack-in-the-box equivalent. He did try sending him the most surprising one his herbivores could find when the baby required them to give him a birthday present a year ago. He managed to battle the baby to a stalemate as comeuppance. Of course, the birthday herbivore did not find it amusing and promptly burst into tears.

The baseball herbivore now had an expression that was… unbecoming of him. He found this amusing. “You did kill my older brother. You did try killing me.”
“And here you are, providing me assistance,” Hibari sneered. They passed by the ‘Welcome Namimori’ sign. “Fate can be coy.” It came in flashes. The long dark hair like a raven’s wing before it was unceremoniously shorn. The cheeky smile. The warmth of her arms that were not bone-like as her mother’s and sister’s. And then that voice like a lark as her thin lips uttered his name. “And cruel.”

Then her death. And of how he could not grieve.

What was dead never died. It only grew stronger.

/18/

The third assumption he made was something he said out loud.

But Hibari did not begin his part through that sentence. Instead he recounted another memory. This was a week ago. It was also another phone call and only I, Hibari and the one from the other end.

“I take it Kei has tossed you the meat of our visit?”

“I was the one meant to kill father,” he said bluntly, all polite conversation forgotten as his grip tightened on his tonfas. “I want to bite you to death and chew off your head.”

“You need to work on your catch phrase,” his sister paused. “Kei told me of your conditions. I will spare your herbivores unless they interfere.”

Hibari said nothing then. Instead, he reclined in his seat and began to think. “What will be your plan afterwards?”

“You will no longer be a part of it,” Yuu said. “You do not need to know.”

“How did father die? Did it cause him great pain?”

“He could not remember Namimori until the bitter end.”
“Fucker,” he said detachedly.

“Do not forget your oath,” she continued. “You will leave Namimori and your fellow herbivores.”

Hibari hummed.

Yuu did not attempt to stop her call. There was hesitance, a first. “Why did you stay? If you hated our home, our town so much, to let us destroy it, why didn’t you leave?”

“I promised.”

“Why break it then?”

“I am tired of keeping it.”

“…Nami did love you. Before she died and before you got taken away, she wanted to see you.”

“Will this be the last call you give me?”

“It is.”

“Then goodbye.”

“I apologize for what we did, Kyoya. And for doubting you… You did well.”

“Were those her last words?”

“No. They are mine. May we never meet again.”
Hibari dreamt for the first time that day. He dreamt of the night Nami gave him a name.

The third assumption Hibari made was something he said out loud.

The manor was reduced to rubble and ash. Like my family will soon be. He thought with no sense of attachment as he went on ahead. The baseball herbivore will follow suit, else he has no choice but to rid of his second assumption and bite him to death. Promptly, he made way to the spot were that detestable room was near the basement.

“Dig,” he promptly ordered his herbivore as he folded his arms and supervised. His stature and training made up for the difficulty of the task.

“What am I looking for, Hibari-san?” he asked, as the bloodstained tatami started to surface underneath the debris.

“A body. A girl. Seventeen.” After barely finishing his request Hibari made his way through his other stop. Namimori’s room. The wooden drawers made sure the rest of the kimonos were destroyed. A few minutes of scattering the rest of them away revealed the perlite box. Resistant to fire. His sister did think of everything.

Sawada Tsuna and Tetsu had scoured the letters and the tape of his interviews along with her photographs, but he cared for neither. He had no need for nostalgia. They, however, did not get the clothing. The only tangible memento of Namimori for the uncle she never got to meet again. He took it all.

Yamamoto Takeshi only held a withered hand apprehensively when Hibari returned. “This was the only thing that didn’t crumble…” he trailed off sheepishly. “Whose-”

Hibari said nothing as he took of his robes and placed it in the box. He glanced at his watch again. “Call our transport. We will be late.”

“But I don’t-“ Hibari seized his phone midway through the sentence and punched the dial. He gave it to the baseball herbivore to settle their tardiness. “Many thanks, old man!” he said and then gave Hibari the thumbs up, only to catch the robes Hibari tossed at his direction and made their way to
“We have one more stop,” Hibari said as he stomped on the clutch and sped off. “Do not ask anymore questions,” he then said before Yamamoto could raise a hand.

“But based on our estimation, the port’s only ten minutes away.”

“We will be leaving Namimori,” he said brusquely. “And go the next town over.” He raised his tonfa before the herbivore could raise another inquiry.

/18/

It was a quiet subdivision, with houses embracing conformity and cool indifference. Hibari stared at the number 18 of one signpost, along with its ‘For Sale’ sign sticking out behind it.

He ignored Yamamoto’s silence pleas to know what was unfolding in front of his eyes. He shall know. He shall be the sole witness. He signalled him to ring the doorbell.

Hibari Kyoya did not believe in nostalgia. It was a deceitful lens that would not assist him in moving forward.

But there it was, forming in a malleable form in front of his eyes as a teenage boy with floppy brown hair and hazy eyes opened the door. His expression was unfathomable once he made eye contact.

“Where is nee-san?” he whispered. The herbivore in his back understood and did not let go of the box. It was the same expression as the boy’s. Of Ui’s. That was how his sister pronounced his name anyway.

The baseball herbivore forgot his place and he had to make him remember. One slap from his tonfa was enough for him to drop the box and for him to catch it.

Ui’s expression changed into something he knew all too well when he opened it. It was a blur by then. At least, that was all his brain could process. There was a short burst of pain from the base of
his skull. He was heavier than he estimated as he tumbled on top of him and began to land blows to his body. He raised his hand for the baseball herbivore. His punches should be weaker, but they weren’t. They stung. They bruised. They ached-

“What the fuck-“ he murmured then. “What the fuck-“ he said, louder this time as he howled like a wounded animal. No one was coming to catch this sight. It was nearing the middle of the day. His parents must still be at work. Or no one bothered. He knew how that was like. “Where’s your sister? Where is she?” he continued to wail as he grabbed his collar and flesh as if they were neither.

“She’s gone. She died nine years ago. Same as your sister.”

“What took you so long? What took you so-“

Hibari raised his hand at Yamamoto’s direction again as another blow drew blood from his lower lip. He had more backbone than he estimated. This was interesting.

“I did not care. What else? She was ugly when she died. I wanted her body to roast to burn that ugliness away-“

By then, the unfettered rage in his face began to disappear. Instead he bit his lip and tears started falling out from his eyes. Hibari frowned by then as he began to stand and wipe his pink and bloodstained hands.

“Leave. I don’t want to see or hear from you again,“ he then said as he stowed the box under his right arm. “There is no point in punching you. My sister will stay dead, and your life will never equal hers.”

“And who are you to make such a notion?” Hibari drawled after he coughed out a tooth. “You are pitiful. Reduced to a state like that, unable to even avenge your sister-“

“You’re the pitiful one, Kyo-kun,” he said, shaking as he gritted his teeth. “No matter how you try to make amends, it won’t change. Saya-nee and your sister are dead and you did nothing. You have to carry this burden for the rest of your life. Now get out of our lawn.”

/18/
Hibari’s third assumption was something he said out loud. For real this time.

They managed to make their way to port and went inside an old fishing boat. Yamamoto was quiet throughout the rest of their journey. Hibari could not let it slide as he dressed his wounds.

“You are not your talkative self,” he went.

“Why didn’t you fight back?” he said, unable to look at Hibari’s direction.

“I know the outcome if I had,” he said as he finished putting on the last bandage. “That would be boring.” By then, he made his way out into the bow.

“You do have a heart Hibari-san,” he went.

Hibari looked on at the glimmering ocean. It was past one, and it dulled his sight into a haze of white and blue. “You have a penchant for overestimating people, Yamamoto Takeshi,” he paused because the third assumption hit him. “I do not advise you to continue doing so. You will end up having no faith in anyone at all.”

“Did that happen to you, Hibari-san?”

“No, to my sister. She was a beautiful thing. Those kinds of things are the easiest to break.” And end up destroying you.

“They always are,” Yamamoto concurred.

Hibari thought that would be his final assumption. There was a fourth.

The wizened captain told them five minutes before departure when he found out what happened to that irksome yellow bullheaded puffball. It was carrying the cloud bangle.
He did not tolerate disobedience, so naturally he raised his bladed tonfa and proceeded to slice that little shit into shreds when the herbivore raised a katana to block his blow, flames ablaze.

This was an action that was outside of his current predictions. Not Yamamoto’s defiance, but his lust to draw blood.

He had been waiting for this moment to check if the other herbivores would go toe to toe with him and last the distance. For now, this little Shiba Inu was holding on well.

Five minutes was enough for him to know not to underestimate his resolve.

“This is what happened to Kusakabe-san too, right?” he said in desperation. “You booted him out of the Committee because you didn’t want him involved. You didn’t want him to die. Same with my father too.”

“Oh, but I want this hindrance to die,” he snarled as the bird continued to move a few yards and followed the dog herbivore’s back, twittering to cheer him on. “It is of no use, collateral, and something I would not risk my life for.”

“I’ll protect it then!” he volunteered as he continued to parry.

“You will follow my orders to step aside,” said Hibari, getting annoyed because of his persistence and skill. “Or I will bite you to death and then that animal’s.”

“Never-“ the herbivore shrieked, but Hibari cursed as his arms started to tire. The consecutive battles were taking a heavy toll on his body and admitting defeat was something he could not afford.

“Then kill it. Kill it in my stead. I do not care where, but hand me the bird’s carcass when you are finished and throw that bracelet in the ocean.”

“Eh- Hibari-san-“
It was by then that Hibari made his fourth assumption. His first might be wrong. He was no different from these herbivores.

He could not take this much punishment.

Chapter End Notes

Finished in under five hours. I know. This was a first in a long while.

During my early KHR days, I never really understood why my then crush liked Yamamoto. He was an effervescent embodiment of the well-adjusted normie that stuck out in a shonen series full of Mafia members and sociopaths. He had his badass moments, but more characters glossed over his awesomeness. Heck, even Amano shelved his prominence in the final arc in favour of more OP characters.

Post-college, I’ve come to appreciate him as a character. If I would pick a character in the KHR-verse to be my friend, it would be him without question. He was so bubbly, so reliable, and the bestest friend who’d place you over his own interests without question (since Tsuna might grow up into self-loathing and was self-centred even during the beginning of the series; I don’t get how he developed empathy throughout the series tbh but whatever I think it’s the Tsuna-hater in me talking again) except when it comes to baseball. It’s really sad how only Gokudera and Chrome/Mukuro were the only guardians whose pasts were explored. His sudden ascension here is a semi-answer to that tbh. I also wonder how he could placate even Hibari most of the time. There are a lot of fics who think Tsuna/Dino are the best foil to Hibari, but I personally disagree. I think when it comes to pure immorality, Yamamoto’s the best this series have to offer since he is (or was in WIDWND) the most uncorrupted. Tsuna and Dino had issues. It would be interesting how this dynamic works out.
Yamamoto Takeshi was accompanied by stories when he grew up. He knew of the types that had endings and the ones that don’t, the ones you can easily follow and the ones that you could engage in debate with anyone for years, those with a clear line between good and evil and those in deeper shades of grey, stories that were true and stories that were coloured by biases…

It was something he had to wrestle with when the years passed and he grew less of a child. He always viewed life as a story and he wanted to keep approaching it that way. Something with a chronological narrative, where a lot of bad things happen to him but at the end of the day, he will prevail and even if he didn’t, it will all be okay.

It was supposed to be that simple. Gokudera Hayato berated him once, told him that he shouldn’t view his life that way. That he wasn’t a fucking hero most of the time, that it would make him act self-important.

He listened. Well, he did try adjusting his life and perceived it just being a subplot to an overarching story, of Japan maybe the Vongola’s, but it did fit him rather nicely. He got to listen to everyone’s stories, or at least get a whiff of them. At least knowing how their character development went throughout his time with them made him really proud. Maybe he’ll write a book or a comic one day? Gokudera was the one best with words though, so he’ll definitely need his help.

It was fun, at least. Trying to make sense of the chaos that he’s living in now, even though Gokudera often said it was futile, that people aren’t boxed in to change like this because there will be times that they regress, that there were scars that wouldn’t heal by the power of friendship, that
there were people he can’t save.

Now that he thought about it, how did they become friends again? And why did he listen to Gokudera’s grumbling when he was egotistic and cared less about them other than Tsuna? Hmm…

His head was hurting. Might as well enjoy the view he’s seeing. Hibari had been resting on one of the small cabins for four hours now. He collapsed during their fight, probably from exhaustion and the injuries he sustained. The captain was really mad, but he did assist him in carrying Hibari to bed. His heavy weight turned out to come from his tonfas that he kept on gripping even when he was unconscious. They must be really precious to him, Yamamoto concluded. Probably the only reliable thing he could hold onto.

It was strange, how the events earlier made him shift the gears in his brain to maximum overdrive. He couldn’t keep up with his friend’s superior level of brain processing, but there was just so much… absurdity that he needed extra bottles of energy drinks and antioxidants (the latter was Gokudera’s tip) to push himself to accept. His friends were no longer there to assist him. He was really on his own.

And he couldn’t complain. He made this choice.

“I never thought I’d be able to see a Hibari again,” said the captain after puffing out a swirl of smoke that swirled into oblivion anyway. “Thought they all died out.”

Yamamoto wasn’t sure how to answer this. He was unsure of a lot of things that day. Starting with Hibari’s ruthless and systematic execution of those men after them without batting an eye, and then his sudden act of boldness by protecting his pets. It chirped underneath the baseball cap he was wearing. He stroked it gently.

“You’re coming to Yonaguni, eh?” he said, folding his arms. “Makes sense to see that man. He was supposed to be the last of their lot. I’ve taken care of the dummy you need to fool that pesky little shit.”

“Thank you, that’s really kind of you,” Yamamoto said first, but then curiosity followed. “Yonaguni?”

“Yeah, it’s not a really well-known little island. Folks here call it ‘Dounan.’ It’s the last of the islands here in Okinawa. The ends of Japan,” he confirmed, just as a large mass of land came to
view and started to block the sun. It was starting to get cold. “Wake your friend up. We’ll be landing soon.”

-18-

The signal was pretty weak on the island. He could not even post on Twitter and Instagram to telegraph their arrival. He needed to look for any internet cafes if they do exist on this side of the world.

Hibari was a light sleeper. His eyes were open the moment he opened the door. By then, he grabbed his tonfas and eyed him beadily.

“Uhm, Hibari-san we’re almost there,” he said, also making sure that Hibird wouldn’t make a scene underneath his hat and blow the things they prepared in a box they left beside the erstwhile prefect. It was open.

He said nothing as he grabbed the shirt from the foot of the makeshift cot and began buttoning it. But Yamamoto saw. He saw the reason why he had never ever, even in the future seen Hibari without anything covering his body.

It showed a story that was not for him to gossip. It made his stomach churn a little as Hibari made his way out, but not before asking where the cloud bracelet was.

It was at the bottom of his rucksack. “I threw it away a little earlier.”

He waited for Hibari to see through his lie, but instead, he continued to walk away.

-18-

It was difficult to understand the dialect spoken in Yonaguni. Add the difficulty of Hibari being uncooperative at speaking to the bus conductor when he already dropped hints that he was able to understand him. But Yamamoto’s patience wasn’t that thin. He had been friends with Gokudera Hayato after all, and had Squalo as a mentor.

Plus it felt like he was on another planet there in Yonaguni-jima. The bus driver also served as a tour guide while they drove, waving off the fee first to Yamamoto’s delight and letting them sit wherever they wanted.
“How you liking Dounan so far?” said the conductor to Yamamoto, ever the eager beaver at the front.

He kept looking at the tall sugar canes waging a bitter war against the grass on both ends of the road. “This place is incredible! It’s like I’m in another country or something!” he said as they passed the lighthouse. “How many lighthouses are there on the island?”

“How many lighthouses are there on the island?”

“Three, I think,” the man said. “Gee, thanks. The tourists were complaining about how there’s little to see here most of the time. Really keeps your hearts up to hear good souls like yours—”

Hibari did not seem to mind the noise as he continued to stare at the window. Yamamoto eyed him apprehensively as he then kept an animated conversation with the driver. It energizes him, this kind of genuine interaction no matter how fleeting. He just hopes that the puffball perched on top of his head wouldn’t make a sound or make his cap fly off and make the island go underwater from Hibari’s wrath.

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He nearly made his cap fly off though when he glued his nose to the window. By god, there was a horse! A real horse! He fumbled through his pockets for his phone, only to pass by too late. No sooner though, did he see another horse with a rider back on the grassy knolls and more horses. He pointed at them excitedly.

“Are there lots of horses here?” He couldn’t wait to look for internet and tell his good ol’ green-eyed best friend Gokudera. He’d definitely get pissed off if he found out a pic of him up close with one. He’d definitely make Hibari ride one too just for the heck of it.

“Are there lots of horses here?”

“This is the north ranch. There’s a ranch at the east point of Dounan too, in Agarizaki. You can take a ride on them and go cross the beach or something—”

“This is the north ranch. There’s a ranch at the east point of Dounan too, in Agarizaki. You can take a ride on them and go cross the beach or something—”

“Eh, for real?” his eyes began shining like stars. He thought this was only common in storybooks he read, so he couldn’t wait to jump on a horse, his katana aloft- that would definitely be so cool. Squalo would definitely give him the like he kept depriving him on Instagram with that post!

“Where you from? ‘Tis like you never saw a horse before.”

“Namimori. It’s a small town too but… this place is way different from there though. Here it’s all green and quiet…” he laughed afterwards.
“Dounan’s been like this when I was born. Never really changed,” said the man. “Before after the great war, there’s been a black market here with Taiwan. See, that island’s just a couple of kilometres away, closer than the nearest island in Okinawa. When stuff in the mainland quieted down though… everyone left. At least that’s what my old man told me. Dounan’s been like this since.”

It made more sense for Hibari to want to be there then. He looked at his friend again (was it overkill to call him that?), who was still preoccupied with the sights on the window. This kind of lonely hamlet smack dab in the middle of nowhere suited him more than Namimori. The horses also seem to be more common than people.

It eluded Yamamoto completely, this lack of violent reactions from the man himself. The sudden shift in mood compared to their very hectic morning made him a little uneasy. Maybe more uneasy compared to the buildup of the mysteries surrounding Hibari Kyoya-san, from those unclear acts of rawness mingling with his cool detachment to killing people and his pets. There was still clearly something wrong with him, not just in the insanity spectrum as his father had vehemently confessed, but also in the way he let down his guard. Like then in that bus, his eyes fixated on the dying sun.

“The last sunset in Japan,” said the driver. “On clear days, you can see Taiwan in the distance.”

*The last sunset in Japan…* Yamamoto repeated in his head, hands routinely opening his phone to take a quick snapshot. What were they doing exactly in a place like this?

-18-

Hibari kept his vigil of making things unnecessarily difficult for Yamamoto who had to keep up with him when his hands pointed at the motorbike rental. Afterwards, Hibari grabbed his motorbike ahead before Yamamoto knew what was happening and drove off, forcing him to pay for both and keep up with Hibari’s reckless speeding.

He had to put a ballistic Hibird back in his rucksack to soothe it once he did catch sight of him. It was like a total mystery-thriller, with Hibari being the asshole protagonist and Yamamoto the bumbling assistant so it was all cool? He was sure his questions would have answers later anyway, maybe to whatever destination Hibari fancied them to ride off too. If it was another fight, then he had to make sure that Hibari will not commit any intentional deaths and continue his fall down the cliff of no return (at least that was the best he could describe it).

The heavy winds seemed to be a common occurrence there, especially on evenings when instead of Yamamamoto readily immersing himself on the twilight colours of the heavens he had to make sure Hibari’s light was still within his line of sight and he did not fall off his bike.
To make matters a little scarier, the roads were like those racing games, devoid of houses and just a long winding path, where some kind of bogeyman may jump scare them at any moment, and it was taking all of his power to not accelerate. Tsuna surprisingly liked those kinds of games since it was less scary than Reborn’s training. Whenever they were at the arcade, Yamamoto would be the first to lose.

Night fell rather quickly when they reached the next town, Hikawa. The driver said it was the southernmost point of the island. By then, Hibari finally slowed down as they passed through a throng of shops that were already closed or on the brink of closing. He was also looking around this time. They might be closer to their stop. When Hibari wasn’t looking, he took his cap and Hibird, wearing the both of them. The thought of Hibari catching them was scarier than the ride earlier.

It was a small town, with narrow paved roads and small buildings littering the main town against the foreboding shape of the fields and mountains a little ways outside. There was barely any people there as well, and if there were, most of them were old people. They really did stick out as they rode along. Hibari then stopped and looked at his direction, making Yamamoto nearly jump from his bike, praying his gig still wasn’t up.

“Look for a fishing shop,” he said. “Bring the owner to me, so I may kill him.”

“Wait- what-” this sudden order from Hibari made Yamamoto sweat buckets and let out a large ‘o.’ His question was answered far quicker than he thought it would. “Is this why we’re here, Hibari-san?” He had to lower his voice when an old man passed by.

“Yes, what can you expect from a dead town?” Hibari drawled. “These people are only waiting here to die. We’ll be doing them a favour.”

Yamamoto was about to protest further when an old lady with hair the colour and shape of cotton balls adjusted her glasses in front of them.

“My, my, you look so much like your grandfather,” she chuckled lightly. Yamamoto could see the lack of teeth. “Are you here to visit him?”

This old lady suddenly gave him another clue. By then, Hibari was about to draw his weapon when Yamamoto blocked him from view and shifted his attention to the woman.
“Y-Yes,” Yamamoto began to laugh. The last thing he needed was for Hibari’s patience too thin by this unexpected interruption and be bitten to death. He almost forgot that this Hibari was making good use of his time “Do you know where he is?”

“It’s been years since I’ve seen his family visit him. I think his fishing shop closes quite late, around 7? It’s just three more houses away- ah, in a hurry are we?” his peripheral vision makes sense of Hibari riding his bike and kicking hard on the engine. “Don’t make him wait. Ah, he looks so much like his sons as well-“

“Thank you!” Yamamoto bowed, just as Hibari began to drive away and jumped on his own vehicle. “Thank you so much!” he said again just as he also made his way to follow Hibari, who was already slowing down and making a screeching halt in front of the only open shop, the sign ‘Hemingway’ a little on the droopy side, in front. By then, Yamamoto made use of his reflexes to stop his bike and raise his arms in front of Hibari.

“You are wasting my time,” Hibari confirmed, lunging his hand at the doorknob before Yamamoto pushed it away. This made his teeth seethe. “I will give you one more chance.”

“Look, I know that your grandpa is one hell of an evil guy because he wrecked your family apart and may have unintentionally made your sister die but maybe we can listen to his side of the story-“

Hibari’s blade punctured his hand. The three seconds of shock from the sight of blood was enough for Hibari to wrench open the door. Yamamoto had no choice but to take out his necklace when an old man with pale greying hair and two heads shorter than Hibari looked at them with twinkling eyes. His back was hunched almost convulsively, both hands trembling as they were supported by his handsome cane. He made out a carved bird in flight by the hilt.

“Waarii,” he greeted, just as Hibari’s eyes widened in acknowledgement and began to tremble violently. Yamamoto then understood and blocked his attack on time with a timed drawing of his blade.

Hibari’s tonfa was just a few inches from the man’s forehead and still, Hibari’s grandfather did not flinch.

By then, he coughed shortly and turned away.
“You’ve come from a long journey,” he said in an airy voice. “I’ll be closing shop soon. Do accompany this humble self for the night.”

-18-

“You’re Tsuyoshi’s child,” Hibari’s grandfather stated as he drove his truck. Hibari refused to sit with them at the back and was at the rear.

“Yeah, uhm, nice to meet you?” Yamamoto scratched his head in embarrassment.

“You look more like Hitomi, but you have your father’s spirit in you,” he said in a pleasant voice, broken by a slight cough. “He was our best swordsman.”

“Dad wouldn’t be able to hold a sword again though,” he said, attempting to laugh, but found it lacking the necessary emotion he needed.

“My grandson had changed since I last saw him. He’s adjusted well with your help.”

“Ehehe,” Yamamoto turned red. “It wasn’t only me though. My friends also did a lot for Hibari-san-“

“Oh, that’s good. Back then, I never thought that man would be able to be accepted by society. It had been rejecting him since he was born.”

“He was the chairman of the Disciplinary Committee of our middle school though! And he has lots of people who like him-“ Actually his goons sans Kusakabe follow him out of fear than adoration, but he did not need to tell his grandfather that. He stopped midway as he stared at the smaller man driving them in his rusting L300. Now that he thought about it, this man wasn’t what he imagined the former Hibari patriarch to be at all. “My dad told me about the war and your part in it. I didn’t think you to be like this.”

“Kakaka…” the man said before fully breaking into a cough and nearly swerving on the side of the road. It was a good thing he was able to grab hold of the wheel in case Hibari does fall off. He won’t die, but he’ll be pissed. He then said thanks and nothing more. “This humble one thanks you.” His words were archaic, almost undiscernible for his contemporary ears. It was strange. He had met Hibari Kei, who wasn’t also like the Hibari Kyoya he had been used too. His grandfather all the more. He reminded him of his grandfather, all smiles and chill, accepting and warm, as if already prepared to face death…
The man coughed again. A small frown formed on Yamamoto’s lips. It had been years since this man had visitors, the old woman said. He looked at the lighted road in front of them. So he had been preparing for visitors like them, probably.

Hibari was right. He had been waiting in this lonely hamlet to die.

-18-

There was a tenderness about his grandfather as he made his way to gingerly open the door and to let them come inside. He had to beg for Hibari to follow him since he was busy eyeing the old man quite surreptitiously, a sign that he was ready to pounce at any moment. It boggled the hell out of him at how he did not fear Hibari’s glare as they made their way to his dingy bungalow. His entire body trembled as he attempted to reach the top cupboard for tea and foraged the freezer for fish to cook, so Yamamoto did it for him. The old man gave him a small, benign smile as he shuffled onwards to the living room. Yamamoto made sure the kitchen door was open in case Hibari did try to finish the job then and began to furiously chop the veggies.

It was weird that neither of them spoke and only the clanging sounds of his knife and the pans he used to fry and cook their food (mackerel and rice) were the only ones that rang through the household. His grandfather must be awkward since this might probably be the only real time he was able to spend this much time with Hibari face-to-face. But now the questions were like a barrage of waves that continued knocking Yamamoto’s façade of normalcy. How did Hibari gain hold of this place? Had he been there before? Why was his grandfather not the same character that his father had described him to be, and how did he get to live on this island for a long time and never visiting Namimori? Where were the rest of Hibari’s relatives? Were they also there on the island? Whose hand did he unearth in that forbidden room? And was Hibird still on his cap? He touched it and breathed a sigh of relief as the bird pecked his finger. At least one question was answered. He should finish cooking and set the kotatsu.

Both their teacups were untouched.

The old man smiled at Yamamoto as he set the food. He inhaled the smell of the mackerel and nodded vigorously when he took a bite, making Yamamoto’s grin warmer and wider.

“Eh, Hibari-san, please eat the fish,” said Yamamoto mid-meal when he noticed that Hibari kept spacing out. He had been like this ever since they stepped foot on the island, looking somewhere far away from his ear.

“Let him be,” said his grandpa before sipping his tea.
“But the food will get cold. It won’t taste as good,” Yamamoto pouted.

“He’ll eat it when he’s done. Or when she’s done,” he said, making Yamamoto shift his attention at the old man again.

“She?”

The old man’s eyes turned glassy. He set the cup back on the table, but not before making a few contents spill. “What is dead will never die. It’s the same for me too.”

With that, Hibari’s eyes shifted back to their direction, as if just waking from a trance. “Make it stop,” he grunted.

“Why did you come here, my grandson?” he said, shifting his direction at him, just as Hibari’s eyes became the widest he had ever seen, his teeth gnashing furiously. His presence was the wall of sorts, preventing the inner beast inside Hibari from ripping the man to shreds. “I presume that Namimori’s gone now.”

“Father and uncle are also dead,” he said flatly. “And you will be next.”

“How will you want me to die?” he then said, making Yamamoto all the more alarmed when he looked at Hibari’s expression changing. A sinister smile instead replaced his feral form. “There were a lot of moments you could have killed me. Even if your comrade blocked your blade, you could have used the other one to finish the job. Does her presence make you hesitate?”

“And you will want that, wouldn’t you?” he said, his voice getting quieter and quieter. “To die unexpectedly, by surprise. The shock would numb the pain. It doesn’t suit you. You deserve to bleed on the ground and recall every sin you have committed to your family.”

His grandfather was nonplussed as he continued to stare at his grandson. “I will ask you again, why did you come here?”

“To wipe out every single member of my accursed household, starting with you.”
“And then… when all is said and done, will you end yours?” there was a soft melancholy that echoed in every syllable. Yamamoto’s mouth lolled open as everything within his line of vision slowly started to crumble. So this was a suicide mission. It makes sense to why he was adamant about not returning.

He never thought he would hear this kind of response from Hibari in his lifetime.

“Yes. Just like you, I find existing meaningless. And… just like you, I have nothing left to lose.”

His grandfather’s eyes continued to pierce through Hibari’s, hazel against silver. “Really? Did you have to come all the way to Dounan to tell me this?”

Hibari did not utter another word. But Yamamoto understood.

He could not find a bearable answer.

-Yamamoto adjusted himself to a routine in the next few days since he became Hibari’s mouthpiece and agreed to stay in his old man’s house and manned the fishing shop in exchange.

In the morning, before the sun rose or the cocks crow and wakes up the old man, he wakes to make breakfast and feeds Hibird before settling to do the washing. The old man’s back hunched due to taking care of the laundry by himself. Yamamoto also makes sure to clean the house, dusting off and sweeping the place before taking a bath, just in time for Hibari to wake up and also enter the bathroom (he takes hours to bathe). By then, Yamamoto would put on a fresh shirt and pants and then prepares their meal. All of them would then sup and make their way to the old man’s truck, Hibari always at the back and Yamamoto beside the old man, who would share basic tidbits on the place. He also promised that he would contact a friend (another old man, Yamamoto concludes) to have him on the ranch and learn how to ride a horse.

At work, he would be the one greeting the customers while his grandfather was at the counter. Hibari would be on the wings, retreating on the back when there were a total of five people inside (including the three of them). He does try to goad Hibari into making sales talk with the customers, but Hibari would show a glint of metal and make Yamamoto end up pushing him at the back anyway.
Hibari though was popular with the customers due to how similar he looked to his grandfather (in his younger days, Yamamoto reminded himself).

“Aren’t you a quiet one? Reminds me of your grandfather when he was your age!” the old ladies would say, making Hibari retreat at the back, much to Yamamoto’s surprise. The old man would remain composed though, and wave it off, telling the women to not scare his grandchild.

“He is so adorable! He might make a good match with my granddaughter!” they would say, and Yamamoto would nearly blurt out the gossip in Namimori that Hibari was asexual and that came from Kusakabe himself.

“Oh really?” said his grandfather when Yamamoto ended up spilling it anyway on the way home. “He really did love Namimori that much, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, it’s really strange when I figured that the rest of your lot don’t like it as much…?” he wasn’t too sure about what he said and trailed off at the end. “I mean you don’t visit, I just assumed-“

“I might not make the return trip,” he laughed before breaking into another fit of coughs that alarmed Yamamoto. “And aside from this accursed age… too many bad memories. Wonder why Kyoya never left when he experienced the worst of it.”

“The worst of it?”

“You might have noticed it even from Tsuyoshi, don’t you? My cute grandson was never loved by my family. He was the fourth child, and his behaviour was enough for my son to send him to a juvenile detention facility.”

“What?”

“Their diagnosis wasn’t too kind,” his grandfather continued to drone in a measured voice. “But without that, when I first met him, I thought he was a lost cause. The likes of him were never meant to roam free in a world like this one, but I guess she kept him in check and left him with a goal to do: To kill the rest of us.”

“Is this Nami-san?”
“Weeks before she died, my son’s family came to visit me here. None of them would dare touch him aside from his father and Namimori. She was also an outcast, the second girl born, a castaway. She did not possess the same qualities that would label her as such. But she was a little rebel and tried to emulate my eldest. Maybe that’s why she took Kyoya under her wing.”

This new piece of information was something he’d definitely share to his friends given the chance. He let the old man continue. “Hibari-san said that his family killed her. Do you think that’s because of the ritual or…”

“That’s what I want to know too, Takeshi-kun,” the old man said. “But there are also some truths that we’re better off not knowing. Those are the truths that you have to relive with until the day you take your last breath.”

-18-

There was a shrine of faded photographs in the old man’s room that Yamamoto stumbled onto (but not really) when the old man told them to eat dinner without him. Hibari went to bed early, as he usually did and set his caper to action. He dropped the rag and disinfectant spray he was holding as he caught sight, after the collage of photographs, a small shrine for a woman, the number of incense sticks scattered in front. There was a lot.

She looked like the rest of them, only her smile was disarmingly regal. She was half-turned towards the camera, clad in a long Chinese tunic, her hair parted in messy waves across her bosom. There was a hint of kindness in those eyes, but only barely. But any doubts about that was overpowered by her beauty. She was probably the most beautiful Hibari he had ever come across.

The collage showed the images of the woman in her teenage years, along with the old man, who seemed like Fon in his adult form. There were plenty of pictures of his grandfather and the woman with their children as well. It was strange to see Fon as a child and wearing a smug expression. Their sister could rival the woman’s beauty, but only slightly. Saito, however, looked the odd one in his awkward smile and a half-raised wave. Then there were pictures of them as teenagers with- Yamamoto’s heart leapt- his parents, back in that place they saw the last sunset in Japan days ago. His dad and Hibari’s dad were beside each other. Saito’s smile was much genuine now. He really did seem happy with them and so unlike the man, his dad pictured him as. Fon’s eyes were less haughty though, his swagger barely even there in the later pictures. His expression was the same as the Fon he knew in his brother and sister’s wedding day though, all serene and content. The same cannot be said of Akari though. He could feel the irritation underneath that bright grin of hers for the sake of that screenshot as she held onto Saito’s arm.

And then there were the baby pictures of Hibari’s siblings. They were only two, however. The old man’s words struck harder then. There were fewer pictures of Nami and none at all for Hibari.
Or wasn’t there really? He managed to see the snapshot of that moment when Hibari Kyoya did come to Dounan and before Nami’s death. Her smile reminded him of the old Fon’s, but only ever so slightly as she held the V-sign for the camera, her other hand on top of Hibari’s nearest shoulder. He did not look like the Hibari he was accustomed to. There was something strange about his expression. He was smiling.

It was a smile of a normal child’s.

Hibari could truly make an expression like that.

By then, something began to fall out from his eyes. It was strange, but this kind of real happiness frozen in time, made him all the sadder the more he knew what came after. He wanted someone, anyone, to come and intrude and make him laugh or apologize or just make him stop his tears.

It was the type of story that he avoided like a plague whenever his friends suggested of watching it next because he didn’t like it that they couldn’t have a happy ending, or that bad things kept happening to them even until before they die. But there he was, stumbling into a family tragedy that felt so familiar and personal, that he wished that anyone would come and interrupt his waterfall.

But no one came. He had to suffer from this knowledge alone this time, in case he does open wounds.

-18-

It was a good thing that he got his day off and had time to ride the horses, get his first horseback ride documented, and beg the neighbour of his instructor for dial-up internet connection.

“And that’s how my trip with Hibari is so far!” Yamamoto chirped over the laptop. “I might go watch the sunset later. The last sunset in Japan, guys!”

“Christ, I still can’t believe you still scored fucking net connection in the middle of nowhere and posted on Twitter and Instagram,” Gokudera groaned. “It’s like you get an extended vacation while the Tenth and I cover your ass. I don’t find this fair at all.”

“You never find anything fair when it comes to me though,” Yamamoto said matter-of-factly.
He paused. “Point taken, you asshole.”

Yamamoto laughed. “How’s Tsuna?”

Gokudera then began to laugh quite nervously. “About that… uh, let’s say that the Tenth gave me another job to do. Us remaining guardians had to split. Dokuro’s the one guarding the Tenth, not like she’s of much use anyway.”

“Eh… so where are you?” It was weird to hear Gokudera not complaining about Tsuna’s decision to part with him temporarily. “And are you an impostor because you’re not really doing a good job in impersonating my friend who is actually clingy with my other friend.”

“Fuck you and I hope you get haemorrhoids,” Gokudera deadpanned. “I’m still in Italy, but in the eastern parts-” he hesitated. “I’m currently based in our palazzo actually. Tsuna asked me to bring my sister and that pervert doctor along. I don’t know where they ran off to though. The last few days were fucking crazy, a total shitstorm. My dad was really happy to see me and has been buying me a ton of suits and footwear. I got sick of it on the third day and asked him to get me an island as a joke, and he gave me one in five fucking hours. Jesus, it’s like the shit I did never happened. It’s really weird.”

“What’s weird?”

Gokudera snorted a little before answering. “I’ve been running away from this kind of life for nearly half of my life, but here I am at the Tenth’s request and swallowing my pride. Who knew that I’d come back to this hole and attempt to reconcile with the man I despise the most? Loyalty can make you do the craziest shit.”

Yamamoto smiled. “You’re amazing, Gokudera.”

“How are you holding up on your end? That Hibari doing anything questionable again?”

“Nah, he’s been really quiet since we’ve been here. His grandfather reckons that he’s seeing his sister.”

“Woah, that’s some creepy shit.”
“Yeah, maybe that’s why Hibari-san keeps to himself most of the time. He doesn’t even make a scene when we’re assisting his grandfather at the shop.”

“The old man seems like a nice country hick. Not how I imagined him to be.”

“I thought I was the only one!” Yamamoto nearly cried. “Dad was really mean to portray him like that.”

“You think that woman’s the same one his grandfather keeps seeing? I mean he did mention that he could see someone else too.”

“Yeah, I think so. I’ve been thinking that you know, like that samurai animé we watch where the MC’s first love dies in his arms and makes him a peace-loving badass? Maybe that’s what happened to him!”

“Fuck you and your love of pop culture,” Gokudera sighed. “But I think you’re half-right. But that twist will be such a killjoy, man. That’s so fucking cliché.”

“Eh, what about coming back to your family and making amends with your distant daddy? Isn’t that cliché too?”

Gokudera groaned. “Yeah, well, just don’t spill any info over here about your location. I have to go. I’m practising for a recital. Fucker, it’s like I’m in preschool all over again!”

“Take care, man.”

There was a quick ‘you too’ followed by a click. By then, Yamamoto stretched his fingers. He only had fifteen more minutes left to use this connection and he had to make the most out of it by thinking the best caption to use when his Line began to ring again, followed by a contact that was the last one he imagined to call him first.

“Hiya Squalo-san!” he said with a grin. “How you doing?”

“How the fuck do you make this shit louder? I can’t hear my stupid apprentice over the damn
phone-“ sounds of crackling and static then followed as the phone got passed around before Squalo could continue. “Give us the tuna’s cloud guardian if you don’t want the entire Mafia hunting you down.”

“Eh, but I can’t do that!” Yamamoto exclaimed, but not before adding. “So… you guys know where I am right?”

Squalo grumbled before answering. “No, but we will in a few… Voi, your signal’s fucking slow it makes me wonder how you were able to upload on Instagram.”

“It took an hour more or less. You do look at my posts! So what do you think of my latest one? Cool, right?”

“It looked like a toddler took your picture and forgot how to use the correct filters. But enough about that! Just give us Hibari Kyoya, and I can persuade the Ninth to stop pressuring Tsuna-“

“Gokudera told me about that though.” He did not tell Squalo that Gokudera had split up with Tsuna and was out there gaining support for Tsuna’s cause. “It’s ok, Squalo-san. I’m not really that stupid. Well, I am stupider than the rest of you, but I know how to count to a hundred!”

“Then let’s look at it this way then. We got access to Hibari’s files when he was deported to an asylum-“

“It was a juvenile detention facility!”

“That’s just a fancy word for Arkham. I’ll make it clear to you then: Hibari’s not a man you can help. Let me rephrase that with a question: Do you think that people are inherently good?”

“Is that a trick question? I’m not really good at trick questions-“

“You fucking numbskull. You’re a fucking idiot, slow at best, a death magnet at worst, but you’re not like us.” He paused. “You did not live a life like I had, or that Hibari had. You’re the same as your stupid boss. I want you to sink it into that thick head of yours that it’s futile to save a person born evil from the start. His brain wasn’t wired like yours. There is no cure.”

“Eh, Gokudera did tell me you’ll be calling, you know. Reborn-san told him to warn me about you.
He was right. You are good at this kind of stuff.” Before Yamamoto could open his mouth, the storm already gave him the necessary warnings in case their call gets long-winded again. He tittered. “I’m too dense to make tempting offers like your lot can, but I’m not too dense to ignore the connotations. Thank you, Squalo-san. You’ve said enough.”

“I’m giving you a chance, you stupid apprentice-“

“You know, we watched a movie once. I think this was after exams. When was it again?”

“Just get on with the story!”

“Ok so there was this part in the movie where the readers were succumbing to despair because their situation sucked and- why are you not interrupting, Squalo-san?”

“What are you trying to say?”

Yamamoto laughed. Squalo might act like he couldn’t care less, but he was still there, not hanging up. It might be because they were tracking him, but good luck on that because he was using dialup connection! “Ok, so the main character said that he couldn’t do it, and then his friend said that he was aware that this was all wrong, that they shouldn’t be there, but they were.” The scene unfolded to him quite spectacularly, as if he was immersed in that scene again, where the MC was about to stab his friend due to the evil coaxing him, but stopped midway. “He told him all about this, this great stories, the ones that really mattered, and they were in one, you know? That in those great stories that they were too small to understand then, it stayed with them. That even though the heroes had lots of chances to turn back, they kept holding onto something.” That there is good in this world… and it's worth fighting for.

It was an understated scene in that understated sequel that truly stuck with Yamamoto, even years later when he watched it in the theatre with his dad. He had his friends rewatch it with him again a couple of months ago, but they preferred the third movie more than this one.

“But you aren’t a hero. What you’re doing will only wreck your family apart.”

Yamamoto grinned. “Maybe you’re right. It was pointless, wasn’t it? I can’t properly say what I mean.”

Squalo’s voice was calmer, wearier this time. “When we do see each other, I might battle you to the death again, you know that?”
The rain gulped and replied without hesitation. “Yeah, I know. I still won’t kill you though.”

“You’re not a saviour, you piece of shit!” he boomed over the laptop, making the other sleeping old people with him jerk awake. Yamamoto bowed in apologies as Squalo continued, “You are only a man, and you must be aware of your limits because it will break you.”

There was a heart in his sadistic master that he was trying so hard to show with every intonation and every second he poured. He was reasonable, at least Yamamoto was aware of that. But.

“Yeah, I know,” he repeated, regaining his smile. “I’m just a supporting character. Always have been, since I joined Tsuna. But you know, the guy I was talking about was a supporting character too, and he saved the world. I don’t want to save the world though,” he chuckled.

“You are a fool. It will only get worse from here on out. Things won’t go back to they way they were.”

“Yeah, you’re right about that. But your future self also said to me that there’s always another day. And maybe it will get better.”

Squalo finally lost it. “You fucking piece of shit I’m gonna fucking kill you—“

-18-

Maybe his reasons have changed for following Hibari. Maybe it’s not just about his mother anymore, but the truths that were too morbid for even the likes of Hibari to admit. All of them said in unison, everyone he had been with so far, had decided that he was a lost cause, that maybe it was best that he searched for his mother on his own (come to think of it though, that’s not such a good idea since he needed a monster like Hibari to back him up) or return back to Tsuna’s side and protect him from those who intend to destroy his resolve.

But he was there. He was with Hibari as kept staring at the porch and maybe to his sister. He was there as he rode around Hikawa to pick up his grandfather in their weekly meetings, and he was there as he saw the changing colours of the darkening sky. Maybe that was something.
The five elders were still inside, making chitchat and froze when Yamamoto opened the door. “Uhm,” Yamamoto turned around in embarrassment. “Sorry ‘bout that, I thought you were finished-“

Suddenly, the four elders were surrounding him, their eyes prodding at him surreptitiously. The only Hibari in the room was looking at him with beaming eyes.

“This man does seem fit for the job. Maybe we can turn things around this year,” the old woman said, nodding vigorously at his old man, who smiled in reply.

“He plays varsity in his middle school team. They were second in the Nationals last year.”

“We had strong senpais last year. I’m not sure how we would fare now…” Or even compete at all. He almost forgot that his town was blown sky high and rehabilitation might last even until his high school years.

“He’ll do. What about your grandson?” they turned at his direction again.

“Uhm,” Yamamoto tentatively raised his hand. “I’m not sure if he’d want to take part in anything-“

“Please understand little one,” said one of the elders, a greying man with half-moon spectacles. “That we only have this chance to accomplish it. This might be our year, and you might be the key to all this.”

“Eh… are you for real?” Yamamoto’s eyes shone. This was like those favourite shows of his again, where everyone is counting on the ace. He might be the ace this time, and he won’t let these people down.

“But for this to work, you have to make Kyoya-kun join,” said the elders, all nodding assiduously. “If you succeed, we’ll give you anything you want.”

“Anything I want?” Yamamoto echoed.

“Anything you want,” They said in unison.
It was a no-brainer. “Fiber optic internet!” Now he did not have to go to the town up north and
slave away for half an hour just to upload a picture to Instagram. There would also be unlimited
calls to Tsuna and gang. He might even be able to finish grinding his avatars in his apps! This was
it.

“What is that?” the adults were stumped, and Yamamoto laughed nervously before taking a deep
breath to explain the lengths he was about to do for the sake of fast and accessible wifi.

Chapter End Notes

- Waarii (ワーリー) is the local term for ‘welcome’ in Yonaguni. Correct me if my
  Romanization is wrong.
- BTW LOTR feels!
- Tsuritama too OMFG!
Yamamoto keeps forgetting that anime doesn't usually apply in real life (not that he cares though). And he needs to watch Star Wars.

If there was something any story lover teenager like Yamamoto couldn't ignore, it was part of living it. Or perhaps, making sure he'll succeed helping a bunch of old people.

"If you would listen to my humble self-er, to me, I mean-" their manner of speech getting to him. It had barely been a week, and only a day since he stumbled there by accident. "This is a mission that I have to do alone. But I will need your help in executing it." He made sure to wear his Namimori Middle baseball team snapback to prove he was serious (since glasses made him dizzy). "To have Hibari Kyoya work for us, I can't ask him to have a go at his grandpa, because he'll definitely kill him."

The old man responded with a weak laugh.

"And I also gave that excuse when he nearly followed me here. He thinks I'm gathering information on your weakness, Hibari-oyaji," he nodded at his direction again. "So, I tried to make some calculations throughout the night but it only lasted for five minutes before I went to sleep when it hit me in the morning. I can pull off the biggest heist in history."

"In history?" the elders asked.

Yamamoto nodded with a serious expression. "I might end up losing my life even if I succeed, but I'm the only man for the job."

"My, my, isn't this too dangerous for this young man here?" said one of the elders as he patted his arm, the only part she can reach even when Yamamoto was sitting at their low table. "You need to eat my special chanpuuru."

"I will do my best to return for it, granny," Yamamoto saluted. "For our mission to actually succeed, I need to make Hibari-san our chess piece. And to do that," he encircled the doodle he made. "I need to steal his tonfas. It's the only possible way he can cooperate."

"Those tonfas were something my son had this humble self-assembled. It's a rare weapon. One of the best pieces this humble self has ever done," hooted the old man.
"Of course, Hibari-san is a prideful one, so he wouldn't ask the old man to make him a new one. However, prying the tonfas from his hands is no feat worth belittling," said Yamamoto. "Even in his sleep, that I can attest, his grip is the strongest."

"Then how will you be able to do it?"

"It was a friend who told me about one of Hibari's Kyoya's main weaknesses. And for that, I need your help. But uhm, before that, you weren't too clear what you want the two of us for exactly. Why are we doing this again."

The elders scowled and closed their eyes in unison, making Yamamoto a little frazzled. Things were actually getting serious. He narrowed his eyes further to set the mood. "Could it be…"

"Yes," they said. One then spoke. "For almost two decades we have waited. For almost two decades, we thought all hope was lost. But now you two have arrived."

"Only the two of you can lead us to the path we thought was long out of our reach."

"Your presence may help us reclaim our days of glory, when Ken-chan's children were our beacons. Now it is your turn."

Yamamoto gulped. "And what is this path you speak of, old masters?"

All five of them opened their eyes. "The path to victory, in the annual Dounan beach volleyball competition."

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"You are so spirited, o young one," said the old man.

"Of course I am! This is really cool, I can't wait to tell my friends!" Yamamoto said, unable to keep still. "It's like I'm living my dream of being in a sports drama! I've been a fan of this series for ages… I'll be the small giant, you'll be the grocery coach, and Hibari-san will be the uppity setter. This will be so cool!"

"Kakaka-" the old man laughed. Yamamoto was prepared to help him steer the wheel when he burst into a fit of coughs like usual. "This humble self has no knowledge about coaching a volleyball team before."

"Ehehe, that's fine! I have three complete seasons of a volleyball anime that you can watch on my hard drive. I can't wait to say my favorite lines to our opponents." Yamamoto scrunches up his expression. "I'm Yamamoto Takeshi, and I sprouted from the concrete!"

The old man then roared with so much raucous laughter that it made their truck shake. "You are truly like your father," he said, regaining his demure expression.

Yamamoto grinned earnestly. "That's what everyone says though." Come to think of it, he should have asked Kyoko-chan or Haru-chan how his father was doing. Was he wallowing in regret for letting him go, or making hissing noises at his physical therapists to displace his anger? It would be both funny and guilt-trippingly sad either way. "How was my mother like?"

The old man nodded. "Oh, she was on the opposite spectrum from your father's. I think her no-nonsense demeanour rubbed off on Yuuya. She was fond of Hitomi."

"Eh, really? So she was a killjoy. Wonder why my old man ever liked her."
"That's what this humble self wants to know as well. Their master preferred her than Tsuyoshi. But your father had talent and drive. Sometimes those were enough to trump hard work with no end goal. She was not hungry for power as your father was." He smiled again, eyes squinting as he tried to make sense of the road and his memories. "I used to believe your father would give up. But he never relented in staying by my son's side. He was like a second brother to my son."

By then, Yamamoto did not utter another word in the last few minutes until they arrived in the house. Hibari's bike blocked their usual spot. It was a mild accusation on his grandfather's part, a sincere confession that he twisted quite differently in his head the more he thought of how Hibari Kyoya nearly killed him and wrecked their brotherhood apart.

-18-

The man in question was sound asleep when they arrived. Yamamoto liked his grandfather, liked his feverish way of making tea, his active listening to his stories, asking questions and tittering at the right spots. The usual Hibari scowl or manipulative smirk was not a part of this old man's repertoire. He was, at least to Yamamoto, selfless. But it was also tangible with his slow sputters of strides and lying downs that he was carrying something heavy. It reminded him so much of the kind characters with terrible histories that they can neither forget nor atone for. It made his chest throb, but he kept his distance.

He gave his hard drive to the old man, only to find out they had no laptop to use there and he had to go to a neighbour to borrow one.

"This humble self needs assistance," he said as he sipped the last of his sake. Yamamoto understood then half-hoisted him back to his room adjacent to theirs. The pictures almost seem to stare at him as he helped the old man get into his bed.

He looked at the shrine first before smiling at Yamamoto. "It's a strange feeling: clinging onto things that would never return. It's a poison– something that can kill you if you let it."

"You've had a long day, Hibari-oyaji," the rain guardian said as the man nodded to him. "Sleep well."

"And to you, young one."

Yamamoto stole a glance at the picture at the edges. It was of sepia, depicting a younger Hibari-oyaji with his brother and the enshrined woman. They were on top of Irizaki, beside the monument, all smiles.

"My brother died that day," the old man said and Yamamoto shuddered. He had an idea how.

-18-

"What's the big deal with the annual beach volleyball competition again?" asked the rain guardian, just to make sure that he heard it right.

"Every year before we begin our summer festivities the four towns in Dounan engage in this fierce competition. We had never won a single match since Ken's children stopped visiting," one elder wagged a finger at Hibari's grandfather, who just laughed in reply. "And if the meagre price we have to pay is this inter-net of yours, then we will make do. No longer will the other elders gloat in our faces. We will trump in the annual monthly meetings and shush them once and for all."

"Wow, this is like those animé we watch!" Yamamoto did not add that their reasons were sorely
childish and misguided like most anime shows. At least he was doing something exciting once in a while as he waited for Hibari to reveal his story to him. Plus he never tried beach volleyball for real before. This was going to be fun. "Let's get to it then before the meat in the rice tacos get cold! Have you done the things I asked of you?"

"From the finest tailor we have on the island," said the old woman as she gave him a plastic grocery bag.

"Got this hanazake from my most trusted friend in Sonai!" said another, giving him a rectangular box.

"Contacted our potential players. We have screened the best players we could find. They will be meeting you tomorrow at the beach."

"Good work team!" said Yamamoto with a big thumbs up. "We only have three days till the competition. Let's make this count!"

-18-

"I didn't know Hibari-san's dad was kickass at volleyball," Yamamoto said. "Was he their ace?"

"My eldest was, followed by your mother," the old man said. "They often came here for summer vacation. Your father played also. But I never came to watch."

"Eh, why's that?"

"This humble self was a busy old coot. Never entertained the idea of leisure back then."

"It's ok, oyaji. Adults have it tough. To be honest, I'm kinda scared of becoming an adult and making money," he laughed.

"In those days, I was not the only Hibari in this island. Namimori was a wonderful place, but it was not our real home. We landed on this land from another one just across the ocean," the old man said solemnly. "My great-grandfather got asked by a disgraced boss of one famous Mafia to assist him in building a safe haven for people like him in the mainland. My son named his youngest daughter after it."

"Namimori..." Yamamoto trailed off.

"The family that stayed here left at my request to stand with me in a war, a long time ago. They all lost their lives. Before he left back to my ancestors' homeland, he came to this place to slaughter even the young ones that were left here."

"Who?"

"My eldest child," the old man said gravely. "He gave my wife a slow death, slicing off her limbs before cutting off her head. My youngest son stopped him from skinning her face as well. This humble self always recalls that endless night. Out of all the things these humble self had experienced and forgotten, it's the only memory that never died."

Yamamoto could only stare in horror as the man broke into a smile again.

"Now, enough with the boring pasts. How is your pet bird doing?"

-18-
He took a deep breath, hands on his back, plastic whistle hanging on his neck as he stared at the four recruits.

"This is everyone?" he asked, surprised. Including him and Hibari, they'd be enough to play but only if he does succeed to get Hibari onboard the team.

He did not expect also for the rest of the players to be comprised of middle-aged old people. He was expecting someone a little younger...?

"What kid, 'ya expected people your age? Those brats prefer playing videogames or go to Okinawa for the summer festival," a man that Yamamoto remembered back in the grocery store selling vegetables.

"Let's get this over with. I still have kids to pick up before three," said the woman from the vulcanizing shop. The others murmured in assent.

"Eh… I was expecting more since we do have to play three consecutive matches in a single day…” Yamamoto trailed off rather sheepishly. He looked at his phone. It was 12:30. They really expected them to finish practice in less than three hours? "Ok, uhm, so anyone here who knows how to play volleyball?"

"We know the basics, methinks," the woman in the fruit stand said, folding her arms. "You have a ball and a net we can practice with?"

"The elders didn't really provide a ball…” Yamamoto trailed off. "And as for a net… I had to improvise, but it will do." He got a fishing net with the old man's permission and his assistance in setting it up for them on the way. The children playing on the beach were throwing rocks at it though, so he stayed two more extra hours in there instead of helping Hibari before practice.

"Just to be clear," said the vegetable guy. "We're doing this for the mums and dads. We can't stand looking at them like last year."

"Eh, that's good motivation then!" his eyes shone again.

"One of them nearly died for getting a hit on his back," said the man flatly. "Look, we're only gonna listen and play for two hours and then return back to man our shops or pick up our kids. Make these hours count, ok kid?"

"Uh… yeah okay," Yamamoto laughed. "Let's split you up into teams then to see what you can do. So any of you got a ball?"

Fruit stand woman get out a ball from her large canvass bag. "I also got us some water and snacks. Don't want an empty stomach during the match, right?"

-18-

"How did Hibari-san go by himself?" asked Yamamoto when the old man came to pick him up.

"This humble self had to close up early," the old man tittered. Yamamoto did not need to ask further and laughed along. "How were you? Do you think you have a shot?"

"They… were better than I expected. They knew more than I did," Yamamoto laughed. "I have to practice more though. I suck at service. I keep serving outs."

"The other towns have better and more seasoned players. Our original players had to retire. We've
been building our team for a year now, but we still lacked people."

"So we're essentially the filler." He was a little bummed. He wanted to be an ace.

"And the ones that can jump," he smiled toothily. Yamamoto's eyes shone again.

"Didn't Hibari-san's brother and sisters play like their mom and dad did?"

"No. That was the first time they visited. And after the summer too."

"Uhm, yeah, have you watched the animé I lent you though? It will definitely pick you up to speed.
Season 3's the best!"

"Kakaka, I shall try finishing it before the big game," said the old man. "It is interesting. Everyone likes to shout their feelings and speak out to the audience what was going on."

"Eh, that's how shonen sports series usually go because of our short attention span and lack of knowledge for the game. I love it because everyone's so dedicated."

"It's a different scenario 'round these parts. Only the people of old care about traditions and competitions like this one. Maybe it is truly time that we do let these die."

Yamamoto held onto the old man's hand determinedly. "No. We'll make this the best thing that has ever happened to this island since Sanai-Isoba landed here thousands of years ago! We won't go out without a fight!"

-18-

That was how Yamamoto treated the past few days. With the help of oyaji and the other elders, he printed out a lot of leaflets that asked the entire island of Yonaguni to watch the volleyball game. With his little knowledge of partnerships and Hibari's pet bird on his shoulder, he scouted every classroom in each school and gave spirited speeches (written by the elders, of course) that urge the youngsters to watch their parents and grandparents to participate in the festivities. After this, Yamamoto had to make do with his two hour volleyball practice and eat his brunch with his older team mates.

"Heard you were handing out leaflets with the young 'uns fer the past two days," said the vegetable store man that Yamamoto forgot the name off because his accent made it hard for him to hear. "I admire your dedication, outsider!"

He grinned back. Later, he'll be making his last door-to-door visit in Hikawa after picking up the old man and Hibari. He was losing his voice too, for talking nonstop. He ate more food than usual because he would be doing his real mission later. "Thanks!"

"Heard you're popular with the kids and persistent with our friends," the fruit stand woman laughed. "I packed some rafute here for you and Ken-san's adorable grandson."

Yamamoto tittered awkwardly as he remembered he was about to nick said adorable grandson's tonfas that night. "Thank you so much! I'll try giving you guys my dad's special sushi next time!"

"Tsuyoshi-san often sold his sushi here when he visited. There were long lines where Hemingway is now," the woman in the vulcanizing shop said. "It would be a great honour to have a bite from his dishes again."

"I will be the one making it though-"
"It's still a great honor!" they said in unison, making Yamamoto scoop them up to their surprise and envelop them into a hug. His feet were on the verge of giving up, but this was the boost he needed for one more push until tomorrow.

**-18-**

This time, he was on the back of the small truck with Hibari. He was on the tail end though, on the mercy of Hibari's feet in case he makes a bad move and gets his just retribution.

Come to think of it, he wasn't able to see Hibari for a while. He looked the same as he always had, napping away despite the occasional humps in the road. And he wasn't complaining about abandoning him for other tasks he heaped on himself.

"We'll be leaving this island tomorrow," he then said, making Yamamoto stop his brain's overdrive at his mission that night. He stared at the former cloud guardian, at his folded arms and at his nonchalant expression. "We will kill my grandfather tonight, and leave on the first boat to Taiwan tomorrow."

Holy shit. He could not think at all.

"You had been too preoccupied with your meagre tasks you had completely forgotten our purpose in this island."

"What took you so long then to tell me this?" Yamamoto said, unable to contain himself and toying with the possibility of getting kicked out on the side of the road.

A coy grin cocked out of Hibari's lips. "I was interested in how you will take it, Yamamoto Takeshi. How you will react when, after all the nights and days you toiled, none of it would bear any fruit." He stood up, releasing his tonfas. He looked like a caped marble statue under the glow of the waning moon. His weapons glinted maliciously. Shit. Yamamoto did not bring his Kintoki or his Rain necklace. How could he let his guard down at a time like this? By then, Hibari rammed his tonfas onto the glassless windows, onto the driver of the car before Yamamoto could react.

**-18-**

It was morning when Yamamoto woke up and felt a cool towel sponging his forehead. A terrible weight then fell into his body. He tried moving his arms to no avail. "No," he moaned. "No, no, no, Hibari-san…"

"Kyoya's gone," he perked up as he finally caught sight of Hibari-oyaji by the door, a warm smile ever present on his lips. "He didn't want to wait for you to wake up and left already."

"What about the volleyball game? What about all the effort we put into everything? It can't end like this. I'm sorry. Are you even alive, oyaji?" He hated how his chapter on Yonaguni's history would end like this, with barely a dent.

"Kakaka, young ones still love to exaggerate even at this age..." the old man laughed. "We are alive, but you are ill. That is why-"

It took Yamamoto all his willpower to get out of bed and stand, but then he felt a painful throbbing on his head and his arms.

"You had a concussion when you fell from the truck," the old man said, dropping his cane and helping Yamamoto stand. "It's better that you rest."
"No," he said as he clawed onto the door and began to hobble for his shoes. "I can't let them down- after everything- even if Hibari-san left-" Everyone worked so hard. It shouldn't be all in vain. It couldn't be.

"In the grand scheme of things, it wouldn't matter Takeshi-kun," the old man said. "It's just another mundane year in the annual festivities. It will not change the world. Our town will continue existing."

"But it matters to me," Yamamoto said, channelling all the characters he had watched as he grew up. This was the moment that he needed to say these exact lines and make a name for not only himself, but also for the people who cared as much as he had. "It matters to everyone that worked hard in making this happen. It matters to you too, doesn't it, oyaji?"

The old man whacked him on his arm and making him tumble to the floor. "How will you help the team when you're barely even able to move yourself? That's why Kyoya's there to assist."

"What? Why didn't you say so?"

"Kakaka, you were too busy spouting your favorite lines to listen. I got Saito's tonfas while you were knocked out and had Kyoya join the team. A lot of the young ones also came on the bench to play. Now, wear your uniform and climb on my back, Takeshi-kun. Let's prove our efforts were not for naught."

Hibari did not looked pleased compared to the waves of Hikawa townsfolk that were more than jubilant to see a heavily bandaged Yamamoto Takeshi coming down the beach.

"Eh, so beach volleyball consists of only two people who can't be substituted?" Yamamoto asked his team mates, who were all wearing navy jerseys embroidered with waves. "I thought they needed six people!"

"I don't know what the elders were thinking to call us four there as well. But I think I understood now," the fruit stand woman said, beaming. "Your team mate's waiting for you."

By then, Yamamoto looked around for the old man to save him from Hibari Kyoya's accusing eyes, but there was no sight of him and his motorcycle anywhere. Come to think of it, there was no sight of him or the elders anywhere.

"Focus on me, herbivore," Hibari then said as he took off the bandages covering his arm. "This better be not a waste of my time."

"Eh… I can't believe that you'd agree to all this…" Yamamoto said, the cheering and the overflowing people present in the stands (and forcing most to sit in front to eat their snacks) still grinding in his ears.

Hibari was also wearing board shorts with the same embroidery as his team's uniform. He was wearing a neatly fitted short-sleeved black wetsuit as well. The same ones that he asked from the elders to give him. "I will crush them. Then it will be your turn."

"I-I don't think I'll be of much help though. I'm injured and all that. Maybe we can substitute-"

"No," his icy gaze pierced even further that hot summer day. "You only need to stand on this court and watch me. That is enough."
Yamamoto wished he can record those lines right now and send it to their group chat.

"We're playing. If I need your assistance, you know what to do."

Yep, he'll be smuggling his phone later during court change.

-18-

It turned out that Hibari was a natural (no surprises there). It also turned out, that him being the only functional player probably won't be enough for them to win their first match.

What Yamamoto hated the most aside from letting his friends get hurt or hearing anyone sullying the name of Shigure Souen Ryuu was being a liability to a team mate. He did not like the thought of letting anyone down.

That included the man who nearly dashed his plan last night.

"I'm sorry, Hibari-san," he apologized again when he did not reach the ball on his side of the court the third time around. The other team was already six points ahead on the third set, with only a point left.

"Is this really all you amount to?" he then asked, not even looking at him anymore. Yamamoto stared dumbly at the sand seeping past his toes as he gritted his teeth. "This was all your doing, getting these herbivores' hopes up." They waited as the server from the other team (and the owner of the laptop in their shop) dribbled the ball. The whistle still hasn't been blown. "They put their belief and time in you by coming here. Do you believe this is all you amount to?"

"I-" Yamamoto said, closing his eyes as he waited for the whistle to blow when-

"Don't you dare look down!" a crackling voice reached through the noisy din, stunning everyone to look at the entrance of the beach. Yamamoto could not believe his ears as the old man stood, cane in hand, his watery eyes as determined as the wheezing of his voice. The rest of the elders shuffled behind him. He focused on Yamamoto. "Volleyball is a sport where you're always looking up!"

He couldn't believe his ears as the crowd erupted. He looked at Hibari, who looked away at the old man, eyes literally on fire as he uttered a curse. The rest of his team mates were clapping at them. But none of their cheers really made sense to him.

In that moment, he knew one thing as he heard the whistle and jumped the highest he could, feinting just in time for Hibari to throw his deadly spike.

The old man did watch the series he lent him. And as everyone in Hikawa cried, Hibari grabbed his shoulder. "I couldn't sleep at night because that old man kept watching that stupid show. It only got quiet last night."

That was enough for Yamamoto to raise his fist. They were back in the game, baby. (At least that was how he remembered it in the animé.)

-18-

"And then to cut the long story short, we won the championship!" Yamamoto concluded, feeling the strong wind cut through his cheeks.

"Geez, that's so fucking predictable. Don't tell me after that match, through the sheer power of team work and tenacity, you overcame all odds and gave that town its first win when all hope seemed
lost. Lame."

"Nah, Hibari ditched us after we won our first match and I collapsed from the fever. My team mates took care of the rest. It turned out the one we faced, the Sonai guys, were the strongest. The rest was small fry. We celebrated by stargazing on a rocky hilltop where their founder, Sanai-Isoba, once lived."

"And now you're calling me with your fibre optic internet. That's a good end to your story."

"Eh, that was five days ago though. And our story didn't end like that."

-18-

"Thanks for helping us," Yamamoto said when he and the old man entered the house.

Hibari ignored him and held out his hand to the old man. "Your oath."

"Tomorrow," he said before turning to Yamamoto. "Help me carry the fish and your sushi, won't you?"

"I almost forgot about that!" the rain guardian laughed as he went on ahead to get the ice box and his round foil-covered tray. He was about to come out when he heard Hibari and his grandfather in the middle of their conversation.

"I saw bodies being burnt on my way back. Were they your doing?"

Yamamoto nearly dropped his load.

"So you did see them?" the old man chuckled. "You do like snooping into other people's business, just like your father."

"I am not that weak-willed insect," Hibari seethed.

"But it was your fault Saya-san died, is it not? Kei relished telling it to me. Especially Nami's expression when she caught you-"

"You--"

"Takeshi-kun," the old man said before convulsing, and by then Yamamoto rushed inside, just in time to see Hibari's eyes the widest it had ever been, almost maniacal as his hands relished in nearly clawing through his grandfather's neck. He got a kick for his efforts in prying off his hands. The old man continued as he coughed. "He told me about your visit to his younger brother and your... actions. It's a weak gesture, Kyoya. Your injuries that day will never amount to the lives you ended that night."

"Enough. It was your fault that I even exist. You dare blame it all on me then? Is it not what you always do? You put the blame on your eldest when you are to blame for your wife's death. You did not come to assist Namimori when it burned. Your death will amount to nothing. You will be forgotten. I-"

Yamamoto raised his hand at his direction and made him fall silent. The old man was weeping. He could not hold it in anymore. By then, Hibari retreated to their guest room, closing it shut behind him. It both angered and saddened him for not finding the things to say like Tsuna or Gokudera or Reborn can to soothe a man with so many scars he had to bear and could never atone for.
"Let us go," the old man then said as he covered his face, his voice still shaky.

"Were the men you slew… sent to kill us?" Yamamoto said as he tied everything at the back of the motorcycle.

"You have made plenty of enemies in the underworld that our attempts to cover it up won't remain unnoticed for long. We slipped for the first time today," the old man said.

"Thank you… even if you did roast them," Yamamoto said. "You should have just stranded them in the middle of the ocean or something." Maybe then they would be rescued.

"You don't deserve to be a part of this, Takeshi," he said as he put on this helmet. "That soft heart will only bring you downfall."

"Yeah, but so far it brought this town good, hasn't it?" Yamamoto said. "Go on ahead. I'll have a talk with your grandson."

-18-

He was clutching the black robes they unearthed earlier when Yamamoto opened the door, surprised that they were unlocked.

"The stage will collapse soon. This… all this will crumble soon," he said.

Yamamoto could not stop himself as his hands found its way to Hibari's collars. "What are you waiting for then, Hibari-san? Why don't you just turn everything to dust, if that's what you really want? Why don't you just kill the old man, even if you had many chances to do so? You're waiting for something too, aren't you?" He couldn't stop his tears as he remembered the picture in his grandfather's room. Of a Hibari who knew how to smile. "You're the same as any of us stupid herbivores. You don't want to give in to despair."

"Then leave me. Leave this island. Find another person to cajole, you worthless herbivore," said Hibari as he clawed through Yamamoto's hands to make him let go.

"I promised my friends that I won't leave your side, no matter how much it sucks. So far it does suck." Gosh, he can't stay angry for too long, can't he? A small smile escaped his lips. "But at the same time, it's not too bad. I mean, isn't that how life goes?"

Hibari turned away. "What point are you trying to make? Why do you think I'm not wasting my time listening to your nonsense?"

"Eh, but you were the one who started it!" Yamamoto bleated and then found the urge to laugh. "Plus I want to know Hibari-san. To be friends with Hibari-san."

"The foolish old herbivore was right. You do watch too much cartoons."

Yamamoto grinned at the thought of the two swapping complaints, even if they do badmouth him. It has to start somewhere, hasn't it? "Yup. I do."

"It's futile, Yamamoto Takeshi. I will only treat you as a tool, something disposable, something to guzzle dry and discard of when my mission is done."

"I know. But I'm not only that, Hibari-san. I just have to make you see it."

Hibari sat down, his back still turned. "You left your friends and your father behind just to make
me see it? I see a child who pretends to be an adult, one who is still unable to appreciate the value of the people who bring more joy to him."

"Was this what you thought when Nami-san said she saw good in you?"

He waited for Hibari to pounce on him like he had on his grandfather. He kept still.

"Sorry for pushing it too much, ehehe," he grinned. "But it looks like I'm right. You did care about her."

Hibari sighed. He did not speak quickly. "Out of all the herbivores I've despised, I despised her the least." By then he stood up, the robes still in his hands. "I will not be attending the festivities. Do not interrupt my rest."

-18-

Yamamoto waited for oyaji's reaction after he chewed and swallowed his sashimi.

"Spot on!" the old man said before drinking his tea. Yamamoto's face reddened in response before he slumped himself on the grass mat he brought as he stared at the starry sky. He sneezed.

"We brought a tent," the old man offered.

"I'll go inside in a few," said Yamamoto. It had been quite awhile since he had seen the Milky Way like this.

"This humble self cannot thank you enough for the things you've done."

"No biggie," he waved off. "You did finish watching it all the way until season 3. Hibari-san told me how pissed he was to wake up early because of it."

He laughed. "He can sleep well tonight."

"You got that right. But you sure he won't be able to get the tonfas to attack you again?"

"It's in the smelting shop. It might take a few days but it will arrive."

"Ooh, an upgrade. Neat!" Yamamoto said. "Hibari-san loved those things, didn't he? Weren't they his father's gifts?"

"They were his sister's request. When they came here, my granddaughter asked me to give it to him as a late birthday gift, from Saito."

"No way…"

"Nami wanted to patch up the remaining inkling of love he and Saito had," the old man said as he gazed above. "She thought she knew better."

"Do you think that's why Hibari-san-"

"Who knows?" the old man laughed. "Kyoya's not a good kid. But he's still a kid. He's still growing. If presented with the right opportunities, maybe he'll grow up better than what fate dictates him to be."

"You do love him, don't you, oyaji?"
Ken closed his eyes. A soft yet cold breeze began to blow. "You know what hope is for this humble self, Takeshi? It's a heart listening to the silence of the universe." He then placed his cane on Yamamoto's shoulder. He did not move. "This humble self sees that in you. Now prepare yourself tomorrow. We'll keep that hope burning alive."

I laughed today? For a second I was unhaunted. I was the sun, & not the light of some dead star.

-Danez Smith, *It began right here.*

Chapter End Notes

-Fugarassa (フガラッサ) is a Yonaguni term for 'thank you.'

-For the Okinawan dishes, Chanpuru is a tofu-based dish topped with vegetable, meat or fish and Rafute is a pork-rib dish stewed in soy sauce and brown sugar. I'd definitely want to try these when I go to Okinawa one day hehe. Okinawa soba and taco rice don't need much explanation, I think?

Last update for the year! Happy holidays! :)

I ACTUALLY CRIED WHEN I WROTE THE OUTLINE OF THIS TWO-PARTER; I tried balancing it with my (already gone) love for Haikyuu and sports anime in general but yeah, there's just so many feels that you can actually wring out from Yamamoto. SERIOUSLY, WHO FUCKING KNEW?

Anyway, back to Hibari's POV next chapter. I'm really surprised at how I used to be hesitant in writing Reborn, Hibari, and Yamamoto but when you actually do the writing, there is a lot you can get from them. I am so humbled LOL
Hibari reminisces about his sister. Yamamoto trains and rises above his trauma. His grandfather prepares them for what's next.

Chapter Notes

CAUTION: Mentions of sexual abuse, violence, self-harm, suicide, animal euthanasia and other possibly heavy themes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You taught me the courage of stars before you left. How light carries on endlessly, even after death.

Nee-san.

A week before her last, his sister asked him a question about remembering. Would it be better to remember the things that you did or that happened to you without emotional colouring, without the pain?

"What about the happy things? When you play with me?"

There would still be the pleasure from the good memories. It was only the painful ones where you'll view your memories in a detached manner. It was better than forgetting the bad- the bad things people said; the things folks regret; the things humans suffered. There will still be the remembrance and the learning, plus there will also be the benefits of forgetfulness. Maybe it will make everyone happier.

He could not think. It was still a concept he could not grasp. He was still a child then, he told himself. He did not understand yet how heavy their world will weigh.

He still couldn't understand now, nine years later. But he could grasp, as he opened his eyes, that there was only so much Hibari Kyoya could endure.

/18/

Sawada Tsuna was outside his door by the time he retired from giving Kusakabe his final requests. The purples under his eyes were heavy, panda-like, appalling. He awoke with a start before he can kick him out of the way, rubbing his eyes and then grinning toothily at him.
"What took you so late, Hibari-san?"

"None of your business," he said automatically as he unlocked the door. "Get out of my sight, herbivore."

"I actually have a request. No, I'm not ordering you or anything!" he said quickly when his eyes peered at him quite menacingly. "I was hoping if- uhm- if you can have Yamamoto-kun tag along with you."

"I trust it that you know my answer," he replied. "I would personally prefer the baby out of everyone you will suggest." He then closed the door, only to hear a shriek of pain as Tsuna stuffed his toes on it. He howled more as Hibari continued to ram the door shut.

"Do it for Tsuyoshi-san's sake," said Tsuna. "He lost his limbs due to your incompetence-"

"I find your confidence that I will not smash your head in a thousand defective pieces more irksome than amusing now. I warned him beforehand and he disobeyed. I owed him nothing."

"What about the people who died that night? His son that you killed?"

"They are dead. It's meaningless to pity the dead."

"Man, you are a tough nut to crack, aren't you?" Tsuna said heavily as he howled in pain again when his hands tried prying the door open. "He'll be an asset in the long run. He's probably the guardian with the most potential. He's a fast learner."

"He is still a herbivore in my eyes, Sawada Tsunayoshi," Hibari retorted. "I will shear off your fingers and toes if you continue to disturb me."

"If this is the price I have to pay for you to accept Yamamoto-kun then you can shear them all off!" Tsuna exclaimed, eyes closed and on the brink of tears as he continued to keep the door ajar.

Hibari stared as he then shuffled through his pockets for the hand shear. The herbivore believed he could win by not using his flames. Contemptible.

He started with the left index finger.

/18/

That was the first time she appeared. It was enough to weaken his hold and enable the herbivore to enter. He was too taken aback to respond as her hands kept prodding the hand shears he dropped.

The second time was on the bus, at the lighthouse. The third one was at that geriatric's house. She lay down beside him, her spectral fingers straddling the folds of his shirt. She was a constant presence in the store. Even in that nonsensical volleyball match, he could make her out in the far ends of the stand.

Her back was always turned.

/18/

She did not wear the same clothes he found her shrouded in death. Instead, she wore the tightly fitted skinny jeans and a pastel yellow Nirvana shirt she wore when they took off to the lighthouse, her hair the same length as his. Her hands were folded in front of her as she examined one of the fossilized herbivore wall décors in the shop.
"Morning, Hibari-san!" said Yamamoto when he entered carrying two large boxes of new equipment. "How was breakfast? The butcher's coming later to deliver us meat from the mainland. We'll be having your favourite hamburger steak tonight! Eh, you're not happy?"

Hibari scowled as he made his way to his usual corner. The herbivore and his grandfather were now having an animated conversation about their schedule for the evening, plotting to have a common time. He did not care what it was for as he tied his server apron.

He hated routines. He disliked the thought of being shackled by a world foreign to his, conformity to that group being the only acceptable route.

He only disliked the thought of meeting geriatrics and have them pinch his cheeks as the baseball herbivore and his grandfather looked on, aware of his capability to bite people to death.

"I can't cover for you forever, though," said the baseball herbivore when they closed shop one day. "The old people love you. Use that to your advantage in making sales! You can definitely do it, Hibari-san!"

Hibari huffed and turned away. He will never get used to this. Adoration instead of fear. Camaraderie instead of isolation.

Much more when the baseball herbivore began to be less of a constant presence at work and even at home. He never bothered to care for the herbivore's shenanigans in waking up early or bringing leftovers or bird feed in the meadow to feed whatever pet he befriended. After the volleyball competition, the baseball herbivore only appeared in the morning, preoccupied with crowds in the schools in the afternoon to play baseball, he believed. He did not mind since the crowd thinned in the afternoon, and it would be easier biting his grandfather to death while he took his nap on the counter.

He doesn't have anything to do anyway. It frustrated him, these kinds of invasive thoughts as he drove his way to work. He was spending too much time sparing his grandfather's life and letting his herbivore gallivant over the rolling knolls and fields.

She then began walking towards the exit, stopping just behind the front door, her rubber-band clad hands now fumbling on her back.

"So she's there now, huh?" Hibari was plentifully pissed at the herbivore's invasion of personal space, his elbows resting on his shoulder, palms cupping his head. He was about to crush his kneecaps but he skids ahead in a split-second. He began walking to that spectre's direction. "Hi! I'm Yamamoto Takeshi, Hibari-san's friend. It's nice to meet you, Hibari-san's nee-chan!"

It was in that instant that Hibari began to shake. She turned her head in his direction, face still partially hidden as she fixes her eyes on his. She touched his outstretched hand.

"You-" Hibari couldn't contain himself from taking huge strides forward, his right thumb and pinkie holding the weapon he fashioned from fisherman wire partially encased at in a rubber sheath to bite the herbivore to death. He felt nothing for her. She was a nuisance, a plague, a relic he was better off without. He twirled it maniacally. He will cut off his nose and ears and-

Namimori then disappeared as he moved closer as she often does, but before he can attend to
maiming the baseball herbivore, his grandfather's cane intervened and removed his makeshift weapon from his hand.

"Takeshi, I must request your leave," said the old man, suddenly appearing in their midst. The usual fake smile of his was absent. "Do you really despise it that much when people attempt to show kindness to you?"

"A-Are you sure, jii-san? Hibari-san might, you know-"

"You still have the eighth form to master. I want you to do so this afternoon."

"Uh… ok. Uhm, sorry, Hibari-san. Later!" By that, the door tinkles.

His grandfather then turns to him. Hibari waited for his tongue lash. Instead, he turns away and resumes his place at the counter.

Apparently, this herbivore wanted him to make the first move. Fair enough.

"You are training him the Eight Forms?"

"Aren't you curious?" the old man chuckled as he began counting the bills. "That was an interesting weapon you intend to use. Quite nasty and crude, but crafty. Who taught you that?"

She was beside his grandfather now, peering at the dusty waterless aquarium behind him.

"She did when we first met."

"Intriguing," he smiled. "Saito and Akari rarely mentioned her to me in our correspondence."

"Why should they?" he responded curtly.

"I wonder how you kept Namimori together with that attitude of yours," he chuckled. He turned at her direction and then shifted his eyes back to his. His gaze was softer. "Come into my quarters tonight. I'll show you something."

/18/

The baseball herbivore was deep in training in the front yard when they returned. He gave a quick salute and sang out that dinner was ready. He flashed a thumbs up at Hibari too before resuming his stance.

"Takeshi's working hard," the herbivore said, attempting to engage him in small talk. He said nothing as he followed his grandfather to his bedroom. He froze when he saw the small shrine and the wall of photographs beside it.

"I took that picture," he supplied his opinion as Hibari found his way to one almost half-buried image. "You nearly skidded off the cliffside and Nami managed to catch you in time." He could not bear looking away. It felt alien, uncomfortable, and yet still irrepressible. His hands instinctively yanked it from its taped resting place. He was opening up a new box he often thought was empty somewhere inside of him. He looked at his sister's expression, breezily larger than life and yet achingly human and then at his. Oh, he could only say to himself as he touched his sister's faded face. He imagined that firmed elasticity in his hands. No human being had attempted to touch him like she had. No human being let him touch them without any reservations for fear like she did. Oh, he repeated to himself as he now looked at his child self. It reminded him so much of their picture Nami kept in that box. The one she couldn't bear to give even to the likes of their
A frown formed on his face, refusing to leave.

"I recall this moment differently," he said as he remembered something else. "Forgot I knew how to make an expression like this."

He was starting to forget her. Maybe that was why her back was often turned. He could even barely recall what she looked like in brief flashes.

He woke up with beads of sweat lacing his face and soaking his shirt. A moth with the tips the image of a snake's head fluttered beside him. He let it fly up at the ceiling as it rested its wings, the patterns staring back at him in the gloaming. He dreamt of her apparition finally looking at him, only for a blank canvass of a face to stare at him back, emitting indistinct guttural sounds as she reached his hand out to him, making him backtrack and seeing darkness again.

The sound of Yamamoto tiptoeing inside did not jolt his attention enough for the herbivore to notice him. He let down his katana and proceeded to check his forehead, flinching as he did in case the man landed a blow on him. Hibari did not protest. This was humiliating. Without his tonfas or any weapons to protect himself with, he was reduced to this.

"Almost thought I'd be working alone tomorrow. Bad dream huh?" he said as he then proceeded to take a bath towel and fresh clothing on the other end of the room. "You've been like this since we arrived. I have some pills just in case," he pointed at the drawer separating their beds. "I'll get some water-"

"Why did you do attempt to delude yourself earlier?" he said without thinking. "You cannot see her."

"Yeah but I know what she looked like. She was really pretty… ehehe, actually I did something bad. I saw a picture of her and you in jii-san's place."

He stood up immediately. He did not want to listen to the herbivore's opinion. He must have snapped that picture and sent it to his fellow herbivores. He stared at the uneasy herbivore, who was now fidgeting with his spare set of pyjamas and his phone.

"U-Uhm, I won't pretend she's there if you wish," he said, not meeting his eyes as he began to rapidly press the keys on his phone.

"Do whatever you want," he said finally, just as his sister appeared again near the door. His eyes perked at his words and he began to adjust accordingly to her direction.

"You know, Hibari-san snores," he whispered in air again, missing her by several inches. But she covered her face as if to suppress a snort.

Hibari threw the heaviest hardcover tome he scrunched from the house, making sure its sharp edges would hit his head. A whimper was enough for him to sink once more at the covers.

"Why did you name me Kyoya?" he asked, three years later in his bath made of wood as Nami washed his back with a showerhead.
"Uh… let's see. Hmm… because of how we met? It was evening, and you look so much like me."

"That's lame," his five-year-old self complained.

Her peals of laughter reminded him of a donkey's bray, and she did not care one bit. "Yeah, that's lame."

He looked at the scars on her thighs and touched it. She just smiled back. "I don't hate it though."

"Even when it's lame?" she said, now tickling his armpits, to his protests. He notices cuts in her forearms too. He attempted to push them away but ended up falling on top of her.

"Even when it's lame," he repeated before finally laughing at the mercy of his sensitive armpits and the soles of his feet.

/H18/

"Hibari-san, can I ask you a question?"

"If you ask another, I will bite you to death," was his outright reply three feet away. His sister was beside the herbivore, her face hidden once more by his massive height.

"Oh, so that's a no then? Crap!" he avoided in time when Hibari's scuba tank landed with a resounding clang where he was originally. "And that," he said on his phone, "Is why you have to be direct with your questions when it comes to Hibari-san, 18lover. Oh, and don't say bad words!" He pressed it again and ducked in time before Hibari swung the tank against his head again. "That was close!" He laughed. "Oops," he said again as he avoided another swing. "If Hibari-san does hit me, I wouldn't be able to enjoy our day off."

Hibari grunted in annoyance as he grabbed the metal bars surrounding the cockpit. Their boat was speeding up. He jumped as the tank skidded down. He quietly agreed, however, with Yamamoto. He'd rather be on this trip than mingling with herbivores. One baseball herbivore was enough of an earful.

It lasted twenty more minutes of clinging to the boat when they finally reached Sanninudai, a point near the southern coast of the island where an underwater Neolithic stairwell. The old man happily asked Yamamoto to help him lower their landing deck. Hibari was not happy to know that the old man would not be coming with them and cancelled his plan of having his grandfather drown by 'accident'. He told the herbivore he was not coming.

"Eh?" moaned Yamamoto who was already submerged on the edge of the deck. Beside him, Namimori was dangling her feet on the waters, hands on her back as Yamamoto ignorantly waved his hands at him. "I'm still a beginner at this. I might die."

"Good," Hibari said, but not before the old man shook his head and eyed him beadily.

"You should go help your friend."

"I don't have friends."

"You sound like your father."

"I am not that degenerate-"

That was enough to make him submerge himself in the water as well, but a couple of feet away
"Uhm Hibari-san I might not keep up…"

Ten minutes later and Yamamoto nearly sunk in the bottom of the ruins if not for an incensed Hibari propping him up to a serene old man and a turned Namimori.

"How was it?" grinned his grandfather toothily.

"Why bring us here?" he said as he threw the herbivore's body with the 10-kilogram tank to his grandfather's feet. He hastily began removing the equipment and partly unzipping his wetsuit to perform CPR.

"Wanted you young ones to take a break. Takeshi's been wanting to visit this place since he saw it on Gugeru? That was how he pronounced it," he said with a hacking cough just as Yamamoto began to cough back water as well and sink back into unconsciousness, breathing deeply now. "You did agree to go instead of staying at home."

"You spoil him too much," he flatly remarked. The old man merely raised his hand in his direction. Hibari pushed it away and scrambled on the deck himself, removing his tank and keeping it a barrier between him and the baseball herbivore.

"Aren't you a little jealous?" he teased and avoided Hibari's slamming of his goggled-cover fist to his jaw. "You've become slower, Kyoya. Takeshi thinks highly of you. I'm sorely disappointed."

Hibari bit the inside of his cheek until he could taste that warm, metal liquid starting to seep. He then looked away when she appeared to touch his shoulder and sat down and got his legs wet again.

"Are you angry for becoming a herbivore too?" said his grandfather just as they were slowly being pulled up. Hibari doesn't look up. "You always saw yourself as a protector. Your self-pride was your strength while it lasted, but it doesn't matter now. Takeshi might have already surpassed you. He has the most potential to be the successor of our dance. He might be even better than his father."

"I find that hard to believe," he drawled but felt a tightening in his chest while he yanked out his fins. That was what Sawada Tsunayoshi said as well. He had to prove to his doubts that they were wrong. He often had. It pissed him off.

"Try tonight," said his grandfather just as the baseball herbivore opened his eyes.

/18/

"Ah, sorry for being so slow!" he said, scratching his head as they sat near the deck, caps in full show. Hibari merely folded his arms. "But ain't it cool though? The old man reckons those ruins predate the Egyptian pyramids! They're more than ten thousand years old!"

"It doesn't interest me," said Hibari. He did not like the think of the baseball herbivore being stronger than him. The more his voice grated on him, the more he wanted to utterly bite him to death.

"Figured you'd say that," he retorted, scratching his head again.

"This never-ending obsession with immortality even aeons ago," he snapped. "It merely shows how people fear to be forgotten. To trump death even in memory through these nondescript monoliths."
Namimori then appeared behind the baseball herbivore with her back still turned, irking him further. "I find it easier to be forgotten. You do not need to be obsessive about your actions, deconstructing and reconstructing every minuscule detail. You can live in any way you want to live."

Yamamoto stared for a minute before chortling. "It just shows we're humans and not gods." He then grinned earnestly. "I still won't forget you though. I already uploaded all the stolen shots and recordings of yours on the cloud. They may fetch a hefty price one day…"

"I will bite you to death when I receive my fangs back-"

"Uhm, they're your tonfas right?" He then started to laugh much louder. "I'm sorry, Hibari-san. It's really weird seeing this side of you. So deep… ah," he then hesitated. Nami leaned her head against his shoulder, face still hidden as ever. "Does Hibari-san really welcome death that much?"

"We all will go there one day," he shrugged. "Why must we fear it?"

"Hmm," Yamamoto noted thoughtfully. "I don't think it's what everyone fears the most though," his eyes darted about before he fixes them to his direction again. "I guess what people fear the most, even by people like you is regret." His sister's head remained planted on his shoulder. "It might be the reason you're seeing her right now aren't you?" His smile was fainter but felt like a sledgehammer as he drove the point home. "You know, I read on google that people like you don't feel emotions. You don't know what fear or sadness is. I don't think that's true now. Maybe that's what Nami-san saw. You have feelings too."

She then disappeared. He turned away. "I don't give a damn about what you think."

The herbivore merely chuckled. "I know you'd say that too."

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"Why don't you hate me?" he asked one day, in that cliff in Agarizaki.

Nami just smiled. "Guess I saw something in you."

Kyoya tried to think and then doesn't think at all.

/

Ken left Hibari's tonfas in his bed along with a note telling them to eat dinner without him that night. That was enough permission for Hibari after supper to challenge Yamamoto to a fight.

He took awhile to respond. "Eh, I might die Hibari-san," he laughed nervously.

"I will not kill you. You have my word." He did not say he might end up a cripple or have chronic injury, however.

"I-I don't know Hibari-san I-"

"Do you know why Hitomi married your father, Yamamoto Takeshi? She was deeply enamoured with my father- they were childhood friends- but traditions, traditions. She slept with my father aplenty though even after marrying Tsuyoshi. My mother despised him when she found out. Who knows, maybe that is why your father hated mine. Maybe you're not your father's child too."

An earsplitting silence pervaded the room. Hibari smiled as the herbivore began to tremble
vehemently.

"Is that true, Hibari-san?" he said, every syllable echoing repressed rage. How easy it was to push herbivores' buttons.

"Come," was word enough for them to take their battle outside. His smile curled however as he unsheathed his katana and murmured *Cambio Forma*. Something was off about the herbivore. He could sense it, how his fangs would not sink into something delectable.

By then, she appeared again, tugging his shirt. He yanked her hand away and did not wait for her to disappear as he raised his tonfas. Oh, how he missed his teeth. Oh, how he missed this thrill.

His senses remained tingling, however. Something truly did not feel right.

The herbivore charged, his left katana disappearing in a flurry of blue flames but he should have known of course, how far longer and better he knew the art of dual wielding.

It took less than five seconds to point the bladed end of his tonfa towards the herbivore's throat.

"One more time," the herbivore murmured and it made him despise himself for agreeing. The herbivore performed another form this time, coming in close in just two steps. He needed to only thrust his tonfa up to hit him squarely in the jaw, sending him to his knees. "One more-"

Hibari kicked him away. The old man lied. This was why they had been taking three days to master the original eight forms. So this was his solution? His intervention? Was it really necessary for him to give a damn?

No matter. He turned away. "You've become weak." He could not mask the bitter disappointment in his voice. He could feel the herbivore flinching.

"I'm sorry," his voice was smaller, stripped of the cheery confidence he often showcased. "It frustrates me too."

"If you continue with this charade of yours, you will die when you face her." He had no time for this. He had to leave and kill the old man now. He truly wasted his time there, letting this herbivore sway him in his cutesy barks with no bite to back it all.

"I know. I just don't know how- What is happening to me? Ehehe…” even his laugh is like a whimper now, retreating instead of entreating. "I have to try harder, don't I? Be better. Fighting…”

A failure.

"You may fool yourself, but you can't fool me, Yamamoto Takeshi." There was a but. There was that but. "You are broken." That but. He began to walk away. "Learn to accept that."

/18/

His grandfather was not surprised to see him seething. The other elders walked beside him. Behind them was a pyre filled with screaming herbivores.

"You got us again, young one," the old man said, dusting off his coat. He could smell blood from them. He sheathed and hid his weapon within the folds of his sleeve. "And to what do I owe this pleasure?"

Hibari raised his tonfa, ignoring her apparition again as she appeared near the pyre, barely
translucent under the blaze. "Tell your fellow geriatrics to leave. If they don't I will eradicate them too."

"What do you think of Takeshi-kun?" he said, making him release the spikes from his tonfas, now bigger and deadlier than he was used to.

"It was a joke in poor taste, grandfather," he said the last word as if chewing gravel. "He doesn't even deserve to be bitten. Now die, you old fuck. I have enough of dawdling into your machinations."

The elders suddenly grouped themselves behind him, slowly revealing their weapons. Ken raised his hand to prevent them from continuing further.

His mouth was a blank straight line. "Are you satisfied now in seeing him break?"

It took Hibari several seconds to answer. By then, Ken continued, "He won't be of use to you if no one puts a stop to it."

"If he cannot rise above it, then it proves how much he deserves to die a shameful death." That was it. Yes, how many times had Hibari overcome adversity alone no matter how much the world shat on him and yet this herbivore could not move forward with such simple bonds? He was just weak. There was truly nothing in there. He deluded himself again.

His grandfather's eyes were colder now, almost like slits. "Was that what you thought of your father's death? Your uncle's? Your sister's? Shameful?"

He could not believe he'd give such a spineless reply. "Yes."

The old man closed his eyes. He inhaled and exhaled heavily. "Then that proves what kind of death you deserve Kyoya." His mouth twisted between expressions, unsure. "And that saddens me more."

Yamamoto was not in the house when the Hibaris returned. Nami was in his bed though, hands splayed out as her face was flattened on top of the pillow. He knew this wasn't real because her hands and neck did not bear any scars. He ignored her and took off his shirt before going to bed.

He hated it when someone else was right. He hated it more when he knew that both he and someone else were right.

These people were a nuisance. Another defence mechanism, maybe. That voice in his head that chose the easier way, blaming others for his pitfalls. He was really becoming like his family. He growled and away from the herbivore's bed, only to see her in front of him, her back still facing him. How long was he truly going to haunt her?

Hey, Kyoya, do you know about the man named Sisyphus?

He closed his eyes. He did not want her to come any closer. It rung in his ears.

"I have forgotten," he said to no one.

Of course you won't. His work is fatalistic as heck.

His mouth grinned by instinct. His sister never liked swearing. That was a Hibari oath he broke
sometimes.

So once upon a time, there's this man named Sisyphus. He did a grave sin to the gods. I forgot what
he did, something about the providing spring water in his town without the gods' permission or
something. So when he died, his punishment in the underworld was to carry a rock up a hill and
then roll it down. He'll carry it up, up again and roll it down, down again. For all eternity!

He opened his mouth to exclaim something but then decided to say something else. "Why are you
telling me this?"

Is there a point in wiping out your family? Of making that friend of yours suffer? What is the point
of taking revenge for me or jii-san? We're already dead.

"Your conclusion is dripping with hubris. I'm only doing this for my own satisfaction. I don't care
about you or uncle."

You're a terrible liar, Kyoya. I still remember that day gramps took our picture. You may have
forgotten a ton of things, but I'm sure you've never forgotten that. We made a promise.

"Promises break. You said before you were used to that."

You sure know how to talk back, you arrogant little shite. Fine, whatever. Suit yourself. You're a
Hibari. You're stubborn as heck.

"Did that stubbornness kill you?"

It did if you're really that curious. I set a bad example for my little brother. If you make the same
mistakes I had, I won't ever forgive you.

"Liar."

You really like shooting down your sister, don't you? Such a naughty child… hmm, you're the same
age as I was, huh? Time sure flies so fast.

"You did not answer my earlier question."

And no room for sentimentality, ah? Hmph. You truly do emulate Sisyphus. If you let nostalgia
consume you, the rock wins. Good job, Kyoya.

"You're the one who taught me to never look back."

Ahaha, did I? A pat on the back on my end then!

"Don't go yet."

What's with the sudden change?

"It's been awhile since I heard your voice."

I thought there was no more room for sentimentality you little brat.

"Please."

That doesn't sound like you. But thank you. I'm glad you're still fighting and growing as you move
forward. You make your nee-san proud.
Liquid fell on his cheeks. He was sure it wasn't from her.

/18/

He was sleeping on the porch, his Kintoki being his other support when Hibari went outside. He noticed a yellow canary sleeping on his shoulder as well. So.

He was a liar too, really…

All of them were the same. He kicked the katana to rock the herbivore awake. The bird immediately opens its eyes and twittered frantically once it saw Hibari's face. He smirked. That must be enough an alarm clock already.

"H-Hibari-san! I'm sorry!" he said, looking at the bird and then at Hibari's expression before also exploding and running around the lawn, the bird following him. "I can explain I-

"You disobeyed my orders. You did not want to kill the bird. I know and I don't care," Hibari cut to the chase, releasing his tonfas. Yamamoto then raised his katana like a ward in front of him. "Herbivores disobey orders they don't want to follow. It's in their nature. I've seen it countless times."

"S-So, what are you going to do to me?" Yamamoto said, covering the bird with his palm and trying to calm down its shrill twitter.

"I want to ask you whether you despise me or not, Yamamoto Takeshi for what I've said last night."

"What?" Yamamoto loosened his grip and dropped his katana.

"It's a binary question. Do you, or do you not?"

"What the heck, did you hear that Tsuna? Gokudera? Reborn-san? I think Hibari's trying to apo-

Yamamoto's reflexes were faster if his phone was on the line. Good. That would make things easier. He yanked back his chain just as the herbivore hid his phone on one of his hoodie's pockets. "Sorry, Hibari-san! It's rare to hear you ask questions like that… see…"

"Your. Answer."

"Uhm, well no, I don't despise you as much last night. See, I talked to Gokudera and I recorded his reply. Just a sec, Hibari-san.” By then he pressed play.

"I detested you, detested how perfect you were. Living in your perfect bubble, believing that things would fall into place. Fucking hated that world view. I wanted to crack your perfect façade. I wanted to believe that you weren't all that, that you weren't as well-adjusted as people perceive you to be. I wanted that bubble of yours to burst and then gloat over you, to prove that I'm fucking better, that you can't handle it like I can. I even practised my final laugh."

There was a pause. "Ehehe, sorry, I'll look for the next recording uhm…"

"I lived in a bubble too, once. Finding out that the piano teacher was my mother was the biggest turning point of my life. I chose to leave that bubble, chose to trust no one but myself, chose to despise myself because I couldn't find a place to belong until I met you guys.

"I couldn't detest you for long. I couldn't believe what a selfish douchebag I was, to hate you for living a privileged life you were lucky not to choose. But then seeing you happy, living a life I never
got to live made me happy too. I didn't want that to change. I couldn't stand the thought of seeing you break.

"But when I saw your mother I was fucking afraid. I was really happy that your dad was alive, but then when I saw you like that after, when you couldn't even look at me, I never felt this much disgust since... I found out I was a bastard. I grew sick of it, seeing that despicable wish of mine coming true and having you unravel like that before my eyes. I could barely even look at you when you apologized to me. I never thought that things would end like this. I used to think how convenient it was for you to leave. I'm really sorry, baseball freak."

"Wow, that's the first time I heard you say a lot of stuff, Gokudera!" Yamamoto froze as he listened to his own voice. "You really do care about me, don't you? I care about you too! About Tsuna, about Hibari-san, about everyone. That's why I have to go and be Hibari-san's pillar, to make sure he comes back to our side. That's a promise."

Hibari was nonplussed for several seconds. He did not know how to react. "It's fake," he said flatly.

"Wait, Gokudera actually said that! We just had to repeat it all from scratch so I can record it. I think my response gave it away..." Yamamoto scratched his head again and began to laugh.

"Your reply is too long..." Hibari trailed off. He was letting this herbivore waste his time again. He needed that phone to prevent him from falling into further shenanigans.

"Eh, so what are you implying Hibari-san?" Yamamoto opened his mouth to a big 'o' again. Hibird chirped dolefully as it glanced at its old master.

"Draw your sword. I'll tear you down and force you to stitch yourself back together. I'll give that sword of yours extra weight."

"You should just say you'll train me, Hibari-san!" he laughed again yet obeyed his command.

"Thanks. I'm in your care, Hibari-sama." He said the last line with much conviction, it ticked his teacher off.

"Are you recording everything again, herbivore?"

When Yamamoto nodded, Hibari lunged.

/18/

"Kyoya-kun! Takeshi-kun!" said one of the old ladies, holding up a bowl of sliced watermelon during their short break. Yamamoto and the bird were more than happy to get the first pieces. Hibari nodded at the herbivore as he noted the time they were wasting and how he needed to eat only two more pieces in ten seconds, sending the baseball herbivore in a frenzy of seed bullets and stained clothing.

"Who made you agree to train him?" said the old herbivore.

"None of your business," said Hibari.

"An interesting turn of developments, that is."

"Do not make anymore references to that franchise. She made me watch the movies enough times to get sick of that green puppet."

"Kakaka! You aren't as stuck up as you portray yourself to be," boomed his grandfather. "So Nami
liked movies, didn't she?"

"She snuck in an old TV in my room. She made me watch a lot of things that were popular when
she was a child."

"Mm. Like a typical girl her age..." he grabbed a teacup and poured himself a small amount.

Hibari could not stop himself from rebutting. "When your wretched son still existed in my
memory, he asked me to hold his penis for him. Nami did too. Maybe Yuu and Kei did too. Maybe
my wretched father did as well."

Yamamoto was still not finished with his first watermelon.

"My sister never complained. She hated sounding weak while she was with me. But I saw it
whenever she came to bathe me at night without our parents' permission. It made her easy prey to
other types of pain. I learned not to break no matter how many times my enemies wounded me
because I know of many other ways to inflict pain. Our family is a natural."

The baseball herbivore was nearly halfway with his second and paused to take a selfie with the
bird.

"Why don't you tell Takeshi?"

"He is not involved," said Hibari calmly, drinking the tea from his glass. "It is up to him to make
his own judgment. I dislike spoonfeeding man-children."

"He's wiser than he lets on," the old man noted. "Reminds me so much of Tsuyoshi."

"You cannot displace your guilt through that herbivore. You were given a choice to free your
children from the expectations you imposed. You chose not to. It is that simple."

The man swirled his glass, still bemused. "No matter how much I'd want to answer to the sins I've
done, it won't change a thing. The people who have the right to condemn me are dead. I stayed on
this island to wait for my chance to atone and here you are now, the child of the son I've hurt the
most."

"I will kill you. This is my oath in the name of Namimori. To my sister and our town."

The herbivore finished his watermelon. Hibari stood up.

/18/

"Do you believe in trauma, Yamamoto Takeshi?" he said as they walked through town, the
herbivore a few steps behind him.

"Uh, yeah. I think that's what Gokudera said about me too."

"I will tell you something about trauma, herbivore," said Hibari as they paused a few yards from a
tree. Yamamoto froze when he found out why. "It stays with you." There was a baby bird that fell
from its nest. They were outside the home of one of their volleyball team mates.

"Ah, Hibari-san-" Yamamoto said, pointing at the bird.

"Get a paper bag or something in the trash we can carry this animal with," he said without missing
a beat. The garbage collecting truck won't be there until mid-afternoon. Yamamoto frantically only
found a plastic bag and gave it to him. Hibari tenderly carried the small bird with it.
"Its neck's broken. If we don't hurry then-"

"Yes," Hibari said. "This will be a better lesson for you than our pointless battling in my grandfather's yard." With that said he pressed both ends of the plastic bag together and began smothering the bird with his hands.

"H-Hibari-san-!" The herbivore screamed, almost as loud as the ferocious screeching of the tiny bird. It pulsed and reared up against his hands. It did not want to go down without a fight. But of course. That was the beauty of it. Death will always, always elicit fear. Life will always cling to that possibility of hope, no matter how slim.

It was foolish and absurd and acceptable and real.

"My sister once told me about a man named Sisyphus, a man doomed to push a rock up a hill, roll it down, and push it up again for all eternity. There is no glory in it. His whole being is exerted in accomplishing nothing. Humanity is doomed to live that way as well, living in this kind of absurdity and death will come and save us all." The struggling from underneath his palms was feebler now. He pressed on it harder. "We try to find an escape to it. Humans tend to choose either killing themselves or clinging to a possible higher plane of existence. There is another option."

"W-What does that have to do with killing a baby bird, Hibari-san? What does that have to do with justifying what a h-horrible man you are?"

The struggling had stopped. He carried the plastic bag and passed by Yamamoto, whose gaze was still fixated on the ground, biting back his tears.

"If you can't accept that life will continue not giving a shit about you then your rock will forever win, Yamamoto Takeshi. Ask better questions. And answer every single one."

She was in front of them, hair still as short and hands still as embellished with loom and rubber bands as ever. Hibari turned at Yamamoto, who shuffled beside him reluctantly.

"Come. We will bury it."

/18/

They returned to its burial spot (Yamamoto fashioned a small rock and a bed of wild dandelions) in Agarizaki to watch the sunrise. Hibird remained fastened on Yamamoto's shoulder, twittering maniacally as the sky turned a soft shade of lavender and salmon.

"What is the third option? What is another way to escape this absurdity?"

"There is no escaping this existence aside from death," Hibari said. "It's similar to trauma. It will mess you up until the day you catch your last breath."

"So what? I just have to live? No other shortcuts? No other cushioning after the fact? I have to take it all head-on, even though I know I can't ever fight fate?"

"That's where I disagree with that kind of thinking," Hibari said, as some parts of the sun began to rise. Namimori was once more in front of him, hands on her knees, wind whipping back her cropped hair as she stared onward. "I go on living because I want to choose how I'd die."

"Even if you will rip the lives of other people in doing so?"

Hibari nodded.
"I expected that much from you," Yamamoto chuckled benignly. "I honestly don't want to die yet. I still have some stuff I want to do after this."

"You will live. As long as you have something to hold onto."

"This is really weird to hear you talk this much Hibari-san! Uhm, is Nami-san there? Hi nee-chan!" he said, waving furiously. She waved back.

Hibari stared daggers at Yamamoto. "Eh, what's wrong?"

He looked at her again. He saw a quick flash of her wide smile there as she turned once more at the rising sun.

"She would always look at you. It annoys me. Whenever she appears, she never turns in my direction."

Yamamoto covered his hand as he guffawed. "That's because you don't call her. You can't let others make the first move forever. I mean, if I didn't help Tsuna that time, I wouldn't have met you all. Even nee-chan!"

That was the last time she appeared.

It had been two days since then, and they had resided near Mt. Urabe battling with the ex-Hibari patriarch nearly nonstop.

"Catch, young one," he said on the first day, tossing something to Hibari to which he avoided. "Still as uncooperative as ever, I see…"

The item glinted and it made Hibari fixate his anger to the man three feet beside him, who just shrugged and laughed hesitantly.

"You will be dealt with, later," said Hibari Kyoya as he kicked the Cloud Bracelet aside. "I don't need to depend on the Vongola again."

"You and your stubborn pride… a Hibari through and through," his grandfather sighed, shaking his head. "I'll be blunt, Kyoya. Use it and partner up with Takeshi-kun, or you will lose your life."

"The first and last time I partnered with anyone was with a pineapple-head illusionist. I will not repeat that with this Shiba Inu herbivore."

The old man squinted at Yamamoto, who nodded in assent and released his rain flames onto Hibari, forcing the bracelet onto his left arm whether he liked it or not. He scowled and tried to pry it off to no avail.

"I used the old man's handmade superglue and my Rain Flames to lock it. Roll won't let you go too whether you like it or not!"

"You ally yourself with him?" Hibari grunted as he continued to bash through it with his tonfa.

"Eh, just until we finish the last part of our training. And for that, I need your help!" Yamamoto pointed his finger guns at him. "I need your assistance in incapacitating the old man, and then he said he can do whatever we want with him."

"I cannot kill him?" This was enough for the flames in his bangle to roar menacingly. Yamamoto
immediately dashed back three more feet away.

"If you do not follow our demands, Kyoya, I will reveal your whereabouts publicly to the underground. They'd be more than happy to annihilate you and Dounan along with it."

"The old man also said that if he died, the other elders will know and contact them anyway, so there is no escape."

"Do you think that would be enough to stop me once I get away from your prison, Yamamoto Takeshi?" he snarled.

"What say you, old man?"

He shrugged. "We have to try, don't we? He's underestimating this humble self. Time to teach my grandchild a lesson. You've been an ungrateful little brat the moment you stepped foot in Dounan."

Seven different coloured flames then began encircling his cane. He pushed it on the ground to produce a Claymore swathed in multicoloured flames. "First form. How do you like it, Takeshi?"

"Still as awesome as ever, old man shishou." Yamamoto readied his two katanas, eyes now sharp and alert.

"Before we begin, I must warn you Kyoya that Yuuya and Kei are far stronger than me. You weren't considered a candidate to succeed your father. That is why you only know how to control two flames at most, while they can control any flame within Mafia jurisdiction. It will take more than a decade of training, and we only have two days. I don't have any of that ridiculous power up mumbo jumbo like those from the shows Takeshi lent me. That carrot-haired guy with the colossal sword whose title is about detergent or something was a good one, Takeshi!"

"The show starts to suck when the guy who betrayed Soul Society got defeated!" said Yamamoto.

"Oh dear, I'm two episodes past that one," the old man laughed.

"We are wasting time with your pointless babbling," Hibari scowled.

"This humble self will just provide you with a taster of our family's strength," smiled the old man.

"And I will be supporting you, Hibari-san since I've fought with the old man a couple of times."

"I will bite you all to death," he hissed. This was ludicrous, but he needed to be patient and kill the old man first and then the baseball herbivore. With that, the rain flames surrounding Hibari disappeared.

And that was not until the old man unleashed the real power of the seven flames of the sky.

Yamamoto Takeshi nodded at him encouragingly. He whispered the magic words and swathes of purple began enveloping him then. It had been too long.

/18/

"He looks cute, doesn't he?" cooed a girl with bangs longer than the tail of her bluish-black hair.

He looked at his younger self, wearing a mini white polo shirt and navy chinos along with small mustard yellow loafers that matched his elementary school hat.

"He doesn't look six though…" a familiar voice trailed off. His hand was fully covered by her own. He looked up. She was easily two heads taller than the other girl. She was also wearing a different
uniform compared to the other girl, a gakuran draping her shoulders, black pants instead of the long navy skirt the other girl wore. "I still think he should have worn the stormtrooper shirt and white pants."

"Your Star Wars otaku persona is showing-"

"Shut up, SMAP weeb…"

Her hair was longer as well, despite the high ponytail it reached past her waist.

"Something wrong, Kyoya?" she said in puzzlement as he continued to ogle. "Nervous about your first day? You'll make lots of friends in no time as long as you shut up about killing everyone, kay?"

"You're giving him bad thoughts again…"

"He might forget, Saya-chi. I'd want him to enjoy his first day. It's his wish to go to school."

"When will I be able to wear those?" he asked, pointing at her gakuran.

"I don't think they'll fit you. I'm taller than Kei-niisan," she pressed a forefinger to her lower lip. "But ok. When you finish elementary school and go to Nami-chuu, you can borrow any clothing I have!"

"Not your Star Wars clothes please…"

"Ahaha, I won't part with those quite easily!"

So this was what she looked like before his mother cut her hair. She was beautiful, eyes bigger and more alive than a normal Hibari's, a loose smile always playful on the edges of her mouth, a restrained yet commanding gait…

Saya talked to the school teacher and began giving a list of things to consider when taking him in. He tagged at his sister's sleeve. She lowered herself to him like a knight in one of those films she had him watch.

"Thank you, nee-san. For granting my wish," he said, tugging on her sleeve again. She merely laughed and ruffled his hair.

"It's your turn now to grant my wish when you make friends, okay?" she said warmly, pulling him closer to her shoulder. "Smile more, okay? Not just for my and your sake this time. Now go out there and knock them out of the park, you cute little brat!"

Nami and Saya waved at him as he his teacher held his hand inside. He'll grant her wish. He would learn how to be happy. He would make her happy.

Three months later and he was whisked into Child Support Services for stabbing their teacher with a pencil thirteen times and breaking the arms of three classmates. He wouldn't be allowed by his father to attend school again.

"Told you it would fail," Kei snorted at her as his father locked him in that accursed room again. Nami could only raise a fist at his direction.

That was only the first of many.
Saya's lifeless body stared at him emptily in that room he resided in. They skinned her face while she was still alive. He was forced to watch. Nami too.

She shuddered when their father touched her shoulder. She could barely look at Kyoya as her father uttered. "You made your choice. Now take him away," he said as his two wet nurses began to subdue him. He bit and pulled and scratch until they bound and gagged him. She could only shake as she looked at him one more time, her eyes swimming in terrified tears, mouth saying the same 'sorry' over and over.

That was the last time he saw her alive.

18

The baseball herbivore caught him before he could fall on his knees. His swallows continued their tirade against the old man, who sliced through them all with ease.

"I won't let you face your battles without my assistance, Hibari-san," he said, letting him stand up by himself. He brandishes his katana in front of him, his flames burning much brighter than that tuna herbivore's. "You don't have to fight them alone anymore."

Hibari grinned. Nami was also in front of him. So that was why she always was in front of him as well. He could not understand why she and that baseball herbivore would risk their lives for people who may betray them one day. He whispered Cambio Forma again as he also walked slowly beside the herbivore.

"I'm a herbivore too, aren't I?" he said as the Rolls in his feet began to multiply.

"No. You're a living, breathing, feeling human being, Hibari-san. You're the same as any of us."

With those words, they charged.

18

An Atlas Moth was perched on his grandmother's grave stone and fluttered when they came closer. He pushed his grandfather's wheelchair and made sure to land on as many stones and pebbles as possible for him to cry out in pain from his injuries. Yamamoto carried the basketful of red camellias, lavender and sagisas.

"You will join her tomorrow morning," said Hibari curtly.

"You don't have to say those words in front of his wife!" Yamamoto exclaimed. "Still as callous as ever, geez…"

The old man's laugh was weaker this time.

"Hey, dad's sensei!" Yamamoto saluted the grave stone. "It's a shame I couldn't get to meet you. You might have kicked my other sensei's sass!"

He must be talking about that shark. He kicked the herbivore on his bandaged side because he was hogging too much space.

"I'll be joining you soon, Hotarubi," he said, bowing his head to her.

Hibari did not need to say anything. He despised her as much as he despised the rest of them.
Their last day on the island was as busy as any other day. They had to watch over the shop until before five, watch their final sunset in Dounan, and then return to the recreational complex where a massive feast was waiting for them as a parting gift from the island residents. He couldn't refuse in case the herbivore attempted to talk to his spectral sister again that night.

"It was a good two weeks!" said the herbivore, triggering his berserk button again. It should have felt a longer stay, but it flew by so fast. He began snapping pictures of the setting sun again.

"My sister told me that a long time ago during a time of conquest, pregnant women were pushed off this cliff to avoid an increase in population. You can still hear the baby herbivores moaning at night with their mothers."

"Sh-Sh- H-Hibari-san! Is that true?"

Hibari smirked deviously. "Who knows?"

This was the same place as that picture where he had his last conversation with his sister. She did not look like the girl he would be seeing several days later, broken and already dying. This girl was holding a small philosophy book, her gaze as sharp as they were forlorn while they looked up at the grey sky.

"Say, Kyoya," she said quietly. "Would it be better to remember the things that you did or that happened to you without emotional colouring, without the pain?"

"What about the happy things?" his eight-year-old self asked. "When you play with me?"

"There would still be the pleasure from the good memories. It's only the painful ones you'll view in a detached manner. Maybe that's better than forgetting the bad - the bad things people said; the things folks regret; the things humans suffered. There will still be the remembrance and the learning, plus there will also be the benefits of forgetfulness. Maybe it will make everyone happier."

"I think that's scary, nee-san."

There was that familiar braying again when she guffawed. "You're right. It's such an irrational proposition. It will probably change the memory by removing the emotions and pathos it's associated with."

It was the first time he saw her hesitate.

"Maybe some memories in their essence are painful because we experienced it, not simply because they were real."

"I don't understand nee-san. You like complicating things!"

"Eh, let's watch Star Wars again when we go home then with Saya-chi!"

"I want to watch Die Hard."

"What about Ikiru?"
"Die Hard, Die Hard!"

"You're starting to rebel against your nee-san huh? You little brat-" she proceeded to tickle him until she began to lose interest, lying on the grass instead. He found this itchy and merely sat beside her.

"What's wrong, nee-san?" he prodded, playing with her shorter hair.

"Do you remember when we first met Kyoya?" she said, closing her eyes. "I saw you on patrol. You were only four. You attempted to kill me."

"Bite you to death!"

"Okay, bite me to death," she said, voice dripping with sarcasm. "I was outside beside the mailbox in the wee hours of the morning waiting for my uncle to reply to my letters. He replied the first two years until I was seven but then he stopped altogether afterwards, no matter how many times I wrote. I began to resent him after, being the weak-ass little girl I was." She paused. Kyoya lay his head on her stomach. He could feel how thinner she was then. "I found out two days ago that dad… that fucker intercepted every single letter when I was seven onwards. He also grabbed hold of jii-san's replies to me. I was ok you know…" her voice hardened. "When he had me suck his cock and do all the shit he'd been doing with you and nee-san and nii-san even when Saya-chi said that was messed up, I did not give a shit. But when I saw those letters in his room… I can't take it anymore. I have enough with our tradition, with our rules of not having any friends… the way Yuu-nee and Kei-nii are as brainwashed and crazy as the rest of them… I should have left with Fon-jiisan. Fuck this family. Fuck it all," she said, just as Hibari began wiping her tears with his sleeve. She then began to shake as she tried to stop her sobs. "Do you know what my real wish is, Kyoya? I want to kill them. I want everyone dead. I want that house burned. I want every single fucking one of us dead."

"Even me? Even you, nee-san?"

"Yeah," she said, covering her face with her arm. "Even me and you."

Hibari looked at the dark blue ocean.

"Do you hate me now, Kyoya?" she said in a faraway voice.

He looked at her scars. He stared at her mouth which were missing a few teeth.

"Yeah, I hate you. But I hate you the least."

She let her arms envelop him. "Can you make a promise to me, Kyoya?"

He squeezed her fingers.

"If I fail as jii-san had, can you finish the job for our sake? If our town does get destroyed… If you can't find a reason not to do it, will you?"

Hibari could smell the familiar peach perfume on her neck. "Okay."

"Okay," she repeated. "Stay by my side until the end, Kyoya."

Hibari appeared near the stone marker.
"Nee-san," Hibari called out. She did not turn. "Nee-san," he repeated, louder this time.

"Hibari-san?" The herbivore's voice seemed to melt away with everyone else as he broke into a run, extending his arms to pull back her shirt and make her look at him. He wanted to see her expression. He wanted to see that smile of hers. He-

"Hibari-san!"

The spell broke and he could see Hibird frantically flapping its wings, in its beak his photograph with her sister.

He couldn't feel anything underneath his feet. He looked down and saw waves lazily splashing against the jagged rocks hundreds of feet away.

He could feel his arm in pain as it carried his entire body. He looked up and saw the herbivore's eyes, heard his laborious breathing and felt his glimmering strength as he began pulling him up. The bird stayed on his shoulder when the herbivore pulled the rest of him back at the cliffside. Yamamoto could only extend the rest of his body back at the grass as he panted heavily.

"That wasn't my sister," he murmured finally as he looked at his photograph, at both their smiles before finally letting go. "That was my rock." He did not even look back as the bird began to chirp in earnest.

Yamamoto then began to laugh. "So the rock didn't win in the end?"

That's what she was. She was like that struggling baby bird. She was that feeling that swelled inside of him that refused to die, and yet was barely clinging on.

"Fuck it. Fuck our trauma," he said before sinking back on the grass as well.

"Just fuck it, huh?" the herbivore snickered. "You know what I feared the most? I feared losing a reason to live when I thought dad was a goner and that you were too. I thought that the reason I came with you was because I wanted to save my mom. But you know... the more days that passed, the more I'm starting to accept that I was lying to myself and that father maybe right. Maybe all of it would amount to nothing. I might die over nothing. That thought jolted back to me when you told me how broken I was. Guess you were right."

Hibari was listening. He did not understand why, but he was listening.

"Maybe it's too late to save my mother, but it's not too late to save you."

A foreign expression suddenly appeared on Hibari's face. It felt warmer than he imagined it to be.

"Your speech is too long," he snorted.

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*With shortness of breath, you explained the infinite. How rare and beautiful it is that we exist.*

*Sleeping at Last, Saturn*

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**A Prelude**

"I remember those clothes well," said Ken serenely as Hibari and Yamamoto came at Agarizaki to also see their final sunrise. Horses roamed across the field and ignored them.
Hibari nodded at his acknowledgement. "Nee-san said these were what uncle wore in that war a long time ago. I deem it appropriate."

His grandfather tossed his cane at their direction. As usual, Hibari moved aside.

"You little rascal..." his grandfather popped a vein in his left temple. "That's a prized heirloom in the family. That is my parting gift."

"No thank you," Hibari grinned maliciously. "These tonfas are enough remembrance. You have my gratitude, grandfather."

"Let's get this over with then," the old man said as he fell to his knees and lowered his head.

Yamamoto turned his back.

"You will be slaying more of our kind, Takeshi. Have a good look at it firsthand. That will be my final request."

"Fulfill his request," Hibari thundered. Yamamoto hid his phone and his hands as he bit his lip to stop his tears. "Now," he then said as he unsheathed the longest blade from his tonfa. He said nothing else as he lowered his blade towards the man's neck at full strength.

However.

It only took two seconds for seven multicoloured flames to swathe their field of view. The old man disappeared from his position to come into view again in front of them, back turned, claymore on hand. His bandaged arm was bleeding.

"Takeshi," said the old man. "I leave Kyoya to you."

Hibari could not register his emotions properly when Yamamoto grabbed his waist, reciting the usual magic words, and then preparing himself to run and jump into the oceanic abyss.

But he did see it. The man who postponed his execution. The man who will end up killing his prey.

Hibari Kei was smiling quite smugly as he began releasing seven flames from his blade. Despite the adrenaline and pandemonium, he heard every word that came out his wretched mouth.

"I came to finish the job."

It was a flurry of colour and gravity then as Yamamoto used the ocean at his disposal, slowing their descent as they landed on a boat that was prepared beforehand. He then made a thumbs up to the cockpit's direction. The boat began to move.

"You knew about this?" Hibari said angrily.

"We got a tip from the old folk that he arrived at dawn," he said quickly. "We'll be changing boats from the main island to confuse them. We didn't want to tell you. You'd throw a fit."

A wide spectrum of colours continued to sputter at the cliffside. It was like a sea of rainbows at daybreak. Hibari attempted to jump overboard, only to be surrounded by Yamamoto's rain flames.

"This was his last request. You said I have to fulfil it," Yamamoto said, eyes still fixed at the fight, despite it slowly becoming a speck on the horizon. "Just let me do something right." By then, he began to cover his face.
Hibari did not move even when his flames disappeared and the herbivore retreated inside the boat to mourn.

"Nee-san," he said to no one in particular. "I wish I learned how to grieve."

Chapter End Notes

Kyoya= night + mirror, according to Tumblr lmao. Can't find any other references that say otherwise sorry about that.

Three pieces I based on some of the ideas I presented in this chapter; I can't find an online copy of the dying bird anecdote so here you go:

- https://aeon.co/ideas/psychopaths-have-feelings-can-they-learn-how-to-use-them

FUCKING FINALLY I CAN MAKE THIS GOOD SONG MY CHAPTER HEADERS. The moment I heard this back in April, I knew that this was definitely something I'd pin to this story. Densest chapter I've ever written (so far). I've been rewriting this chapter even in the original 18 fic I posted, so it pays that I finally have the guts of posting as demanding as this. Makes you proud when you do something you thought was impossible, right?

Anywayz, back to Tsuna and rest of their POV's next chapter. The Hibari-Yamamoto narrative was more a thought exercise than a rollercoaster from the earlier chapters, so we'd be retreading that path until the end! I overestimated my ability to juggle RL and this fic (plus my mental health) so I'll be finishing this fic soon (I'm still not sure when though, but we're on the verge of wrapping up). Thanks for keeping up!
Mendokusai

Superbi Squalo had a routine to keep himself from dicing his partners apart or doing it to himself. Regardless of place, he would wake up two hours before the rest of them to do thirty-minute stretches and perform three thousand strikes with each hand and four thousand for both. If they had no missions that week, they attended mandatory mindfulness lessons to keep their temper and bloodlust in check (per the Ninth's orders) and afterwards, be off to lunch. Afterwards, Squalo will be off to accomplish the paperwork instead of letting Xanxus use them as fire fuel until evening, usually skipping dinner if they were too much. Before sleeping, he would do his stretches and sparring session with a fresh Gola Mosca and then check his Instagram, becoming aghast at his disgraceful protégés endless flurry of photos. It's a miracle that idiot was still alive and how irksome no one was able to locate them. By then, he'd drift off to sleep, grumbling about how much a butt-monkey he had become for that stupid Boss of his.

The Namimori fiasco may have shaken up his routine and reduced his 'Me time' by thirty minutes, but things remained the same. Xanxus would attempt to destroy three acres of flora and fauna when his buttons were pressed far enough (which was as easy as pulling petals off a delicate flower, mind you) and Bel would still attempt to skin their new recruit, Flan, alive while Levi gets speared in the background, but Squalo had his fair share of troubles. Most of their HQ's were getting compromised due to the leaks. He asked Mammon and Lussuria to keep track of the intel while he sorted out their missions to assist in calming the family's precarious position. If any asshole would replace him and be handed in babysitting a bunch of axe-crazy psychopaths, as well as help keep the Vongola together then best of luck to him. No fucker can pull off what he's doing and he knew, as he drank empty a bottle of Irish whiskey each night to knock him dead asleep.

At least that's what he thought when he woke up that morning and shook his head yet again when he saw Yamamoto's lazing about with a stolen shot of Hibari and him winning a volleyball competition like they were having some fucking vacation and not being pursued by the families.

Now that he thought about it, Lussuria reported of how some families were concerned about the missing men that pursued them in the Okinawan isles. Maybe those buffoons have no idea how to navigate in unforgiving seas on the farther islands, so fuck them.

So it was just an ordinary day in the Varia HQ when Bel decided to cook dinner with Flan as the main course.

"Boiled or flambéed Boss?" he asked to Squalo's chagrin during their morning report.

Xanxus did not need to be asked twice. "Grilled," he grunted and decided to trash the foyer for
being woken up earlier than ten in the morning. Their tight schedule due to the Namimori fiasco had the rest making sideline trips either to decimate potential suspects and deserters and just about everyone else for making them wake up at the crack of dawn.

Bel, their second best cook (after Lussuria, naturally) decided to cook his chef-d'œuvre: Cuisse de grenouilles.

"Or as the plebs call it, frog legs," Bel grinned as he raised a giant butcher knife as Levi and Lussuria carefully prop a gagged Fran on the stone altar they used as a prop just outside the mess hall. It was rumoured to be the place Secondo slaughtered his enemies to feed to their hounds. The Varia doesn't believe this of course. They'd rather believe Secondo was a vampire and this was where he usually sucked them dry.

"Shoo, mushroom imp! Peacock freak! Nose-hair loser!" the child cried.

"Oh please. Your stupid pineapple headmaster gave you to us for a reason. And that reason is today," Bel said, grinning widely as he raised his massive knife that looked more like a halberd as it hovered just above Fran's torso. Levi and Lussuria lovingly made sure the chains binding him in place was as tight and as uncomfortable as possible. "I am so happy. We will finally get rid of this little bastard and I will be the youngest genius in the Varia, shishishi~"

"Just get on with it already," Levi said as he massaged his bandaged face. "Remember the last time you gloated for five minutes? It gave this idiot enough time to do something annoying again and made you hit his cuffs by accident-"

"And… remember the time Bel nearly chopped my poor peacock off when the little one made a leeway for it?"

"Are you sure the little one isn't something else?" the princely teen grinned, making Lussuria's left lens crack.

"Just kill the damn frog, Bel! This is what happened last time too! The Boss will be pissed off if we don't keep our promise of grilling Flan legs for dinner-" said Levi. "Remember our stupid anger management classes. This was meant for times like these. Focusing our energy on destroying things that annoy us."

Bel snickered as Lussuria stared incredulously at Levi. He made perfect sense.

"Besides, I haven't tasted frog before so this will be- ARGHHH!"

There was a loud bang followed by a cloud of smoke but Bel and Lussuria put on their gas masks and scanned the place. They had prepared for two hundred possible scenarios their new recruit will try to outwit them. But damn him, there's a reason why they're fucking Varia. Levi was already knocked unconscious in the corner and was starting to exhibit symptoms that eerily reminded them of mustard gas so they did the best course of action and burned him alive.

Both of them sighed as they prepared to find their target. Levi was beneath them to even care about giving him an honourable death.

"Voi! What the fuck are you doing here?"

It was enough for both men to grin behind their masks and begin their assault. Sure enough, the boy was clinging onto Squalo's leg and crying his heart out to pretend that he was an innocent babe and not an apathetic snarky little shite they had no idea of being there in the first place given that they still had Mammon around (who was busy on a solo mission and would not be back until later).
"Christ, you sons of bitches," Squalo said in his office, but not before hushing himself from screaming incoherently in case of Xanxus suddenly passes by. "I thought you're members of the best fucking assassination squad in the underground, and you can't even kill this little bastard quietly?" Flan further scatters his paperwork to the floor just to test if he's really taking the mindfulness exercises to heart. "If you can't do it, I will. Screw the stupid mist guardian and that idiot Sawada's wrath."

This makes their smiles sparkle in quenched bloodlust.

"And where's that parasol moron? I was planning on making him Xanxus' assistant today. If he's dead, I have to appoint either of you-"

That was enough for Bel and Lussuria to run back to the mess hall.

That was the breather that Squalo would end up not taking part in because just as he sighed and raised his sabre to severe Flan's soul from his body one of their lackeys came to inform him that someone wanted to see him.

Flan's screams of joy for his brief salvation complete with hallelujahs pissed the rest of them, but not as much as Squalo who had tied his hair and donned his best black clothes for the occasion.

"Tell that asshole I'm busy," Squalo said as he raised his weapon again to finally fucking chop the little motherfucker when another lackey came forward, his trembling as violent as the first's.

"I-It's the Chiavarone Boss, S-Squalo-sama..." the second lackey trailed off, eyes getting more and more terrified the more the vice-commander's eyes darkened. "H-He said if you didn't come, he'll ask Yamamoto Takeshi to post that-"

The other lackey's mouth opened and nearly lost his balance as he scrambled out of the room when he realized his second lackey was losing a head.

Bel, Luss, Levi, and the child chained to the rock had their mouths open at Squalo.

"I'll be back, you hear?" Squalo could only say as he trudged to the outside of the castle. Jesus Christ, he should never, ever underestimate the knowledge network of that damn Tenth gen.

There was a specific reason why Squalo followed his apprentice since last year. He disliked social media in general because it was damn toxic and time-consuming and a clusterfuck of everything else that may be worth mentioning but he did need to waste time thinking about. All Squalo knew was that his apprentice was an idiot and lacked a sense of personal space, a terrible combination for a teenager in this age of technology.

They had a Vongola Christmas party last year back in Namimori and the Varia's attendance was mandated by the Ninth. The tenth generation and Belphegor were not allowed to drink (the latter did not give a shit and dropped dead after finishing half the bottle of cognac). Xanxus of course preferred spending time with his family back in Italy and got away with it, that son of a bitch. It also turned out that Reborn was the real one who mandated their appearance just to play a game of Truth or Dare: Vongola style. Squalo was the second to the last who had to perform. Most of the players were already wasted that time, reeling at their seats or on the floors at the rented villa. He managed to do his dare (whipping his hair and lip-synching to a song about new rules or something) without incident and that was all he remembered before dropping dead as well (Reborn
was the winner because everyone was too incapacitated to play).

What he did not know until two days after departure, however, while randomly browsing through the shared folder Tsuna made for blackmail and other fun purposes regarding that night was that something else occurred before he passed out and was filmed hastily. It lasted only three seconds in, but Squaolo was not able to rest or listen to Xanxus' outbursts over the phone the next several days. Now, the Varia second-in-command admitted that he was used to making a fool of himself at public because he can decimate anyone who dared to snicker, but this one really toed the line and should never, EVER, see the light of day or the light from anyone's phone screen. Immediately, he deleted that file on the drive and proceeded to hunt down the bastard who filmed it.

He asked about it casually to the Ninth's successor before they left.

"I will shoot the child behind you if you open your mouth," he said as he pinned a confused and terrified Tsuna back near the boarding gates. "Who uploaded the 36th video with the 1:29 mark?"

He made sure to memorize the exact time, but Tsuna did not pay this much attention and was too busy covering his mouth with both his hands to prevent himself from crying out 'Reborn' on instinct.

The brat did not know what he was talking about and was on the brink of tears when he raised his hand to aim his sword at a kid wearing a snapback just a few feet away.

"Y-Yamamoto uploaded most of the files, Squalo-san!" he said, trying to prevent himself from screaming too loudly. "D-Don't hurt the kid. He's a son of my mom's friend. She might not be able to share our videos in the company she's working in if you kill him, please."

Squalo would only find out, to his annoyance rather than shock, that the kid's mom worked at a company that distributes salacious videos and Yamamoto would watch them along with Tsuna and the dynamite kid. But that wasn't the point.

He also asked Yamamoto in the same casual manner if he was the one at fault.

"I will wipe out your favourite baseball team if you don't tell me who uploaded the video," he said through the phone before they departed to Amsterdam to take out another random lackey.

"Woah, chill!" Yamamoto laughed. "Are you ok, Squalo-san? Is this the 36th video with the 1:29 mark?"

Squalo had no chill. "Voi! How did you know?"

"Tsuna told me. Uhm, I can't find it in our shared file though. Someone must have deleted it. Is something wrong? Did it contain something bad?"

He clicked his tongue.

"Yeah, I think I have it on my phone. I have so many videos but it would take awhile to-"

"Nevermind. It's not really of import!" Squalo began to laugh to hide the beads of sweat that began dripping down his head. Belphegor and Lussuria looked at him quite curiously. "P-Play baseball or something-"

"Is something wrong? You really do seem nervous, Squalo-san…"

"You are pushing it! When we meet each other, I'll whip you into shape again. Don't slack off, you hear?"
That was the last time Squalo brought it up again. But he could not forget looking at his account. He often clicked on it without thinking. When he found out that Yamamoto was trying Snapchat, he also instinctively began browsing through it too. He had a track record of dropping a random video that would humiliate someone without him knowing. Reborn even managed to be a victim once (no one wanted to talk about it and had completely wiped it out in verbal memory in case Reborn threatened to blow their brains out in their sleep). He did not want the same thing to happen to him, especially when the Varia prized gossip more than those bumbling teenagers and would pay a hefty price to get their hands on such incriminating evidence that may cost him not only his life but also his relationship with his boss.

The Rain, however, was more of a halfwit than a chess master and seemed to have forgotten it completely. Squalo did not dare bring it up, however, because Yamamoto still had a mean streak and the last thing he needed was to teach him how to blackmail.

In addition, the Namimori Incident was something they did not have time to lie down from. They managed to cover the damage and suppressed the deserters, but the online line searches for them skyrocketed. It was already a week since but they were still being clicked on search engines. What the hell, he thought the only things the people on the internet cared about was pictures of cute things and memes.

"I have to worry about my men making my life more difficult than that fiasco perpetrated by your little brother, so what do you want?" he said bluntly, his sword arm ready to release and hack Dino's bandaged face just in case.

Dino chuckled and poured him three-fourths of single malt in his limo. "It's Octomore. Bought it straight from Islay recently."

Squalo eyed him in annoyance, scanning his face carefully before kicking him in the shins and sending the Chiavarone head howling. His eyes teared up as he began to rub it and complained in earnest at Squalo's sour mode of thanks.

"How long have you been drinking?" he said, noting his reversed shirt that reeked of alcohol, his dirty bandages, even the way he swayed nonsensically to the side. By then he seizes the bottle of whisky and scans the mini-bar, only to grunt in annoyance at the empty bottles littering it. "Jesus Christ, you stupid fuck. This is no time to act like an entitled man-child, you have a family to protect-"

"My HQ was raided by the police ten hours ago. The five other Chiavarone bases scattered in Italy have also fallen. I came to ask for the Ninth for help, but he still has his hands full in getting Tsuna out of house arrest and preventing any more raids in the Vongola-" Dino stopped and was about to reach out for his glass to which Squalo seized. "I'm not the only allied family hit the jackpot. Ah, plus a ton of my men died to make sure I-" He did not continue and lolled his head at Squalo's direction. His smile was painful even for him to watch. "I'm sorry. I'm wasting your time. I just wanted to ask something."

"You're a fucking piece of work, aren't you?" said Squalo, frowning deeply. "You were never this polite to me."

Dino grins. "Alcohol makes you do a ton of crazy things." He then inhaled deeply. "I'm so tired. So this is what my little brother felt when he helplessly watched his world get destroyed."

"You shouldn't compare yourself to anyone, much more to that brat," Squalo spat. "You cannot rest now. It will only be an uphill battle from here on out."
"I just feel so angry with myself. I'm pathetic, aren't I? If Kyoya sees me now, he'd definitely be mad he lost a bunch of times to the likes of me."

"You were always like this when backed into a corner," Squalo yawned. "You're a fucking boss now. You shouldn't be relying on these cheap coping mechanisms. The idiot seahorse I know is better than this." He drinks the rest of Dino's glass and feels its smoky taste wash down his throat. Only Dino knew his favourite kind of alcohol, back in school. Xanxus wouldn't bother to care anyway.

"You haven't called Yamamoto-kun since then, have you?" Dino said tonelessly.

"What does that have to do with- How the hell did you-?"

He gave a small grin. "You know how much of a tattletale he is."

"So that bastard did find out about the damn clip-"

"Wait so it was a clip? I thought it was something else… Was this at the Christmas party? At the Truth and Dare?"

Squalo flushed. "Never you mind."

Dino shrugged. "I don't think Yamamoto-kun's aware of what you're talking about. I was just bluffing."

"You really take after your damn teacher. Always knowing how to get the likes of me riled up…"

He said nothing.

"This is almost like the time you became the boss. He's a man of theatrics, Reborn. He had to have your father killed. Wonder to what lengths he'll go just to prop that brat to become our Boss. He'll be a shinier trophy than you, you know."

Dino's mouth remained a thin line on his mouth.

"Will you interfere? He'll take advantage of this chaos to seize the title."

"Squalo…"

"Mark my words, Dino. I also followed the road of ambition by fighting my Boss' predecessor. It led me here." Not even as a boss. Not even as a model teacher. Not even as the reliable friend to Dino who was close to losing everything deserved. "This story won't have a happy ending as long as the likes of him is holding the damn pen."

-18-

Squalo would end up saving Flan's ass yet again when he asked Lussuria to just make Xanxus' favourite steak so he didn't have to complain about the lack of meat that Flan's body couldn't satisfy him. As much as possible, he needed a good night's sleep this time. His extended talk with Dino was a subject absent from their errant conversations of torture and execution in the dinner table, with everyone retiring without a hitch. Mammon asked for his permission to be excused to travel on the northern part of Italy to gather details to which Squalo waived off.

It was a familiar and uncomfortable feeling talking to his old friend. He truly did share a small chunk of satisfactory years with him in the academy that only bubbled over when they had that
kind of honest conversation in a while. He wondered if that idiot would tell his teacher, but he doubted he'd have the time to tell him due to the things he has to take care of. Plus, he knew that Reborn didn't give a shit about what others thought about his actions. He and he are similar in that sense.

Unlike Reborn, however, he kept caring about his apprentice. He knew that Reborn's reckless actions were for Sawada Tsuna's betterment, no matter how skewed his ways of reaching that goal was. Despite Dino's questionable ascension as the boss, he adjusted to his title quite nicely and was a benevolent father to his men, something he would have never thought Dino would end up when that klutz tripped over Squalo's lunch on their first meeting.

What had he done, really, aside from berating Yamamoto Takeshi and hiding his insecurities from him? He was willing to abandon that idiot, in a sense. This willing indifference was enough for him to stay awake even after finishing the two bottles Dino gave him. He turned on his phone again to browse through Yamamoto's profile. He took a picture of a roaring fire, two kebabs on his empty hands. The hashtag was 'eating for two'. Apparently, his apprentice's appetite was unquenchable as ever.

-18-

He deleted his social media apps the next morning, getting up more than an hour late due to his negligence. He also threw his phone at the pond just outside his window for good measure. He thought his boss and the rest of them did not seem to care the bags under his eyes, or his unkempt hair, or his sleazy manner of assembling the stacks of paper by his window. Mammon remained absent on his seat at the dinner table for the next few days. Things remained civil, death threats and surprise attacks at their headquarters aside.

Lussuria gifted him a new phone one week after his abstinence in social media.

"This is not like you," he said, tone sombre and unlike the man he remembered. Both of them leaned against the wall that faced their mess hall. Squalo wiped his scarlet-stained blade as he looked on at their lower lackeys disposing of the bodies of those trespassers that were relentlessly attempting to breach. If they used nuclear weaponry then he'd be proud to be labelled as such a threat.

"Did Bel and Levi notice too?" He gave zero fucks of that frog's opinion.

Lussuria began to wipe his glasses even though his eyes had no use for them. Squalo noticed that it was his tic whenever he was agitated.

He nodded. "You always looked constipated when you were troubled."

"You peacock bastard." Squalo's spatha reared against where Lussuria's Mohawk could have been.

"At least I know the old Squalo's still in there somewhere," Lussuria laughed, ducking on the side and lighting up a cigarette. "Don't throw that phone away, ok? We got that for cheap on the savings store in the nearest town. I still owe Bel for my share."

"You still owe me for the Boss' birthday gift as well, you fucker," he barked.

"That was almost nine years ago, you still haven't forgotten that?"

Fuck you, Lussuria, Squalo thought that night as he once again stared at his Instagram feed. Yamamoto had not updated for three days since.
Nothing surprised Squalo more than to getting Yamamoto's number from the likes of Gokudera Hayato and pressing on the phone so hard he nearly cracked the screen.

He couldn't believe, as in he honestly swore to the father in heaven that he'd end up calling that asswipe in the dead of night in case those slumbering assholes find out and end up telling the boss, which was aside from dangerous would make him so embarrassed and pissed off if that kid's friends end up finding out.

Just as he heard the ringing on the other end he hung up. Shit, what the fuck was he doing? He was screwing himself up by calling this idiot. Not only because it means he cared, but also because there's a possibility that he'd be fucked when the Vongola learns about this. Plus, he couldn't stand Dino or his teacher sneering at him, that smug 'I told you so' expression plastered on their faces.

He checked his feed again. Yamamoto still hadn't updated his feed since stuffing himself with kebabs as his reward for winning their volley match. He just couldn't stand his conscience screaming that he should check up and make sure that dude kept posting shit and make sure he was alive (and make it easy to track Hibari Kyoya too).

Squalo sighed. Christ, he couldn't even fool himself.

He pressed the call button again. The line buzzed once more, followed by a soft click.

"Hello! You've just reached Yamamoto Takeshi. How may I help you?"

It was like that argument they more than a week ago never even happened.

"It's me, you idiot," he said. His voice was less strained this time though.

Yamamoto gasped. "Squalo-san! You really left ten missed calls? Aren't international rates expensive?"

What the fuck, he really left that much… What the fuck, how much load did Luss and Bel top up on his phone even?

"It's fine if you don't pick those up," he dismissed, trying to sound business-like but couldn't search for words to spew next. "Uh-"

"Yeah, how are you, Squalo-san? Have you been getting enough sleep? Tsuna's been complaining about eating pasta every day. That's kinda racist don't you think?"

"Dunno about the racist part, that little shit can go fuck himself or his sissy tutor in a ditch somewhere, do some noodle sex or whatever," Squalo huffed. He was wasting his time on rants again and tried to backtrack back to their original conversation. "I have only gotten four hours of sleep this week. With paperwork and some attacks and all the usual BS I have to account for to save the family's ass… I don't get enough pay for this."

"You should try drinking milk before going to sleep then."

"That's not- voi- shit, you're still a kid you wouldn't understand- uh-"

"Yeah, I feel kinda bad. I feel left out, y'know. Uhm," Yamamoto paused, and Squalo couldn't find words to continue berating him again. He could hear how his voice was getting quieter. He seemed to be attempting to choose his words. That was a first. "Yeah, I suppose you can say, I feel kinda
lost. I mean…” he then began to laugh on the other hand, but instead of pissing his teacher off, instead, it left a sickening feeling in Squalo's gut. There was no mirth in that laughter. He knew what kind of laugh it was. It was the same kind of laugh Dino let out the night before he became the Chiavarone head.

He did not like that sound. It made him feel a spectrum of emotions that wasn't supposed to belong in his fucking rainbow.

"I don't even know if I'm of any use to anyone at all, Squalo-san," he broke off again as if to catch his breath. "Uhm-" he stopped. "I came with Hibari-san to get answers, y'know. Find out why my dad would leave my mom like that but I'm learning a ton of stuff that makes me think bad things about mom and- uhm, I feel so fucking terrible. Y'know- uhm, I saw Hibari-san as a kid. He was smiling, dammit, Squalo-san he was smiling. Like a real smile. I couldn't- I couldn't stop crying. You're probably going to laugh."

"I'm not going to laugh," Squalo said firmly.

"Please don't tell Tsuna or Gokudera about it. I mean, I don't want them to worry when they already have so much shit-"

"I won't."

"Thank you." There was static.

"How do you say you're of no use to anyone, you stupid kid?"

"Because I'm scared, Squalo-san. I'm scared of not being strong enough to protect Hibari-san. Not just from the Mafia or his family, but from Hibari-san himself. I can't explain it, but the more I'm starting to find out about him, the more I'm starting to see just how different he is."

"You're just lucky. I'll say it again. You did not get to live a life like we have. That can be a bad thing. It also can be a good thing," Squalo couldn't believe he was approaching Dalai Lama status now. "You're opening up a possibility for him to live a life beyond what he thinks he's deprived of."

"I'm scared of giving up before he'll get a chance to save himself. I thought that I could do it too, y'know. But now I'm just…"

"Tired."

"Yeah." There was a ringing finality to it that made Squalo bite his bottom lip. "I thought I can handle it. Handle him."

"You can't give up, y'know. You don't have the privilege to give up on him or your mission. People are offing themselves for you."

"I know. That's why it's so hard not to cry."

"Jesus, Takeshi."

He could hear his hollow laugh. "Yeah, I shouldn't."

"No," Squalo clicked his tongue as he tried looking for a blunt in his drawers. "You should. I'll listen."
"Eh?"

"It's fine. I'll smoke weed to numb your screeching," Squalo snorted. "Let it all out, my stupid apprentice, then fight another day. When you're in the Mafia for real, you won't get this chance. People like me rarely get the chance."

"Eh, Squalo-san, you're so nice all of a sudden…"

"Shut the fuck up and bawl your eyes out, you little shit." He could remember the first and last time he cried as well. It was before he became part of the Varia and he had to kill a loved one before he could join. Part of their stupid decision. Xanxus possibly became the boss because he killed three. He promised from then on he would only shed tears for that person and that person alone.

He heard an abrupt choke on the other end.

-XANXS-18-

Xanxus called them come 11 PM for an emergency meeting, a first in a long string of firsts Squalo will do in a span of one day.

"HQ called. All you pieces of garbage need to get moving. We know the location of the asshole who ratted us out. Not too far out here, three-hour drive. Some trash tipped me he'd be coming in this rundown church, a possible den of a no-name famiglia. Will be faster if you take two of the Maseratis. Now get your asses out and quarter that son of a bitch."

"You ok, vice chief?" Levi inquired. Squalo jerked awake at this and nearly sliced off his left arm. That idiot sure can cry the motherfucking Baltic by keeping him up two minutes before Bel knocked on his door.

"Can't blame you though," yawned Lussuria as both of them made their way to the armoury to gear up, the rest following suit. Fran was tied around a long wooden pike as he snored. "My mask wasn't finished hardening when Levi barged into my room. I was almost done kissing this cute superhero actor in my dream and the last thing I needed was to see Levi's unrefined chest hair."

"Yeah, what a way to ruin your morning," Squalo said grudgingly as he wiped away sleep from his eyes. "I'm not coming with you."

He was as surprised as the Varia sun flame user was. "You piece of shit, did you smoke weed again?"

"I couldn't ease up last night. And shut the fuck up," he hissed. "If the boss finds out I've been nicking from his stash."

"We promised the Ninth to abstain from the drugs until this shitfest is over. Plus if the boss finds out he'll definitely blame us too, because I'm sure you know that when he's mad he can't even distinguish Levi from Mammon."

"Look, I'm not going to steal drugs from him or anyone here again," Squalo said before swallowing all the infuriating doubt and shame from his system. "I found out where my apprentice and target #1 are staying. I'm going to bring them back to the HQ and get the fiasco over with. I can't stand letting the Ninth being stripped off of his post."

"That won't appease the fucking elders. I'm sure they'll do what it takes to."

"Yeah, and that's your job," he snapped, replenishing the ammo on his sword and snatching
multiple low-class rings, rendering his five intact fingers a bling paradise. The rappers on those music videos would be so proud. "If we both succeed then it's two birds with one stone."

"Shishishi, you can't fool us vice-chair," Bel said from behind, chipping some strands of his fringe with his knife. "We already found their location the moment you called Yamamoto Takeshi more than a week ago. Why hurry now?"

"If we continue tarrying here, we'd be the Boss' dinner," he said curtly, ignoring their prying eyes and moved his way past them. "That baseball idiot told me they're leaving the island after that Hibari kid offs his grandpa. There's a possibility they'll be going to some place untraceable when they're done. Now is the only chance-"

"You're a terrible liar, mister second fiddle," Flan drawled, pissing off the rest of them immediately. Levi made sure to drop him near the cacti plant Mammon left as a prank for Christmas. "They are in danger, aren't they?"

The rest of them stopped. Squalo's gaze became icier as he turned at the young illusionist.

"Figured," Flan shrugged. "You are so easy to read, mister conditioner addict. Are you sure you can make it in time?"

"If I take the jet, I may arrive at Taiwan in nine hours and rent a speedboat to Yonaguni," he said flatly.

"You won't make it," said Levi. "The time difference is too long."

"Fucking watch me, you Thomases," Squalo said dismissively, but not before someone blocked the doorway.

"You're disobeying my orders, trash?"

Xanxus was not amused, naturally.

"He's my responsibility as my apprentice." Squalo could barely even look at him straight.

"I wasn't asking for an explanation," Xanxus said, the frown on his face still taut. "I'm fucking asking if you'd say yes or no."

"Boss, I'm not in the mood to-"

"Cut off your hair then, you piece of shit."

Squalo stopped his movements and turned to look at his Boss' murderous face for the first time. "What?"

"I said," Xanxus said, his knuckles whitening, making the rest of the Varia retreat as far as possible. "Cut off that damn hair of yours and don't fucking dare show that wretched face of yours to me again."

"Christ, Boss, you can't be fucking serious-"

"You have five seconds or I'll make sure to singe every strand off-"

"This is the first and last time I'll defy you-"

"I'm being merciful. Severe. Those. Ties. Of yours," Xanxus said. "You want to save that doomed
apprentice of yours? Then die with him, you hazardous trash.” His hands lit up as his face blackened in rage.

Fine. Jesus. Fine, you cocky son of a bitch. Squalo did not lower his head as he grabbed most of his hair near the nape, raised his blade and chopped the most of it in one fell swoop. He tossed the hair at Xanxus feet, ignoring the unequal strands he had left. He shook his head and thought better of saying anything as he jogged straight to his jet. He sped-dialed Gokudera's number.

"Tell that baseball idiot's dad that I won't let him die until he goes to that Koshien shit he keeps spouting about," Squalo said. The world was breezy all of a sudden. He began to lop off the rest of his locks as he switched on autopilot.

Only by then he began to laugh at his own audacity and tweeted for the first time.

-18-

"This won't end well," said Dino at the phone as Squalo sailed on near the port in Dounan. He let the hired skipper do his magic as he grabbed some shut-eye.

"Since when do things end well when it came to saving the people you give a fuck about?" Squalo snorted. "Pretty sure you're aware given all the shenanigans you entangle yourself with the Tenth gen."

"Kyoya's elder siblings aren't enemies you can handle alone. You should have asked me to come-"

"Shut the fuck up and think about your situation for once. You can't die here. You're bound for something greater." His voice grew quieter. "You have to guard over that fucked up Hibari and that adoptive brother of yours. Make sure they don't tread the same ugly path like we had."

"Shit, wait for me you son of a bitch-"

"You drinking again, that's why you're cussing a lot?" Squalo cackled.

"This is suicide. What the fuck came into you to be out of character all of a sudden-"

"It's called character development, you moron." By then, he raised his head at the port and darkened his gaze as the skipper he hired began to scream in intelligible Mandarin.

Dino noticed it too. "Fuck, Squalo, don't tell me-"

"Relax, they're still not done with the main course," Squalo's voice hardened as he saw half-charred corpses of men and women in their sixties and seventies languishing at the edges of the port. The sun was peeking out. "Just passed by the appetizer. They didn't even bother to do them well done, those impatient sons of bitches-"

"Squalo, I don't really get why you're letting me flip out when you're running towards death-"

"You worry too much, Seahorse…” Squalo said, brandishing his blade as he ran past screaming residents, seizing a bike as he does. "I wish it's not too late for me too.” He then tossed his phone at the simmering sea. There were barely any clouds. It was going to be a nice day.

-18-

Squalo remembered the first time he lost to Yamamoto. He couldn't stand the shame of how this kid's pair was bigger than his. Not just for having enough idiocy to attempt to save him, but also
from holding no personal grudges throughout their year of erratic mentorship. It was almost like he learned far more from his student than Yamamoto had from his teacher.

For one, maybe a year ago, Squalo would not risk his life for anyone aside from the man who gave him a chance to be someone other than the second Sword Emperor. And then disobey the orders of that very same man because he had the heart of a kamikaze pilot and the brain of that baseball idiot.

Hibari Kei and the old man beside him almost looked like they were having an affable chat, if not for the old man's face being wiped off completely.

They were barely twenty yards away when Squalo felt something chilling run through the back of his spine. He did not fear Kei, but he did fear the lack of information he had with him compared to his elder sister. Mammon gave him enough background check on her for him to know she wasn't someone to be trifled with. She was a commander, been to Iraq and Afghanistan, has a small army she still keeps as she works as a freelance informant.

Hibari Kei, the man who noticed his presence, was a blank slate, however.

His unsettling look of genuine surprise and pleasantry did not help his unease either.

"Let me handle him. He defeated shishou a long time ago," said a woman who was just three feet beside him. Her cold voice suited her tall and lithe figure as she brandished a blade eerily similar to the only person he ever lost to. Her eyes as well, those eyes that almost made Squalo think that maybe this was his apprentice, if only they were warm and open to showing a hint of vulnerability. He knew she wasn't like that. The blood glittering from her blade was still fresh.

"If you bust out the same moves, I won't guarantee to spare your life like I had with hers. I'm not in the mood to play." The gloves were now off. Squalo was in no way happy or lusting for violence this time around. He was here to save lives, something he would never dare say out loud in case that Yamamoto comes out waving his camera to record everything.

"From the Varia, aren't you?" Kei replied cheerily, waving a bloody hand with him that did not carry any trace of stripped flesh. "Isn't it advisable to battle the two of us alone though? Do bring out your friends."

"If you're gonna yap all day, might as well dice you immediately," Squalo said as he lets his entire intact hand blaze in blue. By then he lets his shark come from behind him.

The woman was unflinching as she positioned her blade by her side and readying her left foot forward. "You chose the wrong flame to use against me, knave."

"Hitomi-san, I don't think you should play with Superbi-kun though," Kei said, strapping the skin away in his bucket bag. "Start looking for a boat we can borrow to chase after Take-kun and Kyoya."

"As you command."

"You f-" Squalo said, now seething as he tried to block Hitomi's path but ends up sprawling on the grass, a gash now present on his left arm just below his elbow. Red flames dissipated as he patted it away. He stood up and looked at his hands before cursing. Almost all of them shattered except for the Varia ring.

He reassessed his surroundings. The woman was gone. Only he and Kei were the only breathing beings on that hill. His blade was unleashed and Kei stared at the blood in his blade for a moment.
before hastily wiping it away in the grass.

"Sorry about that, we're also in a hurry as well. Kyoya and Take-kun may end up meeting our mother next, you see and she's not as nice as jii-san over here-"

"Why the fuck did you kill him?" Squalo's wound began to fester and he cursed that idiot for making him look this dishevelled and it was barely even seven AM. "If he's as nice as you say?"

"He tried distracting us. He put up a great fight too," he said as he held up a cane before letting it burst into a rainbow of flames. "But of course, experience can only get you so far. I was supposed to flay him too. He deserved that much for how he messed up mom and dad and uncle and then us three, sans Kyoya, the favourite of course-"

"That… deranged beast is the favourite?"

"Why do you think he's not normal as the rest of us are?" Kei said with a lopsided grin. "That goes to show he's the favourite. I guess dad just raised him the wrong way? He did try making him like uncle really quickly-"

"Fuck it, I don't give a shit anymore," Squalo said, scratching his head. "I'm pretty sure that idiot apprentice of mine will get fucked up the more he goes through with this so might as well do that little brother of yours a favour." He let his ring burn and raised his blade again.

"You should have kept the ball rolling though," his opponent said patiently. "Distracted me long enough to talk about the sibling I hated the most. Yuuya and I despised him so much. He took our little sister away from us. He ruined our family. I wonder why he should exist and have a family when he messed up ours."

"If this doesn't work out, then third time's the charm," Squalo drawled. He calculated the man's unassuming stance. There was no dominant foot. Shit. He looked at his wound again and turned away as it began to emit a foul scent.

"Looks like I can't use my storm flames then. It's the only ones I've used for so long…" Kei pondered as he walked, his simper intact as his blade emitted yellow, blue, and orange flames.

"How-" he couldn't help but say as he avoided the first blow and parried the second.

The elder Hibari was unfazed as he drove through his diamond-encrusted sword with ease.

"I know some stuff you guys don't," he said thoughtfully. "Sister's much more badass than me but she doesn't play around. You would have died the moment you used your flames. I'm not as merciful though. I like playing with my food." His grin grew wider.

"Nice try," Squalo gritted his teeth as he let his blade slice near his chest, and onto a button that was more than happy to blow the two of them up sky high.

-SPOILER-

"Is this the good place?" he grunted.

"Well, vice-chair if you're stuck with us…" His heart sank as he heard the familiar voice.

"Shit, guess not," he said, his eyes now focusing on the light two feet away from his direction. He
turned around and his frown deepened the more he noticed his Varia subordinates also present within the confines of his room.

Only Flan wasn't in a hospital bed.

"Where's the boss?" he asked wearily to Lussuria. "And how did you guys save my ass?"

"Boss left by himself to capture the culprit. There's a tracker on the phone we gave you. The rest was easy The boss wasn't pleased when we chased after you but we didn't get fired."

"You lucky cunts. Fuck, I swear that man's a fucking nutcase to keep the likes of you lot." He groaned as he began to feel the pain around his legs, his head, his chest area, arms… shit, might as well chuck in his brain because the fucking headache and exhaustion pissed him off more than the usual. "What happened to Hibari Kei?"

" Took us out before chasing after Yamamoto. He's weird… like even by our standards weird. I thought his flames were a fluke but…"

"Shishi, it'a good thing the bomb you used didn't work. You bought it on Craigslist or something?"

"Fuck you, salary was delayed by two weeks because of the Namimori incident," Squalo was really pissed off now because the pain was coming back. "Could've asked that Gokudera Hayato but he would have tipped off the rest."

"It's a nice thing you didn't though, else things would have been pretty different. Shishishi, we would be mourning over your dead body. Boohoo…"


"Still you." He was still wearing his sunglasses even inside the hospital. "The boss ain't stupid for long. No one can sort the paperwork like you can. You think he'd want that extra stress?"

"You really did him a solid with the hair tossing though," Levi laughed. "He kept his usual foul mood when you left. Took one Maserati and stuffed ourselves in the other. We split during the fork to the airport though and rented a jet from an allied family."

"Does the boss even know we're here?"

"Would he bother to care? He might think this is the most sensible way to get rid of us."

"You said he'd hate the extra paperwork." Christ, his mates cared less about their lives than his own. He heaved a sigh and sank back at the pillows. "Only Flan is the most sensible person in this room."

"I only came because they promised to buy me ice cream. Liars," he stuck out his tongue.

"At least someone has their priorities straight," Squalo duly noted. He looked at the ceiling. "Where do we go from here?"

No one spoke for the longest time.

"You think your apprentice is ok?" Levi said.

"Fucking hope so," he said as he waited for the monitor beep to draw him to sleep. "Dude will post on his Twitter soon."
"You think?"

"Yeah. Definitely." He yawned. "I won't say thank you. You brought this on yourselves."

They laughed at this. "We'll make you pay after this."

There were several knocks at the door. By then, all of them froze as their boss entered, followed by the last person they expected him to go incognito with.

Sawada Tsuna drew his breath before using verbal semantics. He turned to all of them.

"I need your help," he said before inhaling again. The fire in his eyes were glowing. "When they find me, they may ask me to stand trial to pay for this shitstorm. What should I do?"

"Why us?" Squalo shrugged.

Tsuna turned to Xanxus, who steadily turned away and moved several inches to boot. He bit his lip and let his hands fumble a little before answering.

"Because Yamamoto-kun trusted you," he said with a small smile. "He just called me two hours ago. Said they're in hiding, but they'll be fine."

He felt his cheeks color at this kid's nauseatingly kind words. Something suddenly lifted from his shoulders and he felt his back comfortably sinking on the Egyptian cotton.

"And I can pretty much trust people who'd be willing to lay their lives for their friend. Jeez, I sound really cheesy I'm sorry," he adds sheepishly.

"You're pretty much doing treason at this point for collaborating with us, dear," Lussuria preened. "What do you want us to do? Get you out of there?"

"I'm not running away. It will just make their pursuit for my friends worse." Squalo found it weird how those words fitted on this kid's lips quite perfectly. There was a certain wholeness to them. Right, like Yamamoto Takeshi, this kid was still whole. "I know nothing about the Mafia or Vongola laws. Reborn hasn't visited me for days now. My guardians have things assigned to them. I'm vulnerable. They've been sending assassins to the Palazzo I'm staying in day and night. I can't even trust my maidservants there. I want to ask… if there's a loophole, any kind to get me out of their trial. It will be a sham and they'll execute me to replace their puppet. You know that."

Xanxus turned to them and looked at the clock. "You have fifteen minutes to be of use to me." He gets on an empty bed and crosses his legs.

"Why are you helping him, boss?" said Levi.

His boss ignored him. "Get to work, you pieces of trash. Don't you dare embarrass me."

Chapter End Notes

Mendokusai- Usually translated as 'What a pain' or 'How troublesome'
Chapter Summary

There was only one way Tsuna will take the mantle willingly: He has to save his friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.'

-L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*

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**Tanomu yo.**

Tsuna did not know this, but the time Reborn dropped him in the tarmac as they casually dodged a violent flurry of gunfire (with Gokudera's heavy body on top to 'protect him' by smothering him) would end up being the last conversation they would have before he was stripped of his title as Vongola Decimo. Or Neo-Vongola Primo. He no longer bothered which.

He was naturally screaming his head off, Reborn at the helm as they continued running under the heat of the Sicilian sun. No vehicles for cover in sight. By then, Chrome and a terrified Lambo unleashed their own version of an armoured tank with the speed of an all-terrain vehicle and proceeded to steer clear of the danger and (to Tsuna's relief) other human beings, armed or not.

"It's a nice day out, innit Dame Tsuna?" the hitman said.

If Tsuna knew he wouldn't see his home tutor again until his trial almost two weeks later he would've said something witty instead of muttering another inane curse word. Or do all the heavy lifting by making sure no one died in their game of cat and dragon fiyahhh… Shit, that sounded much better in his head.

---

Tsuna did not know this either, but he got fatter during his stay and his food was laced with drugs.

He blamed the milk at first for making him woozy after eating his share of bucatini pasta with sardines and wild fennel. He would always be thankful and embarrassed at his handmaidens in the palazzo nestled in a glen several kilometres away from the city centre for changing him and tucking him to bed whenever he suddenly collapses after his dinner.

It would take him five days to realize the Vongola ring was absent from his finger.

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"That idiot rain guardian of yours," said Squalo during the third day of Tsuna's escape. "Told me you were getting sick of the pasta."
He laughed nervously in response. "I exaggerated a bit, sorry. I mean, I wanted to go out because it was sunny when I was there and we were in the middle of nowhere. Yamamoto-kun also had been posting these sweet pictures on Instagram and Twitter, so…"

Squalo poured himself a glass of scotch. "Yeah, fucker doesn't even deserve it."

Tsuna's stomach lurched at this. "I had lamb, uhm, white truffles, stew… It's technically not just pasta? And the food was good, really good… It's just something I'm not used to. I mean, my mom rarely cooks Italian food because dad keeps insisting that he's sick of having those when working…"

"Jesus, the chefs in CEDEF lack imagination don't they? They must not be paid that well-"

"Yeah… I'm pretty sure I heard him talking about constantly changing the cooks. Their budget isn't as big as the Vongola's, I think…"

"I think I've always seen Iemitsu wearing that suit ever since I laid my eyes on him."

He laughed. "Oh my gosh, you're right Squalo-san. He always wears that tank top or those heavy duty pants-"

"Instead of lambasting your dad's fashion choices and making inappropriate jokes about his low-key adoration for the working class let's get this over with," Squalo raised his hand dismissively. "You're a fucking fugitive now, Sawada Tsuna. I heard Gokudera Hayato's back with his family."

Tsuna grinned sheepishly, scratching the back of his head. "He's with Bianchi-san and Shamal-san. He'll be fine. It was Reborn's decision."

"That Thunder cow?"

"He's with the Bovino as well, I think? Reborn's decision too."

"The bedraggled girl?"

Tsuna paused and stared at the half-empty bottle of Grouse on Squalo's small table. "She's in Japan."

"Was that your teacher's decision as well?"

He looked at the clock hovering just on top of Bel's bed by Squalo's left. Yamamoto's teacher requested, by roaring extremities like a rousing tiger how he needed to discuss with them alone. And also that they request to be back at their headquarters the next day.

"No," Tsuna's lips quivered. He pursed his cracked lips together before answering. "I asked her too. Uhm…" he fidgeted with the mittens he hid in the front pocket of his orange hoodie. "She also helped me escape."

"So she's like you: A fucking fugitive. You're barely sixteen and running already from the Mafia. Jesus, kids are getting bolder and bolder, I swear to God…" He drank the rest of the glass. "Judging by you coming to our Boss, of all people, I trust it's because you haven't told Reborn, have you?"

It took awhile for him to respond. "…No, I haven't."

Squalo shifted his gaze from the glass to Tsuna's face for the first time. He flinched and scratched
his head again. Tsuna admired his pointy teeth.

"The shit you're doing has very dangerous consequences, y'know. Based on just letting you stray from house arrest, I'm pretty sure the Ninth is negotiating for your release. If you didn't leave, they would have left you off the hook. Your teacher is aware of this, I'm sure." He poured another glass of scotch. "You're here because you haven't thought that far ahead."

Tsuna was unsure if he should even say anything. This man who often gave him death threats or scowled whenever he passed by was someone he didn't deem to have this much foresight. He's pretty sure most of the Varia, even Xanxus, is aware of this as well but let Squalo do the talking. They survived and grew up in the Mafia for a reason. He was starting to see this now.

"What is your end goal, Sawada Tsuna?" Squalo said.

Tsuna couldn't believe that he'd be saying these words. Out of all people, out of all circumstances, if the context had been different this would be a subject of celebration and tasteful contingencies. He should discard these thoughts now. Longing for other possibilities was poison. He had enough of fooling himself. He had been doing it for so long and it only made things worse.

It took him a split-second to answer. He couldn't suppress the emotions anymore.

"I want to be the Vongola Boss."

-18-

He only found out, during the day that he lost his ring, that Reborn won't be visiting him.

His caretakers were really hushed, polite, and accommodating. They let him get free internet, for crying out loud. But there's always that restraint. Tsuna was feeling it too as well, a sudden influx of nausea and vertigo that swept his actions even when he later realized that they were keeping him sedated to keep him from doing anything peculiar. He doesn't even know if that word was weak enough to suppress the thought that maybe, just maybe, he won't see his home tutor again.

This only struck him when he was having his usual group chat with Gokudera and Yamamoto.

"My recital's gonna suck, I'm calling it now," Gokudera groaned. "I should've sucked for real when they asked me to play the first time."

"Eh, you always say that Gokudera," Yamamoto called him out. "Be more optimistic. You know, like me. I'm pretty sure Hibari-san and I are getting along pretty well…"

"Says you," he blew a raspberry. "You were telling us how he nearly drowned you four hours ago."

"Maa, he's not trying to kill me now though. Oh, and he got his tonfas back. I saw the old man enter our room earlier."

"You should run. Get a head start. He'll definitely test it out on you."

"Eh… I'll think about it when I'm done making dinner. Man, there's so much seafood every day, it makes me wish I lived here. Country life, all that jazz…"

"Listen to yourself," the Storm guardian berated him. "Months ago when we went to Tokyo, you were telling us you want the urban life, or when you went to Italy with the Buckinghorse-Honestly, I can't believe you-"
"Tsuna? What's wrong?"

Both of them suddenly quiet, making Tsuna jerk from nodding off with his laptop. "Ah sorry, go on--"

"It's good the baseball freakazoid remembered you! Are you ok, Tenth?"

"Yeah, nearly dozed off, that's all…" Tsuna blinked and tried to maintain a carefree voice. "I just miss you guys. Here it's just so quiet and Reborn hasn't visited me at all."

He felt how Gokudera's line grew taut and then got buried under Yamamoto's sunny placations.

"Cheer up, friend! I'm pretty sure Reborn's busy. Right, Gokudera?"

And only that time, at Gokudera's hesitation did everything finally hit him like a sledgehammer. He tried to be casual about it to not alarm Yamamoto.

"Can you show me your Vongola gear, Gokudera?"

He knew the Storm understood.

"Ehehe, it's not with me at the moment. I had it tucked away just in case."

"Geez, Gokudera. It's safer if you just wear it."

That laughter was fake. It was good that Yamamoto was too dense or too trusting to notice. They got his too. Have they taken Chrome's and Lambo's as well?

Have they taken Reborn away too? That's impossible, because he couldn't deny Reborn's CV and his reputation.

It was enough for him to discreetly throw away his meal and not sleep at all that night.

-18-

"Uh-oh. We'll be in so much trouble if we do help him," Flan complained pointing every finger at Tsuna like he was performing some magic trick and accidentally poking through Levi's nose in the process. This sent a tumble of limbs and cuss words being thrown in the backseat. The other person beside Levi, Bel, was not amused and prompted to include knives in the chaos.

Xanxus, who was dozing off in the front seat beside the driving Squalo prompted to throw flames at their direction as well, sending the two people behind them, Tsuna and Lussuria screaming and scrambling on every safe inch of space available to not get literally roasted.

"Jesus fucking Christ, children raise your weapons if you want to get captured by the family and executed in a sissy way like lethal injection!"

They heard a lurching, excruciating sound as the top of the car blew off, the sides melted by Xanxus' billowing flames. Tsuna sighed in the relief as he realized they were in the country now and that poor piece of metal did not hit any unwitting vehicle behind them.

Flan raised his hand half-heartedly. "I'm just saying if we turn over Sawada Tsuna now--"

That was enough for Squalo's spatha to wring through the place Flan's wrist would have been if he kept it there one second late.
"Who wants frog legs for dinner?" he screeched, sending the rest to raise their fists in victory.

-18-

[play]

Man's voice: Good morning Kyoya-kun. We're going to do a quick test. It won't hurt, promise.

Kyoya: Ok.

Man: It was your tenth birthday yesterday, right Kyoya-kun? How was it?

[No sound]

Man: Ok, so I will be showing you pictures. You will tell me what kind of emotions the faces are showing. Do you think you're up for it?

Kyoya: Yes.

Man: Ok, let's start! What is this one feeling?

Kyoya: Happy.

Man: Correct! What about this one?

Kyoya: Angry.

Man: Wow, you're on a roll Kyoya-kun! What about this?

Kyoya: That's the expression father does when Nami-neechan gets punished for visiting me.

Man: Do you know what that's called?

Kyoya: No.

Man: Ok then, what about this one?

[No sound]

Man: Kyoya-kun?

Kyoya: I don't know what it's called, but it's what people look like before you stab them.

[No sound]

Kyoya: You're looking like the picture too, sensei. What are you feeling? Sensei?

-18-

There were only two playable recordings in that cassette tape. Tsuna would later find out that the contents he had about Hibari- the letters, photographs- had disappeared. It was a good thing he stowed the tape in his jacket. Or that he took pictures of everything just in case. Reborn would be proud.

He found it intriguing, inducing, addictive. It promised him of sweet, syrupy honey. Hibari's secret history. It hit the notes of grotesque and demented in all the right places. It would destroy him, his hyper intuition whispered when he stumbled into that room, maybe. It would drive him to do
things, experience things that would not only border on the absurd, but also to the point of no return.

His hyper intuition forgot he was still a teenager who believed he knew what he was doing.

He dreamt about the time he was sweet-talked into that house by no other than the Ninth. He told him that Gokudera and Lambo would be returning to their respective homes in Italy to rest up after the things they experienced in Namimori. He told him about Chrome would be living at his mother's place under Iemitsu's watchful eye until things have calmed down. He would be borrowing Reborn to assist him in the current tumbling of events. He told him that he would be staying in a house somewhere peaceful. He even showed him a picture. Of course Tsuna would believe him!

He did not see Reborn after being whisked away to that quaint town of Taormina, past the houses and onto bucolic palazzo near the foot of Mount Etna. He did not care at the time. He had a whole house to himself! He sent pics to Yamamoto on Instagram when he finally got internet.

He got bored after a while for talking to the same faces (he couldn't contact Enma or Yuni or Irie or Spanner for some reason), so he sought solace to the sordid meanings behind Hibari's pictures, listening to the comprehensible recordings of the tape. He thought about a child Hibari, gazing at nowhere in particular within the alcohol-smelling walls of a ward somewhere, being asked things and being unable to provide reasonable answers. He thought about the three-year-old Hibari who nearly choked Yamamoto to death. Had he felt a kind of pleasure back then?

He remembered Hibari's protectiveness of them as well. He liked *owning* things, which was pretty normal until one realized his possessiveness bordered on the fictionally imbalanced. He had the mind of a child who still hasn't grasped the concept of sharing. He believed he was clever enough to strike at the right moment as he went on with Reborn's shenanigans without complaint. They had use to him. That's why he hadn't bitten any of them to death yet.

Why? It doesn't connect with the things he learned about him at all. It's all just a dreadful mass of perverted insanity. It was a pernicious thought that crept through him as he listened to Yamamoto's rambling about winning the volleyball match and training hard to be of use… Shit.

He dialled Yamamoto's account and tried calling. Shit.

Yamamoto deactivated everything. He called Gokudera instead. It was the first time he heard Yamamoto had lost it. Hibari said he was broken.

"-18-

"It's weird," he told Chrome on the bus. His stomach was grumbling. He hadn't eaten or drank anything for the last few days until they bought chickpea flatbread in a local bakery near the station. He let her take the seat near the window. "I didn't expect you to come and save my ass."

Chrome smiled. "That telepathic link you had with Mukuro-sama came in handy."

"He really did listen, what the fucking hell," he said before taking a swig of lemonade. "I hope he's ok, wherever he is now."

"You're kind and foolish to think about him now at a time like this," she said flatly, making him flinch. He knew he needed that, but he did not expect to hear that from his Mist Guardian, of all people. "What do you want to do now?"

"I…" He thought about finding Reborn. He knew Reborn was aware of whatever was happening
but felt a little foolish because he knew it was risky. If the Ninth finds out that he managed to escape, he'll know Reborn was the first person Tsuna would go to. He was also purely dependent on his Sky flames to get out of sticky situations. He felt naked and helpless and ashamed without it. Some future boss. Doesn't even know how to fight without those. He looked at her ear. It was empty of accessories. "Are your organs..." he looked at her belly. It bulged a little. She turned pink and turned away, making him beet red.

"I have it under control. Mukuro-sama taught me well," Chrome in a small voice. She also began unfurling the bread they bought and began to nibble it. "It's so good," she said.

"Yeah, the food here's awesome! Hasn't mom been feeding you though?" Aside from her stomach that was obviously the product of her sitting, she looked paler and thinner than last time. She was hollow around the eyes too.

"No," she shook her head. "I haven't visited the Boss' mother."

Tsuna raised an eyebrow. "But the Ninth said-"

"They nearly shipped me off to Vendicare, to get to Mukuro-sama. They wanted to use our bond," she shuddered. "I've been on the run. I couldn't contact the storm man and Lambo. I don't want to blow their cover-"

"Cover? What cover?"

"Reborn-san gave us missions to fulfil," she said and then flushed again. "The Storm and the Thunder guardians are to stay put to amass allies. I... was supposed to keep watch over your mother but was driven off somewhere else. I was afraid to not be of any use until Mukuro-sama called my name."

Tsuna then enveloped her in a hug. "Oh my gosh, I'm sorry I didn't know. It's fine. Uhm, drink this," he said thrusting the extra bottle of lemonade on her left hand. He suddenly felt terrible. He felt gratitude and at the same time resentment for Reborn. He knew this was ordinary for him to feel whenever it comes to that baby, but there's a sicker, more pernicious flavour that welled inside his belly the more that he looked at Chrome nibbling on her flatbread.

Reborn had been keeping things from him.

"Chrome, I want to ask you to help me. There are two favours I want to ask you. Tsuna took out his phone and scanned one of the letters. Out of the sea of Chinese characters, one of them was in Japanese. "First," he said. "I need your help to find Xanxus." He couldn't believe of all people, he was the one that came to mind when he mentally typed 'angel of deliverance' in his cerebral search engine. "Second," he gave her an envelope containing 1,500 euros that he stole from the maids' quarters and tucked it neatly into her rucksack. He was going to pay them back one day, promise. "I want you to go back to Japan and find the Saya mentioned in the letter. She was a classmate of Hibari's sister. She must have a clue of what happened to her and why they left Namimori."

"How will this help us in any way, boss?"

"I don't know either, but there's a voice in my head that's telling me this might help bring back Hibari-san," he said. He wished his intuition was right.

Chrome's correspondence with Mammon proved fruitful when Tsuna managed to set camp on the HQ without being noticed (their defences were more reliant on the assassins themselves than tech
or illusions and Tsuna doesn't have any aura of bloodlust for those hounds to chase after him). He also managed to sneak in the backseat of the Maserati that the Varia boss seized for himself. He kept himself from hurling long enough until Xanxus reaches his destination. After five minutes, Tsuna stirred and looked at the car window. Xanxus was just ten yards away, nestled quite nicely in one of the tree branches.

He was alone.

Tsuna couldn't believe his luck. He tried his best not to make too much noise as he gently opened the car, keeping the door ajar but only ever so slightly.

"What are you doing here, trash?"

He could feel hot metal roughly shifting through the back of his head and squeaked as he raised his hands. Jesus, he was barely out for ten seconds and Xanxus quickly found out.

"I'm here to ask for your help," he said, fighting the urge to cry because he was powerless without his ring or Reborn's bullets. Xanxus, though a potential ally if you did not push his buttons, was still a calculating killer. He felt his tears welling up in shame. He bit his lip hard and waited for the blood to flow. He needed that pain for clarity.

Before he could utter another word, however, Xanxus cocked his head and had him back to his position earlier. He grabbed the hood of Tsuna's jacket and lifted him up in the branches with barely any effort. He rested a gun's muzzle on the teen's mouth so he had an idea not to get in his way.

Five minutes passed. Tsuna's mouth was getting tired. He barely had any sleep when he took a bus and walked up to the Varia's secluded HQ per Chrome's instructions, avoiding any possible signs of endangerment on the way. He also knew his stomach was going to give up their position any moment. Either way, he will probably get killed by him so might as well choose the less painful option. He tugged on Xanxus sleeve.

One eye darted at him quite dangerously. He pointed at his stomach. The older teen rolled his eyes and scrummaged on the hem of his coat. He took out a leather belt that seemed chewed on several places and drops it with such skill on the branch that it did not slide off. He removes the gun.

"What-"

"I don't bring food. The others bring it for me," he said, staring straight ahead. Tsuna finally caught a glimpse of it. Almost two thousand feet away was a tiny church, just a floor with a single steeple bordering it.

"Oh my gosh, you're on a mission? So cool-" he managed to stop himself from spazzing too much when Xanxus' gun found a familiar hole to lodge itself into.

"Why me?" he growled as he positioned his gun in Tsuna's forehead instead. His eyes were still affixed to the church.

"B-Because you're the only one I can rely on," he blubbered on.

"You're not supposed to be here. And you fucking dare try to sabotage my mission-"

"I'm sorry!" Tsuna moaned. He was sick of getting the short end of the stick again. "What is your mission anyway?"
"Those fucking assholes were supposed to do it," Xanxus scowled. But then a hundred feet away from the ocean of trees up to the church, something stirred. Tsuna froze as four human heads came into view. He knew those heads. He felt his hairs stand on end when Xanxus' mouth broke into a beastly grin.

"Well, well, well… More scum to roast," he said as he raised his gun and was about to point it in their direction when Tsuna raised his hand to block the nuzzle.

"Are they your targets?" Tsuna broke into an urgent whisper. He had to stay calm. Things were starting to get out of control and he had to make sure Xanxus was sane enough to listen to his request. He had no way of subduing him other than his mouth.

"What does it matter? Things are going to hell anyway. Might as well just burn everything down."

They then froze. The four heads stopped as well. All of them instantly changed height, their hair colour changed. They started to move past the bushes and were making their way to the entrance of the church, straddling machine guns on their chests.

A Black Hummer was making its way through rough unpaved road leading up to the church. Tsuna couldn't believe his eyes as he saw a small petite figure clad in black velvet hooded robes make his way inside. He turned at Xanxus, who nodded derisively at his unspoken question.

The target was Mammon.

-18-

"Are your lines bugged?" Tsuna had to make sure. He turned to Squalo.

"Feel free," he said as he pushed his wheelchair up the elevation he made with his frozen rain flames.

"Tsuna?" Enma's voice quivered on the other end. "It's Tsuna!" he called out and there was a ripple of murmuring and a crescendo of voices as he turns on the loudspeaker.

"Tsuna-san!" he heard Yuni's unmistakable chirp.

"Yo, Tsu-kun~" Byakuran was also there.

Tsuna bit his lip and ignored the throb of pain that ached not only in his lips and limbs. "Guys… Geez, I can't even say something cool."

They laughed on the other end. Enma's voice made its way through the throngs of murmurings again. "Chrome told us everything. Are you ok, man?"

He covered his eyes. "Yeah. Yeah, I'll be fine. Uhm… How's Namimori?"

"You should ask Yuni," he heard a crackle on the other end. Yuni's voice placated him somewhat. Kusakabe's been getting a ton of help from the nearby towns along with the national government and some minor gangs in the area. Kyoko, Haru, and Hana are doing their best as well.

"They're still in Namimori. We'll be going there tomorrow to assist. Things are looking up here, Tsuna-san. Don't worry about us."

"We miss you, Tsu-kun."

"Yeah dude, come back when everything's sorted out!"
"I will," Tsuna said, wiping his eyes and trying to laugh. "Damn guys, this is so embarrassing. I didn't think."

"You're going to need us soon, right?" Byakuran's tone hovered between solemn and carefree. "We're preparing ourselves. Yuni has the Giglio Nero mobilizing their allies as well."

"I'm trying to look for other small families in Italy through my relatives," Enma said as well. "You'll need all the help you can get if you want to fight."

"Eh guys, I was just asking for your support! The emotional kind, or the gastro kind for Chrome-"

"You don't have to downplay it for us, Tsuna-san," said Yuni, no longer mincing words. "What you want to do will tip the balance of power and will cost a lot of lives. This is not Namimori anymore."

"That's what Reborn would say," he replied.

"You want to topple the biggest family in the world. You barely have allies. You have no prior experience running a personal battalion. You have no financial support-"

"Wait, wait, wait- W-What are you guys implying?" Tsuna's blood ran cold. They got it all wrong. This wasn't what he wanted them to think when he asked Chrome to bring them together. "I just wanted to ask how you're doing. Look, I'll be standing on trial and then-"

"The trial will be a sham. They need a scapegoat to wrest the title from you, a potential threat to power. You're getting popular, Tsuna-san. You're also a pacifist, a total greenhorn, a soft-hearted soul… You're the last person anyone wants to be the boss."

"Tell me something I don't know…"

"Tsu-kun, what Enma-kun and Yuni-chan are trying to say is, things will not go according to your plan. That's the reason why Reborn is making his move."

"He could've told me-"

"You would object to his methods. You can't make an omelette before breaking a few eggheads into a bloody pulp. Or so they say-"

"Kinda pisses me off because I did not want to be a boss in the first place, ok? Who will they replace me with?"

"They'll find one in a distant line. They wanted you to be the boss because you're the perfect figurehead. But Tsuna-kun grew a backbone so-"

"And those leaks really threw them off. They're paranoid, ok? They just want to maintain the illusion of superiority because other families will jump at the opportunity of their fall from grace-"

"Man, guys, thank you so much for blowing up our warm-hearted conversation into a super planning session," Tsuna sighed.

"I'd rather you be the boss," Yuni laughed. "We need more pretty boys."

"Did you actually just say that?" Tsuna laughed at Yuni's outlandish remark and the possibility that he'd end up getting more than he bargained for.
Xanxus will not be able to finish his mission. There were a lot of factors involved, but the major one was the shootout that occurred ten minutes since Mammon entered the premises. Every man outside suddenly pointed their guns at the church and a loud rumble of metal and glass pierced the dawn.

The Varia Boss leapt down and Tsuna tried his best keeping up with him as he returned to the car and drove back to the path of trees and underbrush.

"If I return you now to the old man, it might piss me off less," he said after half an hour. Tsuna made sure not to utter a sound as he drove. "Change my mind."

"If I become the Boss, I'll grant that wish of yours," Tsuna said.

"Oho? And what might that be."

To be fair, Tsuna was starving, lightheaded, and utterly exhausted. Maybe that's why he spouted those words.

"You can disappear from the Vongola."

-18-

"I have one last request," Tsuna said after breakfast. He finally had a good rest for once that he ignored Flan's bigoted outbursts about him or the constant stream of insults and bursts of violence that seemed run-of-the-mill by their standards, as Xanxus continued to eat without incident. The place was homely in a messed-up sort of way.

Squalo looked up. He was sure the vice-commander was sick of being pushed around, so Tsuna made sure to send a link on Squalo's Whatsapp.

"What makes me sure I can read this?" he said.

"You guys require hopefuls who can speak a minimum of seven languages," he said thoughtfully. "There's a letter that I need. The one written on the day she died."

Squalo clicked his tongue. "You're a greedy one, Sawada Tsuna."

"I like nosing around other people's business," he sighed. "Thanks for being there for Yamamoto-kun."

"I don't want him to die," Squalo paused. He browsed through the sent pictures and doesn't look up. "You'll be losing the chance of having a sense of normalcy if you go through with this. Are you prepared?"

Tsuna wasn't, but he smiled all the same. It was weaker than he wanted. "Yeah. I want to save my friends."

Both did not utter another word. The Varia vice-commander gestured him to the dresser for leftover stationery.

Chapter End Notes
Tanomu yo = Basically pleading in a manly way/ I'm counting on you
Reborn thought things were going according to plan until they don't. Hibari is satisfied that Yamamoto's becoming such a good herbivore.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"All children have to be deceived if they are to grow up without trauma."

-Never Let Me Go, Kazuo Ishiguro

Oboete oke.

During Fon's first visit to Italy with the rest of the Arcobaleno, Reborn wanted to prove once and for all that he was good at everything he does, no matter what that loudmouth Colonnello said. He was going to be the best tour guide ever, dammit!

"Pretty sure that peace-loving hick hates cities or touristy areas," said Skull.

"Say that to his fucking face again and let's see who's the hick," said Colonnello, revealing his sniper rifle and sending Skull squealing in fear.

"Mumu, where do you suggest? He's fucking Asian, dunno if he's ever seen Roman architecture before."

"You're an even bigger racist than our little friend over here," Reborn sighed. He turned to the rest of his Italian Arcobalenos, or at least the Western ones if their nationality was questionable. "You guys will be doing your own thing? No one coming with? No takers? Nada?"

"Please, Reborn. We know you'd want to catch him off guard and duel him," Lal shooed herself away, standing up.

"Oh my god, Lal, what do you take me for?"

"The apotheosis of hedonism. Fuck you," she ran home further as she stubbed her cigarette. "Get up, my stupid apprentice. I want to enjoy our holiday. Let Reborn do all the work."

"You don't want to come with me?" Reborn crooned at Luce. "Walk under the Corsican stars, wander around Alpine meadows, drive the Sardinian deer to extinction?"

Luce let out a tinkling laugh. "Pretty sure Corsica's under France. I have to pass. I promised Aria that I'll spend my free weekend with her."

"Yeah, I have to feed my octopus," Skull said quickly.

"I have a contract-signing in a Casino. One of the shareholders," Mammon squeaked, also making
his way towards the door with Aria and the rest.

Verde didn't even come, leaving a note in appalling curlicues about him enjoying his holidays building a machine that can harness cosmic energy or some bullshit that isn't even science anymore.

Reborn hated the idea of not having a double life like his fellow Arcobalenos. The initial plan was to go to Rome or Florence or Milan but before they could even get out of their rental Audi, gunshots suddenly pervaded out of nowhere, sending them going into a breakneck car chase that can rival those fast and angry movies his current student and his guardians keep raving on about.

"Looks like everyone wants a piece of you," Fon noted serenely when they drifted past the acres of oaks and junipers along with fields of wheat and corn bordering the roads as they drove up north.

"My good looks give it away. I know, they want me bad, but I can only stick to one," Reborn sighed as he shot to the left and brought a clean collision without batting an eye. He had no outfit to protect him and a ton willing to whip his ass because of his prior hits. "Sorry about this. We have to go north near the next country over where fewer people speak Italian and don't give a shit about us. You ok with not seeing the Sistine Chapel or the Colosseum? It's just trees and grass and all the boring nature shit for miles. You must be tired of that shit back in China."

"I don't mind actually," his passenger replied. "I would want to see the Alps that Signore Skull keeps raving about."

"That's because it's the perfect hiding place to hide his helmet-covered ass of a head. Dude had so many girlfriends who want to kill him for not getting it up. Poor piece of shit," Reborn then opened the window to throw out his cigarette. It was a sunny day, the wispy clouds posing little threat of ruining their journey. "We're going to the town where I met Luce. You up for a hike?"

They ended up routing Lombardy, a quiet province just below Switzerland. They had a glimpse of the Alpine range as they rented a boat to ride along the quiet Lake Garda and then rode their bikes on the cobbled and narrowed streets of the small town Crema, staying there to drink Piedmont and Veneto. They swam in the parks of Fontanile Quarantine, sunlight dappling the trees and the waters that shone through the stones just below in misty earthy yellow hues, along with rowdy juveniles that Fon managed to befriend or quiet before Reborn put a bullet between their heads. Often times they would steal apricots and peaches from an unsuspecting villa whenever they biked, to Fon's horror and eventual gratefulness as he takes a bite.

Sometimes, Reborn cooked as Fon stared at the window outside. He would also disappear from his spot, playing with the children and letting them ride his bike as they frolicked around the square, past the marbled Venetian lions in the town halls and gates. At first, Reborn scoffed and scowled at the places they stayed for the night, finding little pleasure at the picturesque sights of mother nature. Eventually, however, Fon would wake up in the morning to see Reborn's bike missing. He would try catching the sunrise on the verdant fields just outside of town.

"This place brings back memories?" Reborn asked in between bites of tortelli cremaschi with the usual Veneto.

There was something in Fon's smile that echoed a sense of disturbing melancholy. One of the village children began calling uncle Fon, to which he replied he'll be coming.

"I can't like little buggers like you can," Reborn blew a raspberry before gnawing on his pasta. "They're so damn noisy, Jesus. How do you stand them?"
"I failed as a good adult figure back in the day," Fon said, swirling his wine glass. He then finished the rest of his meal.

"Regrets, huh? Makes sense. Doubt you lived your entire life as a saint."

Fon simpered. His umber eyes were fixed at Reborn, but he knew his gaze was elsewhere. "I'm sure I can say the same to you," he raised his glass. "To lessons learned, I assume."

Reborn stared at the man in red minutes after as he chased the children, nodding at Reborn respectfully as they passed by.

That was the only time Fon ever opened up about himself. They never talked about it. Now, Reborn knew why at the cost of his friend's life as he stood in front of his fellow former Arcobalenos. Even Verde was present through video call. The girls did not know about this assembly.

"I have a proposition for you guys," he said at them as they assembled under the shade of a massive hornbeam near the midst of an open grassy field. He chose to meet them just on the outskirts of Lombardy near the Serio waterfalls. It was his and Fon's last destination before meeting with the others in Venice. "I'm here to wreak havoc on the underground. Join me, or die. Quite an easy choice, innit?"

-18-

Reborn did not decide to destroy the Mafia on a whim. He was bordering on intense fury that time due to his meeting with the Ninth two days ago.

He would want to describe that meeting as a pleasant, rosy afternoon with Polenta and beef stewed in wine, dining with the Ninth with a breath-taking view of the tallest active volcano in Sicily. Of course it was, the food was divine but would not rival Maman's cooking, and the champagne was sublime.

"You are dismissed as Tsunayoshi's home tutor," the Ninth said when they had finished.

Reborn's infantile face was blank of emotions. He kept his voice calm. "Is this the militant faction's doing?"

The Ninth wiped his face with the black table napkin. "You have no more affiliation with us. You have no right to know."

"You are dismissed as Tsunayoshi's home tutor," the Ninth said when they had finished. Reborn's infantile face was blank of emotions. He kept his voice calm. "Is this the militant faction's doing?"

The Ninth wiped his face with the black table napkin. "You have no more affiliation with us. You have no right to know." *Yes, my hands are tied.*

"Don't let them get their slimy hands on my student. Or ex-student, I don't give a shit," Reborn said as he folded his napkin cleanly. "I need your help to track down Fon's killer. They may have played a part in all this. I'm sure they have ties to the Mafia, given Namimori's part with the Primo's family-"

"I have a better request," said the Ninth pleasantly. "Tell me where Hibari Kyoya and Yamamoto Takeshi are. You provided assistance to their escape from Japan, did you not?"

Reborn returned with a wider smile. "Oh Ninth, what right do I have to address your probing? I am not affiliated with you, am I?"

The present don poured him more wine. "I would have killed you for such disrespect. I will keep Tsunayoshi safe from the Militant's talons if you give me enough information. I know you
maintain contact with them. I have a great knack for discovering dishonesty."

"Aww, isn't that nice then Timoteo?" Reborn kept his cool. "Why don't you try then? I am pretty sure I would have broken both arms before you can even emit that subpar Dying Will flames of yours-"

It was an instant, but Reborn felt five multiple guns aimed at his head point-blank. For their trouble, he had both the Ninth's arms behind his back and under the mercy of his fleshy infantile hands.

"Aww, you're so lucky Timoteo that I'm a baby. What say you, then? I'm on the verge of throwing a tantrum. Will you not help me find Fon's murderers or do you still want to be reduced to a helpless, bumbling old man in front of your lackeys?"

"You little shit-"

"Thank you, Timoteo. I think you're right, I am shit-faced," Reborn laughed as he raised his hands and began to walk away. "Fine, I will disappear. But," he said as he took the wine. "I will give a warning. If I ever find out that you haven't kept Tsuna safe, I have no qualms in fucking your family up." He grabbed his fedora from the hanger. Pistols and rifles were fixated on him as he shuffled to the door. "Oh, and thank you for the meal. Compliments to the chef. The saltiness was up to my liking."

Reborn did not even shut the door as he put his hands and his pockets and whistled as he walked outside.

Time to raise some hell.

-18-

He found it unnecessary to meet up with his tutee. Instead, as Tsuna's remaining guardians were driven along the highway, he decided to lodge Leon on the driver's right temple as he entered the car, making his way to the front seat to the kids' squeals of surprise and horror.

"R-Reborn-san? We thought you were with the Tenth!"

"Nah, that idiot will be fine," Reborn said and nudged the driver to go on his way. "Go back to your families, you two." He turned to Gokudera and an affronted Lambo. "I'll be having both of you on standby. Ask if they have any allied families that will support your damned boss' cause."

"Wait, we thought that he's- a-are you insinuating-"

"Yeah, Tsuna's in deep shit, okay? Make sure he's oblivious to it, can't stand that asshole ruining my plan," Reborn waved off. "If Yamamoto asks, just tell him you're visiting your families and Chrome's stuck with Tsuna, even when she's not. You," he turned at the trembling girl. "Are going to stay with Maman. At the same time, you will be keeping a close watch on Iemitsu. Keep in touch with me, use Maman's phone, whatever, it's up to you."

"I don't want to!" Lambo wailed. "I want to stay with Maman!"

"Yeah, yeah, but you want to be a hero, don't you? Do you want to get accepted by that lowly Bovino you gloat about? Then support that weak big brother of yours. If you don't want him to die-"

"R-Reborn-san-"
"Yeah, Tsuna will be labelled an accomplice for Hibari and Yamamoto's desertion. They may point their fingers of the leaks on him. They'll find a way to connect him there somewhere," Reborn said unflinchingly. "They'll think less about killing him if the other families pressure them not to. For now, at least, the Ninth has a big enough heart to keep him out of harms' way. Stop here," he dictated the man and shoots him in the head for good measure as he dictated them outside the train station. The three of them couldn't move as they closed their eyes at the sight. Gokudera ended up covering Chrome's eyes as she sobbed.

"Welcome to the Mafia, kids," Reborn said as he opened the door. It was a good thing the doors were tinted, Jesus. Anyway, he doesn't give a shit anymore. "Enough with your bitching. We have your boss' ass to liberate."

-18-

Since he has more time on his hands after being fired, Reborn decided to go on a field trip. His first destination was inconspicuous enough. He was hungry, and he was craving miso so he went to the Sicilian Sawada residence, just on the outskirts of town. It was a small early 20th-century villa with its white-washed walls and homely dilapidated glory amidst citrus and olive trees. He knocked on the door.

Nana emitted a howl of surprise as she embraced and lifted Reborn. "I miss you so much, Reborn. Where's Tsuna? How is he?"

"He's ok. Papan must know where he is," Reborn said with a toothy smile. Looks like daddy has some explaining to do when he goes home. "Is Fuuta and I-pin here? I want to play with them."

"Y-Yes, just go upstairs to your right. I'll be making dinner, ok? Do you want miso?"

Nana sure knew how to keep his tummy happy. Reborn hopped his way up the dingy flight of stairs, ignoring the numerous bric-a-brac bordering the dresser in front of them and knocked on the door. It was I-pin who opened the door and immediately cried in his arms as she howled in garbled Mandarin.

"I know. I miss him too," Reborn said as he stroked her bare head. Fuuta was there as well, playing with his tablet on the Persian carpet.

"Is Tsuna-nii ok?" he asked as he held I-pin's hand. Jesus, wait till Tsuna and the girls back at Namimori get the load on this. They were always thinking that I-pin and that crybaby cow would get together. They owe him three big Namimori special parfaits.

"He'll be fine. I came here to ask for your help," Reborn said. "I need rankings of the families Tsuna can rely on and not betray him."

Fuuta grew three more inches since the year before. With Iemitsu's assistance, he was legally adopted under the Sawada's care along with I-pin. Both were going to the elementary school as well until the town blew up.

Reborn remembered the future Fuuta and blinked repeatedly.

"Y-Yes!" the present Fuuta saluted and scrummaged under the bed to reveal a large red hardbound book with a golden embossed insignia in front. He feverishly began flipping the pages to hand to Reborn. "I knew this will help Tsuna-nii one day. I knew it!"

"Yeah, good job kid," Reborn said nonchalantly as he took a photo. Fuuta's cheeks flushed as he
closed the book.

"Is that it, Reborn-san?" Fuuta asked. He was no longer wearing that horrible scarf around his neck.

"Actually-" Reborn paused and was struck by a sudden wave of inspiration. "Can you tell me anything about Fon? Or Hibari Kyoya's siblings?"

By then Fuuta made a sad face and began to tear up. I-pin then began to console her playmate, handing him a dumpling she made. Fuuta tentatively took it and began to nibble it as he wept, prompting I-pin to cry as well.

Reborn did not know how to react. He was always bad with children. "Look- uh-"

"I'm sorry… I- I lost my contact with the ranking planet. I may help in other ways. I-pin-chan and I-"

"No," Reborn then held his breath for being more coercive than he intended. He didn't want these kids to become the teenagers he saw nine years from then. "I mean, are you happy here?"

"We're ok," Fuuta said. "Maman's been very upset because Tsuna-nii still hasn't come home. Reborn-san's presence can help Maman be happy."

"Yeah," he said. "I'll be staying for lunch. Will Iemitsu be coming?"

"Uh, Papan only comes for dinner…" Fuuta trailed off. "Uhm, Reborn-san, will you and Tsuna-nii and the others… will you be okay?"

Reborn nodded. "Who the hell do you think we are? Just… be here for Maman. That is the mission assigned to you both. She shouldn't cry until Tsuna and the others come back."

Fuuta's head hung low as he patted I-pin's head. "I-pin's been wondering if y'know… If her master's murderer had been found."

Jesus. He was terrible at this. He didn't know how to break it to children. He just nodded his head and placed his small hands on I-pin's shoulders. "Don't worry. The bad men will pay. I promise."

-18-

Colonnello was the first to croak after Reborn's ultimatum.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Reborn. What do you want to gain by doing this?"

Reborn shrugged. "Nothing. I was fired and I don't have anything better to do. So what say you!"

Skull was next. "F-Forget about it!"

Mammon hesitated. "Eh dammit, more money to be made when this is going on."

"I don't care if you get my share of the spoils. Don't give a shit about the money," said Reborn.

Verde couldn't care less. "Are we done? I still have to copy my future self's work on the boxes."

"I-I don't like this. Does Yuni know about this?"

"She doesn't need to," Reborn then paused. "As for your fiancée… well, you know the consequences."
"You haven't given us much of a choice," Colonnello raised his hands in defeat. "Knew that maggot of yours made you soft. This is for him, huh?"

Reborn didn't need to answer him. "No more Fon to hold us back from breaking bad."

Colonnello's laugh was more of a nostalgic afterthought. "Yeah, yeah. I miss that bastard too."

-18-

Reborn was forced by Mammon to wake up at 2 in the morning to go for a brief drive somewhere after.

"You sure your informant can be trusted?" Reborn said, crossing his legs. "I mean, if Timoteo's opposition in the militant faction is his brother, I'm pretty sure-"

"Yes, yes, yes," said Mammon impatiently. "Christ, I think that stupid shark and the others are getting suspicious of me for doing this. And with you in the mix-"

"Shut up, you slippery snake," Reborn snapped. "They shouldn't have trusted you since the start. Not your fault they don't use their heads properly…" He then took a bite of the napoletana they bought on the road.

"I'm sure they'll be coming to hunt me down, fucking hell, Reborn. They would have spotted me conspiring with you-"

"Yeah, too late for you to grovel for mercy, innit?" he said, mouth full of pizza. "Relax, Mammon. You're used to double-crossing people. Anyway, I just hope your informant, if I can't trust whoever it is, isn't full of shit."

Mammon sighed as the car stopped and beckoned him in the folds of his cloak. "You'll probably kill me if you find out, but might as well choose the quickest death."

"Are you sure this is a fresh batch of clothes? I don't want to smell-"

"God, you're still a fucking prick-" Mammon said as a subordinate opened the car door and led them inside a small church that looked centuries old. A passing priest ignored their questionable parade. The guards then changed.

"Drug den, huh?" Reborn asked as they went up to the altar. One of the young sextons lifted the curtain on the long table on top of the large crucifix to reveal a pristine clean set of stairs.

"The deacon of this place is in on this. None of the pederasty though, even the family owning the territory would stoop that low." Mammon let his yellow and white salamander grace them with its light as its owner like a sick angel guided them down where two aged wooden doors with some no-name family's insignia carved in front were waiting for them in the midst of a flurry of skulls lined neatly in each shelf.

"Seriously, this setup is kinda kitsch," Reborn yawned as the doors opened and all coy disinterest was replaced by an animalistic urge to rip the person in front of him to shreds.

Hibari Yuu, looked like an oddity in that dimly-lit room as she sipped her from a simple celadon set. She wore a black kimono embellished with yellow roses and camellias, lilac ombre dying the sleeves.

Reborn instantly turned to Mammon, who roll sighed.
"Look, just make it quick ok? Three clean head shots might do the trick if self-preservation tries getting in the way."

"You did not tell me you were corroborating with Fon's murderer."

"It was my brother who killed Fon," Yuu said quietly in Japanese, laying down her teacup. Her four men aimed their guns at their direction. "Sit," she gestured across the seat prepared in front of him. "I can only sustain fifteen minutes of your time. I know you have plenty of things to ask."

"No shit," Reborn spat. "Don't lay the blame on your fratricidal brother. Where the fuck is that son of a bitch?"

"He told me three days ago that he went on a trip to see our grandfather."

Reborn bit his lip. Shit, he couldn't believe he was letting his emotions get the better of him. That stupid Fon, fucking with him like this.

"Mammon-san told me you need my assistance. If you brought what I have requested, then there is no problem." Her slanted eyes were so similar to her younger brother’s. The walnut colour blackened under the lights.

"Let's get into business then," he said through gritted teeth and made his way to the empty chair. "I need the list of the higher up feds we have to take care of, the ones we can bribe, the ones who can be of use to us when the time comes."

Yuuya opened a black clear file beside her and began flipping the pages slowly. With a flourish, she got several stapled papers which she stowed under an envelope and placed it neatly in front of him. "Anything else?" she asked, her lips twitching.

Reborn stood up. "No, goodbye." He then took out from Leon a sealed bag full of photographs and letters Tsuna stole from the Hibari manor and threw it in her direction. She caught it before it caught on her tea.

"We have only spent five minutes of your allotted time. I'm sure you have other inquiries. Now is your chance. A day from now, I can be your enemy."

"If you knew," Reborn was biting the bullet and he knew he could pull the trigger anytime before they can do something about it, but there was something alluring at the idea of knowing what the hell he and his student got themselves into. "Why did you agree to this? Is this to spite on me for being your uncle's subordinate?"

"Is that really how you think of our situation?" Yuu said as she continued sipping her tea. Reborn noticed that her finger was restored with minor stitches. "It's because I deem ourselves to be similar. Taking risks, being ten steps ahead of the other players… quite exhilarating, no?"

"So what, you're not afraid of me suddenly putting a bullet between your eyes? I won't kid around. It's chickenfeed for me," Reborn smirked as the men in the room fixated their guards at his direction.

Hibari Yuu remained impassive. "I'm a risk taker through and through. As I said in a sense, I think we're similar. I don't honestly give a damn about my life as long as I see the Mafia burning with it."

Bingo. Not as much of a doll as you think you are. "Revenge, huh? What does Fon's death have to do with it?"
Yuuya's eyes were still soulless as it stared at the payment Reborn gave in her hands. She laid it on top of her folder.

"He has already suffered enough. Once upon a time, grandfather wanted him to raise arms and start a war with the families that shackled us. I never thought my uncle was a coward for abandoning that dream. I admired him. But still, he abandoned my father to the verge of losing his mind. If he had killed all of us then, maybe this did not have to happen. Maybe my sister would have died happier as well."

"Fon's not a killer."

Yuu fought back a smile. "I was seven when my siblings and I sneaked in the battlefield. I saw him kill his own mother. I never thought I would ever see an expression as glorious as his was."

Reborn raised his gun in her direction by muscle memory. Nothing pissed him off than people who believe they know better than him, especially when it came to the people who gave three fucks about. "You're a hypocrite, Hibari Yuu. You think I'll eat the bullshit you're spouting? You're doing the same damn thing that your grandfather wanted."

"I don't need to do anything. The wheel's already turning. There is nothing more that would bring me greater joy than to see that abhorrent stain you call the Mafia completely wiped clean. I don't even care if your pupil will become the Shinigami to do it. You're doing uncle a favour too. Now if you will excuse me-" she said as an invisible force wrested him and Mammon to the side of the wall. He couldn't move a muscle. "I have bugs to crush."

There was then a flurry of gunfire as he saw their guards and her men engage in a gunfight that shook the entire room and sent dust and grime raining down to fuck up the lighting further. By the time the dust cleared, she remained seated on her chair. Her left arm and leg clattered on the floor. They weren't of flesh and blood.

"Christ-" Reborn muttered.

"She lost them during her time in the army. That's why she was discharged," Mammon panted. By then both of them fell down the floor.

Four guards remained standing on her opposite end. Only, they weren't guards anymore.

Jesus fucking Christ, Reborn should have known. He could distinguish that pineapple hairstyle from anywhere.

"Why are you guys here?" the baby snarled at the Kokuyo gang. Most of them have sustained damage as well. The blond-haired mutt was shot in the shoulder and leg while that robot dude Gokudera ranted about was shot in both arms. It was weird. It would have been easier for Mukuro to have used his flames than to engage in an artillery battle with Yuu's obviously more experienced men.

"Kufu-" Mukuro massaged the right side of his face. "We wanted to ambush your Arcobaleno friend over there and got a tip he'd be here, but to think of all people, to see you-"

"Enough with the chitchat," Yuu said as she twisted her remaining hand. Immediately, all of them released their weapons hands fastened on their back as their faces slammed against the wall.

"I was wondering how you managed to do that. Have you also sealed their flames, as you did with Tsuna and Chrome before?"
"Kufufu~ Is my little Chrome safe, Reborn? Sawada Tsunayoshi was pleading for my help. Apparently, the Ninth had been keeping him hostage. I had to deploy her. Whatever happened while I was gone~"

"Shut your mouth, little boy," Yuu snarled as his head began to slam into the wall repeatedly. Reborn couldn't let this happen. Jesus, if Tsuna finds out about his ineptitude. "Do you want to know about this little ritual my family had practised? Father couldn't do it to Kyoya because my sister died just before he turned eighteen."

"Is this the incest? Yamamoto Tsuyoshi mentioned that."

"What an ignorant fool. He couldn't even paint my family in a more horrendous light?" she said as one by one, every single one of the Kokuyo members began slamming their heads against the wall. "Only Kei, my grandfather, and my mother are the remaining Hibaris alive who can use all the flames of the sky."

"Yuu-san, stop this~" Mammon said to which she ignored.

"No one is born with the ability to have each flame at your disposal," said Yuu, her calm façade was starting to crack. "But our ancestors worked around it and succeeded to pass that knowledge across generations. Aside from marrying each other to pass it on, it has to be ingrained in us."

"Christ, leave these children be," Reborn couldn't believe it came out of his mouth. But he understood. He didn't need for her to say it out loud.

"Until we turn eighteen, nineteen, twenty, whenever, flames had to seep through each nerve in our body until it adapted and each of the seven flames physically manifests. Most of us are not so lucky during the process. Like my father, some go insane. Some, like me, lose the use of our nerves completely. We can no longer feel pain or anything for that matter. Father was not too gentle with us three. I could still remember my sister crying each night because hers was taking too long. Serves that bastard right, I should have recorded how his body exploded~"

Reborn's gun was fixated at her direction. "Stop. Them."

He heard the four clattering to the floor.

"Leave them," she then said.

"I don't think you have the right to order me around, you psychotic bitch~"

Her eyes narrowed. "I wonder how your body will look if it exploded. Even as a baby, your wave energy must be strong~"

"Reborn, let's go," Mammon said, grabbing his hand.

"This little girl is testing me."

"Reborn," Mammon sighed. "It's already fifteen minutes. And didn't you hear what Mukuro said earlier? That girl came to save your pupil, who was in danger~"

"Fuck," Reborn couldn't stand the thought of being outmanned. This girl would have killed him with just a slight jerk of her hand. He fucking hated it. He turned at her one last time. The rest of her surviving brigade was assisting her in putting back her prosthetics. "Are those memorabilia from the people you clearly hate that valuable?"
A tired smile graced her lips. "They are for my brother. Thank you Reborn. You can have my head once your fiasco is over if Kyoya doesn't get to us first."

He couldn't understand if this girl was insane or whether she had a death wish. Maybe both. He felt sorry for her, but it only lasted for three seconds as they returned to their car. Apparently, the other guards in the family had a shootout outside as well. Jesus fucking Christ, this was more like it.

"She already broke the laws of the Omertà. It made her lose the ability to use her flames, but it makes flame users lose any chances of beating her."

"Some ability then. Give the list to Colonnello. If I get my body back, it will be easy killing her."

"Get in line then. Pretty sure Hibari Kyoya will do a better job than you. You're too clean with targets, y'know. She warrants a messy death."

"Fucking hell, no wonder we get along."

Reborn couldn't go to the Ninth directly, given the already bad blood between them for insulting the chef, so he goes to the CEDEF the next day to wait for his turn.

He rung on the doorbell of their HQ and ignored the beams of the snipers marking every inch of his body. He held out a large poster with the words 'BRING ME COLLONNELLO'S BEACH' in case Basil and any other teenagers Iemitsu brainwashed were with any of them. It took ten minutes, but the walls did slide open to reveal a furious Lal Mirch in a pencil skirt. Reborn took a picture to send to Colonnello later. See, he was hip too.

"I need to speak to your boss."

"Jesus, you don't mind if they all point their guns at you?"

"Eh, they'll miss anyway. Just show me to Iemitsu, and I'll be on my way."

Both of them then walked across the white marble floors of their hideout. There was an agent covering every square inch of both walls.

"I'm that dangerous am I?" Reborn grinned.

"Fuck you," Lal said, making him laugh and remembering that time in Palermo again. "You're playing a dangerous game, Reborn."

"It would be against my character if I wasn't, Lal Mirch."

They stopped by the large door at the end of the hallway. Lal did not bother to knock and pressed her finger on a scanner to the left. She followed him as he went inside.

"Yo, Iemitsu," Reborn said, wearing the biggest grin he could muster just to wipe that smirk off his stupid face. The room was massive, five times as big as Tsuna's bedroom anyway. "You don't have to hide your men. It doesn't matter, I mean you no harm."

"Why the hell are you here?" His pupil's dad did not bother with all the bows and curtsies.

"Aww, you don't want to bother being polite to me. How kind of you," Reborn said, almost babbling. He shifted his position. There were ten more men in this room aside from him, Colonnello's bitch, and Tsuna's failure of a father. "I need to talk with the Ninth. He broke our
agreement. He didn't keep Tsuna safe."

Multiple flames sprouted in all directions. Iemitsu's Dying Will flame blazed brighter than he imagined. He grinned. Sweet, they are serious about this.

"Don't fuck with me Reborn. I know you've remained in contact with the rest of the guardians. You're just putting him in a critical position by taking him away, you bastard. Tell me, where the hell is my son?"

"What?" It was almost like the crash after that ride on cloud nine. Things were not making sense. Think, Reborn, think. There's no way. Shit. That little shit. Shit.

"Don't play with me, Reborn. Give me my son now. I may be able to convince the council to not kill him. If you want me to grovel on my knees, I don't even give a shit anymore."

He would want to maximize this and make Iemitsu admit to Nana everything just to see the look on her face when she gets home, but his mind was too sane that time. Instead, he shook his head. "I don't know. Christ Iemitsu, this is your son's fault. I'm in deeper shit because of him."

That was enough for Iemitsu to punch a crater on the floor and for Reborn to reveal his two guns. "You didn't have to do that!" Reborn called out as he began shooting in all directions. What the hell, he has to try contacting Chrome wherever that girl was. Why didn't he think of that sooner? He was losing his mind now that he realized that he really wasn't the only new player in the game.

Tsuna wanted to play by himself too.

Their assault stopped. Iemitsu was shaking as his flames dissipated, his hands still grasping on his phone. "Christ," he said as he fell on his desk, rubbing his tears. "Don't-" he said. "I'm not your boss anymore. It was the Ninth's orders-"

Well, that escalated quickly. Reborn was about to turn heel and find that idiot pupil of his when Iemitsu called him.

"They have officially arrested my son. He'll be tried tomorrow. He said he wanted to see you."

-18-

Tsuna was in worst shape than the aftermath of the Namimori incident. The bags under his eyes were almost black. He couldn't keep himself from nodding off at the table and hit his cuffed wrists repeatedly to his annoyance.

Reborn entered their sound proof room and sat down. His pupil gave him a vile look that he only reserved for those pesky villains they battled. It pissed him off.

"You only had one job, Dame Tsuna." Reborn couldn't stop himself anymore. Tsuna was enough for his plans to come crashing down. "You have no fucking idea what you're doing-"

"Y'know, Squalo-san cut his hair. He looks young, like-"

"If you had sat this one out, like the obedient mutt you are-"

"Is that really what you think of me, Reborn?" Tsuna's brown eyes darted at him like slits. "Be honest with me this time: Am I really just your dog?"

"Okay then," Reborn jumped on the table and crossed his legs in front of him. "What do you have
in mind by getting yourself arrested?"

"None of your business," Tsuna glared at him. "You were never really straightforward with me. You never did believe in me whenever I made my own decisions-"

"BECAUSE THIS WON'T BE LIKE LAST TIME!" Motherfucking. Hell. "YOU WILL DIE NO MATTER HOW YOU SPIN YOUR TALE TO THOSE FUCKING MILITANTS! You. Were. Safe. There. Ingrain that in your pea-shaped head of yours-"

"Trust me on this. One more time, Reborn, please."

"How will this trust of yours help you in any way?" Reborn scoffed. But he folded his arms to listen.

"This is the route with the less bloodshed. This might be the only shot I have to save my friends. To save you," Tsuna inhaled. "They would have killed me, you know. They're afraid. Afraid of the people who trust me. And maybe- when all of this is over, maybe I can change things. Stop all this bullshit. Protect more people. Change how the world sees you guys."

"Christ. Holy shit- so you-"

"Yes. I want to be the Vongola boss."

Reborn was speechless.

"I'm serious," Tsuna pouted. "You're such a prick."

There should be a limit to his naivety. "We are not good people, Tsuna."

"I know. Gosh, I should have stayed in Namimori."

"You don't mean that, do you?"

Tsuna laughed. "You already know I still have stuff to learn. Can you stand by me then, Reborn? Until I can be a student you can be proud of."

"You want me to be frank with you? No matter how you look at it, blood will flow. You mustn't deny that."

Tsuna looked at his chained hands. "Yeah. I'm scared shitless. Was this also how you felt when you entered this world the first time?"

"I ain't no sissy, Dame Tsuna." Reborn's smile made him realize he was more fucked up than he thought. "I didn't have the time to be."

"I can't afford to turn tail too, but I'm not as strong as you or everyone doing their best to save me," Tsuna said heavily. "That's why I'm thankful you're here."

"Bet your dad will want to kill me if he finds out you care about me more," Reborn snorted. "Don't thank me yet. We still have to bring those two friends of yours back."

Tsuna's eyes widened in surprise. "Fuck, I can't believe you used the 'f' word."

Reborn rolled his eyes. "You wanted to know if I'm all talk, right? Time to discard the pleasantries and let's fucking show them."
A prelude to the oncoming storm

Blood was still gushing out from the place he struck a few minutes ago. He couldn't see its exact colour due to the dim light in the dingy room.

"Any injuries?" Hibari's deep voice rippled across the room as he heard a muffled shout and another thud as a silhouette of a man fell down on the linoleum floor.

The incandescent lamp flickered. Yamamoto's vision was grainy as he stared at his hands. "No," he said as he tasted the red liquid that mingled with them and shuddered. It left a salty and tangy taste in his mouth.

"Good," his partner paused. "How does it feel to grant revenge on the two accomplices who crippled your father?" Hibari said, now beside him. He waited for Yamamoto to say something, and when he doesn't, says, "When I was a child, they took care of me when father was away."

There may have been traces of melancholy in his voice, Yamamoto doesn't know, because it was all drained in a sordid vat of cool indifference and pleasure. "And here they are, bitten to death by you."

Yamamoto closed his eyes. He could barely hold onto his katana as his body trembled. He did not know why, but he knew it wasn't out of guilt.

"Come," he said. "You deserve a good rest, herbivore. Tomorrow will be another busy day. We're going to see mother."

Chapter End Notes

- Oboete oke = 'remember this'

- *If you haven't noticed, I've been obsessed with Call Me By Your Name for a while now lol

- *We'll return to Hibari and Yamamoto next chapter. Prepare tissues- a crate of them.
Chapter Summary

The story so far: Tsuna and the others will try their best keeping their friends from trouble. Yamamoto and Hibari aren't too keen on cooperating.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Recreational drug use, underage drinking, self-harm, suicide, and other potentially triggering themes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always
irregularly. Spaces fill
with a kind of
soothing electric vibration.
Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be
better. For they existed.

— Maya Angelou, When Great Trees Fall

Muyo.

When Hibari Kyoya found Nami's body that day, he laughed. It was strange. That was the last time he ever did.

What he saw from Kusakabe's expression made him scoop up her body then. He crushed the bones of her fingers to retrieve a letter faded blue. His accomplice had the same eyes as those he would bite to death.

How strange. His cheeks did not wet like hers had when she said goodbye. His shoulders should have concaved, back breaking under her sheer weight as they walked to her resting place at dusk.

She always preferred the school more than their home. Maybe he will learn to prefer it too. He will wear what she wore. He will become what she became. He will protect the herbivores that encroached the place. He will not hate the burden she carried in that abandoned mansion even in death.

He will not leave Namimori alone. He will not leave her alone.
He ended up watching it burn, however. It should have lightened the load. But he left. He could not be like her. He could not die.

There was still a promise to keep; a doomed end to fulfil.

It was in the eve before he set off to see his mother that he and Yamamoto drank to their success with some cheap rice wine bought in 7-11. His voice did not waver as he looked at the tall child in front of him.

He said, "You must promise me this, herbivore." He waited. The boy said nothing as he looked at his glass. It was almost empty. "When I have done my part, you must do yours. Kill me."

Yamamoto Takeshi knew that his phone was not safe from tampering nor destruction the more he stayed with Hibari, so he began setting his affairs in order by uploading pictures and videos on his phone in a shared drive before drifting off to sleep.

What the rest of the people who would be collaborators on his trips did not know, however, was he kept a private folder that kept his pictures with his family, or some embarrassing candid shots. One of these files had the label 'Gramps.'

Yamamoto started having dreams since they arrived in Taiwan a few nights ago. He dreamt the old man's serene expression, and how his slanted eyes would shine as he told him his burning potential of surpassing his dad and being of great assistance to his grandson.

"Am I doing the right thing, grandpa?" Yamamoto asked.

"What do you think, Takeshi?" his eyes twinkled.

"I dunno... Uhm, I shouldn't be thinking this way, but there are times I wish I could take it back. It's really weird," he looks on at his blade rather thoughtfully. "Now that I've met you, ojii-san, I'm starting to think that maybe it's not worth helping Hibari-san track you guys. It's not like you're hurting him anymore or planning something really bad..."

"Have you told Kyoya this?"

"Eh, pretty sure he won't swing that way. I mean, I've read on google that once he sets himself a goal, he'll keep going at it without caring about the other stuff, like sacrificing sanity or common sense."

"What do you want to do then?" A tiny skylark in flight glistened at the hilt of his staff.

"I just want to know if I'm doing the right thing. I really haven't thought of any of this through when I left. I wish I did, I guess." He then slumps down on the grass and inhales the cool afternoon wind. "Sometimes I think of taking it back. Staying with dad in Namimori. Eh, but Hibari-san also said that regrets only weaken you. So, uh, I dunno. I mean, I wouldn't have met you, I wouldn't have seen Hibari-san in a different light. Oh, and I wouldn't have learned how to play beach volleyball!"

Ken beamed at this with his missing teeth. "It's scary to see the world open up before your eyes. But you know what, Takeshi? That thing I said to you before... It still stands. I see hope in you, and I am more sure than I was then. Your heart remains pure and strong. You don't blame anyone or anything for what you're going through. I couldn't be more relieved to have anyone else stand beside Kyoya. I can rest easy." His back slumped and his shoulders concaved at this. He looks at
the ocean in front of them.

Meanwhile, Yamamoto stared at the corn-blue sky. "It's scary, huh? How little we know of the world beyond ours. I have a friend who's really smart, y'know, but he can get really weird sometimes. He keeps talking about aliens, but there's so little evidence. Like space is so quiet. NASA hasn't picked up a signal in ages. But they still try, y'know? Reaching out. Guess people in general can't stand the thought of being alone, especially in a large world such as this..." Yamamoto inhaled. "I don't... want to be alone too." Droplets started to fall on his Shigure Kintoki. "I don't want you to die, grandpa... I might not be able to handle Hibari-san by myself. I don't think I'm ready." He could not prevent himself from covering his mouth as he tried stifling his sobs. "I'm scared. I'm fucking scared."

His eyes would open to darkness. It would then adjust to Hibari's turned figure. He was still as a sheet. His sleep would be uninterrupted, long, and fitful.

Even with potential blood in his hands, he had no problem letting it linger in his head for too long. Yamamoto suddenly felt a sense of dread and disgust starting to collate on the pits of his stomach.

Taipei is not at all like Tokyo. Unlike the latter capital, there is no sense of brevity, of urgency in the lightly flowing traffic and in the people as they ambled onto work or school. Their neighbours still know how to smile.

It reminded Yamamoto of Dounan. There was still the language barrier, but he managed to pick up some Mandarin words from their last destination that landed them a small place near the heart of the city and part time at a noodle restaurant just in front of their apartment.

"Yeah, the food is just amazing," he said in a voice that did not feel like his when he called Gokudera. "You should try the beef noodles with chilli butter, man and there's the oyster omelette in the night market and the Pidan tofu with the century egg..."

"God, I envy you... Things seem so nice on your end."

"That's what you always say though," Yamamoto laughed. "The fried squid in the night market's pretty good too. And they have chicken wing rice roll. You can eat a wing with one hand. I always try getting those before going home..."

Gokudera noticed. "You ok?"

"Uh yeah! Uhm, I guess I'm just tired? I mean we had a lot of customers today and I had to train with Hibari-san earlier, uh..."

"Ok, be safe man. Uhm, don't get yourself killed or something."

He laughed. "Same. Say hello to Lambo and the others for me, would you?"

"The stupid cow's already a handful," Gokudera said before clicking his tongue. "Yeah, just talk to me, 'kay? I mean, if you're, uh-"

"I'm fine."

"Yeah, of course you are. It's always sunny in Yamamoto-ville. Shit, forget I said that. Yeah, uh, ok." He did not even bid goodbye as he disconnected. It felt weird for Yamamoto to be so defensive.
Hibari does not complain verbally. His eyes though simmered with disquiet when he made his way every morning to work until early evening. By then, Hibari would arrive just after and both of them would end up at the roof surrounded by man-made lights.

"Come," he would say, and both of them will dance. At least that was how Yamamoto euphemized the way their weapons clashed and spun inches from their bodies as they dash back and forth. His body will bloom with bruises afterwards, but he exchanged bows of gratitude before he dashed downstairs to make dinner.

"You want the duck stir fry, Hibari-san?" he would say as he placed some ice on fresh bruises.

Hibari would ignore him and head straight to bed.

It was a routine Yamamoto was grateful of receiving.

The landlady was telling Yamamoto to take care of himself whenever he went home. There had been a string of killings of foreigners lately, she said, and she worried his poor Mandarin might give him away.

Yamamoto knew the culprit, so he assured that he won't pass the night market after work.

"Shit's getting worse. Tenth just got arrested and the allied families are doubling reinforcements to clip you both," Gokudera said on the other end. "Hibari's efforts are getting noticed though. Can you tell him to, er, pipe it down? It won't be helping the Tenth's case at all."

"Gotcha," Yamamoto said as he took a large bite from his second Gua Bao. Hibari didn't take his, as usual, so more for him.

"Damn, that looks so good," his friend scowled on the other end. "Would fucking want that good shit right now. You have any idea what Hibari's objective is? I still have no fucking clue."

"Uh..." Yamamoto had long accepted Hibari's quest familicide that he had forgotten completely how morbid that sounded out loud. "I think he just wants to bite the people who wronged his sister to death."

"Yeesh, dude, as long as you make sure he skips the collateral we'll try looking the other way. It's just classic Hibari to cause a big ruckus. Yeah, and Squalo tried picking you up in Okinawa, I think and paid for it, but his condition's stabilized."

"What?"

"Sharkface was worried about you and got done in by Hibari's brother," he said grimly. "Looks like that asshole will be having a new mechanical hand for Christmas."

"He won't be able to use flames again then."

"You don't have to worry about that. The current situation doesn't merit those. He asked that you don't charge fists flying without a plan like he did."

"Squalo-san can't have- well, I called him more than a week ago and- It's my fault- I shouldn't have-"
"Look," Gokudera paused him. "Don't beat yourself up. We're not risking our asses here because you told us to. We're doing it because we think you're worth giving ten fucks about. Plus hey, if this shit didn't happen, I wouldn't be this much help to you and the Tenth."

"Don't die on us from overwork then."

"Yeah, I'll think about it," Gokudera laughed. "I'll talk to you later when I'm done picking up the stupid cow. Get some rest, ayt?"

Yamamoto couldn't.

He was starting to notice that aside from nodding off work most of the time and nearly sleeping on Hibari's tonfa to the face, he could not bring himself to pass by the night market like he used to, delighting the landlady and pissing off Hibari who did not want to share the rooftop during the sunset. The nightmares were not abating as well, with the little sleep he had already. Mostly, they centred on Ken or his father, but the circle was widening to Gokudera, Tsuna, and the rest of his friends in Namimori.

Yamamoto thought of talking to Gokudera or Reborn about it, but he decided to stare at the pictures instead. He should download a better photo editor in the shop later.

Aside from ignoring his faraway friends, he was starting to ignore Hibari as well and head straight to the rooftop where he would just stare at the horizon. When it got cold, he would take a quick shower before staying at the kitchen. Hibari would then head straight to bed after his own rooftop-brooding.

When the coast was clear, he would sneak to the bathroom to go on with his nightly routine. Just behind the kitchen sink, he would take a blade he covered in plastic and begin cutting his wrists.

During their second night in Taipei, Yamamoto asked Hibari what he feared the most. He did not expect Hibari to give an answer. Moreso, he did not expect to be speechless when Hibari asked him the same thing.

"I don't think it's really worth mentioning. It's not like I'm afraid of stuff like spiders or clowns… or death, or life after death…" his eyes fell down. "Must be nice to fear something you know you can conquer."

Hibari leered at this. "You do not think the likes of me truly fear nothing? The thought of fearing nothing is worth sleepless nights by itself."

He guessed he feared being sad. Being sad was inevitable, he knew and something no one can truly conquer. But there were a ton of things that open when one is aware that he is sad. For one, it was a reflex of sorts, a kind of knowing that something was wrong. Secondly, if it did not go away for long periods of time, it made one capable of doing the unthinkable.

He did not want to share these kinds of thoughts with all the trouble that his friends were currently going through because of his selfish actions. The intolerable nights were getting longer but reliving his mistakes over and over again was more bearable than hearing his friends getting tired of his complaints. Squalo tried doing something about it and paid the price. They shouldn't be following by example.
He found himself also nearly jumping too, if not for Hibari often opening the door at the exact key moment, so instead of turning to drugs or alcohol, he accepts the cool blade running through the flesh of his wrists, just missing his pulse. It made the pain more recognizable somewhat. Several minutes of those was enough for him to smile the rest of the day as well and ignore his low appetite.

It was also helping him curb that irrational fear. Hibari seemed to not notice though. As long as he was not bothering him, maybe it was ok.

-18-

The old couple manning the shop asked him how long he was going to stay.

"Is there a contract?" Yamamoto asked while wiping the tables.

They shook their heads. "No, we just wanted to ask if you're willing to stay here even when vacation's over. You also told my husband you owned a restaurant in Japan before?"

"It was my old man's. Uh, it was a sushi shop so I'm not confident with my noodle-making."

"That's fine! You're a hard worker, so you'll pick it up quickly. You just need extra arm strength, which doesn't look like a problem."

"Shouldn't you be asking your son instead? S-Sorry, uhm I saw the pictures beside the cash register." It must be because he's estranged to them or something. That's usually how storylines in movies go.

Both of them looked at each other before the kind lady answered. "He's been gone for a long time now. It's just the two of us."

"We're just sentimental. You were his age when he died," the old man said with a wide smile. This made Yamamoto's stomach turn slightly. "Tell us as soon as possible when you're leaving so we can find a replacement."

"Ehehe, sorry about this."

"It's fine, we're sorry too for asking you. Though, if you want, we can teach you how to make noodles tomorrow, if there are no customers."

"Y-Yeah, that will be awesome!"

-18-

The landlady would gently tell him the truth when he talked about it on the way home.

"I heard from a friend that he hanged himself, the poor parents," she shook her head. Her shih tzu was licking Yamamoto's feet. "That was three years ago. They were never right since."

Yamamoto felt a short burst of anger at the last sentence but can only bid goodbye as she began her afternoon walk. They closed early that day, making him have extra time on his hands and surprise Hibari with pineapple cake. He did not see him on the bed or the rooftop though, leaving him to try eating a piece and losing appetite halfway.

He did not want to go the rooftop with an absent Hibari so he found refuge on the bed. He also slid the Shigure Kintoki under Hibari's bed so he would not be tempted in seizing it. There was a sense
of déjà vu there somewhere. He knew he would never know the reason why he ended up doing that, but he understood somewhat. Maybe that was what he feared as well. Expectations were scary. Disappointment moreso.

Hibari would find him still staring into space when he returned. Yamamoto noticed specks of scarlet on his white shirt.

"There's pineapple cake in the kitchen. It's really good."

"You only finished half," Hibari quickly shot down. He removed his tonfas and began wiping the blood from the blades with their dirty beddings. He would then be cleaning them up in the roof like the pedantic killer he was. Yamamoto quickly turned away for thinking ill of this man. "You've barely eaten your food for the past few days."

He was starting to notice. "I forgot about the chicken in the fridge. Do you want some for later?"

"Yes. I've also bought something we can share for dinner."

This was a first. "Uhm, ok. Thank you?"

"Consider it a pre-celebration of sorts. We won't have time to do so after I have slain mother. Kei will be rude enough to interrupt our festivities," Hibari said as he took off his shirt to get a fresh pair from his duffel bag. "I also replaced the blade you were using in the bathroom. It was getting rustier."

Yamamoto's blood ran cold.

"You're using jumpers now. My sister was better at hiding. She scarred her thighs." He scooped up the bloodstained laundry and left to wash them.

-H-18-

Hibari Kyoya decided to do bring a bottle home each night to loosen up the baseball herbivore. This was their usual tradition within the Disciplinary Committee, age restrictions be damned.

"Uhm," the herbivore began. "It's good that you came around but… uh," he glanced at his untouched glass. "This catch is kinda, uh, too much?"

"You have never tried drinking before?" he smiled coyly in return. "Given that Gokudera Hayato smokes, he must have offered you to taste."

He shook his head. "Y-Yeah. I mean, my dad tried as well back when I started middle school, but I'm scared of getting too into it? It's bad for my record, uhm…" Yamamoto hesitated. "But it's cool… if you want me to try, ahaha- You've drank before?"

"I tasted bourbon back during a mission one time." Hibari was eight and had finished his fifth that year. Three weeks later and he would be whisked away to a mental institution. "I did not like the taste. My sister preferred scotch."

"Eh, Nami-neesan?"

"The other one," he corrected with a facetious hum. He remembered being six when Nami broke into their family wares and tried the Scappa only to let out a scowl and gagged the contents on the spot. Her mother was not happy when she opened the door the next morning. "She preferred Pimms." He was thirteen when he ordered Kusakabe to get him the same Scotch after burying
Nami. He got him the Yoichi one instead. It did not taste as bad as he anticipated.

Yamamoto rubbed his wrists as he eyed his glass again. "I'll try asking Gokudera to get me those then. Next time."

A speedy silence followed. Hibari took a sip. The herbivore followed suit after several seconds and made a look of comical disgust. He smirked at this.

"Geez, this tastes... different from what I'm used to?"

"I did not give you restrictions in being honest. Alcohol often tastes terrible the first time," he said as he sipped again. "You don't have to finish a glass in one go."

Yamamoto laughed. "Yeah, uh, thanks."

He grunted in response. "Regrettably, I'm also a lightweight. Clean up after my third drink and carry me to bed."

"Uh, Hibari-san, you're pretty... uhm, this is the alcohol talking right? Maybe I can ask you stuff... Hmm, you'll probably say a lot of things too... This will be interesting, ehehe..."

The herbivore was getting more annoying the as he sipped. He preferred passing out then than let his privacy be bombarded. The bird was snuggled in contented sleep by the herbivore's shoulder, further irking him. He poured himself more to quicken his neurotransmitters.

"This is kinda rude of me to ask, Hibari-san, but how old are you? Since there's a lot of talk that you're older than Ryohei-senpai and the upperclassmen... You've repeated a year more than twice now and-"

"Yes, I'm older," he said irritably. His voice was still not slurring. His tolerance was working at the worst timing.

"Eh... uhm, why don't you graduate? I asked around- actually it was a lot of us- not just Tsuna and Gokudera and Ryohei-senpai- and your grades are ok so why-"

"I don't want to leave and let the Disciplinary Committee in the school be jeopardized," was his curt reply.

"Eh, but shouldn't you move on? I'm pretty sure your henchmen are trained enough to try working it out on their own. You're too obsessed with discipline and micromanaging everything. You deserve a break from those. I really don't think you're happy staying in Nami-chuu. You're doing a lot of things already and not enjoy being like the rest of us."

He did not even interrupt the damn herbivore. His blunt honesty was more potent under alcohol. "Is that what you think?" His voice hardened.

Yamamoto noticed. His eyes widened for a moment and he turned his head to his left, coordinating himself again before responding. His response was harsher than the last. "It's like you're trapping yourself, I guess. I mean, soon we won't be teenagers anymore and go work and all, uhm... Don't you want to do other things?"

"You're insinuating that you know better of what I want?" He drank another glass again. His tonfa was already poised to gun him down if he attempted to demean him further.

"N-No. It's just- I just think staying in Nami-chuu prevents you from opening yourself to other
possibilities. It's your comfort zone, Hibari-san but maybe... uhm..."

"That I fear the future? Tell me herbivore, what do you think will happen to me if I do become a member of the Vongola? Do you think the blood in my hands now will be limited to my kin? You must jest," he responded coldly. He drank again. The alcohol was still not working. "The Mafia is a world that rests in bloodshed, herbivore. And yet, you try to delude yourself. This is not the end to extinguishing candles. Putting out flames will be a never-ending task that you will grow tired of. I am doing you a favour by preparing you. I do not pretend to be ignorant of that possibility." He was no fool. His family's roots were too intertwined to the Mafia that even the likes of him wouldn't be too foolish to ignore. "Better that I die after I end my bloodline than be trapped in that loop."

"Tsuna won't let that happen."

"How then, would you suggest that he try saving our hides from our executioners? I think the term 'grow up' fits your state more than mine," he sneered. "He will realise this. He must learn to rely on his two feet to continue walking. Do you think it is easy to hold back from seeing the red whenever you see blood oozing out from flesh? I saw your eyes, herbivore. It exhilarated you."

It was his time to render him dumb. Yamamoto then finished sipping his glass and poured himself another.

"Subduing the town without decimating every group that crossed my path was not easy, especially with how every fibre of my being ached to bite them dead every time. But I promised her that. To prevent our town from descending to chaos, even that damn school... Herbivores are blissfully ignorant of our town's history. My sister was thirteen when she took the mantle within the Disciplinary Committee. There was no more Hibari to inherit that role. Our school was in shambles when I entered. You have no right to disregard what that was like."

Hibari looked at the bottle. It was three quarters empty.

"Without the school, nothing would have held me back. I am an abnormal piece of trash the world would be better rid of, as my mother would kindly say," he attempted to lighten the conversation. Good. The alcohol was entering his bloodstream.

"I'm sorry."

None of them then spoke as they drank their alcohol. Hibari remembered the first time he saw his sister wearing the red and gold armband and that urge to rip it out with her arm for himself. His empty hand released his tonfa. He ignored the clatter it made when it reached the floor. "Namimori Middle School was the place she felt she belonged. I felt the same."

He disliked the look in his eyes as he bowed in surrender. The victory in making him understand was less satisfying than he assumed. His vision was also blackening. There was that same feeling of anger that bubbled within his insides again as he kept that calm façade of his.

"I'm sorry for not seeing it that way," he repeated at Hibari. "Namimori Middle is more special than I thought it would be." With that, Yamamoto let out a laugh. "In a way, I guess you thought we were your family? Of herbivores, yeah?"

"I find it quite interesting, even now. I thought herbivores were just little beasts I would be fond of biting to death. But then, it made me understand her a little. That feeling of having something to protect, of possessing... It was pleasant while it lasted."

"And then the family that would have given you a place to call home only ended up taking it
away," he said in a somber tone. "Wow. This single session made me understand you more than the few years we met you."

"I had other duties than wasting time telling anecdotes," he said curtly. "You complicate it too much. They were never my family. They never treated me as such because they did not catch my father's interest as nee-san and I had."

"You don't hate them then?"

"I don't know if my thoughts equate to that," Hibari responded. "My brain is not wired enough for me to classify it as such. It might be similar to how you feel about your mother's ties to them."

"Oh," his response was icy. "Uhm, right." No confusion in his tone. There was hesitance, but his short answer was clear that he struck a chord.

He also did not care about the herbivore's dynamics. By then, he stood up. He did not wish to risk for another minute to pass and him to rely on the herbivore's strength to carry him to bed. His center of gravity was in disarray when he took a step.

"Y-You ok, Hibari-san?" Too late. He could barely even hit the herbivore's cheek as his arms carried Hibari to their quarters. He made a mental note to repay his debt in full before he finished his mission. One definite blow to his pride was relying on this herbivore. He stared at the scars he had on his wrists. He also noted the heaviness under his eyes as he proceeded to also cover his body with a sheet.

"It's humiliating to know that it's your first time and you can tolerate so much alcohol," he said. "Fetch water and Ibuprofen. I'll bite you to death if I wake up on the wrong side of bed."

"R-Really? Maybe I took it from the old man." The herbivore scampered and proceeded to make sure his morning would be tolerant enough. It was unfortunate that he was not able to push his buttons and make him explode. That would be interesting to watch. He can try again tomorrow if he did not get a headache when he opens his eyes again.

"I will bite you to death if you don't get rest after this," he then said. "Take care of yourself if you want to be of use even after this."

The herbivore smiled. It did not irritate him as much. It was a reassuring expression. "I will, Hibari-san." He was about to turn away when Hibari tugged the ends of his shirt. He felt like a child again. He often tugged Nami's shirt before she sneaks back to bed after telling him a scary story.

"Can I ask you something?" He despised the tone he used because he really felt like a lowly herbivore.

"Uhm, sure? I'm terrible at providing deep answers though. You should try asking Gokudera or Reborn-san instead."

"Getting in contact with them will merely grant us more trouble," he dismissed. By then, he could only feel his throat act up again. He signalled the herbivore to give him the glass of water. His brown eyes echoed the damn rock again. "How did it feel when you lost my grandfather?"

His eyes widened before lowering their gaze to the floor and then to his left. He did not attempt to even laugh when he answered. "I still can't forgive myself for watching him die."

Hibari continued. "Can death merit forgiveness for the sins he costed Namimori?"
"I wish I can speak badly of him. He must've done a ton of bad things to merit your hatred. But he did nothing bad to me, so I have no right to say bad things. I'm a terrible person, aren't I?"

"You thought that there was a chance for him to atone?"

"I never thought of it like that," he smiled. "I just thought it was sad that I won't ever get to ask him what he thinks of the noodles I made here. I'm sure that he can never make up for the bad things he did. But yeah, the thought of him not tasting the stuff I make is kinda sad." With that, he proceeded to take his glass. "Isn't that the same with Nami-neesan for you?"

Hibari did not respond. Yamamoto did not wait for his answer and went to the kitchen to get more water.

It was simple for the damn herbivore. He despised how loss is such a vague concept for him to understand and feel. It was nothing for him to find her body and cover it with dirt. He did not know how to shed tears. But he couldn't forget that emptiness. That might mean something.

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In his own twisted way, Hibari cared. He knew that understanding Hibari would be like cramming a Russian novel, so he consulted the internet for the main points. It did not compare to listening to the real thing. He did not feel like a subject of fascination anymore. Hibari was not a textbook psychopath like he theorized. He was aware of his limits and acknowledged them head-on. He did not bother masking his egocentrism nor did he dismiss it. He did not pretend that he despised people, but he was still willing to ignore the people who did not cross weapons with him.

"Do you like killing?" Yamamoto asked him then.

"I made a book when I was seven about murdering people." He had a blank look on his face as he narrated how overjoyed his father was when he saw it and Nami's horror. "Remembering it now, I was too fond of theatrics then. I made sure the drawings were reminiscent of my family members. I don't know what became of it."

"You don't look too happy."

"Because it took me awhile to follow through with them. They were too unrealistic." Hibari drank more. "Death was an everyday occurrence in the family. It grew stale after awhile." With that, Hibari paused and fixed his direction at him. "Do you want to know how I killed your elder brother?"

Yamamoto froze before attempting to laugh it off. "I'll end up unsheathing my katana if you do."

Hibari looked at him with an unreadable expression. "Yes. That would jeopardize everything. It was not really noteworthy though. But I did get this," he pointed at a scar just above his armpit. "From your father. He wanted to slice an arm off for strangling your brother." There was neither pity nor fondness. Instead of being angry, Yamamoto possessed measured sadness in his features. He could not understand why.

"That was the same expression my sister gave me whenever I share as well," he continued. "It's amusing. I know what it is, but I don't know how to feel it."

"It's what you do when you want to help someone but you can't," Yamamoto simplified.

Hibari's mouth was a thin line. "I always did want to help her. She may never have hated me, but I knew she hated herself."
Yamamoto opted to throw away the metal blade the next day and enjoy the sunrise that early morning. He tried waking up Hibari, but the glint of steel the instant he touched the sheets made him retreat with Hibird instead. He did take a selfie with a sleeping Hibari though (at a kamikorosu-safe distance). Despite the dark territory their conversations with alcohol had led them to tread, they were going somewhere.

He felt like he could empathize with his situation, ignoring the senseless deaths and other close calls Hibari committed, him included. He was in control and sane with him, but he could not ignore the killings that Hibari was committing in the name of self-defense. They were happening in broad daylight as well and made him wonder how the hell Hibari often got away with them.

"So you're getting all cosy with Hibari, eh? This is the last thing I'd expect to hear." He could hear Gokudera smoking on the other end.

"Funny, yeah," he replied. "He often gets angry when Hibird doesn't snuggle next to him. They've had a row since Hibari-san tried to bite it to death. So last night, he was demanding the bird to leave my shoulder but it wouldn't budge. He got so pissed off that he summoned Roll and plopped it on his instead. Only he got its spines stuck in his face for it."

"That would have been funny if you weren't the one telling the story."

"Yeah, I wish I recorded it. I nearly got bitten to death from laughing so hard." It was funny how easy it was then to talk to Hibari. Much more, he was eating the food he was bringing them. He might invite Hibari to come with him to the night market next time.

"Still can't believe Hibari… dunno, he's getting too complicated for my liking."

Yamamoto stopped laughing. "What are you trying to say?"

"He's still an unstable individual. You can't let your guard down around him."

"You're saying like he's a monster."

"Jesus Christ, so what, he's like fucking Eleven, is that what you're trying to pull? Fucker won't care about you the moment you get in his way. Reborn-san and I know his type. We've met a ton of people like that son of a bitch and I won't ever forgive myself if you-"

"But Hibari-san is not those people. He's Hibari-san," he said defiantly. "He… He may not be like us but he- if you heard him talk about Nami-nee-chan-"

"He has a clear goal in mind now, but what do you think will happen once he's done avenging his sister? You won't be able to stop him then unless you-"

"You're a- a- scumbag if you say that word, Gokudera," Yamamoto could not accept this. How dare they? How could they?

"Is that the best insult you got, you baseball freak?" Gokudera did not sound like his friend anymore. "You should man up and think of better ones. You've only met one of these people. I've met more and lost a whole lot of others trying to look the other way. You won't get a fairytale ending with how things are going."

"I won't let him die."
"Course you won't. Think he's some broken bird? Some hapless skylark? Grow the fuck up. You can't save him, especially if he doesn't want to."

"What will you think of me if I do try?" Yamamoto was stunned. He was willing to argue with Gokudera over some naïve belief and he was starting to feel terrible. He did not want to give in.

"That you're thrice as dumb as I thought." He hung up.

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For Hibari, honesty was the last pillar to run to, hence he rarely uses it under normal circumstances. However, it was the most conspicuous choice, especially under the influence of alcohol.

He found out later that there was so much more to that state, seeing this only after continuing that aimless drivelling with Yamamoto Takeshi every night, ignoring his malarkey about the damn bird perched on his shoulder. There was no guarded talk and conversation. He enabled himself to be scalded by his own jabs at his actions and feelings. He was not the only one biting other herbivores to death. Lying to himself was something he surmised as a sign of weakness. Walking away from a fight of rhetoric was never his style. He never liked to lose.

They said that alcohol makes you a different person. It was a herbivore perspective, a shallow conclusion at least. He also made the same assumption whenever his normally stoic Disciplinary Committee lose their conservativeness and reduce their worthless states to absurd concepts of unions and compensation for their supposed hard work. Saying that to his face was unthinkable. He assumed there was a split personality in every herbivore to be unleashed when one's brain lets down its guard.

He was too weak then to understand that alcohol was less a switch of binary states and more of a mirror of introspection. He no longer perceived it as a method to catch someone else off guard. Through Yamamoto's help, he saw it as a chance to reconcile with things he was too ignorant of prioritizing. It was difficult to verse, but he saw it less as a competition but an opportunity to ponder his thought processing.

It was liberating, but the effects the next morning were sometimes intolerable to handle. He remembered seeing his sister complaining about headaches the next morning when she snuck off to Saya's again.

"What do you think about 'kindness', Hibari-san?" Yamamoto Takeshi was pensive when he drank. He was still prone to confusion and bouts of incessant laughter, but he was more thoughtful and careful about his words.

His questions would be easy to dismiss outside their small kitchen. Here, it reminded him of those men in lab coats that would poke and prod him callously. But there was something about this herbivore that made him comfortable enough to unravel without being noted down for his incoherence at such concepts if he did not rely on textbook definitions. There was neither objectification nor judgment within the herbivore's eyes.

So he tells him a story. A memory.

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It was five days before his sister's fifteenth birthday when Hibari learned from Saya that it was his obligation to present her a gift. Nami had been doing it for his supposed birthday that he always assumed was a given for Children's day.
He found a present in one of his targets' sitting room. There was a parrot with grey plumage sans a red tail sticking out. He wanted to dub it Avian Death Star and taught it to say his favoured phrases, such as 'Bite you to death' or 'Herbivore' or 'Kill yourself' (the last one was his mother's favourite phrase). He managed to hide the parrot in their favoured woodland and fed it with fruit seeds and snails until he smuggled it to Nami's room.

She was not amused when she heard it speak.

"What's its name?"

"Avian Death Star."

"We'll call it Alec instead," Namimori said as she placed the bird on her drawer, where it promptly began to poop. "How did you get this? Aren't African Grey parrots expensive?"

"I got them from my targets," he said matter-of-factly.

Nami clicked her tongue before turning at the bird. "Hi Alec. Can I call you Alec?"

"Avian Death Star. I'll bite you to death."

"Jeez, Kyoya, you should teach the bird nicer phrases," Nami said. "I'll call you Alec, ok?"

"Kill yourself, kill yourself."

"Well, that just got dark," she sighed as she let it perch on her sleeved arm. "I'm going to teach you nice words, ok Alec?"

"Bite you to death, herbivore."

Hibari smiled at her. Nami fixed her eyes at him.

"You little rascal… I accept your challenge."

"Tsunami, tsunami!"

"That's the last straw, Kyoya! Don't use teach my nickname in school!" she said, chasing him around the room.

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"My mother was the reason why I never gave my sister gifts again," Hibari said, turning over his empty highball. He asked Yamamoto to pour him another glass. "We kept Avian Death Star-"

"Eh, I thought his name was Alec-"

"This is my story herbivore, you have no right to interrupt," Hibari said, releasing Roll and attempting to make the cloud hedgehog charge at Yamamoto. It tottered to the side and instead napped beside Yamamoto's arm. This made his eyebrow twitched in annoyance. "The bird was hidden in the woodlands where we often played. We took turns to feed it every morning and evening. Yuu and Kei found out and told mother. Pets were not allowed in the house. My sister was kept in the torture chamber for two weeks. Mother burned the parrot while we were obligated to watch. It cawed the same phrase over and over. My sister did not tell mother that I brought it to the house. She paid with thirty lashes a day and a burning every three days." Hibari grinned at this. "My sister was always a masochist. Always putting others above herself. Her undoing, you might say," his eyes shifted at his arms. Yamamoto quickly rolled down his sleeves. Hibari drank the rest
of his sake.

"What were the last things Alec said?"

Hibari slowly lowered his glass. He stared at his right for a moment, words attempting to squirm out. He blinked rapidly. "You be good. I love you."

With his poor comprehension of morality, hearing those words from his mouth made him sick. Alcohol was such a difficult serum to swallow. He crashed in the bathroom and did not open until morning. The herbivore would be at work by then, leaving him alone with his thoughts and those inexplicable feelings of resentment.

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Hibari might be a masochist for finding it addictive to overshare with a herbivore, but it made him stronger somewhat. He will not admit it to Yamamoto, but it made him look forward to evenings and his visits to 7-11 beforehand.

He also killed five people that afternoon. Today was productive. He had a lead to where his mother was holing up. They tipped him off to where the Hibari hands were located. He will be paying them a visit tomorrow evening. They dwelled in the city outskirts, making it less difficult for him to dispose their bodies. He might need the herbivore's assistance to navigate, however. His part-time was becoming handy, especially with his strings of conversation about potential places to visit when this was over.

He decided to reward his efforts with another visit to a convenience store three kilometres away from their apartment. Despite visiting a different 7-11 every other night, ten men with submachine guns materialized outside the window just as he finished paying. He dropped a coin behind the counter.

"Can you pick that up?" he asked just before the glass shatters and he ducked behind the shelves. He revealed his tonfas and patiently bid his time for them to reload. They did not bother waiting, however. He heard multiple footsteps kicking the glass. By then he stuck his head up and did not bother to see their faces as he pointed his tonfas at them and began to shoot. Five bodies clattered to the floor within four seconds. By then, he ducked again as gunshots began playing their music. His ears rung as he released one tonfa after another to shoot each herbivore one by one until only screams and screeching sirens were heard.

The cashier did not even bother picking up the damn coin when he returned to the counter. He grabbed it as she covered her head. She continued to tremble violently and could barely look at him. He tried to keep his irritation in check by asking her in the most pleasant way he could where the back exit was.

He got rewarded by a shaking finger to his right and his bag of groceries.

-18-

At work, Yamamoto blocked himself from self-reflections as he waited and cleaned tables or made noodles with the old couple he was working with. Hibari may be the one buying the alcohol each night after his shady dealings, but it was Yamamoto paying. Being with Hibari was like playing with fire. It was a dangerous game with rewarding highs, and Yamamoto couldn't get enough. The sadness and sheer perversity surrounding Hibari was alluring for him to give up on.

"Take-shin, your friend!" he heard the woman say. "My favorite show is on too. You go and take
Hibari visiting was unexpected but welcome. Yamamoto saluted and emerged from his break only to stop himself from singing out when he saw the only occupied table.

"Hiya, Take-chi!" Hibari Kei said and for the first time, Yamamoto couldn't bring himself to trust that cheek and candor as he gave an enthusiastic wave at him. On the contrary, remembering this man killing his own father and crippling Yamamoto's mentor made him take out his rain necklace.

Much more, when he saw the person sitting opposite this madman.

His mother was primly sitting on the table, both eyes transfixed at him and his green half-apron.

"I'll have the beef noodles please," Kei smiled, ignoring the necklace on Yamamoto's hands. He noticed the damn cane he must have scavenged from Ken's body. The elder Hibari turned to his fellow customer. "How about you, Hitomi-san?"

"I'll have what he's having," she said. Yamamoto remained rooted to the spot. Dammit. He forgot his katana.

"Is something wrong with our orders, Take-chi?"

"N-No. They'll be coming right up." He should focus. Focus. He found himself backtracking as he handed the orders to his boss, who began humming an old ballad right away.

"Loosen up!" he called again. Yamamoto found himself turning away and focusing at the old man as he kneaded the dough and rolled and twisted it.

"Something the matter, son?" he asked him. He shook his head and couldn't maintain his grin. This was not good. He needed to warn Hibari. Of course they have an inkling of where they were going. They must have gone to warn Hibari's mother. Damn it. Why were they here? To threaten him? To kill him after they've finished eating? He should have brought his katana.

"Is that your mother, Take-shin?" his unassuming boss asked gently as he gave him a tissue. Yamamoto touched his face and then began wiping his eyes hastily. "You don't have to be nervous. I made sure this order's extra special."

He wished he could articulate the fear and sadness and anger that were fighting in the pit of his stomach, but he said a thank you instead before returning to the den of vipers. Only, Kei’s chair was vacant.

"He had to run an errand for Akari-sama," Hitomi said. "You can leave that there."

"Uhm, ok." Now Yamamoto looked at his shoes. He recalled his conversation with Gokudera about her. There should have been bitterness present, but he kept on looking at his hands. "Are you going to kill me?"

"I did not get any order to do so," she said before taking her first slurp. Yamamoto waited with bated breath as she swallowed. "It's good."

"Yeah?"

"It is." Her voice remained monotone, he did not know if she really meant it. He looked down again. There it was. That absence of thought as he listened to this woman eat.
"Of course it is. You're eating at the best beef noodle shop in the city!"

"Am I?" she said, her eyes suddenly warm, making Yamamoto fumble with his word choice. He chose the safest ones.

"For sure!"

Her eyes deadened again. "You're just like your father."

Yamamoto nearly slapped her. "Sorry, didn't really have anyone else to look up to. Why are you here again?"

Her voice was the smooth, mechanical one she often used. "Kei-sama has proposed a deal: I, in exchange of his younger brother."

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The herbivore reeked of weed when he went to the rooftop that evening. Hibari offered him a glass of alcohol, to which the herbivore waved off.

"Did you kill those people in the news? The landlady was talking about it nonstop when I got home."

Hibari sat down, leaving enough space between them. The herbivore did not even bother hiding his fag and inhaled it.

"They were from the Mafia. Apparently, despite being in the same place for ten hours a day, they found my hide worth pursuing than yours." He took a bottle and poured himself a glass.

"Is that gin?"

"Whiskey. They have a local distillery here."

"It's about time you stop drinking Hibari-san. That stuff can kill you."

Hibari did not even bother arguing as he took a quick sip and let the contents burn his throat. It reinvigorated his gut.

"I'm sorry they came after you instead of me."

"It doesn't bother me," he responded as he lowered his glass. "You will be coming with me tomorrow. I require your assistance."

He nodded as he took a long draught again.

"How long have you been using?" he said, noting the loss of coughing.

Yamamoto did not answer.

"Have you already finished Gokudera Hayato's?"

He did not answer again as he continued eyeing the cold sunset.

For the third time that night, he needed more alcohol to continue talking.

"You were never good at hiding your storms, Yamamoto Takeshi," he said. The sky was a melting
ice lolly now. He remembered Nami. Instead of providing comfort, she felt like an omen. "Do you tire of it? It won't be long now. I won't need you soon."

Yamamoto laughed darkly. "I wish it would be easy for me too. To drop those words so casually. I envy you sometimes, Hibari-san." His eyes flickered as it searched his face. There were those familiar dark circles again. "How easy it is for you to shoulder everything."

Hibari felt his eyes widening for the first time. It triggered something that he never thought he could feel. It was a terrible, aching feeling that made bile rise from his throat. He managed to stop his hand from shaking. He looked away and began to try emptying his glass, welcoming that burning sensation. He did not like that feeling. There was only one other time he felt this way.

It was five days before her last.

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"I always wished I was you. Had the same blood as you. Couldn't feel things like you."

"What?"

Nami laughed. "Nothing. Just a thought. When you grow older, you pretend to be more mature by thinking about deep stuff you don't really understand. You try believing you're not a child. I mean, I still like believing I can use the Force to get Yuu-nee's pudding from the fridge."

"Really? You still believe that?"

She tucked her elongating bangs behind her ear. She no longer bothered to hide the scars on her thighs and wrists as she wore her favourite moth-embroidered kimono. She did not embrace him, her familiar defence mechanism when she dropped something out of her usual character.

"Yeah, I believe that I can become a Jedi master one day and just lightsaber the shit away." She lay down beside him and stared at the ceiling. "But you can't. You learn to live with them."

The wounds on her thighs were still fresh. The bruises on her legs as well.

"I just get so tired nowadays. I wish I have enough power for us to run away without being found."

Hibari squeezed her hand. "Are you angry, nee-san?"

She wiped away her tears. "No. I'm fine. I just have bad thoughts again and again. Like really bad ones. Can you smile for me, Kyoya?"

He tried. The way his lips moved upwards only made Nami laugh. "We really have to work on that," she said as she rubbed his head and proceeded to roughhouse him.

"I think it's good that you're still a kid though. I don't think being an adult is a ton of fun. You also have time to visit me."

She simpered at this. "Yeah. I guess you're right. You're smarter than I was at your age, Kyoya. I wish I grew up faster then. Maybe I would have planned it more and stayed with jii-san, you know."

"I wouldn't have met you."

Her eyes were cold for a moment before lightening again. "Yeah, that would have been awful."
He knew she lied.

Yamamoto found it funny. How easy it was for him to accept Hibari and how much he wished ill of Hitomi.

So he laughed. There was no mirth to be heard. "Are you ok being treated like that? Like some kind of hostage?"

"It was my suggestion." He couldn't stand those eyes.

"How can I be sure that you won't be double-crossing us?" He was really able to sound like that.

An ugly pause. Her expression was watchful, almost wry. "You don't have to decide right away."

He cut through her officious words. "This means Hibari-san will die then."

"Yes. Yes he will." There was no remorse. The flame in her eyes burned constantly.

"You hate him for killing my brother?"

He loathed her. He did not need to hide it from her.

And then her voice became brittle, inconsolable. "I wish I did not listen to Saito that time. I never thought how easy it was to lose the two of you."

He couldn't find himself to pity her as she hunched over her bowl which was still half-full of noodles. "So why are you serving them now if you know they did something bad? You came to attempt killing me anyway."

Her shoulders continued to sag. Her eyes shifted. "If I left, Saito promised to kill both of you. I struck a deal, same as this one- If I stay, he'll leave you alone."

"Liar." He doesn't love her. That was it. He never loved her. That was why.

"Takeshi." Even uttering his name couldn't ignite anything. A frown formed at this.

"Sorry mom. I guess... it's not easy to believe you." I hate you I hate you liar liar liar- "After what you did to dad... after you almost killed me."

He wished he had his katana. It was so damn easy. Her guard was down. She felt like an insect, a mosquito he can swat constantly until she was nothing more than a bloody speck.

What was he thinking? He started laughing again. "Sorry. I can't really control myself." He laughed harder. The boss looked at them approvingly, as if he knew. "It's the first time I've ever been this mad at someone-" He wanted to scream. Tears began to pour out of his eyes. She could barely even look at him as she started to shake. "Why don't you talk your way out of it, mom? You're not really helping your case here." This was getting pointless.

"I love you." Her voice was meek. "I love you. I love Tsuyoshi. I can never- I've hurt you so much-" He wished he could even pity her as she was disintegrating in front of his eyes, in a pool of sobs and regret and self-loathing. Instead, he was starting to understand why Gokudera could never really find it in himself to trust Hibari. As he looked at his measly excuse of a mother, he empathized with his perspective.
"Are you done?" Yamamoto laughed again. "I don't think I really have anything to say to you. I'm not really good at confrontations, so please leave after you pay at the till. Have a nice day." He stood up.

-18-

It was not easy to shift one's judgement when you already established yours. He never really knew Hibari aside from his spotted past. From day 50 or later during that Kokuyo fiasco, he was sure he can trust Hibari, warts and all. It wasn't the same with his mother. She never really proved herself on day 1. He laughed at himself. He was as biased and as hypocritical as any normal human being.

He was as unexceptional as the rest of them. Ken must have been such a sentimental old man not to see this. So he called Gokudera on the rooftop. Asked him how to blow off a joint. It helped him clear his head somewhat.

Ten minutes ago, he heard the landlady call a certain 'Hibari furen.' It was easy for him to silence her. Shit. Fucking shit, he was just as likely to mess up as they do.

"Talk to me." Gokudera was under a lot of pressure, but still picks up his phone without fail.

"Am I a good person?" he asked, his hands shaking as he coughed back the smoke. "If I'm not, can you tell me that I'm a good person? Please? It's ok even if it's not true. Just tell me, please Gokudera, tell me I'm doing the right thing standing by Hibari-san. I don't think… I don't think I am. Maybe. Shit. I'm sorry. This is stupid-

"It's not." Gokudera did not hesitate. He never fucking hesitates when it came to calling him. "Yes. You are a fucking good person. Don't ever doubt yourself."

Yamamoto cried. "Ok. I believe you. I believe you, Gokudera."

-18-

The herbivore broke down in front of his eyes.

"I'm scared of the future. I'm scared that I'm sad. I'm scared of failing. I'm scared of you."

He was brave enough to say those words out loud. Hibari wasn't, hence he found himself standing up and leaving everything to silence.

-18-

When he came to knock at his sister's room to play was the first time he heard her tears. There was an unpleasant feeling that welled in the pits of his stomach that made him not open the door. Like with Yamamoto, he left her to carry her sorrows alone.

It was also that time when he saw his mother and other siblings enjoying their time grilling barbecue in the garden. Their father passed by.

He asked him if he can come with them. And that Nami was crying in her room. His father's eyes shifted then before a smile pursed his lips. It was a revolting sight to see. He said that she was not allowed to come for visiting him. In addition, he wasn't allowed to go for letting her come and was prompted to the backroom immediately to receive his punishment.

That was when Hibari decided he hated crowds.
When Hibari told Yamamoto his part in the overall narrative hours later, the latter did not meet the former's eyes as he continued pouring the sake down his throat. There were no hints of bare accusation as he continued flipping his blade. This made Hibari resume pouring himself more. He could tolerate five glasses enough without charging to the bathroom. The herbivores should be giving him a medal already.

"Were these the terms you and Tsuna agreed on?" he did not know how to make of Yamamoto’s tone. This was the first time he heard him use it.

Now it was Hibari's turn to be caught off guard. Honesty would have come smoothly to him under the influence of alcohol. He finished his glass. Yamamoto was looking at him now. His mouth was expressionless.

"So my role in this is to be your executioner, Hibari-san?" Yamamoto's tone was unforgiving. He did not bother finishing the chicken he brought from work. "Do you think I can do something so messed up?"

The alcohol was biding its time. So Hibari went, "I will kill you here if you refuse."

Hibird left Yamamoto's shoulder. By then, Yamamoto unsheathed his Shigure Kintoki beside him. None of them spoke.

He gave the hilt of the blade to Hibari. "Do it then, if you really are as fucked up as you think you are."

Normally by then, Hibari would drop the blade and proceed with the tonfa. He can crush his windpipe with the chain. It won't be as agonising compared to him butchering it with a katana he was unfamiliar with. But he, whether he admitted it out loud or not, had grown fond of the rain herbivore so he proceeded to raise the katana, its gleaming, sharp edge right above his head.

Yamamoto's eyes were empty. He could barely open his mouth as he looked onwards, resigned to his fate. The bird began to chirp in desperation as it attempted to bar Hibari's path.

"It's ok, Hibird. Please take care of Hibari-san for me. I can count on you, right?" he said as he bit back tears.

So this was all he amounted to. This was better than selling Hibari to his evil siblings. This was also better than admitting to the Vongola that he failed, that their efforts were all for naught. Hibari never really considered him as anything more than his end. Was that why he kept training him? It would have been nice if he did get that century egg along with those beef noodles as his last meal.

He was alone in the end. He could not run to anyone. He was no better than the rest of his friends, than even Hibari-san who had a noble reason for decimating his bloodline. He could not empathize with his mother for betraying him and his dad.

"Can I ask you something?" he said as as he looked at his cold eyes.

Hibari grunted in response.

"Did you think Nami-nee-chan was lonely when she died?"
"All human beings die alone," Hibari dismissed.

"They do, don't they?" Yamamoto said in return. "I'll try telling Nami-neechan you were a swell partner while it lasted."

There was blackness after that.

-18-

Death was a splendid shroud to wear. It dazzles, bewitches, and immunes oneself from the mucky slander of the living. Hibari may be a demon, but he was still a slave to his lungs. Namimori was made of light even in memories. As he lowered her corpse down a grave he personally dug, her face was serene, alluring, benign. He kept the letter she tightly grasped around her bony hand, maliciously snickering when he saw the contents. There was no condemnation in her short valediction. It was one of the only mementos of his past that he kept tucked away in her old gakuran. Her statuesque figure made him alter it to suit his laughably diminutive stature. He inherited Fon's height instead of his father's. It was ironic how grateful he felt about that now.

He decided to part ways with the letter as he wheeled off the still soporific Yamamoto into a cargo ship that was headed to the Japanese mainland coast. He had no use for him anymore. He was becoming a hindrance. His brown eyes were starting to resemble his sister's.

And unlike her, he was better off breathing. Better to feel vilified than to not feel at all.

-18-

The bird was on his shoulder when he walked forward the sprawling estate, dressed in his uncle's black robes. It was like walking into a pretty picture, rich with color, filthy with grandeur, and as bullshit as his family always was. He touched Hibird quickly, just as before he lets his tonfa emit a gunshot and hear a grunt almost ten feet away. He ducks then and prepared to tread to his doom, the bird following him with a chirp.

At least he did not have to bring them hell alone.

-18-

When Yamamoto woke up, he felt paper in his left hand and bound rope itching both wrists. Everything was darkness, sans the three one-inch holes on his front. He shook his neck and was relieved to feel the necklace still clinging onto him. He tried to utter the magic words, only to feel his mouth tightly shut by duct tape.

Hibari must really not want him to come and do this.

He tried raising his body up and only came close to lifting his torso a few inches from the ground before he smacked the wooden ceiling of his prison. He managed to move to his left side though to make sure his necklace was within distance enough for him to scrape his hands behind his back and saw through the ropes after several minutes. By the time he slashed through the long crate Hibari stuffed him in, he grabbed the katana by his right and picked up the paper.

*From nee-san,*

*You be good. I love you.*

Yamamoto stared as he looked at the large letters written neatly on the crumpled paper until he was blinking back tears. He tucked it close inside his bomber jacket and whistled to his swallows,
letting their light guide him up to fresh air and the sunlit sky and sea. He gripped hard on his Shigure Kintoki when he cut through a life boat and used as much flames as he could to speed back to the docks.

Her last words must be his. Yamamoto was having none of that.

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The bird was bleeding by the door. Hibari made sure to cut a piece of cloth to cover its spindly feet. Rest pronounced death. He assessed his damage as he hobbled forward. He could barely lift a left arm. Right ribs broken. Internal organs slightly ruptured.

Amazing how he felt nothing throughout the ordeal. Plus he had been through worse.

He heard a gunshot. Shit. He nearly toppled down, his right leg giving way from the attack. Shit. Shit. More gunshots. He shoots purple, multiple needle spheres to puncture the entire floor. The doors from all sides burst open. Their bayonets easily penetrated his spheres from multiple directions.

How amusing. He had forgotten that the multiple deaths in the capital was enough pre-emptive for his mother to prepare.

If so he will hear these pigs squeal. He snapped his fingers.

The spines elongated further. Red liquid smeared his left and right cheeks. He saw the pigs twitch instead of making a sound.

"Ack-" he coughed and saw his metal puncturing his chest and belly. He flicked his fingers again and sliced the ignorant herbivores into the chunks of meat they were. He felt it this time. He made sure to land on a fallen herbivore and faced the ceiling, breathing slowly. He grabbed a small vial from his sleeve but his shaking hands, fearful of the darkness this visit enlightened, dropped it and let the contents pour to the floor. He could hear Hibird twittering feebly.

Shit. Even when his mother would have crowed with joy at his luckless state through the CCTV purposely supplanted in front of him, she refused to come out.

The main door opened again. Hibari readied his tonfas possibly one last time. Even when death was knocking hard, rest was still for the privileged many.

-18-

"Hibari-san. Hibari-san."

Hibari realised he was better off dead than to know the herbivore saved him.

"Did you kill them?" he said, stubbornly refusing to open his eyes.

"No. Just knocked them out."

"Damn you."

"Well, damn you too for locking me up in a crate!"

"You were becoming a nuisance," Hibari said testily. "Being with you is toxic."

"W-Well ditto!" he fired back. Hibari opened his eyes. A deep gash was gurgling by Yamamoto's
right shoulder. He was also refusing to look at Hibari, nose in the air. "It's the reason I'm becoming less sane by the minute."

"You must be," Hibari snorted in amusement. "If you're here."

"And letting you live," he pointed at the empty vial beside his head. "And letting you kill more people."

"Yes, yes."

Yamamoto smiled as he plopped Hibird on his shirt pocket. It emitted a weak thank you. "I'm becoming more and more fucked up, aren't I?" He helped Hibari stand and walk to the end of the hall. Both opened the door to see more men and a woman sitting in a long table. The meals looked exquisite.

"You will never be as fucked up as me," Hibari reminded him, before turning to the woman of the hour. "Good evening mother. I hope we aren't late for dinner."

-18-

Akari, like that damn mansion, may look like a flower but underneath that pretty skin and unassuming smile are thorns and apathy. She was raised like them, Hibari forgets. She was hard like them too.

"It's been nine years since we left, Kyoya. How thoughtful of you to visit me," said his mother in a sweet voice, looking less her age, hair having no traces of white, her face still as plum and as supple as he could remember. Her lips were blood-red. She walks almost beguilingly, her long robe of purple and silver trailing the floor as her bony hands extend to the feast in front of them in that long table. Her lithe body did not match her complexion at all. "What do I owe this pleasure?" Her eyes are clear and guarded.

Hibari the younger raises his hand in front of Yamamoto before he could open his mouth. By then, the rest of the men surrounding them had drawn whatever arms they had. "Do not touch anything," he says quietly. "She's a poison specialist. She has laced every inch of this place with her sickening liquid. Even a slight graze may kill you."

Before Yamamoto can respond, Hibari also releases his weapons and starts walking. "What you owe me? It's simple actually," he pauses. "I want your head."

-18-

"What kind of mother was she to you that made you dislike her so much?" Yamamoto asked three nights before.

He did not even need to think. "Like I was not a Hibari."

He didn't even need to continue the flashback. Multiple chains penetrated her body before she can even move a finger. No time to hear her vitriolic proclamations about him. No time for her to show off and provide her an opportunity to believe she can destroy him. This was not her story. It ended the moment they left the mansion and Nami behind.

"Saito will never... never let you... do this... to... me..." Akari trailed off, while Hibari looks on, eyes still as unblinking as he crouches down on her writhing body. She was crumbling, her wispy hair mussed up and matting with the blood. He almost cared to pour the poison in her stained mouth, but remembers this woman smiling sweetly during dinner as her daughter was raped in the
back room. So he waited for her brown eyes to finally look at his. It only took five minutes, which was disappointing to say the least.

"Silly mother," he says as she catches her last breath. "If he did love you, I would have never been born."

Before he can slice her head, however, he turned and raised his tonfa. Yamamoto collapsed. He had forgotten the men. His herbivore paid the price.

-18-

"Do you want to know why my mother despised me so much, Yamamoto Takeshi?" he said as he hobbled to the herbivore's broken form. "I remind him of how less my father loved her. I am a bastard child. My sister knew. My lovely father tried to search for Fon and disappeared for a year before returning home with me in tow. They slept on separate beds. It presented a kind of discordant clarity to my situation. I ended up revelling on it. Oh, how my other siblings secretly feared me. I shared their blood and more. I was a Hibari and yet not."

Yamamoto's chin continued bleeding. His eyelids were beginning to droop.

"You brought this on yourself," Hibari drawled. "You chose to die."

His breathing was getting shallower. The cloud guardian clicked his tongue and attempted to hoist him up and carry him up to the balcony. He still had enough energy to run on as many Rolls as he could to get him to the nearest hospital.

"Am I a good person, Hibari-san?"

Hibari nearly stopped his footsteps. "You would have stayed on the damn boat if you weren't."

His smile was weaker. "You're a good person too. You kept your sister's last words."

"Do not say anything anymore. You're losing a lot of blood, and your voice is irritating me."

"Please… take my phone then. There's no passcode."

"A selfie is not the most appropriate-"

"Please."

He sighed as he fished for the device on Yamamoto's left jacket pocket. He saw a drive file after unlocking it.

"I kept our pictures in a shared file, Hibari-san. The Vongola e-mail addresses are there too. You can choose to delete them or share them. It's up to you. I won't be able to stop you anyway."

"Will this be your epiteth then?" Hibari said, scrolling at the hundreds of photos Yamamoto took from Yonaguni up to Taiwan and their drinking session. "What do you think will happen if I share these?"

"If you share it, maybe they'll understand. It might not happen right away, but they will one day."

A serene and yet bright smile formed on Yamamoto's lips. "Maybe they'll see why Nami-nee-chan and I never gave up on you."

Hibari started to run, Yamamoto on his back and supported by spineless hedgehogs as he dashed through the sky. "Your life is not worth mine, Yamamoto Takeshi. Even with this."
He managed to force a laugh. "I'm honoured then."

The cloud guardian chose share. Instead of letting Yamamoto decide to let things end there, Hibari also pressed the number of the person he kept calling the most. He couldn't stop his teeth from gnashing as the seconds ticked by.

"What is it?" Gokudera Hayato picked up irritably on the other line. "If this is about that damn fried chicken again I'll definitely-"

"The herbivore is dying," Hibari cut to the chase. "Come here and save him."

It took less than four hours for him to arrive with that accursed doctor who gave him those weak knees to sakura. Both of them used a healthy mix of violence and diplomacy to bend the hospital's protocols and managed to stabilize Yamamoto's condition after six hours.

-18-

Gokudera attempted to throw his used cigarette on the metal bin and cursed as he missed it by inches. He turned his head to Hibari after picking it up. "We'll take it from here. You should go get patched up and hit the sack. Quest's still not over, innit?"

"You should take the baseball herbivore back. His body may recover with time, but the rest may not."

He snorted. "You're out of luck then. That dumbass is slathered with extra-strong glue since day one. Won't be easy to take him off." He offered Hibari a cigarette, who seized it without question.

"And you… have no problem with this?"

A shadow passed Gokudera's bejewelled eyes. "Course I do," he said as he lit Hibari's cigarette. "I still think you're not worth fucking ourselves over for. Reborn and I already have constructed protocols when you toe the line. Can't take any chances."

"And you are casually divulging this."

"Your history's enough for me to know that these kinds of arrangements don't surprise you," he snorted. "Just don't fucking mess with my friend, and I'll guarantee that when the Tenth's trial is over, no harm will come on your pretty little fringe."

"You should do something with that feminine cut of yours. It is not as charming as you think."

"I've got no intent to charm them motherfuckers. Haters gonna hate," he retorted, folding his arms and leaning against the wall. "It's fucking annoying how my life would have ended up if I hadn't met the Tenth and that baseball otaku. Would have gone straight to killing my dad with my own two hands due to assuming he left my mom."

"You commend them too much. It was still your hand to throw in abandoning that path."

"Yeah, but they pressed my buttons hard enough until I've realized they changed me. Guess that's what I'm waiting for with you. Fucking hell, this is getting cheezy."

Hibari said nothing as he blew smoke circles with amateur skill.

"Saw the pics. Holy shit, would dig going to Yonaguni when this is over. The sunrise looks insane… I would do anything to keep that baseball idiot smiling like that," he said, eyeing the
smoke. "He's brave enough to stop himself from succumbing to reason and despair. He's no fucking egocentric fool like the rest of us. Maybe that's why he wins his battles."

"Yamamoto Takeshi is an interesting anomaly," Hibari agreed.

"Guess he's just dumb enough to see you in a different way."

"Hi, Hibari-san. This will be quick," Yamamoto said three days later, adjusting himself as he sat up. He reached out his hand and handed him the piece of faded blue paper. "Guess you have to hang onto that a little longer now, don't cha? Eh, you can go now. Gokudera told me. Get some sleep."

There were a ton of things Hibari wanted to say. He has plenty of things he wants to tell her too, when he returns to Namimori. Even so, as he looked at Yamamoto's befuddlement, when all has been said and done, the most important things can never be said. He didn't mind. Hence these words: "It's Kyoya."

"Eh?"

He smiled wanly. "My sister named me. I did not have a name until she found me."

By then, Yamamoto began scratching his head in awkward silence. This erased the expression from his face. "Uhm," he said finally. "Uh, you can call me Takeshi too."

"I'll call you whatever I want, herbivore," he said before slamming the door shut, to the squeals of the other patients outside the halls.

"Eh, bummer guys, this would have gone through the top 10 character developments of all time," Yamamoto said, now revealing his phone under the sheets. "Oh well, Hibari-san- sorry, Kyoya, do you have anything to say? Eh? What's with the glass? N-Not the phone, Kyoya- Hibari-san-"

This was how Yamamoto got the scar underneath his chin.

---

End?

The sight of the night market and the wall of bodies made Hibari backtrack. He would have left by then if the herbivore did not nudge his knee, phone at the ready.

"You want more Gua bao right? We can't back out now!" Yamamoto said, also readying his PWD sign. "This, and those tonfas of yours will come handy tonight. I want Tian bu la, dang it!"

The row of paper lanterns along the main path distracted him enough to part the man sea at least. Yamamoto continued gleefully held his phone aloft, trying to include him in his story. He closed his ears at the clatter and chaotic cacophony of shrill voices and plastic and sizzling smoke.

"We're leaving," Hibari yanked the wheelchair, but not before seeing Yamamoto run his necklace at his neck.

"We are not leaving empty handed until I get my food," he growled. His eyes gleamed at his sharply. This was enough for Hibari to wheel him and blow the rest of the herbivores away. After ten minutes of pushing and attempting to bite the herbivores to death, Yamamoto handed him his prized Taiwanese burger.
"How does it taste?" he asked him as he took a bite. The contents were otherworldly. "Makes you wish they can taste it too, yeah?"

They had this conversation before. His smile was dissatisfied. It bore a complex web of emotions that he understood almost perfectly.

"Remember Nami-nee-chan's letter, Hibari-san- wait, uhm, K-K-Kyoya? Eh, this is really weird-uhm, so yeah, remember her letter?"

Hibari was too busy finishing his second bun to correct him.

"You're right to believe that humans are alone in the end. Maybe that's how she felt when she said those words. I've read somewhere how the idea of love distracts us from an existential loneliness."

"You believe that she was doubting herself then?"

He shook his head. "I dunno. But I understood something else entirely when I read it over and over. Maybe when she said 'I love you', she also meant 'You shall not die.' That maybe even beyond death, she will not never stop believing."

"Believing in what?"

Yamamoto shrugged. "I can't say. I don't know. It's not up for us to guess what's beyond certainty."

"You're not making any sense."

He laughed as he took a quick snapshot of his nearly empty cup of fried fish broth. "I guess we'll understand someday. So until then, we should try not to die."

Hibari's lips quivered in response. Ok, they seemed to say.

Yamamoto reminded him of something that seemed unattainable since she left him. He let himself be consumed in his very nature, in this long-limbed gazelle of a boy, in his hooded eyes and loose, overwhelming smile. How long had he been searching for it only to be found instead? This boy reminded him of home. He was not his sister, nor would he ever fill that emptiness, but it suited him fine.

Both of them returned to reality then, immersing themselves in the sights and sounds for another round.

Chapter End Notes

Muyo= informal term for 'there is no need' or 'unnecessary'

My philo professor’s take on Marcel’s Metaphysics of Hope (I did not include the non-English part because my translation skills suck): tiny.cc/MarcelHope

Another inspiration: tiny.cc/greatsilence

This was a difficult chapter for me to write. The past few months were hell and my
mental health couldn't keep up. To those who waited, thank you. If I were honest, this chapter is a disjointed piece and reflects a ton of personal stories. I wanted to trim it and make it cookie-cutter enough to swallow, but it wouldn't feel like a real chapter I've worked hard on. I don't want to spoonfeed you too much. I hope you understand.
Chapter Summary

A summary of what may have become.

Chapter Notes

Maybe one day I'll be able to upload everything when the scars have healed on my end. In a sense, this summary combines some pieces I've written so far, along with the things I haven't. I can't thank you enough for reading this fic. Sorry for not fully seeing it through. The final three chapters are a coda of sorts.

Three quotes:

I was pretty much a frog in a well, knowing nothing of the sea.

-Uchouten Kazoku, e06

...

I watched a snail crawl along the edge of a straight razor. This is my dream; this is my nightmare. Crawling, slithering, along the edge of a straight razor, and surviving.

-Col. Walter Kurtz, Apocalypse Now

...

Desiring a future does not betray the past.

-Kyousogiga, e08

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Tsuna

Tsuna is given extra knowledge about the existence of two factions, the Militant and Moderate. The Militant faction, led by Timoteo's brother, has been slowly trying to gain the upper hand in the power struggle especially with the destruction of Namimori and the espionage on the Vongola's secrets by Hibari's siblings. The Ninth is also losing face and has advised Tsuna against saving Hibari as preventing them from going after Hibari will only ruffle the feathers of the other families in letting a Mafioso leave a family member alive and gain the advantage in their unrest.

Tsuna rejects the Ninth's proposition and says if the Vongola becomes his enemy then let it be so.
Gokudera

Gokudera, partnering with his sister and Shamal, meets up with his dad, a member of a prominent Mafia family to host a big party in their estate to invite other big Mafia families. During this time, he phones up his old childhood friends, also members of famous Mafia families and begins using his Italian blood ties to even out his Boss' game. During the party, he is requested to play the piano, something he had never tried for more than half of his life. It takes him awhile to adjust but muscle memory wins out over his insecurities and he manages to perform well, to everyone's delight.

He thinks his father was an airhead who only wanted him to come back so he can have a successor, only to realise that his father still regrets losing Lavina, and wants the best for him. He shoots the people who were mudslinging Gokudera and his bastard blood and ends up making the party a disaster and losing the support of the other families, who take up their arms to decimate them, only to get rescued in time by Lambo and the Bovino. It turned out, Verde had been working in secret with the Bovino to master their time-travel technology. They end up going to the Bovino hideout in Gran Sasso Italy (where CERN conducted an experiment that proved going faster than light is possible) and meets Lambo's aunt Ottavio, who turned out to be the female boss of the Bovino. It turned out that the Bovino is much of a stronger family than he thought, capable of wielding technology far too advanced for their age. They are attempting to travel between dimensions, having surpassed the fourth already and intending to breach the fifth with Verde's help. Here, Gokudera collaborates with them to hasten the weaponising of the flames of the skies from TYL and intends to use this as a dealbreaker for the other families to join their cause. He ends up meeting future Lambo and discusses the uncertain future with him, joking about this world line being different from the other future Lambo he talked to. He bonds with his father and says he forgives him on his mother's and his own behalf. He learns of Shamal's and his mother's close friendship and rekindles his surrogate relationship with him.

Gokudera manages to procure enough support. By then he, Bianchi, and Shamal begin cutting down Hibari Kyoya's would-be assassins before returning to Tsuna's side.

Tsuna

Tsuna proposes a trial by combat (a la game of thrones) and to everyone's surprise, instead of making Reborn his champion, chooses Chrome instead.

Chrome, the night before the promised day, asks Tsuna if he was sure of making her his champion, to which he affirms without any hidden doubts.

"I believe in you, just the same as I believe in Hibari-san, in Yamamoto-kun, in every single one of my guardians," he says.

"I don't really care if I lose and die in the process. What I fear," she says back. "Is when I win. I have never killed a man before. I'm scared of how that will feel."

"Ironic huh... Reborn often reminded me that with every questionable action I take, I'm not the only one paying the price," Tsuna chuckles. "It does weigh on you."

"Is Cloud Man really worth your suffering for, Boss?"
"Worth my position, worth your sanity, worth everyone's efforts? Maybe not," he says after a long pause. "But you know what the Mafia has taught me the most? That it sucks being a coward. Especially for your friends."

Chrome

Chrome dreams.

Chrome Dokuro was tired and subdued by the time they returned to Kokuyo, her cheeks flushed pink from the evening breeze and her growing hair a tousled mess under Mukuro’s arms.

He was singing a lullaby, a request from Chrome inside the gymnasium by the pool. The moonlight made the turquoise walls spectral and iridescent, as if they’re inside the belly of a river.

Her master smelled of musk and autumn. She fingered the lines in his arms, like she’s reading his body in braille. Her lips part to take him all in.

Mukuro did not complain at all. He sang the song in Italian, a language Chrome will learn once she steps under the mantle of the Vongola.

His smile was weathered as he retraced his words. Chrome will soon learn Italian whilst he-

Her eyelashes fluttered as she kept clutching into his arm like a lifeline, her breathing erratic. But Mukuro knew it was because of something else.

He could not even finish his prediction of Chrome’s future. Perhaps it was never his right to know.

Just like it was never her obligation to depend on his strength.

“Arrivaderci,” he whispered, planting a kiss on her forehead, trying to make it as inconspicuous as possible. Chrome was never like Chikusa and Ken. She was never like Mukuro; they never lived as children as the Estraneo shaved of their humanity, slowly yet viciously. They never knew if their parents had truly hated them as much as hers had. He listened to Ken and Chikusa’s request to know. For that, they have to leave.

Now that the Arcobalenos have found peace and he no longer had anything to teach her, there was nothing to tether him to this place.

None of them were comfortable with peace. It was slowly killing them, the more they stayed. They prefer the cold walls and scavenged food than the hot meals Tsuna often delivered through Chrome.

This was not their home, but it was hers. He may not have given her the world, and still he could not even give her this.

He leaves Chrome in her small seat. Her uncovered eye blinked at him, her gaze soft. She looked wraithlike and pliant and reminded him of embers and the path of humans he hated so much.

“I’ll be waiting, Mukuro-sama,” she murmured, her smile cutting him like glass. “I always will.”

“Protect my vessel for me then,” he said, a final order until he lets darkness consume him. “Make
sure Sawada Tsunayoshi’s body is unsullied until I return.”

Chrome was no longer listening. Her eyelashes fluttered as she slept, the drugs Mukuro administered fully taking effect.

She wakes up.

Before Tsuna’s trial, Chrome travels to Japan where she meets up with Yuni and Enma, telling them about Tsuna’s next move. With the help of Kyoko, Haru, and Hana, she ends up meeting Ui and asks him of Saya’s part to the overall Hibari narrative. She manages to stop Ui from hanging himself, relating to his bitterness to his cold parents who were too wrapped up in their grief of losing Saya that they never did see him growing up. He gives her Nami’s and his sister’s pictures and letters to each other, hinting their relationship was something more than mere friendship, and how this may have played a part to Saya’s and Nami’s demise. He also noted how Nami wasn't the girl that Kyoya saw her as, or that her letters they got hold of portrayed him as. In one of her letters, she discussed about synaesthesia:

I’ve recently found out about synaesthesia, a condition where you can taste sounds and hear colours and see time in your surroundings. I’ve thought of how brilliant it would be to browse my books and see the colours of determinism and metaphysics and Planck’s constant. I wonder if, as a synesthete, it will be easier for me to not only put love in words and actions and feelings as something abstract but as something I can sense and describe in objective detail. Maybe we can see the colours of longing and contentment or taste the awful music you’d like to play of those boy bands of yours. Maybe when you hold my hand, I can see the prismatic colours of happiness and melancholy and fulfilment, taste how these words roll around my mouth as we ride our bicycles home and retch as we say the usual bye-byes.

It won’t just be concepts we try to capture via language and our enfeebled human senses. Maybe we can transcend that conventional sadness that wells in our bellies as our fingers and lips interlock. Maybe we can be more certain of our futures if we see the bright colours of March then April then May, or this year and the next. It's such a nice condition to have, even though I know the grief and heartbreaks between those moments will be harder to bear.

P.S. Let’s be classmates again next term. And if we can’t, hope I’m still a member of the gardening club even when I don’t visit. I keep telling you, it’s fun if you join the Disciplinary Committee. They’re not as scary as you think!

Ui surmised that maybe she died because she felt alone in the end. That she resented her choices and thought that by ending her own life, she was making the right one for the first time. Chrome realised how this young man may be more similar to her than she initially thought and promises to come back. They talk for awhile before Chrome returns to Italy.

The night before the duel, Chrome calls Yamamoto.

“Why me?”

“I want to understand why you would stay with the Cloud Man. Weren’t you afraid, even of what might come after?”

“Ahahaha, alright, I see.”

“I’m afraid of failure more than death. I don’t want the sacrifices you’ve done to be in vain because of me.”
“Do you know what I’ve learned during my stay with Kyoya, Chrome-chan? Courage is not the absence of fear. It’s fear, walking. I’m sure even Kyoya’s scared too, in his own way.”

“Things won’t be the same after this. It scares me.”

“I’m sure it scares all of us. But we can be scared together. That doesn’t seem so bad.”

Tsuna

Tsuna, Chrome, and Reborn enter the courtroom, a small makeshift arena for her and the militant faction's champion... which was none other than Mukuro, caught by the Hibari siblings on behest that they give him the info regarding his biological family. Tsuna can only watch in horror as Chrome, looking unfazed, starts to battle him. By then, Reborn excuses himself to follow Gokudera without Tsuna's knowledge and his inability to know the outcome. Both look evenly matched at the beginning, until Chrome breaks, being outmatched by Mukuro's combat skills. Mukuro is about to land the finishing strike but kills the elder of the Militant faction instead, sending the place into an uproar. Tsuna by then could barely watch and unleashes his flames, protecting the both of them as Mukuro now carries a barely-conscious Chrome.

"Why?" was the only word Tsuna could let out as his flames encircle them three, burning higher and higher with every tick.

Mukuro laughed. "If I kill Chrome, it would make you and them my enemy. If I kill one of them, it will only make them my enemy. Quite an easy decision to make, isn't it, young Vongola? I should be asking you why you're protecting me when it's more detrimental for you."

"You already know how simple-minded I am," said Tsuna.

He snorted. "Kufufu... with this action, you are about to start a war."

The Sky laughed. "What are you talking about Mukuro-san? You arrived late to the party. It already started."

The three of them escape and gets picked up by Lamboo, who promised the Bovino a better standing in the Mafia if they join Tsuna's side. By then, the rest of the guardians meet up and relay the latest news they have. Tsuna asks Reborn where he thinks the Ninth will side to.

"He's a calculating man, and calculating men rarely take risks."

"So he won't join us?"

"He won't."

"You are his most trusted friend. Won't you join him too?"

"I'm not a calculating man, Tsuna. You know how much I like to gamble."

"This means the main branch will be our enemy then. Do you think they'll go after Hibari to make us surrender?"

"I think they will. Everything rests on Hibari."

"Then we need to prevent that from happening."
"I assume... that person will be me then."

Tsuna nodded.

"I need to go to the Pacifier Spring though first. I think it's time for me to show my idiot student what I'm truly capable of."

---

**Hibari**

Yamamoto and Hibari end up meeting Yuu and Kei who propose a place and time to settle it once and for all. Kei asks Yamamoto to reconsider one last time, to which Yamamoto declines. The two then and up visiting Osaka, enjoying the sites. The last stop was Hibari showing him around the Hanshin Tigers stadium, a first for Yamamoto.

"Yeah, actually Tsuna and the rest are going to war soon," Yamamoto said as both of them continued striding around the diamond. Hibari, surprisingly strayed behind. Hibird fluttered back and forth on their left shoulders. "And the other faction said that if they handed you over, they'll surrender."

Hibari smirked at this. "You herbivores are willing to lay down your lives to save a single person? I thought your brains were operating adequately."

"I don't mind, you know me," he laughed. "What's the use of living if we're not with the people we care about?"

"Are you sure?" he said softly. "Isn't that selfish of you? Your other herbivore friends will become casualties."

"I don't really think to be a good person equates to having a perfect conscience. Those kinds of people tend to get killed off early in survival movies," Yamamoto stopped near the third base and began looking up at the sky. Clouds managed to obstruct the sun enough. Crows cawed from above. "Maybe I just can't give this up after the stuff we've been through. Being here with you, Kyoya, it feels like a dream- even with, y'know, it being a nightmare sometimes."

"No," he said. "It happened. We are not the same people before this. When you dream... you either recall it again and again until you move on, or you simply forget." He paused walking as well. "But I will not."

Yamamoto turned at him. A small smile punctured his mouth. "It's just a dream for me. Because I'm aware that when we come back to Namimori, we'll probably be strangers again."

It took awhile for Hibari to utter a word. He didn't want to respond. "You seem to think death is a better option."

"Of course not! But I have to face the music right?" He shuffled around the plate. "I regret nothing though. I'm glad you changed me, Kyoya."

Will he really attempt to prove this man wrong? Can he truly attempt to appear normal as the rest of them can afterwards? The herbivore laughed as Hibird twittered on the tip of the finger he held aloft. He looked like a blazing sunrise. His words warmed him enough, but he knew for long, it will melt his wings as he continues to soar closer and closer-
He decided to walk away at the pitcher's plate. He revealed a ball underneath his uniform and shows it to Yamamoto, who immediately perks up as he caught sight of it. "Save the valedictions until we return to Namimori."

---

**Yuu and Kei**

A memory-

"Hey, this place is out of bounds," a voice called out testily to her right when Yuu opened the door with a loud clang.

She turned to that direction. Sure enough, she saw a stirring Nami, the magazine of one of her distasteful science fiction fantasies strategically covering her eyes as she snored. The Disciplinary Committee arm band fluttered lazily on her left arm.

"Where are your lackeys?" Yuu said stiffly. She was aghast at the way her sister wiped the drool from her mouth with her sleeve and then rubbed sleep off her eyes with both fingers. It was a good thing she was wearing the boys' uniform, else there was more to see other than the hickey on her neck and the purple and blue welts on her right cheek. "Is that why you didn't come to class?" she noted at the bruise.

"They're eating without me. And the teacher's used to it," she shrugged. "Didn't think you'd come here concerned. You were always in the library during lunch."

"Father was out of line," she said after a beat.

"He did find out I knew about Kyoya. This was mother's work though. Still can't acknowledge that he exists. You should have seen the look on her face when I beat the shit of that Kei-chan of hers. I mean, I got a shattered kneecap and this, but it was totally worth it. How is our beloved brother?"

"He'll be planning to kill you," Yuu said. Nami was buttoning up her uniform, tying her long hair irritably. She always pulled it off, being effortlessly beautiful despite her boorish ways.

She laughed her familiar donkey bray. "Would like to see him try. Father would be pissed off." She stood up, stowing her magazine back into her bag, which Yuu noticed, had more paper paraphernalia and a familiar thousand-page softcover of some intellectual. Like their father, Nami inherited his love for reading. It did not show on her marks, however. She rarely attended enough classes. "Didn't think you'd care though. Thanks, sis," she said. "Would've appreciated it more if you brought lunch, but this will do."

"Sorry."

She turned at Yuu's direction. "I was jesting, you can't take a hint sis." By then, she began to laugh. "Geez, you really don't have many friends, huh?"

"That's taboo."

"Eh, what about dad and Tsuyoshi-san though? I miss him. Always brought us sweets on his trips."

"He worked for us."

"So? Gosh, I really can't grasp how idiosyncratic our beliefs are sometimes." By then, both of them
were leaning against the railings. Nami’s hair was being whipped back and forth by the harsh breeze.

"I wish father would just kill Kyoya."

She thought her younger sister would swipe her hands across her cheek or she would slash her chest with the knife hidden at her sleeves. Nami merely stays put, fingerling at the cigarette in her bag.

"Do you really think things will return to normal if he does?"

"He might leave you alone."

"He won’t. It won’t stop. I overheard them arguing about it. Said grandfather did the same thing to them. Dunno, I mean, at least with Kyoya, I’m doing something worthwhile. Father doesn’t handle him like he does with us."

"I just can’t stand it. I can’t stand how you don’t hate him for doing this to you."

"I don’t blame you for hating him," Nami said breezily. "You don’t have to be like me."

"I don’t want to be the fool. Kei and I are planning to do away with him soon."

"You think it will end with that, huh?" she said. "Who’s the fool now, sister? It won’t end through hatred. It will just be a wheel that keeps turning and turning—"

"Your idealism only earned you the title of being the favourite and not in the best way either," she spat. "Can you really say, after all he did, that you still love him?"

"I do. That’s what uncle will say."

"Look where it led him. Uncle doesn’t even have the balls—"

"Don’t."

Nami’s switchblade was pressed threateningly at the base of her head, across the foramen magnum. If she pushed the tip further she may end up scrambling her brain.

Yuu sighed. "Always his ass-kisser."

"I pity you for not having any adult to look up to," she said casually, her knife still poised to kill. "He’s enough to convince me to cut our parents some slack. You can say," she said, returning the blade home. "I put myself in their shoes." She adjusted her armband, tied up her wild and yet beautiful mane. "They’re human too. They have things that keep them awake at night, but they still try their best to raise us, even if they don’t know what ‘best’ means."

"I can’t take you seriously if you keep changing into those clothes when they’re not around."

Her sister laughed. "Easier for me to move and discipline the hell-raisers in school. Anyway, gotta go. Saya’s asking me to help her clean up the gym for our class practice later."

"Nami."

She turned, her wide brown eyes staring at her in bemusement.

"Just keep your head down, ok. I won’t tell if you promise to not do anything stupid like putting that
animal to school."

"Eh, what can I say, I'll do anything for my cute critters," she winked at her. "Don't worry. They can't break me."

The present time-

"The end is nigh then," Yuu said, shuffling the deck of cards in front of them. It was almost the fated hour.

"You're right," Kei smiled benignly. "It's all happening so fast. I guess you can say we're bad at stalling."

"I want to kill Kyoya before it all ends."

"I'll let you deal the finishing blow then," Kei said, pecking her cheek. "I have to meet him and prepare him to your liking beforehand."

"I wonder what our sister would say if she finds out we never did let go of our hatred of him, like how mother kept her hatred for uncle."

"I never knew of this. I thought I killed him on your orders."

"What are you talking about?" Yuu by then stared at him surreptitiously. "Have you forgotten that mother wanted him dead on her request?"

"Ah, did she?" the both of them then turned to see their youngest sibling slowly ascending the stairs, their men dead just a few inches from him. "I have a present for you," he said as he threw a heap of flesh at their feet. Yuu's eyes darkened when she realized where it came from. "It's my first time trying it so... it may not be as clean like how you two do it." Kei then began walking towards him and threw his two sheaths aside. "I get why you like doing it though. It is... therapeutic." Hibari managed to cushion the blow by extending both his tonfas in front of him. He backtracked just in time to cut off the rest of his brother's strikes. "Reminds me of the good old days when killing was just a pastime."

Kei snorted. "Visiting grandfather seemed to have taught you well."

"Oh, it made me remember a lot of things. It made me realize the real reason why all of you left. You were all ashamed because you knew why she died," Hibari smiled through gritted teeth. "And this," he then began reversing his weapon and quickly began doing elbow strikes. "Is but a smidge of what I'm dying to show you."

Yamamoto splits himself from Hibari and faces Yuu.

"Jii-san taught me the forms they used during your civil war a long time ago." He seizes the first strike and cuts through her left cheek. His eyes glimmer calmly as he readied his next stance. "They were not forms to be used against mere opponents. He tailored them to beat Hibari's."

Yamamoto dashed just in time as Hibari's tonfa screeched against Hitomi's blade, whose edge was mere inches away from her son's neck.
On the eve before the first day of battle, Xanxus visits Tsuna.

"It's late," he smiled. "It's probably the best time to leave now, with the Varia you know... being on my side and all. Heads will roll, you might fight against your dad again..."

"You're a fucking eyesore," Xanxus put bluntly. He pointed his left gun at him without leaving his seat. "Why did you think I'm willing to eschew the Vongola when it's been a part of my life for the longest time?"

Tsuna nervously made his way to the nearest seat, all the while the gun moved at his direction. "A-Aren't you taking this... uhm, too much?"

Xanxus snorted. He cocked his gun. "You're not scared at all, aren't you? You didn't freeze at my gun, even without the gear or Reborn protecting you..."

"Uhm," Tsuna looked on thoughtfully. "If you wanted to kill me, you could've done it earlier."

A scowl crossed Xanxus' lips. "You smug little shit..." He raised his gun at his direction lazily this time. "Just couldn't put my finger to it, why you gave that proposition..."

The pensiveness remained on Tsuna's eyes as he shifted his attention to the scars around Xanxus' face. "You will probably laugh," with that he leaned back against the rickety wooden chair, hands on his lap as he rocked it back and forth. "Uhm, I guess I like worrying about other people? Quite a sissy response to be honest, uh..." he twiddled his thumbs as it lay on his lap. He couldn't keep maintaining eye contact. "Yeah... I guess... I still remember Hibari-san leaving."

"You think I'm similar to that ugly duckling?"

"H-Hibari-san's not ugly! And no, not like that, uhm-" Why can't he articulate things properly to prevent further misunderstandings? He took a mental note to enrol in Speech classes if there is a next time. "It's uhm... I guess I realized when he chose to leave with no qualms it made me see what a hypocrite I was. I thought I treated Hibari-san as a friend but in the end, he never really thought of me that way. I made him fight my battles without really understanding his motivations. I guess... I assumed that you're tired of it like he is. Maybe you want a place that won't suffocate you."

Xanxus merely crossed both feet at the top of the table. He smirked as he returned both guns under his coat and splayed both arms carelessly at the arm rests. "You think about it too much, brat." His eyes bore into his too intensely that it made Tsuna fidget all the more. "Let Hibari be a lesson to you then. That in this kind of world, you can't be friends with everyone. If you want everyone to like you, why are you starting a war?"

Tsuna looked at his hands. "Is power really the end game of everything here?" he said quietly.

"Power is the reason why we submitted to you. A lot of people opposed you, and we only decided to coexist because we acknowledge that you're stronger than us," Xanxus interjected. "You benefited from it greatly since the beginning, unlike me, or the pineapple, or the Shimon... that damn porcupine is an outlier. We tried to flip the world order. Look where it got us." He laughed at the last sentence.

"...And don't you want that to change?"

"Do you think it will be easy? I've seen a lot of people fall for that cause, you brat. You might become a part of that statistic if you do try."
"You sound like an old geezer."

"Y-You piece of shit-"

Tsuna's eyes remained unfazed as he looked at the Varia Boss. "When this is over, I'll make sure you'll live in a world that won't piss you off all the time. Doesn't matter how long it will take. I'll keep my word."

"You fucking brats..." Xanxus turned to look at the fire. "Then I'll stick around. That damn shark doesn't stand a chance now that he can't use his flames."

"Eh?"

He stood up and continued to walk towards the door. "I want to see the looks on the other Bosses' faces when you succeed. Either way, whether you succeed or fail, maybe you'll give our lives and death a proper meaning. That's the true calling of a Don."

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**Reborn**

He arrives, but maybe a little too late to the bloodbath.

Reborn's blood ran cold as he saw the wretched sight in front of him.

Hitomi was still in the middle of the room, her neck badly bruised and bloodstained as her glassy eyes stared forward. Yamamoto was on his last legs before also falling just in front of his mother, sleeves and legs ripped and soaked in scarlet as he clattered the floor face-first. His body continued to shake as Yuuya moved past it. She passes Hitomi's corpse as well and moves towards the culprit, the eye of the damn hurricane the Vongola ended up being drawn into.

Hibari Kyoya struggled to breathe. One hand still outstretched, the chain of the tonfa a fair distance away from Hitomi. He showed no resistance as Yuuya knelt down at her brother. She smiled at him.

"Nami will be delighted to see you so soon," she then said as she lowered her head towards her brother's nape. Reborn drew his gun.

Kei's blade was faster, however, reaching his target before Reborn's.

His sister's chest.

Flames blossomed from the wound. Yuuya turned around, earthen eyes staring against the same impassive eyes of her brother's. He smiled at her quite innocuously.

"Y-You-" It dawned on Yuuya just as Kei twisted his blade and let her body burst into flames.

It dawned on Reborn too, who was quick enough to run and shoot, readily aiming at his chest. Kei was quicker, however, and raised his narrow katana to deflect its path.

"You killed her," he spat.

"Naturally. Her part is done," he smiled again. Of course. Of fucking course. There was a damn good reason why he was only seeing Hibari Kei for the first time.
Because this was not Hibari Kei. That smile was too familiar. His speed and serene presence as well. So in the end, this was the man pulling the strings.

"You clever fox," Reborn gritted his teeth. "I should've known, Fon."
XXII

Chapter Summary

Fon recalls things beginning with the end.

Chapter Notes

Arguably the best chapter in the fic, and the one I enjoyed writing the most.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They testify without end in our memory.

-Jacques Derrida

Taso, kare wa?

Reborn did not expect Fon to speak first. He strongly avoided discourse whenever they met. He disliked the trappings of free speech especially when it came to opposing his friends.

He also could not believe Fon would frown at him. He preferred a smile, no matter how deranged it might look with his bloodstained figure. It fitted him more. Not this look of unabashed bitterness.

"Do you believe in ghosts, Reborn?" Fon asked. It was the first time both of them faced each other in these forms again. His fingers curled tighter around his blade. The calmness in his voice reminded him of a pool's surface whose ripples have quelled sometime ago. Reborn had forgotten how deep his voice would drop and it made his hands grow rigid as he closed in on the trigger. Fon's dark brown eyes looked impossibly sad.

The hitman's lower lip curled. "People are more likely to kill you."

The elder Hibari smiled this time. No matter how hollow it looked, he preferred it more than open disappointment on his face.

"Ghosts are theoretically dead people so…” he laughed.

"You remember that film?" Reborn snorted in response.

"We watched it in Skull's battered VCD player with the others…” Fon said as he looked at his blade for a moment. "That was the first time I've watched a movie again with people I care about."

Reborn beamed. "Cannot believe I'd be fighting you like this. People always assumed I was the strongest Arcobaleno, but there was always that thought at the back of my head that assuming just made me cocky."
"Nonsense," Fon shook his head. His katana gleamed under the fluorescent light. "You're the strongest, no qualms about it."

"Liar. You never liked showing off. Was it because of the damage you can cause if you did? The amount of lives you'll ruin, just because?"

Fon shifted his blade. A storm flame blazed then simmered on the sharp end. "I was always the stubborn one in the family. I feared that Kyoya will catch it like Namimori had."

"Your fears came true and you let the Mafia descend into chaos because of it."

His eyes darkened. A yellow flame sparkled and shined as it encased the storm.

"I guess I'm one of the people who's willing to lose everything just to get something." A blue flame lit up to envelop the blunt end. Then green. Then purple.

"Were you happy now that you've done it? You've avenged your beloved niece. You've finally ended your bloodline."

An orange flame flowed through the entire blade. Fon began to walk by Reborn's direction. He quickly brandished two guns as he backtracked towards the younger Hibari.

"No. There's still one more," he said as his flame lit a cool indigo. He raised his blade and prepared to strike.

"I'm nearly thirty and I still believe in ghosts," Yuu admitted as she turned and sat at the right end of the Namimori torii.

"How so?" Fon asked as he offered her white tea.

"She always appears in my dreams. Sometimes even when I'm awake. I thought I'd outgrow them but she doesn't leave. She must still despise me."

"You didn't do anything."

"That is the point. I did not do anything. I let her think it's not worth living."

"We won't exactly know how she died though."

She snickered as she looked at the town below. "You always were the first to decide the best way to break her. I don't think you will fully understand, no matter how much you try reading her."

Fon stared at the full teacup before giving it to a pensive Yuu. She smiled in thanks as she took a sip.

"Once this is over," she said. "Maybe I'll be able to dream less. You don't have to worry about being mother's plaything anymore as well. We don't need to fight over something as fucked up as a family name."

"Do you really believe that, Yuuya?"

Her eyes were hollow. "Yes. After everything, all I want now is a good night's sleep."
"I know your secret," said Akari after planting a long, greedy kiss on Fon's lips. "Your hands are too rough."

"You've indulged that child of yours far too long, sister," he said as he pulled his hands away. "Where is Saito?"

Her tinkling laugh rang through the halls. She must have bottled it for years. "The first thing our daughter did after coming home after so long was ram our blade on that spineless bastard's throat. I couldn't stop Kei from coming after you."

"He paid a sorry price for trying."

Her smile quivered. She exhaled before taking a sip from the bourbon whisky he brought. "I warned him to not underestimate his uncle. Nothing I can do about it, can I?"

"I thought you would attempt to kill me the moment I stepped foot in this place."

Age left Akari untouched. Her mouth though, did not attempt to beguile him like she would.

"I had been waiting for you. My feelings have remained unchanged."

"Even when I ended your favoured child's life?"

"He grew tired of these hands," she paused from crossing her fingers with his, hesitant. Her smile was soft and made Fon's quiver. "You still favour our brother more, don't you?"

"Where is he, Akari?"

"He's not the same brother you remembered. He died along with Namimori. You are better off remembering him as the little lost chick who attempted to search for you-"

"Did you ground his bones and put him in one of those delicate bottles of yours?"

"Do you think that bastard deserves to be edified, brother? I threw that body in the dump. Let him rot like the trash he was. You were wrong to let him live. You should have chosen me. He let our name rot and nurtured that little beast who's destroying our family-"

"I am tired," Fon stood up. Akari wept. "You promised to stay by his side and become a wife to him, to assist him and nurture his kin-"

"He doesn't love me. He brought that abomination to our family. He favoured that little shit above our children, brother. Don't you dare wash your hands from your foolish arraignments. If you became the head- you could have spared his life and from being cursed with that title. You could have spared us from this wretched place. You selfish bastard- You s-"

Fon did not even attempt to shout. He could only stare as Akari continued to wreak and sob violently. Her spindly hands looked as if they can break at the slightest touch. She was a horrid, miserable thing, he concluded. He inhaled. He knew that soothing words were too late to reach her. She was going to die anyway.

It was almost summer. Maybe that was why, he surmised, the sunrise was recklessly red.

It nearly made him believe his father's blood was black. Bathing under the light should have felt cathartic, all the more as his blade continued to put more holes on Ken's chest and stomach and
torso. But he could only stare. Emotion felt like a hindrance then.

"Are you happier now, my son?" he managed to say as he started to expire.

"I wished you had been kinder to Saito," Fon said.

"I wished you spared him from such a fate," Ken said with slow breaths. "Our family would not have fallen apart like this if you stayed."

"Is it a Hibari trait to point fingers?" he said quietly. The sun was a brilliant yellow as it rose. He could hear Hitomi calling out his nephew's name.

"Your mother always said you took after me too much," he said, laughing weakly. "Stubborn to a fault. Afraid of being wrong."

Fon said nothing.

"Saito was a fool. An obedient fool, that he was, for putting his faith in us."

He wiped his eyes with his blood-smeared hands as his father took his last breath.

---

18

He loved his brother too much to see anything else.

**Father did a lot of things to me. To Kyoya too.**

His niece's handwriting was feverish until before her last.

_He found out about Saya. I really don't want to write to you about it. You asked me to be kind to him. To stay and be a good daughter to him. I thought I could. I want to be what you wanted me to be, but he asked Kyoya to kill her. I know it's for the good of our family. But he did it to spite me. He did it because I love her. I love her more than I could forgive every transgression they can commit to this vile body._

Yuuya was beside him. Her eyes were flitting on another letter.

_I had to choose between her and Kyoya. I feel terrible for letting this resentment poison me. I know Kyoya does not merit my hatred. But I wish he protested. I'm a terrible sister, aren't I?_

"Do you want some cake, Keikoku? They have your favoured mousse here."

_I wish I was like you. I wish I can just throw it all away and start anew. I wish I can just forget everything and not let it bother me. I'm a coward in the end. Maybe if I was like Kyoya, not besmirched by this accursed blood_

"Here you go." Yuuya squeezed his hand.

"Thank you," he said, attempting to laugh as he folded her letter away.

She did not let go of his hand. "Reborn did not give us her last letter."

"Didn't he now?" he said as he took the fork and began to shove pieces to his mouth. They tasted like sand.

"She wrote that four days before. I remember her light was on the night she died."
"Have you wondered what went on father's mind when he found her?"

"We just went up and left. I never really thought of disobeying him. I wish I had asked. But I was afraid then. Looking back, I guess that's why I joined the army. I thought it was better to battle demons I could see. It felt like a good idea then."

Fon tried taking the last bite. "It's easier to run away."

She shook her head. "It takes great courage to just leave everything behind. No matter what mother says, I don't think our sister did that out of cowardice. I just wish before she took her last breath, she finally forgave herself."

18

One well-aimed strike would be enough for Fon to end it all. One to fully slash past his heart. He twisted it for good measure.

Reborn was a split-second too late to react. He did manage to destroy the blade with a timed bullet, but the damage had been done. Fon fell head-first on the cement for the trouble. Blood flowed freely. He thought that would be enough for a concussion, but his years of training betrayed him.

"You fucking piece of shit-" he said as the elder Hibari let out a bitter laugh.

"Kyoya shares only half-" he reminded him before his breaths betray him. Yellow flames protruded from Reborn's hand as he attempted in vain to resuscitate his stubborn friend.

"Don't you dare," Reborn barked. "You're the only mission I'm willing to fail-"

It was getting harder to laugh at this irony.

"For Kyoya, for Namimori, live you piece of shit- don't you dare run away again-"

18

The cicadas were screaming in perfect chaos even as he stopped at her grave. He lowered his white rose at the patch of grass in front of the moss-ridden stone.

Kyoya had the same aesthetics for peace as any Hibari had. His propensity for violence complemented his respect for the dead. None of the ostentatious and hollow pomp that celebrated one lying six feet under, closed to exceeding limitations and possibilities of a world that remained existing.

"I was supposed to give you morning glories. When I visit again, maybe." he said to her gently. "Kyoya told me to come. I should start listening to him." He took out a faded blue letter from his breast pocket. "Are you angry that it took me so long, little Nami?" He looked at the surroundings, at the blooming bluebells and lily of the valleys and daisies that surrounded sunlit patches. "We used to play here often. I remember."

Plenty has changed since. There was a ton of things Fon wanted to say, but the sloshing of his bag made him remember that there were things he must not mention while inside hallowed ground. Instead, Fon sat down beside her, remembering the time she read her first letter to him, before the war, before Fon prioritised his own sanity over his family's. He remembered her eagerness and how in one letter Nami admitted that it was embarrassing for him to listen to her gushing about her life.
He then began to read. The cicadas chirped louder.

His younger brother felt like a bird nesting as he lay down by his side, peaceful, both hands clasping his right as he slept almost in unabashed gratitude. This was always how Saito was until he started junior high and Ken told the both of them that they can try killing each other in any way they saw fit.

Despite the sombre dignity Saito showed as he asked Fon to spare their wretched dreg of a father that tragic night, he was still a child when it was just the two of them.

"What do you think? A boy or a girl?" Saito said as both of them sat on the roof under the gloaming of stars.

"I chose neutral colours for the clothes," Fon said. "Would prefer being surprised."

"You've changed nii-san," said he as he rubbed his hands together for warmth. A steady breeze was blowing. "The last time I was here, you'd rather swim in the river or hop from village to village."

"The elder Hibari hummed in response. "You were the one who suggested that I teach in a school to pass the time."

"It was a joke!"

"Well, I'm disappointed you haven't. You're still shy around my wife when it's already been a month."

"W-Well, she has really pretty eyes." Saito then took awhile to reply. "I'm running away, aren't I?"

Fon was quicker. "There's no shame in losing yourself at times."

"Will you really continue staying here?" Saito continued looking at the crescent satellite to their right. "Are you happier?"

Fon did not answer and kept looking at the punctured darkness in front of him. He attempted to close his eyes and pretended that he could not feel his brother's tears as he embraced him like a creeping gourd from their trellis, still hesitant to bear fruit.

"I can't come with you," Fon said. "My wife needs me. She will go in labour soon."

"I know you'll say so," Saito said. "Too plenty of mines to tread back home."

"Father resides in Yonaguni, but he will not hesitate to come no matter how aching his bones and heart may be," he paused.

"Namimori still wants to see you."

"That child has so much faith in me," Fon gave a wan smile as both of them were not lying down with arms behind their head. "Please extinguish it. She has to wake up and look on forward."

"You're the only thing keeping her sane," Saito said as he stared at his hands. "Her fire does not waver despite being weaker than her siblings."

"You don't love her."
"That is not what a parent should agree with."

"You are still human. You will always favour one, no matter what you say," Fon said. "Do not let her die. Promise me. She's bound for greater things beyond the confines of our wretched blood."

"Alright," Saito said as he fell like a limpet on top of his brother's hesitant chest. "I promise."

Fon continued spreading the ashes over the river. It scattered along with the falling peach and cherry blossoms, echoing mid-spring. His expression was unreadable. Saito was behind him, a milk bottle grasped by his left.

"He has her eyes," said Saito as he cooed the babe in his other hand. It babbled as it reached out to grab his thumb and sucked on it greedily.

He looked on at the river as he continued scattering the ashes, staring at them uninterestedly as the wind did the rest.

"Did you love her?" the younger brother asked.

"I don't know," Fon said as he turned at the child. Its grey eyes flashed at him quite accusingly. "It was convenient while it lasted…" he smiled at his brother. "Is it strange?"

"It's not."

"I just wished she does not hate me for whatever he will become," he said as the last grains of grey fell between his fingers. Tears started to fall from his eyes. "Strange. Death had been such a constant for so long, and only now they appear." He wiped an eye and stared at the liquid.

"You've changed," Saito repeated. "You don't have to be ashamed, nii-san."

"There are really times you are a reliable younger brother," Fon said.

"What can I say?" he chirped. "Well," he smiled at his brother and let the bottle rest on his other arm. He stuck out a hand. "Hurry up. Your son's quite heavy."

"Still weak as ever."

Fon embraced them both. The baby did not cry out and peered at them both in keen interest.

"You promised her you'll visit him once every three months at least," Saito said, trying his best not to cry. "Don't forget."

"I will, if the Arcobaleno permit it," he said. His pet monkey now sat on top of his head. "Until then."

"Until then," child Nami wiped away her snot as she repeated his words. "Can't I come with you instead?"

"There will only be bad monsters that will come after me," Fon said. He did not have much time to stay. His father may reconsider and attempt to wrestle him back at their manor again. "Who knows? Maybe when I come back, you'll have a little brother to play with."
"Mmm…” It was a cool night. If it wasn't for the wailing of the women and children, it would have been like one of those evenings. "Are you sad for killing grandma?"

"Remember this, little Nami," he said as his hand pulled her close to his chest. "Be good. I love you." In truth there was no emotional catharsis as he hacked her body to pieces while his loved ones watched in horror. He might never forget his brother's and Tsuyoshi's eyes.

18

It was dusk again. Hitomi's turn to hold the camera. Tsuyoshi was taking too long to fix his hair.

"The steak is burning!"

"Goddammit Hitomi, give me three more seconds!"

"Seriously Saito, I'm reconsidering hooking up with this bum…"

"Ehehe, don't say that. Akari don't forget to guard your camcorder. Someone might try nicking it tonight."

"As if! Say, can we do that Patrick Swayze thing again?"

"A-Akari-sama, that's too much… if your parents see…"

"Fon, you ok?" Tsuyoshi's eyes dart at him. He rests an arm around his shoulders and pulls him closer with the rest of them. "Akari might steal your title if you're not careful, Mr. Chatterbox."

Saito looked at him quizzically. Fon plastered a smile in return. All of them looked shiny and new, staggeringly beautiful even. All they needed was one touch from him to crack.

"Fon-sama?"

"Nii-san?"

He then grabbed Saito's head and began to ruffle his hair. The thought was still there. "I think it's my stomach. Is everyone ready?"

"Yeah, we can't wait to finally dig in!"

18

Fon managed to wake up to nothing. He blinked rapidly, only to smell cigarette smoke from his right. He laughed at this. Once again fate dictated him otherwise.

"Will you tell your disciple about this?"

Reborn coughed to force back a laugh. "I expected a 'why' question. It depends if he asks me to."

"I can't believe I fooled you of all people, Reborn," Fon smiled in the darkness. "I avoided you while I can. I didn't think you'd join the fray, and as an adult no less."

"You belittle yourself too much," Reborn said. "Tsuyoshi told Tsuna about your wasted potential. Did you really walk away to save your brother?"

"You must assume I'm a longsuffering person then if that is true," Fon said. The tiny light from Reborn's cigarette was fading. "My family mollified me too much, unfortunately. They had plenty
of expectations. I thought Saito could carry it."

"Because you couldn't? That's absurd."

Fon rose up from his bed, only to feel rope singing his wrists and his legs. Of course. He could not see any moonlight. No breeze either.

Reborn ignored his discomfort as he lit another cigarette. "I really find it difficult to believe you are the same person."

"Will you kill me now, Reborn?"

"Is that a question or a plea?"

"I'm sure Kyoya will surpass me eventually and know contentment within the Vongola. I just hope you forgive him for what he has done."

"Jesus fucking Christ Fon, how long are you going to avoid answering my questions?" Reborn snapped. "For once, answer me, why? Just why?"

Fon looked at the cool glow of the cigarette. He could imagine Reborn gritting his teeth. "Because I don't have anywhere else to run," he bit his lip. "I always take the roundabout way. Whether it be answering queries or atoning for my transgressions."

"A lot of lives were ruined because of you."

Fon smiled. "I wanted happiness without consequence. Nothing else mattered to me."

Reborn took awhile to remark. "We're not infants anymore, Fon."

Fon smiled wider. "I often assume that my happiness equated to others' own. It's a dangerous habit of mine. I…" He closed his eyes. "Namimori rubbed off on Kyoya too much. She wanted to be me. I wanted her to be better, but I fucked up. Clear and simple."

"Maybe she found out she was wrong. That's why she died."

"I presume too," Fon smiled again. "But that's all it is: Empty presumptions. I did not act. My brother paid the price."

"He paid the price for fucking his children. He fucked yours too."

"My family expected me to be perfect. I assumed the same. I thought I had perfect judgment to let Saito lead. Now here we are. I took the roundabout way again. It's tiring to make others suffer from my wrong choices, Reborn."

Reborn said nothing. Fon laughed at this.

"You agree then?" His laughter grew more raucous and mad. "I find it appalling if I follow the moral code, honestly. Because despite everything, I feel like I made the right choice. I'm happy to have killed the remaining branches of my family. I have also saved Kyoya. I have no more regrets."

"But you never wanted to be a father to him."

It was Fon's turn to be silent.

"If I abide by your wishes and kill you, you'll die a coward. You'll be taking the roundabout way
"It's unlike you to care so much. Is this your disciple's compassion rubbing off on you?"

"You overplay that brat too much. It's because you are my friend and I don't want the blood of someone important on my hands again," he waved off. By then, Reborn dropped his cigarette and quickly crushed it underneath. "But I understand what you're afraid of. Your son will agree with me as well on this, maybe. In his own way. You deserve to be loved Fon. It feels… wrong to validate the shit you did but you're worth saving. There's hope in you."

Fon stared at the blackness. He was starting to make out Reborn's fedora and those overtly curled sideburns.

"I guess I know where Kyoya got those godawful amounts of pride from," he chuckled. "And his disappointing height."

"You're mocking me at such an inopportune time?" Fon couldn't hide his tears with his sleeves because of the ropes.

He saw the former Sun Arcobaleno smile. He then felt four quick sweeps and the tightness around his limbs disappearing.

"Your choice of way again," he said as he saw him step up on something, hands upwards and the creaking sound of metal could be heard. A fresh breeze and the pale moon made him cover his face for a moment. "This time though, don't choose the usual."

Fon stared up as Reborn climbed ahead. He extended a hand to him. Fon imagined another. Then another. Then three more. He raised his half-closed fist and grabbed them all.

"Despite the distance from us," he remembered his brother's favourite quote. "Despite the shadows around it…"

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Chapter End Notes

Taso kare wa (誰そ彼は) = derived from tasogare (黄昏) or dusk/twilight, meaning 'who are you' if you couldn't tell the person passing by. Tasogare, when used in poems/songs, convey a kind of loneliness and melancholy.

-Last line is from Michael Foucault

-In a sense, Fon was the main antagonist in the end. I had already planned his reveal during the original one I posted, but it still stung me at the back of my mind how it will fit in the end that a person like Fon would be able to commit something extreme like this. So I made a fitting backstory. Here, he is not a good person, a terrible parent even. But then again, who in KHR truly isn't?
Chapter Summary

Sometimes you have to answer the difficult questions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_I knew that he was goin' on ahead and he was fixin' to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold, and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up._

_-No Country for Old Men, Cormac McCarthy_

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**Wasurenaide.**

The first person Hibari saw was the baby— he knew it was him through that soft-brimmed hat and those ostentatious sideburns— sitting beside him in the hospital bed.

"You will go to trial soon," the no-longer baby said. Hibari's stomach rumbled a little. He heard the birds chirping outside. He thinks about his own yellow puffball. "You've been out of it for five days straight."

Hibari stared at the ceiling then. "Where is Yamamoto Takeshi?"

There was an abrupt pause. "He was here more than thirty minutes ago with that bird of yours." The soft thrumming of raindrops could be heard. Hibari adjusted his eyes. The sky was a lazy grey to his right. It must be mid-afternoon. He just knew these things by sight alone. "He's been coming here for two days straight. No limbs lost in case you're wondering."

By then, Hibari raised his hands. No cuffs, chains, ropes binding him to the bed. He looked at the hitman. A long line replaced his mouth.

Reborn returned a small smile. "Didn't think you'd first ask about Yamamoto. He didn't ask about you first when he woke up."

Hibari wanted to ask what his first words were but thought better. "He knows he doesn't have to worry about me."

"That kid has too much faith in you." He could hear some hostility in Reborn's voice. "You were a perfect Cloud to my tutee, but I never thought you'd have the guts to sever ties with us. And yet faith chooses to smile on you. There must be an end to it, don't you think?"

Hibari grinned coyly at Reborn. "How strong is your gift of precognition, I wonder? Is it as strong as your gift to... hmm, hide from Sawada Tsunayoshi's hyper-intuition?"

Reborn's mouth grew wider. "Strange. I thought you'd be furious. Did he not knock you out properly?"
"I was too strong for him to go easy on me," Hibari wanted a fly to buzz inside for him to catch and crush. "It is just an educated guess."

"Are you incensed that I made that choice then?"

Hibari merely shooked his head as he looked at the transparent curtains. The light was not as bright and as harsh as he remembered. He welcomed it so. "He is a friend to you. I can condone that now."

"Really…" Reborn snorted. "This is unbecoming of you. Choosing to see it in a nonbinary way. His hands are not clean. Nor did he try to love you in a satisfactory way."

"People are not perfect. I've learned that all too long ago," Hibari said. He sank back at the pillows, his back as relaxed as it had never been. "I as well. I never saw my actions as heroic, but I always assumed I was right. Yamamoto Takeshi…" He hesitated for a moment, but he forced a small smile on his face as he let that sense of warmth flood every cell in his body. "He was not afraid to tell me my actions were wrong. But he was willing to accept every grain of it. It's proof somehow, that there is more room to grow. That there is nothing wrong with that."

Reborn's eyes grew wide. This made Hibari smile in sudden amusement. The adult then stood up and glanced at his watch.

"I don't want to admit it," he finally said with a laugh. "But I was blind enough to not see what Tsuna and Yamamoto saw in you."

"Your fears are not unfounded. Those herbivores were merely brave enough to keep going in spite and despite of," Hibari said as he looked at the ceiling again, then back at Reborn. "I think that is similar to what you did for my father. I appreciate that."

18

Ten days had passed. Hibari's trial and verdict came and went. The rest have returned to Namimori and visited a conscious Sasagawa Ryohei for the first time. He was still stuck in the hospital for additional tests and rehabilitation. Tsuna and Gokudera had just finished visiting him and were now eating beef noodles at TakeSushi that afternoon after school.

"You're dang right, Yamamoto. This is good shit," Gokudera gave his seal of approval as he slurped the last few inches of noodle. Yamamoto laughed at the counter as he prepared to make two more batches for the remaining customers.

"Wish the old-timers were here to taste this though," he said as he looked at the near-empty restaurant. "Place is quiet even on weekends."

Tsuna smiled sadly at Yamamoto. "I'll tell mom and Kyoko-chan and the others to come whenever they can."

"Screw my rent! I'll come here everyday too!"

"Uhm, I don't think that's a good idea Gokudera…"

Tsuna and Yamamoto laughed as Gokudera continued to discuss his new weekly budget plan. Apparently, he'll scrape on the basic amenities and raid Yamamoto's toiletry stash in return for his food trips.

"Pretty sure we have to expand to other places. Dad still has enough capital to build a smaller place
next town over. He's just waiting for me to graduate so I can work full-time here while he focuses
over there."

"Is this why you're not going to school everyday, Yamamoto-kun?" said Kyoko to the others' surprise. Haru, Hana, and Chrome followed from behind.

Yamamoto nodded. "Yup. My dad's friend can only work part-time here so I can't totally focus on coming… but I'll still try graduating though!"

"Speaking of graduation, thank god we didn't need to enrol to other towns. To be fair, Kusakabe-san really did push through with the late graduation. No sakura montage, but at least we'll finish together," Haru said as she pointed at the fatty tuna set at Yamamoto.

"Can't believe everyone's graduating too," Hana rolled her eyes. "Including that idiot Mochida…"

"Are you avoiding to mention another person, Kurokawa?" Gokudera leered.

"What the heck, if a DC idiot hears you…"

"He's no longer the chairman though," Kyoko points out. "He's only Hibari Kyoya-san now."

"Kyoko, you should be careful…” Hana whispered.

"Come to think of it," Tsuna butted in. Chrome gave ten consecutive bows as she pointed at Haru's same order after a long pause at the counter. "Isn't it weird? I mean, Hibari-san's our classmate."

"What?" Yamamoto dropped a bowl and nearly spilled on Chrome's uniform if not for her catching it on time with only her ribbon paying the price.

"He just started coming three days ago though. You know, as part of his sentence. It's the Tenth's doing, of course, since he'll be succeeding soon-"

"Eh- we're not sure I did anything, Gokudera-kun!" Tsuna decided to slurp on his noodles loudly in case a DC idiot does overhear. "And I won't be succeeding until I've finished high school! Plus… well, maybe they considered that Hibari-san technically managed to stop the leaks so…"

"You're discrediting yourself too much, Tenth!" the Storm interjected. "I am forever grateful that you chose me as your Right Hand Man-"

"Speaking of which," Hana made sure to cut short the sycophantic remarks. "Do you reckon he'll be graduating with us?"

All of them looked at each other.

"Well… Hibari-san is, uhm, he'll be in Vendicare in a months' time so-" Chrome offered as she returned at the table. Haru gave her a tissue for her tie.

"Well fuck me thrice and counting, we'll go down in history as the batch Hibari Kyoya graduated with," Hana said wildly.

"We mustn't be too hasty though…" Tsuna attempted to keep things sane as the rest babbled on.

"Right… you didn't tell us about your adventures, Tsuna-kun!" Kyoko said as she looked at the two boys in front of them and then at Yamamoto-kun. "Is it… uhm, can you tell us?"

Tsuna and Gokudera looked at each other and chuckled quite nervously. "As long as you won't tell
"Reborn…"

"Where is he? Kinda weird that the baby isn't with you…"

"Uh, Hana-chan, about him being a baby, well he's grown up now with his ex-baby friends-"

"And Yamamoto-kun! Can you tell us what happened with Hibari-san too? He's not as… scary as he was before."

"I-Is this true, Kyoko-chan?"

But Yamamoto was already absent in the counter. His dad appeared behind the curtain and told them he was making his deliveries.

Only Haru believed him. Unlike her, they were all aware enough of Hibari's demeanour to know Yamamoto's exit was on purpose.

Ten days later and Tsuna and Gokudera were in tears as they waited for orders on the old diner, thanking Yamamoto for treating them. The diner was also smaller than the one they were used to, but they thanked the heavens that the food they wanted wasn't removed.

"It's nothing," Yamamoto said as he attempted to placate the two. "It's not technically my money, since you come to the restaurant every day. I also figured you must be sick of the same food already."

Both of them shook their heads. They lied of course. Nana was also not cooking because she was too busy buying takeout from Yamamoto when Tsuna told her about his circumstance.

"You guys are terrible liars, haha-" Both Tsuna and Gokudera froze. They did not like the sound of that laugh. Usually, Yamamoto would be too trusting to care. He was *ok* with it, but he would not be *frank* with them about his feelings.

"How?" Both of them were unable to finish their sentence.

Yamamoto gave them that usual look of bemusement. He was not threatened. Both of them gave a sigh of relief at this. "Uh sorry if I scared you! I was used to Hibari being… you know, passive-aggressive? So…"

"It's nothing Yamamoto-kun!" Tsuna said quickly. Gokudera nodded in assent. "We're just not used to you, uh, being in touch with your feelings?" Gosh, he was really terrible at explaining himself.

"Ah, how long did we not see each other?" Yamamoto scratched his head. "You can say that hanging out with Hibari makes you more aware, I guess? Like I look out for possible cues… and both of you were too insistent so I thought that…"

Even Gokudera did not dare to interrupt as Yamamoto attempted to explain himself. The past three months that they were apart changed their outlooks in a sense, but without speaking, both the future Boss and his Right Hand concluded that Yamamoto changed the most. Their dynamics did not shift, but it might not be easy to handle this Yamamoto. He was more careful about his words, and he was no longer a person who can share without direct probing.

"Sorry for being weird, uh-"
"No, it's just…" Gokudera attempted to break the ice first. "Well, Hibari sure… it must have been tough, innit?"

"Reborn didn't tell us anything about what happened so…"

"Yeah, Hibari and I requested it," Yamamoto said. "I don't want to assume his reasons, but for me… I guess I just don't want you two to hate me."

The thin nonchalance in his voice made them sew their lips together again as they twiddled their thumbs.

Yamamoto looked on at the window even as he got his blue lemonade.

Tsuna turned to his left. Even Gokudera was too busy stirring his coffee to make reparations for his failed attempt to restart the conversation. He suddenly found his shoulders sagging as he sipped his chocolate milkshake.

"I've been thinking actually, about what happens after graduation." Both their stomachs turned unceremoniously as Yamamoto continued to drop one bomb after another. "About you know… the Vongola… Hibari…"

"Yeah, I asked Reborn if he'll fill up Hibari's role. I mean, we need as much help as we can get. Given his sentence, we may need to look for a real replacement…”

Yamamoto shifts his gaze at his lemonade. He opened his mouth but quickly closed it again. He then said, "Shouldn't I be locked up too, Tsuna?"

"What?" Both Gokudera and Tsuna sputtered.

"Dunno, don't you think it's weird how easily we return to our normal lives, without consequence? I don't think it's fair that Hibari got his share, and a lifetime in Vindice may not make up for it…” Yamamoto trailed off. "We did plot to make Hibari get away with murder, making a ton of bad choices along the way… Isn't it weird?"

"Y-Yamamoto-kun, what are you-" Tsuna gave a half-hearted laugh. Gokudera raised his hand to interrupt his Boss.

"If you do get locked up, will it change a thing?" he asked him.

Yamamoto did not quickly answer. Tsuna expected him to, surprising him further. Gokudera's gaze became colder as he continued to bore on Yamamoto's.

"Acting like a total martyr won't make things better," Gokudera said as he added more cream to his coffee. "You don't have to hide your doubts from us. No matter what plans you have for the future, even if we're not a part of it, we'll support it. No questions asked."

"It's ok to hate us, Yamamoto-kun," Tsuna smiled. "We won't hold it against you if you do."

Their orders arrived. Yamamoto could only shake as he wolfed down his triple patty burger.

"Goddamn," Gokudera said as he gasped for air like a fish out of water mid-meal. "These taste even better than I remember."

Hibari chose to sit at the last chair next to the window, making his classmates- Gokudera, Tsuna,
and Hana included—keep their backs straight from start to end of classes.

He may have formally relinquished his power as chairman, but there were no pretensions that he was still the most dominant and feared force in the school. No one dared to approach him during lunch break. He also never had the time to care anyway. During breaktime, he would swiftly move past the door before another person in class can react, including their terrified teachers. According to some of their classmates and the newly appointed DC members, he continued coordinating with Kusakabe about plans for the town. Tsuna and the rest would not dare try to ask him to eat with them as well, scared of rejection more than a tonfa to the face.

It was also getting more difficult to get in touch with Yamamoto at school. He would either be training with members of the baseball club or helping his dad at the restaurant. Other times, his dad would be surprised to find out that Yamamoto was absent in school on some days.

During said days he was absent, Gokudera and Tsuna along with the girls would attempt to scour through arcades and the newly minted baseball field after class to look for Yamamoto but they would return empty-handed. He was also starting to neglect his shifts at the restaurant, with none of them having a clue to where he was.

Tsuna and the rest had no other option but to swallow their anxieties and talked to Hibari one day three minutes before the start of class.

His eyes shifted quite menacingly as they took one step back. Crowding. Definitely a strike one.

"H-Have you talked to Y-Yamamoto-kun, Hibari-san?" Tsuna's voice was more high-pitched than usual. Hibari narrowed his eyes at him. The Vongola heir gulped in response.


Tsuna yelped when he saw a glint of collapsible tonfa appearing on top of his hardened right fist.

"O-Ok. Thank you-"

"What exactly did you do, Hibari-san?" All of them opened their mouths in fear when Kyoko spoke.

They could see a vein pop out from Hibari's left temple. "Are you sure you want to know the specifics, Sasagawa Kyoko? You might attempt to sock me again if I tell you."

Hana's hand clawed onto Kyoko's shoulder. "Don't provoke him-"

"Do not worry, Kurokawa Hana," he said as he shifted his gaze at her with a small smile. "I'm willing to entertain questions, as long as it doesn't bore me, per se."

It took a while for Kyoko to recover. She swallowed hard before asking, "Why does Yamamoto-kun hate you so much?"

None of them spoke. The door slid open to reveal their first teacher. Hibari waved them off and they returned to their seats, too stunned to disobey.

The last person they expected to know Yamamoto's whereabouts was a hospitalized Sasagawa Ryohei. He was still undergoing physical rehabilitation when Hana told him about what happened that early morning.
"Ah, Yamamoto? Guy visited me yesterday. Asked me how I was doing, showed him this," he turned his head to his crutches. "Gave me a sushi boat, really good stuff I'll say," he added with a snicker. "Talked to me about a lot of stuff: Baseball, his noodles, more baseball, his dad's condition, his decision of not pursuing Koshien--"

"Hold on-" Tsuna could not believe his ears. "He's what?"

"I forgot about the last part since I took a nap to recharge myself after rehab, but could you tell him to bring him those beef noodles next time?"

"S-Stupid Lawn Head-" Gokudera punched himself instead of letting out his anger at the still recovering Sun Guardian.

"Must be a good thing though. He's becoming a man by choosing to be your guardian, Tsuna! The path of the sword is the most manly--"

"Ryo, did he tell you anything else? Like where he usually wanders off to?" Hana interrupted. Tsuna and Gokudera locked eyes in shock.

"W-Wait, Kurokawa, did you just say Ryo-"

"Yeah, he liked visiting Hibari's sister's grave. Y'know, you should try talking to him. He doesn't look too good at the moment. Kinda hollow around the eyes… He also got thinner since I last saw him. Send my regards and good luck! And bring me a fresh batch of underwear, Kyoko! I love you!"

"Geez, onii-chan-"

All of them stared at nothing in particular while they waited at the bus station half an hour later.

"W-What milk do you think Yamamoto-san likes the most?" Chrome stammered.

"He was a big fan of banana milk before y'know, shit happened," answered Gokudera.

"I… didn't know Kurokawa called onii-san Ryo."

"Well, we did spend a ton of time together while some of you were busy saving the world." Hana turned red at this.

"So… Ryo huh?" Gokudera asked out loud.

Hana shrugged in reply. "Let's look for Yamamoto."

"Guys, no one's here!" Tsuna called out as lay down sprawling on the grass due to the bag he carried full of plain milk, banana milk, chocolate milk, and strawberry milk. None of them could decide what Yamamoto was craving for at the moment so they got all the flavors available at the 7-11 they visited.

"Looks like your beloved Ryo was wrong-" Gokudera let out a howl that made the birds screech and flap their wings when Hana sent a speeding slap to the face.

"If you attempt to tease us again like the little brat you are-"

"Yeah, you guys are such stuck-ups. You haven't gotten a girlfriend, have you?" Haru stuck out her
Kyoko continued walking on ahead as her friends continued their squabbling and pointed at a large rock in front of a small pine tree. A fresh white chrysanthemum with bundles of jasmines were laid in front of it. "I-Is this Namimori-san's grave?"

All of them quickly trudged past the grass and daisies to be behind Kyoko. She continued peering at it for a possibility of a name. Nothing.

"Hibari-san's kind of selfish..." Kyoko said in a quiet voice. "He kept the knowledge of Namimori's burial place to himself and Yamamoto-kun."

"Probably because we're too loud," Tsuna shushed as he attempted to pry off Gokudera and Haru from each other. "And we never asked."

"Do you think he left those flowers?" Chrome said.

"He might have," nodded Haru. "N-Now that you mention it, don't you think Hibari-san will come-"

"He said he won't be visiting until he has kept his promise to her," someone said from behind the trees, making them screech and send more woodland animals away in sheer terror. Yamamoto walked out, clad in a jersey and summer uniform. He grinned in greeting.

"So this is the reason why...?" Gokudera said.

"Didn't expect a lot to be worried about me," he said. "I guess I just want some peace and quiet, and this is the only possible place to get it."

"You could've told us! We would have left you alone!" Tsuna exclaimed.

"Because he doesn't visit, is that it?" Kyoko said.

Yamamoto nodded. "You can say that." He scratched his nose. "Hibari and I did not exactly leave in the best of terms. It was not an easy ride, to tell you the truth."

"But we often visited him, even when he woke up."

Yamamoto turned to Tsuna and shook his head slowly. "What exactly where you trying to accomplish by coming back to Namimori and pretending things would be the same?"

Tsuna for the first time wanted to hit Yamamoto. It was good that Chrome grabbed his left arm on time and shook her head repeatedly.

"I wanted us a taste of normalcy, no matter how fleeting and stupid that sounded," he said and prepared for the worst.

"That sounds quite out of touch," Yamamoto said. The soft expression in his face made him all the more threatening. "I wish I can believe that."

"What's wrong with being out of touch from reality?" Gokudera said. "What's wrong with going to school and acting like our age?"

Tsuna did not like the unpleasant feeling welling up from the pits of his stomach. He hated confrontations. Much more when he knew he was in the wrong. He wished he was arguing with Reborn though, not with the person in front of him.
Yamamoto looked at each of them. Tsuna could not make out his thoughts as he made his way forward, in front of Nami's grave. It was a good thing none of them wanted to add more fuel to the fire by supporting Gokudera. The last thing he needed was to sever one more tie and lose a friend.

"She was like you too," Yamamoto said before letting out a deep sigh. "I wish to go back too, I guess. But I never will. I guess that's why I hate him so much."

The three little piglets, the baby, and Gokudera's sister were no longer there to welcome him back. Maybe that was why Tsuna couldn't stand it there. The house felt big and cold.

"Why the long face, Tsu-kun?" his mom asked. "You had a fight?"

Tsuna wished he invited Gokudera to finish the hotpot. Naturally, he'd get the scraps when the old faces were there. At least they made him watch his weight. "Guess." He hadn't talked with his mom in a while after everything that happened. He wished he was able to tell her everything, to make the burden less heavy, but after all of that, well, it taught him to be less selfish.

"You can't tell me, like your father?" Her hair was longer since Italy. She didn't bother to cut it. At least Tsuna can lie to her with a straight face though.

Who was he kidding? Of course he couldn't. "You knew?"

"A small part of it," Nana laughed. "Because I'm his wife and your mother." She grabbed more vegetables and tofu, the stuff people rarely touched. "At least that idiot isn't cheating on me."

"Wait, too much info- why are you telling me this now?"

"The last thing this family needed is more questions to poke and prod and break it apart," Nana laughed. "Maybe one day, Iemitsu and you will be able to tell me. Sometimes that's for the best."

"Even if it costs you your peace of mind?"

Nana smiled. "Most of the time, your loved ones are more precious than your own ego. You don't have to be right all the time."

Tsuna looked at the veggies his mom stacked on her bowl. He gave her the remaining beef, full belly be damned.

"The problem is, even when we're wrong, we like to delude ourselves," he started to laugh.

"It's not wrong to live in your delusions sometimes, Tsu-kun," Nana said. "It's ok to believe in our little lies when the truth is too much to bear."

Tsuna then noticed the heaviness under her eyes and the disarray in her usually-perfect hair. She was no longer bothering to keep appearances now that he was the only one there. Tsuna smiled at this as he finished his share.

"What's wrong?" Haru asked as both of them licked their popsicles on the way home. Gokudera had to run to meet the payment deadline for his rent while Kyoko and Hana came to visit Ryohei. "You still hung over with what Yamamoto said?"
"He's right though," Tsuna said as he chewed the melon flavoured ice and got a quick brain freeze for the trouble. "We're not normal teenagers anymore. Thought that would be cool like the shows but, yeah, it's not."

"Nothing you can do about it though. That's the price you gotta pay. And at least you made Hibari-san experience normalcy, even if it's kinda quick."

"You think?" Tsuna said heavily. "We could hear the breathing on each other's necks during class. Wish he chose the desk in front."

"W-Well there's that-"

"And we can't even talk to him. He's always the last to enter- on time of course- and the first to leave-"

"And that too."

Both of them tittered at this.

"I haven't told Kyoko-chan and the rest about this, but it looks like I'll be going to Tokyo after grad," Haru said after biting the last chunk from her popsicle. "Mom told dad that she wants me to stay at her place after what happened here… umm-"

"N-No, you don't have to apologise, Haru-chan. I think they'll understand-"

"You don't have to make this anymore awkward," Haru said, not bothering to stop her tears falling out of her eyes. "Jeez, I just wish I can grow up and not cry over someone like you-"

"Apparently, Kyoko-chan wants to join the Vongola," Ryohei said to Hana when Kyoko excused herself to buy snacks.

"And you refused? That's why she's not talking to you?" Hana presumed he did not do it in a tactful manner either.

"I told her she shouldn't because I said so," Ryohei remarked proudly.

"You sound like a total mom, not manly at all…" she said.

"H-How dare you, Kurokawa? That was uncalled for-"

"Actually, you sounded like total failure of a brother. At least give her some sound reasoning why."

"Y-You're such a meanie…"

"Mark my words idiot nii-chan. If you don't fix this any sooner, she might not make your favorite dishes. You don't want that now, right?"

"Uoohhh! H-How could you say that? Kyoko-chan can't possibly abandon me…"

"You're overreacting as usual, gosh," Hana sighed as she patted his head. "You should think about what your sister wants to do, even if she has to regret plenty of things along the way."

"She might die," he sniffed.
"You think Tsuna and his monkeys will let that happen though?" Hana said. "She's not a kid anymore. For crying out loud, we'll be graduating ahead of you."

"Stop reminding me! I can't believe Kyoko-chan's going ahead of me-"

"Look, I'll try watching out for the both of you when I have the time. So you don't have to keep blaming yourself."

Both of them stopped speaking then. Ryohei held Hana's fingers tightly. She squeezed it in return.

The last time Hibari and Yamamoto spoke to each other was in that hospital room before Hibari was brought to trial. A yellowed letter was on Hibari's lap.

"The ex-baby gave me her last letter to Fon, my unhappy father. He gave it to me as a farewell gift, perhaps." Namimori's handwriting this time was cleaner, free of the scratches and underlines she used in her palinode to her little brother. It was also more stylized and a little stiff.

"What does it say?" Yamamoto said with a small smile. He leaned his chair beside his. Hibari looks on.

"She did not blame him in the end for what happened to her. Nor did she blame herself," he said as he folded the letter. "She did not tell him she was going to die. Instead, she asked him about me."

He paused.

Yamamoto looked at Hibari's taped fingers. "It's ok if you don't want to tell me-"

"She asked him if he believed I was capable of love," Hibari said. This made Yamamoto look at his face. A dark splotch simmered from the large gauze on his left. One eye was also covered on the other end. His gaze seemed to melt. It didn't fit his face. "Quite a childish question, don't you think?"

"Is that all it said?"

"She said further how, even if he rejected that idea, she'll believe as sure as the sun rises in the morning. And that one day, I'll believe in it too."

Yamamoto's eyes darkened at this. He felt his throat run dry.

"This will be our last conversation," Hibari said. "If it weren't for the ex-baby coming here, you would have killed me. Is that right?"

Yamamoto swallowed the bile rising from his throat.

"You don't have to force yourself to like me, Yamamoto Takeshi. You have every reason to kill me. But I choose to live all the same."

"I know you did it so I wouldn't have to, but…"

"Don't explain yourself. It makes you look pitiful," Hibari closed his remaining eye. "You have a bright future ahead of you. Continue answering the difficult questions you make up along the way."

He bit his lip as he closed the door.
"You came by yourself?" Yamamoto asked when he saw Chrome walking towards him and Nami's grave, holding an enormous sunflower with petals almost as big as her fist.

Chrome hesitated at first to take another step but gulped as she attempted to continue forward. "Saya-san's brother asked me to give this to Nami-san."

"Really?" he gave her a nonplussed look.

She turned a light shade of pink when she nodded. "He said to give his regards to Hibari-san and you."

Yamamoto scratched the back of his head at this. "Dunno that he remembered me."

"We had been talking about a ton of things. I mean- if that's ok with you-"

"Of course, Chrome-chan! It's just… weird, he might have thought badly of me after everything."

So she actually made a friend on her own. He beamed at her proudly.

"He also gave me this," she took out a mint letter envelope from her jacket. "Those are Saya-san's. Pictures of Nami-san… he wanted Hibari-san to have it."

"Oh, ok, yeah I'll give it to him. Thanks," he smiled at her, making her turn red when they touched hands and proceeded to look at her feet. He tucked it safely in the inner pockets of his bag.

"Ui-san told me about Saya-san and Nami-san. How much they cared for each other," she then said as she lowered her sunflower under the foot of her grave. "It makes me think of how things would be like… if both of them were alive."

"Yeah…” Yamamoto said, stuffing both hands under his pockets as he sat down beside her. She was also willing to talk about such topics with him too. They have really grown. "Maybe we wouldn't have had a stricter Disciplinary Committee? We wouldn't be under Hibari as well, since he's in high school… Know what, I never actually got to ask him how old he is…"

Chrome chortled at this. "Please tell us when you do."

Yamamoto rubbed his nose and nodded. "It's a promise."

Both of them look at her grave then for awhile. Chrome then opened her bag and gave him banana-flavored Pocky. "I figured you're hungry for staying here so-"

"Ah, thank you, Chrome-san!" he laughed as he accepted it graciously. "Didn't expect you'd have-ah, and strawberry milk too-"

"I also have some chocolate-" she said as she took out a large chocolate bar. "It's like banana split…"

"Banana split?"

"Banana, strawberry, chocolate…” Chrome turned red and covered her face. "I can't bring ice cream so-"

"Oh right- yeah I got it!"

"I-I'll do my best next time," she said in a meeker voice. "Next time, definitely."
"You don't have to beat yourself up. It's cool, Chrome-chan. It's nice that you actually brought a bunch of snacks." Yamamoto took a bite from the chocolate bar.

"It's nothing compared to what you did for me," she said, making sure her legs were tucked comfortably as she sat on top of them. "You gave me strength to do the impossible."

"It's all on you for even pushing through with them," he said, scratching his head repeatedly. "You're the amazing one. Pretty sure all of us are grateful."

"Mukuro-sama came to visit me last night, actually," Chrome said. "He told me that he was proud of what I've become standing up for myself." Her cheeks flamed at this.

"That's nice then!"

Her eyes drooped as she stared at a petal falling from the sunflower. "He also told me I can carry the title of Mist Guardian without him. He was leaving to search for his family, actually."

"Are you sad then?"

Chrome shook her head. "I told him that I won't accept it. After graduation, I'm leaving for Hakone with Ui-san. I don't know for how long, but I might stay there for a while. I haven't told Boss yet."

He was at a loss for words. Chrome's decision eluded him. How for her to reject Mukuro's request was so uncharacteristic that it made him rerun the possible reasons why she would make such an outlandish move.

"It scares me too, honestly," she laughed. "Being selfish like this. But Hibari-san won't be here to protect Boss. I don't want to be a burden to him, as much as the thought of more battles like before will burden me. You may think that I'm running away-"

"I don't think you are. For someone like you, I think you deserve this."

Chrome managed to smile mechanically. "Like Ui-san, I guess I want to heal. I'm not as strong as everyone so I think… I told you first because maybe it's the same with you."

Yamamoto's gaze shifted at the grave. The soft rustling of the leaves against the breeze began again. His mouth formed a thin line on his face. He looked at his bound wrists.

"I was wondering Chrome-san," he then said. "After everything, do you regret meeting Mukuro now?"

Chrome began to nibble on her chocolate Pocky. "I'll be lying if I say it doesn't happen sometimes. But if I died that day, I wouldn't be making decisions like this."

"What did Mukuro say when you told him?"

There was chocolate on Chrome's teeth as she smiled. "He wished his illusions were more powerful enough in making me happy." She then began to cry.

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It was the first genuine smile they saw in Yamamoto when he came to their usual meeting place in the park. It was smaller and less brazen than they remembered, but it was enough for them to lend him a room on the bench.

"Peace offering?" Yamamoto said as he gave them piping hot taco rice. Both of them inhaled the
smell before sinking their teeth on their pieces rather greedily.

"At least something good came out of all this," Gokudera finished his piece and smacked his lips. "I can rely on you when I'm having trouble with cooking back at my place."

"You should teach mom how to make this," Tsuna agreed.

"Don't ditch us on our last grad practice tomorrow!"

"Yeah, don't leave us hanging. The girls will be hanging out with us in the arcade afterwards. We need all the strength we can get."

Yamamoto wanted to ask what price they paid to spend their last time as middle schoolers together. How they managed to get Hibari off from getting axed, how Ryohei woke up from his coma. If they knew about Chrome leaving. It was all too good to be true. He was pretty lucky to have met them. He adjusted his black wristbands again. The last thing he needed was for them to see.

"Course I won't!" he said as he put his arms around his two best friends. "I could really go for some chocolate milk now though. Let's go!"

"Can't believe you'll graduate even when you rarely went to class," his dad said when they were closing up.

"I did well in my exams!" Yamamoto replied. "You should believe in your son's academic skills more."

He helped his dad close down the blinds. Ever since that day, the night rarely attracted any customers, so they were closed by nine. "You've honed your dishonesty, Takeshi."

"Eh? What are you talking about?"

His dad's hands were still trembling. They may never stop, at least until they find a way to make them do. Yamamoto felt a knife twisting his chest.

"Kyoya has scarred you," he then said as he sat on the table. He did not bother to beckon his son to sit beside him, who was still washing glasses at the counter.

"It's his family's specialty, isn't it?" There was no trace of bitterness in his voice. His dad was right. He really did become good at lying to himself. "It's the same with you."

"The last thing I need is for you to despise him and let it poison you," his dad then said. "If it does, I can never forgive myself."

"You did nothing wrong," Yamamoto said, his smile felt like he was telling a painfully unfunny joke to himself. "And maybe it's because in the end, I never really did understand him. I deluded myself to think the opposite, but I guess… ahh…" Tears were streaming. "Ahhh… ahaaaaaa…" He continued to laugh as he tried making fun of them away.

His dad stood up but stayed at the table. He knew, or rather did not know how to placate him now, especially to see his son so vulnerable. Yamamoto sniffed as he laughed and cried and wiped his eyes with a clean handkerchief he kept in his pocket.

He remembered Chrome, and Mukuro, and his words to her. Maybe he was envious that Hibari did
not say the same things to him. Maybe all he wanted to hear was, after all that they've been through, Hibari asking him to stay. Even just a little while.

In the end, Hibari let that blanket of loneliness enshroud him completely to bother letting anyone in. He thought he could fix that, but he couldn't. That was all there is to it.

18

"This sucks," Gokudera said glumly as he kicked a piece of rubble aside to hit the back of a poor soul two feet away. His diploma was slung over his back. "No one shed a tear. I was waiting to upload something…"

"You're too slow," Yamamoto elbowed him as he raised his phone. "I saw Kusakabe-san bawling earlier."

"No fricking way! Let me see-"

Yamamoto saw Tsuna taking a picture with the girls as he let Gokudera grab his phone. Just behind him, he saw Dino again, his hair shorter and less mussed up like last time, that familiar look of exasperation on his face as a familiar dark-haired boy wearing the outdated school uniform followed him a few feet away.

"Uhm be right back-" he said to Gokudera as he made an extra effort to follow them while they rounded left of the auditorium.

18

"Then what happened?" the woman said as she continued writing on her notepad. Yamamoto straightened his posture as he attempted to appear dignified.

"I never got to give him the photos," Yamamoto said, turning at the menagerie of books around him. Behind her was a window showcasing a breath-taking view of the megalopolis around them. An aquarium-full of electric blue sand was on a table beside him, with many clay figures making their way to their usual rural lives. "Just bailed when he and his tutor were talking. I took pictures with my friends and treated them to our family restaurant. That was it."

"Nothing to tell me about your graduation?"

"Hmm… it wasn't too memorable. No cherry blossoms because it was already summer, but we still pushed through," Yamamoto laughed in embarrassment. "I forgot what happened actually. My friend's crush gave a speech and we sang… that's all I remember."

"How do you say it wasn't too memorable?"

"Uhm, like I never really cared?" Yamamoto clicked his tongue. "To be frank, I was getting sick of Namimori. I just didn't want to admit it."

"You didn't want to admit it…"

He let out a deep sigh. Somehow, he felt irritated at revealing this much negativity. It felt new. It didn't sound like him to vent so much.

"I didn't like thinking that Namimori, my friends, everything didn't feel the same. That's why I came here with my friend's tutor's help."
"How did they take it?" Reborn asked then crossed his legs when he sat down. Yamamoto swiftly gave him his espresso. He hoped that the café menu will calm the adult enough to hear what he wanted to say.

"The moment I told them it was because I don't dream of going to Koshien anymore flipped everyone out," he laughed. "I wish I recorded the looks on everyone's faces. Ryohei-senpai nearly had a seizure. Couldn't make out Gokudera's expression though. He left quickly. He doesn't pick up my calls and replies to the memes I send."

"Relinquishing your title came from the very left field," he said as he took a quick sip. He nodded at the taste. "Have you told Hibari Kyoya?"

"Not sure he'd care," Yamamoto laughed. "I haven't talked to him since he left the hospital. It's fine though. My dad's ok with opening a sushi shop in San Francisco while I work on getting into varsity there."

"Pretty sure you'll get in but I'll pull some strings just in case. Are you sure about this?"

"I already gave my gear to Tsuna before coming here," he said. "Can't wait. Baseball in America's no longer a pipe dream."

Reborn smirked. "You'll be all alone out there. It will be tough."

Yamamoto shrugged. "It's easier than all the adventures I've survived so far. Plus I want to visit a therapist. To understand if I'm really okay. I want to rise above this. Probably won't make it to the Inheritance Ceremony though… or if I can come back."

He grinned at this. "The future's not set in stone. But your battles are now. I can only wish you success and enough money to rent the best penthouse in San Fran."

"Wish Hibari-san was here but yeah-" Tsuna tried to laugh. Yamamoto wheeled his small bag as they waited in Haneda airport, Tsuyoshi just a few feet away from him. He wanted to leave with little fanfare. He already hosted a farewell feast with almost the entire Namimori population present.

"I didn't expect him to have any parting words. And at least Gokudera's here."

"S-Shut up, baseball freak. Of course I'll be here!" Gokudera quickly folded his arms and turned away. "This is too sudden, no time for any melodrama at all!"

"Can you give this to him though?" Yamamoto handed Tsuna the envelope. "When he finishes his sentence, I mean."

Tsuna quickly returns it. "Make this a reason for you to come back. Oh right," he hands him a cerulean tea-shaped charm. A baseball bat was sewed in the middle. "From Kyoko-chan."

"That's sly, Tsuna," Yamamoto laughed as he took it. "Thanks."

He smiled in return. "Had to learn quickly. I might become the Boss soon."

"Uhm, Gokudera…"
"Yeah, yeah, here-" Gokudera threw a capsule silver necklace to his direction. "Your mother's bones are in there. Give them to your dad."

"Thanks… well…"

His best friend kicked him hard on his right shin. "Jeez, no more bawling like last time! Not like we won't see each other again."

Yamamoto was at a loss for words. It was the best time for him to say something, anything to not make what could possibly be their last moment together unforgettable, or at least trigger flashbacks.

"I hope you'll find the heart in you to forgive yourself, Yamamoto-kun." Tsuna's soft expression was on the verge of cracking.

"Become the number 1 player or something," Gokudera added. "Can we, uh, can we do the huddle thing we did when we fought the Varia before?"

"Eh, are you serious, Gokudera-kun?"

"I know that there's only three of us if it's ok with y'all-" "Let's do it," Yamamoto beamed. After this, he had one last request before he leaves his home behind. "On the count of three…"

As usual, Squalo had his hands full again with the Varia alone. He should begin plotting a coup by now with all the questionable imports of meat they were receiving because of Xanxus' usual cravings for rare steak. It exhausted almost 60% of their monthly budget which was not a good sign given the damage their base sustained during the last war. The Ninth was also cutting down expenses at the moment given their businesses being rebuilt and undergoing government sanctioning as they begin their quest towards legitimacy, just in time before that Sawada brat becomes the de facto leader. But of course, given that he was the only smartass aside from Mammon, now currently having enough money to pay off a vacation fine, he has to beat it into the remaining members that they were broke. Legitimately broke.

He thought it was going to be easy, but as usual, duty was an asshole. It happened five days ago.

"So," Squalo said as he put both feet on the table, just a few inches from the new recruit's face. They were inside the interrogation room AKA the former dungeon where the usual torture devices, iron maiden, large pendulum axe, and the rubber chicken were all present. "That ex-Sun Arcobaleno had special permission from the Ninth to sign you up here. Just a heads up, you piece of shit, if you survive the night in the manor, you're officially one of us."

The recruit leaned back and yawned. His gakuran remained effectively velcro-ed around his shoulders. "Is Sawada Tsunayoshi aware of this?"

"Doubt it," he huffed. He was sure that Reborn pulled plenty of strings again to keep him there and not neglect his training. As usual, he was thinking ahead.

"I smell corruption," Hibari smirked as he folded his arms. "And you are not displeased of this arrangement?"

"You think I have the power to give a shit?" he barked. "As long as you don't get in my way, I
won't write off your habitual killings as bad behavior."

The morning came and there were no minor hiccups. For some reason, Hibari's would-be attackers had to be sent to the hospital because of unbelievable pain in their abdomens. All of them blamed Fran's 'Winter Dream' concoction but CCTV footage showed a canary visiting each cup and dropping some kind of liquid on each.

Hibari gave an innocuous smile and ignored them the rest of the day. He made specifications on his Varia uniform having similarities to his gakuran.

"Here you go," Squalo said as he gave him his uniform after Hibari's inauguration. On his first mission three days ago, Lussuria reported how did not make a fuss and carried out a smooth execution of four former militant faction members. He had him eat at a high-end hamburger joint as a reward. "Never have I imagined that you'd make it out alive after what happened." His pleading guilty then also spared the lives of many Vongola members, something he did not expect this maniac to do.

"They were just weak." Hibari gave the classic answer, but then followed with, "And he stopped me from running blindly."

Squalo clicked his tongue. "He's in America right now. Apparently, he quit, just like you."

Like Squalo's reaction when he heard the news from Tsuna, it took several seconds for Hibari to respond. "It was inevitable."

"That Sawada brat also asked me to give this message to you. Kid found out from Bel's Snapchat, fucking idiot..." he smiled as he took a cigarette. "I won't forget, he told me."

"Forget what?"

"The fuck do I know?" Squalo roared. "He just said 'I won't forget.'"

"I see. Is that everything?"

"Yeah, you cold piece of crap. Get the hell out of here. You'll be partnered with Levi on your next mission."

"Thank you."

Squalo stared as Hibari stood up, that fake, benign smile plastered on his face. His mouth was still open after he closed the door.

Chapter End Notes

*忘れないで or don't forget.
Finale: Nine Years Later

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading. I have no regrets.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A Recording, Nine Years Later:

"I learned how weak I was. How cocksure I was to beat everyone, and then fall facedown in humiliation because of my arrogance. I had so many things to learn. I had so many weak resolves I needed to discard. I didn't like the thought of knowing there are people stronger than me, up until now. The Vongola taught me a lot of things. I learned tenacity. I learned to keep going even if my limits didn't permit me to. I learned... living."

Kaeru yo.

It was Sasagawa Ryohei who picked Hibari up from the local airport, the latter's scowl deepening when he found out. Ryohei's booming voice was enough for him to show a tonfa and almost get themselves arrested.

"I'll be packing up soon too," Ryohei said when they were inside the car. "I'll be in Las Vegas for a fight."

"When did you wake up?"

"A few months since I got in the hospital," he said. Hibari was secretly piqued by this as they drove. "You never visited."

Hibari was enjoying his ignorance more than correcting him. He also did not bother to care what Vongola outsiders were up to.

"Kyoko-chan filled me in on the blanks. It was like missing a climactic story arc in a manga and I was like fodder to the extreme! Y'know, the ones they kill off to show things were getting serious," Ryohei sighed.

"She was right."

"Eh, that hurts to the extreme!"

"Your sister packed a better punch than you," Hibari said as he texted Kusakabe for further preparations. He only had to endure twenty minutes of this herbivore's yapping and he can say good riddance to him.

"Seriously?"

"Yes, she reminded me of someone," Hibari paused as he looked at the trees bordering their line of sight. "She was the second person whom I allowed to injure me."
"Wow, and I missed that?"

Hibari nodded and was pleased to hear him groaning.

"Oh man, this extremely sucks! I would have scored the best seats to watch that Chrome-Mukuro duel! And that improved tonfa of yours… Yamamoto's a total Hibari otaku when he tells me about your adventures," he laughed.

"If you weren't such a herbivore, you would have," he said but not before adding, "But you chose to get in harm's way to save Tetsu even if it costed you a chance to partake in it. Thank you."

Ryohei's laugh was raucous and comforting. "If I didn't save him, Namimori wouldn't be able to be what it is today. Besides, I liked my time off as a Mafia goon. Finally able to live my dream as a world champ! Even if the fame and fortune's taking quite a while to come around…"

"You don't sound very convincing," he drawled.

Ryohei grinned at this. "You don't sound very convincing playing Hibari Kyoya."

"How condescending."

"Makes me remember the shit I've missed," he said as he drank his second Pocari. "You've changed, I guess."

"How do you say I've changed?" he scoffed.

"Dunno, you know how to hold a conversation, I think?" Ryohei laughed before wincing in pain as he turned his cheek in time and avoided a tonfa from crushing his skull. "Not as awkward addressing you as before."

"You mollify me too much."

"And you're more vulnerable. No, not in a bad way. I mean, it makes you easier to talk to. Makes me feel comfortable to share my shit too," Ryohei scrunched up his face to explain further but scratches his head halfway ang gives up. "You get it, right?"

"I don't, and I don't care."

"I guess I don't feel like a herbivore now compared to how you addressed me then," Ryohei said after a long pause. "It's easier to believe Yamamoto's words this time. I still can't believe you're pen pals during your sentence."

"I try to ignore him." His letters become more frequent when he did which was a nuisance during missions. The last thing he needed was for the other animals to egg him on. Plus, he limits his letters on a monthly basis and makes it easier to manage. "He sent me dirt once. I threw it in the garden." And on Squalo's sleeping face.

"That's the dirt from the Yankee stadium! He played there once!" Ryohei berated him. "Dammit and I was thinking of bringing you dirt from Las Vegas…"

"I'll make good use of it," Hibari smiled innocently. He would target Xanxus next.

Ryohei laughed. "Ok, I'll try. Uh, I still can't wrap my head around how easy it is to get a reaction out of you that doesn't merit a death sentence, to the extreme!"

"I can't believe you know how to express yourself other than baby talk," Hibari grunted. "Having a
normal existence suits you."

"I wish I can say the same to my sister," Ryohei said as they turned left on the highway. The Namimori welcome arch was just beyond the horizon. "Do you have an idea how she's doing out there with Tsuna's dad?"

Hibari opened the window to blow a cigarette. "Call her."

Ryohei laughed nervously. "We're not exactly… since she finished high school, uh-"

"Call her," Hibari repeated. "Both of you are stubborn." He instinctively rubbed his right cheek. "Pride will get you nowhere."

The driver was silent as he turned around the curb and past the sign, back to the road leading up to Namimori shrine.

"This is near my place so I gotta pass driving you to someone else. My flight's tomorrow," Ryohei said as he killed the engine. So far, he could make out Kusakabe under the imposing torii.

Ryohei was quicker in closing the door than Hibari's. He was also taller than him this time. He has some catching up to do. His driver did not hesitate to hug him before running back the main road and nearly cost him a broken arm.

"Enjoy your homecoming!" he cheered before leaving, just in time for a staggering Kusakabe, arms full of flora, to clumsily go down the steps.

"Sorry for taking so long, Kyo-san!" he panted. The flowers in his arms were still fresh and dainty-looking. "I got what you requested and the complete plans we did during the town renovation-"

"The latter can wait," Hibari nodded. "The flowers will rot if you enumerated them in detail. Are you the one driving me to Namimori Middle-"

"Hiya, Kyoya!" He could feel that uncanny lurch in the pits of his stomach when he heard someone also climbing down the steps, a hand up in the air in greeting. "I got a call from Sasagawa-senpai to- ohhh, you look so much like Fon now!"

"Tetsu…” Hibari turned at the current Namimori chairman, who was already shaking in fear. "Place the flowers in the back. You and I will discuss Namimori later."

"R-Right away, Kyo-san!"

If he thought Ryohei was taller, Yamamoto Takeshi cut a cooler, more imposing figure as he skidded down the steps, katana and rain necklace absent in his open maroon blazer and loosely folded jeans. His grin was less wild than the one he wore.

"Guess it's you and me again, huh?" he said, smile continuing grow smaller as he awkwardly raised a hand for Hibari to ignore. He no longer wore those black wristbands to hide his fading scars.

"Let's go," he said as he entered the car first. Kusakabe managed to bid both of them goodbye on time before Yamamoto kicked the engine of the civic again.

The scar under Yamamoto's chin never healed. His eyes were not wide and gleaming with prospect like he remembered. He also smelled of cigarettes.

"You're awfully quiet," Hibari said as he looked up. The sun was starting its descent.
"I've started liking it. I get why you disliked crowds," he heard him say. His voice was deeper, raspier, sombre.

Hibari hummed. "I take it that you don't want to talk to me."

"What? It's not like that…” Yamamoto looked at the dashboard mirror and smiled at his direction. "It's just… I don't resent you as much."

"You're a strange man."

"I'm not a herbivore anymore?" Yamamoto laughed.

"No. Herbivores lack the courage," Hibari could only stare at his car window. "I… threw the dirt you sent me."

"Figured," Yamamoto laughed. "Gokudera said that was dumb."

"Will you be playing again?"

"Not in the foreseeable future," Yamamoto tittered again. "Sasagawa-senpai and I took tryouts to fill up a spot in the team. And I've already spent too much time having the time of my life in the States. My record's better than I hoped it will be. No regrets there." He then paused as he turned the car on the parking lot beside Namimori Middle. "Plus I get really envious whenever I see Gokudera's pictures. He always sends them in the middle of practice and it makes me so mad-"

"This is self-destructive, even for you. Stay in your bubble. If you try killing yourself again-

Yamamoto laughed. "You could just tell me you're concerned about me." They were now near the school in Namimori. "You've become awfully nice." The smile in his mouth thinned as he killed the engine. "She must be really proud, somewhere."

Hibari looked at the gates. Kusakabe restored the place exactly how he remembered it. How she must have seen it.

"I did not know any better then," Hibari said.

"We always don't," Yamamoto's voice was soft. "We never really outgrow our mistakes if we don't forgive ourselves. I still have bad dreams. There are times when I wake up and nearly do some… err, unhealthy things. But yeah, I try making my heart a little bit bigger than how I assume it to be. Sometimes it helps. The group chats and your letters help. Miss therapist helps too. I'd want you to meet her if I come for my sessions again. I think you also need something like that."

Both of them then continue walking up past the gates, past the students running in the fields, past the Disciplinary committee saluting at Hibari as they walked on behind the school, under the fields of trees and wild weeds and grass.

Hibari carried the flowers with both arms as they continued trudging near the clearing, up to the small moss-ridden rock beneath a short pine tree. There were large white sagisōs, half-open flushed pink peonies, vibrantly violet bluebells, and plenty of sweet peas wrapped in burlap. He never liked the idea of adding more pomp even in meeting a loved one.

A cool wind was beginning to blow. Hibari stared at the worn rock first, felt foolish in doing so, and lowered his present to Nami.

Yamamoto pressed forward when Hibari stood up, lowering a knee in respect as he also brought
out a long strand of lily of the valley. He made sure to keep it a few inches away from Hibari's pile.

"You're really not going to say anything?" he turned at Hibari.

"The flowers have spoken for me."

"Oh, ok," Yamamoto smiled faintly. "Uhm, then, happy birthday, Nami-san. And to your little brother too." He turned to his direction. "Uh, Kyoya?"

"Yes?"

"What did you say, exactly? I'm not good with Hanakotoba."

"That is for the two of us to know, and for you to find out," Hibari grinned coyly. He let the wind envelop them before continuing, "How did you know her birthday?"

"Just a hunch," Yamamoto laughed. "Your birth details were kinda sketchy, right? I just assumed you copied off Nami-san's. Or she let you share hers."

"…You chose the best place to insult me," Hibari said. He grinned in response. "Eh, looks like my hunch was right again that you won't tear me apart while Nami-san's looking."

"Your sanctuary's limited within this patch of land. Once we depart, I will make sure to burn your bones when I'm done."

"You're still a funny guy."

Hibari looked at the rock again. "I thought you and the other herbivores would attempt to erect a tomb of sorts."

"Tsuna was seriously considering that, but the girls talked him out of it. We figured to leave this place the way you wanted it to. Plus, you laid her to rest here with your own two hands. Respect man."

"Shush," Hibari said. "What about the rest of my family?"

"Back at your place, beside where Nami-san buried Avian Death Star. We also had your grandfather buried there and your dad, like you requested. Left their graves unmarked."

"No," Hibari interrupted. "I will ask Tetsu to assist in unearthing them and laying them to rest with the rest of my kind in Dounan. I would rather rest without their bones beneath my household each night."

"Eh? Are you sure?"

"Yes," Hibari said as he took a cigarette from his pocket. "That will be my last service to my name. It will die with me when the time comes."

Yamamoto shuffled his hands in his pockets as he looked down at the rock. "Eh, do what you want. It's not too late for you to change your mind though."

"I wonder. You have become cocky. We have not seen each other for nine years and you assume plenty." Hibari smiled at this. "Where did you lay Hitomi?"
"Oh, here," Yamamoto pointed at the metal vial dangling on his neck when he unbuttoned his top. "When I get my rain necklace, I'll also add this along."

"You have forgiven her?"

The smile on Yamamoto's face made Hibari wince a little. "Not really. I dunno. But I hope I will one day."

"You've grown."

He only scratched his nape. "You too."

"All of you keep surprising me. It makes my stay in the Vongola bearably interesting."

"Yeah, we're also planning on throwing a party at Tsuna's place. You don't have to come."

"Are you not inviting me?"

"It's not like that! You dislike crowds, and everyone went overboard to celebrate our reunion so-"

"What are you standing here idly for then?" Hibari's gaze narrowed at his direction. "I'll be coming. Wait for me in the car."

"Uh wait, I have to record this-"

"I will change my mind in three seconds if you don't comply," he remarked curtly.

"O-Okay, j-just text me!" he ran back furiously before Hibari could react further. By then, Hibari looked at the unlit cigarette in his hand and placed it between his lips, lighting it up with the flames surrounding his wrist. He blew a puff of smoke before speaking, eyes still at Nami's marker. "You can show yourself. You must have a gift as well?"

There was a soft rustling from the branches of the nagi tree by his left. Hibari did not bother looking at the intruder as he took a long draught from his cigarette.

"How can I be sure that you won't kill me if I move even a step? No one's here to stop you," he heard the intruder say.

"I could have done so even when that herbivore was here," he said coolly. "I do not believe in spirits. Nami would not haunt me if I do time a chain through your chest."

There was a bouquet of morning glories and white roses on his chest that were meticulously wrapped in indigo mesh and embroidered silver ribbon. Fon no longer wore his traditional robes of vermilion and white. The braided ponytail was absent. He could see the older man's scar-ridden hands. His eyes, tired and wary as they were, still had that artificial twinkle he often used to ensnare pitifully gullible souls.

He did not take another step.

"It's been awhile, Kyoya," he started with a wan smile.

By this, Hibari turned at his direction and flicked his cigarette to his face. Fon did not move as it hit his cheek.

"You should call me by the name you and your wife gave me," Hibari said.
Fon continued smiling. "It doesn't matter. Namimori did a far better job in naming you."

"Just one of the many things you've failed in as a father," he said. "The more years that pass, the more perplexed I become in figuring out why my sister adored you so much. How potent was the ambrosia you used?"

"I."

"Please step closer… father," Hibari said. "I don't want us to waste our time in emotional drivel. You can opt to leave when you've given her your gift."

"I'm sorry. You have every right to be furious. I've been a terrible human being."

"You can start making amends by giving Nami your gifts of pity," Hibari hummed.

Fon walked up and lowered his bouquet near Yamamoto's gift and put his hands together to utter a silent prayer.

When he stood up to face Hibari, with his frayed and pitiful form. He did look old. The flecks of grey on his head was beginning to show.

"It took you so long to visit. Tetsu told me you never showed in my absence."

"If I knew our meeting would end up like such, I would have come sooner," Fon's twinkling eyes were blatantly affixed on his. "I… don't know what to say."

Hibari said nothing for a few seconds. Life on the run changed Fon, as life in self-exile from Namimori has transformed him. It was more difficult now for Fon to maintain his delusional austerity. He did not find Fon pitiful despite that, however. He had no idea how to solidify these feelings into short insights. So instead, he resorted to honesty.

"Sawada Tsuna had already granted you immunity from your caustic actions. You did not have to hide for nine years. Nami waited too long," he said. That herbivore successfully wrested that immunity without shedding blood as well, at the cost of extra paperwork and three strands of white hair. He paused. "I underestimated you for abandoning everything. I was wrong to believe you were a coward. Giving in to our impulses, everything was too easy. I learned this the hard way."

Fon snickered. "Nami would be proud."

"I don't need you to tell me," he dismissed. "She already had."

It was easier now. Conversing with this man, making room for him there to be by her side.

"What was mother like?" he asked as he also knelt down three feet apart from him. The acceptable distance had significantly shortened through the years.

"Well to start," Fon said, his smile soft and vulnerable. "She had alluring silver eyes."

Yamamoto narrated the ride back to a small hushed crowd that night as everyone began to drop like flies at the alcohol the Varia served. Apparently they opened a gin distillery in Italy to keep themselves afloat despite the additional budget Tsuna was pushing for with the elders. "Yeah, it was the quietest ride back there I've ever sat through. I tried my best not to breath too loudly. Oh, and Chrome-chan, I think Kyoya is three years older than me. I got to ask from dad, but he's not
All of them looked at Hibari, who was busy minding himself in the corner and drinking five more glasses than his usual amount. Living with the Varia for nine years really builds up tolerance. Yamamoto then felt someone tapping his shoulder.

"How do you think I should approach Kyoya, Takeshi-kun?" Fon asked him. He was taller than the Storm Arcobaleno now by a head. It still eludes him how statuesque he appeared back then as Hibari Kei.

"He's more chill now. I think it's ok if you offer him some steak over there and begin talking to him," Yamamoto said.

"Thank you. I'm still… I don't know if he's still willing to-"

"Well he hasn't challenged you to a fight yet, so I think it's ok?" Yamamoto scratched his chin. "I reckon he's still sore over you not giving any kind of hoot, but he'll come around. He's honestly quite easy to read deep down." With these, he then makes an excuse to get some drinks to chat with Gokudera and Tsuna.

"You think that pineapple head will come? Haven't seen him since he attempted to rampage CEDEF to get files on the Estraneo," said Gokudera. At their right, Ryohei was putting on a big show to talk to a long-haired Kyoko, who was trying her best to shush him as she continued her conversation with Bianchi and Fuuta. I-pin and Lambo were also trying to evade the Varia who were insistent that they try their gin, Fran being the most pushy (Tsuna reckoned this was to prevent himself from being skewered yet again). Haru was pushing her résumé to Dino's shaking hands, who was busy holding onto the pillar to support himself from falling over. Apparently, she was rejected from joining CEDEF and was looking elsewhere to join the Mafia. Hana didn't care for the rest of them and was busy hogging the karaoke to herself as she lugged more alcohol.

"Pretty sure he will," Tsuna massaged Gokudera's shoulders, sending him teary-eyed and kowtowing in return. "I texted him to come. Told him to meet his former half," he pointed a thumb at the Mist Guardian, who was all by herself at one of the tables before being cornered by a drunken Mammon. "He hasn't met her since she decided to come back after her break up with Saya-san's brother."

"When was that?"

"Uh… almost four years ago?"

Yamamoto turned at Reborn who was deep in discussion with Yuni and Lal Mirch in the left corner beside the bar. Only Verde was absent from the Arcobaleno septet. Collonnello was busy ordering Skull around to give a shit that he was close to wrecking the bar. He then smiled as he saw Fon edging closer and closer to Hibari, Hibird holding him by the sleeve as it flew forward. "A lot sure has happened," he then said before pushing his fork full of meat in his mouth.

"Yeah, Reborn's no longer my home tutor," Tsuna laughed as he nervously scratched his nose. "It's been three years already, but he still comes every week to criticise my shit."

"Well statistically speaking Tenth, his criticisms have gone down by 35 percent," Gokudera said.

"He's still criticising about 60 percent of my output though," Tsuna pouted. There was a sound of shattered glass. Apparently, Hibari had revealed his tonfas and was challenging Fon to a fight. "Shit, we have to stop them. Uh, since you're the newly-appointed Rain Guardian Yamamoto-"
Yamamoto managed to calm down an incensed Hibari when they dropped down the Nami-chuu rooftop. "How did Fon-san piss you off?"

Hibari turned away. "His face irritates me."

"Don't look at the mirror next time then," he sighed. "Try giving him a chance. You're still as petty as ever, gosh-"

"It's good to see you again."

Yamamoto let out a silent shout as he attempted to shoo whatever spirit was possessing Hibari. "Are you ok?"

"You and the other Vongola do make a big show when I say things like this," he said with a low growl. "I'm no wild beast."

"W-We were called herbivores before you know," Yamamoto laughed. It must be the alcohol. "It's good to see you again too."

Hibari turned and walked forward at the railings. There were no longer traces of the place where Yamamoto attempted to jump from long ago. Yamamoto then traced his fingers along the spindly metal beside him. He no longer bothered to push him away as his grey eyes became more sombre. "It's strange how this town managed to move on without me... and it doesn't bother me at all."

"It doesn't bother you at all that I'm almost a foot closer to you than normal?"

"Do not provoke me, Yamamoto Takeshi."

He continued to chuckle. "Dunno about that. There are people waiting for us at Tsuna's place." He sighed. "I wish I had been there to have seen you grow like this."

"You were there since the beginning," Hibari said. "You never left."

Yamamoto found it difficult to maintain a straight face. "That hurt more than a tonfa to the face."

Hibari grinned. "You were always the easiest to scar." He looked up. "Do you still despise me?"

The moon was a crescent shape in the night sky. It was ethereal and reminded them of their last night after they left the cool glow of the aquarium. Back when he thought meeting this Hibari was only in dreams.

Yamamoto shook his head and laughed again. "Thank you for keeping your promise."

"It was easy to keep, after the hell we've survived. After the flames you consumed to keep them warm..." Hibari was looking more and more like his father. He closed his eyes as he inhaled the night air. "Do you see it then, Yamamoto Takeshi? What my sister saw?"

"Yes, more than ever," Yamamoto said as he looked at this aged and bruised yet invaluable dreg of a human being. His cracked visage took in the sliver of moonlight. Like white-gold filling the kilns of cracked china. He took out the envelope that he kept pristine all those years and handed it to him. "Ui-san wanted to give it to you."
Hibari looked on as he stared at the pictures. His smile was unafraid to seep through. It was contagious. "She was happy."

Tears fell from his eyes. Hibari inhaled as he wiped them away with his sleeve.

"Yes, she was happy."

"It does come, this oppressive sensation. It wakes me up in the middle of the night at times. But you still sleep and then wake up. Again and again." Hibari held the pictures in his hands. He lets the pictures light up in his purple flames, casting light as each burning page swirled and smouldered above the night.

"What is dead will never die," Yamamoto agreed. He imagined a better world once. A world where Tsuna became the Boss at his own pace. Where Hibari graduated at an earlier age, Nami and Fon taking his pictures as the rest of them said goodbye. He imagined his team playing and winning at Koshien. He imagined Gokudera with his mom alive, doing a joint recital in a big amphitheatre somewhere. Imagining it all was easy.

But Yamamoto knew his current life doesn't have all of those things. That he must wake up to the skeletons in his closet. Stir the ghosts in his garden. And still he walks, katana in hand, holding his friends by the arm, even as they disappear one by one. Hibari is aware of this too.

"What is dead will never die," Hibari agreed. Acceptance was etched in his face. The ashes continued to rise like glimmering petals against the waning moon. "You learn to live with them."

Both of them looked on at the city lights one more time. The scent of peach blossoms pervaded the air.

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In most cases, people, even the most vicious, are much more naïve and simple-minded than we assume them to be. And this is true of ourselves too.

*Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov*
*Let's go home

For further reference:

- *When your child is a psychopath*
- *Psychopaths have feelings too*
- *A thought experiment on morality*
- *A memoir of having a brother for a murderer.* This is for subscribers only.
- *Notes on a suicide*
- *A documentary about a history of incest within the family*
- *Astronauts by PowaPowaP* aka the main theme of this damn fic. Check Reol's cover when you have time.

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